# Developing an Opportunity Census: Toward a Data-Driven Theory of Equal Opportunity

David Castro 16 November 2016

## Beginnings

Since the dawn of our republic, equality has served as a foundational value within American culture. It earns first mention in Jefferson's famous line in the Declaration of Independence as a "self-evident" truth: that all men are created equal. In his Gettysburg Address, Lincoln famously reframes this "truth" as a "proposition" to which the nation is dedicated, in other words, as a guide star for the American project. Equality is also enshrined in the 14th Amendment of our Constitution as a commitment to "equal protection" of the laws. And of course, the ideal of equality animates the most famous speech of the civil rights era, Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream." In King's poetic image of little black boys and girls joining hands with little white boys and girls "as sisters and brothers," we can see the compelling vision of equality, and the liberation it implies.

And yet throughout our history the "self-evident" truth of equality has not really been a truth at all, if by "truth" we

mean an accurate description of reality. Indeed, American society has always exhibited profound inequality: for people of color, for women, for those without land or wealth. Today, equality remains an unachieved ideal, a work in progress. It is a creed that some feel we have been called to live out, to give meaning, yet one that we have failed to practice. The deep chasm between the vision of universal equality and the stark reality of unfairness and oppression in everyday life reminds us of Rousseau's famous opening line of The Social Contract: “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.”

## The Current Situation: Ongoing Narratives of Inequality and Injustice

Thanks to an army of psychologists and behavioral economists, we understand that the human imagination and heart are driven not so much by facts and figures as by compelling stories. Over the past several years, the nation’s attention has been riveted upon graphic stories about profound inequalities in our justice system. We have seen story after story in which police officers have used excessive, lethal force upon black civilians. 2014 witnessed the stories of Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Laquan McDonald, Tamir Rice and Antonio Martin, among others. In 2015 and 2016, the narratives continued, including tragic incidents involving Eric Harris, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, Philando Castile, and Keith Lamont Scott, among many others.

The extremely graphic media accounts of these events, often including shocking videos, have been interpreted by many as compelling illustrations of widespread societal injustice, sparking public protests calling for change. The Black Lives Matter movement has swept the nation, beginning in Ferguson, MO, and spreading through Los Angeles, New York, Bloomington, Cleveland, Milwaukee, Chicago, Baltimore and many other major cities and communities. The movement has protested evident discrimination not only within the justice system, but also across many other sectors of American society in which racism has produce a full spectrum of inequality. We measure this inequality through documented racial and ethnic disparities in educational achievement, employment, income, housing, asset development, health, longevity, access to capital, civic engagement, political participation, political power and other features of social equality.

## Equal Outcomes: Opportunity for What?

There are three standard ways to measure inequality: income, consumption and wealth.[1] Using income alone, a simple rank ordering of lowest to highest income of the population depicts inequality. Taken one step further, one performs a ratio of a higher income to a lower income.[2] We've become familiar with the outcome of this ratio: those at the top of the income bracket have between five and 70 times the income of those at the lowest point of

the income bracket. Income measures are also used at the national level, calculating the percentage of national income that a population group (e.g., the lowest 5% of households by income) receives.

Many economists consider the use of income data to measure inequality erroneous, however, as it does not take into account taxes or government transfers (such as social security, food stamps, unemployment benefits, etc.). Capital gains, a significant source of non-cash income largely realized by the wealthy, are also not included in income data until they are accrued.3 While distribution measures get us a bit closer to an accurate picture of inequality, they also are dependent only on income data, which provides an incomplete picture of household income.

To avoid some of the problems with employing income alone as an outcome measure of equality, some economists look instead to patterns of resource consumption. Consumer Expenditure Survey data is used to estimate the total value of goods and services consumed over an individual's (or group's) lifespan. As you may imagine, there is a substantial lifetime spending difference between the rich and the poor. This lifetime spending inequality turns out to be less than standardly reported pre-tax income inequality.[3] It is less because the consumption measure may mask significant differences in actual economic well-being between rich and poor as all households, regardless of size or income, consume a

standard package of goods and services in the course of daily life. What percentage of household income this consumption package costs may provide a more accurate picture of inequality. For example, when your paycheck equals your expenses for basic needs, 100% of household income is consumed. Conversely, a person of significant wealth with a large amount of discretionary income might spend as little as 10% of household income on basic needs.

