

Five-Year View of U.S. Opportunity Shows Lack of Gains Post-Recession

by [Cara Willis](#) • Monday, October 5, 2015

Five-Year View of U.S. Opportunity Shows Increasing Poverty and Income Inequality Hampering Larger Gains Post-Recession

While overall access to opportunity has increased 9% since 2011, rates of youth disconnection, income inequality and poverty remain high; wide disparities among geographic regions persist

BOSTON, MA – The fifth annual U.S. [Opportunity Index](#) shows that access to opportunity has increased nearly 9 percent nationally since 2011, reflecting a dramatically improved post-recession employment picture, higher high school graduation rates and a significant drop in violent crime, among other factors. Despite these gains, increasing poverty and income inequality combined with stagnant wages continue to impede progress for middle and lower income communities.

Over the past five years, all 50 states and Washington DC and three-quarters of counties have improved on the Opportunity Index, an annual composite measure of 16 key economic, educational and civic indicators that expand or constrict access to economic mobility. The Index ranks each state and grades more than 2,600 counties A-F each year.

Yet, the 2015 Opportunity Index also reflects the nation's uneven economic recovery. Millions of Americans are being left behind, including 5.5 million young adults, 13.8 percent of youth ages 16-24, who are disconnected from school and work. There are higher rates of poverty (+10.5%) and income inequality (+3.4%) and lower median family incomes (-4.2%) in 2015 than there were five years ago.

The Opportunity Index data over five years demonstrates that access to upward mobility varies greatly by geography, and that some states and counties have wider opportunity gaps than others. A child growing up in Somerset County, New Jersey has a far better chance at going to college, getting a family-sustaining job and living in a safe neighborhood than does a similar child born in Marion County, Florida, even though those two counties have similar population sizes and unemployment rates. Somerset County received an A- on the 2015 Opportunity Index, while Marion County received a C.

“This five-year view of opportunity clearly shows that where you grow up plays too large a role in access to the American Dream,” said Opportunity Nation Executive Director Monique Rizer. “In too many places, zip codes determine how far one goes in life. This persistent opportunity gap, particularly for our nation's youth, is unacceptable.”

While the percentage of young adults who are neither in school nor working has decreased slightly to 13.8 percent in 2015, youth disconnection rates remain higher than they were pre-

recession, 12.9 percent. The two factors that correlate most closely with overall opportunity, as measured by the Opportunity Index, are the percentage of people who live in poverty and the percentage of disconnected youth ages 16-24.

In Louisiana, West Virginia, Mississippi, Nevada and Washington DC, nearly 1 in 5 young adults ages 16-24 are disconnected. In contrast, fewer than 10% of youth are disconnected in Nebraska, North Dakota, Iowa, Minnesota and Vermont.

“We all pay a steep price for youth disconnection in lost talent, less resilient communities, lost tax revenue and higher need for social services,” said Sarah Burd-Sharps, co-director of Measure of America. “We must do better and help young adults, particularly low-income youth and youth of color, connect to meaningful education and career pathways.”

“As the 2016 presidential race gathers momentum, it is critical that candidates and voters have a clear picture of where access to the American Dream is expanding and constricting,” said Russell Krumnow, managing director of Opportunity Nation. “No one sector or political party can solve the opportunity gap alone. The Index helps policymakers and community leaders focus on cross-sector and bipartisan solutions that can improve the lives, prospects and communities of Americans.”

Inside the 2011-2015 Opportunity Index:

Despite an increase in overall opportunity (8.9% from 2011-2015), the five-year landscape reflects several alarming trends:

- Youth disconnection (13.8%) remains higher than pre-recession levels (12.9% in 2007)
- Poverty has increased 10.5%; 15.8% in 2015 compared with 14.3% in 2011
- Income inequality has increased 3.4%; in 2015, households at the 80th percentile have incomes 5 times higher than those at the 20th percentile
- Median household income has fallen 4.2%, from \$51,050 in 2011 to \$48,906 in 2015

Other indicators that have lost ground 2011-2015:

- Access to banking institutions -7.0%
- Volunteerism -4.0%
- Preschool enrollment -2.3%

Indicators that have improved 2011-2015:

- Unemployment rate -44%
- Internet access +13.7%
- Group membership +13.4%
- Access to health care +10.2%
- Violent crime -10.2%
- High school graduation rate +9%
- Postsecondary completion rate +6.4%

- Affordable housing +4.5%
- Access to healthy food +1.3%

2015 Opportunity Index State Rankings:

TOP 10	2015 RANK	BOTTOM 10	2015 RANK
Vermont	1	South Carolina	42
Massachusetts	2	West Virginia	43
Connecticut	3	Arizona	44
North Dakota	4	Arkansas	45
New Hampshire	5	Alabama	46
New Jersey	6	Georgia	47
Nebraska	7	Louisiana	48
Iowa	8	Mississippi	49
Maryland	9	Nevada	50
Virginia	10	New Mexico	51

Visit www.opportunityindex.org to explore the complete dataset and methodology.

About The [Opportunity Index](#):

The Opportunity Index is an annual composite measure at the state and county levels of 16 economic, educational and civic factors that expand or restrict upward mobility. The Opportunity Index ranks all 50 states plus Washington DC and grades more than 2,600 counties A-F, and is designed to help identify bipartisan, cross-sector solutions that expand opportunity to more Americans. The Opportunity Index was jointly developed by Opportunity Nation and Measure of America.

About [Opportunity Nation](#):

Opportunity Nation is a bipartisan, national coalition of more than 350 businesses, nonprofits, educational institutions and community leaders working to expand economic mobility. Opportunity Nation seeks to close the opportunity gap by amplifying the work of its coalition members, advocating policy and private sector actions, and releasing the annual Opportunity Index.

About [Measure of America](#):

Measure of America, a Project of the Social Science Research Council, provides easy-to-use yet methodologically sound tools for understanding well-being, opportunity and inequality in America and for stimulating fact-based conversations about issues we all care about: health, education and living standards.

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