

# For Love of Country: A Path for the Federal Government to Advance Racial Equity

Executive Summary

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# Executive Summary

The ideal of an equitable America that works for all is fully realizable and embodied in our Constitution. Achieving that ideal requires deep love for our country and all who live here. It also requires understanding the root drivers of persisting gaps and racial inequities. Amid a global pandemic, increasing economic inequality, and a climate crisis, the past year has laid bare widespread inequities and structural racism<sup>1</sup> in our nation that is harming all – including White Americans – at alarmingly high rates. Persisting inequities in the country could depress the U.S. economy by as much as \$5 trillion over the next five years and exacerbate the harm for all.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the opportunity for equity is vast, with the opportunity to uplift more than 100 million people – or one in three people in the U.S. – who are “economically insecure,” defined as having a household income below 200 percent of the federal poverty line.<sup>3</sup>

The United States is at a crossroads, with a historic and unprecedented opportunity to usher in a new era of equity that uplifts all people. This momentum has already begun across all sectors – for instance, in 2020, Fortune 1000 companies committed over \$60 billion to racial equity initiatives.<sup>4</sup> The current moment – on the heels of an unprecedented global pandemic and a renewed societal recognition of racial inequities – coupled with the Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities, presents an opportunity to create a more perfect union that benefits all.<sup>5</sup>

The federal government can lead the way. Realizing that any transformative journey requires an understanding of our starting point, and building on our vast portfolio of equity work that spans more than 20 years, PolicyLink has developed and offers a suite of resources for how the federal government and its agencies can respond to the executive order and begin the multiyear effort to build a more equitable

society. These resources include a blueprint that can guide the racial equity journeys of federal agencies, a workshop facilitation manual that agencies can use to begin developing their blueprints, and a comprehensive narrative report that examines the federal role, key outcomes, and opportunities associated with achieving equity.

### **Equity is about creating a nation that works for all.**

Equity has been central to our nation, enshrined in our founding era as a core principle of the country. An equitable society is one where all citizens – regardless of race – can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential. But the reality is that our democracy has not always served all of our people, particularly people of color. Achieving equity will require lifting up the 100 million people who are “economically insecure” – of whom, 55% are people of color (50% of all people of color in the U.S.) and 45% are White (25% of the White population).<sup>6</sup>

### **The federal government can be a pivotal leader in creating a more perfect union.**

Across its many roles – from employing nine million people to spending more than \$4 trillion annually on programs, policies, and regulations – the federal government influences nearly every economic and social issue that impacts those who reside within America’s borders.<sup>7</sup> The core mission of the federal government has historically been to serve all American people, and the government has been advancing equity in our nation for years. This moment and the current focus on racial equity is an opportunity to accelerate this work and design a nation that works for all. Though a monumental task, the federal government has the capacity to lead the country in transformative change and has done so in the past – for example, driving policies and programs that created a large middle class throughout the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup>

### **The opportunity for equity is significant for our economy and democracy.**

Designing a more equitable nation means understanding the current state of the most critical socioeconomic outcomes, the root drivers of persisting gaps, and what is possible in the future. These key outcomes span across four categories.

- 1 Creating engaged communities of opportunity** of systems, rules, and norms that enable development and govern residents (e.g., transportation and digital infrastructure, housing security, food security, civic engagement)<sup>9</sup>
- 2 Unlocking human potential** through systems that create productive and resilient human capital and income ( e.g., health, higher education)<sup>10</sup>
- 3 Driving an equitable economy** that supports investment, innovation, and economic activity (e.g., entrepreneurship, research and innovation.)<sup>11</sup>
- 4 Ensuring equitable financial services and social supports** that reduce economic volatility and enable wealth creation (e.g., financial inclusion, social safety nets and supports)<sup>12</sup>

Decades of research from experts, community leaders, and academics have highlighted that these outcomes not only matter for a person’s quality of life and economic mobility but also are interdependent and reinforcing.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, historically and currently, the federal government has long played a central role in shaping these outcomes – from the New Deal to a century of housing policy to the COVID-19 vaccine roll out strategy – in positive, negative, and seemingly neutral ways.

**Enduring impact on racial equity requires addressing the consistent root drivers of persisting gaps** across outcomes, which disproportionately affect people of color but harm all, as opposed to the symptoms. Across socioeconomic outcomes, persisting gaps and disparities are often driven by three consistent themes:

- Inequitable laws, policies, and programs (e.g., limited incentives for change, uneven distribution of economic and political decision-making power)
- Uneven distribution of resources (e.g., lack of individual income and resources for programs)
- Limiting mindsets and beliefs (e.g., bias and racism within interpersonal interactions)

**If root drivers of inequities are addressed successfully, the opportunity is vast.**

# Addressing root drivers of inequity could mean...



**19 million**

additional renter households are no longer struggling to pay rent<sup>14</sup>



**63 million**

additional people have continuous access to clean drinking water<sup>15</sup>



**28 million**

more people with access to health insurance can afford needed medical care<sup>16</sup>



**10 million**

children lifted out of poverty<sup>17</sup>



**14 million**

individuals gain access to a bank account<sup>18</sup>



**42 million**

individuals with access to high-speed broadband<sup>19</sup>

## A blueprint for racial equity can guide this work for federal agencies.

Grounded in the understanding of their roles and the opportunity at stake, federal agencies can begin to reimagine and transform their organizations to drive toward an equitable society. Every major change effort needs a set of guiding principles and a clear plan of action. This was reflected in our panel of ~80 current and former federal employees, over 50 percent of whom felt their agencies were not yet prepared to approach racial equity and needed resources to get started.<sup>20</sup>

Our report and blueprint for action provides agencies with guidance that can help them embark on their multiyear journeys:

# North Star

A nation where all people can participate, prosper,  
and reach their full potential

*Consistent across federal government*



## Guiding Principles

**Set of common principles that serve as a timeless touchstone and guide a consistent, coherent approach**

Understand the past, present, and your influence

Consistently address root drivers

Work in partnership with impact in relevant communities

Adopt a continuous learning and adaptive approach

Be transparent and accountable

*Agency-specific*



## Strategic Vision and Action Plan

**Concrete roadmap for how to achieve racial equity strategically at the agency level, created through five steps**

- 1 Understand mission and role in shaping racial equity
- 2 Understand starting point and the root causes of inequity
- 3 Set a bolder, re-imagined future aspiration for the agency's path to equity
- 4 Define strategic goals and flagship initiatives that can drive change
- 5 Create a roadmap for execution to drive results



## Execution and Enabling Infrastructure

**Execution of the strategic vision and action plan and enabling infrastructure of capabilities, tools, and stakeholder engagement to drive success and accountability**

Build skills, capacity, and change mindsets

Reinforce strategic goals through processes

Implement mechanisms to monitor and course-correct

Set a concrete plan and cadence for engaging a wide range of stakeholders

We have built on our decades-long work and expertise in racial equity to develop these resources. Though this is a multiyear journey, every step counts, and federal agencies can take immediate action to begin this work.

Above all else, the federal government can ensure that its work continually strives to improve outcomes for all Americans, including those who have been historically underserved. Achieving racial equity in America is not only possible, but critical to further the progress of our great nation and to protect the enduring stability of our multiracial democracy. This is an opportunity to design a nation that works for all.

# Endnotes

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