For nearly 20 years, MDC has published State of the South reports to alert our region's leaders in all sectors to the challenges and opportunities we face in making the South a place that works well for all its people. This edition examines the landscape of possibilities and pitfalls facing the South’s youth and young adults, who are poised to be—if they are not already—the workforce, the parents, and the leaders we will count on for our future collective wellbeing.

Prospects for Southern youth and young adults in the 15 to 24 age group are widely variable, depending on the circumstances of their birth, the inclusiveness of their communities, the dynamism of the economies in which they function, and the quality of the education and workforce systems that serve them. A recent national study on intergenerational mobility underscores the distressing fact that it is harder in the South than anywhere else in the nation for someone born at the bottom of the income ladder to make it higher up the ladder as an adult. If the American Dream centers on the belief that where you start out shouldn’t determine where you end up, that dream is far too elusive and its promises more illusory here than elsewhere in our nation.

The youth mobility challenge is even more stark and pervasive than poverty in the South. Immobility plagues both our fast-growing New South cities and struggling, remote rural areas. For too many youth and young adults, geography, class, race, and ethnicity determine the messages they receive about what is possible, the resources they are connected to, and the way our education and employment systems treat them. A pervasive climate of fiscal stringency threatens many of the progressive social and policy pillars built by earlier generations to foster broader prosperity.

The headwinds of uneven recovery from the Great Recession and uncertain directions in federal and state policy make progress against immobility a profound challenge.

Yet our region is punctuated with signs of determined innovation to change the opportunity landscape for youth and young adults. This edition of the State of the South examines where diverse communities—large metros, small cities, and rural regions—are placing their bets and working to create an “infrastructure of opportunity”: a clear and deliberate set of pathways and supports to connect youth and young adults to educational credentials and economic opportunity. No single formula characterizes these efforts. They reflect the culture and circumstances of their locales. But most center on fostering educational attainment and postsecondary completion, building deliberate connections to economically rewarding work, providing social and community supports to help young people stay the course as they move up the opportunity ladder, reforming institutional policy and practices that impede mobility, and marshaling the economic, political, and civic leadership needed to turn disparate programs into strong, coherent systems of youth and young adult advancement.

With this report, we hope to spur leaders across the South to examine patterns of youth and young adult mobility and success in their communities, to examine who is—and is not—realizing the American Dream and why, and to create a shared agenda for building a vigorous and pervasive opportunity infrastructure. We will continue this analysis over the coming months on our website, stateofthesouth.org. The price of failing to change the odds for youth and young adult success in the South is steep; the payoff rich for all of us. Society benefits when everyone succeeds.

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