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Background Paper

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Getting to Zero Hunger by 2030: Race, Poverty, and Hunger

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Ending hunger in the United States is within reach. Our country has already committed to doing so by 2030 as part of a set of 17 global goals that also include ending extreme poverty. But achieving zero hunger requires identifying the people most likely to be hungry and supporting policies that give them access to the opportunities they need to build a better life.

Members of many groups are more vulnerable to hunger than the average American. For example, more than 1.4 million military veterans live below the poverty line. Adults with disabilities are twice as likely to live with hunger and poverty as the general U.S. population.¹ Women, children, and older Americans run similar higher risks of hunger and poverty.²

Within each vulnerable group, however, communities of color (African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans)³ fare worse every time. For example, veterans of color are twice as likely as all veterans to live below the poverty line. People of color living with disabilities are three times as likely to face poverty as other disabled adults. In addition, elderly people of color are up to four times as likely to live below the poverty line as all seniors.⁴

A natural response is to wonder why our country has such statistics. Why do communities of color have even higher hunger and poverty rates within groups whose rates are already high? The common denominator among Latinos, African Americans, and Native Americans is that these communities have experienced racial discrimination throughout U.S. history, resulting in higher rates of poverty and hunger.

Ending U.S. hunger and poverty is quite possible. But it requires two things—first, that we acknowledge the role of racial inequality in the high hunger and poverty rates among communities of color, and second, that we work together to tackle these inequalities in our workforce, communities, and schools.

Understanding Our Workforce

Having a job that pays enough makes the difference between a family having enough money to fall into, or rise above, hunger and poverty.



Bread for the World photo

Policies of the past continue to make it difficult for some groups to rise above hunger and poverty. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, the United States passed laws, including the Fair Labor Act, to ensure that workers are paid a minimum hourly wage. This enabled millions of working Americans to put food on the table during one of the most desperate times in American history.

But millions of other families, primarily families of color, were largely excluded since this policy left out workers in tip-based jobs. Racial segregation in the workplace during the Great Depression limited many African Americans to tip-based jobs. Excluding tipped-based workers from the first minimum wages made African Americans even more vulnerable to earning low wages and living in poverty. Today, African Americans are still disproportionately represented in tip-based jobs, where they can legally be paid as little as \$2.13 an hour.⁵

The consequences of these racially-unequal practices are still seen today. The 10 lowest-paying jobs in the United States still disproportionately employ men and women of color, due in large part to the racial segregation witnessed in the 1930s.⁶ These jobs have limited or no employer-provided benefits and keep people working long hours with little to show for it.

People of color also face the racial pay gap, where they are paid less than whites for the same work. Native American, African American, and Latina women, for example, are paid between 55 cents and 60 cents for every dollar paid to a white male. A Latina would have to work an additional 10 months to earn the same income to support her family.⁷

Every American who works hard should be able to meet their family's needs, without worry of hunger or poverty. To achieve this goal for every American, our country will need to support policies that reverse the history of racial inequality in the workforce.

Understanding Our Neighborhoods

Owning a home in a neighborhood filled with opportunity and resources is a cornerstone of the American dream. Some Americans, however, are far less likely to achieve this dream.

This is largely due to practices of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), a federal agency created in the 1930s to help struggling Americans buy homes and join the middle class.⁸ The FHA offered low interest mortgage rates, but these loans were not available to everyone. While most whites were guaranteed loans, African Americans—along with anyone else who chose to live in African American neighborhoods—were legally refused loans. This practice is known as “redlining,” which identified entire African American neighborhoods as “Grade D” or bad credit risks.⁹

Redlining made it nearly impossible for the private sector to offer home mortgages in black neighborhoods or appraise prop-

erty at comparable values.¹⁰ This meant that many African Americans were denied homeownership, a cornerstone of building a better life. Other communities of color were also impacted since they were often pushed out of white neighborhoods.

Discouraging whites from living in black neighborhoods pushed them to move outside the cities, deepening the racial segregation of American neighborhoods. Services and amenities that made communities more livable, including banks and grocery stores, also moved out.¹¹ Property values decreased, businesses closed, and jobs left.

