



The Opportunity Agenda



WE CAN THRIVE TOGETHER: VISIONING ECONOMIC JUSTICE FOR ALL

DISCUSSION GUIDE

We believe that ending poverty is within our reach, and that we have both the power and responsibility to do so. Unfortunately in America, persistent economic hardship is a pervasive, complicated issue with roots that grow deep into the fabric of our country, driven by a history of racism, classism, and gender inequality. All of this can make talking about poverty very difficult.

A good starting point for any challenging conversation is to begin by uplifting the vision that we want to see. A vision of Economic Justice can help us push for the radical change necessary to ensure a future where everyone can thrive. Together, we must amplify the message that poverty is solvable.

This discussion guide is intended to help start a conversation about what Economic Justice looks like, and how to achieve it.

INTRODUCTION

WHAT ARE THE ROOTS OF POVERTY?

We cannot talk about the roots of poverty without addressing America's legacy of structural racism. **Structural racism** refers to the larger systems, beyond individual racist behavior, that perpetuate inequality based on race. Remember that our country was founded on the premise that white males—and no one else—would have access to property rights. This vision, carried out by the system of government that was created and the culture that ensued, is still very much a part of how prosperity is defined and who benefits from it today.

As the year 2020 laid bare, systems born from **racial injustices** in America persist in multiple forms—from barriers to health care, to quality jobs, to healthy food, and to education opportunities. Racial injustice is also seen, glaringly, in the epidemic of police brutality and mass incarceration.

In many instances, these and other factors contribute to multiple generations of families who are unable to break out of poverty. This **cycle of poverty** often continues unless there is outside intervention. So, it is important for the government to step in and provide broad relief in order for us to make progress toward economic justice.

A core belief in this country is that the circumstances into which a person is born should not limit where they end up in life. That is why it's critical that we find ways to talk about poverty and reframe the narratives that further this unjust cycle.

WHAT IS ECONOMIC JUSTICE?

Simply put, **Economic Justice** is about developing systems and policies that provide everyone the opportunity for a dignified, productive, safe, and creative life—a life in which they can prosper for themselves, and for their loved ones.

An economically just society provides ways for **all people** to thrive in life, regardless of their race, gender, sexuality, or the circumstances that they were born into. Economic Justice is also about shared values—strong principles that we believe in, which center us and help guide us in trying times.

Some of these core values include: **Voice** (having a say in the decisions that affect you); **Community** (recognizing that we should work together and support each other); **Opportunity** (the chance to reach your dreams and go far in life); and **Security** (having all your basic needs met).

To understand how Economic Justice is achievable, we must start by visioning a world where these shared values can thrive.

VOICE

WE ARE UNSTOPPABLE

“Economic justice is the coming together of the 140 million poor and low income people, across all lines that have been used to divide us, to as Dr. King said, ‘make the power structures say yes when they may be desirous of saying no.’ Our unity is our power and our vision. And it is our coming together as clear and committed leaders that we can make the change we know is possible.”

– Charon Hribar, Poor People’s Campaign.

Building Economic Justice and shared prosperity requires listening to and uplifting the ideas, hopes, and dreams of **all people** in this country. This can take many forms: words, art, song, dialogue, uprising, or statements of support. As we have seen in recent months, having a **voice** in the decisions that affect us through voting, uprising, protest, and creative expression can be a powerful, transformative force.

To achieve Economic Justice, we must support and amplify the voices of people whose lives are **directly impacted** by poverty. People who have experienced poverty often understand it best and can identify and evaluate strategies for interrupting the cycle of poverty. But too often, the voices of those in power, those with money, and those with privilege dominate the conversation with little room for the voices of those most affected.

We believe that, while it’s important to consult the thinking of economists, academics, and politicians as experts, it is equally important to consider those with direct life experiences as experts. They carry a vision and deep understanding that is essential to listen to, consider, and amplify.

What does voice mean to you?

How can we amplify the voices of those who are not always the loudest, yet have lived experiences?

