Communicating about Intergenerational Urban Poverty and Race in America: Challenges, Opportunities, and Emerging Recommendations

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FRAME WORKS

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Introduction

Decades of discriminatory policies, compounding centuries of devastation, violence, and racial antagonism in the name of white supremacy, have locked millions of Black Americans and other people of color out of upward mobility and into intergenerational poverty. This concentrated poverty is the product of intentional discriminatory design. Across the United States, the effects of redlining—the decades-long practice, beginning in the 1930s, of discrimination and obstruction against areas where Black Americans lived—can still be seen and felt today. While the Fair Housing Act of 1968 banned redlining and racial discrimination in housing, unjust zoning ordinances, disinvestment in neighborhoods, and disenfranchisement of Black and Brown residents continued—then and now—perpetuating inequity of resources and opportunities for communities and the people who live there.

The consequences of these actions have not been solely financial. Scholars, activists, and advocates have consistently documented how where a person is born shapes and determines outcomes across their life course: the quality of K-12 education a child receives; the amount of stress or trauma that a developing child experiences; whether and how people can access decent health care, quality foods, meaningful job opportunities, or reliable transportation; and life expectancy itself. It even influences the quality of air people breathe.[1]

The tide is turning, however. Emerging and longstanding solutions focused on what each neighborhood needs, crafted in collaboration with the communities that would benefit from those solutions, bring hope and new possibilities for addressing the intergenerational poverty caused by this history of structural and systemic racism.

This brief is aimed at contributing to that hopeful project. It summarizes key findings from research on public perceptions of intergenerational urban poverty and race in America.[2] It is part of a broader project that the FrameWorks Institute is conducting with support from and in partnership with Purpose Built Communities to develop strategies to communicate about urban poverty in ways that build support for racial equity and place-based solutions to end intergenerational poverty.

This brief describes a set of challenges and opportunities for communication that result from an understanding of these public perceptions. It also offers preliminary recommendations for responding to these challenges and opportunities, although further research will be needed to build on these findings and to develop the most effective ways of framing the solutions to intergenerational urban poverty.

What are we trying to communicate?

To develop an effective strategy for communicating about intergenerational urban poverty, it's necessary to identify a set of key ideas to get across. To do this, FrameWorks researchers conducted interviews and feedback sessions with people who are working to address urban poverty in America. The place-based anti-poverty practitioners identified a set of foundational points that they would want the public to understand:

Urban poverty is concentrated poverty. It exists when the majority of people in an urban neighborhood lack the resources to meet their material needs and participate fully in society.

Urban poverty in the United States is the product of racist policies, past and present. Policies across domains—in housing, education, employment, transportation, and other systems—are responsible for racial and economic segregation in cities. As a result of these policies, residents of neighborhoods of concentrated poverty are systematically denied resources and opportunities.

The effects of urban poverty are multifaceted and compounding. Urban poverty denies access to good jobs, undermines physical and mental health, and limits people's ability to build and pass on wealth. These individual costs create costs for cities and society as well, through unrealized human potential and higher public spending. Structural racism not only contributes to the creation of neighborhoods of concentrated poverty but amplifies the effects of urban poverty in the other ways it operates within society (such as its influences on employment decisions and the justice system).

Urban poverty is best addressed through a place-based approach. A place-based approach addresses the needs of urban neighborhoods in direct collaboration with community members. It includes solutions like building mixed-income housing, removing exclusionary zoning barriers, investing in equitable education, and promoting private sector investment in community development.

What shapes public thinking about urban poverty? Two foundational strands of culture and society.

Thinking about urban poverty in America is bound up with two foundational strands of American culture and society—the dehumanization and pathologizing of Black Americans and other people of color, and the ideal of the "self-making" individual. Both ideas have been the subject of extensive sociological and historical research. Before we turn to the learnings from our original research for this project, it's important to examine the roots of these patterns of thinking, as their history helps us understand what is happening in American culture and society today.

Dehumanizing and Pathologizing Understandings of Black Americans

Structural and systemic racism are not only infused into the policies that have produced intergenerational urban poverty, but they are woven into public perceptions about who experiences poverty and why. The research for this project, in keeping with a large body of literature and our own previous work, showed the deep and persistent ways that many Americans—largely but not only white people—draw on assumptions that dehumanize Black Americans and pathologize them as individuals, families, and communities. These dehumanizing ideas about Black Americans have been woven into the fabric of American society and culture. They reflect and justify the oppression and exploitation of Black people.