Such resources are essential for families to succeed. The lack of these resources created pockets of concentrated poverty—communities with poverty rates of 20 percent, 40 percent, or more—which is present in many low-income communities of color across our country today.¹²

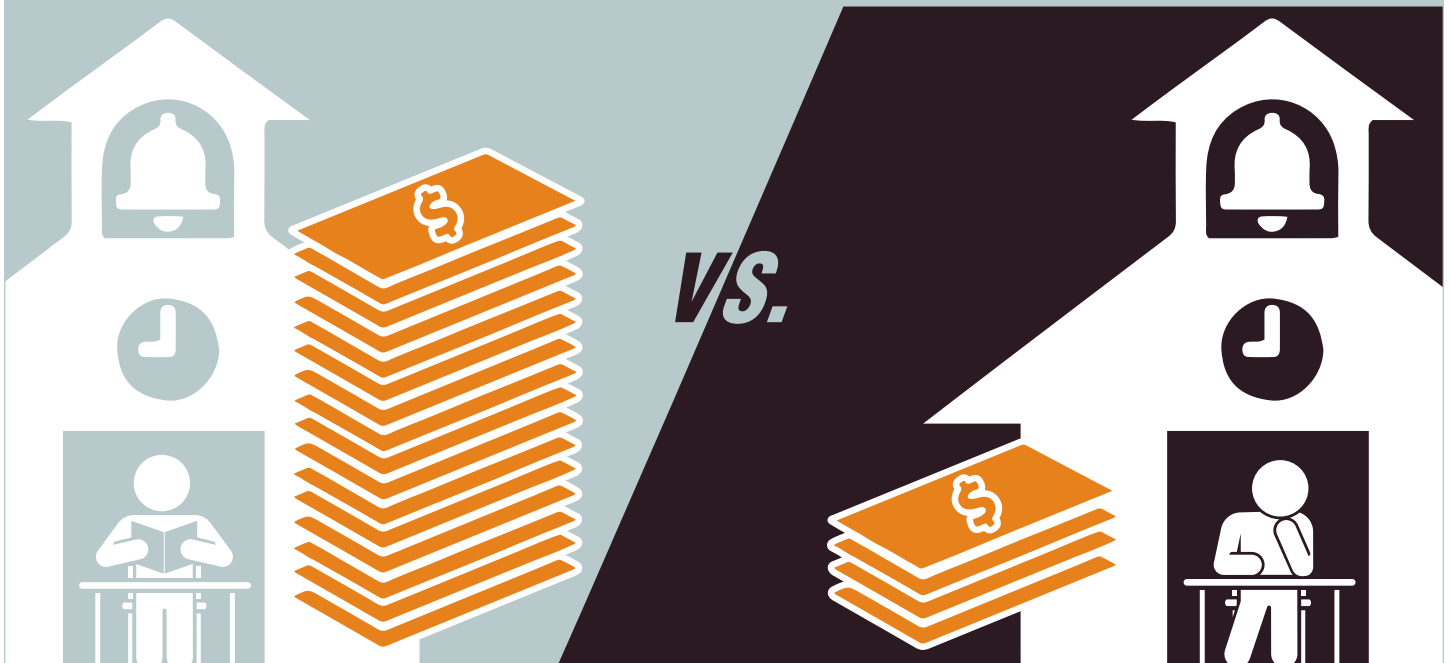
Ensuring that every American lives in a neighborhood filled with opportunities that help families avoid hunger and poverty is essential to reaching our national goal.

Understanding Our Schools

We value our schools because we value the future of our children. A good education includes graduating from high school and attending college—both critical factors in later earning enough money to prevent hunger and poverty as an adult. The most critical factors for educational achievement include children's nutrition (so they can pay attention and learn in class),¹³ as well as their classroom size and curriculum.¹⁴ These factors are linked to school spending.

DID YOU KNOW THAT...

