



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Designing the Next Generation of Federal Place-Based Policy

Insights from Past and Ongoing Programs

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Place matters. The neighborhoods, cities, rural communities, and metropolitan regions where we live shape both our day-to-day quality of life and our families' prospects for upward mobility. But our nation's history of racial discrimination in both public policies and institutional practices has built profoundly separate and unequal places, sustaining and exacerbating racial inequity and injustice.

To succeed, efforts to advance racial equity and boost upward mobility will require a robust national commitment to reversing the legacy of segregation and disinvestment that disproportionately harms low-income communities of color. The federal government can play a central role by catalyzing and supporting reparative work within communities, in partnership with local and state governments, regional coalitions, and philanthropy.

This report presents findings from a scan of 33 past and ongoing federal place-based programs to inform future federal place-based policies. It reflects advice and input from a policy working group made up of policymakers and civic leaders with broad and deep experience working in communities across the country. Members of this group envision that the next generation of federal policies focused on places will

- confront racial inequity and injustice,
- bridge sectors and policy domains and activate resources and policy levers at multiple scales,
- respect and build community voice and power,
- deliver sufficient resources and lasting system reforms to achieve meaningful change for people and places, and
- promote a culture of learning through evidence and evaluation.

With these principles in mind, the scan of current and prior programs offers seven main findings:

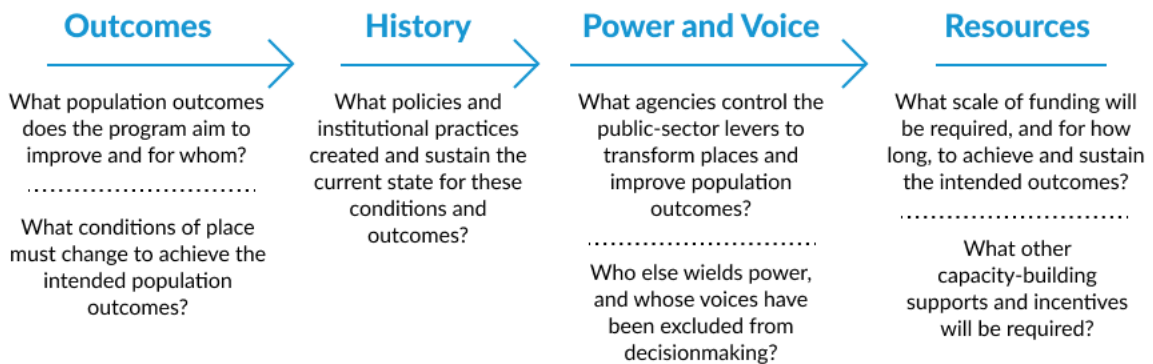
1. **Federal programs rarely center racial equity.** Few federal place-based programs have explicitly centered racial equity, although many programs have focused on economically disadvantaged communities and some have sought to address racial disparities by directing resources to communities and institutions of color. Barriers include policymakers' limited sensitivity to the pervasive impact of structural racism, political risks associated with explicitly naming racial injustices, and in some cases legal constraints to making race an explicit factor in resource allocations.

2. **Definitions of “place” and goals for improving places vary widely across federal programs.** Place-based programs target areas as small as individual neighborhoods and as large as multicounty regions. Many focus primarily on conditions inside the boundaries of their target places, and few have engaged at multiple geographic scales by explicitly addressing the interconnections between neighborhoods, cities, and regions. Although all place-based programs ultimately aspire to promote the well-being and life chances of the people who live in the areas they target, most of these programs have invested primarily in improvements to the built environment.
3. **Bridging across multiple policy domains poses significant challenges.** Most place-based programs are housed in a single federal agency and focus their work on that agency’s goals. Collaboration with other relevant agencies has generally been limited, despite important interconnections across their domains. Statutory, regulatory, and oversight constraints can all make coordination challenging. A handful of programs offer promising models for formally aligning and coordinating work across federal agencies in support of place-based work.
4. **Programs have invited community input but generally have not aimed to build community power.** Many place-based programs acknowledge the importance of community engagement activities by referencing “consultation” and “input” as elements of their implementation. Some go further, mandating inclusive planning processes that bring new voices to governance, decisionmaking, and resource allocation. In addition, some place-based program grantees have shared resources with community partners that invest in local power building.
5. **Funding for federal place-based programs has often been insufficient to achieve their goals.** Although the federal government has established ambitious and transformative objectives for many of its place-based programs, it generally has not provided sufficient funding to achieve those objectives. Despite some innovative models to make efficient use of scarce federal funds and streamline grantees’ access to multiple funding streams, insufficient funding has largely impeded efforts to deepen, scale, or sustain place-based programs.
6. **Few federal place-based programs have advanced comprehensive systems change.** Most place-based programs strive for lasting improvements in community conditions, and many support activities that aim to strengthen or reform systems. Few, however, have pursued comprehensive systems change efforts—that is, efforts to identify the root causes of community problems and change policies, practices, relationships, and thinking to address those causal forces. In fact, few programs have examined underlying issues like structural racism. And the federal government has not provided dedicated support to local organizations or intermediaries that could drive transformative systems change.