COMMUNITY

WE CAN THRIVE TOGETHER

“In order to make sure our communities are healthy, we need hard working people to be able to take time off work when they need to stay home sick AND when they are facing longer-term illnesses or are welcoming a new baby or child to the family. We cannot expect these changes without being in one accord and agreement that EVERYONE is entitled to a respectable standard of living no matter their age, race, creed, religion, sexual orientation, or ethnicity.”

– Aisha Wells, Mothering Justice

We all deserve the freedom to thrive. We are now seeing, in a powerful way, that we are stronger when we work together in **Community. This is especially true when it comes to Economic Justice. We must push back against messages that pit “us vs. them” and divide us based on the color of our skin or how much money we make. We can do this by naming values that everyone—irrespective of their situation in life—likely has in common. The importance of:**

- **Living in healthy and thriving communities.**
- **Having the chance to move forward in life.**
- **Being free from the constant, nagging worry about “just getting by.”**

What is a specific desire that you have for your future?

What kind of things would someone need to achieve this goal?

OPPORTUNITY

WE CAN GO BEYOND

“The color of your skin does not devalue your contributions to the world. But in America especially, being Black has meant both shouldering the labor of our nation’s economy and democracy while being denied its value, so much so that just being able to care for one’s family is untenable for too many. Economic justice to me in this moment means listening to the voices of Black people, investing in Black communities, and supporting Black mobility so that all of us can have the baseline of what we need to live with dignity — and the opportunity to fulfill our highest potential.”

– Janet Kim, Caring Across Generations

The United States was founded on the ideal of **opportunity** for all—the idea that anyone who works hard in this country can thrive in life. However, this concept of the so-called American Dream ignores **structural barriers** such as racism, classism, and sexism, and supports the flawed narrative that individuals are fully to blame for their own circumstances. We believe that we can change this, that if we remove these barriers to opportunity—which affect everything from getting a quality education, to pursuing one’s passion—and shift the existing narrative, more people will have a chance to realize their dreams and aspirations. We must work together to loudly call out racism, classism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination when we see it. This is the first and most important step toward economic justice and opportunity for all.

**Do you feel that you have more opportunity today than your parents or caregivers did?
What opportunities or privileges help you get ahead that other teenagers might not have?**

SECURITY

SECURITY MEANS FREEDOM

“Security means freedom. This means that all of us have the right to feel safe in our bodies, have our basic needs met, and to be treated with dignity. It means having access to equitable resources for our education and healthcare, and a workplace free of sexual harassment and other harms, so that we can support our families and thrive.”

– Sunu Chandy, National Women’s Law Center

Everyone deserves to have their basic needs met and the opportunity to get ahead in life – from food on the table and a roof over one’s head, to a quality education and job that pays a **living wage** while providing opportunities. We call this security. Security means freedom from fear and freedom from want

Security and safety should not come down to the “haves” versus the “have nots.” Everybody deserves security, dignity, and true community safety in their lives. Yet, this is not the case in our country. Due to **systemic inequalities**, a small percentage in our country hold massive wealth while millions are barely able to get by. The serious consequences of this economic injustice could not be clearer than what we have seen this past year, and the incredible movement that has resulted.

In this moment, we are being activated to join a transformative, national movement to do something about the systemic injustices we see. We are realizing how deeply connected we are. We are seeing that together, with vision, resilience, and courage, we can create a better world. And in that, we are empowered. We are unstoppable.

What do you have that you think everyone should have or have access to?

TAKE ACTION!

