Emerging scholarship increasingly points toward the need to enact a more effective and transformative agenda for research on social inequality in youth outcomes. Whereas most previous research on youth inequality is concerned with describing inequality or understanding its causes and consequences, recent studies are beginning to call for expanded research that is more likely to actually produce societal reductions in inequality (Carter and Merry 2019; Carter and Reardon 2014; DiPrete and Fox-Williams 2021; Raver and Blair 2020). This new agenda is transformative in that it moves beyond simply describing inequality in youth outcomes to examining and disrupting societal mechanisms that result in unequal distributions of life outcomes and access to opportunities.

The central question this article addresses is, What can social scientists do to deliver the forms of knowledge that may lead to a reduction of social inequalities in youth outcomes and opportunities at large scale? Scholars of human development have been called upon to tackle this question (Gamoran 2013; Yoshikawa et al. 2018). Our hope is that this article inspires further consideration of the question. We define “large scale” as societal (national) change with shifts in policy or societal views as two key indicators, among others, of achieving impact. However, we recognize that the political structures of societies differ a great deal in the distribution of policy making and influence at the national, subnational, and local or municipal levels, and the social organization of societies varies a great deal as well (e.g., according to ethnicity, language, caste, or class). Some of the pathways and examples cited may be applicable at subnational or local levels, depending on the political and sociocultural context. We begin by discussing key mechanisms that reproduce and maintain social inequality in society. Next, we turn our focus to instances in which research has addressed these mechanisms to delineate six pathways for the kind of research that may generate reductions in youth inequality at scale. We draw on examples of initiatives involving a diverse array of social scientists across sociology, economics, political science, anthropology, history, legal scholarship, and psychology. In the final section of the...
article, we propose three levers for achieving impact for this emerging research agenda.

**Distributional and Relational Inequality**

Across the world, disparities persist in youth’s access to key supports that will allow them to thrive: quality health services (including sexual, reproductive and mental health), employment and economic mobility, quality education, and inclusion in strategic decision making and policy-making processes (United Nations 2019). These in turn are linked to disparities in youth outcomes such as their educational attainment and success, health and mental wellbeing, social-emotional skills, and participation in leadership and community engagement (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2019; Patton et al. 2016). Much research shows the unequal distribution of these opportunities, resources, and supports on the basis of social groupings (Carter and Reardon 2014; Lamont, Beljean, and Clair 2014).

Focusing on the reduction of youth inequalities in societies, our discussion centers on two broad types of inequality: distributional and relational. “Distributional inequality” refers to the differences in the allocation of resources, opportunities, and outcomes across a population characteristic. Wealth and income inequality have dominated most research on distributional inequality. Other research has focused on unequal distributions of health risks and educational attainment, also implying lack of opportunity. Additionally, we consider “relational inequality,” specifically how hierarchical relations of power among stratified social groups—typically defined by race, class, ability, gender, sexuality, and their intersections—reproduce differences in access to opportunities and resources. Boundaries among social groups may be expressed in objective form to mark social differences among the groups to which differential resources are allocated, or they may be expressed as cultural symbols and narratives used to acquire status and to distinguish groups from one another and monopolize resources (Burton and Welsh 2016; Carter 2018; Lamont and Molnár 2002; Schwalbe et al. 2000; Schemmel 2012; Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt 2019). A research agenda aimed at reducing youth inequality ought to consider how to disrupt underlying mechanisms of both distributional and relational inequality.

Our agenda also challenges current research on reducing inequality that is at too small a scale to have societal implications for action. Although much of public policy analysis and research on social movements may focus on large-scale phenomena, many research-based interventions that could potentially address distributional or relational inequality have not been evaluated at large scale. Hundreds of evaluation studies aimed at reducing inequality in youth health, educational or other outcomes are of programs implemented entirely at the level of schools, families, or neighborhoods without addressing the system complexities that arise in larger scale change. Such relatively micro-level implementation cannot simply be aggregated to produce scale. For example, implementation of policy-enabled interventions involves governance, finance, and institutional change (Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock 2017), processes that these evaluations do not engage or describe. Social movements with national political or cultural impact have often involved cross-site leadership, multiple organizations, and state institutional allies alongside effective mobilization and communication (Amenta et al. 2010; Ganz 2010).

