



COMMON PURPOSE

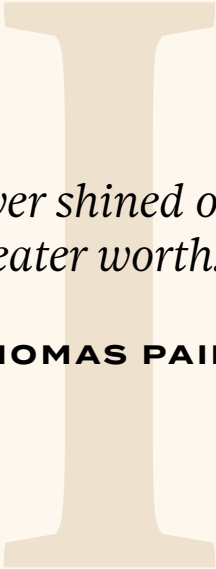
BUILDING A MOVEMENT TO RENEW
THE AMERICAN PROMISE



July 4, 2026

In early 1776—several months before *America's Declaration of Independence*—Thomas Paine published his famous pamphlet *Common Sense*. The pamphlet by Paine—one of America's founding fathers—called a burgeoning nation to action.

This pamphlet, *Common Purpose*, is published in that spirit.



*The sun never shined on a cause of
greater worth.—*

THOMAS PAINE

Introduction

On this Fourth of July in 2026, the 250th anniversary of our Declaration of Independence from British colonial rule, we the people of the United States of America now constitute a population of nearly 350 million—well more than twice our numbers at the end of World War II and far beyond the 2.5 million at the founding of our nation.

We still have much in common with the America of the 1950s. We still have the same Constitution. We still gather for Labor Day picnics and Thanksgiving dinners. We still watch

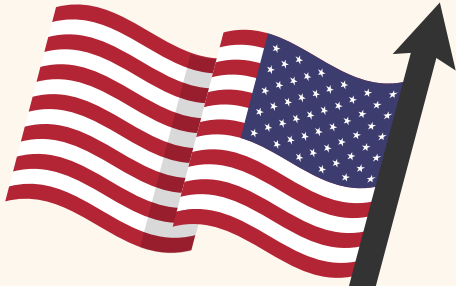
fireworks on the Fourth of July in towns and cities across the country. Millions still tune in together for sporting events and the ball dropping in Times Square on New Year's Eve. Our rituals remain familiar.

But our country is not *exactly* the same, nor do we see ourselves that way. In particular, we now have the widest [income and wealth inequality](#) of any industrialized nation in the world, while still being the [richest country on earth](#).

Most working Americans feel this everyday as they struggle to make ends meet in whatever job they have. For some time, discussion of an “affordability crisis” has gripped the American populace. We find ourselves deep in political logjams, cultural divides, ethnic tensions, and uncivil discourse. Fewer Americans than at any point in two decades—only about [59 percent](#)—expect their lives to improve in the future. We no longer seem to share a *Common Purpose*.

America used to be a country driving confidently toward a shared future. Even if we had a lot of problems, there was a time when all we had to do was identify what needed attention and, with the proper application of work—leaning in with our famous *American ingenuity*—the problem would at least begin to be solved. We believed that each successive generation would be better off than their parents, with even greater opportunities to make a thriving life for themselves and their own families.

Largest Economy, Greatest Inequality



US GDP IS
\$32.4
Trillion

10%
OF AMERICANS OWN
70%
OF THE WEALTH



That *promise* is what made America a model for the world, a place where people could go to school, find a job or start a business, and enjoy the assurance of future financial security no matter their line of work. America was where you could carve out your own little corner of the country, raise a family, and know that your children would be even better off than you, as would your children's children.

Optimism was once a general feature of us as Americans, propelled by our national history of creating a middle class with good-paying jobs combined with a sense that America as a nation could accomplish anything if we set our collective mind to it.

Now, though, our nation is *stuck*. In measure after measure that once spoke to our greatness as a shining light to the world, the lived experience of working Americans is not what it used to be. We all want the same things—affordable housing and childcare, good schools for our kids, jobs that pay well enough to thrive—but wages, housing, and childcare are weighing people down. The American Dream, which once united us, is in tatters. Very few of us *thrive*; many of us barely *survive*.

Profound economic imbalance and the ills it spawns have *stagnated* our country. Economic mobility is stalled. Wealth accrues to fewer and fewer households. Stagnation has curdled into resentment, which has hardened into

polarization. Politics has shifted from a contest of ideas to contention over grievances. And so we've separated ourselves into contentious, sometimes even *warring* "tribes," turning neighbors into factions and policy debates into existential battles.

Being stuck can immobilize and obstruct. Something that fails to get unstuck may never move again. We are no longer moving forward with *Common Purpose*.

In 1776, Thomas Paine wrote *Common Sense*, a pamphlet that helped spur the creation of the United States. It was published at a critical point in our history as a nation. Paine advocated for a break with the colonial British power that was stagnating the progress of Americans in the New World. America, he argued, needed to make its own way—without Britain—on a path that gave it a common purpose, which was then spelled out eloquently, six months later, in our Declaration of Independence.

Just as Thomas Paine was prompted by the situation of his time, this pamphlet is prompted by today's situation. Our country today is at another critical point in history—no less consequential for America's future than were the circumstances of 1776. Like then, the crisis we confront has the potential to determine the trajectory of our country and its people for generation upon generation.

And so, following in Paine’s footsteps, this pamphlet advocates for a new unity of the American people motivated by a singular idea:

We as a nation should be judged by whether greater numbers of working Americans are thriving. That should be our Common Purpose.

This pamphlet is intentionally brief, no longer than is necessary to establish—with some data—the reality of a crisis readers will surely recognize. Then, just as *Common Sense* did, it issues a call to action, for all Americans to join together and build a *movement* to reverse our country’s trajectory and make it possible for all of our fellow Americans to realize the American Dream. It is a call to come together to replace the struggle to survive in our country with the opportunity to thrive, by uniting around the very measures—the *outcomes*—by which we will know whether we are succeeding.

This pamphlet *does not* spell out specific policy or tax reform proposals, budgetary needs, programs to be started, or how to bring anything to scale. Its details are limited to what is needed to help give guidance for the debates that must happen among elected officials, leaders across all sectors, and, most importantly, everyday Americans.