These perceptions have roots in racial-settler capitalism. Racial justice advocates and scholars point to how racial capitalism has structured the quality of life for people of color in America. From the country's founding, predicated on Native American genocide, broken treaties, and land theft to its economic success dependent upon centuries of stolen labor from enslaved Africans,[3] racist ideas have justified the exploitation and dispossession of people of color.

Such dehumanizing ideas are spread through popular media. From *Birth of a Nation* to nightly local broadcast news, a narrative of Black criminality has long been used to shape the public's perception of Black life, culture, and values. These media portrayals have formed and perpetuated stereotypes used to justify punitive policies that target Black people. Because 75% of white Americans do not have nonwhite friends[4], for roughly 150 million white people, these frames in the news, television, and film have uncontested power in shaping their perception of Black people, communities, and culture.

In the 20th century, the dehumanization of Black people was perpetuated not only through the regime of racial apartheid and related terrorism in the American South and North, but in less discussed ways by federal anti-poverty programs. Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal not only pulled many Americans out of the economic devastation of the Great Depression, but it also demonstrated the role government can play in concretely improving the quality of life of its citizens through a broad range of interventions. And although many Black Americans benefited from aspects of the New Deal, the suite of anti-poverty programs was not only not designed to serve them but included measures that excluded them from benefits.[5] One example is the Social Security Act of 1935. The social policy created to provide retired people over 65 with a continuing income excluded domestic and agricultural workers, many of whom were African American, until the 1950s. There remains debate about the intention of these exclusions[6], but the impact is indisputable. This exclusion reinforced the idea that poor Black lives are not as valuable as poor white lives and further entrenched Black Americans in poverty. Yet media narratives and political rhetoric cast these conditions as cultural pathology and often obscured the structural and policy roots of the poverty many Black communities experienced.

These narratives crystallized and poverty became more clearly racialized in the public consciousness in the years that followed, through policy pieces like *The Negro Family: The Case For National Action*. Drafted in 1965 by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and more commonly known as the Moynihan Report, it attributed Black poverty to nonnormative family structures rather than hundreds of years of racial oppression. This framing paved the way for a range of racist tropes about Black Americans, including the "welfare queen," which was promulgated a decade later by Ronald Reagan. In January 1976, while running for the Republican presidential nomination, Reagan told the story of an unnamed Chicago woman who "used 80 names, 30 addresses, 15 telephone numbers to collect food stamps, Social Security, veterans' benefits for four nonexistent deceased veteran husbands, as well as welfare. Her tax-free cash income alone has been running at $150,000 a year." Upon winning the presidency, Reagan continued the story of the "welfare queen," using it to push Congress to pass significant funding cutbacks to public assistance programs.

This history is the source of current perceptions around urban poverty. While race is a social construct, it shapes the real world and our lived experience. There is no America without it—race structures American culture and society. Understanding it is crucial for effectively

shifting people's perspectives and increasing support for racial justice and equity. Just as new policy solutions must account for these historical, political, and structural contexts, advocates' communications efforts must do the same.

The Ideal of the "Self-Making" Individual

Alongside a deep and pervasive history of structural racism and dehumanization of Black Americans, individualism is a second underlying current in American culture and society that fundamentally structures how Americans think about poverty. Broadly speaking, Americans think about the individual as the key agent around which human life revolves. They see personal characteristics—desires, capacities, behaviors, responsibilities, and rights—as the central factors shaping the events, circumstances, and outcomes of life, with self-discipline, persistence, and hard work as the core values that should govern each person's life.

There is a lengthy and substantial literature documenting this deep current in American society and culture, from Tocqueville's early nineteenth century analysis to more recent reflections by Bellah, Putnam, and others.[7] These writers have consistently observed how frequently Americans default to the belief that each person has both the capacity and duty to become a self-reliant individual who stands on their own two feet in the world. In FrameWorks' research, we have seen this individualist lens applied to a broad array of issues, from criminal justice to health to education to addiction. Over and over again, people assume that a person's condition in life is largely due to their own choices and willpower. Over and over again we have seen this individualized lens inhibit people's capacity to see the larger systemic, structural, and environmental factors at play.

