# How Do Fish See Water?
## Building Public Will to Advance Inclusive Communities

**Tiffany Manuel,** TheCaseMade

*"There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an
older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, 'Morning, boys.
How's the water?' And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually
one of them looks over at the other and goes, 'What the hell is water?'"*
—*David Foster Wallace*[1]

Cultivating more equitable and inclusive communities is challenging work. In addition to the technical challenges of fostering such communities, there also is the added conundrum of how we build public support for policies and investments that make equitable and inclusive development possible. On the public will-building front, this work is made exponentially tougher because it generally means asking people to problematize an issue—racial and economic segregation—that they do not see as a problem that threatens the values and vitality of the communities in which they live. Unlike climate change, health care, education, or other social "issues" that are well-understood as requiring public intervention, racial and economic segregation operates so ubiquitously that it is often ignored as a "thing" to be solved. It just *is*. And, when people are asked explicitly to reflect on the high level of concentrated segregation that characterizes their communities and to consider the well-documented negative consequences of us living so separately, many struggle to "see" this as a compelling policy problem with the same shaping force of other issues requiring national attention. Perhaps most importantly, they struggle to see their stake in shaping solutions and supporting policies that cultivate more equitable and inclusive places. Because segregation is so fully woven into the environments around us, we behave like fish—ignoring the water surrounding us.

More often, segregation and its consequences are understood from a set of distinctive public narratives (or commonly shared beliefs that dominate the public discourse).[2] Those narratives are: (1) *consumer preferences and racial difference* (i.e., the idea that people make rational choices to live with others who are like them, especially in the context of race); and (2)

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[1] David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005).

[2] "Public narrative is a form of social reproduction in all societies, invisibly woven into the fabric of everyday life. These shared systems of meaning, mostly taken for granted and unremarked, exist as themes or stories in our consciousness. They give coherence to group experience, particularly how the world works. Expressed in legal codes, the arts, mass media, and corporate discourse, core narratives provide the necessary mental models, patterns, and beliefs to make sense of the world and explore our place within it." See: Corrina Wainwright, *Building Narrative Power for Racial Justice and Health Equity*. Edited by Bisola Falola and Steffie Klinglake. (Open Society Foundations, July 2019), 4. https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/publications/building-narrative-power-for-racial-justice-and-health-equity.

the narratives of *individual responsibility and mobility* (i.e., poor people wanting to move to better neighborhoods need only earn their way there, via hard work and perseverance). When people use these narratives to reason about segregation, it becomes infinitely tougher for them to think constructively about solutions that foster inclusion, especially around race and income. To build stronger public support, advocates of mixed-race and mixed-income policies must carefully navigate these narratives to make a much stronger case for why segregation and inequity are problems that deserve and require a more thoughtful collective response.

There is good news on the horizon for advocates who have tried for decades to elevate the issue of racial and economic segregation on the political and policy agendas. The policy window on equitable and inclusive community development practices is open now, as political will grows nationally to address the severe shortage of affordable housing, gentrification, and displacement concerns. Whether this is a moment to make real progress on how we address segregation or just a wrinkle in time, however, depends mightily on how we make the case for relevant solutions and how we are able to show how those solutions relate to a very long list of pressing social issues already on the political agenda.

### The Public Discourse on Poverty, Race and Place

> *"My longstanding advice to ambitious people trapped in stagnant communities*
> *—move, for God's sake!"*
> *—Kevin Williamson[3]*

An explicit public conversation about poverty, race, and place is making its erratic way across the country and creating a perfect storm for policy action. A perfect storm always arises from a rare combination of unpredictable factors. This current political storm seems to be stimulated by at least three significant factors: a particularly challenging presidential administration that has polarized the nation around issues of race and inequality; a rapidly "browning America"[4] that is changing how Americans see themselves; and the spatial dynamics of the economic inequality that is widening the income and wealth gap. By themselves, these issues could sustain gale-force winds in the public consciousness, but they have been accompanied by a larger colluding force: a national housing crisis. The severity of the national shortage of housing is driving up housing costs across the country—upending communities that have long been home to low-income residents and many people of color, displacing them to the outer edges of many cities and raising the visibility of gentrification.

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[3] Kevin Williamson, "More Garbuttiana," *National Review*, April 15, 2016, www.nationalreview.com/article/434100/white-working-class-donald.
[4] Ezra Klein, "White Threat in a Browning America*," VOX*, July 30, 2018. https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/7/30/17505406/trump-obama-race-politics-immigration.

While these topics have always been fodder for debate and analysis in academic circles, they have not typically led the nightly news or played out in contentious parent-teacher association meetings. Yet today, in a very explicit way, that is exactly what is happening across the United States. On the one hand, we are seeing the onslaught of racist attacks by President Trump on cities like Baltimore (which he labeled "a disgusting, rat and rodent infested mess"[5]). On the other hand, we are seeing rebuttals by anti-racism advocates who also point to the vast racial and economic disparities across communities but see the culprits as a toxic cocktail of white supremacy, advanced capitalism, and a system of interlocking policies of exclusion. The fervor on both ends of this spectrum is elevating these issues in the public discourse and challenging advocates to understand how to best steer the conversations toward concrete policy actions that could make a difference.

As this dynamic has played out, contentious battles over the siting of affordable housing in neighborhoods large and small are erupting, as everyday people try to make sense of the rapidly changing racial, economic, and spatial dynamics playing out in their communities. Issues like zoning and land use policy—typically of interest only to local policy wonks—today bring people out to community meetings with almost as much passion as local football or baseball games.

Despite the challenges of wading into the erratic eye of this storm, housing and community-development practitioners are doing so because this political environment represents one of the best opportunities we have had in years to advance a real conversation about the interlocking institutional policies that have reinforced racial and economic boundaries in the United States. With better data and evidence in hand about what works to create and sustain inclusive communities, housing and community-development advocates are pushing hard to position solutions against the backdrop of these broader social forces.

