US PARTNERSHIP ON
MOBILITY
FROM **POVERTY**

Creating Mobility from Poverty

An Overview of Strategies

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ABOUT THE US PARTNERSHIP ON MOBILITY FROM POVERTY

With funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Urban Institute is supporting the US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty, chaired by David Ellwood and consisting of 25 leading voices representing academia, practice, the faith community, philanthropy, and the private sector.

Partners will consult widely, seeking out diverse voices and expertise as they examine the causes of persistent poverty and stagnant mobility. Ideas will not come only from the Partners themselves: the Partnership will solicit new thinking from innovative leaders, programs, and individuals around the country. The Partnership will learn from communities and families living in poverty, from the nation's leading service providers and advocates, from a wide network of experts, and from the latest research findings. The Partnership's approach will be geographically agnostic and politically nonpartisan; its findings will be transparent and available to all.

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Creating Mobility from Poverty

Mobility *is* the American dream. It is the foundational promise of the nation: through initiative and hard work, anyone can rise from poverty and succeed. Both anecdote and scholarship show unequivocally that at least some people from all walks of life do get ahead and thrive. The American dream also contains an implicit assumption that mobility is readily available regardless of the circumstances of one's birth, and that such mobility is more common in the United States than in other nations. Sadly, research shows that the United States is not particularly strong on upward mobility for those born at the lower end of the income distribution. The odds of economic advancement differ considerably based on family, race, neighborhood, and other factors. For example, a study from the Brookings Institution showed that the majority of African American children raised in families in the bottom 20 percent of family income did not escape that income category as adults. (More than three-quarters of comparably defined poor white children escaped.)

This overview paper broadly outlines the types of strategies being used to help people move up from poverty. It lays out basic categories for classifying such programs, explains the logic of various approaches, and offers some broad pros and cons of various types of interventions. The accompanying paper, *Building Blocks and Strategies for Helping Americans Move Out of Poverty*, provides a much more detailed discussion, including examples of some well-regarded programs in each category (Bogle et al. 2016). Readers should recognize that in this report, we do not evaluate the alternatives, rank them, or recommend a specific strategy; that work should come later. Rather, this report serves as a road map for those thinking about ways to significantly increase mobility from poverty.

Pathways to Prosperity and the Larger Forces That Help Shape Them

The move from poverty in its many forms to a life of dignity, inclusion, and middle-class security must be understood as a journey rather than an event. It is a path, often poorly lit, with junctions and obstacles. For any child born in the United States today, success will require navigating a complex combination of risks, barriers, choices, and opportunities throughout life. The child's brain will develop most rapidly in the first few years when parents, family, and caregivers will be central in his or her life. Later, schoolteachers, coaches, classmates, neighbors, peers, health care providers, police officers, and dozens of other people and institutions become increasingly important. Choices and chances associated with

childbearing, marriage, and family formation generally play a critical role. Eventually employers, partners, children, landlords, and a host of other people and forces take hold. Neighborhoods determine the nature and quality of institutions and engagement outside the home, from schooling to crime and justice. National and international social, cultural, and economic forces shape or constrain opportunities, expectations, and aspirations. The ways to success for adults and their children caught in poverty often seem opaque at best. Even for an adult who once led a middle-class existence, where a fall into poverty was caused by a job loss, an injury, an illness, a family split, or the birth of a child, the route back is often intensely challenging.

The journey takes place in a context where race and ethnicity, gender, and class are interwoven. Many of the very institutions that one might expect to provide support and guidance have been intentionally or unintentionally designed in ways that isolate, divert, and weaken opportunity and mobility. The legacy of segregation and discrimination in federal, state, and local policies and practices have left too many low-income African Americans, immigrants, lone parents, and others living in neighborhoods that lack quality housing, schools, basic services, and policing. Some of the more explicit legal exclusions have changed, but their legacies persist. For example, eviction, as described in Matthew Desmond's compelling new book, and rental costs far in excess of many people's ability to pay create housing instability that often causes frequent moves, leading to children repeatedly changing schools and exposing families to highly stressful and chaotic settings (Desmond 2016). Further, schools themselves have been financed and managed in ways that often leave the lowest-income students clustered in the worst schools.

Structural racism is particularly evident in the criminal justice system, leading to highly disproportionate and massive incarceration of people of color while many low-income neighborhoods are still dangerous and crime ridden. Whatever the logic behind them, tougher drug laws and sentencing standards have clearly led to vastly greater imprisonment of African Americans and Latinos, in turn creating terrible consequences for their employability, family formation, and eligibility for various services, including housing support.

It should come as little surprise that the neighborhoods in which children grow up matter a great deal for their chances of upward mobility, as Chetty and others have demonstrated (Chetty et al. 2014). Virtually all concentrated-poverty neighborhoods in the United States are majority minority, meaning that the majority of their residents come from groups who are elsewhere in the minority. Families in such neighborhoods can get stuck in these same distressed communities for generations, unable to move up the economic ladder.

