Foreword by Angela Glover Blackwell

President Barack Obama has called inequality the defining challenge for America in the twenty-first century. The economic model of recent decades is failing nearly everyone except those at the very top. This is true not only for the very poor but also for lower- and middle-income families. It is especially true in rural communities, where poverty and isolation combine with spatial challenges and a history of disinvestment.

When the first edition of *Worlds Apart* was published, the United States economy seemed to be flying high. The stock market was soaring. The national unemployment rate was only 4 percent, the lowest in nearly a quarter century. Yet poverty persisted. Professor Duncan painted an unforgettable picture of what that looked like in rural America and examined the economic and political forces that left so many remote communities behind.

Things are different now.

The apparent prosperity of the late 1990s and early 2000s turned out to be a bubble that obscured deep structural problems in the U.S. economy. Good jobs are disappearing, the middle class is shrinking, and inequality has reached an all-time high. More than 100 million people—a third of the population—live in or near poverty, and for the first time in modern history, employment does not offer a sure path out. Millions of people work in low-wage jobs that leave them struggling to make ends meet.

In the shadow of worsening economic insecurity, the nation's overall rural population dipped from 2010 to 2012—the first net loss ever recorded. Only 230 rural counties had growth rates higher than the national average of 1.7 percent, while 1,200 rural counties lost population.

America also looks different for another reason: the historic shift in demographics. By midcentury, a majority of the population will be people of color. Already, most babies born in the United States are infants of color. By

2020, more than half of all Americans under the age of nineteen will be of color, and they are more than twice as likely as their white counterparts to grow up poor. In the global economy, diversity can be a tremendous asset for communities, regions, and the nation as a whole. But if racial inequality is allowed to continue, and widen the gaps in education, employment, health, and wealth, the results will be slower economic growth, lower wages for almost everyone, and dimmer hopes for future generations.

To respond to the economic crisis and the shifting demographics, the nation urgently needs to build an equitable economy—one that produces good jobs and full employment, upgrades the skills and education of our increasingly diverse workforce, and creates opportunities for all people, regardless of where they live, to participate, prosper, and reach their full potential. Rural communities, like inner city, urban, and suburban neighborhoods, need these strategies to be tailored to their particular realities.

Rural America, of course, is not a single entity but an array of places and peoples: tribal lands carved from the nation's original sin; communities in the Mississippi Delta that bear the legacy of slavery; the *colonias* along the Mexican border and thousands of similar unincorporated hamlets in California's Central Valley. Many rank among the poorest, most neglected places in our nation, lacking such basics as functioning water and sewer systems.

Rural America includes communities rapidly being absorbed by ever growing suburbs; farmland and an agricultural economy increasingly hampered by a broken immigration system that fails to support a predictable and stable workforce; and small manufacturing and processing towns in Georgia, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Arkansas that have the fastest-growing immigrant populations in the nation. While some of these communities have resisted the newcomers, with anti-immigrant sentiment and restrictive policies, others are reinventing themselves as places of shared prosperity and inclusion for the new generation of Americans.

Every rural community is shaped by its history, geography, and political and economic landscape. Yet each faces challenges playing out all across America. Addressing every community's needs while connecting them to the broad-based struggle for justice and fairness in America will produce equity—just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate and prosper. Equity is the antidote to the plight of isolated, disinvested communities across America, including rural communities. The nation must rethink its relationship with its rural areas, which have long provided an outsize share of the food and raw materials on which we all depend, while

receiving little in return. (Case in point: of the 19 million Americans not served by broadband, a critical link to participating in the economy, three quarters live in rural areas.) And rural communities must look inward—to grapple with inequities inside their own borders, to embrace the changing faces of their towns and villages, and to reinvent themselves as communities of opportunity for all.

The equity agenda builds on the wisdom, voice, and experience of local residents. It focuses on empowering people while strengthening the places where they live. It reflects the bedrock American value of access to opportunity. It taps into the great strength of rural America, where people often take pride in the small scale of their communities, know their neighbors, and are accustomed to calling on one another to take action.

What action is needed? This book tells us, by revealing why some communities remain stalled, some progress only to slip back, and others manage to change and thrive. Education is key. Without it, rural communities will continue to be left behind. We must set high expectations for rural youth and make the investments necessary for them to succeed. These include high-quality schools, from pre-kindergarten through college; comprehensive education supports such as counseling and enrichment programs; and forward-looking workforce development systems that equip generations of tomorrow—and today—with the skills to participate in an ever changing, globalized, knowledge-based economy.

Federal and state investments in job creation are a must. Not just any jobs, but those that pay family-supporting wages, offer opportunities for advancement, and give young people a reason to stay in rural communities or return to contribute, build businesses, and raise families. Rural areas also need support from the finance and business communities for small business development, which not only spurs local economic growth, but also stands as an inspiring symbol of resurgence.

Rural renewal requires the reversal of the infrastructure deficits that stem from years of underinvestment, policy neglect, and inequitable land use planning. Twenty-first-century infrastructure—roads, bridges, public transportation systems, broadband, state-of-the-art school facilities, to say nothing of functioning water and sewer systems—undergirds strong communities. It connects people to jobs and educational opportunities, and it boosts productivity, business efficiency, and growth. As the stories on these pages remind us, public infrastructure investments must be targeted at rural communities, and they must reach people at all income levels.

These investments reap benefits beyond economic development. Years of research show that where people live determines how healthy they are. Healthy people and robust, opportunity-rich places go together. The converse is true, too, as rural residents know all too well. They grow the nation's food, yet they themselves have the most limited access to fresh, nutritious groceries. They sit amid expanses of land, yet they have the most limited access to parks and other resources for healthy living. As a result, rural communities have some of the highest rates of illness and injury in America. This can change if ailing places are transformed into communities of opportunity in which everyone can participate in every way—economically, socially, culturally, and politically. Yes, political voice and full participation are essential ingredients for healthy lives.

As *Worlds Apart* documents, the path to creating opportunity-rich communities is rarely straightforward and never easy. It takes time, patience, and determined, responsive leadership. The strategies may be unique in rural communities, but the struggle for equity is the same in thousands of communities across America. The burden on all leaders has never been greater. Together we must build a nation in which no one, no group, and no geographic region is left behind.

Let this book serve as our call to action and our guide.