Drawing on conceptualizations of inequality that pay attention to mechanisms of distributional and relational inequality (e.g., Carter and Merry 2019; Irons and Tseng 2019; Lamont et al. 2014; Schwalbe et al. 2000; Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt 2019), we have two aims: (1) to delineate research pathways that target *distributional* and *relational* mechanisms to achieve societal reductions in inequality and (2) to propose what academic institutions can do to train and support researchers to carry out this research agenda.

**Distributional Mechanisms Underlying Inequality of Resources and Opportunities**

The implications of distributional inequality in society for youth may arise in three different ways. First, expansion of income and opportunity might occur, but only at the top of the distribution. According to Piketty (2014), societal economic inequality rises when rates of return to accumulation of capital rise faster than economic growth as a whole. The result is the concentration of wealth, assets, and income in a relatively small number of households at the top of the distribution. Efforts to reduce the concentration of capital, informed by economic theories, include redistribution through tax systems, progressive income tax systems, and an increase in inheritance or estate taxes. No one has developed conclusive empirical models, in economics, political science, or sociology, that explain why certain welfare states redistribute to a greater degree than others (Arts and Gelissen 2002; Fellowes and Rowe 2004).

Additionally, distributional inequality manifests in how decision-making power at state, local, or institutional levels is disproportionate and concentrated in a small number of households. The polarization between Democratic and Republican social and economic policies in the United States in the past 40 years resulted in real incomes of middle-income families rising twice as fast during Democratic administrations compared with Republican ones, and real incomes of low-income families rising 10 times as fast during Democratic administrations (Bartels 2018). Differences in household incomes may further influence patterns of campaign finance contributions, which can be leveraged for access to key policy makers. Findings from a randomized field experiment indicated that policy makers were three to
four times more likely to accept meeting requests from prospective attendees in their constituencies when the latter revealed that they were contributors to campaigns (Kalla and Broockman 2016).

More directly, political power becomes concentrated among a minority of the population through phenomena such as widespread corruption (Gupta, Davoodi, and Alonso-Temme 2002) and the limited range of ideologies represented in lawmaking bodies (Gilens 2012). Key studies in political science demonstrate that policies more strongly reflect the ideologies of the middle class than of more disadvantaged groups (Gilens 2012; Gilens and Page 2014). Other political phenomena, such as disconnects between public opinion on inequality and actual voting behavior, the decline in power of labor unions, and increases in gerrymandering, are implicated in a wide range of institutions in which power is concentrated in a small elite, including the educational, justice, and service systems affecting youth (Khan 2012; Twohey, Eder, and Stein 2020). These forms of concentration of power contribute to the disparities in access to health, education, and leadership opportunities among youth, for example through passing laws that reduce spending on social safety net programs and public education as well as rescinding those meant to protect youth from discrimination and exploitation.

Second, distributional inequality increases when the proportion of the population at the bottom of the income and wealth distributions rises. In the United States, wage stagnation and increases in income poverty over the past 50 years (particularly in child poverty) have to some extent been mitigated by increases in certain safety net programs and policies, most notably the earned income tax credit and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (Fox et al. 2014). The recent coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic has produced notable increases in job loss and entry into poverty. If the unemployment rate remains at the roughly 10 percent, as it is as of this writing, the U.S. poverty rate will rise from the February 2020 level of 12.4 percent to 15 percent (Parolin and Wimer 2020).

Third, distributional inequality rises if forces reduce the proportion of society who are arguably in the middle class. This occurs when both the lowest skilled and highest skilled job sectors in a society grow, with shrinkage in the middle. Employment bifurcates into high-wage and low-wage jobs, as it did in the United States between the 1980s and early 2000s (Autor, Katz, and Kearney 2006); and as some have shown, this is a pattern going back to the 1970s (Bárány and Siegel 2018). Proposed efforts to reduce this form of inequality include identification and support of new sectors for moderate-skill jobs (e.g., with increasing automation of manufacturing processes, the monitoring of production has become a growing sector, with the need for higher levels of computer and digital technology skills than in prior eras; Bárány and Siegel 2018). These might in turn alter the job market opportunity structures for youth.

