Grand Challenges
for Social Work

Policy Recommendations for Meeting the Grand Challenge to
Achieve Equal Opportunity and Justice

In the United States, some groups of people have long been consigned to society's margins. Historical and current prejudice and injustice can bar access to success in education and employment. Addressing racial and social injustices, deconstructing stereotypes, dismantling inequality, exposing unfair practices, and accepting the superdiversity of the population will advance this challenge. All of this work is critical to fostering a successful society. Based on social work's science and knowledge base, we recommend policies to facilitate Latino immigrant integration through expanded health coverage, to create a policy environment that eliminates stigma by strengthening federal antidiscrimination laws, and to increase success for African American children and youth by eliminating zero tolerance policies in schools.

Recommendation 1:
To Accelerate Latino Immigrant Integration, Expand Coverage under the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA)

Achieving equal opportunity and justice for immigrants requires a concerted effort toward their full social and economic integration. In 2014, more than 40 million immigrants lived in the United States, representing over 13% of the total population. The largest proportion of these immigrants trace their origins to Latin America.[1] Fundamental to an integrative approach to immigration is the provision of health care because it facilitates all other aspects of social participation, including education and employment. The passage of the ACA in 2010—especially the expansion of Medicaid—promised to be a defining moment for the health of Latino immigrants, one of the largest uninsured groups in the country. However, reform efforts have fallen short. A 2012 Supreme Court ruling made Medicaid expansion optional for states. In states that have expanded Medicaid eligibility, the uninsured rate among working-age members of the Latino community has decreased from 36% to 23%, while in states that have opted not to expand Medicaid eligibility, uninsured rates for the same group have remained virtually unchanged.[2] Current policy hurts the Latino immigrant community because the vast majority—over three quarters—of the nation's 10.2 million eligible uninsured Latinos live in states that have not expanded Medicaid.[3] Also hurting the Latino community is the ACA's failure to address health coverage for recent arrivals (i.e., those who have lived in the country for less than 5 years) and for unauthorized immigrants.[4] Given the substantial disparities in access to health care, strategic steps to expand its reach to all Latinos can make the ACA a critical mechanism to accelerate their integration into the United States. Not only can it help prevent the development of complex and expensive health conditions that may place undue burdens on the U.S. health care system, but more importantly, it will improve the health of the largest minority population in the country.

Recommendation 2:
Enhance, Expand, and Strengthen Federal Antidiscrimination Laws, Including the Voting Rights Act

In addition to increasing opportunities, policy change that promotes equality helps to deconstruct stereotypes and build healthy social relations across communities. Historical experiences, cultural differences, and innate human behavior have created structural inequality fueled by deeply ingrained attitudes and behaviors toward those who are seen as different. Such stigmatizing attitudes, in effect, become mechanisms for tangible disenfranchisement. Producing changes in these attitudes and behaviors requires a mutually reinforcing set of policy and environmentally based strategies at multiple levels, in a multicomponent approach.[5] As we have seen in smoking rates over the past 20 years, federal, state, and local policy changes that discourage smoking (e.g., smoking bans) and encourage abstinence (e.g., quit lines) have influenced perceptions of social norms toward smoking, and these new social norms have reduced smoking rates in a sustainable way.[6] This use of social policy to set an expectation for social norms can be applied to interventions that create awareness and understanding and thus strengthen the fabric of American society.[7] Given their powerful potential to disrupt the cycle of social stigma, bold policy interventions are called for. We recommend four key actions to foster full integration in the United States. First, we must expand federal antidiscrimination laws for minority groups that are not currently protected, including the LGBT community. Second, we must expand affirmative action laws that seek to broaden representation of disadvantaged groups. Third, we must increase opportunities for equal employment and fair housing. Finally, to fully integrate disenfranchised communities, we must reform and technologically advance the Voting Rights Act so that all citizens have the ability to vote in all their respective local, county, state, and federal elections.

Recommendation 3:
Eliminate Zero Tolerance Policies in Schools and Promote the Use of Evidence-Informed Practices and Policies to Address Racial Disciplinary Disproportionality

Racial disproportionality in the rates of school suspension and expulsion is a key factor in any discussion of African American educational attainment. Although African American children and youth account for 15% of the U.S. public-school population, they represent 48% of those suspended from school, outpacing all other ethnic groups in school suspension rates, yet there is no evidence that they engage in misbehavior at higher rates.[8] Suspensions and expulsions associated with zero tolerance policies lead to a host of negative academic and social outcomes, increasing the probability of falling behind

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academically and school failure.[9] We endorse the following policies for the purpose of eliminating the disproportionate suspension and expulsion of African American students based on zero tolerance in school discipline practices. First, tie school discipline practices to performance appraisals for school teachers and administrators. This will make individuals within schools accountable for suspension and expulsion rates, and the accountability will require school teachers to place a greater focus on classroom management. Second, link disciplinary practices in schools to campus report cards and mandate state reporting. Currently, only school districts are held accountable for school discipline outcomes. This measure would make school administrators more accountable for developing alternatives to exclusionary school discipline practices. Third, identify and implement evidence-based training for school teachers, administrators, and other school-based professionals working with students who exhibit problem behaviors or who have been diagnosed with disabilities. Fourth, mandate school and district reporting on the use of evidence-based interventions as alternatives to exclusionary disciplinary practices in schools. Fifth, conduct outcome-based research on accountability measures and evidence-based practices related to exclusionary disciplinary practices in schools.

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End Notes
1. Brown and Stepler (2016).
2. Doty, Beutel, Rasmussen, and Collins (2015).
3. Garfield and Damico (2016).
4. Sommers (2013).
5. Hornik (2002).
6. Nyborg and Rege (2003).
7. Banks and Ford (2009).
8. Skiba, Eckes, and Brown (2009/2010, p. 1088); Smith and Harper (2015).
9. Losen, Hodson, Keith, Morrison, and Belway (2015).

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