### *What's Driving the Conversation in Housing and Community Development?*

> *"Developers say that perhaps the toughest impediment to new housing construction is local opposition, especially if the proposed construction site is in a safe neighborhood with good schools."*
> *—Ana Beatriz Cholo*[6]

Housing and community-development practitioners have made the development and preservation of high-quality affordable housing a reality in many neighborhoods across the

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[5] Meredith McGraw. "President Trump heads to Baltimore, a city he called a 'rodent infested mess'". ABC News September 12, 2019, https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/president-trump-heads-baltimore-city-called-rodent-infested/story?id=65570278

[6] Ana Beatriz Cholo, "Why Affordable Housing Doesn't Get Built: Developers often face public opposition, regulatory barriers and financial risks," *Huffington Post*, Feb. 6, 2016, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/affordable-housingcalifornia_us_56cf4b61e4b03260bf75e01e.

country. We know that housing is the foundation for creating stable, healthy communities; we know that housing is key to addressing economic inequality, because housing remains the primary way that Americans build wealth; and we know that housing is a key mechanism for dismantling racial and economic segregation. Much progress has been made in addressing tough issues, such as racial and economic segregation, by bringing mixed-income developments to neighborhoods. Blighted neighborhoods have been turned into bustling ones and other, more affluent, neighborhoods are now home to low- and moderate-income families who would otherwise not be able to afford to live in those communities.

While much progress has been made, it is disheartening to see how many families across the nation still do not have a decent, affordable place to live; the extent to which many neighborhoods are still racially and economically segregated; and how difficult it continues to be to tap existing housing policies and programs to drive more equitable outcomes and inclusive communities.

The housing and community development fields have been increasingly explicit about naming the goals of equity and inclusion as priorities and collaborating with other sectors (e.g., health, education, transportation), recognizing that a good portion of our very well-intended efforts have reinforced, rather than upended, patterns of racial and economic segregation in communities. Consequently, we are learning from each other about how to create more inclusive communities and developing greater sophistication in piloting strategies that advance more equitable and inclusive communities.

From the vantage point of housing and community-development practitioners, the public discourse about the relationship between poverty, race, and place has been problematic, in and of itself. Anyone who has been to a neighborhood meeting on the siting or zoning of affordable housing in the last 10 years knows well how much misinformation and implicit bias is allowed to stand in for informed deliberation.[7] When the thorny issues of racial and economic segregation come up in the media, arise in community meetings, or require public comment in other community forums, rarely is there enough depth of understanding to move those conversations toward support for useful policy solutions. Much of this has to do with the narratives that undergird public thinking about these issues.

From the expertise in communities, as well as a growing body of framing research on poverty and inequality, we know quite a lot about the narratives Americans use to think and talk about these issues. For example, whereas housing and community-development practitioners view the relationship between poverty, race, and place as a result of broader systems and structural issues, the narrative circulating in broader public discourse often is quite different. In public discourse, poor neighborhoods are seen as a function of the flawed people who live there:

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[7] Jillian Olinger, Kelly Capatosto, and Mary Ana McKay, *Challenging Race as Risk: How Implicit Bias Undermines Housing Opportunity in American – and what we can do about it*. (Columbus, OH: Kirwan Institute, 2016), http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/implicit-bias-housing.pdf.

people who fail to take advantage of the opportunities that exist in America and who fail to live up to the community values around hard work, grit, and determination. As the logic goes, poor people are understood to be poor because they make "poor choices" and, by extension, the fact that they are disproportionately black[8] or Latinx gets attributed to a broader narrative about racial or cultural difference.

Moreover, the public narrative often posits that people need to take more initiative to address their own challenges—to move when rents are too high, to get more education or job training when wages are too low to pay for the desired quality of housing or neighborhood amenities, and more generally to make better life "choices." This perception makes it difficult to engage the people in advocating for inclusive policies, programs, and investments that have equity built into them. And, because the public narrative tends to attribute racial disparities in housing to individual choices rather than to the structural dynamics of social and economic inequality, it reinforces ambivalence toward supporting a stronger set of policies, programs, and investments that would ameliorate these issues. We see this playing out in housing policy today, as polls across the country show increasing support for the idea that people ought to have decent, affordable housing yet the public response to policies that would help has been lukewarm.

Policies supporting fair housing enjoy widespread public support in principle, but there has been virtually no public appetite for enforcement and stronger engagement. Instead, when the public conversation moves to policy solutions on an issue people believe to be fundamentally about individual "choices," the commentary is unforgiving. Reactions often take the shape of the comment in the box at right, which responded to a NYTimes article describing the Trump Administration's virtual shut-down on the implementation of

**:TheUpshot** **The New York Times**

## Trump Administration Postpones an Obama Fair-Housing Rule

By Emily Badger and John Eligon

Jan. 4, 2018                                   f  y  ✉  ➔  🔖  68

> **Katie**  Atlanta · 2 days ago
> This is great news and I hope the rule is eventually abolished. If you can't afford to live on, say, Jupiter Island, Florida then you have no right to demand that the Island build lower cost housing to accommodate you. Discrimination in the sale or rent of housing should never be tolerated but it's a very different thing to say that there is some affirmative duty for every community to directly reflect the nation's racial and ethnic diversity even if that means forcing low income housing into Chappaqua. That is governmental overreach of epic proportions.
>
> Reply · 👍 24 Recommend

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[8] Editors' Note: We have recommended that essay authors use the term "African American" when referring specifically to descendants of enslaved people in the United States and the more inclusive term "black" when referring broadly to members of the African diaspora, including African Americans, Caribbean Americans, and Africans.

Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing (AFFH) policy.