The broader economic and policy context in which people strive to move forward also greatly influences their prospects. A growing economy with expanding job opportunities offers far more chances for mobility out of poverty. According to the Economic Report of the President, between 1994 and 2000, real average annual gross domestic product growth averaged over 4 percent a year;[1] over that period, poverty rates dropped from 14.5 to 11.3 percent.[2] The recession-marred economy of the early 21st century led the poverty rate to surge above 15 percent. Now, even years into an economic recovery, it remains well above 14 percent.[3] With real gross domestic product growth forecasts averaging just above 2 percent a year (Congressional Budget Office 2016), increasing mobility from poverty will be challenging.

The number of available jobs is not the only concern: the quality of those jobs also matters for promoting mobility from poverty. The share of jobs considered middle-skill (those requiring more than a high school education but less than a four-year college degree) and paying near the average hourly wage (about $25 today)[4] is declining (Canon and Marifian 2013), and technology and globalization are often blamed. Jobs that can be automated or effectively performed by workers in countries with developing economies are at particular risk. A shortage of middle-skill jobs could pose serious challenges for workers trying to climb up from the bottom rungs of the economic ladder.

For many Americans, working does not seem to offer a guaranteed stepping stone to a better future. In their book, *$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America*, Edin and Shaefer (2015) document that a combination of low wages and employers that offer only irregular and unpredictable hours can make it nearly impossible for low-wage workers to dependably earn enough to support their families, and no ladder seems to exist for such workers to climb up.

Yet we have reason for hope. Great programs matter, and institutions can be reformed. Families might be better supported in ways that help them overcome both the personal and structural barriers they face, and the changing nature of work should offer new opportunities for higher-skill, higher-paying jobs with more value added. But for anyone seeking to expand mobility, the reality and the nature of the task are daunting.

A Brief Note on the Meaning of Mobility

The commonsense notion of mobility is captured by the idea that people "get ahead": they "climb a ladder"; they feel empowered, included, and respected; and they have a reasonable level of control over their destiny.

Scholars fight mightily over definitions and measurement of poverty and mobility. As veterans of those wars, we are not sure how enlightening those semantic fights are in deciding the best strategies to increase mobility. One issue that seems particularly contentious, and potentially important, is the question of absolute versus relative mobility.

Absolute mobility occurs when a person or family's situation improves in absolute terms: their income rises, their life becomes more stable, and they gain a greater sense of dignity or control. Sizable absolute income mobility is the easiest to understand: it's when the amount of money earned rises a lot. A family whose real income rose from $15,000 to $30,000 experienced absolute income mobility. In principle, a prosperous and growing society could have absolute upward mobility for nearly everyone simultaneously; income could grow for people up and down the income scale. That would be a situation in which "a rising tide lifts all boats." Note that rising absolute mobility does not necessarily change inequality: we might expect rapidly rising absolute mobility for those at the bottom to be associated with a narrowing of inequality, but such an outcome is certainly not inevitable. Incomes for those at the bottom could grow faster, slower, or at the same rate as incomes of those higher up in the distribution.

Relative mobility in its purest form usually focuses on movement in a family's "rank" in society. If the entire society becomes wealthier but the same people are in the bottom 20 percent, those people have experienced no relative upward mobility because their ranks are unchanged. They have more income, but others do as well. The power and leadership hierarchies probably remain the same. Indeed, the only way for one group to experience upward relative mobility is for others to move downward. There must always be a bottom 20 percent. If one group leaves the bottom quintile, some others must slip down to replace them. A rising tide could lift all boats, but unless it lifts some more than others, relative mobility is unchanged. An alternative version of relative mobility focuses on changing levels of inequality. An inequality measure of relative mobility would likely consider whether the gaps in income (or some other measure) have narrowed between people at lower and higher percentiles even if those people's ranks have not changed. If the incomes of those at the lowest income strata rise faster than those of the middle and upper classes, differences have narrowed, and so a form of relative mobility has occurred.

Similarly, poverty measures can be absolute, as they are in the United States, or relative, as they are in many parts of Europe. If the absolute poverty level is $20,000, then a family whose income rises from $15,000 to $30,000 has escaped poverty. A relative poverty level is typically defined relative to the median or mean income. Thus a family might be defined as poor if their income is less than 50 percent of the median income. People can move out of relative poverty only if their incomes rise relative to the median. By this kind of definition, poverty could actually decline in bad economic times if incomes for people in the middle were declining faster than incomes for those at the bottom.

Compelling arguments exist for many different formulations of mobility. But a natural starting point is to look for programs that significantly improve critical outcomes, such as income, education, family stability, incarceration rates, exposure to violence, or whatever other measure matters for those at the bottom. Generally, we would expect programs targeted at people with low incomes to improve their absolute position and to narrow the gap that otherwise would have stood between them and those higher up in the hierarchy. In any case, essentially all program evaluations look for changes in absolute levels.

