



BOOSTING UPWARD MOBILITY

METRICS TO INFORM LOCAL ACTION

SECOND EDITION

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Local leaders can create and bolster conditions that substantially boost upward mobility and narrow racial and ethnic inequities for children, youth, and adults. To build public will and achieve meaningful progress, communities need actionable metrics they can use to assess current conditions and monitor their progress. This brief provides a concise set of evidence-based metrics to monitor progress in the short to intermediate term on key pillars of support for mobility from poverty. It draws upon the expertise of a scholarly working group, on-the-ground testing by eight counties, and insights from other mobility initiatives under way across the country. Here, we refine and replace the framework and metrics introduced in a previous “beta” publication (Turner et al. 2020). The metrics in this brief can help communities establish priorities, set targets, catalyze action, change policies and practices, and monitor their progress over time.

Stalled Mobility from Poverty

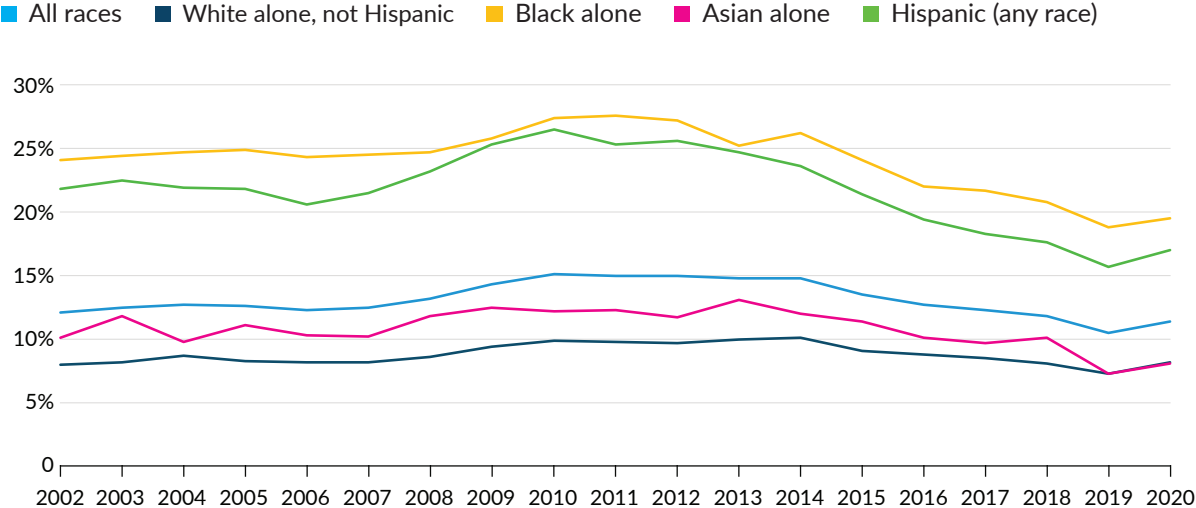
In recent decades, rates of economic mobility in the United States have stagnated, casting doubt on the promise that people who work hard can achieve security and success. Only half of Americans born in the 1980s have outearned their parents by adulthood; the vast majority of those born in the 1940s have done so (Chetty, Hendren, and Katz 2016). Adults with very low incomes rarely climb to the middle of the income distribution, much less to the top (Acs and Zimmerman 2008; Bradbury 2016). And children who grow up in poverty are far more likely to experience poverty again as adults than are children in families with higher incomes (Acs, Elliott, and Kalish 2016; Ratcliffe and McKernan 2010; Wagmiller and Adelman 2009).

People of color and other marginalized groups face especially steep barriers to economic advancement in the US. Consequently, poverty rates are substantially higher for people of color than for white people, and rates of upward mobility for people of color are lower. In particular, Black Americans and Native Americans experience much lower rates of upward mobility and

higher rates of downward mobility than white Americans (Chetty et al. 2020; Mazumder 2014). For example, two-thirds of Black children from families in the bottom income quintile remained in the bottom quintile as adults, while only a quarter of white children raised in the bottom quintile remained there (Acs, Elliott, and Kalish 2016). Further, immigrants who lack legal documentation earn 14 to 24 percent less than their documented peers (Enriquez 2015). And adults with a disability experience poverty at twice the rate of adults without a disability (Altiraifi 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the profound structural inequities in economic security and opportunity in the US. During the initial shutdowns, people working lower-wage jobs were less likely to be able to work from home and either lost employment income or had to continue working in unsafe conditions (Gemelas et al. 2021; Rho, Brown, and Fremstad 2020). Black and Brown people have lost employment income, suffered from food and housing insecurity, and gotten sick and died from COVID-19 at higher rates

Poverty Rates



Source: United States Census Bureau.
 Notes: Survey changes were implemented in 2013 and 2017.

than white people ([Morales, Morales, and Beltran 2020](#)).¹ Students of color, students with disabilities, and English-language learners have faced more barriers to successful remote learning than their counterparts, undermining their academic achievement ([US Department of Education 2021](#)).