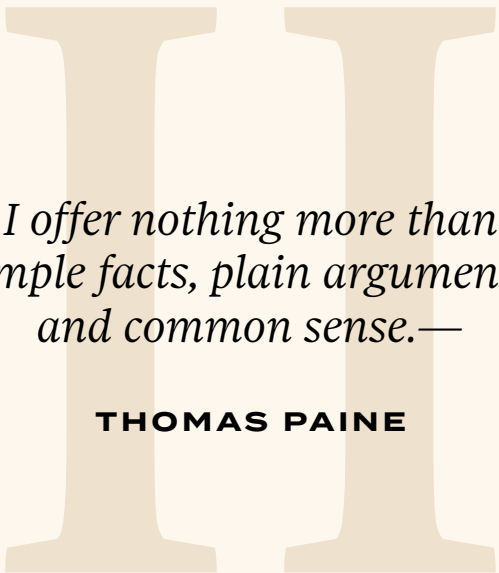
This pamphlet does not spell out specific policy or tax reform proposals, budgetary needs, programs to be started, or how to bring anything to scale.

As we celebrate 250 years of independence, we desperately need to restore hope and optimism across America. *All of us* should feel the hope that comes from *making progress*. None of us should be stuck. This is a call for a movement to get more Americans across this great land *unstuck*.

If we fail to find *Common Purpose*, our divisions will continue to widen and we will find ourselves hurtling at an even faster speed toward a future very different from what any of us want.

In *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine wrote: “Who the Author of this Production is, is wholly unnecessary to the Public, as the object for Attention is the *Doctrine itself*, not the *Man*.” So, too, with *Common Purpose*; as with Paine’s work, this pamphlet is written to draw your attention to the words—to what is advocated in these pages. As Paine described himself, the present author is “under no sort of Influence public or private” other than “reason and principle”—as well as that of compassion for all Americans and fear for what our future holds if we do not join in *Common Purpose* to act.

This is a call for a movement
to get more Americans across
this great land *unstuck*.



*I offer nothing more than
simple facts, plain arguments,
and common sense.—*

THOMAS PAINE

How We Got Here: The Lost American Dream

Meet Kayla, age 27, who struggles to make ends meet even when everything at work and home is “normal.” She works as an emergency medical technician (EMT) in a large North Carolina county that is mostly rural. It’s considered a “good” job—she pulls down about \$40,000 a year—mostly because there’s always work and layoffs are almost unheard of. Her shifts are long—12 to 14 hours—and often unpredictable.

She and her partner share care for their three-year-old son. Living had been hard, but manageable.

Things got more difficult when her partner's job relocated out of state and Kayla suddenly became a single parent. The childcare center she relied on closed unexpectedly after losing staff. The only available alternative charges nearly \$1,600 per month, which would be a wholly unmanageable percentage of their combined monthly income. She's been forced to cobble together care from neighbors and relatives, frequently calling in for unpaid leave when coverage falls through. Each missed shift reduces her paycheck and jeopardizes her standing at work. In her job, Kayla saves lives daily, but now, with literally no savings and her family's income having to cover living costs in two places, her own life is beginning a downward spiral.

Meet Henry, 28, who like Kayla is representative of far too many working Americans today. He always wanted to be an elementary school teacher, and took on debt to study early childhood education in college. He was excited to find a position teaching second grade in a public school outside Denver, at a pre-tax salary of \$53,000—about what many first-year teachers earn. He quickly became the kind of teacher who stays late to help struggling readers.

Henry's other dream was to start a family. He met Nora; they fell in love and married. Combining his income with Nora's

from her low-paying manager job at a local nonprofit homeless shelter didn't help as much as Henry had hoped. When they welcomed their son Charlie 18 months later, they barely had enough room, but renting or buying a larger place was out of the question. They did decide that Nora would become a stay-at-home parent during the baby's first years—as their own moms had done.

Things became precarious on one income. Their rent went up. Henry's share of health insurance premiums rose. Everyday prices for groceries, utilities, and diapers climbed steadily. There was nothing left at the end of each month. Nora couldn't go back to work because the childcare costs were prohibitive. Henry took a second job stocking shelves three nights a week, leaving him exhausted after preparing lessons well past midnight. The fatigue dulled the very patience and creativity that had made him a great teacher. And on top of that, their money situation forced him and Nora to make a heartbreaking decision: no more children.

Henry and Nora simply couldn't afford the life they had hoped to build for themselves in the jobs they had chosen. A couple of years later, Henry left the classroom for a corporate training job that paid enough to support his family without working a second job. The move was practical and

responsible—but it shut the door on Henry’s long-held dream, and the classroom lost a teacher who never wanted to leave.

Meet Claire, who is 41 years old and has spent nearly a decade as a home health aide for the elderly in suburban Florida. She works six days a week, often 12-hour shifts, and is ineligible for overtime pay because under state law she’s paid as a “companion” through an agency. Her annual income from her job rarely exceeds \$35,000—far below what’s needed to meet basic needs where she lives. She takes side gigs cleaning houses as often as she can.

With rent consuming 50 percent of her paycheck and with no paid sick leave, Claire has zero basic security. She is in constant fear that one little thing will mean losing her apartment and possibly end her ability to work at all.

Stories like these can be found in every part of America, where millions and millions of working Americans are barely surviving and certainly not thriving. Kayla, Henry, and Claire have been doing everything right, and yet no longer enjoy even a modicum of the security America once provided. The situation in our country forces people to choose careers based not on their interests, but on whether they can make enough money, often just to get by.

Data turn the sense that we’ve lost the American Dream into undeniable fact. Data, for instance, show Americans

abandoning their *personal* dreams for the future—dreams about careers or starting a family.

