

# Inequality Matters

Prudence L. Carter and Sean F. Reardon  
*Stanford University*

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Direct correspondence to [plcarter@stanford.edu](mailto:plcarter@stanford.edu) and [sean.reardon@stanford.edu](mailto:sean.reardon@stanford.edu).

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# Overview

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Talk of inequality, particularly economic inequality, in the public sphere is commonplace in twenty-first century America. Indeed, various aspects of social inequality—race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and immigrant status—have been the subject of protest, debate, legislation, and judicial action for much of the last century. Inequality in its various forms—and what to do about it, if anything—is often the animating force behind much of contemporary political debates and social movements. These debates take place against a backdrop of fitful progress and retreat in America’s long struggle with inequality.

Although we have made some significant progress on racial equality in the last 60 years—in education, health, legal rights, and housing access—much of that advancement stalled in the 1970s and 1980s, leaving us far from racial equality in any particular domain that influences life chances. Economic inequality in the United States, meanwhile, has been growing steadily for nearly 40 years, challenging the idea that America is a land of economic opportunity. Traditional patterns of gender inequality have been eliminated or even reversed in some aspects of education and health, but remain stubbornly persistent in the segmented labor market, wage structures, and politics, for example. The lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities have attained some semblances of equal protection in some spheres, but they still face enormous bias and invisibility in many others. In short, we still have a long way to go on the questions and practices of social equality.

The causes and consequences of these trends in social inequality in the United States have been the subject of a large body of scholarship. Every academic

discipline—including sociology, economics, political science, psychology, anthropology, history, philosophy, epidemiology, public health, education, and public policy—includes a rich body of work addressing the definitions, patterns, causes, and consequences of social inequality. Given this extensive scholarly attention, one would think that we know a great deal about social inequality and maybe something about how to reduce it. While we have increased our knowledge about inequality, there are some aspects of inequality about which we have insufficient knowledge. We have produced considerably less research to inform policy and practice about interventions to reduce it.

Our aim in this paper is to describe, in very broad brushstrokes, the state of academic scholarship regarding social inequality, with an eye toward identifying important gaps. We focus on four key interacting social domains: (1) socioeconomic (financial and human capital), (2) health (including physical and psychological), (3) political (access to power and political representation), and (4) sociocultural (identity, cultural freedoms, and human rights). Our reading of the research reveals that the evidence regarding inequality, its causes, and consequences is mixed. In many cases, divergent findings can be attributed to conceptual and methodological differences among studies. In other cases, there is simply not enough high-quality research, often due a lack of relevant data, to form firm, evidence-based conclusions.

We identify four notable gaps in the scholarship on social inequality. First, we know far too little about inequality of opportunity, relative to what we know about inequality of outcomes. More focused attention, we argue, should be given to unpacking the ecology of economic, political,

social, and cultural influences that shape individuals' and communities' life chances and welfare. Evidence of unequal outcomes is insufficient for a full understanding of the processes that produce these inequalities. Second, the scholarship of the last few decades has been much more successful at documenting the patterns, trends, and (to some extent) causes of social inequality than it has been at demonstrating its consequences or identifying effective strategies for reducing it. Research on strategies for reducing inequality has largely focused on evaluating policies and interventions designed to improve life chances for those at the bottom end of the inequality distribution. Much less research has addressed broader strategies for reducing inequality.

Third, scholarship on the causes and persistence of inequality has focused too little on inequality-preserving social processes that are difficult to observe—such as the roles of elites, private institutions, and corporations in shaping the policies that produce and reinforce inequality—or social and historical reproduction processes that create and maintain “common sense” notions of the sources of inequality. For example, some popular narratives frame the black-white academic achievement gap and racial and economic inequality as “natural” facts that result from inherent group differences, rather than viewing them as socially constructed patterns produced by generations of unequal opportunities. Fourth and finally, the *problem of inequality* has been framed in both scholarship and in public discourse as a *problem of poverty* (or some other form of social disadvantage). In other words, scholarship often asks “why are the poor poor?” and “what are the consequences of poverty?” rather than “why are socioeconomic conditions, health outcomes, and the distribution of political power so unequal?” or “what are the consequences of inequality for society?” This framework narrows the scope of research, and thereby limits our understanding of the issue.

# What Do We Mean By “Inequality”?

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In discussing social inequalities, it is important to make two distinctions. First is the difference between the unequal distribution of desirable life *outcomes* (such as health, happiness, educational success, or material possessions) and the unequal distribution of *opportunities* (access to power and life chances that facilitate attainment of desirable outcomes). Second is the distinction between the unequal distribution of opportunities and outcomes *among individuals* and *between groups*. The idea of equality of *outcomes* versus equality of *opportunities* appears straightforward, but can be complicated to pin down in practice. In part this is because opportunity is an inherently slippery notion, making it very difficult to precisely measure equality of opportunity. Opportunity can also be a feature of an *interaction* between an individual and his or her context, a point Jencks (1988) makes in his illuminating discussion of the complexity of defining equality of opportunity in education. Because individuals have different backgrounds, resources, and dispositions, the same environment may not provide “equal opportunity” to each individual.

The mere unequal distribution of outcomes (such as health status) does not necessarily imply inequality of opportunity. For example, in a society in which everyone had equal access to quality healthcare, some individuals may be healthier than others as a result of luck, genetic factors, or personal choices. Nonetheless, such unequal outcomes may lead us to suspect that opportunities for living a healthy life vary significantly among individuals, in ways that do not all derive from chance. The fact that the top 1 percent of earners earn 22 percent of all income in the United States (Piketty & Saez 2013) is evidence of a distributional income inequality. A host of material, social, historical, and political conditions has increased the likelihood of disproportional access to opportunities, producing this distributional inequality.

The second distinction—inequality among individuals and inequality between groups—is useful for understanding the patterns and causes of inequality. However, inequality among individuals need not imply between-group inequality, which is present when race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and immigrant status correlate strongly with unequal access

to power, resources, and life chances. Between-group inequality includes racial or gender income differences, immigrant group differences in access to political power, religious group differences in social or political rights, and socioeconomic differences in access to quality education and health care.