Historically, approaches to lifting people from poverty have centered on increasing their employment and income. However, as the US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty argued, real and sustainable mobility from poverty involves more than just economic success ([Ellwood and Patel 2018](#)). The Partnership's normative

definition of upward mobility also includes autonomy and power—the ability to exercise control over one's personal circumstances and to influence policies and practices that affect one's life. And it includes a sense of belonging and dignity—being valued for one's contributions to family, community, and work ([Acs et al. 2018](#)). The lasting fallout from the pandemic recession illustrates the significance of this three-part definition of mobility from poverty. Pocketbooks and balance sheets may have recovered ([Barnes, Bauer, and Edelberg 2021](#)), but many people feel like they have less power and autonomy and less dignity than before the pandemic.²

Barriers Blocking Mobility and Sustaining Inequity

Mobility from poverty is often viewed as a matter of individual ability and effort. But people experiencing poverty face a web of barriers that often impede their best efforts and undermine families' ability to provide a stable foundation for their children's development. For example, high levels of violence in the communities where families experiencing poverty live (including violence by police) can inflict lasting damage to children's physical and mental health, undermining their ability to succeed in school, community, and work ([Jackson, Posick, and Vaughn 2019](#); [Kelly 2010](#); [Sharkey et al. 2014](#)). Poor-performing public schools deprive students of the knowledge, skills, and credentials they need to thrive in today's economy ([McCoy et al. 2017](#)). Many of the jobs available to workers with limited education pay low wages, so even two parents working full time may not earn enough to cover their family's basic costs of living ([Applebaum, Bernhardt, and Murnane 2003](#)). And when day-to-day expenses absorb all a family earns, they struggle to accumulate the savings necessary to weather unexpected setbacks, afford quality housing, start a business, or pay for their children's college education ([Lerman and McKernan 2008](#)). No single factor ensures people's mobility over the long term, because progress achieved in one area—such as education or skill-building—can be undermined by impediments in others—like a layoff, an unexpected rent increase, or the high cost of a medical emergency.

Racial prejudice, discrimination, and segregation have created especially stubborn barriers to upward mobility for people of color. Public policies and institutional practices have created and sustained profound racial inequities and injustice that span multiple domains of life ([powell 2008](#)). These intertwined barriers influence where our families can live and the resources available in our neighborhoods; what schools our children attend and their educational effectiveness ([Johnson and Nazaryan 2019](#)); what firms hire us and the adequacy of pay, benefits, and job security to support our families ([Weller 2019](#)); our access to financial services that enable us to save and build wealth for our children's future ([Hanks, Solomon, and Weller 2018](#)); the health and safety of our living environments and our ability to obtain good health care for ourselves and our children ([Bailey et al. 2017](#)); and whether police and other public officials protect or jeopardize our safety, health, and freedom ([Hinton and Cook 2020](#)). All these policies and practices have systematically disadvantaged people of color striving to achieve economic success, autonomy and power, and dignity and belongingness, creating powerful, self-perpetuating feedback loops that sustain inequity and injustice from one generation to the next.

Metrics to Inform Strategy and Measure Progress

The Black Lives Matter movement and the COVID-19 pandemic have heightened national attention to structural racism and injustices faced by people of color and other marginalized groups. In response, many communities across the country increasingly aspire to identify and dismantle the barriers that block upward mobility and perpetuate structural inequities. To do so, local leaders need actionable metrics they can use to assess current conditions and monitor progress. And defining these metrics is no simple matter. The policy reforms required to support mobility from poverty and close long-standing equity gaps rarely bear fruit immediately. Rather, they pay off over decades, through the course of people’s lives, their families’ development, and their children’s adulthood. So long-term measures of people’s mobility experiences are essential.⁴ But if metrics focus exclusively on these long-term outcomes, communities cannot assess progress along the way to learn and adapt in a timely manner or to hold local decisionmakers accountable for action. To make meaningful progress, communities need metrics that assess current barriers and monitor their short- and medium-term progress. Moreover, no single factor determines people’s mobility over the long term, so focusing on progress on only one or two factors can leave critical barriers unattended, and progress achieved in one domain may be undermined by the neglect of others.

In early 2019, the Urban Institute formed a Working Group composed of distinguished scholars representing relevant disciplines to develop a concise but comprehensive set of evidence-based metrics to track progress on mobility at the local level.⁵ The Working Group systematically reviewed factors that influence mobility from poverty for families, adults, and children. They applied rigorous criteria to reach consensus on metrics that are supported by strong evidence of predictive relationships to mobility and that can be influenced by local and state policies (Turner et al. 2020).

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Leaders in eight counties have applied this initial suite of mobility metrics to develop local Mobility Action Plans. Drawing upon the experience from these on-the-ground efforts, the Working Group reconvened in 2021 to review and update the framework and metrics. This review also considered insights from other mobility initiatives under way across the country as well as evolving scholarship to produce the revised framework presented here.

UPWARD MOBILITY COHORT

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|--------------------|----------------------|
| Alameda County, CA | Riverside County, CA |
| Boone County, MO | St. Lucie County, FL |
| Philadelphia, PA | Summit County, OH |
| Ramsey County, MN | Washington, DC |
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Framework for Boosting Mobility and Advancing Equity

This updated framework explicitly centers racial equity and the local systems and structures that either block or boost the efforts of individuals and families. It begins with the three-part definition of mobility from poverty advanced by the [US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty](#). This normative definition reflects the aspirations of people and communities across the US with whom the Partnership engaged ([Ellwood and Patel 2018](#)). The Partnership defines meaningful and sustainable mobility from poverty through three mutually reinforcing dimensions:⁶

- **Economic success.** Rising income and assets are widely recognized as essential to upward mobility.
- **Power and autonomy.** Mobility also requires control over one's life, the ability to make choices, and the collective capacity to influence larger policies and actions that affect one's future.
- **Being valued in community.** Feeling the respect, dignity, and sense of belonging that come from contributing to one's community is an essential element of mobility from poverty.

