

Promoting Neighborhood & Community Vitality

“Am I going to remain tired, or am I going to make a difference?”

President of Communities for Change, Detroit

The Paths to Leadership in Community Change (www.aecf.org)

The Data

- **Key Ingredients for vitality.** Advocates and scholars emphasize that residents should feel secure in their homes, collaborate with one another, be influential in public affairs, have supportive jobs and quality affordable goods, services, and institutions nearby, and maintain a collective moral fabric. (R.F. Ferguson & W.T. Dickens, *Urban Problems and Community Development*, Brookings Institution Press, 1999)
- **Community disinvestment and concentrated neighborhood poverty erode vitality.** In 2000 6.7 million people lived in urban high-poverty neighborhoods. These areas disproportionately experience job flight and unemployment, business and infrastructure disinvestment, under-resourced schools, an inadequate tax base, and declining collective efficacy. (G.T. Kingsley & K.L.S. Pettit, *Concentrated Poverty: A Change in Course*, Urban Institute, 2003)
- **Community disinvestment and concentrated poverty are policy decisions.** Since the 1930s public policies initially at the federal level and then at state and local levels have provided incentives for suburban housing and job growth at the expense of central cities and older suburbs and their low-income residents. (PolicyLink, *Promoting Regional Equity*, 2002)

The Issues

- **Limited fiscal capacity of central cities and aging suburbs.** Inequitable tax policies mean that these communities face aging infrastructures, deteriorating housing, unmet educational needs, and costly government services without the fiscal capacity to meet them. (www.policylink.org/EquitablePublicInvestment)
- **Poor neighborhoods underserved and overcharged by retailers.** The lack of competitive retail offerings negatively affects prices, with inner city residents paying up to 40% more for basic grocery items than their suburban counterparts. More than 25% of retail demand is unmet in inner cities. (Boston Consulting Group & ICIC, *The Business Case for Pursuing Retail Opportunities in the Inner City*, 1998, www.icic.org)
- **Neighborhood address, stigma, and discrimination.** Lower-income neighborhoods experience zip code discrimination in auto insurance (www.consumersunion.org/pub/core_financial_services/000683.html), homeowners insurance (*Homeowners Insurance Study 1996*, www.fhcsp.com), and job hiring (*Discrimination in the Job Market*, 2003, www.povertyactionlab.com/projects).
- **Persistent poverty and reduced community organization.** Over time persistent poverty in a neighborhood generates self-reinforcing processes by undermining key features of community social organization: mutual trust, shared expectations for social control, and neighborhood engagement. (R.J. Sampson & J.D. Morenoff, “Durable Inequality” in *Poverty Traps*, Princeton University Press, 2004)

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Options for Philanthropy

- **Producing local area data for planning and priority-setting.** Effective community action begins with good data and the ability of community stakeholders to use it for planning, action, and evaluation. A Guidebook for Local Learning Partnerships covers issues of collaboration and the nuts and bolts of building a data warehouse and using data strategically (see www.aecf.org/initiatives/mc/llp/guidebook.htm).
- **Supporting equitable neighborhood development.** A community cannot thrive if its neighborhoods don't. Equitable development is undertaken in a variety of ways: affordable mixed-income housing, tax innovations, local hiring strategies, neighborhood stabilization, community development financial institutions, to name a few. An Equitable Development Toolkit is available at www.policylink.org/EDTK/tools.html
- **Strengthening leadership from excluded and isolated communities.** A range of methods can be used to help local leaders learn new skills and meet the challenges facing them. *The Paths to Leadership in Community Change* (www.aecf.org/publications/data/leadership_paper.pdf) and other resident and parent engagement approaches (www.aecf.org/initiatives/leadership/programs/parent.htm) provide examples of approaches taken and lessons learned in capacity-building.

Key Resources

- **National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership.** A collaborative of the Urban Institute and local partners to develop and use neighborhood information systems for policymaking and community building. Includes guides to building and operating neighborhood indicator systems and building community capacity to use information. (www.urban.org/nnip/)
- **PolicyLink.** Focuses on neighborhood regional equity and offers tools for equitable neighborhood development, equitable public investment, fair distribution of affordable housing, and community strategies to improve health. (www.policylink.org)
- **Annie E. Casey Foundation.** Publications and tools from the Making Connections and Rebuilding Communities initiatives provide lessons learned, promising practices, and guiding principles for promoting neighborhood and community vitality. (www.aecf.org)
- **National Community Building Network** (www.ncbn.org) and the **Aspen Roundtable on Community Change** (www.aspenroundtable.org). Both offer a solid understanding of the field of community building and access to an array of tools and information for local community builders.



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