Given evidence of the unequal distribution of life chances, power, and resources, scholarship should be able to explain the extent to which inequality arises from differing access to opportunity or other factors (such as luck or variation in choices that individuals make even in the presence of equal opportunity and information). Moreover, it should be able to identify whether the key processes at play are group- or individual-level processes.

In the case of between-group inequality of outcomes, scholarship should examine the sources of this inequality. Certainly, unjust laws and economic, social, and political practices laid the foundation for the gradients of between-group inequality in the United States. Racial inequality is rooted in slavery, colonialism, and conquest (Frederickson, 1981; Omi & Winant, 1994; Takaki, 1987). Gender inequality certainly derives in part from a history of cultural norms in the family and other domains of the private sphere and institutionalized sex discrimination at work, school, political arenas, and so on (Andersen & Collins, 2012; de Beauvoir, 1989; Hochschild, 1973).

Despite tangible changes in many legal and explicit institutional barriers to equal opportunity and access (e.g., the Fourteenth Amendment, the Nineteenth Amendment, the Civil Rights Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the legalization of gay marriage in many states), inequality persists. Certainly there have been tangible improvements in many dimensions of outcome-based inequality—racial and gender gaps in income, health, education, and political representation have all narrowed in recent generations, for example—but they have not disappeared. Further, it is very difficult to estimate both the contemporary and cumulative effects of prior forms of discrimination on different groups.

# Four Domains of Social Inequality

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Here, we highlight four key domains that constitute much of the ecology of inequality: (1) socioeconomic, (2) health, (3) political, and (4) cultural. Before delving into each domain, however, we note that our terminology describing each domain is necessarily broad. By “socioeconomic,” we mean wealth, income, and work in addition to schooling and education. The “political” domain encompasses not only participation, power, legal and civil rights, but also resources, in addition to social and public policy. The “health” domain incorporates both physical and mental well-being. Finally, “sociocultural” includes power, the structure of stereotypes, media control and representation, and access to cultural tools. We focus on these four areas because of their intersections and far-reaching implications.

## Socioeconomic Inequality

Many scholars argue that socioeconomic disparities are the primary domain of inequality—the one that drives or reinforces inequality in other domains. Socioeconomic inequality refers to the unequal distribution of economic resources (e.g., money, usually measured by income or wealth, and access to credit), opportunities to build human capital (e.g., from schooling, technology, and job training), and social resources (e.g., access to social capital and information).

The United States has higher income and wealth inequality than almost all other developed countries. In the last 40 years, our inequality level has grown dramatically (Gottschalk & Danziger 2005; Piketty & Saez 2003, 2010; Western, Bloome, & Percheski 2008). Despite economic growth in the late twentieth century, the gap between the poor and the affluent has widened precipitously, with potentially substantial negative consequences for those at the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy. The distribution of financial resources is so skewed that the wealthiest 20 percent of U.S. households hold 89 percent of the country’s wealth (and 95 percent of the nation’s non-home wealth) (Wolff 2013). Research on income inequality in the United States clearly demonstrates a dramatic increase in the gap between the most affluent and the rest of the population since the late 1970s. It appears this increase is due mostly to the rapid rise in income from wages, salaries, and

investments and accumulated wealth in the top 10 percent of the population—particularly in the top 1 percent (Piketty & Saez 2013). Finally, although income and wealth inequality has grown in many countries, few have seen inequality rise as rapidly in the last few decades as the United States.

### *Between-Group Socioeconomic Inequality*

There are substantial racial/ethnic, gender, and national origin disparities in material resources (Carneiro, Heckman, & Masterov 2003; Neal & Johnson 1996; Sharkey 2008), labor market opportunities (Pager 2003); and educational outcomes (Jencks & Phillips 1998; Magnuson & Waldfogel 2008; Reardon & Galindo 2009; Reardon, Robinson-Cimpian, & Weathers forthcoming). Likewise, the socioeconomic status of one’s parents is strongly predictive of one’s own material well-being, earnings (Chetty, Hedren, Kline, & Saez 2014), educational achievement (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Reardon, 2011), and health (Adler & Newman 2002; Deaton & Paxson 1998; Fiscella & Williams 2004; Williams & Collins 1995). Because of high levels of racial and socioeconomic segregation, most black, Latino, and poor children grow up in low-income neighborhoods (Logan 2011; Logan & Stults 2011; Reardon & Bischoff 2011). Moreover, racial disparities in neighborhood conditions are persistent. More than 70 percent of black children who grow up in the poorest quarter of American neighborhoods remain there as adults, compared to 40 percent of whites (Sharkey 2008). These racial disparities in neighborhood economic conditions lead to disparities in the availability of local resources, such as schools, parks, and health care institutions.

There are also significant differences in employment rates by race. In 2012, the unemployment rate for blacks was twice that of whites (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). Racial differences in wealth are much larger than the differences in wage earnings. In 2010, for example, median white household wealth (\$97,000) was 20 times the median black household wealth (\$4,900) (Wolff 2013).

Socioeconomic inequality also plays out by gender. Disparities in economic resources (income and wealth) typically favor men. In 2010, women earned 81 percent of the median weekly earnings of their male counterparts.

In 1979, the first time comparable data became available, women earned 69 percent of the median weekly earnings of their male counterparts. Thus, things have improved, but inequality persists (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). The long history of discrimination that produced these inequalities has also served to reify them, causing them to appear to be “natural” patterns rather than artifacts of a social system. This then tends to sustain such inequalities, even as the structural barriers that produced them (slavery, *de jure* segregated schools, and the disenfranchisement of women) are removed. Thus, despite improvements, the growing income divide maps onto ongoing inequalities, circumventing past progress toward more equality along racial and gender lines.

It is important to note that educational inequality—as measured by the dispersion of educational attainment—has not widened in recent decades. Moreover, racial and gender disparities in educational outcomes have narrowed, often substantially, in the last 40 years. White-black and white-Hispanic academic achievement gaps have fallen by one-third to one-half in the last four decades (Reardon et al. forthcoming). Racial disparities in high school graduation and college enrollment have likewise narrowed in the last decade or two (Murnane 2013; National Center for Education Statistics 2012). Educational disparities that have adversely affected females historically have also decreased. Among most racial and ethnic groups, females are graduating and attending college at higher rates than males. However, their representation in various disciplines or majors, especially science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), is significantly lower. Paradoxically, while women have higher levels of educational attainment, on average, the economic returns to education are lower for them (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; J. A. Jacobs, 1996; Mickelson, 1989). It is possible that even more progress might have been made toward closing these gaps if not for the widening overall economic inequality of the last 40 years.