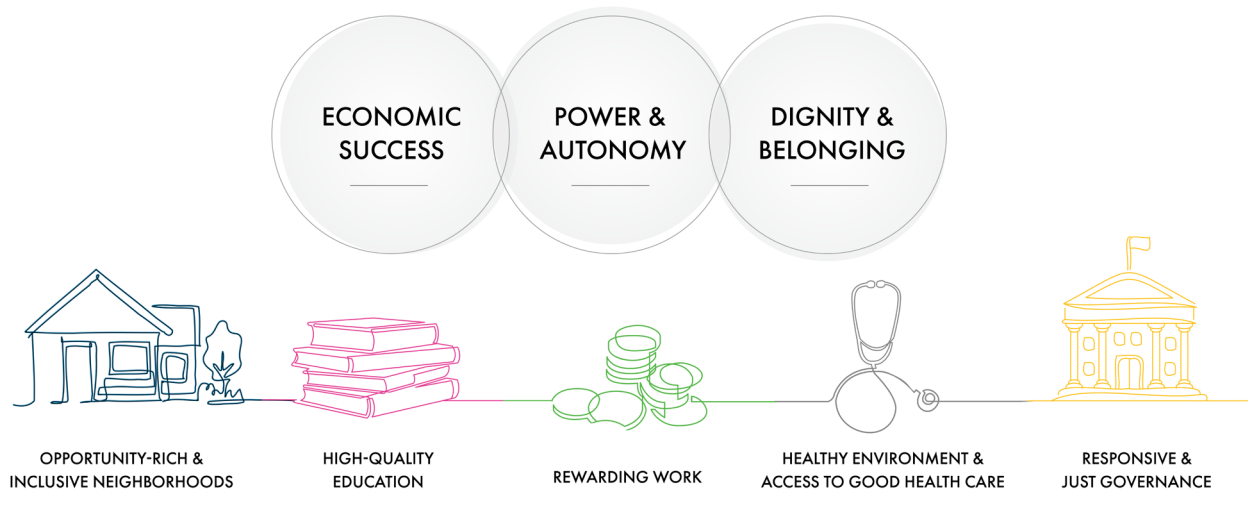
Local communities aspiring to boost upward mobility and narrow equity gaps should focus on building or bolstering five essential and interconnected pillars of support that families and individuals need to achieve economic success, power, and dignity:⁷

- **Households can live in opportunity-rich and inclusive neighborhoods.** Neighborhoods play a central role in supporting families' stability and well-being, their access to social and economic opportunities, and their children's chances to thrive and succeed ([Turner and Gourevitch 2017](#)). Neighborhoods are where children experience critical stages of socioemotional and physical development, where social ties form, and where people access resources and life opportunities ([Minh et al. 2017](#)). The ability to find and afford quality housing, to feel welcomed and respected

in one's community and social circles, and to have equitable access to local resources all reflect essential aspects of an inclusive neighborhood.

- **People of all ages can pursue high-quality learning opportunities.** Education—from prekindergarten through postsecondary—provides a crucial avenue to economic and social mobility. High-quality preschool programs, elementary schools, and high schools boost academic achievement, college enrollment, and adult success ([McCoy et al. 2017](#)). Schools also provide children and teens with networks of friends, peers, and mentors, helping to shape their social identity and feeling of belonging ([Grusky, Hall, and Markus 2019](#)). And adults can continue to build skills and credentials throughout life, expanding their prospects for upward mobility ([Baum, Ma, and Payea 2013](#)).
- **Young people and adults can pursue rewarding work.** Jobs and wages constitute the primary source of income and economic security for most people in the US today. Steady work enables people to gain skills and experience so they can advance to higher-paying jobs, building both income and wealth to support their families and boost their children's future prospects ([Chenevert and Litwok 2013](#); [Mincer 1975](#)). Work can contribute to one's sense of personal autonomy and power and provide feelings of accomplishment and dignity.⁸ Reliable income and sufficient savings enable people to better weather life's inevitable challenges and disruptions and to provide a stable and supportive home for their children ([Lerman and McKernan 2008](#)).
- **People can live in healthy environments and gain access to good health care.** Good and stable health helps people of all ages surmount life's challenges, excel in school and on the job, ensure their families' well-being, and fully participate in their communities. Environmental quality reduces people's risk of health complications that may undermine school or work

UPWARD MOBILITY FROM POVERTY



ENSURE EQUITABLE ACCESS FOR ALL, INCLUDING PEOPLE OF COLOR & OTHER MARGINALIZED GROUPS

performance ([Evans and Kantrowitz 2002](#)). Access to and utilization of health services can help parents ensure that their children receive basic care through critical formative years ([Devoe et al. 2012](#)) and enable adults to obtain the tests needed to screen for early detection of diseases, enhancing the likelihood of effective treatment ([Ettner 1996](#)).

■ People can rely on responsive and just governance.

Governance that is attentive to the needs of all community members and residents who are deeply engaged in collective decisionmaking are hallmarks of a community that supports upward mobility ([Pastor, Terriquez, and Lin 2018](#)). A responsive local government empowers the people it serves by ensuring their concerns are addressed. By allocating resources equitably, local governments can help ensure all residents have good prospects for economic success ([Hajnal and Trounstein 2010](#)). And when public institutions that are intended to serve and protect communities act with justice and restraint, residents feel that they are valued and respected members of

the community ([Goff et al. 2019](#)).