Schools that are 90% white spend **\$773 more per student** than schools with 90% students of color.¹



All students need schools with adequate funding. But since FHA encouraged racially segregated neighborhoods, children of color, who are more likely to live in “Grade D” neighborhoods (see neighborhood section above), have become seven times as likely as white students to attend underfunded schools.¹⁵

Perhaps the most visible impact of this disparity is the difference in school lunch quality between students living in low-income “Grade D” neighborhoods and students living in higher-income “Grade A” or “B” neighborhoods. Currently, schools throughout the country are struggling to keep up with the high costs of maintaining kitchen equipment, hiring cafeteria staff, and purchasing healthy food to prepare for students. While “Grade A” or “B” neighborhoods usually have the means to meet these rising costs and still provide healthy meals to their students, “Grade D” schools generally do not.

As a result, a lot of students attending “Grade D” neighborhood schools—who are disproportionately students of color—receive cheaper processed and reheated meals,¹⁶ instead of the healthy meals that the primarily white students attending “Grade A” or “B” schools receive.¹⁷

Understanding the Role of the Family

The resources that families have access to determine whether their members can avoid hunger and poverty. Most people can relate to family members who need support, whether they are children, elders, or people who are ill. Providing this care can be a heavy financial responsibility for any family, but it is even more difficult for low-wage workers whose jobs offer few benefits.

Based on some of the policies mentioned above, families of color are less equipped to support their household members. Since parents of color are more likely to work in low-wage jobs with limited benefits, for example, they are less likely to receive employer assistance with child care.

They also have less income to enable them to save for the future. Older Americans of color were likely to have earned lower wages for their entire careers because of racial bias in the workplace. This prevented them from saving enough for retirement. The average savings of African Americans and Latinos who are nearing retirement is \$30,000—one-fourth the average \$120,000 that whites in the same age group have.¹⁸

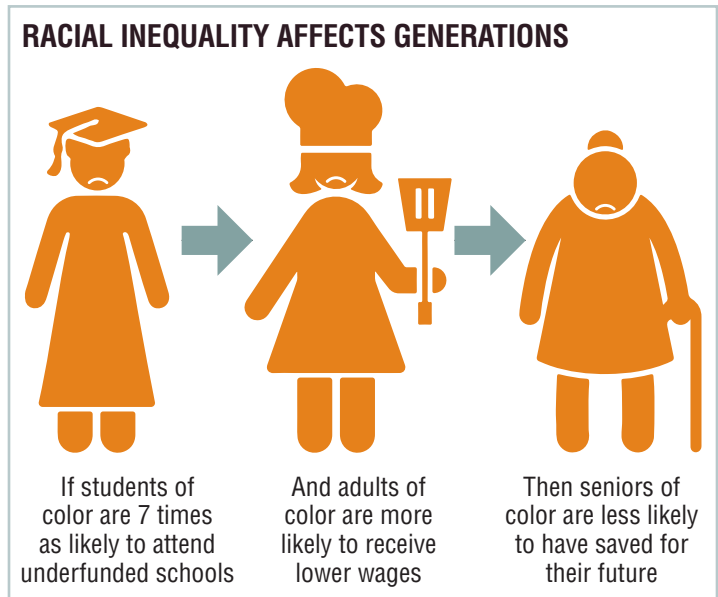
DID YOU KNOW THAT...

Domestic and Agriculture workers, who were primarily people of color, were denied **\$158 billion** in Social Security benefits from 1937-1952.²

As a result, older Americans of color must rely more on their families for support—in most cases, their adult children who are also more likely to work for lower wages. Caring for an older parent often pushes a family of color, who is already up to

three times as likely to live below the poverty line, even deeper into hunger and poverty since they don’t have the supports (i.e., fairly paid jobs with benefits).¹⁹

This shows that policies limiting the opportunities available to people from specific racial groups have generational effects that weaken the ability of families of color to strongly support their members.



Going in the Right Direction: A Path Toward Zero Hunger

Bringing an end to hunger is within our reach, but it requires acknowledging the role of racial inequality. Since people of color are more likely to experience hunger and poverty, we must prioritize efforts that end racial inequality in all settings, including the workplace, home, and school.

DID YOU KNOW THAT...