## Health Inequality

### *Distributional Health Inequality*

Second, we consider the health domain. There is, of course, considerable variation in health among individuals. Some of this variation is due to age, biological factors, personal choices, and the vagaries of luck. Of concern to us, however is the extent to which health disparities—in both access to healthcare and health outcomes—are unequally patterned among groups.

### *Between-Group Health Inequality*

Health and wealth have always been closely related (Wilkinson 1994). Low-income, less educated, and many people of color in the United States are much worse off, on the whole, than more educated and economically advantaged populations on various measures of physical health (Williams 1999). This is partially due to their financial circumstances. Lower-income children and children of color are some of the most vulnerable to health inequality. Data from 2011–2012 demonstrates that more than 2 million children fell below the poverty level because of their families’ health care costs. Children from poor families were twice as likely not to receive preventive medical and dental care as children in families earning 400 percent or more than the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). Poor children were also three times as likely to be obese between the ages of 10 to 17 (Children’s Defense Fund 2014). Indeed, those states with higher child food insecurity in 2011 had more overweight and obese children. Children who are poor and food-insecure (lacking consistent access to adequate food) are especially vulnerable to obesity due to risk factors associated with poverty, including food affordability and sufficient opportunities for physical activity (Children’s Defense Fund 2014).

In general, low-income and less educated individuals are at substantially higher risk for most diseases. Many studies confirm that a concave relationship exists between personal income and health outcomes, meaning that each additional dollar of income leads to better health outcomes, but by smaller amounts as the income reaches a certain threshold (Wagstaff & Doorslaer 2000). This income-health gradient, as it is known, has grown stronger over the last 30 to 40 years (Dowd et al. 2011). For instance, the life expectancy for individuals with incomes above \$50,000 in 1980 was about 25 percent longer than those who made less than \$5,000 (Deaton 2003). A 2006 study found that the life expectancy gap between the best-off group, Asian women, and the worst-off group, urban black males, was 20.7 years in 2001. The study concluded that these health disparities cannot be explained by socioeconomic status or basic health care access alone. Rather, at least some of the inequality is due to the lack of strong public health policies to reduce health risk factors (Murray et al. 2006).

In addition, some health disparities based on class and race are increasing (Williams & Collins 1995). Since the 1980s, the wealthiest Americans have seen a significant increase in life expectancy, while the life expectancy for

the poorest Americans has increased by very little (Singh & Siahpush 2006). Research from other countries helps us understand these disparities. For instance, some studies show that in poor countries, life expectancy increases rapidly in the early stages of economic development. As countries become richer and living standards increase, however, the relationship between economic growth and life expectancy weakens, and eventually disappears. Thus, when rich countries get richer, on average, it appear to do nothing to further their life expectancy (Pickett & Wilkinson 2009). Likewise, comparative international studies indicate that countries with greater income inequality score worse overall on health indicators (Pickett & Wilkinson 2009). Thus, the richest societies do not have the best health—the countries with the least income inequality do (Wilkinson 1996).

Some recent research suggests that when it comes to mental health, *all* members of a society are disadvantaged by high levels of income inequality (Pickett & Wilkinson 2009). Other research suggests that the happiness gap between the rich and the poor has widened with the income gap (Layard 2006). According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Denmark, Finland, and the Netherlands have the highest “life satisfaction” or “happiness.” Each of the happiest countries has very high taxes, suggesting robust social services may be a cause of their happiness (Kostigen, 2009). Pickett and Wilkinson argue that, in more developed countries, additional wealth does very little, if anything, to add to the overall happiness (Pickett & Wilkinson 2009). The Pickett and Wilkinson (2009) research, however, is based largely on cross-sectional correlations and so is subject to spurious correlations. Recent research on the relationship between income and happiness, using longitudinal data, is more mixed on how inequality affects happiness (see, for example, Easterlin, McVey, Switek, Sawangfa, & Zweig 2010; Sacks, Stevenson, & Wolfers 2010; Stevenson & Wolfers 2008).

Despite the correlational and cross-national evidence suggesting a relationship between income and health inequalities, it is not entirely clear if the poor health of low-income individuals is primarily due to their *relative* poverty (the fact that their incomes are low relative to others in society) or their *absolute* poverty (the fact that their incomes are low, regardless of the incomes of others). To the extent that the latter is the cause, reducing poverty would reduce health inequalities, even if income inequality remained the same. If relative poverty is the culprit, however, a reduction in income inequality may be necessary to decrease the income-health gradient. As

with most factors associated with income, the evidence is suggestive but not conclusive on the comparative importance of absolute and relative income in shaping health inequalities.

## Political Inequality

Political inequality is evident in the substantial between-group differences in civic engagement and access to political power and rights. Particularly salient here is the substantial evidence that the views of lower- and middle-income citizens are not as well represented in policy decisions as the views of the rich (Gilens 2012). The United States Constitution (and the Fifteenth, Nineteenth, Twenty-fourth, and Twenty-sixth Amendments) provides all citizens above the age of 18 the right to vote and run for public office, provided that they meet certain requirements. Yet, people of color, women, and individuals from low-income backgrounds are substantially underrepresented in political positions at the local, state, and national levels. Moreover, many who have been convicted of criminal offenses (even nonviolent ones) have lost their right to exercise voting power (Uggen & Manza 2002). Limited access to political power in the United States has served as a fundamental condition of inequality since the nation’s genesis.

Political participation is strongly determined by socioeconomic status (as measured by education and income). In fact, political campaigns have come to rely more heavily on monetary contributions than service and time—the latter, perhaps, being a resource more evenly distributed among residents and citizens (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady 2004). In some ways, this reflects a change in the nature of civic engagement and organizational participation since the 1960s, a trend reflected in the growing number of professionally run political organizations for which membership requires nothing more than the ability to write a check (Putnam, 2000; Skocpol, 2004). As political participation—and likely influence—has begun to hinge more on monetary participation, we have entered an era where political and socioeconomic inequalities are increasingly intertwined.