Racist assumptions about Black Americans and other people of color, combined with highly individualized beliefs about personal responsibility, come together to fundamentally structure how people understand why urban poverty exists, who is to blame, and what and whether anything can be done. These patterns of public understanding stand in stark contrast to how members of the field understand the role that structural racism plays in creating concentrated urban poverty and how it blocks support for the kinds of solutions needed to address it.

While public thinking about urban poverty is multifaceted—it's neither monolithic, nor all good or bad—these two strands of thinking run through and exert a strong influence on public thinking. Recognizing the deep history of these strands is vital to understanding the depth of the challenges described below and beginning to think about how to counter them.

Results from FrameWorks' Research

To map how the American public thinks about intergenerational urban poverty today, FrameWorks researchers conducted 20 one-on-one, two-hour-long cognitive interviews with a diverse group of participants spread across 12 states. Participants were selected to look roughly like a cross section of the general public. Interviews were analyzed to identify the deep, implicit, often taken-for-granted ways of thinking that members of the public use to think about urban poverty in the United States.

The strength and depth of racist ideas and assumptions, and the degree to which they are baked into how many people think about urban poverty, were clear in this research. Our goal in describing these troubling patterns in the data is to provide a clear-eyed basis for identifying strategies to counter, challenge, and overcome them. Our descriptions characterize ways of thinking from the inside, articulating the logic of particular models or mindsets—how using assumptions leads to specific patterns of reasoning. When we describe racist and other toxic ways of thinking, we do so with the goal of exposing the underlying logic of these mindsets so that they can be effectively countered and overcome. This in no way represents affirmation of or support for them.

Importantly, our research also identifies ways in which public thinking already includes more productive understandings and assumptions. Such productive understandings open up opportunities for communicators to strengthen, leverage, and expand public thinking in positive directions.

In what follows, we identify both challenges and opportunities that communicators face in getting across the foundational points about intergenerational urban poverty and race discussed above. We offer recommendations about how to respond to challenges as well as leverage opportunities. Communicators can start using these general recommendations right now, with the caveat that further research is needed to identify more specific, evidence-based framing strategies to move public thinking in the right direction.

We first present five core challenges that emerged from the research, followed by three communications opportunities. The report concludes with three combined "challenge + opportunity" findings that have a double edge to them, with both positive and problematic implications that communicators must consider.

Challenges

These are patterns in public thinking that run counter to and complicate the kinds of understandings that the field wants to elevate.

Challenge: Members of the public generally assume that the existence of poverty is the natural state of affairs.

When people think about poverty, they assume that income and wealth inequality is an expected feature of human life, and that, as one research participant put it, "you're always gonna have someone who's at the top, and you're always gonna have somebody that's at the bottom." This understanding of the world and how it works includes a deep assumption that inequality is natural—that some people will always be living "at the bottom" in conditions of poverty.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *harder* to get key points across:

This belief provides the basis for accepting poverty as a fact of life in America. It feeds an overarching sense of fatalism about whether poverty rates can be meaningfully reduced, and it undermines any sense of urgency about poverty as a problem. Its sense of naturalism also directs attention away from efforts to understand urban poverty as something *constructed*, the result of centuries of racist social engineering and policymaking.

How to address this challenge:

EMPHASIZE the constructed nature of urban poverty by highlighting the myriad ways concentrated urban poverty has been built and sustained. Don't leave the designed nature of urban poverty unsaid. Use examples, stories, and metaphors to make explicit the fact that urban poverty is the result of a history of intentional decisions made by society and those in power.

INCLUDE SOLUTIONS in messaging to combat fatalism and press home the point that there are known remedies that can be implemented to effectively reduce poverty in America's cities.

Challenge: Many people see Black American culture as dysfunctional and think of Black Americans as having "broken bootstraps."

Many members of the public assume that people of color, especially Black Americans, who live in poverty in America's cities are in this situation because their families and communities are dysfunctional. In our research, many participants—many but not all of whom were white—echoed the familiar pathologizing tropes discussed above, suggesting that urban Black families and communities cultivate a lackluster work ethic, welfare dependency, irresponsible parenting, substance abuse, and criminal conduct. According to this way of thinking, the people who emerge from these "cultures of dysfunction" lack the discipline and gumption to make themselves into responsible and self-governing people who live up to the individualist mandate to be self-reliant. Rather than being able to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, they are thought to have "broken bootstraps." Notably, this racist thinking pays no attention to structural constraints and is premised in the assumption that the capacity to self-make depends on an individual's values and determination alone.