Another debate involves what outcome is of greatest concern. Income is typically a starting point, perhaps because it is embedded in nearly all published poverty lines and it is comparatively easy to measure and understand. Many other outcomes affect most people's sense of mobility. Increased safety, better health, newly reliable housing, bankable assets, increased dignity, greater political power, a greater feeling of societal acceptance or inclusion, new pride in one's work, and value to society can all be seen as central elements of mobility, and one should be quite wary of ignoring them. If a program were to offer high levels of means-tested public assistance benefits, thereby raising incomes and lowering poverty, one might celebrate it in principle as offering mobility from poverty. But if such a program was highly stigmatizing, isolating, and actually reduced opportunities and incentives to greater independence, control, dignity, and inclusion, many observers would not regard it as offering true mobility.

Alternative Strategies to Increase Mobility

The number and diversity of programmatic interventions to help those in poverty and increase their mobility is almost overwhelming. There is no generally accepted way of classifying programs by their structure, strategy, or targets. Our team has developed a framework that combines elements of who, or what, or where an activity is targeted and its core strategic thrust or method. The breakdown is as follows:

1. **Fundamental "building blocks" for promoting mobility:** These programs are targeted primarily at one or several interrelated elements in the long chain of events, institutions, and outcomes that lead to mobility. Examples include early childhood development programs, efforts to reform schools, and employment and training programs. Virtually all successful programs have multiple elements (e.g., making child care available in employment and training programs for parents), but the pieces are typically woven around a primary goal or track.
2. **Initiatives generating comprehensive personal or family mobility pathways:** These programs tend to focus primarily on a specific individual or family and determine what combination of

services, training, and support they need to succeed. Generally, a closely collaborating "navigator" or advocate helps the person or family members determine what they want and need; that collaborator also helps the person or family find those needs either within the program or from other programs in the community. The distinctions between this category and the first are not sharp; rather, the categories exist along a continuum. In truth, as many building-block programs increasingly seek to connect support for clients to other domains, they are extending their work to more elements of a mobility pathway.

3. **Place-conscious strategies to create neighborhoods of choice and opportunity:** Programs in this domain address the combination of economic, social, and cultural structures and institutions within places (typically neighborhoods) that influence the trajectory of the residents within. These strategies can take several forms, such as fixing the neighborhood (improving all or a subset of key conditions), making conditions in the neighborhood matter less by expanding families' access to amenities and opportunities outside it, or enabling families to move to and succeed in better neighborhoods.

4. **Regional, cross-sectoral, jointly accountable partnerships:** Another visible innovation involves efforts that bring together community leaders from across multiple sectors to hold themselves accountable for setting joint goals and achieving significant results. "Collective impact" initiatives, which have proliferated dramatically in recent years, are one expression of this type of goal-oriented partnership. Typically regional, these groups are a networked combination of political and economic stakeholders and service-delivery organizations that agree to collaborate and be accountable for individual and community outcomes; the partnerships may address what happens to residents over a significant span, such as "from cradle to career." These programs are distinguished not by shared delivery but by collective responsibility for ambitious, population-level outcomes.

5. **Large-scale economic, political, and institutional changes:** These are attempts to fundamentally change the aggregate context within which mobility occurs. An obvious example is macroeconomic policy: a strong, growing economy generally greatly increases opportunities for rising incomes. These could include antidiscrimination or desegregation policies, major criminal-justice reforms, and attempts to reform major economic or social sectors in this category. Political empowerment is another element often cited as essential for creating conditions for effective transformations to mobility structures.

6. **Accountability, informational, and managerial innovations:** One of the greatest challenges in designing, managing, and judging mobility initiatives is the lack of timely and relevant data that can track successes and failures. Governments and the plethora of service providers often have massive amounts of data on usage, outcomes, risks, and interventions that are hard to access or pool. In principle, vastly improved, readily available performance and outcome measures could spur innovation, accountability, and learning.

There are many variations on these themes, and many programs have elements that might place them in several categories. We offer this framework as a way to open discussion, consider key features, and gather insights about alternative strategies.

We briefly discuss each category below. The accompanying paper, *Building Blocks and Strategies for Helping Americans Move Out of Poverty,* offers richer descriptions of the types of programs and initiatives found in categories 1 through 4 above (Bogle et al. 2016).

Fundamental Building Blocks for Promoting Mobility

We struggled while thinking about how to label this large group of primary-purpose programs. Most leaders of these programs would describe them as something far more than mobility building blocks that offer health, safety, housing, or nutrition (all invaluable services in their own right). Many would argue that those factors are "fundamental rights" regardless of their impact on mobility. Still, nearly every advocate would also point to their essential role in facilitating or supporting mobility. And in a conception of mobility as a journey with multiple elements, they can be seen as critical building blocks for success. Primary-purpose programs aim at one of the multitude of outcomes along the chain toward ultimate mobility goals. Our current language combines the "fundamental" and "building block" concepts.