In this view, the growing income and wealth gaps are not simply the result of economic forces, but also of broad policies in a political system dominated by partisan ideologies that support the interests of particular social classes. As evidence of this, some cite evidence that the gap between the rich and poor has increased greatly under Republican administrations and decreased slightly under Democrats (Bartels, 2008). Political inequality points



to not only wealth and income inequality but also other groups that have sought equality historically—including women; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) persons; and racial, ethnic, and religious minorities. This suggests that political inequality may have broader influence than any of the other domains.

### *Between-Group Political Inequality*

Narrow access to political power affects groups that have even significant material resources. Political power in terms of representation in government or even in the workplace is inequitably distributed to immigrants, people of color, poor and working-class people—those who are not Protestant Christian, women, and LGBT people, for example. One of the most conspicuous examples of political inequality in the twenty-first century is the limited attainment of civil rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons. The LGBT community is working to gain federal and state rights to marry. In 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled Section 3 of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) unconstitutional in its definition of marriage as only between a man and a woman. Although 38 percent of Americans live in the 18 states that have adopted full, state-level equality (at the time of this writing), and still more live in cities, counties, or states with partial equality, 51 percent live in 29 states and 5 U.S. jurisdictions that still ban all types of unions except those between one man and one woman (Marriageequality.org 2014).

Social and cultural groups draw symbolic boundaries about what they perceive to be “appropriate,” or “respectable” based on their own social locations and backgrounds (Lamont, 2000; Lamont & Fournier, 1992). Thus, cultural and religious norms that reflect those of politically powerful social groups continue to affront the LGBT community’s civil rights campaigns.

The fact that many groups have limited access to political decision-making is highly visible in the composition of most powerful elected and appointed political institutions, from Congress and the Supreme Court to the state legislatures. The election and re-election of President Barack Obama notwithstanding, racial and ethnic minorities and women are substantially underrepresented in almost all political institutions. For example, more than four-fifths of all members of Congress are male, white, Christian, affluent, and heterosexual (House.gov, 2014).

In assessing the state of research on political and economic inequality, Jacobs and Soss (2010) rightly note that on the one hand, expanding citizenship has increased access to civil rights, the vote, and full participation in

society. On the other hand, Jacobs and Soss argue, the equalization of rights has also precluded any radical changes and redistribution of resources by recasting (economic) inequalities as products of differences in individual talents, efforts, or social mores as opposed to casting inequalities as products of systemic biases and exclusions (p. 352). Social welfare programs, for example, face significant political opposition because many Americans associate racialized stereotypes with these programs. For instance, Americans overwhelmingly oppose welfare to those perceived as “shiftless,” a characteristic that has come to be associated with African Americans, partly through the media’s persistent tendency to connect welfare with blacks (Gilens 1999).

Meanwhile, Americans tend to support corporate tax benefits and economic subsidies. Studies find that business leaders and the affluent have capitalized on their greater financial and organizational resources to tilt the balance of political power in their favor. As a result, the political process systematically favors Americans in the top 1 percent of the income distribution (Hacker & Pierson 2010). Meanwhile, middle- and working-class interests are continually undermined by political assaults on unions. Long gone are the relatively inclusive public policies of the New Deal and Great Society eras that helped to improve the overall welfare of many Americans. These policies changed the American political climate, mobilized interest groups, and altered the prospect for initiatives to stem inequality in the last 50 years (see Farley 1998; L. R. Jacobs & Skocpol 2007).

In addition, for a democracy to flourish, its people must engage in strong civic relations. Recent political scholarship examines these processes through analyses of social capital and cohesion (Keefer & Knack, 2007; Putnam, 2000). Some find that rising inequality is a sign of declining social capital, arguing that diminished civic solidarity erodes support for redistributive tax and economic policies (Kay & Johnston 2007). A 2003 study found that trust plays an important role in civic engagement and indicated that inequality is the strongest determinant of trust. The study also found that trust has a greater effect on communal participation than on political participation (Uslaner & Brown 2005). In short, rising inequality has eroded the extent to which many Americans would support programs that would enhance the life chances or opportunities of their fellow citizens.

Countries reporting the highest levels of social trust rank highest on economic equality. These countries include the Nordic countries, the Netherlands and Canada. While

the causal direction of the association between trust and economic inequality is unknown, this research highlights the interconnected nature of inequality domains discussed here. These countries have emphasized equality of opportunity in education, health care, and the labor market as well as gender equality in their social welfare policies (Rothstein & Uslaner 2005).

One consequence of lower social trust and cohesion in more unequal societies is a rise in violence (Elgar & Aitken 2011). Crime rates are positively correlated with higher levels of income inequality (Fajnzylber, Lederman, & Loayza 2002). Violent crime, but not property crime, is closely related to income inequality, social trust, and mortality rates, excluding homicide. Low social status may be central to the psychosocial processes linking inequality, violence, social cohesion, and mortality. Countries that spend a greater portion of their gross domestic product (GDP) on welfare have lower imprisonment rates, and this relationship has become stronger over the last 15 years. Indeed, a substantial welfare state appears to provide significant protection against mass imprisonment in the era of globalization (Downes & Hansen 2006).

High rates of incarceration threaten the collective well-being of certain communities, particularly low-income and working class black and Latino communities. While there is some debate about whether college enrollment is higher or lower than incarceration rates for young black males (see Toldson 2013), the reality is that their incarceration rates are disproportionately higher than other social groups (Pettit & Western 2004; The Sentencing Project 2013). With little to no access to jobs that pay livable wages in their neighborhoods (Wacquant & Wilson 1993), many of these young men are imprisoned for drug possession, selling and using illegal substances, or for the social ills that ensue from participation in gangs. Meanwhile, drug laws in the United States issue harsher sentences for substances that are sold in poor communities of color versus those sold in white or affluent communities (Alexander 2010).

Moreover, in some states, as incarcerated individuals are released from prisons, few are ever allowed to exercise their rights to vote again (Uggen & Manza 2002). Like the Jim Crow era, which kept black sharecroppers, domestic servants, and other disenfranchised workers mired in poverty, the prison industrial complex renders it nearly impossible for formerly incarcerated black and Latino voters to ever acquire a semblance of political power again (Alexander 2010; Uggen & Manza 2002).