- Over the 11 years from 2013 to 2024, the number of people in our country completing teacher preparation programs dropped by more than [20 percent](#). Today, [87 percent](#) of teachers express concern over low pay and [40 percent](#) work extra jobs. Americans like Henry who dreamt of becoming teachers are taking different routes because they cannot imagine a thriving life working in our schools.
- The share of American adults under 50 without children who say they are unlikely to ever have them rose significantly in just five years, from 37 percent in 2018 to [47 percent](#) in 2023. [More than a third](#) of those people cited being unable to afford children as a major reason. Some fear in advance the very childcare-related financial crisis Kayla is confronting. The dream of having a family is disappearing.
- Since 1960, American households have undergone a quiet but profound shift. Then, most families relied on a single income; today, [the majority depend on two](#)—and even with total household working hours increasing by roughly [16 percent](#), financial security

has not followed. The new reality is that it takes two people working more hours to achieve what one income once provided, and even with two incomes many families feel increasingly *behind*.

The lived reality for tens of millions of us is decade upon decade of stagnation. This, too, is demonstrable—with more data that show just how off-track we are as a country.

- Over the past several decades, the US economy has grown dramatically. Since the late 1970s, worker productivity has risen [three times faster](#) than typical worker pay. [Wages barely keep up with inflation](#) in basic needs like food, housing, healthcare, and child-care. For millions of working families, the result is a growing sense that even when they work hard and play by the rules, getting ahead feels impossible. It's no surprise that a poll released in late 2025 found that [69 percent](#) of us believe that the American Dream no longer holds true or never did—the highest level of skepticism in nearly 15 years of surveys.
- Roughly [53 million full-time workers](#) in the United States—about 44 percent—earn less than what they need to meet basic living costs in their local areas.

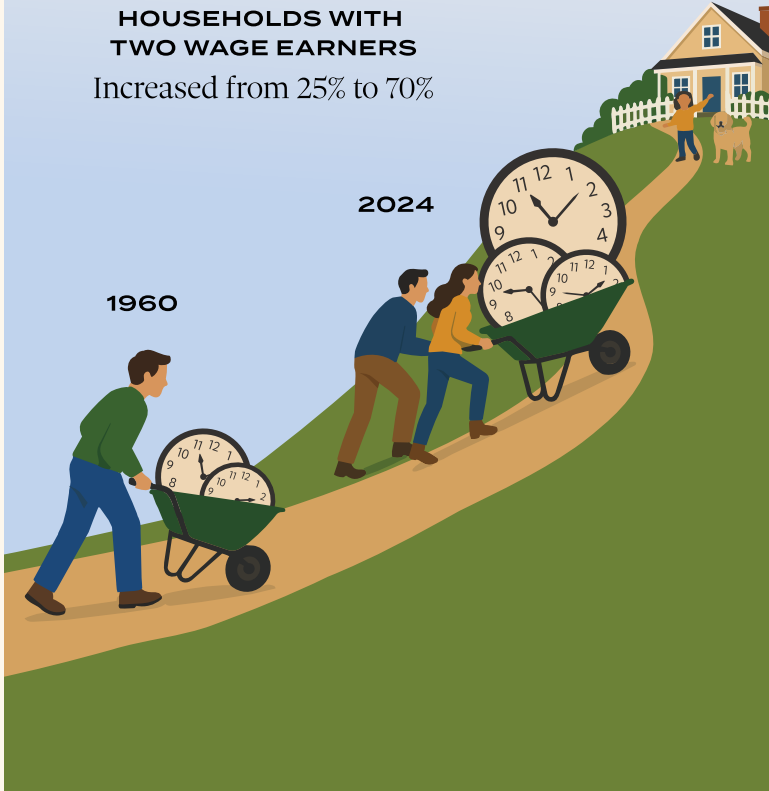
Americans are working more for less financial security.

WORK HOURS PER HOUSEHOLD

Increased 16%

HOUSEHOLDS WITH TWO WAGE EARNERS

Increased from 25% to 70%



For families with children—especially single parents—the income required rises steeply, making shortfalls both more common and more severe.

- For the last 15 years, Americans on average have been paying between [17 and 21 percent](#) of their income for childcare—nearly triple what the federal government defines as “affordable.” Henry and Nora’s lived reality reflects the true situation. No wonder our friends and neighbors are reluctantly deciding not to start families.
- For years, we’ve known that children who cannot read well by the end of third grade face steep odds in the rest of school and in all their future endeavors. Today, millions of American children are already behind even before reaching age 10. Nationally, progress on early reading has largely stalled, and [roughly two-thirds of fourth-graders](#) in US schools are not proficient readers. National reading scores have actually declined since the late 2010s.

This is not what America is supposed to be. How did we become a country with so many of our people so close to economic collapse, with so many people we’ve failed to elevate beyond simply getting by, with so many people forced to avoid taking essential jobs or starting a family?

It's not that we didn't try. For decades, going back to the 1960s, our government has tried to address the challenges that arise from Americans not being paid wages that keep up with the cost of living. Major new programs were launched to "fix" housing, the "problems" of the cities, rural poverty, and other challenges. Federal funding for education expanded throughout all 50 states. Medicare and Medicaid were launched. Rent subsidies were established for low-income families, along with grants to rehabilitate homes and comprehensive urban renewal for blighted neighborhoods in major cities. We tried to create and sustain a "social safety net"—a tremendously ambitious effort, but clearly not what was and is necessary to keep us from falling to where our country is today.

The federal government spends more than [\\$1 trillion](#) each year on well-intentioned, means-tested safety-net programs aimed at helping people *survive* in times of need. [Trillions more](#) are spent on human services, community improvement, and K-12 education. America also has a vast charitable sector of [1.9 million](#) nonprofits and more than [\\$500 billion](#) in annual philanthropic giving. All this money, though, translates into only *incremental* change. Sure, we may be making some difference in hundreds of thousands of *individual* lives, but we rarely change outcomes at scale or shift the overall pattern of results.