Urban Poverty = Black "Inner City"

People strongly associate poverty in America's cities with the "inner city." This "inner city"—consistently racialized as Black—is pathologized as a place of dependence, resignation, poor work ethic, substance abuse, grimy urban landscapes, and, above all, crime.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *harder* to get key points across:

This way of thinking locates the roots of urban poverty in the current culture of Black families and communities, *not* in the history of structural racism. In the process, it obscures the links between America's racist history and structures and the challenges that Black families and communities living in America's cities face. It identifies Black people and Black communities and culture—not history, not systems—as the problem.

The idea that urban poverty is the result of "cultures of dysfunction" within families and neighborhoods also undermines support for a place-based approach. When people see

Rural vs. Urban Poverty

People have a benign, even romantic, vision of rural poverty. They think of poor rural communities as places where social ties are healthy and people are self-reliant even amid hardship. By contrast, urban poverty is envisioned as harsh, dirty, and dangerous, with weaker social bonds and a prevailing ethic of dependence and resignation. Importantly, rural poverty is often implicitly racialized as white, while urban poverty is racialized as Black.

Black families and communities as dysfunctional, they do not attribute productive agency to them and the places they inhabit. That in turn makes it difficult to imagine locally grounded and initiated place-based solutions.

This way of thinking also contributes to a larger pattern of fatalism about whether and how to address urban poverty. If dysfunction is deeply entrenched in culture and place, remedial steps by outside agencies, including government, are unlikely to help.

How to address this challenge:

EXPLAIN the historical and structural roots of urban poverty and specifically the racist policies and systems that have created it and continue to perpetuate it. People need consistent systemic explanations for why concentrated urban poverty exists, or else they will easily fall back on racist assumptions about Black culture.

ELEVATE examples of community-centered collaborations that have borne positive fruit to show the agency and capability of community actors and to counter racist stereotypes and the discourse of "dysfunction."

Challenge: Racism is defined by most people most of the time as a problem located in individuals, not systems.

Consistent with the deep current of individualist thinking, members of the American public are accustomed to thinking about racism as a personal trait and a matter of personal prejudice located in the individual. People assume that racial discrimination is a product of individuals holding and acting on conscious or unconscious racial biases. This is the default way of thinking about racism for most Americans most of the time.[8]

How this pattern of thinking makes it *harder* to get key points across:

Equating racism with personal prejudice leads people to assume that the problem is individual racist people and makes it hard to see how our society's institutions, structures, and systems are built to advantage white people and oppress and exploit people of color. Even for people who *are* able to think about racism in structural terms, it is easy to default back to more individualized ways of thinking, and thus to assume that remedies to racism lie in personal, not systemic, transformation.

How to address this challenge:

CONSISTENTLY TALK about systems and structures that have targeted Black Americans and other communities of color, **NAME** specific systemic measures and policies in the process (e.g., redlining), and **SHOW** their effects to embed them in the discourse around intergenerational poverty.

MODIFY the term "racism" with the terms "systemic" or "structural." References to "racism" on its own are likely to be interpreted in terms of personal bias.

Challenge: People do not think of housing as a key arena for addressing urban poverty.

Three areas loom large for members of the public when they think about how best to intervene to reduce urban poverty: education, employment, and health care access. People recognize that access to good schools is key for children to have a good shot in life; that people need jobs that pay a living wage and have some level of job security; and that health coverage has become a necessity in light of health care costs. Across our data, these were the default areas participants were the first to go to and the most comfortable thinking and talking about.

Most people are not, however, well-attuned to the need for better and more geographically distributed access to affordable housing. Housing rarely emerged as a topic in our interviews unless brought up by the interviewer. Housing is an issue that is backgrounded for most people when they are thinking about urban poverty.

The absence of thinking about housing in conversations about how to address urban poverty likely results, at least in part, from people's consumerist understanding of housing. In previous research on affordable housing, we found that people widely treat housing as a consumer good—a commodity whose cost both should be and inevitably is dictated by the market.[9] People generally don't see the role of policy in shaping the cost and quality of housing, so housing isn't thought of as an area where policy changes or collective action could make a difference.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *harder* to get key points across:

Because housing is not already an area people are thinking about as a part of what needs to be addressed to respond to urban poverty, it will take extra effort to build support for reforms and interventions in this area. Communicators will need to focus on raising the importance of housing as a topic. They should also help people recognize *how* zoning requirements and other public policies can and do shape people's housing options and how they can effectively be used to address urban poverty.