**Relational Mechanisms Underlying Inequality of Resources and Opportunities**

Relational inequality is characterized by an unequal distribution of resources and opportunities emanating from socially bounded, hierarchical relationships of power among groups. According to one model, relational inequality occurs through three processes: *exploitation*, when a social group appropriates resources from others; *social closure* or exclusion, when groups control activities and limit access to resources by other groups; and *claims-making*, the rationales and discourses groups use to justify why some actors are more or less deserving of resources (Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt 2019). This argument follows prior work by Lamont et al. (2014) that advanced the idea that in addition to macro-level forces (e.g., policies), ecological ones (e.g., neighborhood), and individual psychological ones (e.g., stereotypes), cultural forces such as stigmatization and racialization also shape inequality. In fact, Lamont et al. and others (e.g., Domina, Penner, and Penner 2016; Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt 2019) have argued that relational patterns among groups buttress the conditions from which distributional inequalities emerge and are reproduced continually. They have noted that in examining relational inequalities, processes of categorization such as scripts, narratives/claims, and repertoires that symbolically distinguish one group from another are the central unit of analysis. These processes manifest especially in organizations and institutions.

Relational inequality is observed in daily meaning making and other social processes or practices that foment systemic racism, xenophobia, and wide-scale stereotypes continuously. Arguably, these forces drive highly racialized disparities in wages, livelihoods, and living conditions in post-apartheid South Africa, or much of the accumulated disadvantage among African Americans and other groups in post–Jim Crow in the United States. Relational inequality inhibits the allowance of equitable educational opportunities, or social safety nets and employment opportunities to undocumented immigrant or asylee and refugee populations, or voting rights to formerly incarcerated people, or the promotion of activities that include individuals with disabilities, or race-conscious policies that address the reality of racism in institutions and organizations (e.g., Alexander 2010).

Efforts to reduce relational inequality include plans to realize the rights and access of marginalized populations to opportunities and resources, legal challenges to exclusionary policies and practices, and counter-narratives or frameworks that challenge macro-ideologies and claims-making that reify inequality. The role of ideologies and claims-making in social inequality cannot be overstated. Ideologies such as the embrace of competition over cooperation, the proliferation of consumerism over frugality, beliefs in meritocracy, and the championing of technology
rather than collective consensus as the primary actor in advancing society provide an overarching paradigm or “cultural story” that justifies inequality (O’Sullivan 1999:125). White Christian nationalism is also a more consequential ideology influencing the present policy landscape in the United States (Whitehead and Perry 2020). Counter-narratives have functioned as the core of many civil rights and grassroots movements (Amenta and Polletta 2019; King 1963; Freire [1970] 2014; Gould 2009).

Notably, research to reduce inequality has focused mostly on distributional mechanisms and much less on relational mechanisms of inequality. Our view is that the efforts targeting distributional mechanisms are necessary but insufficient to reduce inequality without attending also to relational mechanisms. Relational processes of exploitation, social closure, and claims-making are the mechanisms for justifying unequal distributions of wealth and other goods and services. Increases in income disparity, for example, are often justified by claims-making about effort and merit associated with groups on the basis of demographic categories. Distribution of money to fund education systems is often justified by claims-making about “school finance waste” and by social closure around ability to manage education opportunity (e.g., state takeover of school districts in black and brown cities). Differential distribution of school-level education opportunities (e.g., advanced placement courses, enrichment opportunities) are often a matter of exploitation, that is, powerful actors’ appropriating opportunities from other group (e.g., upper-middle-class parents demanding that school finances be directed toward opportunities for their children; Roda and Wells 2013). Disparities in representation within the state’s lawmaking institutions is fundamentally a matter of exploitation, social closure, and claims-making about leadership competence, voting rights, citizenship, and which groups’ votes count as “legal” ones (e.g., the recently concluded 2020 U.S. presidential election).

