

Summary Report

Compiled by New Hampshire Listens for Our Kids New Hampshire



When Opportunity Stops Knocking:

New Hampshire's Kids and the American Dream

Held May 2015—Berlin, Laconia, Nashua, Manchester, Pittsfield, Plymouth, Keene, Lancaster, Portsmouth, Concord, West Lebanon, Rochester

Background

The conversations that took place in early May 2015 were focused on informing and getting input from New Hampshire residents on the increasing opportunity gap in the United States and in New Hampshire. *Does everyone in New Hampshire have similar opportunities to succeed economically and socially? Is it harder to get ahead now than it was in previous generations? How can we make sure that everyone, especially children, have access to the opportunities they need to have a good life?* These were the kinds of questions at the heart of the conversations. To plan these conversations, NH Listens worked with a bipartisan group of civic and business leaders. The planning group and NH Listens were informed partly by the recently published book by Robert Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, which provides extensive analysis of the growing opportunity gap. Outreach was conducted statewide with particular emphasis on the event location communities (See Appendix A). Our mutual goals were to:

- Explore changes people see in economic opportunity and social mobility, particularly in New Hampshire
- Share experiences about how these changes may have affected you, your children, other young people, and your neighbors
- Discuss barriers to opportunity and possible approaches to overcoming those barriers

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Summary of Themes

The information in the discussion guide (Appendix B) was organized by five stages of life—*Coming into the World*, *The Early Years (0–5)*, *School Years (6–18)*, *After High School*, and *Twenty and Thirty Somethings Early Work and Family*. While discussions addressed all five stages, most groups spent significant time on the early years as a critical period for children and on twenty and thirty somethings regarding early work and family. Across these stages, the majority of deliberation across groups focused on poverty and inequality, the role of local communities, and educational opportunity. The following themes were summarized from all small groups across all locations (See notes in Appendix C and a description of our process in Appendix D.).

Poverty and Inequality

While the conversations focused on opportunity and the American Dream, participants in all forty groups made clear connections between opportunity and the problems associated with cycles of poverty. Basic needs were discussed, and participants grappled with the roots of poverty and necessary steps to build bridges out of poverty. The causes and impacts of the growing opportunity gap were also discussed, with emphasis on barriers to upward mobility and opportunity as well as acknowledgement of a growing gap between have and have nots. Multi-generational poverty, jobs that pay low wages (and getting to and from those jobs in rural areas), and the increased

economic segregation of neighborhoods were seen as major contributors to the growing opportunity gap. Related to these economic conditions was a concern about the changing nature of families and communities. Both single parents and two-parent working families face challenges related to caring for children and assuring their social and educational success. Poverty and inequality served as the context for what became a more focused conversation on actions that can be taken regarding education.

“Personal responsibility plays a role but...this is overwhelming.”

(Note that this and other participant quotes may be found in Appendix E and F.)

Basic Needs

Participants discussed how families at the very least need to be able to access health care and nutrition, affordable housing, energy and heat, transportation, and child care (so parents can get to work). The need for a safe place to live was also emphasized, including places that are free of violence and do not expose residents to lead.

The dynamics of poverty were explored, with participants discussing personal experiences of poverty, including the stigma associated with poverty (associated with feelings of embarrassment, marginalization, hopelessness, and lowered aspirations), intergenerational poverty, and the stresses of daily survival.

Specific economic impacts of poverty were examined, including the challenge of meeting basic needs with inadequate wages (including minimum wage rates that perpetuate poverty), homelessness, lack of access to jobs and job training, and commuting long distances to find work. Lack of access to social services in general and specific lack of access to technology were also seen as significant challenges. These stresses were seen as sometimes associated with mental illness, addiction, or other forms of disability. Participants from the North Country and rural communities expressed feelings of being cut off from the opportunities enjoyed by those in other regions of the state.

Participants suggested the need for more jobs that do not require a college education, specific skill-based job training, better information about existing resources for children and families, and **wages above the current minimum wage levels**.