How to address this challenge:

LINK housing to the issues that people are already attuned to—how housing shapes children's success in schools, impacts health, and provides a stable platform for success in work and career.

EXPLAIN how current housing policies advantage wealthy communities and disadvantage low-income communities, and how new zoning and other policies to encourage mixed-income housing would strengthen community life across incomes. Providing a step-by-step explanation of how policies shape housing options and costs helps people recognize the need for changes to these policies.[10]

Challenge: Members of the public are largely fatalistic about efforts to reduce intergenerational urban poverty.

"Stuck" in Poverty

Across our research, by far the most dominant metaphor used for urban poverty is that of "stuckness"—that the people who live in these neighborhoods are "stuck" in their condition. Notably, both people who blamed poor people for their condition and those who invoked more systemic reasons used this language.

Members of the public largely assume that urban poverty is an intractable problem that will persist for the foreseeable future. There are many reasons for this fatalism. The assumption described above that "you're always gonna have somebody that's at the bottom" is part of the challenge. So too is the racist and dehumanizing assumption that Black culture is somehow inherently dysfunctional and that it results, generation after generation, in people who have "broken bootstraps." Beyond these assumptions, many members of the public also say that the problem is simply too big, and that our nation lacks both the focus and the means to address the scale of the problem. Many, too, express skepticism that the federal government is up to the task, invoking deep negative models of government ineptness and inefficiency, even as they acknowledge that the scale of the problem demands a national response. For all these reasons, few participants in our research expressed any optimism that positive and meaningful change could be realized.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *harder* to get key points across:

Public fatalism about our capacity as a people and a nation to successfully mitigate, interrupt, and end intergenerational urban poverty in America represents a core challenge to place-based intervention efforts. When people think there isn't a realistic chance of accomplishing these

goals, they figure there's no point in trying. In an era of competing demands on resources, this fatalism sets the groundwork for people to see other priorities as more worthy of investment and more likely to succeed, and makes it all too easy to disengage from this issue.

How to address this challenge:

PROVIDE examples of success—cases where poverty reduction efforts have helped communities build sustainable wealth. This can help counter fatalism and show the problem isn't intractable. Well-told stories of success also stick with people, giving them examples of positive potential that they can remember and refer back to in a way that counters their own or other's sense of fatalism.

LEVERAGE the greater sense of efficacy around local solutions to build support for a place-based approach. Our research found that people are unfamiliar with the term "place-based solutions" but can easily embrace the idea of local solutions for local problems. This local level for solutions feels more doable and more desirable to people than broad, sweeping discussions at the national level, which often cue people's unproductive thinking about the federal government.

Opportunities

These *are* both patterns of understanding that align with the field's goals and key leverage points that can be used to strengthen and expand public thinking.

Opportunity: There are times when members of the public are able to think in more systemic ways about the causes of urban poverty.

People generally believe that the US is a land of opportunity, and, more so, that it should be a land of *equal* opportunity. Importantly, many recognize that this is not the current reality, especially for people living in circumstances of concentrated urban poverty. They know that many of the supports, opportunities, and institutions that help people advance in life—in education, health care, employment, transportation infrastructure, and other systems—are less available and of lower quality in low-income urban neighborhoods, especially in neighborhoods of color. In short, they understand that *place structures opportunity* in important ways.

Many participants, especially but not only Black and Latinx participants, also displayed an awareness of *structural racism* as a factor contributing to urban poverty. They recognized that there have been patterned and pervasive ways throughout US history that people of color, especially Black Americans, have been subjected to discriminatory practices in criminal justice, education, and elsewhere, and that those discriminatory practices have played a role in concentrating poverty in communities of color.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *easier* to get key points across:

The idea that place structures opportunity and that opportunities are unequal across different places relocates the causes of poverty away from individuals, families, and communities and toward larger systems and infrastructures—including in education, employment, and health care. This opens space for people to see the need for changes in how places are constituted. Awareness of structural racism also opens a space for communicators to talk at the systems level, and to call for the creation of systems that do not discriminate and for efforts to compensate for the consequences of historical racism and discrimination.

Both the idea that place structures opportunity and the recognition of structural racism help people see urban poverty as a shared public problem that requires public solutions. This creates opportunity for people to imagine a role and responsibility for government and other public and private actors in leveling the playing field.