It also is worth acknowledging that even in discussions of poor white communities, the public message about solutions tends to be the same: Take personal responsibility and move to a place that you can afford:

> *"The truth about these dysfunctional, downscale communities is that they deserve to die. Economically, they are negative assets. Morally, they are indefensible… The white American underclass is in thrall to a vicious, selfish culture whose main products are misery and used heroin needles. Donald Trump's speeches make them feel good. So does OxyContin. What they need isn't analgesics, literal or political. They need real opportunity, which means that they need real change, which means that they need U-Haul."[9]*

If there is any good news on this front, it is that Americans consistently support the broad ideals behind inclusive mixed-race and mixed-income communities. A 2013 Urban Land Institute study found that 62 percent of Americans surveyed said they "would prefer to settle in mixed-use communities,"[10] and a follow-up study in 2015 found that 66 percent "would rather live in a community with a mix of cultures and backgrounds."[11] In terms of equity concerns, polling finds that Americans generally feel empathetic towards those who are economically struggling[12]; believe in the ideals of policies meant to address racial discrimination in housing; and, when given sample scenarios, can identify the kinds of behavior that violate things such as fair housing laws.[13] Similarly, polling on affordable housing more generally finds that Americans believe deeply in the idea that everyone should have decent, affordable housing in

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[9] Kevin D. Williamson, "The Father-Führer," *National Review*, March 16, 2016, https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2016/03/28/father-f-hrer/

[10] Urban Land Institute, *America in 2013*. (Washington, DC: Urban Land Institute, 2013), https://uli.org/wp-content/uploads/ULI-Documents/America_in_2013_web.pdf.

[11] Urban Land Institute, *America in 2015*. (Washington, DC: Urban Land Institute, 2015),http://uli.org/wp-content/uploads/ULI-Documents/America-in-2015.pdf.

[12] See for example, a national poll in 2017 commissioned by the Strong, Prosperous, and Resilient Communities Challenge (SPARCC), How Local Leadership Can Drive Prosperity for All, available at: SPARCC, "How Local Leadership Can Drive Prosperity for All," accessed on November 24, 2019, http://www.sparcchub.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/SPARCC_Poll-Results_Report.pdf. We should be careful to note that Americans also say that the poor should do more to "help themselves," "get jobs," and stop using/abusing government programs. For example, a 2016 poll conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates for the American Enterprise Institute and Los Angeles Times compared contemporary attitudes about the poor with the same polling questions they used in 1985, finding a persistence in the perception among Americans that the poor overuse government benefits and "prefer to stay on welfare," despite a significantly reduced set of benefits offered as part of the public's social safety net.

[13] Martin D. Abravanel and Mary K. Cunningham, *How Much Do We Know? Public Awareness of the Nation's Fair Housing Laws*, (Washington, DC: HUD Policy Development and Research, 2002), https://www.huduser.gov/publications/pdf/hmwk.pdf.

communities that are thriving. Some polls also have found general support for the idea that local governments can do more to advance housing options.[14]

On the other hand, these polls also find that Americans are deeply distrustful of government, skeptical that government agencies can positively impact tough social issues like racial discrimination,[15] and are hard-pressed to personally advocate for new governmental policies. Moreover, many of the same people who say in polls that they favor affordable housing fail to support affordable housing developments when they are proposed in nearby neighborhoods; use coded language to stand in for racial stereotypes to justify their opposition; fail to support local or national legislation that would make it possible to build, create, or preserve existing mixed-income housing; and fail to support the organizations trying to diversify the landscape of their neighborhoods.

The shallow nature of the public discourse on these issues does not reflect an absence of evidence or data that validates a perspective that emphasizes racial and economic inclusion.  In study after study, scholars have demonstrated through rigorous research that neighborhoods of concentrated poverty have lower odds of advancing the life outcomes of the people who live there. For example, in a series of studies led by Harvard economist Raj Chetty and his colleagues at the Equality of Opportunity Project, researchers found that racial and economic segregation reduces intergenerational economic mobility (i.e., the likelihood that children of low-income families will, as adults, earn higher incomes than their parents). From this kind of research, we know so much more about the way in which systems can create or reinforce disadvantage as well as about the impact of policies that have the potential to produce better population-level outcomes. We also know that although living next to affluent people does not, in and of itself, improve outcomes for low-income families, the institutional pathways to opportunity are more visible in places where affluent people reside—ultimately, where better schools, jobs, transportation, community investment and a deeper bench of resources for wellness already

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[14] See for example, a poll commissioned by the Housing America Campaign and the National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials (NAHRO) http://www.nahro.org/sites/default/files/searchable/Zogby.pdf (last visited September 28, 2018); a series of regional polls across the country are reporting similar results. For example, a 2017 poll of the Denver region (sponsored by a group of Denver residents, developers, and advocates called All in Denver) showed wide support for affordable housing and project-based subsidies among likely 2018 voters. See: Jon Murray, "Armed with a poll, affordable housing advocates want Denver to accelerate—or expand—its $150 million plan," *Denver Post*, May 3, 2017, https://www.denverpost.com/2017/05/03/armed-with-a-poll-affordable-housingadvocates-want-denver-to-accelerate-or-expand-its-150-million-plan/.
A 2017 poll of the Gulf Coast region (conducted by the University of New Orleans and sponsored by nonprofit housing advocates HousingNOLA, Greater New Orleans Foundation, and Enterprise Community Partners) found that "housing was the second leading issue voters said they want candidates in the election to address." See: Jessica Williams, "Poll: Affordable housing is No. 2 issue on minds of New Orleans voters," *New Orleans Advocate*, Sept. 19, 2017,  https://www.nola.com/news/article_33b10676-fe9b-5440-bf2f-04664bd299df.html.
[15] Thomas Suh Lauder and David Lauter, "Views on poverty: 1985 and today," *Los Angeles Times*, August 14, 2016, https://www.latimes.com/projects/la-na-pol-poverty-poll-interactive/.

exist.[16] Without these pathways to opportunity, whole neighborhoods and groups of people, essentially get locked out of the opportunity for advancement. Fortune.com essentially drew the same conclusion when it headlined a story on the widening racial wealth gap with "Blacks and Latinos Will Be Broke in a Few Decades."[17]

### *Popular Narratives at Odds with the Scholarly Discourse*

I have written extensively about the deep-seated narratives that reduce support for affordable housing and inclusive communities' work when we do not effectively navigate around them (i.e., the narratives of individual responsibility, mobility/choice, and racial-difference).[18] The dominance of these narratives creates formidable and consistent opposition to calls for equity as they get lifted up in public discourse. When we examine the narratives on racial and economic segregation in particular, the difference between the scholarly discourse (evidence-based) and those shaping the broader public square is striking.[19] Below, I outline some the ways in which public narratives about segregation differ from those advanced by scholars who study and write about these issues.