As noted, no simple method exists to distinguish between programs in this category and those that might be seen as building comprehensive pathways. Although some programs are highly focused on a single element, others link in various ways to help families find additional support. Often, program staff will help with a referral if they find that a person has another problem that interferes with his or her ability to participate effectively in the primary activities. Some programs string together several elements to create a path: a program might offer remedial education, followed by technical training, followed by job placement and perhaps support on the job, even while the core focus remains finding employment. Programs exist along a continuum, ranging from very targeted to highly comprehensive and path oriented.

For simplicity of discussion, we place the overwhelming share of current programs and initiatives into this first, broad category because, for quite logical reasons, most programs and initiatives focus their energy on advancing one or two core outcomes. These programs can be highly innovative, and the most successful ones nearly always pursue several closely related blocks that work in tandem. In some cases, programs might be put into both the building-block and the comprehensive pathways list; one such example might be a comprehensive program designed to help ex-offenders and high-risk youth.

The following list gives a sense of the wide range of these fundamental building-block programs. Some focus on individuals (e.g., parenting skills); others focus on institutions (e.g., school reform):

- Family formation and stability

- Parenting skills

- High-quality child care and early learning

- Elementary and secondary education

- Postsecondary education

- Employment and training

- Wages, wage supplements, and work supports

- Cash or near-cash safety net

- Asset formation and access to capital

- Health and mental health

- Safety and justice

- Housing

- Community building and social capital

Of course, not all building-block elements have been pursued with equal intensity or resources. In the United States and presumably nearly every developed nation, the bulk of resources designed to combat poverty and enhance mobility and dignity fall into three broad categories: (1) safety-net/public assistance programs, (2) education, and (3) heath care insurance and services.

Cash and near-cash safety-net or public assistance programs, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (formerly Aid to Families with Dependent Children), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly Food Stamps), and Supplemental Security Income, raise quandaries about both goals and labels. One might put housing assistance here as well (though because such programs often limit housing choices to specific buildings or locations and thus influence neighborhood choices, schools, and much more, they are more than near-cash programs). Poverty is often defined as a lack of money, and almost by definition these means-tested programs reduce the level and depth of poverty as they raise incomes of low-income people and families. Further, these programs can be essential for mobility: Children cannot learn when they are hungry or homeless, and deprivation creates stress and uncertainty that impairs long-term decisionmaking.[5] Providing income or nutrition at a time of need is

an essential building block on a path to mobility. Children's allowances and social insurance programs can be enormously helpful in providing an essential base of income to cope with the often extreme challenges poverty creates.

Education is essential for mobility in the modern era, and its significance is growing. No institution (other than family) captures more of a child's time or provides more essential skills than primary and secondary education. And higher education is nearly essential for most higher-paying jobs today. Both reason and evidence suggest that a great school can be transformative and a terrible one can be debilitating and demoralizing. It's no wonder that so much time and energy of those who care about mobility is devoted to improving education for less-wealthy students.

Health care is vital as well. No child who is ill can readily thrive, and a sick parent cannot work or support his or her children. Providing access to high-quality health care is important not only because many see such access as a fundamental human right but also because a lack of care can derail any potential for mobility.

But the work of increasing mobility doesn't stop with those big three categories; all the less well-financed blocks also have compelling justifications. Early childhood education, criminal justice, housing, and all the rest all play an essential role in propelling prosperity.

Programs large and small have been carefully evaluated, and some show considerable promise. Primary-purpose programs have the virtue of their goals often being easy to quantify. Their focus, and the fact that some individualized services are often delivered over months rather than years, can make it comparatively easier to manage and monitor the programs and set high standards for both clients and providers. Even programs designed to change entire institutions lend themselves to continuously monitoring outcomes for those being served. And, of course, the building-block programs often align with government funding streams.

Yet there is a widespread pessimism about the nation's ability to dramatically increase upward mobility, in part because individual program effects have often been modest. Three explanations are prominent for the nation's failure to significantly alter mobility. First, some vehemently argue the nation has not done enough to support successful programs. In effect, we have failed to invest enough in the individual blocks to expand or reshape them to have the widespread impact the nation might aspire to. Second, others emphasize that focused programs have a difficult time considering individuals, families, and neighborhoods as a whole, and therefore even their best efforts are dampened or thwarted by problems outside their purview. Third, the large societal forces such as structural racism; discrimination; political disenfranchisement; and broad economic forces, including technological

change, trade, and immigration, are often claimed to be so potent that even significant reforms in individual building blocks cannot overcome the challenges.

A deeper look at the particular building blocks can help test the first explanation—we just need to do more of what works better. The companion paper to this report, *Building Blocks and Strategies for Helping Americans Move Out of Poverty*, offers insights about where one might look for an understanding of the effects of reforming and expanding existing building blocks (Bogle et al. 2016).