In sum, a great deal of research demonstrates between-group inequality in access to political power and the ability to exercise political rights. The specific causal mechanisms that produce these political disparities are less clear. In some cases it is clear that differential access to rights (such as the right to marry) results from structural forces and power differentials that work to exclude certain groups. In other cases, it is not clear whether disproportionate political participation results from explicit exclusion, lack of socioeconomic resources, or disillusionment. Future research on political inequality should investigate its mechanisms more fully.

## Sociocultural Inequality

Conventionally, as we think of inequality, generally we think of financial or material access, power and resources. In addition, there exists another level of inequality, one that is, perhaps, more intangible. A number of scholars have considered how social identities and group cultures are impacted by other forms of inequality (Carter, 2012; Gans, 1975; Lamont, 2000; Lareau, 2003; Markus & Conner, 2013; Warikoo, 2011; Warikoo & Carter, 2009). Despite the debates about the meaning of “culture,” we can safely assume that there is some consensus that different social groups share languages, tastes, interactions, physical presentations, and comportment. Further, social scientists have documented how these “cultural repertoires” or “toolkits” (Swidler 1986) have been ascribed different values, such as “highbrow,” “lowbrow,” “mainstream,” “deviant,” or “subcultural” (Alim & Smitherman, 2012; Bourdieu, 1986a; Gans, 1975). With power and resources has come the ability of some social groups to shape the orientation of just about any social institution and organization with their cultural preferences. Contemporary debates about multiculturalism in a pluralistic society cut at the core of this issue. Many who lack this power and access, consequently, have had limited to no say, particularly in our schools, government, economy, and even within our families.

Economic power engenders cultural capital, or what some refer to as the “culture of power.” Cultural sociologist Pierre Bourdieu highlighted how economic inequality becomes institutionalized as cultural inequality (Bourdieu 1986b; Bourdieu & Passeron 1977). In line with the work of Bourdieu, many researchers have shown how the habits of the middle and upper classes are privileged in schools and elite educational institutions to the extent that they disadvantage those outside of

these groups (Karabel, 2005; Khan, 2010; Lareau, 2003). That is, schools teach dispositions in line with (upper) middle-class norms. Children from higher-status families may utilize those dispositions to ultimately lead to a reproduction of their higher class statuses, as Khan (2010) documents in his award-winning ethnography about students attending an elite East Coast boarding school.

Meanwhile, large-scale, nationally representative studies show that different socioeconomic and racial/ethnic groups share similar values about education (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Harris, 2011; Solorzano, 1992). That is, they subscribe to the dominant achievement ideology that getting a good education is a critical means to upwardly mobility. At the same time, research shows that students bring diverse cultural selves to school. Not all groups of students share the same language, self-presentation, relationship to authority, or other interactional styles (Carter, 2005; Lareau, 2003; A. E. Lewis, 2003; Morris, 2006; Ogbu & Simons, 1998; Staiger, 2006). Different social groups may use cultural symbols instrumentally to maintain collective identity and still seek to gain material resources (Carter 2005). Yet, whether various social groups' historic, invented, or constructed cultural practices are negative and dysfunctional or self-valorizing and functional is very much an open question (Foley 1991). For many of these groups, if their cultural prescriptions do not conform to those inherent in social organizations these cultural practices inhibit their progress (Bielby, 2000; Bourdieu, 1977; Lareau, 2003; Moss & Tilly, 1996; Neckerman & Kirschenman, 1991; Reskin, 1993).

### *Between-Group Sociocultural Inequality*

Cultural inequality—as indicated by differential access to dominant cultural capital—engenders significant probabilities that dominant, privileged, and/or elite social groups have disproportionate access to high-status positions or resources. We might consider explanations for why women acquire fewer senior management, corporate chief executive officer, or board chair positions. Some point to differences in gender socialization with the corporate sector privileging “male” behaviors—but primarily for men only. Using sociological research to bolster her point, Sheryl Sandberg, the chief operating officer at Facebook and one of the few senior women in corporate America, says, “Aggressive and hard-charging women violate unwritten rules about acceptable social conduct. Men are continually applauded for being ambitious and powerful and successful, but women who display these same traits often pay a social penalty” (Sandberg 2013: 17).

Other examples of cultural inequality include the evidence that many (high-achieving) low-income students do not apply and gain admittance to elite colleges and universities (Hoxby & Avery 2013; Reardon, Baker, & Klasik 2012) because of limited cultural capital—or access to knowledge. Furthermore, cultural inequality plays out when those who control media outlets influence the dominant images of less advantaged members of society and perpetuate stereotypes (Dines & Humez 2010). In the educational realm, unequal cultural practices occur in curriculum and pedagogy—which have fueled debates about which groups' histories, social and cultural icons, languages, and realities are even taught (Banks & Banks, 2001; Gándara, 2013; McCarthy, 1990; Sleeter, 2001). Negative images or stereotypes about the intelligence or capabilities of either black students or girls, for example, have been shown to have an adverse impact on test scores (Steele & Aronson 1995).

Cultural inequality intersects with material inequality, too. Unquestionably, recent technological advances (including the Internet, smartphones, and tablets) either have led or will lead to large macro-cultural changes in communication in the twenty-first century around the globe. These innovations have increased our capacity to search and archive information. Through the proliferation of massive open, online courses (MOOCs), they have broadened educational access. The Internet and the various cultural tools have likely expanded access not only to education but also to good jobs, better healthcare, and political discussions and campaigns (as exemplified by Barack Obama's first presidential campaign).

As these massive cultural changes occur, use of specific modes of communication vary by group. According to Pew Research Center surveys (2013), age, educational attainment, and household income are the main correlates to Internet usage. That is, Internet usage is higher among the young, the highly-educated, and those with high incomes (see also DiMaggio, Hargittai, Celeste, & Shafer 2004).

In Silicon Valley, the Mecca of technological innovation, Internet access and usage are not the only indicators of material and cultural inequality. Women, blacks, Latinos, and older people are grossly underrepresented and are not visible at all as movers and shakers. Implications for the effects of limited access to and opportunity for income, political, and cultural inequality are yet to be studied systematically. It does not take much imagination, however, to perceive the likely consequences of generating more wealth inequality, which impacts individuals,

various social groups, and communities excluded from the development of this economic sector (Wadhwa 2014).