The record suggests something that may seem counterintuitive:

We have not been measuring success correctly. Success should be defined by more working Americans *thriving*.

So much money expended for so little structural, long-term change, and for no measurable difference in restoring the American Dream for our country as a whole. Meanwhile, the challenges working Americans face become more and more difficult for most, and even more acute for some who live in certain zip codes and/or are people of color.

At the same time, the wealthiest in our country are impervious to the costs of basic necessities that average working Americans face. They do not have to put in the hard work to make ends meet, but instead are guaranteed, almost every day, to have accrued greater wealth through their investments in stock and bond markets, real estate, and so on.

What explains the lack of progress by everyday working Americans? Could our focus on people surviving be the problem? The record suggests something that may seem counterintuitive: *we have not been measuring success correctly*. Success should be defined by more working Americans *thriving*.

The current measures we focus on today must be augmented with others. The current measures are divorced from the daily lived experiences of most Americans. They have created a picture behind which to hide from confronting our *stagnation*. How the stock market is doing has little direct impact on the financial wellbeing of most Americans; Wall Street shouldn't be the only "street" we measure.

GDP growth tells us nothing about how and whether the wealth that growth produces is reducing inequality. The unemployment rate misses that the issue today is not whether people *have* jobs, but whether they have jobs that pay enough to cover expenses and allow them to save enough for emergencies, let alone for other non-essential expenses—including things that just make life worth living each day. Tracking whether people have places to live masks whether they can actually *afford* what housing costs. When “basic needs” are defined as those that keep you merely surviving, it becomes clear why we’re not actually improving people’s overall situation.

Our focus must be on measurable *outcomes* that translate into making a real difference in moving people from surviving to *thriving*. Without a new set of additional measures as our guide, decades of money and effort will continue to be squandered.

We once had a functioning “social contract” that underpinned the American Dream. That contract meant that for most of us, if we worked hard we’d be able to afford a decent, stable life. If we followed the rules, we’d be treated fairly. If we paid our taxes, we’d get roads, schools, safety, and opportunity in return. But now, if housing eats up 50 percent of your income, childcare costs consume a huge portion of what’s left, and

We measure Wall Street. Why not Main Street?

MACRO MEASURES OF U.S. SUCCESS

Dow Jones • Budget Deficit
30-Year Mortgage Rate • GDP



MEASURES OF AMERICANS' LIVED EXPERIENCE

Wages • Housing Costs
Healthcare Costs • Childcare Costs

The fight for survival has driven a wedge between us as Americans that obscures our recognition that we all share a *Common Purpose*.

a single medical event can put you and your family in bankruptcy, that “social contract” feels broken.

That break erodes trust in our country and in the very institutions that make up the “system” that’s supposed to work for us. An erosion of trust is a recipe for growing polarization—exactly what we see today. The situation has spawned divisions and distractions so profound that we can’t even seem to agree on who to hold accountable for what we face.

The fight for survival has driven a wedge between us as Americans that obscures our recognition that we all share a *Common Purpose*. Surely a belief in the American Dream, deserved by all of us, still lives deep down in all of us—even if only as a fading ember. But just as surely there is tremendous *angst*, sometimes unspoken and sometimes eruptive, that comes from sensing that the bargain has been changed.

Our partisan battles only divert our attention, speed the decline of our country, fuel our discontent, and further sever our connection to a *Common Purpose*. In Thomas Paine’s time, the injustice of America’s situation came from a king across the ocean, a Parliament that taxed without representation, and its administrators in the colonies. Today, unlike in Paine’s time, our common enemy is *internal*. We’ve let this happen, largely because so many of us have been so busy just trying to *get by*—and there are so many issues to address that it is nearly

impossible to focus or keep track. As the promise of America has eroded, we have accepted *surviving* in place of *thriving*. We have resigned ourselves to our lot in life. We have come to believe, often quietly, that nothing fundamental can change. We have shown a willingness to fight one another while ignoring the structural decline of opportunity. And so now we tolerate a system that rewards fewer and fewer and excludes more and more of us, while telling ourselves that this is inevitable. Inequality has become the quiet architect of our polarization. As economic distance widens, so too does emotional and political distance—corroding the possibility of again sharing a *Common Purpose*.

We are at a moment of profound crisis, of reckoning. But we are not powerless to change this situation.

In the wealthiest nation in human history, we are restrained not by scarcity or capacity, but by our reluctance to insist that opportunity be real and measurable.

The American Dream will not restore *itself*. It will not reappear simply by being invoked and defended in speeches. It will not strengthen because we defend it with rhetoric. It will return only if we decide that survival is insufficient and that thriving must become our country's standard. It will return only if we unite in *Common Purpose*, show the will to change,

and demand of our leaders that they work with us to change the circumstances that have gotten us to this point.

This is a call for a *Common Purpose* that rests on the shoulders of the *best America*—the America that is, first and foremost, a kind nation, a caring nation, a nation that volunteers, that donates, that steps forward to help our neighbors in times of crisis.

Again, we as a nation should be judged by whether greater numbers of working Americans are thriving.

What is proposed here is an undertaking that will require engagement, dialogue, compromise, and transparency at levels we have perhaps not seen since our forefathers' founding of our great nation. It is only then that we can rebuild trust and maintain the disciplined action that will give us hope for renewing the American Promise.

That means a new kind of *movement*.



*We, the people living now, have the
responsibility to shape the future.—*

THOMAS PAINE

A Movement to Renew America's Promise

A new *Common Purpose*—overcoming our national stagnation and elevating tens of millions of our neighbors from barely surviving to *thriving*—demands a *movement* to renew America's Promise. It will be a fool's errand if we cannot measure our actual success. The time for vague aspirations and unclear goals is over.