Today, in many communities across the US, one or more of these essential and interconnected pillars is failing for people experiencing poverty. For example, jobs available for people with limited education and skills may not pay enough to support a family, or the costs and time required to commute from neighborhoods with affordable housing to areas with well-paying jobs may be too high. And even where these pillars function effectively for some people, they may fail for people of color and other marginalized groups, thereby sustaining or increasing inequity. For example, public schools serving predominantly white neighborhoods may offer a higher-quality education than those serving children of color, environmental hazards concentrated where people of color live may damage children's health and undermine their ability to succeed in school, or discrimination in hiring and promotions may block people of color from occupations with rising wages.

Predictors of Pillar Strength

For each of these five essential pillars, the Working Group identified key predictors that both reflect their performance in supporting people's economic success, power and autonomy, and belonging and can be influenced by state and local policies. Predictors were selected on the basis of strong research evidence linking them to upward mobility. They are intended to help local stakeholders assess the strength of the pillars and inform strategies for repairing or reinforcing them; they are not intended for tracking individual outcomes for families, adults, or children or for evaluating the outcomes of particular programs.⁹

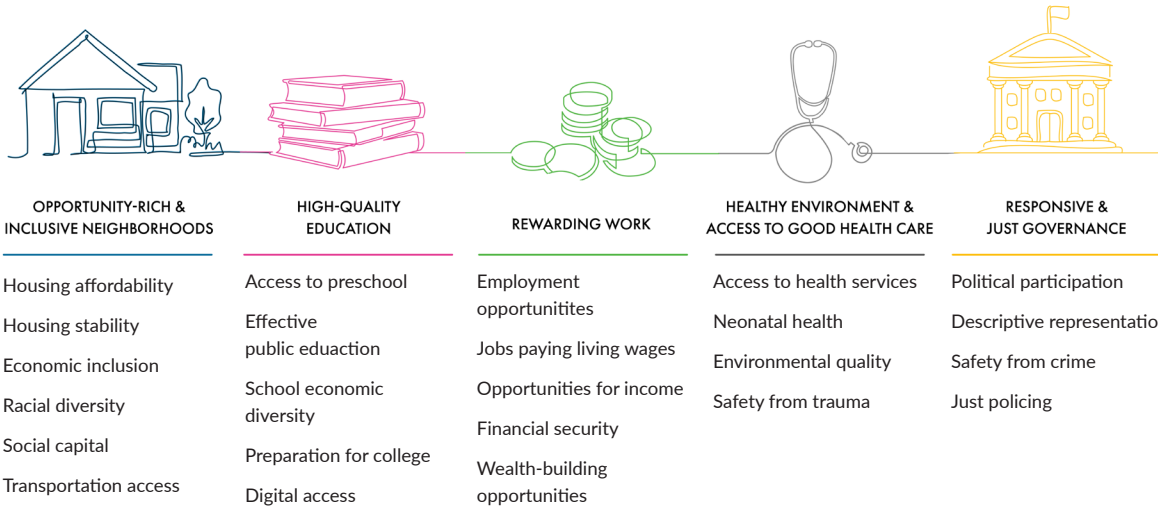
For each predictor, the Working Group also identified a metric that can be used to compare and monitor a community's performance over time. Table 1 provides a complete list of the predictors, their importance, and the metrics selected to represent them. The optimal data for measuring key predictors are not always available for the relevant geographic units; they are not always collected at the needed frequency, recency, and reliability or with sufficient coverage of demographic groups; and they are not always properly adjusted for changes over time in jurisdictions' demographic compositions. To the greatest extent possible, the Working Group selected well-established metrics that can be constructed from nationally available data sources to yield reliable and consistent data for cities and counties nationwide. The initial set of mobility metrics called for new survey data, collected locally, for a handful of predictors. However, experience from the Upward Mobility Cohort indicates that conducting local surveys with any reasonable degree of rigor and reliability imposes substantial burdens and is not feasible for most localities. Therefore, the Working Group identified replacement metrics or removed

predictors lacking viable metrics.

Most of the predictors from the original version of the upward mobility framework have been retained in this revised version. However, three of the original predictors have been removed (belongingness, family stability, and overall health), and two new predictors have been added (wealth-building opportunities and digital access). The three predictors that were dropped unfortunately lacked sufficiently strong metrics that could be consistently constructed from nationally available data sources.

- **Belongingness.** Belonging in community is a critical component of what it means to have moved up and out of poverty. And a person's sense of belonging is associated with better physical and mental health, contributes to positive academic outcomes and higher academic self-efficacy, and reduces emotional distress and risky behaviors. The original mobility metrics suite called for communities to conduct local surveys to produce a measure of belongingness, and unfortunately, no reliable substitute measures of belongingness are available for all communities from existing data sources. Still, the important role of belongingness can be incorporated when local decisionmakers gather qualitative evidence, conduct surveys for key subpopulations, or assess the impact of specific programs on participants' sense of belonging.¹⁰
- **Family stability.** Family stability shapes the environment where children spend their formative years, and family instability is associated with poor outcomes among young children, including lower cognitive test scores and more behavioral problems. To reflect stability, the original metrics suite includes measures of family structure, based on evidence of strong associations between the presence of two-

UPWARD MOBILITY PREDICTORS



parent families and positive outcomes for children. However, other family structures can and do provide the same degree of stability, and the local policies that can bolster family stability focus on the availability of quality health care, child care, housing, and financial security—all factors captured by other predictors.¹¹

- **Overall health.** Good health helps people surmount life’s challenges and excel in school and at work. When people’s health is compromised, their overall well-being and their personal autonomy are compromised. Unfortunately, our initial metric required original survey data collection, and no

reliable substitute measures of overall health are available nationally from existing data sources. Still, the local policies that can bolster individual health are captured by other predictors, including access to health services, environmental quality, and safety from trauma and crime.