Finally, we note that between-group cultural inequality also pertains to the legal and social acceptance of different groups' tastes, practices, and customs. Certain cultural practices have faced stigma, been outlawed, or have led to workplace, social club, and school dismissals, often because they do not conform to the preferences of social groups with power (Carter, 2012; Takaki, 1979; Warikoo, 2011; Yoshino, 2006). For example, media reports about a young black girl being suspended because of her natural hairstyle or a working-class black college athlete's arrest on a flight because of his sagging pants indicate cultural inequality and bias (CBS News, 2011; Fox News, 2013). In sum, cultural inequality often works in tandem with other forms of material, political, and health inequality.

## Summarizing Research on Inequality in the Four Domains

By and large, considerable scholarship has attempted to account for the persistence of distributional and between-group inequalities while many explicit legal and institutional barriers to access have been dismantled. Such scholarship attempts to determine the extent to which these inequalities stem from unequal access to opportunities, power, resources, and life chances and to what extent they result from between-group differences in values, choices, or endowments in a world with equal access. The stakes of such scholarship are high.

Determining the causes of distributional or between-group inequality is not simple. The reduction or elimination of explicit legal and institutional barriers to access does not guarantee the elimination of all barriers to opportunity. Many historically disadvantaged groups continue to face limited access to various opportunities even in the absence of explicit legal obstacles. Over the past 50 years, the march toward civil rights and access to opportunity has been steady. However, the longer disadvantaged groups have been denied access to opportunities, the more the effects of this inequality are compounded and are difficult to remedy in subsequent generations. If between-group inequality arises from unequal access to opportunity and resources, society has a normative obligation to equalize access (at least to the extent that society values distributional equality). But if such inequality arises from different individual choices when opportunity is equal, society may have no obligation to act.

Finally, we note that the four domains of inequality—socioeconomic, health, political, and sociocultural—are greatly interconnected. For instance, because Congress creates laws pertaining to economic policies and tax structures, the socioeconomic domain is intertwined with the political domain. Likewise, income and health inequalities are linked due to the cost of healthcare, while political processes shape decisions about health care policies and insurance. Furthermore, when the media transmits messages from political actors or uses the news to project images of who does or doesn't deserve resources or government support (see, for example, Katz 1990), the political domain becomes linked to the cultural domain.. The fact remains that inequality in the United States is a vexing social problem that afflicts many. In some cases, it is a matter of life and death.

# Gaps in the Inequality Scholarship

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The scholarship on inequality in the United States is quite extensive across disciplines. Nonetheless, our read of the scholarship suggests that there remain dimensions in need of further evidence.

## Better Data, Measurement, and Analysis of Inequality of Access to Opportunity, Power, Resources, and Life Chances

Scholarship on inequality has been particularly effective at documenting the patterns and trends of both distributional inequality and between-group inequality of outcomes. As we describe above, there is an extensive body of research on patterns of distributional inequality of income and wealth as well as between-group differences in income, wealth, education, health, and political power. With the increasing availability of good data on measures of such outcomes, the literature also provides good information on trends in inequality. There are certainly some areas where data limitations make descriptions of patterns less readily available. For example, wealth data is much less available than income data, and data disaggregated by race and gender is more readily available than disaggregated by income, national origin, religion, or sexual orientation. Still, most recent patterns of inequality in outcomes have been well described.

Evidence regarding inequality of access to opportunities, power, resources, and life chances is not as well documented, however. In large part, this is because access is less readily measured than outcomes. Scholarship that identifies how to concretely conceptualize and measure access to opportunity, power, resources, and life chances would be very useful in helping to describe patterns of social inequality.

One of the biggest challenges to inequality research is the creation of conceptual and empirical models that holistically capture the cumulative and systemic factors that created inequality, and continue to sustain it. If we are to better measure inequality in access to resources and life chances, we need clear, sharply articulated conceptual models of what we should measure.

In addition, much inequality research is framed to compel us to focus on access to material resources (e.g., livable wages, wealth, fair housing, equitable school funding and quality teaching) as a source of inequality. We know that inequality is also associated with social, cultural, political, and social psychological causes and consequences (Bourdieu, 1977; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Lareau, 2003; Massey, 2007; Steele & Aronson, 1995). If material resources were all that mattered to eliminate inequality across domains, we could fully engender equality of opportunity while sustaining social, residential, and educational segregation. That is, separate could, in principle, be equal. The idea that equal material resources alone could eradicate inequality is seductive because it both simplifies the problem, removing the need to change social structures and interactions. Yet, there is ample evidence that this is not true. The segregation of social networks—at churches, country clubs, workplaces, and civic organizations, for example—leads to unequal access to information and different social ties. It can also serve to perpetuate stereotypes and lack of intergroup interaction, even in the presence of material equality.

Given this, a more transformative inequality research agenda would call attention to not only inequalities of material resources, but also sociocultural, political, and psychological aspects of inequality, and their interdependence. To be sure, some research has already highlighted the fallacy that inequality can be eliminated simply through the redistribution of some material resources. Perhaps this is most obvious in a host of legal and educational research studies that argue for the value of *true integration* (powell, 2005) in schools. Studies document how access to resource-rich schools is insufficient to eradicate academic inequality. Even in such schools, other means of inequality are pervasive via practices such as tracking, patterned participation in extracurricular activities, segregated peer networks, and senses of academic efficacy (Carter, 2012; Crosnoe, 2009; Hallinan & Williams, 1989; Mickelson, 2003; Moody, 2002; Oakes, 2005; Tyson, 2011).

Methodological division or tribalism is another challenge to the study of inequality. While large-scale quantitative research can provide an important, epidemiological description of inequality, qualitative studies often

provide deeper insight. Such studies can generate key conceptual and theoretical ideas and provide sites of investigation for other measures in need of development in broader studies. New transformative research on inequality would engender mixed methods to study the interlocking domains of inequality. Some of this transformative inequality research would also take an ecological approach—that is, one that investigates the interplay of institutional, policy, community, and individual-level factors that reproduce multiple forms of inequality. Strong mixed-method studies that capture the multidimensionality of inequality are lacking.