When outcomes are unclear or misleading, accountability dissolves and it is impossible to engage in debate, shift gears,

and make the adjustments needed to avoid repeating the things that haven't worked in the past. So, we *must* make a profound shift to an additional set of measures that truly reflect the lived experience of working Americans.

Clear metrics, with what constitutes thriving determined *in advance*, are an absolute *requirement*.

This is an *Outcomes Movement*, *targeted* and *specific* and based on a straightforward premise: Before launching any effort aimed at correcting the precarious situations in which so many Americans find themselves, it is *communities*—not outsiders—that must come together and identify where efforts should be focused *and* select the intended outcomes they want to improve in concrete, measurable, and realistic terms: “we aim to move x number of families from situation a to situation b between now and a *date*,” as in, say, we aim to move 500 families from paying 48 percent of their income on housing to paying less than 30 percent, and do it within three years.

This is how successful businesses operate; they employ standard performance indicators, with clear outcomes measures such as net income. This is what the military does when it continually updates its readiness based on capability metrics and its operations based on timely data. This is the norm in these and other sectors that establish objectives, set measures

An *Outcomes Movement* is about creating ongoing dialogue, necessary transparency, and true accountability. It makes a statement of our values, of what we care about as a nation.

of success, and monitor and adjust based on those measures. It is time to apply the same logic and discipline to ensuring that working Americans thrive.

We as a country must begin to operate this way, starting with conversations in our communities across the country about what we can do to make genuine progress.

An *Outcomes Movement* isn't about *solving every problem* in one fell swoop, but about getting America back on track. A focus on real and realistic *outcomes* is the key to creating a sensible direction, ongoing dialogue, the necessary transparency, disciplined action, and true accountability. And perhaps most importantly, it makes a statement of our *values*, of what we care about as a nation. It signals our renewed, shared *Common Purpose*.

Requirements for an *Outcomes Movement*

An *Outcomes Movement* will not just emerge because we decide it's worthy of pursuing. It cannot be left completely up to others. A good place to begin is to recognize the three central requirements for launching such a movement: establishing the outcomes on which to focus; building a strong data infrastructure; and ensuring transparency.

1. Outcomes that Matter for Working Americans

First and foremost, an *Outcomes Movement* needs to focus on the persistent challenges that reflect the *lived experience* of people across our country. That means employing outcomes measures that represent what it takes to be a *thriving* American.

Of course, every state, region, city, town, and neighborhood will have its differences, but outcomes measures fall into at least *seven* clear, measurable areas that truly *do* matter because they affect so many Americans and offer clear distinctions between *surviving* and *thriving*. These are the outcomes areas where we know people fall through the cracks, where lives of just getting by become lives of increasingly desperate economic and emotional challenges. Every one of them can be addressed at a community, state, *and* federal level.

The outcomes areas that are essential are accompanied here by specific suggested outcomes measures as a way to guide and discipline the discussions and debates in which communities will need to engage.

Wages

A meaningful *Outcomes Movement* for working Americans needs to focus on the [percentage of Americans earning a living wage](#)—the minimum income necessary for a worker to meet basic needs, the sort of wage that breaks the cycle

in which life is a daily constant struggle simply to survive. A living wage is not the “minimum wage” that varies widely across the country—and tells us nothing about what people actually need to do more than barely survive. Still, ensuring a living wage is a solid first step before we can do anything that genuinely aims at ensuring a thriving wage and truly gets working Americans beyond the persistent potential for one-paycheck-from-catastrophe scenario. If wages are insufficient to give an individual or a family some stability, to allow for meeting basic needs and building some modest savings *and* having some extra left over to enjoy life, then something fundamental is broken in the relationship between work and living.

Housing

An *Outcomes Movement* should measure the [percentage of people in our communities paying no more than 30 percent of income on housing](#). That’s because just having and keeping a place to live has become a daily challenge for tens of millions of Americans—including many with full-time jobs. It’s not how much housing costs but the percentage of income spent on housing that matters most. Housing is the single largest expense for most families. Stability erodes when rent or mortgage payments consume more than 30 percent

of income, an affordability standard of the US federal government. When the cost of housing is at a “severely cost-burdened” 50 percent or more, crisis is inevitable. We cannot claim progress toward restoring America’s promise if housing remains structurally unaffordable.

Education

Almost every aspect of education is a big, complex challenge and the subject of ongoing debate. One thing is certain: we know *all* kinds of education are key to whether working Americans thrive. Yet the link between schooling and securing a good-paying job is weaker than perhaps ever before in our history. An *Outcomes Movement* focused on education requires a tough choice: Where to start? Reading proficiency has long been a strong evidence-based predictor of future educational attainment and lifetime earnings. An *Outcomes Movement* should measure the [percentage of America’s children who can read proficiently by the end of 4th grade](#), which today stands at a staggeringly low 31 percent—a number largely stagnant for decades. Creating opportunity demands we move this number. Success will empower us to address other aspects of education in new ways, from crushing student debt to a stronger guarantee that continuing with school leads to long-term financial security.

Childcare

Childcare is, for the most part, widely available across America. The challenge is whether families can afford childcare without sacrificing financial stability. The federal government’s definition of *affordable childcare* should be our measure: *childcare consuming no more than 10 percent of a household’s income.* Today, though, nearly every family paying childcare costs in our country—an outrageous 84 percent—spends more than that, forcing them to make impossible tradeoffs between work, savings, and basic needs such as food and clothing. Unaffordable childcare also pushes parents—especially mothers—out of the workforce, causes increased family stress, and stalls economic mobility.