Table 1 provides the final suite of predictors and defines their respective metrics. See work from Solari and colleagues (2022) for details about the criteria used to select metrics and the strengths and weaknesses of those selected.

UPWARD MOBILITY PREDICTORS AND METRICS



NEIGHBORHOODS

FAMILIES CAN LIVE IN OPPORTUNITY-RICH & INCLUSIVE NEIGHBORHOODS

PREDICTORS	METRICS
HOUSING AFFORDABILITY	
Families and individuals need the security and stability of a decent house or apartment they can afford, where family budgets are not stretched too thin to pay for other basic needs like nutritious food, health care, and educational opportunities.	Ratio of affordable and available housing units to households with low, very low, and extremely low income levels
HOUSING STABILITY	
Housing instability and homelessness represent extreme manifestations of powerlessness and the loss of dignity and belonging, disrupting family stability and undermining both physical and emotional health.	Number and share of public school children who are ever homeless during the school year
ECONOMIC INCLUSION	
Economic segregation excludes families with low incomes from well-resourced and opportunity-rich neighborhoods, undermines their sense of belonging, and creates neighborhoods of concentrated poverty and distress, which damage their children's long-term prospects.	Share of residents experiencing poverty who live in high-poverty neighborhoods
RACIAL DIVERSITY	
Racial and ethnic segregation perpetuates separate and unequal neighborhood conditions, contributing to inequities in education, health, work, and wealth and preventing people of different races and ethnicities from building the social ties that foster mutual respect, dignity, and belonging.	Index of people's exposure to neighbors of different races and ethnicities
SOCIAL CAPITAL	
Social networks help connect people across lines of income, education, and identity, enabling them to share information and other resources that support well-being, connect to opportunities for advancement, and strengthen feelings of belonging.	Number of membership associations per 10,000 people and ratio of Facebook friends with higher socioeconomic status to Facebook friends with lower socioeconomic status
TRANSPORTATION ACCESS	
Without accessible transportation options, families may be unable to take advantage of opportunities for work and education, or they may have to trade expensive commutes for other needs and goods.	Transit trips index and transportation cost index



EDUCATION

PEOPLE OF ALL AGES CAN PURSUE HIGH-QUALITY LEARNING

ACCESS TO PRESCHOOL	
Quality preschool helps families prepare their children to start school ready to learn, with the cognitive and social skills required to succeed in academic settings and beyond.	Share of children enrolled in nursery school or preschool

EFFECTIVE PUBLIC EDUCATION

Well-performing public schools support children’s cognitive and social development, providing the foundation for postsecondary and career success.

Average per-grade change in English Language Arts achievement between third and eighth grades

SCHOOL ECONOMIC DIVERSITY

Children from families with low incomes and children of color achieve better academic outcomes when they attend more economically and racially diverse schools.

Share of students attending high-poverty schools, by student race or ethnicity

PREPARATION FOR COLLEGE

Equipping young people with a high school degree and the requisite skills to enroll in and benefit from a two- or four-year college program prepares them to build the skills that lead to sustained success in the labor market.

Share of 19- and 20-year-olds with a highschool degree

DIGITAL ACCESS

Without reliable access to online resources, young people and adults are locked out of opportunities to learn, build skills, and gain the credentials they need to advance economically.

Share of households with broadband access in the home



WORK

YOUNG PEOPLE AND ADULTS CAN PURSUE REWARDING WORK

EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Work constitutes the primary source of income and financial security for most people in this country, contributing to one’s self-esteem, life satisfaction, and sense of control and to children’s well-being, behavior, and academic performance.

Employment-to-population ratio for adults ages 25 to 54

JOBS PAYING LIVING WAGES

Living-wage jobs provide opportunities for work that enable people to meet their families’ financial needs, supporting both economic success and feelings of dignity and autonomy

Ratio of pay on the average job to the cost of living

OPPORTUNITIES FOR INCOME

Families need a base level of income to meet basic needs and costs related to working, and greater incomes support higher academic achievement and educational attainment, better physical and mental health, and fewer behavioral problems in children.

Household income at 20th, 50th, and 80th percentiles

FINANCIAL SECURITY

Opportunities to accumulate even modest savings can help families weather destabilizing events, such as a period of unemployment or an unexpected expense, providing a sense of autonomy and control and supporting family stability.

Share of households with debt in collections

WEALTH-BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES

When people can build wealth over a lifetime, they are better positioned to take advantage of new career or entrepreneurial opportunities, support their children’s aspirations, retire in dignity, and pass resources on to support the continued success of the next generation.

Ratio of the share of a community’s housing wealth held by a racial or ethnic group to the share of households of the same group.



HEALTH CARE

PEOPLE CAN LIVE IN HEALTHY ENVIRONMENTS AND GAIN ACCESS TO GOOD HEALTH CARE

ACCESS TO HEALTH SERVICES

Access to health services is essential to both preventive care and treatment of health conditions, enabling people to enjoy the good health that facilitates success in school, work, and social relationships.