Ending the racial pay gap could increase **GDP by 20% in 2050.**³

Achieving Zero Hunger through Our Workplaces: Workplaces that offer livable wages, benefits, and advancement opportunities are crucial to ending hunger and poverty. Since communities of color are disproportionately represented in low-wage jobs, we must address low pay, bias in job opportunities, and the racial pay gap by:

- **Ensuring that all workers are paid a livable wage.** Currently, a person can work full-time, year-round and still be well below the poverty line.
- **Adding good benefits to low-wage positions,** including health insurance, retirement savings plans, paid time off, and childcare assistance.

- **Aggressively recruiting and training workers of color** for higher-paid positions and industries, as well as providing leadership and advancement opportunities for low-wage workers of color.
- **Identifying all positions where workers of color experience the racial pay gap** to eliminate this gap.²⁰
- **Connecting public schools with more social services and programs** that directly support low-income students.
- **Rethinking the way that public schools are funded—or underfunded.** Currently, a school’s funding is tied to the surrounding neighborhood’s property values and property taxes.

Achieving Zero Hunger through Our Neighborhoods: All Americans need strong neighborhoods to thrive. People of color are more likely than others to live in areas of concentrated poverty with limited opportunities. We can reduce concentrated poverty and increase opportunities by:

- **Helping lower-income people of color purchase and restore homes**, which will increase property values in their neighborhoods.
- **Investing in lower-income communities** by ensuring access to amenities and services that make neighborhoods more livable, such as grocery stores and hospitals.
- **Prioritizing initiatives to reduce poverty** in neighborhoods with rates between 20 percent and 40 percent or even higher.

Achieving Zero Hunger through Our Schools: To be confident in the future of the United States, we must invest in our nation’s children and the public schools they attend. Students of color are far more likely to attend underfunded schools that lack the necessary resources to enable their students to succeed. We can strengthen such schools by:

- **Implementing a stronger federal child nutrition program** that provides healthier meals for low-income students and schools, regardless of ability to pay.

Achieving Zero Hunger through Our Families: Family can be a valuable support system. But, family members must have the resources to support each other. This can be achieved by:

- **Strengthening employment benefits for low-wage workers**, including health care, paid leave to care for an elderly relative or a child, and child care.
- **Ensuring that workers of color are not limited to low-wage work or facing a racial pay gap**, so they can save for the future and support their family in the present.
- **Expanding access to savings and retirement programs** so that workers of color can build financial security for their retirement.

The policies in this paper were developed from a Bread for the World Institute briefing paper entitled “Ending Hunger in Communities Where It is Most Likely,” and do not reflect specific policy recommendations of the Alliance to End Hunger.

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Endnotes

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- 3 Note: While Asian Americans also belong to a community of color, this paper focuses on African Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos as groups that, on the whole, have higher hunger and poverty levels. When statistics on Asian Americans are disaggregated, people from Southeast Asia and their descendants also have higher levels of hunger and poverty than the U.S. population overall. Since this paper cites consistent data across aggregate racial groups, Asian Americans are not a specific focus
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- 9 Historical Shift from Explicit to Implicit Policies Affecting Housing Segregation in Eastern Massachusetts. The Fair Housing Center of Greater Boston. <http://www.bostonfairhousing.org/timeline/1934-1968-FHA-Redlining.html>
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- 18 Race and Retirement Insecurity in the United States. The National Institute on Retirement Security. Nari Rhee, PhD. December 2013. https://www.giaging.org/documents/NIRS_Report_12-10-13.pdf
- 19 21 “The Concentration of Poverty is a Growing Rural Problem.” Tracey Farrigan and Timothy Parker. United States Department of Agriculture. December 5, 2012. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2012/december/concentration-of-poverty/>
- 20 For more information on how to identify areas in the workplace where communities of color face the racial pay gap, please read Bread for the World Institute’s briefing paper, “Ending Hunger and Poverty in Communities Where It Is Most Likely.”

DID YOU KNOW THAT...

- 1 <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education/news/2012/08/22/32862/students-of-color-still-receiving-unequal-education/>
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