TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>03</td>
<td>FIVE-YEAR LANDSCAPE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04-05</td>
<td>PATHS OF OPPORTUNITY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06-07</td>
<td>STATE RANKINGS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08</td>
<td>NATIONAL TRENDS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09</td>
<td>INDEX INDICATORS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-25</td>
<td>INDEX DATA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The fifth annual Opportunity Index offers a chance to not only reflect on a half-decade of both progress and setbacks for opportunity as the country has emerged from the Great Recession, but also to accelerate bipartisan, cross-sector solutions that benefit all of us.

Overall, the Index shows that access to opportunity has increased nearly 9 percent nationally since 2011, a result of a dramatically improved employment picture, improved high school graduation rates and a significant drop in violent crime, among other key indicators.

However, the nation’s ongoing economic recovery is uneven, leaving millions of Americans behind. There are higher rates of poverty and income inequality and lower median family incomes in 2015 than there were five years ago. And access to upward mobility varies greatly by geography. In too many places, how far one goes in life is largely determined by one’s zip code.

This is unacceptable.

While the percentage of young adults who are neither in school nor working has decreased slightly since 2011, U.S. youth disconnection rates remain higher than they were pre-recession.

Today, there are 5.5 million disconnected youth, equivalent to the entire population of Denmark, and millions more at risk. We must do better.

When our youth do well, our communities do well. We all benefit.

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, as well as a deeper understanding of effective solutions by public, private and nonprofit sectors that can improve the lives, prospects and communities of Americans.

Let’s make sure that expanding opportunity is at the top of the next president’s agenda so that five years from now, we will be celebrating even more significant gains in Opportunity Index Scores in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.
YOUR ZIP CODE SHOULDN’T DETERMINE HOW FAR YOU GO IN LIFE

Meet John and Jane.

John and Jane were born in two counties of similar size, racial composition and unemployment rates. But that’s where the similarities end.
We can’t change all the circumstances of John and Jane’s lives, and their talents and ambitions also play a role in how far they will go in life. But shouldn’t all children have access to the same conditions of opportunity that John enjoys simply because of where he grows up?

We can’t pick our ethnicity, our parents or our IQ. But if you work hard, your zip code shouldn’t condemn you to an inescapable economic fate. In a free society, some inequality is unavoidable. But inequality without the chance for mobility is economically inefficient and unjust.
The 2015 Opportunity Index is a composite measure of 16 key indicators in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and 2,673 counties.
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The indicators that correlate most strongly with 2015 state Opportunity Scores include:

- Poverty rate
- Rate of youth disconnection
- Percentage of adults with associate’s degrees or higher

The rate of youth disconnection has fallen 4.8% since 2011, but remains above pre-recession levels.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Poverty Rate</th>
<th>Youth Disconnection</th>
<th>Adults with Associate’s Degrees or Higher</th>
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<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
<td>5.5 million</td>
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<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
<td>5.7 million</td>
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Overall opportunity in America has increased by 8.9% since 2011.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Overall Opportunity</th>
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<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>49.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>50.1</td>
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<td>2013</td>
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<td>2014</td>
<td>52.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>54.0</td>
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Economy:
- Over the past 5 years, all 50 states and the District of Columbia and 3/4 of all counties have increased their scores on the Opportunity Index. Most of this progress is due to an improved employment picture as the country has emerged from the Great Recession.
- Despite gains, the economic landscape is decidedly mixed, showing uneven economic recovery from the recession.

Unemployment rates have fallen 44% since 2011. Yet youth unemployment remains in the double digits.
## Opportunity Index Indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economy</th>
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<td>Wages</td>
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<td>Poverty</td>
<td>High School Graduation</td>
<td>Volunteerism</td>
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<td>Inequality</td>
<td>Postsecondary Completion</td>
<td>Disconnected Youth</td>
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<td>Access to Health Care</td>
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<tr>
<td>Internet Access</td>
<td></td>
<td>Access to Healthy Food</td>
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The unemployment rate

**BEST:**
Nebraska
2.5%

**WORST:**
Nevada & West Virginia (tie)
7.2%

**MOST IMPROVED:**
Michigan
4.8%
(11.9% in 2011)

Nationally, the unemployment rate decreased 44% since 2011.

In 2015, Loudoun County, VA had the highest median income: $114,415, while Owsley County, KY had the lowest: $18,707.

National median household income declined 4.2%; it was $51,050 in 2011.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey.
Poverty has increased 10.5% over the past five years. In 2011, 14.3% lived below poverty line.

Poverty increased the most in Nevada and Rhode Island – up 27.4% and 24.4%, respectively, since 2011.
Nationwide, income inequality has increased 3.4% since 2011. Morgan County, UT has the lowest rate of income inequality in 2015: 2.6.

**INEQUALITY**

Ratio of household income at the 80th percentile to that of the 20th percentile

**BEST:**
Utah 3.9

**WORST:**
District of Columbia 7.2

**MOST IMPROVED:**
South Dakota 4.1 (4.2 in 2011)

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey. In 2015, households at the 80th percentile had incomes 5 times higher than households at the 20th percentile.
Nationally, access to traditional banks dropped nearly 7%, perhaps an indication of more Americans shifting to online banking.

North Carolina lost the most ground, with a 19.3% decrease in access to banks since 2011.

ACCESS TO BANKING

Banking institutions (commercial banks, savings institutions and credit unions per 10,000 residents)

**BEST:**
North Dakota
7.5

**WORST:**
Nevada
2.6

**MOST IMPROVED:**
Nebraska
6.7
(6.4 in 2011)

Source: Measure of America analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, County Business Patterns and Population Estimates Program.
More Americans lived in affordable housing in 2015 than in 2011 – a 4.5% increase.