Still, the sheer length of the building-block list demonstrates one of the critical challenges facing almost any listed program: the inability to address other steps along the mobility path may reduce the capacity of those served to actually move ahead. Preschool programs may be successful, but gains may erode when children enter badly performing elementary schools. Job training, placement, or retention may founder if housing is unstable, a child is sick, or the car breaks down. Attempts to educate or train may be dampened or thwarted by homelessness, violence, poor nutrition, or substance abuse. Schools are ill-equipped to deal with untreated health needs. And children whose brains were undeveloped as infants may fail to thrive even later in enriched environments.

As noted, most building-block programs try to deal with some of the elements that interfere with success, such as by helping with child care or transportation. Some of them work to create thoughtful, connected steps along the mobility journey. Career pathways, an approach that provides industry-specific training, support services, and close connections to employers, is one such example. As more programs connect, the closer they become to the more comprehensive approaches discussed below. There are obvious limits, though, and stove-piped government funding streams and accountability rules can make it nightmarish to combine resources to cross boundaries. Those struggling to escape poverty may be faced with first navigating a morass of conflicting program demands and expectations.

The next three sections of this paper explore ways to create more comprehensive and integrated programs that draw together the multiple building blocks necessary to much more fully support a family, a neighborhood, or a community. Further, one simply cannot ignore the larger social, cultural, and economic context described briefly in the opening paragraphs above, and we touch briefly on those forces again in the final section. Although a great deal has been written about the nature and intensity of those forces, we as a nation are behind in overcoming them.

Nonetheless, there are at least five powerful reasons that devoting substantial resources to well-defined and targeted services and institution-building efforts can make considerable sense. First, *certain individual events or steps along the mobility path are foundational*. The timing of when women have children may have profound consequences for both a mother's and child's life chances, and often the father's,

and children's brain development in the first few years can have lifelong consequences. Changing these outcomes may reverberate loudly throughout the mobility ladder regardless of barriers or opportunities encountered along the way.

Second, *some individual institutions, notably schools, are large, and their influence extends over many years and is pervasive*. Moreover, it may be easier to change a single institution than to change a whole combination of influences along a mobility path.

Third, one may find that *certain links in the chain of events impose "binding constraints"*—the one element that stops people from moving up the opportunity ladder. For example, if young adults cannot effectively learn about what employers need and expect, they may fail in the labor market despite having the wherewithal to succeed. Well-placed support at this stage might have a surprisingly large leverage effect.

Fourth, one of the most basic of management truisms is that *organizations tend to be most successful when they try to do a few things very well*. Trying to be all things to all people is usually a recipe for failure. Professionals often specialize, as do governments.

Fifth, *individuals and groups who want to provide a more comprehensive path-based, person- or place-conscious institutional strategy still need specific building-block providers to offer services to their clients*. Without high-performing mobility elements, there is no way to build more complete pathways.

Initiatives Generating Comprehensive Personal or Family Mobility Pathways

Several programs now focus on both understanding the specific aspirations, capacities, and needs of individuals or families and providing far-reaching support that often stitches together many different building-block programs. Some of the most promising programs have a navigator or coach who helps the person advance toward independence. Working with the navigator, the person assesses his or her needs and sets priorities. Two Boston programs described in *Building Blocks and Strategies for Helping Americans Move Out of Poverty* (Bogle et al. 2016) illustrate variations on this theme.

Economic Mobility Pathways (EMPath) offers Mobility Mentoring as a key component of its theory of change, called the Bridge to Self-Sufficiency. Under this framework, coaches assist low-income women to simultaneously strengthen each of five pillars—family stability (particularly housing), well-being, education and training, financial management, and employment and career management—so deficits in one pillar do not undermine the others. Although this pathway model is led by a single agency

working with individuals and families, EMPath's approach is not self-contained. Program managers vet and refer people to high-quality partners *across multiple domains* to achieve intermediate outcomes on the path to self-sufficiency.

Another program, Roca, serves ex-offenders and high-risk youth. The program lasts four years and builds intense "transformational relationships" with a youth worker and crew supervisors. These adults will rouse participants from bed to get them to a job site, talk through emotional regulation skills, help them obtain vocational training, place them in jobs, and help them keep those jobs so they can advance.

Interestingly, both these programs not only have deeply engaged, long-term coaches, they also start with a strong base in brain science and psychology to help clients gain greater control over their lives. EMPath's model draws upon insights from behavioral psychology to overcome detrimental effects that scarcity and stress have on decisionmaking. Roca uses cognitive behavioral therapy to help clients manage their lives (and their emotions) more effectively. Lastly, both track progress systematically, often daily, and use data to monitor success and breakdowns.

Another approach is embodied by two-generation programs, which seek to simultaneously and interactively work with parents and children. These programs often provide housing assistance, postsecondary education, and job training for parents, along with help with child rearing and specialized developmental support for children. Again, such programs often involve working with a life coach. Many two-generation programs also aim to build social capital.