**Public Narrative:** *Segregation is an Historical Artifact in Post-Racial America*
**Scholarly Narrative:** *Segregation is a Driving Force Fueling Continued Disadvantage*

Whereas scholars understand segregation as a contemporary problem that has long-term consequences, the public conversation often gets mired in segregation as an historical artifact or something related to the civil rights era of the 1960s, with little relevance to the inequalities that characterize so many communities today. The connection to that era in public thinking allows many people to dismiss the conversation because they want to believe the problem was solved long ago, when this country enacted anti-discrimination laws and set up public agencies to adjudicate civil rights complaints. So, when confronted with the ideas that Americans continue to live very racially and economically separately, many dismiss the implications because: (1) they see themselves and the communities in which they live as post-racial[20] (i.e., the "*I don't see*

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[16] Robert Chaskin, Amy Khare, and Mark L. Joseph, "Participation, Deliberation, and Decision-Making: The Dynamics of Inclusion and Exclusion in Mixed-Income Developments," *Urban Affairs Review* 48, no. 6 (2012): 863–906.

[17] Josh Hoxie, "Blacks and Latinos Will Be Broke in a Few Decades," *Fortune,* September 19, 2017, http://fortune.com/2017/09/19/racial-inequality-wealth-gap-america/.

[18] For example: Tiffany Manuel, "Who Gets to Live Where and Why? The Answer to This Question May Be Settled By How Strategic Our Narratives Become," *Shelterforce*, January 30, 2018, https://shelterforce.org/2018/01/30/gets-live-answer-may-settled-narratives/..

[19] Praxis Media Productions, *Fair Game; A Strategy Guide for Racial Justice Communications in the Obama Era* (Praxis Project, 2011).; and Drew Volmert et al.,, *Mixing it Up: Reframing Neighborhood Socioeconomic Diversity,* (Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute, 2016), https://frameworksinstitute.org/pubs/mm/mixingitup/Knight_MessageMemo_Final_2016.pdf.

[20] Nikole Hannah-Jones, "The End of the Postracial Myth", *The New York Times Magazine,* November 15, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/11/20/magazine/donald-trumps-america-iowa-race.html

*color*" conversation); (2) many do not want to see themselves in racial or class terms (i.e., the "*aren't we all really the same*" conversation); and (3) whites increasingly see themselves as the "victims" of racial discrimination (i.e., the "*what about reverse discrimination*" conversation).

Thus, continued calls to action on racial and economic segregation in this context meet with exasperation by a public that has grown tired of reliving it. This makes calls for continued vigilance on this issue seem dated and irrelevant, especially in a contemporary, so-called "post-racial" America.

**Public Narrative:** *Segregation is About People of Color*
**Scholarly Narrative:** *Segregation is About Systems that Affect All of Us*

Many scholars on the issue of segregation think and talk about segregation as being rooted in systems and policies that were intentionally designed to be exclusionary. To follow this line of reasoning and its implications would mean that many Americans would have to acknowledge their own (or their loved ones') participation in unjust systems, and they might also be led to acknowledge how they have benefitted from systems that intentionally excluded other people. Looking critically at the research evidence might also mean acknowledging that people have some role to play in undoing those systems and possibly even remediating past harms to others. To avoid this situation, racial and economic segregation gets annexed in the public imagination as being solely about people experiencing poverty, or about people of color, rather than collectivized to draw out the bigger implications for all of us. This allows many people to view any solutions (even policies to promote equitable and inclusive development) as being zero-sum and benefitting only "other" people, even when those policies could improve outcomes for everyone.

**Public Narrative: *Segregation is a Function of Consumer Preferences***
**Scholarly Narrative: *Segregation is a Function of Bad Policymaking***

Scholars understand racial and economic segregation as a problem that is dynamic, caused by a complex set of factors, and has many negative consequences when not addressed. Much of the scholarly literature focuses on the instrumental role of public policy in creating and perpetuating segregation.[21] The public conversation, however, often fails to problematize segregation because Americans largely view segregation as a perfectly reasonable stance taken by interest-maximizing consumers. As the logic goes, people acting as consumers make choices that maximize their preferences. Some people will choose to live with others more like them while others may have a stronger appetite for diversity and choose to move to racially or

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[21] Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York: Liveright Publications, 2018).

economically diverse neighborhoods. Any explicit attempt to shift consumer preferences toward diversity is shunned as "social engineering." When understood in this way, the public conversation lacks substance about how the systems around us create, incentivize, and shape consumer preferences and how those preferences could be shifted to produce more equitable outcomes.

**Public Narrative:** *Segregation is a Motivator for Social and Economic Mobility*
**Scholarly Narrative:** *Segregation is a Barrier to Social and Economic Mobility*

Although scholars understand segregation (and especially concentrated poverty) as having negative impacts, the public conversation understands racial and economic segregation as a motivation for the hard work and social acceptance that eventually leads to economic and social mobility. As with public views of poverty more generally, segregation is thought to be a motivator for the poor to "earn" their way into thriving neighborhoods because, as the logic goes, there is no stronger motivation for hard work than the goal of "escaping" a poor or dilapidated neighborhood.

**Public Narrative:** *Segregation is Remedied by Integration*
**Scholarly Narrative:** *Segregation is Remedied by Policies Intentionally Meant to Drive Equity and Inclusion*

In the past, policies tackling segregation would have aimed for "integration." Today, many people—especially in communities of color—resist that language, based on the negative impact that past attempts at integration have had on those communities' self-determination. The disappearance of minority-owned businesses, professional associations, and whole communities that emerged out of the legacy of discrimination has been painful. As a result, the idea of integration is now perceived among many communities of color as something to be avoided because it means the *loss* of something (racial and ethnic identity) versus *gaining* something (being welcomed fully into the fabric of local communities). Moreover, popular discussions of the value of integration focus almost exclusively on the benefits that are thought to accrue to people of color who are able to interact with whites, but they rarely highlight how the interaction with people of color also benefits whites and other groups. Without a more balanced appreciation of the mutual benefits of inclusion (not integration), the public conversation limits the ability of both whites AND people of color to see the advantages of engaging on this issue.