A third measure of inequality attempts to correct for the incomplete nature of income data and the skewed nature of consumption data—wealth or net worth. Calculating a household's net worth takes into account cash and non-cash income (capital gains), savings, investments, real estate and the value of expensive consumer goods (such jewelry, cars or art collections). These standard categories of a wealthy household's portfolio are mostly absent within low-income households, yet such elements of wealth are routinely excluded from standard inequality measures based on income data.

In contrast to economists, sociologists are more holistic in approaching the measurement of inequality in outcomes, looking at inequality of conditions (unequal distribution of income, wealth and material goods) and inequality of opportunity (unequal distribution of life chances as represented by factors such as education level, health status, and contact with the criminal justice system).[4]

## The Tension with Freedom

The scope and depth of our comprehension of unequal outcomes in America tells us something important. Understanding the facts about a situation, even understanding fundamental causes and trajectories, does not necessarily lead to change. This is especially true when, as in American culture, there are contradictory values in the social system. Of course we know that American culture contains substantial elements of individual, systemic and structural racism and classism. But beyond these original sins that reflect cultural values diametrically opposed to equality lies the cherished, inalienable right to liberty, or freedom. In considering the tension between the values of freedom and equality, it is important to note that a focus on freedom is what inspires the call for equality. Inequality limits freedom: That is the reason that inequality is a problem.

Nevertheless, within American culture, the value of freedom often is expressed in tension with equality. This is because many feel that freedom only has real meaning when it manifests as individual power: the power to own property, to create wealth, to act, to express oneself, to influence others, even to aid others. Here is the rub. The expression of power by any person or group always has the potential to limit the power of another person or group. Power afforded to one can easily manifest as oppression to another. The right to bear arms promotes

equality with others who bear arms, but it creates the possibility for domination over those lacking arms. In this way, the exercise of any freedom entails the possibility for oppression, and thus threatens equality. Unchecked freedom leads inexorably to inequality. In its most extreme version, the value placed on freedom may even call into question the very legitimacy of the societal interest in equality, as we see in some ideological expressions on the extreme right.[5]

The focus on freedom in American culture, combined with our nation's ample, if regrettable, historical legacy of racism, sexism and classism (including, for example, slavery and oppression of women), leads to a politics that is not fully committed to equality of outcomes in American society. This is starkly visible in the current ideological divide between the right and left on issues of racial, gender and ethnic equality. Many on the left believe that the long history of injustice in American society requires the redistribution of economic and political power to achieve equity, even if that means limiting the freedom of individuals and groups who have inherited historical advantages from inequality. In contrast, many on the right insist on limiting power redistribution according to a concept of Pareto efficiency or optimality, meaning that no individual's welfare should be diminished in the cause of promoting equality for another.[6] According to this view, it will be fine to promote little black girls and boys holding hands with little white girls and boys "as brothers and

sisters," as long as the little white girls and boys lose no advantage in the process.

Society's moral evaluation of Pareto efficiency involves an ongoing assessment of what one group of people owes to another. Imagine a family in which the mother and father grow fat while their children starve to death. No one would defend such an allocation of food because of strong moral and legal norms about the obligations of parents to feed their own children, in view of (and despite) their obvious lack of productive powers in securing food. We expect children to depend on their parents. On the other hand, imagine how you might feel if the police showed up at your door each night to remove excess food from your refrigerator so that it could be used to feed refugees living at a local charity.

The difficult balance between the values of freedom and equality is worked out every day through the myriad processes of our local, state and national governments, combined with the philanthropic efforts of third sector organizations. We pay taxes to fund programs and policies that benefit others. Every day, in countless ways, individuals limit their freedom to protect the welfare of others. We give from our surplus to support those who have less. At different points in our lives we may be on the opposite ends of the giving and receiving spectrum. How are we to understand this effort to achieve an optimal balance between liberty and equality? We could call this desired balance the pursuit of justice. The most difficult

policy issues that we face at home and abroad arise because we are not clear about how to strike this just balance across the vast domain of human affairs. The institutions of government that work to strike this balance on a daily basis in our communities—from our police departments, to our judiciary, to our legislatures, to our executive powers—do not all seek the same equilibrium points. They also do not share the same understandings about the truth of the current situation, nor the same beliefs about effective strategic action in the pursuit of justice.