How to take advantage of this opportunity:

INVOKE the value of *fairness across places* to tap into the shared agreement that location should not dictate opportunity. Our work on affordable housing and community development found this value to be highly effective in building support for policy change.[11]

CONNECT THE DOTS between systems and outcomes. While people can often recognize that systems matter, they struggle to understand exactly how systems work. Explaining *how* systems contribute to and perpetuate urban poverty can, in turn, help people see what kinds of solutions would make a difference. For example, linking how public schools are *funded* to the kinds of educational outcomes children have in a community can help people understand better how more equitable access to educational opportunities can be realized.

Opportunity: Some people, especially Black Americans, understand the role of children's learning and development in the persistence of poverty across generations.

In answering questions about why urban poverty exists, some of our research participants, especially Black participants, sought to explain *how* poverty is transferred from one generation to the next. These explanations focused on how children learn by example and mimic what they see growing up, and how parents who lack the skills to realize upward mobility often pass along that same lack of skills to their offspring. These ideas, at their core, focus more on children's learning and the *processes* whereby poverty is replicated across generations, and much less on the supposed dysfunction of families or communities.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *easier* to get key points across:

These ideas bring productive attention to the roles of both childhood development and adult education in the intergenerational experience of poverty. These are productive arenas for promoting place-based interventions that focus on supports for children, adults, and families, and they open up a key window for communicators to focus messaging on how investments in areas like early childhood development, adult education, community centers, and recreational and green spaces can disrupt negative patterns of poverty.

How to take advantage of this opportunity:

EMPHASIZE childhood as a window when core skills develop. Point to the supports needed for children and their development and how these help them, but also by extension, their families and communities. Use such a developmental frame whenever describing efforts aimed at children.

CONNECT skill development to resources. While the public recognition that skills are part of the equation is generally productive, it's critical to frame skills as a matter of opportunity and resources to avoid moralizing and the idea that when people lack skills it is a result of their lack of effort.

Opportunity: Members of the public recognize that people's health is undermined by poverty.

Members of the public understand that poverty is a source of chronic stress in people's lives, and that such stress has negative mental and physical health effects. Many also understand that the health of those living in urban poverty is further undermined by a range of compounding factors, including reduced access to quality health care, environmental threats (such as pollution), limited access to healthy foods, and weak or deteriorated transportation infrastructures.

Social Determinants of Health

Attention to the social determinants of health was notably stronger in this research as compared to FrameWorks' previous research. We suspect that the issue itself—urban poverty—focused people's attention on how, in poor urban communities, different systems are interwoven to produce a range of bad outcomes for residents, which, in turn, helped people see how these determinants affect health. Further research is needed to fully understand why people seem better able to see the social determinants of health when thinking about urban poverty—is it that the frame of "urban poverty" productively focuses attention on the place?

How this pattern of thinking makes it *easier* to get key points across:

Because of how people generally value health and see it as beneficial not only for individuals, but also for families, communities, and employers, this awareness of the negative impact that poverty has on people's health can be leveraged to draw attention to the importance of addressing poverty as a core challenge for the nation. It also speaks to something that is readily familiar to all people—the experience of stress and the negative role it plays in life.

The recognition that people's health is undermined by factors beyond personal control is also crucial because it creates an opportunity for communicators to emphasize solutions that lie at the community and policy levels, in housing affordability, health care access, the food supply, pollution levels, and other domains. It also opens a window for affirming that health care is a collective responsibility, not just a private one.

How to take advantage of this opportunity:

REAFFIRM that residential location should not determine a person's health, but that all too often, it does.

EXPLAIN what kinds of policy-driven changes at the community level can help improve health across individuals and families to help strengthen people's ability to link public policies and people's health.

Challenges & Opportunities

These are findings that have both positive and problematic implications that communicators must consider.

Challenge & Opportunity: Members of the public recognize that many people who live in poverty are working full-time in an effort to build better lives.

People see poverty as existing on a scale, from those who are desperate and homeless to those who are barely making ends meet and living paycheck to paycheck. On this latter end of the scale, they recognize that there are many people who are working full time, or more, doing the best they can, and yet who still struggle financially. This strikes people as wrong because it violates a basic belief that hard work should be rewarded.