**Public Narrative:** *Segregation Needs No Government Intervention*
**Scholarly Narrative:** *Segregation Requires Government Intervention*

Scholars see government policy interventions aimed at structures and systems as the most effective way to solve housing and community-development problems. While the popular narrative can acknowledge that government has some responsibility for improving neighborhood conditions and has a regulatory role to play in the housing market in particular, it also frames government intervention as inefficient, ineffective, and in some cases even counterproductive. This is especially true when the conversation is narrowed specifically to affordable housing. The term "affordable housing" is a highly racialized term often conflated with "public housing"— something the public largely considers a government failure.[22] This association makes government intervention more problematic to a public that already lacks confidence in government's ability to solve social problems.

### *Making a Stronger Case for Inclusive Mixed-Income, Mixed-Race Communities*

Despite the growing evidence base about when and under what conditions mixed-race and mixed-income communities meet their intended goals, public understanding remains relatively shallow. Housing and community-development practitioners must navigate carefully around the narratives that dominate public thinking and thoughtfully reframe the narrative about segregation for a wide range of community stakeholders and strategic partners. While there are many ways to build public will on these issues, a few fundamental principles are essential.

1. **Lead with a strong narrative of interdependence that highlights the inter-reliance of all racial and economic groups in the region/nation.**

As we noted above, mixed-race and mixed-income communities tend to be discussed primarily in terms of benefits to the low-income families and people of color whose lives will be positively impacted by greater access to amenities, social networks, better resources, and the like. Framed and discussed in this way, whites and higher-income residents do not see what they gain from the success of such efforts. Yet, as much of the research has shown, whites and higher-income residents benefit substantially from inclusive housing and community development policies. Acknowledgement of mutual benefits is key to elevating this conversation. As we make the case for inclusionary policies, perhaps more than anything else our task is to help people in all walks of life affirmatively connect to the ways in which we all benefit from the policies of inclusion. In particular, lifting up the value of *interdependence* has been shown to be effective in empirical research evaluating how we can shift the narrative.[23]
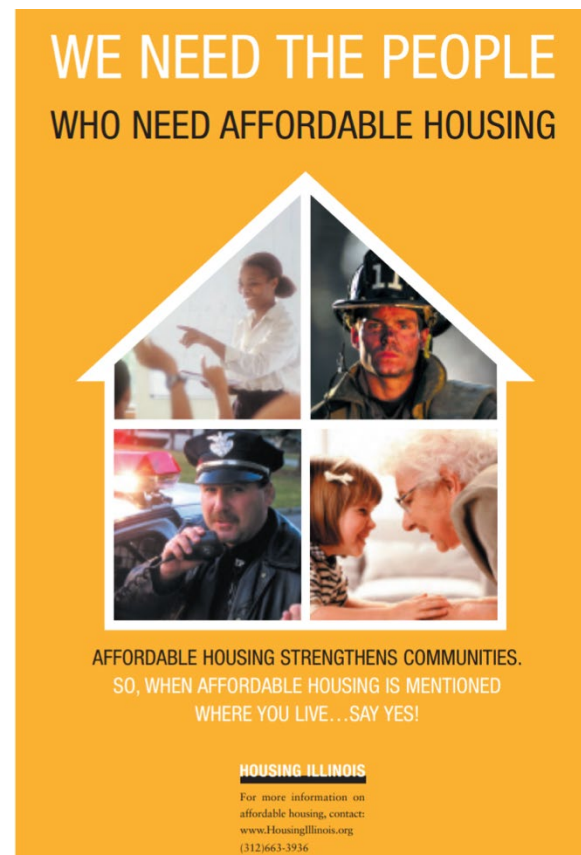
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[22] Rothstein, *The Color of Law.*

[23] Moira O'Neil and Julie Sweetland, *Piecing it together: A framing playbook for affordable housing advocates.* (Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute, 2016), http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/housing/enterprise_housing_playbook.pdf.
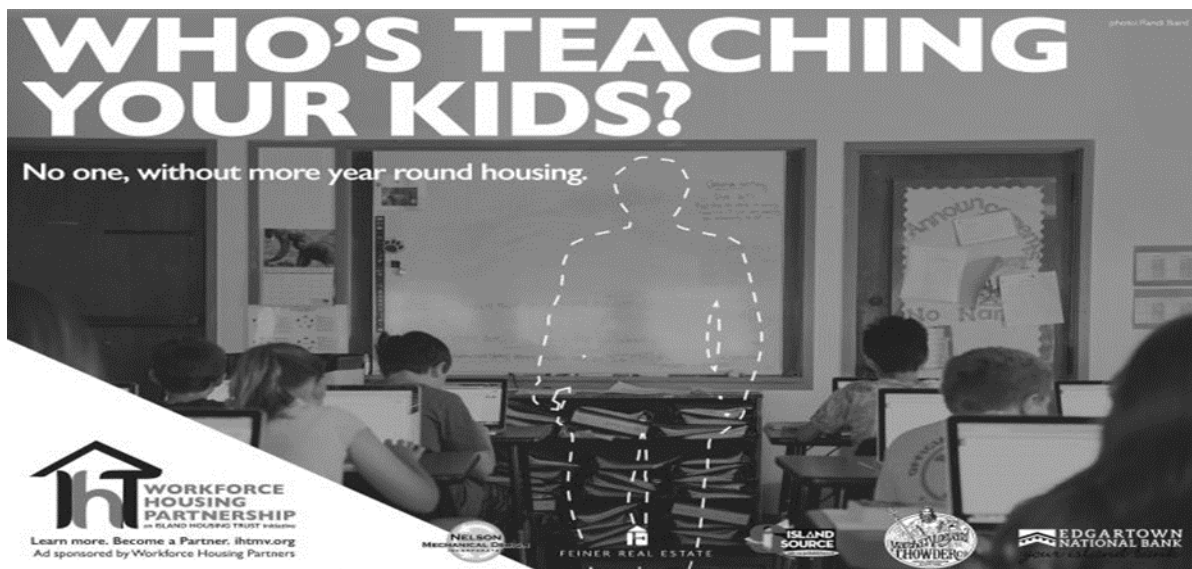
Research on a wide variety of issues, including housing, shows that messages that lead with values more consistently position these issues as *collective* problems that, when solved, have *collective* benefits for all.[24] Values help people get up and over the perspective of separate fates or the inclination to see problems and solutions as relating to "those people." Values-based messaging can be especially important as housing and community development advocates often need to gain support for policies and programs that are targeted to less influential constituents—low-income families, people experiencing homelessness, racial/ethnic minorities, seniors, and others.