Savings

For far too many Americans, even a small “wrong turn” in life through no fault of their own—a sudden car repair; an unexpected medical bill; a broken appliance—can quickly become a financial crisis. Families without some savings live constantly on the edge, where a single disruption can cascade into missed rent, job loss, and even long-term hardship. The US Federal Reserve reports that the *percentage of Americans with sufficient savings to cover at least a \$400 emergency* today stands at only 63 percent. To start, this should be our measure

in an *Outcomes Movement*. Only *resilience* can combat the persistent one-paycheck-from-catastrophe scenario that permeates our communities. Otherwise, Americans find themselves forced to miss payments, incur ongoing late fees, sell things that matter to them, or take out loans at outrageously high interest rates just to survive.

Health

Health—foundational to every other outcome—is, like education, a big, complex challenge for our country. If you’re not healthy, it’s nearly impossible to meet your personal and professional responsibilities. Poor health costs the US economy an estimated half-trillion dollars annually because of missed workdays and reduced on-the-job productivity. Access, cost, and quality are all pressing issues, but we need a place to start—and affordability makes sense. [*Affordable healthcare costing less than 10 percent of a household’s income*](#) is a commonly used benchmark, including by the US Department of Health and Human Services, but roughly one in four working-age Americans spends well more than that—including on insurance premiums, which leads to many being *underinsured*. In other words, even having health insurance no longer ensures that healthcare is affordable.

Mental Health

It may be surprising to see mental health included with measures such as housing and savings, but it is a crisis we cannot ignore if we expect Americans to truly thrive. In the specific context of an *Outcomes Movement*, the best outcomes measures of mental health are still evolving, and different states are exploring a variety of approaches at the community level. The CDC collects data that give us a place to start—***reducing the percentage of adults 18 and older who have been told by a healthcare professional that they have a depressive disorder, major or minor***, which stood at 22 percent in 2024, and ***reducing the percentage of high school students reporting persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness***, which rose sharply from 28 percent in 2011 to a shocking 42 percent in 2024. No society prospers with anxiety, depression, and despair on the rise. We cannot claim progress toward restoring America’s Promise with this major barrier to thriving, when so many people suffering in ways deeply felt but often unseen by others.

How are Working Americans Doing?

THE THRIVING REPORT CARD

Wages & Savings		
Single Adults Earning a Living Wage	53%	F
2 Incomes, with 2 Children, Earning a Living Wage	44%	F
Have \$400 in Emergency Savings	63%	D
Housing		
Spend Less than 30% of Income on Rent	48%	F
Spend Less than 30% of Income on Mortgage	71%	C-
Childcare & Education		
Spend Less than 10% of Income for Childcare	16%	F
4th Graders Who Are Proficient in Reading	31%	F
Health & Mental Health		
Spend Less than 10% of Income for Healthcare	77%	C+
Adults Without a Diagnosed Depressive Disorder	78%	C+
Teens Not Feeling Persistently Sad or Hopeless	58%	F

2. A New Era of Public Outcomes Data

To track our progress and ensure our ability to make adjustments, an *Outcomes Movement* will require a new era of *publicly accessible outcomes data*—an opportunity because of how far we already have come in our collection and use of data.

Fortunately, governments—federal, state, and local—already collect enormous amounts of data that allow us to track most of the outcomes measures suggested. We do need to make some changes. Much of the outcomes data collected is fragmented, outdated, or difficult to gather; and outcomes data needs to be standardized, further disaggregated, and collected in a timelier manner. Today’s AI, carefully incorporated, can help us do more with data by both accessing and analyzing it better and faster. Carefully trained AI could also help identify questions and issues that may not be obvious.

Outcomes data on third-grade reading proficiency offer a powerful model for other outcomes data collection. Today, student data is disaggregated down to the individual school level (a proxy for communities), and then by race, gender, and other critical demographics. The greater the specificity of outcomes data, the better the measures will work to provide transparency and more effective policy, program, and resource allocation debates.

3. Transparency

An *Outcomes Movement* will democratize data to ensure full transparency. That, in turn, is what allows for meaningful measurement and makes accountability possible. Fully transparent outcomes data create a sort of permanent negotiating table around which people can gather to talk about real, quantifiable issues, engage in policy debates, shift gears collectively, and maximize the probability of success.

Achieving full transparency requires a *mechanism* that is accessible to and usable by *anyone and everyone, wherever*: individual community members, local governments, nonprofit coalitions, philanthropic organizations, schools, as well as at the state and federal levels of government. That mechanism must mirror the principle that *clarity precedes action*, which is central to an *Outcomes Movement*.

Dashboards are a tested example of the kind of mechanism we need. They are common in many sectors, including business and healthcare as well as with governments, as a way to keep track of outcomes. In an *Outcomes Movement*, a dashboard can display the outcomes measures a community has chosen and track the baselines a community has set to make progress transparent on a consistent basis. They are a way to disaggregate data by income, geography, gender, or other demographic characteristics in order to reveal disparities

that overall averages might conceal, further helping us reach the clarity we aim for.

Dashboards also function as mechanisms for *sustained accountability*, becoming the reference point against which leadership, investment, and policy are judged and making it more difficult to undercut progress when there are transitions in leadership. A dashboard is a shared civic scorecard that allows for measuring whether a community is advancing or drifting. It transforms “progress” from anecdotal to demonstrable—making stalled progress visible and progress achieved verifiable.

Roles in an *Outcomes Movement*

There are distinct—and distinctly *important*—roles in an *Outcomes Movement*.

Community Members

Community members are the driving force. To start, communities will come together to form a collective group—a partnership between individuals, community and philanthropic organizations, and local government leaders—that will build a local *Outcomes Movement*. This group will engage community

members to join in helping determine what issues to focus on and to select the outcomes to strive toward. The local *Outcomes Movement* will develop a dashboard. All of this shared work reflects the *Common Purpose* behind these efforts: more working Americans thriving.