“We like to believe that everyone is equal in our country and that if you work hard you get ahead. But that isn’t always true.”

“Poverty limits opportunity at all levels.”

“Housing insecurity affects everything for a child.”

A Growing Gap

Participants discussed the increasing changes between the rich and poor and expressed a belief that the American dream may not be as achievable for poor families. They described this as an increasing divide between the “haves and have nots,” exacerbated by stagnant wages for lower paid workers. Participants also noted the links between poverty, inequality, race, ethnicity, and gender. Examples of the increasing gap focused on being priced out of opportunities like sports or other extra-curricular activities. This lack of “extra opportunity” intensifies the differences between those who are rich and poor.

The **causes of the growing gap** were examined. Many attributed it to a “broken system” in which those who are disadvantaged lack the networks and knowledge necessary to find resources and “escape” poverty. Other cause

and effect relationships discussed include single parenthood, lack of individual motivation, lack of job opportunities and decent wages, and inadequate housing.

The **ability to close the gap and move out of poverty** was related to both individual factors and system factors. Some focused on the responsibility of parents to take care of their children, while many others emphasized the need to provide support to parents to help them care for their children. This would include mentoring assistance for parents, with special attention to the needs of single parents who face economic and social challenges. Participants described the need for a “two-generation approach” that aims to help both parents and children in order to close the opportunity gap.

Many participants noted that New Hampshire is the first in the nation with respect to **providing financial assistance to working families**, not just to those who are unemployed and most destitute. In other words, there was recognition that working and non-working people live in poverty.

Participants believe it is important to **“give the poor a voice”** by assuring their participation in community and civic life, increasing their voting rates, and acting as self-advocates. Many groups extended this idea to giving a voice to children, so their needs and views can be known as action steps are designed.

“People don’t vote because they don’t feel they have a voice because of money in politics.”

“The path ahead for children is not as easy as it was for us.”

“The money gap matters. The “race to the top” is much easier for those with the most resources. Others left behind.”

Strengthening Parent and Family Support

One of the most impactful ways to support families and parents was seen as **access to jobs with a “livable” wage**. This was closely followed by the need for affordable housing for a range of income levels, instilling a strong work ethic and individual motivation, teaching kids to save, basing services on needs rather than wants, acknowledging the role of grandparents as child care providers, accessible and affordable transportation, and meeting basic needs so that parents have time to spend with children.

“High rents and low wages lead to extreme family issues.”

“NH is first among states in the portion of public assistance dollars going to working families.”

“Why are mother’s demographics improving while more children are moving into poverty?”

“How can we support and invest in NH families (all NH families) without labeling them by establishing a dehumanizing process for eligibility?”

The Role of Local Communities

Participants in almost all groups discussed the influence of local communities and their role in the well-being of children. Many cited the need to focus on helping all children since families have unequal resources and capabilities. Discussions about local communities focused on three areas—values, community ties, and changes in modern life. Most groups also focused on how one’s neighborhood affects opportunity, and the ways that local communities can take actions to close the opportunity gap. The need for long-term rather than short-term thinking and decision making was often mentioned.

Values, Community Ties, and Modern Life

A common theme across almost all groups was about how **the American dream has changed**. A shift in values from more community-focused to more individualistic was discussed extensively. Participants believe that we are in a time that is less community oriented, where people are busier with their personal lives and are more isolated from each other. Increased use of technology and on-line communication was seen as part of the cause of this isolation. Many believe there has been a change for the worse in people's work ethic and motivation. There was considerable attention to strengthening community ties, to assure that people look out for each other, especially those living at lower income levels.

The connection between strong communities and children's success was made often. The adage **"it takes a village to raise a child"** came through loud and clear from many, many groups. The phrase "it takes a village" was used multiple times in multiple regions. The idea that investing in children, especially those who are poor, pays later in various ways came up often. Many groups were concerned about the data indicating that adolescents do not feel cared about, and there was a desire to create communities where young people know they matter. Participants expressed the importance of taking personal responsibility to address issues of poverty and child well-being in our own towns.