How this pattern of thinking makes it both *easier* and *harder* to get key points across:

People's recognition that people who work hard often live in or at the margins of poverty can help people see the need for changes to the status quo in areas like wages, health care access, and educational opportunity. At the same time, this attention to the working poor can complicate efforts to build policies that support *all* people experiencing poverty, as it creates space for a contrast between the deserving and undeserving poor. In particular, this opens the door for racist stereotypes of Black people who purportedly choose not to work because they're too lazy and would rather live off welfare supports.

How to take advantage of this opportunity and address this challenge:

EMPHASIZE how place-based measures and improvements to labor, health care, housing, and educational policies can reduce poverty across all people living in poverty, including those workers and their families who are struggling to make ends meet.

BE CAREFUL when talking about people living paycheck to paycheck. While it's important to reinforce the spectrum of financial insecurity and acknowledge the reality that many working people experience poverty, it is important not to reinforce the idea of deservingness, which the "working poor" frame implicitly does. Be sure to emphasize that we need to take steps to ensure that *all* people in poverty have access to resources and opportunities.

Challenge & Opportunity: Members of the public believe "the system is rigged" against working and middle-class Americans.

Many people have a strong sense that our country's economic "playing field" is not level. They think the wealthy are able to purchase influence with politicians to serve their interests, while incomes lag and life continues to get more expensive for everybody else, especially working and middle-class Americans. They believe this "rigged system" is resulting in growing wealth inequality and an increasingly tenuous economic life for many American families. *This* is thought of as the central economic problem facing the country.

How this pattern of thinking makes it both *easier* and *harder* to get key points across:

Skepticism of Business

People do not generally envision a strong role for businesses and corporations as part of the solution to urban poverty. Instead, many people see corporate greed, profiteering, and predatory business practices as contributing to the problem.

Many people invoked this idea of a rigged system to argue that "the system" needs to change. This opens a space for communicators to argue for change across a broad range of systems and policies that have worked against the interests of poor, middle-class, and working-class Americans from all racial and ethnic backgrounds, including in housing, labor policy, health care, environmental health, transportation, and elsewhere.

Yet the "system is rigged" idea also presents challenges, as it is currently not strongly applied to urban poverty and to the specific policies and systems that have created areas of concentrated urban poverty. The "rigged system" that people are thinking about is not the racist structures, policies, and practices that have disenfranchised, marginalized, and oppressed Black Americans and other people of color throughout American history. Instead, it is about people's sense that the country's financial and political system serves the interests of the rich rather than those of middle- and working-class Americans. As such, messaging about urban poverty will need to account for the fact that "the system" most people have in mind doesn't involve the policies and practices that most need to change to address concentrated urban poverty. More research is needed to explore how best to leverage this widespread perception of a generally distorted system *while also* directing attention to the specific systems that hurt low-income urban communities of color.

How to take advantage of this opportunity and address this challenge:

EMPHASIZE AND EXPLAIN how the system is rigged against low-income urban communities of color. Connecting the idea of a "rigged system" to urban poverty specifically may help people see urban poverty as the product of collective design.

TALK about how our society is rigged to disadvantage Black and Brown people. This can potentially situate structural racism within an existing form of systemic thinking.

DESCRIBE place-based work as a key means of remedying systemic failures in targeted, strategic, and achievable ways.

Challenge & Opportunity: Members of the public can see that urban neighborhoods of poverty are subject to underinvestment and divestment.

People recognize that poor urban neighborhoods consistently experience both underinvestment and divestment. This is talked about in terms of city governments not investing in the infrastructure of poor neighborhoods, businesses leaving or not setting up operations in the first place, and people, including the best and the brightest—leaving as soon as they get a chance. The underlying assumption is that capital—financial, material, and human—avoids and flees poor urban neighborhoods and thereby perpetuates and strengthens the underlying pattern of poverty.

How this pattern of thinking makes it both *easier* and *harder* to get key points across:

The recognition that areas of urban poverty experience lower levels of investment creates opportunity for communicators to make the case that all communities are valuable locations for investment, by both public and private institutions, and that government at all levels should structure incentives to encourage private investment. This attention to investment also productively draws people's attention to the importance of community-level and systems-level policies and actions.

Yet underneath the recognition of underinvestment may lie a deeper assumption about the inability of poor neighborhoods to fulfill the basic "rules" of reciprocity around which society is organized. People assume that cities don't invest *because* tax revenues from poor neighborhoods are low. Businesses leave *because* locals lack the wealth to purchase and consume. People leave *because* local life doesn't offer them a path to advancement. This deeper assumption can structure a false understanding that, at some level at least, poor communities are getting what they deserve.