Ratio of population per primary care physician

NEONATAL HEALTH

Starting out life in fragile health undermines a child's prospects for longer-term health, educational attainment, and economic success, and caring for a child with chronically poor health may also limit parents' work and earnings.

Share of low-weight births

ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

Environmental hazards expose people to health risks that threaten their quality of life and may undermine school and work performance.

Air quality index

SAFETY FROM TRAUMA

Exposure to trauma affects children's brain and socioemotional development; undermines people's feelings of connection, agency, and self-efficacy; and interferes with capacities for school and work success.

Deaths due to injury per 100,000 people



GOVERNANCE

PEOPLE CAN RELY ON RESPONSIVE AND JUST GOVERNANCE

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Opportunities to participate in local political processes and decisions provide an important source of power for both individuals and communities, and children whose parents are politically engaged are more likely to become politically active themselves as they grow up.

Share of voting-age population who turn out to vote

DESCRIPTIVE REPRESENTATION

When the demographic characteristics of elected officials match those of their constituents, people feel more able to exercise power over what their government does.

Ratio of the share of local elected officials of a racial or ethnic group to the share of residents of the same racial or ethnic group

SAFETY FROM CRIME

Exposure to crime, even if one is not a direct victim, can contribute to stress, depression, and anxiety in youth and adults, and teens who are exposed to high levels of violent crime are more likely to engage in criminal activity themselves.

Reported property crimes per 100,000 people and reported violent crimes per 100,000 people

JUST POLICING

Exposure to overly punitive policing can deprive people of their sense of control and belonging in a community, and a criminal conviction can limit future economic opportunities.

Juvenile arrests per 100,000 juveniles

Using the Mobility Metrics to Inform Local Strategies

Communities can apply these metrics to catalyze and guide local strategies to increase mobility from poverty among residents. Civic and community leaders, policymakers, and on-the-ground practitioners can

- **compare** their community's metrics to peer communities to assess the extent of the local mobility challenge and build public support for tackling it;
- **reveal** persistent racial inequities and the structural barriers that perpetuate them;
- **prioritize** mobility predictors where the community's focused attention and action can have the greatest impact;
- **highlight** interconnections among predictors from different policy domains to recruit partners and identify the roles different actors can play;
- **set targets** for improving local mobility metrics and narrowing inequities as part of a strategy for meaningful changes in investments, policies, and practices; and
- **monitor** the metrics over time to assess their community's progress and hold local stakeholders accountable.

By capturing both the scale and interconnectedness of a community's mobility challenges, the mobility metrics can steer local strategies toward policy and practice reforms that meaningfully support and boost people's opportunities for upward mobility and reduce inequities. Although new programs or interventions that help a limited number of participating individuals or families can make important contributions, they rarely match the scale of the challenge and often fail to address the persistent and interrelated structural barriers that block or undermine people's mobility from poverty. Building or

bolstering the five pillars essential for supporting upward mobility and ensuring equitable access likely requires fundamental reforms to local policies, institutional practices, and decisionmaking processes. Specific solutions will of course vary depending upon local context, institutional capacities, and political constraints.

For example, communities could

- **expand access to opportunity-rich neighborhoods** by reforming zoning and building regulations so the private sector can build more housing at lower costs, establishing housing trust funds and using the proceeds to help finance affordable housing production and preservation, or enacting rent stabilization or property tax abatements that moderate housing costs;
- **improve public school quality** by investing in school facilities, staffing, and supplemental supports in schools serving children from low-income families and children of color, adjusting enrollment boundaries to make schools more racially and economic inclusive, or reforming school discipline policies;
- **increase access to living-wage jobs** by recognizing and rewarding "high-road" employers, raising the local minimum wage, extending minimum-wage coverage to more classes of employment, or passing living-wage ordinances that apply to firms doing business with local government;
- **provide healthy living environments** by subsidizing healthy meals in schools, expanding public health facilities or mobile clinics, or remediating exposure to environmental toxins (like proximity to chemical waste dumps, lead in the soil or in older homes and apartments, or air pollution from nearby highways); and

■ **make local government responsive and just**

by aligning dates for local elections with national contests to boost voter participation, training government staff to engage with service recipients in ways that respect their dignity, or investing in policies and programs to support public safety outside the criminal legal system.

The focus here on local strategies is not intended to suggest that all barriers to mobility from poverty can be overcome locally. Federal policies such as the earned income tax credit and economic policies that expand employment play essential roles. But locally controlled policies and investments can create conditions that boost rather than block residents' upward mobility. For example, the federal policy response to the economic dislocations wrought by the pandemic demonstrates what can be achieved when government devotes significant resources to alleviating hardships. Projections suggest that the poverty rate, as measured using the supplemental poverty measure, is lower in 2021 (7.7 percent) than it was before the pandemic's onset (13.9 percent in 2018; [Wheaton, Giannarelli, and Dehry 2021](#)).

The suite of mobility metrics described here should not be viewed as the only data communities will use to inform the development and execution of local mobility strategies. Rather, they perform an indispensable signaling function, directing attention to barriers that warrant further information gathering, analysis, and discussion among local stakeholders. For example, mobility metrics data led Summit County to focus on issues related to juvenile justice and mental health. The county partnered with a firm to facilitate focus groups with professionals working on these issues and supplemented those qualitative data by partnering with a survey firm to collect original data on both topics, with an oversample of people experiencing poverty. The survey found people experiencing poverty had more days of poor mental health and felt less safe than residents not experiencing poverty.