This incoherence results in an inconsistent and often chaotic approach to balancing liberty and equality, different in method and results for different people in different communities engaged in different systems. Aristotle observed incisively that, in the pursuit of justice, treating different things similarly is no better than treating the same things differently.[7] Coherent thinking about social justice requires a shared vision of the outcomes to which we aspire and the recognition that strategic action in pursuit of justice depends upon an awareness of meaningful differences and a willingness to act upon them or discount them, depending on the context. Unfortunately, a shared vision of justice, and about which differences matter and which do not, and toward what ends, is precisely what we lack in our system as a whole. To point out one simple example, some believe that our societal systems must be highly conscious of race to

achieve justice (as in a white police officer being aware of unconscious racial bias in dealing with a black citizen), while others believe that the system should be intentionally blind to racial differences (as in a college admissions office avoiding affirmative action programs for students of color).

## The Justice Opportunity Zone: Equality of Opportunity

In this ongoing tension between competing ideologies, with the right more focused on freedom and the left more focused on equality, there is one arena of significant agreement: the importance of equality of opportunity. The concept of opportunity is celebrated in the idea that people are “created” equal, with the implicit recognition that true freedom will cause inevitable inequalities to arise as serendipity combines with natural talents and hard work. The idea of equal opportunity is also celebrated in the commitment to equal protection of the law enshrined in the Constitution. The inspiration here is that the fundamental rules of engagement in the marketplace and the public sphere should be the same for all. There is an expectation of fair play and that our judicial system will create an equal playing field for actors across the private and public spheres.

While there has been a large volume of thought and research applied to understanding inequality of outcomes, the concept of equality of opportunity has received

comparatively less attention in the historical conversation about measuring equality, even though it provides an arena of striking consensus across the American political landscape.

How might we measure equality of opportunity as distinct from outcome measures of inequality? Four observations are important here.

First, we must recognize that the concept of opportunity implies a developmental approach to equality and human outcomes. The idea in a nutshell is that each person in society is presented with a starting position and then moves through a process of development and engagement in society that will lead to a set of outcomes over the course of a person's life. This idea has important consequences in thinking about outcome measures. For example, it would not make sense to compare the income of a person near the starting line with that of a person near the finish line of their social engagement and trajectory. It may be challenging to unscramble "starting position" data from available data sets.

Second, a focus upon opportunities in a developmental process necessarily implies the definition of a series of opportunity baselines, a set of thresholds that we take to define the minimum conditions of meaningful opportunity.[8] To illustrate the concept, consider the example of a meaningful educational opportunity. One might persuasively argue that today an educational

system which fails to expose students to information technology tools will negatively affect opportunity, even though it is possible to receive a base-level education, in terms of literacy, math, and knowledge, without the use of computers or advanced information technology.

Equity baselines always ignore or discount some potential sources of inequality when defining minimum conditions for developmental equity. Sports competitions, for example, do not control for inequities in coaching acumen or player recruiting although professional leagues have used tools like salary caps and draft selection to equalize opportunity. Any systemic approach to equal opportunity must recognize the practical impossibility of eliminating all sources of inequality in establishing starting or threshold capacities.

Real equality of opportunity must also account for the evolution of advantages that skew unfairly to the top of the societal pyramid. Thirty years ago, a minimum baseline of educational opportunity need not have included access to information technology. Today students from upper-income families who have access to the best educational technologies enjoy significant advantages. To provide meaningful equality of opportunity, baselines must evolve as society develops new tools that create opportunity advantages for those who have privileged access through wealth or social status.

The third critical observation is that the measurement of equality of opportunity, of advantages and disadvantages, necessarily makes assumptions (relying on implied shared values) about what outcomes are important in providing base levels of equal opportunity. We recognize, for example, that we cannot account for certain uncontrollable genetic differences across human beings. We also cannot control for evolving cultural norms and tastes that nevertheless may deeply impact an individual's outcomes. Obvious examples would involve personal attributes associated with social and cultural norms involving athleticism, beauty or natural ability.

Fourth, the concept of opportunity is clearly bound up with a free market approach to individual engagement and development within society. We assume that productive capacity through individual ownership is a critical determinant of personal outcomes when measuring equality of opportunity. This is an important background assumption because one could easily adopt other approaches to thinking about outcomes that would result in different assessments of the meaning and measurement of equal opportunity. For example, equality of opportunity would have a starkly different meaning within the social culture of a Christian or Buddhist monastery intent on the daily practice of asceticism, spiritual contemplation and communal productivity.