How to take advantage of this opportunity and address this challenge:

FOREGROUND the need for *fairness across places* in making the case for investment in poor urban communities and the idea that all communities can and should experience the opportunity to thrive.

EXPLAIN how poor urban communities are sources of untapped potential and explain how investment can catalyze prosperity. This is likely to reinforce positive perceptions of these communities while undercutting the idea that investment won't have a strong return.

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Conclusion

Neighborhoods are not simply the places we are from. They are sites of history that can also determine our future. Neighborhoods carry deep meaning, and in the United States, that meaning is often intertwined with race and class mobility. Past and ongoing discriminatory policies and practices have locked millions of Black Americans and other people of color into intergenerational poverty. Civil Rights–era legislation offered some redress, but there is more work to be done.

Policymaking is key to social change, but its benevolence is neither inherent nor its effects static. Neighborhood resources and design make that clear. In many places, decisions made long ago still determine who gets a grocery store in their neighborhood or who can access a well-funded public school. Advocates focused on place-based approaches have long been working to address the destructive legacy of systemic and structural racism. And now, they are gaining support from government officials and the general public. The devastating impact of the coronavirus pandemic, particularly on Black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities, is leading to a greater awareness and deeper discussion about necessary solutions.

Evidence-based communications strategies can help move progressive, place-based efforts forward, leading to meaningful change. Framing research, along with policy reform, strategic partnerships across sectors, and community engagement, creates an opening for the United States to finally become what it imagines itself to be: a place where anyone—no matter their personal or shared history, background, identity, or income—can thrive.

Endnotes

1   Hoffman, J., Shandas, V., & Pendleton, N. (2020). The effects of historical housing policies on resident exposure to intra-urban heat: A study of 108 US urban areas. *Climate 8*(1), 12, https://doi.org/10.3390/cli8010012

2   A fuller description of the data and methods behind this research is available as a supplement to this brief.

3   Fong, S. E. K. (2019). Racial-settler capitalism: Character building and the accumulation of land and labor in the late nineteenth century. *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, 43(2), 25–48. https://doi.org/10.17953/aicrj.43.2.fong

4   Cox, D., Navarro-Rivera, J., & Jones, R. P. (2016). *Race, religion, and political affiliation of Americans' core social networks*. Public Religion Research Institute. https://www.prri.org/research/poll-race-religion-politics-americans-social-networks/

5   PBS. (2012). *FDR and the New Deal* [Video]. https://www.pbs.org/tpt/slavery-by-another-name/themes/fdr/

6   DeWitt, L. (2010). The decision to exclude agricultural and domestic workers from the 1935 Social Security Act. *Social Security Bulletin 70*(4). https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/ssb/v70n4/v70n4p49.html

7   See De Tocqueville, A. (2003). *Democracy in America* (vol. 10) (B. Frohnen, Ed.). Regnery Publishing. (Original work published 1835); Bellah, R. N., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W., Swidler, A., and Tipton, S. M. (1985). *Habits of the heart: Middle America observed*. Hutchinson; Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon and Schuster.

8   In past research, we have consistently found this to be true across racial groups—we've found an interpersonal model of racism to be dominant not only among white participants but also among Black participants and other participants of color. Recent research for a different project (conducted in fall/winter 2020) suggests that a systemic model of racism seems to be on the rise generally but to be stronger among Black people—

something identified in the current project as well. Survey research for the other project found that a slim majority of Black participants endorsed the systemic model over the interpersonal one. While it is important to acknowledge differences among groups in endorsement of and reliance upon different ways of thinking, it is also important to stress that the interpersonal model has traditionally been and remains strong across groups.

9   Levay, K., Volmert, A., and Kendall-Taylor, N. (2018). *Finding a frame for affordable housing: Findings from reframing research on affordable housing and community development.* FrameWorks Institute.

10   O'Neil, M., and Sweetland, J. (2018). *Piecing it together: A framing playbook for affordable housing advocates.* FrameWorks Institute. See this report for additional recommendations on how to frame affordable housing.

11   O'Neil, M., and Sweetland, J. (2018). *Piecing it together: A framing playbook for affordable housing advocates.* FrameWorks Institute.

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