

# Foreword

**By Karen Pittman, Co-Founder, President, and CEO, The Forum for Youth Investment**

Work hard, get ahead. That is the “American Dream.” However, according to economist Raj Chetty, this dream has not been a reality for almost 50 years, when getting ahead is defined as being better off than your parents were at your age. In 1970, when I was entering college to prepare for my career as a sociologist focused on bridging youth development research into policy and practice, 30-year-olds had a 90 percent chance of achieving this milestone. Today, it’s a coin toss.

As a Black woman who grew up in Washington, DC, I know that urban young people of color have always struggled with upward mobility. But, as this report makes clear, the path upward is also a challenge for young people in rural America, where economic opportunity varies greatly, even within the same state or region. The barriers to upward mobility are similar to those in urban areas: poverty, racial barriers, underinvestments in education, limited job options. But what about the solutions?

This is the question that National 4-H Council and The Bridgespan Group set out to answer. Their findings are relevant not only for rural America, but for all of us. Believing that the answers to the question could only be fully revealed through discussions with youth and adults in rural America, the research team made a bold decision. They dug in deep to look for common success factors in rural counties whose youth are upwardly mobile. This decision had one obvious drawback that the team recognized: none of the approximately 200 rural counties in which at least a quarter of the population is Black ranked in the top quartile for upward mobility, and only two ranked in the top half. This fact is not surprising. But it does raise the question of whether the findings from this study are relevant for more racially and ethnically diverse communities. I believe that they are.

The study, which is richly filled with quotes and examples from the extensive listening tour, identified six common factors that seem to help rural young people advance, all of which reflect social capital rather than economic capital. These are communities in which adults—teachers, parents, business owners, neighbors, and health and social service professionals—worked together to ensure that all young people were known and supported. The Bridgespan team interviewed approximately 100 young people. Many said they were provided with early and ample opportunities to build life skills, have jobs, explore careers, and take leadership roles.

There are plenty of large cities and metropolitan areas—from San Francisco and King County (Seattle) in the Northwest, to Nashville and Palm Beach County in the Southeast—in which mayors, school superintendents, youth and social service organizations, and business and civic leaders have come together to make youth master plans that call for these factors to be put in place, and to secure the resources needed to do so. But the devil is in the detail. Two questions—by whom and for whom—surface quickly, and the fragmentation begins, with resources flowing to some and bypassing others.

When there is a cohesive sense of community, the answers to these questions are easy: by everyone, for every young person. Every young person is known. Every young person is needed. Every adult can play a role. Every opportunity matters. No offer of support is too small. In rural communities where all means all—and where differences in opportunity, effort, and expectation are not linked to race and class—small populations (about 20,000 people) require people to make connections, which seem to activate caring, compassion, commitment, and creativity among the community members as a whole. In rural communities that lack this cohesiveness, some of the six factors may be more difficult to activate or even extend to all youth. This may be one of the reasons that rural communities with larger Black populations fall into the bottom quartile of the upward mobility scale.

The rural communities studied clearly had a cohesive sense of community that made them willing to create and direct significant social capital towards all of their youth. As I read the examples, however, I was reminded of the Washington, DC, community that I grew up in.

The kids on my block, in my school, and in my church were known by name. We were expected to behave. If you did something wrong on the way home from school, word traveled fast. We were expected to work hard in the community: alley clean-ups, sick and shut-in meal preparation, errands for elderly neighbors. We were expected not only to work hard in school but also to be engaged after school in clubs, part-time jobs, or church-run volunteer programs. We also were supported by an overlapping community of adults, which included neighbors, teachers, business owners, and parishioners who, when needed, pitched in to provide care packages and hold fundraisers to send kids to camp or pay for uniforms, books, or college applications.

The life experiences of teens living in a predominantly white rural county of 10,000 people and those living in a dense, predominantly Black urban neighborhood are different in many important ways. However, both types of communities can suffer from more limited economic diversity, albeit for different reasons. And this constraint can make adults acutely aware that their future depends on their ability to take full advantage of their greatest asset: their young people.

There is no doubt in my mind that the six social factors identified in this study are making a difference in the lives of rural youth across the country. They made a difference in my life. This leaves me wondering: What will it take to activate these factors in rural communities with class and racial divides or pressing external constraints? Might the social cohesion seemingly activated by the social proximity found in small rural communities also be activated by cultural bonds? The sixth factor, a sense of shared fate and community ownership, can be found in communities that share a common culture, especially when they also are in geographic proximity. If so, is it possible that rural young people, especially those involved in programs like those sponsored by 4-H, who are living in racially or economically divided communities, could use the findings from this study to challenge adults to do better by all youth? This report has certainly inspired me to think differently about the factors behind the numbers.