7. **Evidence about place-based program impacts and effectiveness is weak.** To date, only a handful of federal place-based programs have been independently evaluated, in part because conventional evaluation methods are not well-suited to their breadth and complexity. As a result, the field lacks definitive evidence about the impacts of these programs on people and places, particularly on low-income communities and communities of color. Some programs have required (and supported) grantees to collect data and use existing evidence. But few programs explicitly define desired outcomes or metrics from the outset, and data collection has focused more on process measures than on results. And few programs have effectively engaged community members in data collection or interpretation.

As policymakers and practitioners design a next generation of place-based programs, they should explicitly incorporate insights from current and prior federal place-based programs into an evidence-based theory of change that confronts long-standing inequities and injustices and ensures that every community supports its residents' well-being and the long-term life chances of its children. We pose a series of high-level questions that offer a disciplined framework for doing so (figure 1). These questions apply to the design of an entirely new place-based program or to the refinement of an existing program. They also have relevance to the design of programs that may not be considered place-based but that influence or are influenced by the places in which people live, work, and play.

FIGURE 1
A Framework for Designing the Next Generation of Place-Based Programs



URBAN INSTITUTE

For more information, see the full report at <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/designing-next-generation-federal-place-based-policy>.

The places where we live shape both our day-to-day quality of life and our prospects for upward mobility. Our nation’s history of racist policies and practices has created profound inequities in place-based resources, blocked intergenerational wealth building, and prevented low-income residents and people of color from fully accessing and participating in democratic processes. Advancing racial equity and upward mobility will require a robust (meaning well-funded, comprehensive, and sustained) national commitment to reversing the legacy of segregation and disinvestment, ensuring that every family can live in a community that supports its well-being and the long-term life chances of its children.

With support from Blue Meridian Partners, the Urban Institute and PolicyLink are collaborating to develop a blueprint for the next generation of federal place-based policy. The blueprint will draw upon community voices, research evidence, and practitioner insights to lay out principles and a structure for incorporating lessons from the past into future place-based policies that confront long-standing racial inequities and injustices. It aims to articulate the ecosystem of supports available to communities and accelerate progress by strengthening federal investments in place-based work.



URBAN INSTITUTE is a nonprofit research organization that provides data and evidence to help advance upward mobility and equity. We are a trusted source for changemakers who seek to strengthen decisionmaking, create inclusive economic growth, and improve the well-being of families and communities. For more than 50 years, Urban has delivered the facts that inspire solutions—and this remains our charge today



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BLUE MERIDIAN PARTNERS is a pioneering philanthropic model for finding and funding scalable solutions to the problems that limit economic mobility and trap America’s young people and families in poverty. Blue Meridian identifies, invests in, and scales up the strategies most poised to make a local and national impact on social problems confronting young people and families in poverty, such as unplanned pregnancy, foster care transitions and adoptions, employment opportunities, recidivism, and more.

Policy Working Group Members

This effort to develop a blueprint for the next generation of federal place-based policy is informed by a policy working group, composed of policymakers and civic leaders working at the intersection of policy areas and across a wide range of geographies, that is sharing insights and fostering learning regarding place-based principles, programs, and action.

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