

# Social Progress Powered by Science



Grand Challenges  
for Social Work

GrandChallengesforSocialWork.org  
#Up4theChallenge

For more than a century, social workers have been building a stronger society. With social work leading the way, we doubled the number of babies who survived in the early twentieth century, lifted millions out of poverty from the Great Depression to today, and assisted people with mental illness through de-institutionalization, aftercare, treatment, and advocacy.

As always, large-scale challenges remain. Racism. Inequality. Violence. Mass incarceration. Environmental degradation. Population aging. Forging effective solutions is possible only when we unite around a bold strategic agenda for change. The Grand Challenges for Social Work define this platform. The Grand Challenges are a call for evidence-based social innovations attainable within a decade.

**Thirteen Grand Challenges are described below. For more information and to get involved in this critical initiative, please visit [GrandChallengesforSocialWork.org](http://GrandChallengesforSocialWork.org)**

## JUST SOCIETY

### **Eliminate racism.**

The United States is built on a legacy of racism and white supremacy that has consistently and significantly impacted the daily lives of millions of people. Today, racist policies, bias, and discriminatory practices continue to promote racial inequality in myriad ways. Social work has provided considerable leadership in the civil rights and race equity movements, but has much more work to do, internal to the profession and for society as a whole. We propose to develop a model for eliminating racism by identifying evidence and practice-based interventions that will end racism and ameliorate the negative outcomes of our history of racism.

### **Achieve equal opportunity and justice.**

In the United States, some groups of people have long been consigned to society's margins. Historic and current prejudice and injustice bars access to success in education and employment. Addressing racial and social injustices, deconstructing stereotypes, dismantling inequality, exposing unfair practices and accepting the super diversity of the population will advance this challenge. All of this work is critical to fostering a successful society.

### **Promote smart decarceration.**

The United States has the world's largest proportion of people behind bars. Mass incarceration and failed rehabilitation have resulted in staggering economic

and human costs. Our challenge is to develop a proactive, comprehensive, evidence-based "smart decarceration" strategy that will dramatically reduce the number of people who are imprisoned and enable the nation to embrace a more effective and just approach to public safety.

### **Build financial capability for all.**

Nearly half of all American households are financially insecure, without adequate savings to meet basic living expenses for three months. We can significantly reduce economic hardship and the debilitating effects of poverty by adopting social policies that bolster lifelong income generation and safe retirement accounts; expand workforce training and re-training; and provide financial literacy and access to quality affordable financial services.

### **Reduce extreme economic inequality.**

The top 1% owns nearly half of the total wealth in the U.S, while one in five children live in poverty. The consequences for health and well-being are immeasurable. We can correct the broad inequality of wealth and income through a variety of innovative means related to wages and tax benefits associated with capital gains, retirement accounts, and home ownership. Greater lifelong access to education will also provide broader economic opportunities.

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## INDIVIDUAL AND FAMILY WELL-BEING

### Ensure healthy development for all youth.

Each year, more than six million young people receive treatment for severe mental, emotional, or behavioral problems. Strong evidence shows us how to prevent many behavioral health problems before they emerge. By unleashing the power of prevention through widespread use of proven approaches, we can help all youth grow up to become healthy and productive adults.

### Close the health gap.

More than 60 million Americans experience devastating one-two punches to their health — they have inadequate access to basic health care while also enduring the effects of discrimination, poverty, and dangerous environments that accelerate higher rates of illness. Innovative and evidence-based social strategies can improve health care and lead to broad gains in the health of our entire society.

### Build healthy relationships to end violence.

Interpersonal violence has a traumatizing impact — across the lifespan — on individuals, families, communities, and society. Oppression based on factors

such as a person's age, race, gender, identities, abilities, or socioeconomic status alter these experiences. Healthy relationships foster emotional resilience and strength. Developing and broadly implementing interventions, both universal and targeted, with individual, relationship, community, and service delivery systems can bolster a range of interpersonal relationships, reduce violence more broadly, and strengthen our mental and physical health, our families, and our communities.

### Advance long and productive lives.

Increased automation and longevity demand new thinking by employers and employees regarding productivity. Young people are increasingly disconnected from education or work and the labor force faces significant retirements in the next decades. Throughout the lifespan, fuller engagement in education and paid and unpaid productive activities can generate a wealth of benefits, including better health and well-being, greater financial security, and a more vital society.

## STRONGER SOCIAL FABRIC

### Eradicate social isolation.

Social isolation is a silent killer — as dangerous to health as smoking. National and global health organizations have underscored the hidden, deadly, and pervasive hazards stemming from feeling alone and abandoned. Our challenge is to educate the public on this health hazard, encourage health and human service professionals to address social isolation, and promote effective ways to deepen social connections and community for people of all ages.

### End homelessness.

During the course of a year, nearly 1.5 million Americans will experience homelessness for at least one night. Periods of homelessness often have serious and lasting effects on personal development, health, and well-being. Our challenge is to expand proven approaches that have worked in communities across the country, develop new service innovations and technologies, and adopt policies that promote affordable housing and basic income security.

### Create social responses to a changing environment.

The environmental challenges reshaping contemporary societies pose profound risks to human well-being, particularly for marginalized communities. Climate change and urban development threaten health, undermine coping, and deepen existing social and environmental inequities. A changing global environment requires transformative social responses: new partnerships, deep engagement with local communities, and innovations to strengthen individual and collective assets.

### Harness technology for social good.

Innovative applications of new digital technology present opportunities for social and human services to reach more people with greater impact on our most vexing social problems. These new technologies can be deployed to more strategically target social spending, speed up the development of effective programs and bring a wider array of help to more individuals and communities.

### Contact Grand Challenges for Social Work

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