## More Research on the Consequences of Inequality and Strategies for Reducing It

How much inequality is there? What causes this inequality? What are the societal consequences of inequality? What can be done to reduce inequality? Of these central questions for the study of inequality, scholarship has focused largely on the first two. By focusing primarily on the observable patterns of inequality and different explanations for its existence, questions about whether certain inequalities are problematic, and why, and for whom remain open.

There is, however, considerable research on the consequences of inequality. In economics, for example, there is relatively robust literature on the effects of economic inequality on economic growth (see Ostry, Berg, & Tsangarides 2014, for a recent, and brief, review of this literature). Similarly, public health and epidemiology have rich scholarship on whether income inequality increases health disparities. Pickett & Wilkinson's *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Stronger Societies* (2009) marshals a wide range of evidence to argue that higher income inequality leads to lower average health and other social outcomes (such as life expectancy, happiness, etc.). The evidence is largely correlational, however. So stronger research designs might be useful to more firmly establish the causal link between inequality, health, and social outcomes.

Importantly, there is even less extensive research in other domains. We envision scholarship that takes aggregate population groups (countries, regions, or cities, for example) as the unit of analysis, and asks how the distribution of outcomes along some dimension (education, health, income, political power) would differ if the aggregate level of inequality in a region were

changed. Such research would be a useful complement to research that asks how individuals' outcomes would change—particularly of those of disadvantaged groups—if their individual access to opportunity or resources were changed.

In addition, more research is needed to evaluate potential remedies for inequality. Discussions of reducing inequality more often focus on reducing poverty or improving outcomes for those at the lower end of the inequality distribution. For example, education policies aimed at reducing achievement disparities typically focus on strategies designed to improve the outcomes of low-performing, low-income, or students of color. This is not to say that reducing poverty or improving outcomes for those most disadvantaged cannot reduce inequality. If such strategies have targeted effects—that is if they improve outcomes more at the bottom than at the top—they will, by definition, reduce inequality.

Indeed, a number of programs and policies have been effective in reducing inequality. For example, the Progres program in Mexico (now called *Comunidades*) and similar programs in other countries, have demonstrated that social policies can make targeted improvements in health and education outcomes among the poor (and thereby reducing inequality) (Schultz 2004; Skoufias 2005; Soares Veras, Ribas Perez, & Osório Guerreiro 2010). Likewise, the Earned Income Tax Credit has had substantial effects on the incomes and employment of the poorest families in the United States (Dahl & Lochner, forthcoming; Eissa & Liebman, 1996; Meyer & Rosenbaum, 2001). A number of programs and policies started in the 1960s—including the desegregation of schools and hospitals in the South—appear to have reduced black-white inequalities in health and educational outcomes (Almond, Chay, & Greenstone 2006; Ashenfelter, Collins, & Yoon 2005; Chay, Guryan, & Mazumder 2009; Guryan 2004; Johnson 2011). Anti-discrimination and affirmative action policies have played a role in reducing gender and racial disparities in employment and wages (Reskin 1998).

In addition to large-scale social policies, a number of smaller, local interventions show promise for reducing between-group inequality. Some interventions developed by social psychologists, for example, have been shown to be effective at improving educational outcomes for students of color (Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master 2006; Walton & Cohen 2007). While it is not clear if such interventions can be successfully scaled up, they are certainly promising.

Despite evidence of effective remedies for some inequalities, more research is needed to identify more strategies.

## More Research that Focuses on Less Tangible Processes that Create/Maintain Inequality

Inequality may be facilitated or inhibited by laws and social policy, which do not emerge at random. Rather, they emerge from a set of interactions among individual and institutional actors, though these processes are not necessarily well understood. Relatively little research focuses on the roles of elite actors in shaping the policies and laws that facilitate inequality, for example (but see, for example, Gilens 2009, 2012).

The way that inequality is framed and understood may have important implications for relevant social policy. To the extent to which inequality is seen as “natural” and even beneficial (because it produces competition, for example), and the extent to which poverty or wealth are seen as deserved results of individual effort or merit, support for social policies that reduce inequality is likely to be thin. Conversely, to the extent to which inequality is perceived as unjust and resulting from unequal opportunity rather than unequal effort or merit, redistributive social policies are likely to find much broader support. There are, of course, many groups and institutions that actively seek to influence the framing of inequality, but not all are equally successful. And while there is some good scholarship on the framing of social issues (Benford & Snow, 2000; Lakoff, 2004), we need more research on how certain narratives come to be understood as “common sense” explanations for inequality.

## More Focus on the ‘Problem of Inequality,’ Rather than Solely the ‘Problem of Poverty’

The issue of economic inequality in the United States is often framed as an issue of poverty. This is true in public discourse and debate as well as in academic scholarship. Moreover, despite the extensive body of research, a large part of the scholarship on inequality is focused more on understanding *poverty* than on understanding *inequality*. In part, this is because the *problem of inequality* has been framed in both scholarship and in public discourse as a *problem of poverty* (or some other form of social disadvantage). In other words, scholarship often asks “Why are people poor?” and “What are the consequences

of poverty?” rather than “Why is there so much inequality in socioeconomic conditions, health outcomes, and the distribution of political power?” or “What are the consequences of inequality for society?”

Consider, for example, the literature on “neighborhood effects.” This literature asks whether and how neighborhood contexts affect individuals’ development, behavior, educational and health outcomes, and life trajectories. Much of this literature focuses on the effects of neighborhood poverty rates and “concentrated disadvantage” (typically measured with some combinations of poverty rates, unemployment rates, proportions of single-parent families, proportions of adults with low levels of educational attainment, etc.) as a key feature of neighborhood context (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls 1997; Sampson, Sharkey, & Raudenbush 2008). This literature documents that individuals living in disadvantaged, high-poverty neighborhoods experience worse outcomes in any number of dimensions. Much of this literature is concerned with understanding the mechanisms behind this association.