There is a strong prima facie logic in the combination of superb coaches, a model of change, and comprehensive data and tracking all linked to finding individualized paths out of poverty that take advantage of other resources in the community. And many of these models have shown real promise. But to date, only a few have been comprehensively evaluated. Other versions of this model operate without the heavy role of a coach or navigator; some simply create close links with sister programs and ease the problem of individuals navigating the system themselves. This can involve colocating services or offering periodic visits from staff of one program to the site of another. One would certainly expect that the importance of a coach might depend on the level of need and obstacles facing the person being served.

Serious questions remain. Creating a system that can draw effectively on a wide range of services and help individuals make changes in their lives to adapt to the very real structural and personal challenges in their lives requires exceptionally talented coaches, long-term engagement with clients, and complex management information systems. The comprehensive programs depend on the existence of high-quality building-block programs to draw upon.

The comprehensive programs are often extremely expensive. In particular, the costs associated with recruiting, training, and paying long-term coaches with manageable caseloads can be daunting. That may nonetheless make strong economic sense, even for governments, when the programs demonstrably reduce costs later, which is a particularly strong possibility for programs that reduce crime and imprisonment. More commonly, though, the diffuse benefits are hard to capture in offsets elsewhere in the system.

Scale also poses a serious question. Often, as in the case of housing assistance or addiction counseling, slots are severely limited. A great coach might get her or his clients to the head of the queue, but that may crowd out others.

Finally, and quite importantly, the strong focus on individuals does little to change the large institutions, networks, and neighborhoods that ultimately play such a critical role in limiting mobility and concentrating poverty. Nevertheless, programs such as Roca argue that they are also working to change institutions like the criminal justice system through their frequent interactions with courts and police departments, and they often form critical learning relationships with both judges and police officers.

Place-Conscious Strategies to Create Neighborhoods of Choice and Opportunity

Chetty and colleagues have added compelling new evidence that neighborhoods indeed matter to economic mobility (Chetty and Hendren 2015; Chetty, Hendren, and Katz 2016). Specifically, they find that children who move with their parents from low-mobility to higher-mobility neighborhoods do better as adults. And the earlier they move, the better their outcomes. Even within families that make a "positive" move, young children do better as adults than their older brothers and sisters do, presumably because the younger children have more time in the favorable environment. Similarly, the Moving to Opportunity demonstration had far more long-term economic payoffs for children than for adults.

If neighborhoods matter, especially for children, two strategies are obvious: improve the neighborhoods where people experiencing poverty are clustered or help them move to better neighborhoods. And while these two strategies differ operationally, both are based on the presumption that neighborhoods matter a great deal, so it seems logical to discuss them together. More sophisticated versions of place-conscious strategies recognize that these need not be "either/or" choices, nor does attention need to focus exclusively on what is happening within the narrow borders of a neighborhood.

The federal government, notably the Department of Housing and Urban Development and more recently the Department of Education, has put considerable effort into place-based strategies, creating flexible programs built upon housing or schools as anchors and connecting with other actors and institutions in the community. And across the country, several neighborhoods have been targeted for intensive restoration and improvement. Purpose-Built Neighborhoods offers compelling examples philanthropists working with local government agencies and groups within and outside the neighborhood to spur dramatic transformation.

It is easy to understand the appeal and the potential impact of both transforming neighborhoods and providing more neighborhood choices. But the financial, operational, and political challenges are intense. An essential question emerges as to who chooses how and where to change the neighborhood. How can one maintain local control and recognize the divergent wants and needs of highly diverse local communities? Political action has to be supplemented with outside support and expertise to build credible and dynamic neighborhoods.

Further, all these programs must deal with what might be called the paradox of place. In the United States, moving into and out of houses and neighborhoods is quite common, especially for upwardly mobile people. The paradox is twofold. If one is successful in helping residents of a distressed neighborhood escape poverty, their tendency to move elsewhere may make the situation within the neighborhood worse for those who remain. Conversely, if the neighborhood improves, families that are already affluent or upwardly mobile may choose to move in, in turn gentrifying the neighborhood, driving up rents and home prices, and potentially crowding out disadvantaged families before they can take advantage of their improved conditions.

Margery Turner of the Urban Institute has a helpful way of addressing these tensions through a place-conscious strategy in an unpublished summary paper written for this project.[6]

A place-conscious perspective argues for simultaneously pursuing three complementary strategies and for doing so over a long period because evidence shows that "dosage" matters:

1. **Invest in the most urgent needs of neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty.** We still have much to learn about *how* place influences economic mobility and which neighborhood attributes matter most. But what we know suggests that key factors include crime and violence, public school quality, environmental factors affecting health, and access to jobs. Sometimes, economic mobility may mean connecting residents of low-income neighborhoods to opportunity-enhancing assets in other neighborhoods (such as schools, public transit, and jobs) so that where they live actually matters less.