The narrative of interdependence conveys a strong value proposition for mixed-race and mixed-income communities. A key example comes from Housing Illinois, a statewide campaign initiated to build public will around affordable housing. Their campaign's lead, *We Need the People Who Need Affordable Housing,* communicates a strong value of interdependence and repositions the listener—even the low-income families who will directly benefit from the availability of affordable housing—as part of the conversation. This lifts low-income families up as valued (i.e., needed in this community) and also reminds many whites and other higher-income families that *their* success or fate is intertwined with that of others in the community.

Similar efforts around the country are beginning to emerge, such as the example below from the Workforce Housing Partnership on Martha's Vineyard, asking people to think about how they benefit from inclusive mixed-income housing.



WE NEED THE PEOPLE
WHO NEED AFFORDABLE HOUSING

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WHERE YOU LIVE…SAY YES!

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affordable housing, contact:
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(312)663-3936

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[24] Tiffany Manuel, "Who says your frames are better than mine? Making the case for strategic framing by using the power of experimental research," New Directions for Youth Development 124, (2009): 71-82.

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2. **Position mixed-race and mixed-income communities as smart investments in the long-term future of the region rather than as a response to the housing "crisis," segregation, or the challenges of concentrated poverty.**

Advocates for mixed-race and mixed-income communities often talk about them as resolving the broader "crisis" of affordable housing and/or addressing the challenges of racial and economic segregation. While that may be the motivation, most people do not naturally see or problematize those broad concerns in the same way. Moreover, even when they do see housing as a crisis and/or segregation as problematic, they often default to the dominant public narratives of individual responsibility, mobility, or racial difference as solutions.

Instead, position policies that foster mixed-race and mixed-income communities as smart investments to shape a prosperous future for the community and the region. As an investment, focus the conversation on both the ROI (return on investment) and the SROI (social return on investment). The key to making the case for smart investment is being specific about what those social returns are likely to be—for example, a stronger economy and better-educated workforce—and how they help position the broader community for long-term gains. This approach also helps to mitigate criticism about the public subsidy often needed to finance some portion of these developments.

A good example of this approach comes from Minnesota, where in August 2018 the Governor's Task Force on Housing released a report, *More Places to Call Home: Investing in Minnesota's Future,*[25] to kick off a campaign called *Prosperity's Front Door.* The report and the naming of the campaign avoided the crisis- and problem-driven messaging that typically pervades this kind of effort and instead offers a narrative (see box below) that lifts up the effort as smart, forward-looking, asset-based, and benefit-producing.

> **The smartest investment we can make in our state's future is securing a foundation of strong communities and stable homes for all Minnesotans.**
>
> In Minnesota, we enjoy vibrant communities and a dynamic economy—built on livability and affordability—that give us a strong competitive advantage, nationally and internationally. Our local businesses attract dedicated employees, our colleges and universities recruit high-caliber talent, and our towns and neighborhoods boast strong and welcoming communities.
>
> Our homes are the foundation of our flourishing communities; they fuel the engine of our economy. No one thrives if we price out young adults who have the talent and skills to strengthen our businesses. No one thrives if businesses leave the state because they can't attract and retain a workforce. No one thrives if families struggle to put a roof over their heads. The more Minnesotans who succeed, the more Minnesota will thrive—and we have proven that we have the will, the creativity, and the solutions to do so.

A second example is the social returns report[26] created for Clarendon Court, a mixed-income development in Arlington Virginia, which showed both the return on investment in the development and the social returns that accrued back to the surrounding neighborhood (see infographic at right). Using multipliers, researchers were able to quantify returns from residents who made strong use of the



When a single parent of two working as a Licensed Practical Nurse moves into affordable housing in Arlington, the $6,500 saved on rent each year would be enough to pay for...

**16** months of public transit use for the whole family

**2** years of extended-day after-school programs for two children

**35** credits toward a Registered Nurse degree at Northern Virginia Community College

surrounding transit system, took advantage of after-school programs, and returned to school at the local community college.

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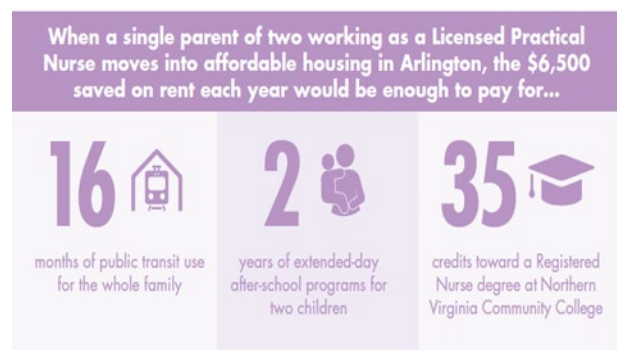
[25] The Governor's Task Force on Housing, *More Places to Call Home: Investing in Minnesota's Future*. (Minnesota: The Governor's Task Force on Housing, 2018), http://mn.gov/gov-stat/pdf/Housing%20Task%20Force%20Report_FINAL.pdf

[26] Enterprise Community Partners, *More Than A Home Investing Together to Create Opportunity* (Columbia, MD: Enterprise Community Partners, Inc., 2017), https://www.enterprisecommunity.org/download?fid=8006&nid=5922

### 3. Position equity concerns as addressing the consequences of inaction and as part of a broader set of policy and systems changes.