"It starts with us. It is morally and socially unacceptable that less than 50 percent of youth in high school feel they matter to the people in their community!"

"We need to give children a compelling reason to want to come back and contribute to this community because their experience is positive and supportive."

The Nature of Neighborhoods

A majority of groups discussed the ways in which **communities have changed**, especially as they have become more homogeneous with fewer interactions among neighbors, less mixing of different socioeconomic or ethnic groups, and a declining sense of connection and community compared to the past. This is heightened among families that change residence, and school districts, because of jobs and/or rent. Some groups focused on the fact that fewer children now play outside, spending more of their time inside, away from neighbors and age-peers. Other changes discussed included the changing demographics of New Hampshire communities, especially related to new immigrant populations. The need to assure connections with these new residents was emphasized by many.

"We need a way for poor and not so poor kids to work together and learn together effectively."

"The neighborhoods where people live determines so much about their kids' lives."

Local Efforts

Reflecting New Hampshire's traditions, almost all groups discussed the **need for local communities to invest both** philosophically and financially in young people, mostly through education (see below). That is, emphasis was on local action rather than relying on state or federal solutions. Most of the groups (34/40) questioned whether **the state's tax structure, which relies heavily on local property taxes**, advantages the rich and hurts the poor and is

part of the problem. And many groups discussed **the need for non-parent adult mentors** for children and youth, both within and outside of school. The need for **collaboration across sectors**, including business, schools, social services, and faith groups, to support children and working families was mentioned in most groups. Such collaborative efforts might focus on the creation of **community centers and hubs** that connect residents, offer information and support, and serve all members of a community in a way that integrates rather than separates.

“(There is) a need for mentors to take an active long-term interest in children and their families to provide encouragement, guidance, and to listen and acknowledge.”

Educational Opportunity

The primary theme to emerge from all forty groups, across all regions, was an expressed concern about unevenness in educational opportunities, and the need to address this both among schools (from school to school and town to town) and within schools (some children may have more capabilities to navigate the resources schools offer than others). Access to **educational opportunities for all children** was the most commonly shared concern related to this topic. Though participants addressed pre-K–12 education and the importance of educational opportunity in general, participants focused especially on early development and education, from birth to school age and on higher education. Summer was also a time seen as a growth opportunity for middle and upper income children and much less so for lower income kids due to program costs. Education was a deeply shared, common concern. In addition, participants often introduced topics related to health and mental health systems, substance use, the need for early prevention and care, housing, and transportation as significantly related to educational opportunity.

“Access to enriching after-school programs and developing trusting supportive adult relationships (mentors) is needed.”

Early Childhood

The **need for early care of children and support for their parents** was clearly communicated. This often centered on early education opportunities, but also spanned health resources, parenting, and general community supports for young children. Again, the importance of equal access to such supports was emphasized by many. All forty groups spoke to the critical need to assure that parents have the knowledge and support necessary to care for their children in the first years of life. Early child care out of the home was identified as important by over a quarter of all groups, while access to high quality preschool and kindergarten was seen as important by almost all groups. It was recognized that children from families with more financial resources have greater access to professional early care than their lower income peers, and that this advantage leads to other forms of an opportunity gap. A few groups explored ideas related to a child care tax credit or business provided benefit that could impact early care resources available to families.

“Better educated mothers have more professional day care and less educated mothers rely heavily on relatives.”

“Essentially any kid from any background has a chance to succeed without the issue of income. Focus on the individual and change the way education starts or is determined by income.”

“Initial investments of both time and money impact the future of all of our children.”

“Invest in early childhood.”