2. **Prevent displacement out of revitalizing neighborhoods.** When neighborhood investments start to pay off and a previously distressed neighborhood begins to attract higher-income residents, a place-conscious approach should preserve affordable housing and minimize displacement to ensure that many of the original residents can afford to stay.

3. **Help struggling families move to high-opportunity neighborhoods if they want to.** Staying in a distressed neighborhood, even if it is in the process of revitalization, may not always be in a family's best interest. Helping residents of a distressed neighborhood who want to move gain and sustain access to safe neighborhoods with good schools and other opportunity-enhancing amenities should be part of a larger vision for expanding choice and promoting economic mobility. Place-conscious strategies look beyond the neighborhoods where low-income families are currently concentrated and work to eliminate barriers that block families, especially families of color, from finding affordable places to live in high-opportunity neighborhoods.

Place-conscious policies certainly come closer than other strategies to tackling many of the underlying institutional failings and the economic and social structures that so often severely disadvantage families and groups. But the operational challenges in transforming multiple core elements of a neighborhood simultaneously have proven exceptionally great, and failures seem far more common than successes. In some circumstances, linking residents of distressed neighborhoods to amenities and opportunities elsewhere in the city or region (like a high-performing magnet school or apprenticeship program) may effectively make place matter less. But even so, neighborhood-focused efforts can quickly bring into intense conflict issues of politics, economics, and particularly race and class. Finding ways out of the paradox of place that mobility itself creates will require enormous skill and creativity and resources, but success could be transformative.

Regional, Cross-Sectoral, Jointly Accountable Partnerships

A rather different approach to coordinating often disparate building blocks to create a more coherent and more potent path for mobility has emerged in recent years. In this approach, a coalition of community leaders from multiple sectors, typically including service providers, government agencies, labor and business leaders, and other community and philanthropic leaders, forms to develop a far more effective, rational, coordinated, and accountable combination of interventions. Appropriately, the name "collective impact" is often imparted to such programs and initiatives.

Leaders of the various stakeholders agree on a common set of goals, such as a cradle-to-career system for young people in their region. They develop collective accountability measures, assign specific responsibilities to different organizations, design data and tracking systems, and employ internal and external experts to identify and craft strategies that work, negotiate turf wars, and work toward filling

gaps and eliminating overlaps. In theory, such mechanisms could be applied at smaller (neighborhood) or larger (state or national) levels, but generally they have emerged at the levels of large cities and regions.

The Strive Partnership in Greater Cincinnati, or Strive (which is also discussed in *Building Blocks and Strategies for Helping Americans Move Out of Poverty* [Bogle et al. 2016]), one of the oldest and most successful collective impact initiatives in the country, focuses on improving academic success for students in Greater Cincinnati and northern Kentucky. Strive provides a framework for building a cradle-to-career civic infrastructure with individual partners playing different roles. The program claims credit for real improvements (in the range of 10 percent) in test scores, high school graduation rates, and college attendance. The success of Strive has given rise to the StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network of 64 community partnerships in 32 states and Washington, DC.

Divergent actors willing to work in tandem, not only to achieve collective impact but also to assume collective responsibility and accountability, certainly offer the hope that a whole can be created from the often differing parts of mobility policies. Such a strategy need not cost a great deal and could create leverage and efficiencies that the stove-piped systems lose. It is a systems approach to solutions, and it begins the task of linking dispersed elements in ways that maximize their joint impacts.

What is less clear is how this actually happens on the ground and whether system-level coordination leads to clearer, more approachable paths for individuals and to constructive system changes in institutions and neighborhoods. Truly integrated systems with very diverse leadership of different elements can be notoriously hard to manage and maintain over the long run.

Large-Scale Social, Economic, Political, and Institutional Changes

In seeking to increase mobility, most programs typically accept national conditions as they exist or work to change things from the ground up. Yet nationwide systemic changes may be needed to genuinely increase mobility. Indeed, some would argue that failing to address systemic barriers may doom serious efforts. Often, these issues are at the heart of presidential campaigns and major social movements, meaning that they are steeped in controversy, often obscured by misinformation, and heavily laden with partisanship. Indeed our turbulent presidential elections often seem to revolve around these very issues.

The large forces we touched on in the early part of this paper powerfully shape what is possible and who gets ahead. The far harder issue is how one can tackle them. Problems involving race, class, gender,

power, and privilege cannot simply be accepted or ignored. Any attempt to begin to make progress must necessarily take place at many different levels. Some attempts will require large national or international movements to reshape the political and social environment; others will involve changing the narrative about the nature of poverty, deprivation, struggle, and even character. Some will involve directly confronting clear and proven bias in specific domains or sectors, such as in housing and hiring, criminal justice and political structures, enfranchisement, and access to power. Still others will require addressing specific elements of existing programs that isolate, stigmatize, humiliate, and even brutalize those seeking to move ahead. And many will require creative new strategies that encourage far greater economic, racial, and social interaction and integration.