Even when policies that foster mixed-race and mixed-income communities are framed as an "investment in our future," advocates still must position equity issues as part of the conversation. Personal stories can be useful if done well, but they become problematic when they do not implicate a wider range of community actors, policies, and systems as part of the story. Our task is to position equity in the story by raising the inclination most people feel to address inequality across places—i.e., the popular notion that there should be fairness everywhere—and also by showing the negative consequences for everyone when we fail to address the disadvantages of some. Useful tactics include building a case for inclusion based on the economic costs of racial segregation to the whole community,[27] the negative impacts from restrictive local housing policies on all home values and regional economic growth,[28] and the talent communities are excluding when they let racial segregation limit access to good schools.[29]

A good example of this principle in action comes from the Metropolitan Planning Council (MPC) in Chicago (see box on next page), which published a report on the Cost of Segregation [30]that framed economic and racial segregation as detriments that have "strangled opportunities for millions of people."  This framing enabled MPC to highlight the equity concerns inherent in the issue and to raise it productively in the public conversation.

[27] "The Cost of Segregation," Metropolitan Planning Council, accessed January 28, 2018, http://www.metroplanning.org/costofsegregation/default.aspx?utm_source=%2fcostofsegregation&utm_medium=web&utm_campaign=redirect.

[28] Paavo Monkkonen, "Understanding and Challenging Opposition to Housing Construction in California's Urban Areas" (Housing, Land Use and Development Lectureship & White Paper, UC Center Sacramento, Sacramento, CA, Dec. 1, 2016).

[29] Alex Bell et al., "Who Becomes an Inventor in America? The Importance of Exposure to Innovation," http://www.equality-of-opportunity.org/assets/documents/inventors_summary.pdf, (2017).

[30] Metropolitan Planning Council, *The Cost of Segregation,* (Chicago, IL: Metropolitan Planning Council, 2017), https://www.metroplanning.org/uploads/cms/documents/cost-of-segregation.pdf

"Everyone deserves an opportunity to earn a living—and the economy is better off when everyone participates in it. Yet, not everyone in the Chicago region has the same pathway to economic success. Over generations, policies and practices have set up barricades in and around Chicago, ultimately leading to a region where people of different races and incomes live separately from one another. Some of these boundaries can be seen on a map. Others are invisible yet powerful barriers that affect local public-school performance, business investment, workers' preparation for today's jobs and what kinds of employment—if any—are available within a reasonable commute of where a person can afford to live. Like bricks of a wall, these decisions have stacked up over decades, and individuals, communities and our entire region are living with the consequences.

Economic and racial segregation has strangled opportunities for millions of people. Disinvestment has devastated entire city neighborhoods and suburban villages, towns and cities. Lack of diversity also hurts affluent communities, where limited housing options often mean that young people cannot afford to return when starting their own families, retirees cannot afford to stay and valued employees are priced out.

Add it up, and it's clear that segregation holds back the entire region's economy and potential—and whether we realize it or not, it's costing all of us. Our social fabric *and* our economy will be stronger if we all have more opportunities to live, work and go to school with one another."

4. **Work to diversify perceptions about who benefits directly from mixed-race and mixed-income communities.**

People often oppose inclusive development because of who they fear will be drawn to it. We know that when groups that are perceived to benefit from a proposed policy are not considered "deserving," the likelihood of public support significantly diminishes.[31] "Stereotypes and negative perceptions of what an affordable-housing dweller looks like don't help," writes journalist Ana Beatriz Cholo. "Potential neighbors fear that the low-income inhabitants will drive 'junkers' and mar their pristine suburban landscape. The newcomers have too many children and, of course, the building will resemble a Soviet housing project."[32] Therefore, the need to broaden understanding of who benefits from mixed-income policies is critical. This does not mean we need to mask who the intended beneficiaries are. Our task is to widen the public's understanding of who benefits and to help a wider range of community stakeholders see how they benefit from such policies.

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[31] Anne Schneider and Helen Ingram, "Social Construction of Target Populations; Implications for Policy and Practice," *The American Political Science Review* 87, no. 2 (June 1993): 334-347.

[32] Cholo, "Why Affordable Housing Doesn't Get Built"

[The Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance](#) took this tack in advocating for stronger public support of equitable development in their [Great Neighborhoods](#) campaign. The alliance's campaign features stories about stakeholders who are impacted by the need for housing and the shortage of affordable housing, positioning them as part of a broader story of smart investment. For example, the story of Bryan Bryson, an MIT professor and resident of a mixed neighborhood in Dorchester, MA underscores not just his past struggles to find housing but the importance of the mixed-income community in which he now lives and the structural need for local zoning reform (see box at right).[33]



**Why we need zoning reform: Meet Bryan**
June 11, 2018

My name is Bryan Bryson, I'm a proud resident and community member of Dorchester. I'm also an MIT Professor.

I'm here today to tell you the story of being priced out of my neighborhood in Cambridge where I lived for a number of years. And to say that if this is happening to me, a professor making a very good salary, imagine how it's impacting teachers, nurses, and other working families throughout our Commonwealth

5. **Reframe the conversation away from the public narratives that frequently backfire and reduce public support.**

A final note about the specific words that tend to dominate messaging on these issues. We know that people most often associate the terms "mixed-income housing" and "affordable housing" with very negative and highly racialized stereotypes. These conceptions are very narrow and, without added explanation, quickly limit public thinking about the importance of affordable housing issues, the ways in which housing is connected to other issues, and—most important—options for change. While it is not possible to completely avoid using these terms, it is best wherever possible to use language that connects to stakeholders' chief concerns and values. Talk about how much a 'home' means to people and how deeply affected people are by the quality of the homes, the neighborhood resources, and environments that surround them, for instance. And avoid phrases like "moving to opportunity" or "housing choices," because they can trigger public narratives about personal responsibility, mobility, and racial difference.