It would be a mistake to focus exclusively on the county- or citywide average values of these metrics; doing so can obscure disparities between racial and ethnic groups and across neighborhoods. Some of the metrics, like the neighborhood exposure index and the student poverty measure, have been designed to explicitly reflect racial and ethnic inequities. For others, disaggregating the data is essential for identifying persistent inequities and injustices in the structures that either boost or block upward mobility. For example, Riverside County's team overlaid disaggregated data about the cost of living by race and ethnicity with data about the cost of living for people working in different industries. This analysis revealed critical disparities across race and industry, even though average values suggested that most people could make ends meet in a community.

The perspectives and wisdom of people experiencing poverty should inform the interpretation of the mobility metrics, the collection of supplemental data, and the development of local strategies. Community members may question the accuracy of metrics data, offer more nuanced evidence, highlight disparities across neighborhoods or population groups, or prioritize critical information gaps. For example, Ramsey County's data for access to preschool showed a lower share of children enrolled in nursery school or preschool than peer counties showed, and a lower share of children of color enrolled in the county. After presenting the data to community members, the Ramsey County team realized that this predictor did not reflect the cultural context that some families are less likely to default to preschool for child care, particularly in communities with higher rates of intergenerational households. The county pivoted to try to find a metric that assessed preschool access without using enrollment numbers.

Looking backward to interrogate the history of local policies, practices, and structural barriers can also play a central role in interpreting the mobility metrics, acknowledging sources of inequity and injustice, and charting a path forward. This can be difficult work that requires resources and time for extended listening and learning, mutual respect, and healing. For example, Philadelphia engaged a consultant who specializes in antiracist results-based accountability to closely examine how the government could more systematically approach

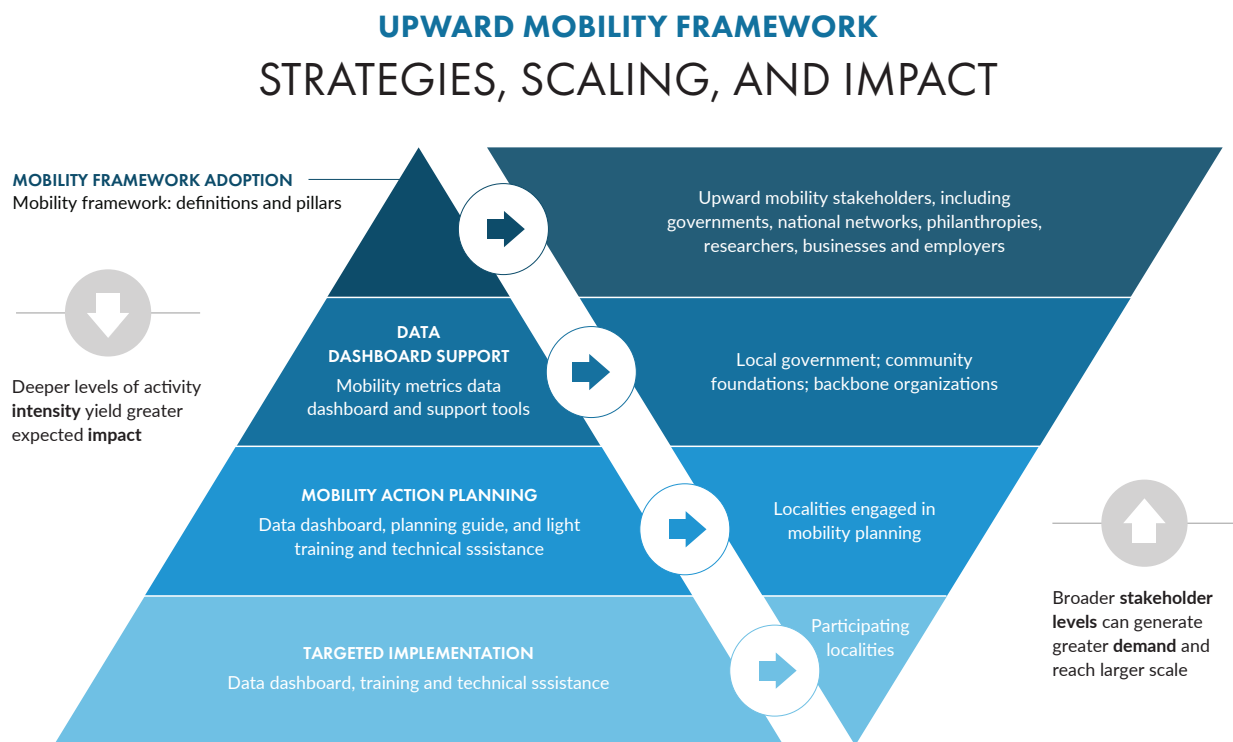
performance measurement with an eye toward ensuring that programs are adequately addressing the root causes of inequities and that performance measures can track impact.

For guidance on how communities can apply the mobility metrics to develop Mobility Action Plans, including examples from the initial cohort of eight counties, see a report by Fedorowicz and colleagues (2022).

Next Steps

Over the past 18 months, the Urban Institute has provided technical assistance to leaders in eight counties, helping them use the original suite of mobility metrics to inform local Mobility Action Plans. And we have shared lessons learned with a group of other national organizations that are supporting their own cohorts of communities to build and bolster local conditions that boost mobility and advance equity.