With these considerations in mind, we can posit that a coherent theory of equal opportunity would need to

address at least four evolving and interdependent baseline dimensions of personal development and social engagement: (1) health, (2) education, (3) employment and (4) access to the dominant forms of capital: information, social, and economic.

An evolving baseline does not define an abstract ideal or stagnant minimum threshold of capacity, but rather dynamically links a minimum baseline to an upwardly mobile average standard achieved by those who enjoy the most success in productivity and engagement in the free market and its related community and public sector spheres. Consider as an example the case with college education. We know that people in society who achieve college education double their earning capacity on average over their lifetimes.9 Nevertheless, because only 34% of citizens in the United States earn bachelor's degrees, four-year college degree attainment remains a significant source of inequality of opportunity. On average, those with a bachelor's degree spend 17 years on education when post-graduate work is taken into account. So the achievement of equality of opportunity in the educational arena would require a baseline that actually exceeds support for bachelor degree attainment. In 1970, four-year college degree attainment was less than half of what it is today. Because indicia of inequality evolve over time, so must the minimum baselines that define equality of opportunity.

## Toward an Opportunity Census

We advocate for the development of an annual opportunity census benchmarking the average starting positions enjoyed by the top one-third of the population, and then creating social policies to elevate the remainder of the population to that target level of opportunity. While development of a comprehensive standard pursuant to this general theory remains beyond the scope of this essay, we can outline some concrete examples of opportunity indicia that might be employed. Defining meaningful opportunity would involve measuring key indicators enjoyed at the top of the pyramid, and then ensuring availability across diverse populations.

In the arena of health, equality of opportunity centers on having sufficient health to participate fully in intellectual, physical and social developmental activities. These would include indicia such as:

- Nutrition (e.g., food security, access to affordable fresh foods, average daily intake of sugar, sodium, refined grains, saturated fat)
- Exercise and group play (e.g., minutes of activity per day, minutes of group play per week)
- Development of psychosocial health including robust reality testing, imagination and persistence (grit) (e.g., Grit Scale, behavioral task performance)
- Environmental safety including toxin-free and violence-free living and educational spaces (e.g., EPA

air quality index of residential areas, felony crimes per capita, life expectancy)
- Immunization and other disease prevention activities (e.g., availability of clean drinking water, ratio of immunization to birth records, ratio of affordable primary care services to population)
- Access to high-quality medical care (e.g., ratio of public and privately insured persons to population, affordable qualified health centers per capita)

In the arena of education, equality of opportunity centers on being able to participate in high-quality educational activities, both formal and informal, leading through and beyond baccalaureate secondary education attainment. These would include indicia such as:

- Affordable early childhood development of literacy, math and creativity skills (e.g., number of high-quality, licensed early learning centers affordable at 10% of average family income per number of children under 5, percentage of parents with young children having knowledge about impact of early child development)
- Access to affordable safe schools that provide high-quality college-preparatory curricula (e.g., cohort graduation rate, school safety ratings, school district rankings, school expenditure per student, college matriculation and graduation rates of alumni)
- Access to affordable social and emotional learning opportunities that create the foundation for effective

social engagement later in life (e.g., rate of engagement in arts, cultural, sports and faith-based youth development programs)
- Access to quality, affordable post-secondary institutions including graduate education (e.g., affordability rankings of local colleges, knowledge of financial aid system among adult population, graduation rate, percentage of degree attainment among U.S. citizens)
- Access to affordable information technology that enhances educational achievement (e.g., percentage of household Internet access, presence of home computer, public computing centers, access to smartphones per capita)

Equal opportunity in employment is dependent upon access to the full range of educational opportunities outlined above, and also involves access to and ability to perform work providing sufficient income to sustain opportunity in health, education, and access to social and financial capital. Examples of indicia in the field of employment would include the following:

- Merit-based internships, hiring, advancement and compensation without invidious discrimination (e.g., Equal Employment Opportunity Commission adherence/number of charges and violations among local employers, workplace diversity among all positions that reflects local population distribution, equal pay for equal work)

- Access to programs that increase job and trade specific skills relevant to the local labor market (e.g., audit of training programs mapped to employer needs and number of un- or underemployed adults)
- Access to information about job opportunities (e.g., number of gainfully employed persons in social network, Internet access)
- Geographic mobility to access employment locations (e.g., reasonable commuting time by car and public transit, access to reliable form of transportation)
- Social mobility to access and learn how to operate in social networks related to employment (e.g., mixed income residential areas, exposure to professional work environment)