Finally, because the terminology of "racial and economic segregation" is easily dismissed by many as not relating to them and as dated, it can be tempting to avoid talking about these issues or to finagle with the terminology. No matter what we call it, just acknowledge that the real challenge is not so much the label but the fundamental challenge in how we think about

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[33] The Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance. "Why we need zoning reform: Meet Bryan." *Great Neighborhoods* (blog). November 24, 2019. https://www.great-neighborhoods.org/post/meet-bryan.

segregation. Not everybody sees segregation as a problem (some actually like the idea of living with people more like themselves); not everybody wants to acknowledge the driving forces behind it; and few understand the full implications of why talking about segregation is useful. So, we'll have to work a bit harder to re-introduce these topics to a public audience that is not terribly excited about the conversation needed to transform policy. Our task is to take the time to constructively lead the conversation so that people see themselves as part of the problem *and* the enormous benefits to them of solving the problem.

### *Conclusions*

In this essay, I have argued that our attempts to build inclusive communities that explicitly address racial and economic segregation will not advance very far or very quickly without a concomitant effort to build public will to support this work. While polls show that Americans agree in principle with the ideals of racial and economic inclusion, we also know that the public support to manifest those ideals is often tepid.  Making the stronger case for policies and investments that foster inclusive mixed-race and mixed-income communities, is certainly not a salve for all that is challenging in terms of organizing public support. Strategic casemaking[34] is critical for building the bigger tent we need to help us gather the resources that could help. More specifically, we need to get much more strategic in how we engage public audiences about poverty, place and race.

The good news is that there is a national conversation into which we are being called and while there are many challenges in how that conversation is taking place, there is equally compelling evidence to suggest that these challenges can be overcome. First, let's get serious about countering the dominant public narratives that constrain both the popular discourse and ultimately, our ability to advance meaningful policy solutions. Second, let's reassert the relevance of race in the context of housing and community development but reframe the conversation in a way that offers Americans a better way to understand how they benefit from the continued struggle to resolve these issues. Third and finally, as we make a stronger case, we should also be organizing allies on both sides of the aisle like never before. If we truly believe in the values of equity and inclusion embedded in mixed-race and mixed-income development policies, doubling down on our casemaking and leaning forward on our organizing efforts, should be among our highest priorities.

More specifically, our task overall is to help people "see" racial and economic segregation: (1) as a cross-cutting problem that affects us all; (2) as something that is deeply relevant today, affecting a whole range of issues we are trying to address through other policy

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[34] "Resources," TheCaseMade, accessed November 24, 2019, https://www.thecasemade.com/resources.

solutions; and (3) as solvable through policies and investments that advance community-building strategies like mixed-race and mixed-income development.

*Implications for Action*

**Implications for Policy.**
- Policymakers must make stronger, consistent and intentional use of equity frameworks that help to evaluate how proposed policy solutions across issue areas (transportation, housing, education, etc.) will affect existing patterns of racial and economic segregation across and within communities. Those impacts must then be broadly communicated to help strengthen a constructive public conversation that prioritizes and legitimizes a focus on reducing segregation.
- Policymakers must also be more intentional about diversifying the mechanisms used to gather community input and feedback on policy development. Even in local politics, public feedback mechanisms heavily represent the interests of more privileged constituents, often leaving out many people who might have alternative points of view. In a world of complex problems, the most meaningful solutions are created when people of different backgrounds, strengths, and skill sets put their minds together. Not only do we strengthen the efficacy of the solutions when we diversify the process, we also help build the public resolve to lean in and participate meaningfully and constructively.

**Implications for Research and Evaluation.**
- Researchers must use data and research evidence to reinforce narratives that emphasize solutions, rather than problem- or crisis-focused, and those that frame overcoming segregation as an outcome that benefits everyone.
- Institutions, organizations, and individuals involved in research and evaluation should use the findings not only to engage and inform public conversation but to build public will. This means being open to an intentional process of translating those findings into narratives that have the express purpose of empowering people to act. It is important to say here that the goal of this translational process should never be to politicize the conversation or to engage in partisan politics – people need to have the freedom to act as their own beliefs inform them to do so – but the research findings can be presented in ways that help people get excited about the possibility for change. In other words, the findings can be presented in ways that build people's sense of agency.

**Implications for Development and Investment.**
- Developers and investors must actively engage and listen to community residents and stakeholders, not just to expedite investment and community planning plans but to build the trust that undergirds stable and inclusive communities.
- Investors who engage in real estate and community development projects must become more intentional, data-driven impact investors. That is, they should assess their investments both in terms of their ability to drive profits but also their ability to foster more equitable and inclusive places. And those investments must be assessed

both on the front end (as new developments are proposed) as well as on the back end (after investments have been made). This kind of assessment offers up the ability to evaluate the long-term impacts of their investments. Moreover, and most importantly, it offers up the opportunity to report those impacts – both the financial returns and the social returns, on those investments. Social returns – like their ability to cultivate multi-use, multi-racial, more inclusive developments – help to focus and prioritize the public conversation on the narrative of inclusion.

**Implications for Residents and Community Members.**
- Advocacy and community organizing groups must be pro-active in aggressively engaging nontraditional audiences that often oppose equitable development. This means working to engage new champions for equity by focusing on how we build stronger ties across sectors, factions, political parties and community organizations.
- Advocacy and community organizing groups must refocus on powerful storytelling that positions how inclusive communities work to the benefit of a great many people in their communities. As such, this storytelling must strategically focus on telling the "story of us" and recruiting a wide range of community members to reinforce the narrative of interdependence in our stories. As more people begin to see themselves reflected in our narratives of change, it offers up new possibilities for cultivating inclusive policies.

*"The point of the fish story is merely that the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about..."*
*—David Foster Wallace[35]*

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[35] Wallace, *This Is Water*

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