Looking ahead, we plan to pursue four mutually reinforcing strategies to expand awareness and adoption of the revised Mobility Metrics Framework and support on-the-ground efforts to apply the metrics and integrate them into local government decisionmaking so they help drive the changes necessary to boost mobility from poverty over the long term.



These four strategies will offer multiple “on-ramps” in order to meet the needs and capacities of different kinds of users. Potential users include national funders and intermediaries working on mobility from poverty that could adopt the Mobility Metrics Framework and align their efforts, community foundations and other civic leaders that could apply the framework to local collaborations aimed at advancing upward mobility, advocacy organizations looking to build awareness and public will for tackling barriers to mobility and equity, and local leaders seeking intensive technical assistance to develop a Mobility Action Plan for their city or county.

The highest-level engagement strategy focuses on increasing awareness and adoption of the Mobility Metrics Framework’s definition, pillars, and predictors. It aims to enable a wide universe of organizations to understand and adopt the framework itself, recognizing the importance of power and autonomy and of belonging alongside economic success and the related predictors. This strategy will support the broadest range of potential users—stakeholders representing government, national networks, philanthropies, researchers, businesses, and employers.

At the next level, we plan to offer data tools and supports to stakeholders ready to engage more deeply with the mobility metrics and begin applying them to advance mobility from poverty. This strategy makes the mobility metrics available on demand, giving users an opportunity to access the data for their locality and draw from other resources that help them interpret the data to better understand local conditions.

For localities that want to initiate a mobility action planning process, the third level will offer robust supports by complementing the data dashboard and support tools with light technical assistance and planning resources. A planning guide and other capacity-building supports will help increase take-up and use of the mobility metrics to inform and guide local action.

Finally, we anticipate that some localities will seek more intensive technical assistance to accelerate or intensify their process for developing a Mobility Action Plan. To meet this demand, Urban will partner with a small number of technical assistance-focused organizations and experienced users in a design process for an intensive technical assistance curriculum. Building on lessons from the current eight-county cohort and development of the planning guide and other on-demand supports, this design process will codify an intensive technical assistance approach and launch a train-the-trainer program to build a cadre of qualified technical assistance providers.

As this four-part strategy unfolds and as scholarship about key predictors of upward mobility continues to evolve, further refinements to the mobility metrics will likely be warranted. We welcome recommendations for evidence-based adjustments as well as lessons learned about how they can be supplemented by richer local data to fully inform community efforts to boost upward mobility for all their residents.

NOTES

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Risk for COVID-19 Infection, Hospitalization, and Death by Race/Ethnicity,” National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases (NCIRD), Division of Viral Diseases, last updated April 29, 2022, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/investigations-discovery/hospitalization-death-by-race-ethnicity.html>; Solomon Greene and Alanna McCargo, “New Data Suggest COVID-19 is Widening Housing Disparities by Race and Income,” *Urban Wire* (blog), May 29, 2020, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/new-data-suggest-covid-19-widening-housing-disparities-race-and-income>.

² Tracy Brower, “Missing Your People: Why Belonging Is So Important and How to Create It,” *Forbes*, January 10, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tracybrower/2021/01/10/missing-your-people-why-belonging-is-so-important-and-how-to-create-it/>; Megan Brenan, “U.S. Mental Health Rating Remains below Pre-Pandemic Level,” Gallup, December 3, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/357749/mental-health-rating-remains-below-pre-pandemic-level.aspx>.

³ Margery Austin Turner and Solomon Greene, “Causes and Consequences of Separate and Unequal Neighborhoods,” Urban Institute, accessed May 19, 2022, <https://www.urban.org/racial-equity-analytics-lab/structural-racism-explainer-collection/causes-and-consequences-separate-and-unequal-neighborhoods>.

⁴ For example, Opportunity Insights provides measures of adult incomes for children who grew up in specific census tracts nationwide. [Acs and colleagues \(2018\)](#) describe long-term, population-level measures of all three dimensions of upward mobility.

⁵ Other, related metrics and dashboards had previously been developed. Examples include the [National Equity Atlas](#) and the Opportunity Index. But existing metrics have not focused specifically on upward mobility, its three-part definition, or the full array of relevant policy domains. And none provided consistent data for all

localities nationwide.

⁶ To date, most research and systematic measurements have focused on economic success. Less scholarship has focused on rigorously measuring people’s power and autonomy and their sense of being valued in community, and far less is known about how to advance these outcomes. Further scholarship is required to build knowledge about how the three dimensions relate to each other over the short, medium, and long term.

⁷ Robust and equitable pillars of support at the local level increase the likelihood that people will gain key life experiences associated with upward mobility over the course of their lives. See Julien (2022) for a discussion of 28 “mobility experiences” supported by both scholarly research and a public opinion survey.

⁸ Arthur C. Brooks, “The Dignity Deficit: Reclaiming Americans’ Sense of Purpose,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/usa/2017-02-13/dignity-deficit>.

⁹ Ongoing scholarship is needed to systematically quantify the magnitude of each predictor’s impact on outcomes (within and across generations), to fully understand the causal mechanisms through which predictors affect outcomes, to explore how these mechanisms may differ for different groups of people or in different community contexts, and to assess the effectiveness of policy levers through which communities can influence these predictors. See Julien (2022) for further discussion of these outstanding research questions.

¹⁰ See work by Solari and colleagues (2022) for more information on these strategies for assessing belongingness among particular groups of people or program participants.

¹¹ See work by Solari and colleagues (2022) for further discussion of the relationship between family stability and structure.

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