

TAKE A STEP: ILLUSTRATION OF ADVANTAGES, DISADVANTAGES AND FACTORS LEADING TO POVERTY

Instructions for the facilitator:

This is an example of an effort to help participants reflect on the "unequal playing field" that benefits some while making it more likely that others will be left behind.

What you will need:

- tape
- 3 colors of index cards, such as red, yellow, and blue. There should be more yellow (or whatever color you are substituting for yellow) cards than any other color and only a few blue (or the substitution) cards. For example, if there are 30 participants, have 3 blue cards, 20 yellow, and 8 red. [\[1\]](#)

Place a piece of tape on the floor in the center of a large room. Then ask participants to line up shoulder-to-shoulder across the room. The participants in the middle of the line should be standing on the taped line on the floor so that the group is shoulder-to-shoulder in a line across the center of the room. Ask participants to listen carefully and to follow the instructions given.

For a shorter version (ideal for younger grades, if pressed for time, or if in a small room), only read the prompts with * in front of them.

Instructions for participants:

If you have a blue card you grew up speaking English as your first language—take two steps forward. If you have a yellow card you grew up speaking English as a second language, but eventually learned English well—take one step forward. If you have a red card you never really learned English until you were an adult—take one step backwards.

*If you have a yellow card your family owned a car when you were growing up—take one step forward. If you have a blue card your family owned two or more cars simultaneously—take two steps forward. If you have a red card your family didn't own a car and you were dependent on public transportation or rides from others—take a step back.

If you have a red card you had to go through winters without heat and summers without air conditioning—take a step back. If you have a blue or yellow card you did have these things—take a step forward.

If you have a blue or yellow card you had your own bed growing up and didn't have to share with your siblings or parents—take a step forward.



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If you have a blue card you were able to travel on an airplane as a child to go on a trip, see new places, visit relatives, etc.—take one step forward.

*If you have a red card you lived in an unsafe area plagued by violence—take three steps back. If you have a yellow card you sometimes had to worry about your safety growing up—take one step back. If you have a blue card you never had to worry about safety growing up—take a step forward.

*If you have a yellow or blue card you had health insurance and access to a doctor or hospital if needed when you were growing up—take a step forward. If you have a red card you didn't have these things—take a step back.

If you have a blue or yellow card you breathed clean air growing up—take a step forward. If you have a red card you lived, played, and went to school in a place where the air was very polluted—take a step back.

Every fourth person with a red card, you or your parent was disabled—take a step back.

*If you have a blue or yellow card you were able to go to school every day as a child and had a decent education growing up—take a step forward.

*If you have a blue card you were also able to go to a four-year college—take two steps forward. If you have a yellow card, you went to technical school or perhaps received your associate's degree from a community college. Take a half a step forward. If you have a red card, you did not have any further education after graduating from high school. Take one step back.

*If you have a red card and are standing to the left of the middle line, take another step back. You didn't receive a good education in grade school or high school. You may have lived in an area with a failing school system, or your school may have had very limited resources and students did not have access to the materials or education needed to succeed—take another step back. Or, perhaps you did not have regular access to education because of money, sickness, or another reason at some point in your life.

If you have a red card your family didn't have access to a phone or television when you were growing up—take one step back.

*If you have a blue or yellow card you always had access to a computer and the internet when you needed it—take two steps forward. If you have a red card you didn't have this access—take a step back.

Every fifth person with a red card you or your family members have been denied the opportunity to vote despite being of voting age—take a step back.



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*If you have a yellow or blue card you always knew where your next meal would come from—take a step forward. If you have a red card you sometimes had to skip meals because your family didn't have enough money—take a step back.

If you have a red card and are standing to the right of the middle line, the community where you grew up experienced severe drought which limited your access to food, or flooding which destroyed homes—take a step back.

Every fourth person with a red card, your family migrated as a result of poverty or conflict—take two steps back.

If you have a blue or yellow card you went on vacation growing up—meaning that you went somewhere new and enjoyed or learned about another place or culture—take one step forward.

*If you have a red card you were homeless as a child or had to live with relatives, another family, or in a shelter—take three steps back.

*If you have a blue card you had a bank account, savings account, or some other financial savings created for you as a child—take two steps forward. If you have a yellow card your family saved some money for you in a college fund—take one step forward.

If you have a red card your family did not have a checking account or paid cash for large and small purchases—take three steps back.

*If you have a red card your family was affected by high levels of debt growing up, such as credit card debt, difficulty making mortgage payments, or fear of (or actual) foreclosure on a home—take two steps back.

*If you have a blue or yellow card you made visits to the public library to check out books, borrowed or bought books from elsewhere, or had a habit of reading regularly as a child—take two steps forward.

If you have a blue card you had a stable family and grew up with both parents present—take two steps forward. If you have a yellow card you had one parent present, but a stable and loving home life—take one step forward.

*If you have a red card you grew up in a poor community where industrial pollution from factories or chemical plants caused sickness or disease in your community—take one step back.



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After the statements are read, have the participants stay in place and ask them to reflect upon the activity. Use the following prompts:

- Take a look around you. Take a moment to process the experience. (give everyone 30 seconds to just pause and think and reflect)
- As you are reflecting, think about the following: Who is behind you or in front of you? How does that make you feel? How did you feel when you took steps (Forward or Back) that others didn't?

Now that you've silently reflected and processed.....let's discuss the following:

Now ask participants the following questions:

- "What thoughts or reactions do you have to this activity? What surprised you?"
- "Did your perspective about your own or others' privilege (or lack of) change as a result of the activity?"
- "Which "step backwards" statements were most memorable for you? Why?"
- "How might some of the "step backwards" experiences be connected to poverty?"
- "If you were someone who mostly stepped forward rather than backward, what responsibilities go along with the privileges you have received?"
- "If you mostly stepped forward during this activity, how did you feel while moving ahead of the pack?"
- "If you mostly stepped backward during this activity, how did you feel about slipping behind the pack?"
- "Does this activity help you to identify some of the "root causes" of poverty? Which ones?"
- "Which causes of poverty are missing from this activity?"
- Other thoughts or feelings?
- How can you use this experience back in your community?

11 The suggested proportion of the cards of each color are based on the U.S. Census Bureau, 2011 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, which estimates that 8.7% of households in the U.S. make \$150,000 or more per year (the blue cards), 66.3% of households make \$25,000-\$149,999 per year (the yellow cards), and 25% of households make less than \$25,000 a year (the red cards).