Similarly ,the overall economy and elements such as trade and immigration profoundly influence the possibilities for mobility from poverty. In the hottest economic times of the mid-1990s, private companies desperate for workers were entering prisons to train workers soon to be released on parole.[7] Concentrated poverty actually diminished. And at the height of the Great Recession, millions of middle-class jobs were lost. These short-term dynamics interact with longer-term shifts in the nature of work and jobs. If technology is crowding out middle-skill jobs and disrupting what used to be better-functioning job ladders, solutions will require both strategies to more effectively link training to jobs and mechanisms that enable entry-level jobs to lead to better jobs, in turn creating a credible career progression. If technology and trade are tilting the wage distribution toward vastly more inequality, are there levers that might shift the pattern in the other direction? Far more demand-side solutions need to be explored, including spending on infrastructure; public service jobs; and wage subsidies that might heighten the benefits of supply-side strategies, such as training and job placement.

The desirability of restoring shared prosperity is widely accepted, but the ideas for doing so are far less developed. Any serious effort to enhance mobility from poverty must explore larger structural changes and develop the capacity to examine larger-scale transformations.

Accountability, Informational, and Managerial Innovations

The last strategy differs from the others. It focuses on driving more-integrated strategies and finding more-effective solutions by concentrating on ways to improve data systems and administration. Great organizations need to focus on outcomes. When outcomes are not easy to measure or they take years to determine, process-oriented systems can take on a life of their own.

One striking feature of our fragmented service-delivery systems is just how much data exist and how little can be accessed, matched, and evaluated. Part of the issue is privacy, but government data systems are often antiquated, poorly documented, and compartmentalized. There simply is no good way to even know how many different programs at-risk people and families interact with and how they reinforce or hamper each other.

The most successful mobility strategies typically rely heavily on data for tracking, coordination, and evaluation. Sometimes programs design and build their own monitoring systems. Others use prebuilt systems, such as Efforts to Outcomes. But the systems often end up with significant internal and external incompatibilities: for reasons including multiple mandatory data systems within one agency and across agencies, systems do not communicate with each other well if at all.

The lack of useable data also hampers evaluation. Most evaluations in social policy now require years of data collection about a program model that does not change in the light of initial results, careful randomization, and massive resources. But that is not how effective organizations learn and improve. In recent years, some of the most interesting innovations across various sectors have been enabled by widespread, real-time availability of reliable data. One can experiment with a new product design in Minneapolis stores and know immediately what happened. Big data are being used to find connections across domains that people have never explored before. Social media is being monitored to know what is happening neighborhood by neighborhood.

Thus, one final direction to consider is a big bet on technological upgrades, data matching, and systems development. With credible data, evaluation and management can be interactive as providers quickly learn where their program is working and where it seems to be failing. If the goal is to alter a long trajectory of events to enhance upward mobility, no funder or provider can afford to simply try a program for 20 years and see if it is effective. But if intermediate outcome measures were developed, collected, and easy to monitor, steps could be woven together and monitored for progress and decay.

Data cannot provide the innovation and interconnection that an effective mobility strategy requires.

But without good data, the task is likely vastly more difficult.

Next Steps

The framework developed in this paper is offered as an opening for discussion and deliberation. Groups who are serious about increasing mobility would be well served to think about the range of options before them. One striking feature of the current governmental and philanthropic landscape is how much energy and resources are devoted to enhancing building-block programs, whether through better design, extension to include one or two other building blocks, or simple expansion of high-promise initiatives. The real question is whether an attempt to dramatically enhance mobility from poverty will not inevitably require organizations to look for both more comprehensive strategies and tackle the intense challenges associated with larger social and economic forces.

Notes

1. Computed from Executive Office of the President of the United States (2016, 400).

2. See "Table 3. Poverty Status of People, by Age, Race, and Hispanic Origin," from "Historical Poverty Tables: People and Families - 1959 to 2014," accessed August 18, 2016, https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/historical-poverty-people.html.

3. Ibid.

4. "Table A-1. Current and Real (Constant 1982-1984 dollars) earnings for all employees on private nonfarm payrolls, seasonally adjusted," Economic news release, Bureau of Labor Statistics, last modified August 16, 2016, http://www.bls.gov/news.release/realer.t01.htm.

5. See especially *Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much* (Mullainathan and Shafir 2013).

6. Margery Austin Turner, "Place-Conscious Strategies for Expanding Economic Mobility" (unpublished manuscript, February 2016), Microsoft Word file. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

7. Martha Irvine, "Desperate for Workers, Companies Are Recruits Ex-cons, Former Addicts," *Billings Gazette* (Montana), November 10, 2000, http://billingsgazette.com/business/desperate-for-workers-companies-are-recruits-ex-cons-former-addicts/article_59a020b3-89a5-5daf-999b-b1bba3bc2a10.html.

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