Community members will need to stay informed on the measures and where things stand. The dashboard will be key, helping engage the entire community to act and monitor whether the community is improving or falling behind—and putting the community in a position to hold leaders accountable for actual *results*.

Philanthropy

An *Outcomes Movement* opens a new avenue for foundations and individuals to move beyond the trap of incremental change by supporting communities to focus on outcomes. Philanthropy can offer catalytic help to communities to convene and select outcomes measures; help create the data infrastructure required and often impossible to fund; and build the mechanisms required for transparency that ensures accountability. Measurement may not be flashy, but philanthropy can be the rocket fuel that will thrust communities beyond aspiration into an actual *Outcomes Movement*.

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Elected Officials and Government Agencies

We need our elected officials and government agencies to commit to the *Outcomes Movement* by working with their communities to select outcomes and then joining in the efforts to make progress on those outcomes. Done well, elected officials, government agencies (including school districts), and communities working hand-in-hand with transparency and accountability could very well help usher in a new era of trust in politicians and institutions.

Employers

Employers have an opportunity to contribute to an *Outcomes Movement* by understanding where their employees stand in the seven outcomes areas and ensuring they have the support needed to thrive—such as by providing health insurance, access to affordable childcare, and mental health services as well as connections to services that help with financial planning and securing an affordable home. The specifics will be different in different parts of the country, but there is no doubt participation will benefit employers in recruitment and retention of their workforce.

Media

An *Outcomes Movement* is big news, and media of all types will have an opportunity to play an important role by promoting dashboards, regularly reporting on stories that impact outcomes measures, and covering the human stories that shape the movement locally, regionally, and across the country. Media's historic role of holding power to account will be a critical component of an *Outcomes Movement's* success.

Coming Together in *Common Purpose*

An *Outcomes Movement* will not eliminate the disagreements that fuel our national discontent. Rather, it will *elevate* our disagreements in a productive way. Imagine debating—in good faith—which policies to adopt, programs to create, and public expenditures to make to improve reading proficiency, improve mental health, and reduce the cost burden of childcare—all based on having agreed to the outcomes measures on which we seek to make quantifiable progress.

We cannot restore the American Promise without measurement. We cannot restore trust without transparency. We cannot restore unity without a shared understanding of what thriving looks like. The American Dream cannot remain a

slogan. It must become our measurable *Common Purpose* once again—to be a society that cares for and about all its members.

Restoring the aspirations and opportunity that made America great—restoring the American Dream—is an obligation we must accept. It will not be easy, especially in our complex, challenging, fast-paced, need-for-immediate-results world. But the *Outcomes Movement* proposed here—based on what we, in our communities, agree is the path to Americans *thriving*—is a far easier starting place than promises that end up being broken or trying to tackle everything that needs to be fixed all at once.

We must go into this with patience and without any illusions. Building an *Outcomes Movement* across these great United States will require a fight not with arms, and not based on the divisions that are tearing apart the fabric of our great country, but with facts and data—having embraced, again, a *Common Purpose* to which we can all aspire, with shared hope for restoring the promise of America.



*We have it in our power to begin
the world over again.—*

THOMAS PAINE

The Promise of Acting Together, the Cost of Doing Nothing

Imagine an *Outcomes Movement* having taken root in a not-too-distant future.

Alma, a mostly stay-at-home mom with two kids, lives in a working-class suburb of Chicago. She works a part-time clerical job while her kids are in school—her wages helping supplement the income of her overextended husband Dave. He works in a college facilities department full-time and on weekends at a big-box home improvement store.

She and Dave keep things afloat, but she dreads the future her kids face. Housing takes more than 40 percent of the family's income, and they sometimes feel they can barely keep up.

Alma attended a meeting at her daughter's school about a statewide *Outcomes Movement* effort, where they discussed tackling challenges like hers, and even a concentrated effort to reduce the percentage of income spent on housing across her town to a more manageable 25 percent. The meeting energized her and she decided to get involved—and now Alma spends some of her evening time helping residents secure more affordable housing and calling her local state senator and representative to hold them accountable to the policy commitments they've made.

In one large Texas city, a dashboard is now a core part of how *everyone*—not only the mayor and city council members, but employers, community organizations, individual residents, and others—tracks the progress being made toward outcomes measures for people to thrive. It's become common for people to hold up screenshots at local meetings and hearings where efforts continue to be debated, adjustments are made, and accountability is put on the line.

A two-term state representative from one of West Virginia’s poorest counties, running for reelection, has made outcomes a core part of her campaign. Her promise isn’t that she can singlehandedly fix the cost of living that’s crippling so many of her low-wage constituents. She does promise to devote the first three months of her next term to holding community dialogues that lead to decision-making about which outcomes areas to begin addressing and the measures to gauge progress. And she commits to having a dashboard fully accessible to everyone—even arranging for it to be hosted on a county website—to ensure accountability, including her own.

It is no small undertaking to create an *Outcomes Movement* that becomes something more than just another “program” with little genuine, widespread impact on people’s lives. But it won’t be the first time we Americans have done big, difficult things that matter, and done them swiftly and with resolve.

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, our government mobilized the full power of our scientific institutions, private sector, and public agencies in “Operation Warp Speed” to develop vaccines—a process that typically takes a decade or longer. The COVID vaccines were developed in record time—less than 11 months—not because the problem was easy to solve, but because there was a national will to do so.

An *Outcomes Movement* won't be the first time we Americans have done big, difficult things that matter, and done them swiftly and with resolve.

It demonstrates that when we define a clear outcome and align resources toward achieving it, America and Americans can still do great things.

The challenge before us now is a significant one. The loss of the American Dream—under siege from unaffordable housing, stagnant wages, underperforming schools, untreated mental illness, and communities divided against themselves—spells catastrophe for individuals, families, and for our country as a whole. A nation that cannot provide the opportunity for its people to thrive cannot count on indefinite stability, but rather can expect *rupture*.