Early Adulthood

In addition to the early years as a critical time in a child’s life, participants especially focused on the time when youth are leaving high school and entering into post-secondary education or the workforce. The most frequently mentioned concerns here related to the **cost of higher education**, which is a particular challenge in New Hampshire, and viable alternatives such as apprenticeships and other innovative educational environments. The **accumulation of student loan debt is a barrier to opportunity** when young people are establishing families and trying to make it on their own. For young adults coming from poor families, college debt may cause them to remain in poverty, especially if well-paying jobs are not available where they live. The different levels of educational achievement and attainment experienced by poor versus non-poor young adults is a major factor in perpetuating the “two generation” poverty discussed by participants. These concerns were the basis for the strong belief held by most participants that society must value and invest in education both at the pre-K–12 and post-secondary levels. Successful extended learning programs such as Dover Biz Ed Connect and high school/community college partnerships were also mentioned.

“Public education has been key to spreading opportunity in America. It’s time to double down and fix our broken schools.”

“College debt is a big barrier to low income kids going to college.”

Participation and Reach

Three hundred and thirty-three people attended the community conversations. Of these participants, 257 completed a final evaluation at the end of the event. A full summary of the evaluation may be found in Appendix G.

- 333 attendees (461 pre-registered, 42 walk-ins, total reach: 503)
- 12 locations with attendees from 81 different NH towns
- Age range of 16 to 80 with an average age of 53
- About 7 percent of participants were under 30 years of age
- 10 percent of participants identified as students and 23 percent identified as retired
- There were more women (68 percent) than men (32 percent)
- Political perspectives ranged from 34% liberal, 26% somewhat liberal, 29% moderate, 10% somewhat conservative, and 1% conservative
- Participants were generally highly educated with less than 1% K–8, 4% high school/GED, 8% some college, 4% Associates, 25% BA, 58% Grad/prof
- 99 percent of participants agreed that the facilitator made sure everyone took part in the conversation

- 97 percent of participants felt that the facilitator did not impose his or her ideas or values on the group
- 93 percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the information in the discussion guide was useful to the conversation
- 94 of participants agreed or strongly agreed the group talked about the most important issues related to the topic
- 97 percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed that everyone had an equal chance to express his/her views

Overall Conclusions

When the discussions of all forty groups across twelve communities are considered as a whole, it is clear that those who participated were most concerned about the context of children's lives, focusing on the effects of poverty, inequality, and the resulting social barriers for children, youth, and young adults. Related to these economic conditions was a concern about the changing nature of families and communities. Both single parents and two-parent working families face challenges related to caring for children and assuring their social and educational success. Multi-generational poverty, jobs that pay low wages (and getting to and from those jobs in rural areas), and the increased economic segregation of neighborhoods were seen as major contributors to the growing opportunity gap. A decline in community values and the associated sense of isolation were also seen as barriers to mobility and opportunity.

While participants identified a range of possible responses to this changing context, the large majority concentrated their discussions on **the role of educational systems, from early childhood through post-secondary education, as the most powerful force that can improve mobility and opportunity**. Participants saw these points in the life stages of a young person as the most critical and vulnerable, times when there are either opportunities to thrive and begin to fulfill the American dream, or when lack of opportunity can lead to stagnation and lost opportunity.

Most of the time spent in small group conversations focused on the causes and consequences of the growing opportunity gap, with frequent discussions about poverty, the challenges of parenting, and lack of well-paying jobs. When participants turned to solutions toward the end of their conversations, there was a focus on community-based resources and services that can:

- support families with very young children
- reduce income inequality (including through equitable tax structures and higher wages)
- assure equal opportunity during the pre-K–12 years in public schools
- make post-secondary education affordable
- support adequate and affordable housing
- strengthen participation in community life through mentoring
- reduce mental illness and substance abuse
- balance formal supports with efforts to increase individual motivation and responsibility

Such solutions may be initiated at the local, state, or national level, but overall participants believed that it is the local community where the emphasis should be placed. Regions where there are fewer well-paying jobs, more social isolation, and less access to high quality early education and public schools should especially be the concern of policy makers and other leaders.

"We must trust ourselves enough to think differently."

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Bringing people together for engaged conversations and informed community solutions