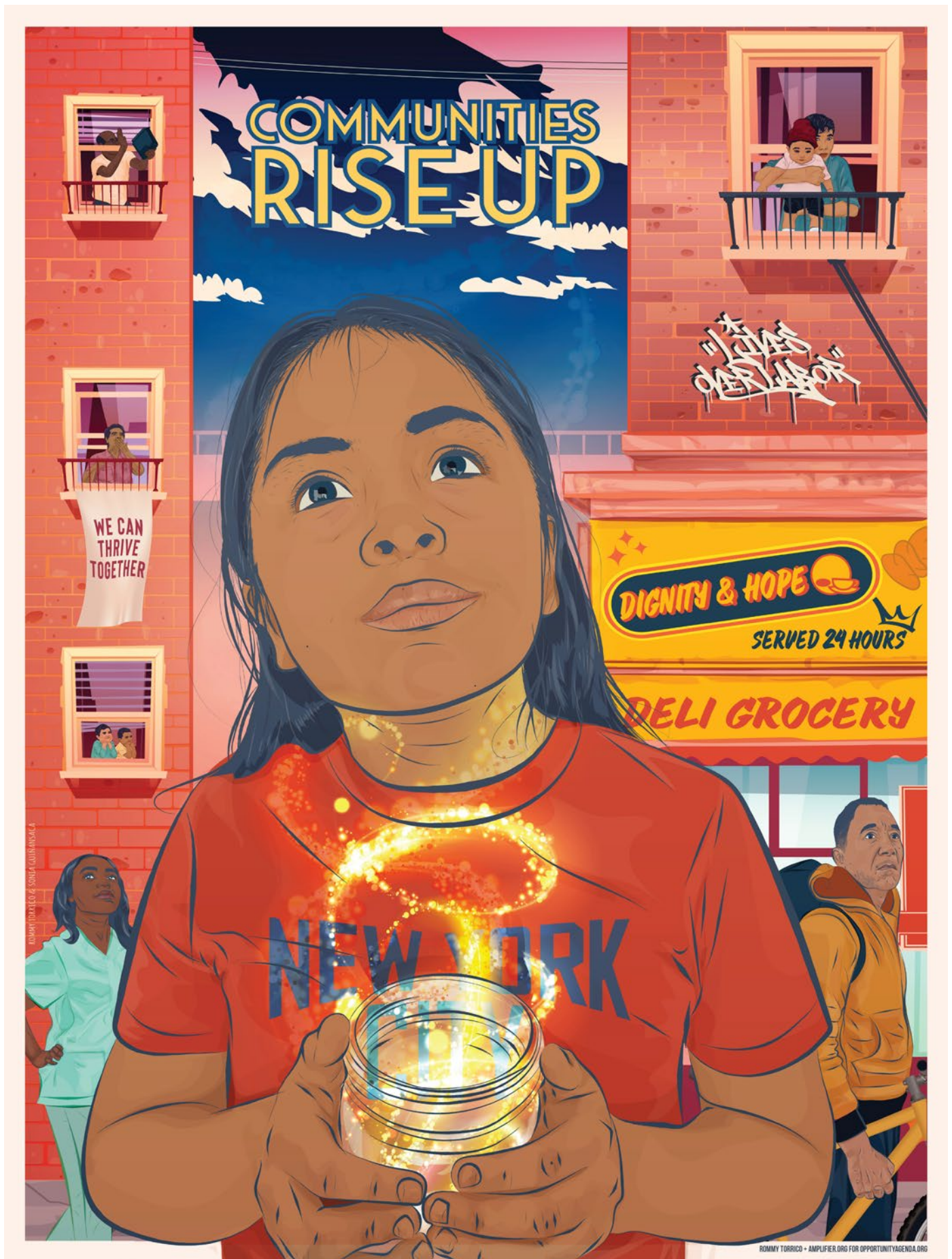
To learn more about Economic Justice and get involved, you can turn to the following organizations: [Poor People's Campaign](#); [Color of Change](#); [Caring Across Generations](#); [United We Dream](#); and [BYP100](#). Are there any local organizations that you know of in your community?

To learn more about our vision for Economic Justice, visit [opportunityagenda.org](#) and [amplifier.org](#). Join the conversation on social media by using the hashtag #EconJustice4All.



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SECURITY MEANS

FREEDOM



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Economic Justice is Within Our Reach

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