Despite the importance of scholarship on neighborhood effects, its focus on how the effects of high-poverty neighborhoods on low-income individuals frames the issue to obscure some of larger dynamics. First, the neighborhood effects literature implicitly takes the variation in neighborhood contexts, particularly in neighborhoods’ economic contexts, as a given. In some ways, the causal question of interest in much of this literature is the question of whether poor families would fare better if they lived in less disadvantaged neighborhoods. An alternative question, one generally not addressed by the neighborhood effects literature, is why are there grossly disparate poor and non-poor neighborhoods? Why are poor and non-poor families disproportionately represented in different groups? Why is there inequality to start? By framing the questions of interest as the question of the impact of disadvantaged neighborhoods, the neighborhood effects research fails to render as problematic the mere existence of highly-disadvantaged neighborhoods in the first place.

Second, the neighborhood effects literature has generally been much more focused on how low-income, disadvantaged neighborhoods affect their residents than on how affluent, advantaged neighborhoods benefit their residents. That is, the neighborhood literature—like much of the literature on social mobility—has been far more concerned with the intergenerational transmission of poverty than with the intergenerational transmission

of wealth or advantage. In this regard, the neighborhood effects literature shares a primary interest in investigating the reproduction of poverty (or the relative scarcity of upward social mobility of those born into low-income circumstances) with the “culture of poverty” debates of the 1960s and 1970s (Leacock, 1971; O. Lewis, 1996 (1966)), although current scholarship emphasizes a different set of mechanisms (Small, Harding, & Lamont 2010). Nonetheless, much of this scholarship asks “why are people poor?” or “why do the children of the poor remain poor?” Yet, in order to understand inequality and the forces that create and maintain it, it is arguably equally or more important to study the operation and reproduction of wealth and privilege than to study the operation and reproduction of poverty. Scholarship should be just as interested in asking “Why are the rich rich and how do they and their children stay that way?”

Another less studied issue is how the actions of the advantaged affect access to opportunity for the disadvantaged. Neighborhood effects literature asks how a local context affects its residents’ outcomes, but it does not generally ask how the actions of those in one local environment affect those in another. Reardon and Bischoff (2011) show that the rich have become increasingly spatially segregated over the last 40 years, and argue that this spatial segregation of affluence may affect the public investment and social goods accessible by poor and middle-class families. If this segregation leads to less investment (public or private) in collective social goods accessible by all, then a focus on the impact of local context may obscure a significant force in the reproduction of inequality. Neighborhood effects research—and research on social mobility and inequality in general—would be strengthened by a stronger focus on how the actions of more advantaged individuals and groups affect access to opportunity and resources of the less advantaged.

This is not to say that there is no scholarship on the consequences of inequality or the reproduction of advantage, but such scholarship is less common and plays less of a role in shaping academic and policy discourse around issues of poverty, wealth, and inequality. Scholarship on health disparities, for example, includes a number of recent papers and books on the role of inequality in the production of health disparities.



# Why Is the Scholarship on Inequality Not More Complete?

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As we suggest above, inequality scholarship may be incomplete because inequality is often framed as a problem of poverty or disadvantage. There is a certain political economy to such a framing. In principle, everyone can support an interest in reducing poverty, because it does not imply a zero-sum game. If poverty is measured relative to some absolute standard of income or living conditions, for example, we could eliminate poverty simply by raising everyone's standard of living, or raising the standard of living of the poor and leaving the affluent class' behaviors—as they pertain to the reproduction of inequality—unchanged. Everyone can support a “War on Poverty” (in principle), but a “War on Inequality” implies reducing the relative advantage of those with power. Reducing inequality need not be zero-sum, of course. If everyone's income increased when inequality was reduced everyone would be better off in some absolute sense. Reducing inequality does, however, imply that the gap in access to opportunity, power, and resources would narrow. For the advantaged, a reduction in inequality may mean a reduction in their relative power. Thus, framing the issue as a problem of inequality may have less political viability than a problem of poverty.

Second, it has historically been much easier for scholars to study disadvantaged individuals than more advantaged ones. Researchers cannot typically access gated communities, corporate boardrooms, prep schools, private golf clubs, or Senators' chambers with the same ease with which they can access low-income communities, fast food restaurants, public schools, public parks, and community meetings. Barbara Ehrenreich (2002) could take a series of minimum wage jobs to understand working conditions of the poor; she could not have taken a series of corporate or professional jobs to understand the working lives of the affluent. Because it is easier for most scholars to study the poor, we know far less about the rich and how they shape and maintain inequality.

# Summing Up

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In this paper, we aimed to survey research on various domains of inequality. In our current society, there is little hope that we will fully eradicate inequality; differences in individual performances and outcomes will persist. Here, we highlight, as well the stark disparities between groups, patterned by race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other identities. To be sure, the United States has experienced great improvements in myriad areas. The research we surveyed, however, indicates that absolute gains in a society are insufficient for the reduction of large and significant relative (and often disadvantageous) differences between social classes or groups.

Furthermore, researchers and policymakers have more work to do to uncover the mechanisms that perpetuate inequality and produce interventions that disrupt and staunch the growth of inequality. In part, we have argued, this is because we need better data and measurement of key aspects of inequality, particularly inequality in access to opportunities and freedom from hazard. It is also because much inequality research has focused on understanding the causes and consequences of poverty, without equal attention to understanding the persistence of affluence and advantage. A deeper understanding of inequality and potential remedies may require better understanding of how the actions of the advantaged perpetuate inequality. It may also require more attention to sociocultural processes that frame and shape popular notions of inequality and its causes.

The multidimensional problems of inequality require multidimensional solutions, perhaps developed through innovative, interdisciplinary collaborations between seasoned researchers and the next generation of researchers. As we move forward, tackling inequality through research, policy, and practice mandates an ecological approach that attends to the multiple, interlocking domains of inequality. Mixed-method research projects, in particular, may be necessary to produce both generalizable findings and deeper insight into the subtle, often invisible social mechanisms that shape individuals' lived experiences.

Unbridled societal inequality may have significant costs. Hence, investigating how to reduce its many forms

remains essential. Given this, we must determine how to galvanize the attention of both the research community and the wider public. While future inequality research may produce generative scholarship to fill in gaps of knowledge base, this research will be much more valuable if it can be effectively translated to advance public understanding, promote civic dialogue and engagement, and inform social policy. The multiple, interactive processes of inequality already threaten the vibrancy of the nation's democracy, economy and productivity, and international stature. Collective efforts and investments in the best new research, practices, and policies for the reduction of inequality, nonetheless, will help to fulfill America's promise for a better future for its entire people.

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