

Irwin Kirsch & Henry Braun, Editors

The Dynamics of Opportunity in America

Evidence and Perspectives



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This book is dedicated to our colleague and friend Andy Sum. Andy worked closely with us on the America's Perfect Storm report and helped to inspire this initiative with his commitment to understanding the factors influencing opportunity in America and his passion for sharing what was learned to inform the public discourse.

Preface

Opportunity has long played a central role in the American experience. Although the playing field has never been entirely level, most Americans still believe that with hard work, some intelligence, and a little luck, it is possible to make a better life for oneself and one's family. That is, the American Dream is alive and well. This was certainly the case in the decades following World War II, when the American economy grew strongly and, to a reasonable extent, prosperity was shared among all income groups. However, after 1980 things began to change. For one thing, the productivity gains recorded by the economy since then have not been shared equally, resulting in greater inequality in both income and wealth. For another, economic restructuring, due in part to the forces of technology and globalization, has increased the premium to high skills, while those with weaker skills have lost ground in real terms. In addition, policy choices at various levels of government, as well as changing business practices, have generally contributed to the growing divergence in economic outcomes.

One question many are asking is: Does this really matter? In fact, recent data tells us it matters a great deal. There is strong evidence that a family's circumstances are increasingly predictive of the human and social capital that will be accumulated by its children and, consequently, their own prospects as adults. Today, a large proportion of a new birth cohort will grow up in circumstances that will give them a small, if not negligible, chance of following a trajectory that will lead them to a markedly better place than where they started. In other words, the playing field has tilted sharply, making it more difficult for many to have a decent chance of realizing the American Dream. The devastation wrought by the Great Recession of 2007–2009, along with the slow recovery that followed, has only added to the pessimism of the general public regarding the future.

It is in this context that, in 2013, Kurt Landgraf, then President and CEO of Educational Testing Service (ETS), decided, with the full support of the ETS Board of Trustees, to fund an initiative now titled *Opportunity in America*, which builds on

a report issued by ETS in 2007 titled *America's Perfect Storm*.¹ That report examined the likely impact of three powerful forces on the prospects for the future. Those forces were (i) wide gaps in literacy and numeracy among both school-age and adult populations, (ii) seismic changes in economic activity and the restructuring of labor markets, and (iii) demographic trends leading to a population that, over a generation, would be somewhat older and much more diverse. The authors argued that, left unchecked, the convergence of these forces would drive the country on a path leading to lower average cognitive skills and greater polarization, economic and otherwise, with grave implications not only for millions of individual lives, but also for society as a whole.

Under the direction of a national advisory panel, this initiative looks more deeply into the dynamics of how human and social capital are developed, along with their growing influence not only on adult outcomes but also on the transmission of opportunity to the next generation. An overarching goal of the initiative is to contribute to public understanding of how these dynamics drive inequality of opportunity where, by opportunity, we mean pathways to the accumulation of human and social capital.

This volume is one of several products planned for the *Opportunity in America* initiative. It contains 14 chapters, including an epilogue, written by leaders across a range of fields including education, economics, demography, and political science. They bring a variety of historical, theoretical, and research perspectives to the discussion of inequality of opportunity. As a set, these chapters not only illuminate key aspects of the problem but also offer suggestions of what policies, programs, and/or changes in practices could begin to reverse the trends we are seeing. Written in an engaging style, this volume constitutes an essential foundation for informed discussion and strategic analysis.

* * *

We extend our deep appreciation to those who contributed to the ETS initiative now known as *Opportunity in America*. We especially wish to thank the authors who contributed to the development of this volume and to acknowledge the guidance provided by the members of our National Advisory Panel, whose names appear in the appendix. We enjoyed the opportunity to collaborate with all of them. In addition to Kurt Landgraf, who, with the full backing of the Board of Trustees, provided the funding and support necessary to conduct this phase of the work, we also wish to thank Walt MacDonald, the current president and CEO of ETS, and Ida Lawrence, Senior Vice President for Research and Development, for their continued interest and support of the initiative.

Special thanks also go to our colleagues at ETS for their excellent work on various aspects of the project including contacting and supporting the national advisory panel members and the authors, arranging their travel and contracts, as well as for their planning and supporting the meetings and seminars that were held in Washington, DC, and at Educational Testing Service in Princeton, NJ. These

¹ Irwin Kirsch, Kentaro Yamamoto, Henry Braun, and Andrew Sum, *America's Perfect Storm* (Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 2007).

individuals include Marylou Lennon, Judy Mendez, Anita Sands, and Judy Shahbazian. We also wish to extend our gratitude to Larry Hanover for his careful handling of the review and editing process for each author and to Clara Sue Beym for her watercolor that graces the cover of this volume.

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Editors' Note

In December 2015, just before this book went to press, the Every Student Succeeds Act, the successor to No Child Left Behind, was passed by Congress and signed by the President. Although it continues some of the testing requirements and disaggregated reporting of NCLB, it severely curtails federal oversight of state accountability systems. We offer this note to provide context when reading certain chapters, written several months earlier, that address NCLB and related issues. For a detailed summary, see http://edworkforce.house.gov/uploadedfiles/joint_esea_conference_framework_short_summary.pdf.