That is the cost of doing nothing.

We cannot and should not accept stagnation for our country. We cannot and should not surrender to the disappearance of the American Dream. We must build an *Outcomes Movement* at “warp speed,” before time runs out to propel our country forward.

Fortunately, we are not starting from scratch. There are signs in many places that an emerging *Outcomes Movement* can already be found.

Through a two-year community engagement process, the Vermont Futures Project developed an economic plan to address that largely rural state’s unsustainable future, with its aging population, rising cost of living, shrinking workforce,

and other economic challenges. The project uses a public dashboard to show how the plan’s initiatives are progressing.

Utah entered 2026 with a troubling reality: despite a strong economy, economic mobility for many Utahns had stagnated for decades, and no statewide infrastructure existed to align around a shared, measurable outcome of more working Utahns thriving. To that end, community-driven Utah’s Promise led a sustained, multiyear advocacy effort to translate that shared outcome into state policy, culminating in the legislature creating the REACH initiative (Raising Expectations through Accountability, Community, and Hope) in March 2026 to move families toward economic stability, establishing the state’s first outcomes-based economic mobility framework.

In Kent County, Michigan, home of the city of Grand Rapids, KConnect works on third-grade reading proficiency, post-secondary-school educational success, basic family income, and a *thriving* family income. A “set of common indicators and metrics helps align the efforts” of the many partners in this work, and a publicly accessible Data Dashboard ensures that “everyone is working towards the same outcomes and can track progress collectively.”

The state of Louisiana illustrates what happens when people already in leadership positions take responsibility and

move on tackling problems an *Outcomes Movement* would address. In 2019, the state ranked third from last in the country in fourth-grade reading proficiency, and had no consistent way to measure whether students in the earlier grades were on track to read at grade level. Then across the state, elected representatives, school systems, and educators aligned on ensuring more children could read proficiently by the end of third grade—adopting a common curriculum, investing in teacher training, and implementing consistent, statewide measures to monitor progress. Data helped guide instruction and improvement. As a result, Louisiana has made some of the fastest gains in early literacy in the country—a 10-point increase in the percentage of third-graders reading at grade level in only four years, and a rise to 15th in the nation in this metric. It’s a remarkable demonstration of what selecting an outcomes measure and aligning institutions and resources toward improvement looks like.

Even in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, a small Rocky Mountain city of 14,000 people, an *Outcomes Movement* is unfolding. There, the city’s website hosts an Affordable Housing Dashboard that is part of a locally led effort called Steamboat for All. It measures how many households spend 30 percent or more of their income on housing—which is the majority of both renters and those with mortgages—as well as other

information related to the city's policies and programs aimed at reducing that number in the near term.

As these examples illustrate, America is not a country that lacks ingenuity. We are not a people lacking in resources. We are not a nation incapable of coordinated action. We have it within our history and our present day to act together with *Common Purpose*. We just need the *will* to do that coast to coast.

An *Outcomes Movement is practical*: define what matters; measure it publicly; align around it; adjust when it fails; and persist when it shows genuine progress. An *Outcomes Movement* provides a *disciplined* way to define what *thriving* means, measure it honestly, and align effort toward it; to transform vague aspiration into measurable obligation; to make visible what must change and whether change is occurring. The tools, data, capacity, and resources already exist.

An *Outcomes Movement* is possible, but only with real effort and genuine will. It will require civic conversation; elected officials who prioritize outcomes over rhetoric; institutions that align around shared measures; and community members who demand transparency and remain engaged.

Imagine an *Outcomes Movement's* renewal of the American Promise—an America where once again, in the big cities and the great rural swaths of our country, working hard is a path toward a comfortable life.

Imagine an America where
working hard is again a path
toward a comfortable life.

Imagine how it would change the lives of Americans like the ones we met earlier. Imagine an *Outcomes Movement* in Kayla's rural North Carolina that has firmly established the *affordability* of childcare as a civic responsibility assured by government, employers, and the taxpayers who insisted on it with their engagement and their votes. Imagine the school districts around Denver, where Henry once worked, *teeming* with dedicated young teachers fulfilling their dreams of shaping young minds, secure in the knowledge that they can focus on lessons without worrying about making ends meet or abandoning their students for new, higher-paying corporate jobs or exhausting themselves with second and third jobs.

Our future depends on us choosing to resurrect the American Dream and make it broadly attainable again. Americans cannot wait for others to make this happen. We must demand it of ourselves, and ask our leaders and our institutions to join us.

In the third edition of *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine wrote, "We have it in our power to begin the world over again." Two hundred and fifty years later, that power remains, not because circumstances are easy or because division is absent, but because we Americans have it within our history to act together, and we still possess the capacity to do so.

An *Outcomes Movement* will be a statement of what we care about and what our nation values. It could spell a powerful start to restoring trust in our country and our institutions. It could be the beginning of putting the “system” back to work for us. And with that, it could reverse our polarization and bring us back together as a people.

The question is not whether we can restore the American Promise, as the place where working Americans thrive, but whether we *will try together* in *Common Purpose*.


Notes

Notes

Andrew Wolk, author of this pamphlet, is the founder of the Finding Common Purpose Foundation. Read more about Andrew at www.readcommonpurpose.org/author.

Links to sources of specific data presented in this pamphlet are available at www.readcommonpurpose.org/references.

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In 1776, Thomas Paine wrote *Common Sense*, a pamphlet that helped spur the creation of the United States. Britain's governing of the colonies, he argued, was stagnating the progress of Americans in the "New World"—and six months later, our Declaration of Independence was signed.

Today, our country is stagnant once again. Following in Paine's footsteps, this pamphlet advocates for a new unity of the American people motivated by a singular idea:

We as a nation should be judged by whether greater numbers of working Americans are *thriving*. That should be our Common Purpose.