Equal opportunity in terms of access to capital is the most challenging arena to define. At the top of the social pyramid, participants engaged in the free market enjoy substantial advantages through increased access to financial, social and information capital. Their social networks create information asymmetries, and access to wealth allows them to exploit opportunities further promoting success and driving up overall inequality. People at the top of the social pyramid are able to endure failure and financial setbacks, and they are able to spend many more years investing intensively in their educational capacity and social network development than populations who lack advantages derived from access to capital. Promoting equality of opportunity in this arena

requires identifying and benchmarking key indicia of access to capital. Examples of indicia in this lane would include:

- Economic information transparency (e.g., knowledge of banking system, formal economy and basic business practices across adult population, percentage of adults with checking accounts)
- Political and policy information transparency (e.g., equal access to information about proposed laws and regulations, equal access to policymakers and service on public boards, equal access to government contracts and sources of funding)
- Access to nondiscriminatory pools of financial capital for investment in education, skill development and entrepreneurship (e.g., distribution of bank lending reflects diversity of local population, knowledge of financial aid system among adult population)
- Access to qualified, nondiscriminatory mentors and other sources of reliable know-how in career and business development (e.g., participation rates in high-quality civic, professional and economic development organizations such as Chamber of Commerce, Urban League, Rotary, etc.)
- Geographic mobility (e.g., feasibility of physically accessing communities different from one's own, ability to exercise choice in housing location, fair housing compliance among realtors)
- Social mobility (e.g., comparison of parent/child

income, occupational status and wealth accumulation, number of persons in personal network with household incomes >25% above median household income for locality, number of persons in personal network with educational attainment levels of Bachelor's Degree and above, number of persons in personal network with investment portfolios and/or own a business)

## The More Perfect Union

When we remember the inspiring words of leaders such as Jefferson or Lincoln or King emphasizing our shared American project toward the compelling vision of equality, we feel the outrage triggered by the ongoing media accounts of societal injustice, particularly through incidents of violent racism. Americans are not seated together at the table of brotherhood and sisterhood; some of us do not even have seats. Some of us are not yet seen as being worthy of respect. Oppression and inequality are a reality of daily life in our homes, on our streets, within our schools and workplaces, and within our economy. But outrage alone is not action, and even the most complete understanding of the problem is only a precursor to action. Only data-driven policies that are actually implemented qualify as meaningful action. In this cause, data can serve as the bridge between vision and reality, spanning the reality of the injustice that so many endure, and leading toward a new reality of justice that

communities create. In our free market economy, equality of opportunity is the most politically viable pathway to more equal outcomes. Using an opportunity census that serves as a continually evolving foundation for all social policy objectives, we can open pathways for the oppressed to rise. Then those whom we believe were created equal at the beginning of their lives may have a chance to experience genuine equality—perhaps for the first time.

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## Author Bio

David Castro a graduate of Haverford College (1983) and the University of Pennsylvania Law School (1986). In 1993, following a successful career both in private practice and as a Philadelphia prosecutor, David was awarded a Kellogg Foundation National Leadership Program Fellowship. As a Kellogg Fellow he studied community leadership and its relation to improving quality of life. Based upon this work, working with his mentor and colleague Lynne Abraham, in 1995 David founded I-LEAD, Inc., a school for community leadership development that has served several thousand emerging leaders across Pennsylvania through its affiliation with Pennsylvania Weed and Seed, and its development of an accredited Associate Degree program in Leadership. David is also one of the founders of I-LEAD Charter School, a high school that combines leadership development with academic remediation serving at-risk high school age youth in the economically challenged city of Reading, Pennsylvania.

In 2002, in recognition of David's work on behalf of Pennsylvania communities, he was awarded an Eisenhower Fellowship, which he used to study leadership and its impact on economic and community development in Turkey. In 2009, in recognition of David's work in community leadership and education, he was named an Ashoka Fellow by the

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David is the author of Genership: Beyond Leadership Toward Liberating the Creative Soul, now available in print and e-book formats. He is also the host of Innovate Podcast, a biweekly podcast featuring dialogue with social entrepreneurs, writers, visionaries and researchers engaged in transformative thinking, action and creative collaboration. Innovate has featured renowned guests such as Kailash Satyarthi, winner of the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize. Innovate is produced by Ashoka, the Kellogg Fellows Leadership Alliance, the Philadelphia Social Innovations Journal and I-LEAD. Innovate is sponsored by Arch Street Press.