Louisiana was the only state to experience a slight decrease in the number of households living in affordable housing since 2011.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey.
INTERNET ACCESS

Percentage of households with high-speed Internet for state overall; 5-level categories for counties

BEST:
Hawaii, New Hampshire & New Jersey (tie)
84%

WORST:
Mississippi
51%

MOST IMPROVED:
West Virginia
64%
(50.1% in 2011)


NATIONAL AVERAGE

72.7%

All 50 states plus the District of Columbia increased high-speed Internet connections since 2011; average increase is 13.7%.

311 counties received the highest level (5) in 2015 for Internet access.
PRESCHOOL ENROLLMENT

Percentage of 3- and 4-year-olds in school

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey.

**BEST:**
District of Columbia 77.7%

**WORST:**
Nevada 31.9%

**MOST IMPROVED:**
District of Columbia 77.7%
(65.91% in 2011)

Nationwide, there were fewer children in preschool in 2015 than in 2011; 2.3% decrease reflects state cuts in wake of the Great Recession.

In contrast, North Dakota increased enrollment by 15.8% due to early education investments that began in 2009.
ON-TIME HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION

Percentage of freshmen who graduate in four years

BEST:
Iowa 89.7%

WORST:
District of Columbia 62.3%

MOST IMPROVED:
Nevada 70.7%
(56.3% in 2011)

Source: State and county data are from the U.S. Department of Education: EDFacts Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) for the 2012-13 school year.

National on-time high school graduation rates increased 9% since 2011.

81.4%
NATIONAL AVERAGE

+9%

Oregon dropped the most, 10.4%, but the decrease is linked to federal changes in the way high school graduation rates are calculated.
POSTSECONDARY COMPLETION

Percentage of adults 25 and older with an associate’s degree or higher

BEST:
District of Columbia 58.2%

WORST:
West Virginia 25.7%

MOST IMPROVED:
District of Columbia 58.2%
(51.1% in 2011)

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey.
*Georgetown Center for Education and the Workforce.

37.7%

NATIONAL AVERAGE

Nationally, postsecondary completion rates increased 6.7% since 2011.

By 2020, two-thirds of all U.S. jobs will require some form of postsecondary degree or credential.*
Nationwide, group membership increased 13.4% since 2011.

Civic engagement may help low-income youth build social capital and skills that help them find meaningful career pathways.

GROUP MEMBERSHIP

Percentage of adults 18 and older involved in social, civic, sports and religious groups

Source: Measure of America analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Data-Ferrett, Current Population Survey, Civic Engagement Supplement. Due to limitations of the survey data, this indicator is only calculated at the state level. As a result of the discontinuation of the Civic Engagement Supplement of the Current Population Survey, data for this indicator in the 2015 Opportunity Index are from 2011 and 2013.
Nationally, the percentage of adults who volunteer decreased 4% since 2011. The likelihood that a young person is disconnected from school or work drops nearly in half if he or she volunteers.

**BEST:**
Utah
45.4%

**WORST:**
Louisiana
17.7%

**MOST IMPROVED:**
Delaware
26%

(23.5% in 2011)

Source: Measure of America analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, DataFerrett, Current Population Survey, Volunteering Supplement. Due to limitations of the survey data, this indicator is only calculated at the state level.
DISCONNECTED YOUTH

Percentage of young adults 16 to 24 who are neither in school nor working

BEST:
Nebraska 7.6%

WORST:
Louisiana 19.8%

MOST IMPROVED:
Maine 9.8%
(13.5% in 2011)

Source: Measure of America analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey PUMS Microdata.

Nationally, youth disconnection rates have dropped 4.8% since 2011, a decrease of 136,508 young adults.

The number of disconnected youth—5.5 million in 2015—is one of the strongest predictors of state Opportunity Scores.
Nationally, violent crime dropped 10.2% since 2011.

Knox County, NE has the nation’s lowest crime rate, 7.7 (population 8,557).

Source: State data from the U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation Uniform Crime Reporting Statistics (www.ucrdatatool.gov); county data from the County Health Rankings analysis of data from the U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation Criminal Justice Information Services. County Health Rankings are from the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute in collaboration with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.
ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE

Medical doctors per 100,000 population

BEST: 
District of Columbia 1,025.4

WORST: 
Idaho 159.4

MOST IMPROVED: 
Wyoming 250.2 
(169.5 in 2011)

Source: Measure of America calculations using medical workforce data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Area Health Resources Files and population data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Population Estimates Program.

Nationally, access to medical doctors increased 10.2% since 2011.

Statistically, 175 counties did not have a doctor in their community in 2015.
ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOOD

Grocery stores and produce vendors per 10,000 population

BEST: New York 5.5
WORST: Nevada 1.2
MOST IMPROVED: New York 5.5 (4.9 in 2011)

Source: Measure of America analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, County Business Patterns and Population Estimates Program.

* U.S. Department of Agriculture, Healthy Food Access.

Nationally, access to healthy food increased 1.3% since 2011.

23.5 million Americans live in “food deserts,” neighborhoods that are located more than one mile from a supermarket in urban areas and more than 10 miles in rural areas.*
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.
For more information, and to learn how much opportunity is in YOUR community, visit www.opportunityindex.org

*For additional sources, visit www.opportunityindex.org/briefingbook
The Opportunity Index was jointly developed by Opportunity Nation and Measure of America.