There are many examples of social change to reduce inequality, including most of the major civil rights movements of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, but when has social science research made a dent in countering the unequal distribution of, and access to, resources and opportunities? Do any generalizable pathways for research emerge from such instances, and could they inform a transformative research agenda to produce knowledge necessary for reducing inequality at scale in society? Through the examples that follow, we describe six pathways with examples of how research has targeted each of these two broad sets of social inequality mechanisms. We discuss examples within each of the six pathways in terms of their potential to affect distributional and relational inequality as well as future directions for each. In a concluding section, we discuss three levers through which training in and practice of social science research could change to enable this agenda.

### Research Pathways to Reduce Social Inequality

#### Pathway 1: Research in the Pragmatic and Social Processes of Policy Making

Public policy is one mechanism for driving more equal distribution of resources. Policy making is at once a pragmatic enterprise and a social one, susceptible to all the vagaries of large-scale human endeavors (Tseng 2012). Therefore, the inputs of data or evidence to the policy-making process are often puny in relative influence compared with that of more purely political forces. However, use of evidence occurs more broadly than through influence on specific policy decisions and can include conceptual influence on assumptions underlying policy. Mechanisms through which data can enter a policy debate include personal experience, information from networks, expert testimony and other public comments, advising to political candidates, administrative data, as well as (occasionally) more formal social science research, including impact evaluations and qualitative research (Tseng and Coburn 2019; Weiss 1977).

Poverty reduction is a prominent area in which social science research has influenced public policy, largely through targeted policies affecting the poor. In the two examples that follow, evidence was leveraged to reduce distributional inequality either directly or indirectly via changing normative claims-making in the policy process. In the first example, the development and impact evaluation of the Progresa/Oportunidades conditional cash transfer (CCT) policy in Mexico was influential in scaling that policy to a large number of nations around the world. CCTs are transfers, usually targeted to the poorest in a society, of income contingent on behaviors that are predictive of long-term human capital development.

Under the leadership of economist Santiago Levy, the Progresa/Oportunidades policy took funding for a complex array of existing antipoverty programs, focused on in-kind nutrition and milk and targeted largely to the urban poor, and repurposed them to focus on deeper rural poverty and a shift from in-kind goods to CCTs. In addition, across several years, an experimental design was used at the village level with assessment of a variety of human capital outcomes (such as schooling attainment, health and nutrition) as well as take-up of the transfers (take-up was very high even early in implementation). A large literature of impact evaluations based on the years of evaluation shows consistent and robust impacts on indicators of income, expenditures (consumption), child and adult health, and educational attainment, even after accounting for multiple comparisons (Parker and Todd 2017). The approach has scaled up to more than 50 national policies worldwide. Brazil implemented one of the other early national CCT policies, known as Bolsa Família. That policy, together with Progresa/Oportunidades and a CCT policy in Chile, have resulted in reductions in societal
income inequality according to one set of researchers (Soares et al. 2009). For youth outcomes, education has been most frequently studied. A recent systematic review found that CCT programs had consistent positive effects on enrollment and attendance in school, with effects of large magnitude among those that explicitly conditioned on schooling with monitoring of compliance (Baird et al. 2014). However, long-term effects on educational attainment have rarely been studied, and other youth outcomes have also rarely been examined in the existing impact evaluations.

In a different example, a set of large-scale, national qualitative studies indirectly influenced poverty reduction by targeting claims-making processes at the policy level. In 1999, psychologist and anthropologist Deepa Narayan spearheaded a large-scale study of more than 20,000 people living in poverty in 23 countries using qualitative and participatory research methods to inquire into poverty. The aim was to understand poverty from poor people’s perspectives and lived experiences (including women, men, and youth), while minimizing assumptions about them and their needs and priorities (Narayan et al. 2000). Such perspectives and experiences often remain invisible to policy makers. The study, titled *Voices of the Poor*, influenced mind-set shifts about poverty in several ways. First, it reframed poor people from “losers” to “resources,” people with incredible ingenuity whose coping strategies were tremendously diverse in harsh and limited opportunity structures. Second, it helped people across sectors rethink how their policies and program design could be made pro-poor, for example, roads, infrastructure, livestock, health, education. Third, it put the issue of lack of power and voice among the poor in the center of the policy debate, which has significant implications for the designation of billions of dollars. Fourth, it revealed how the poor had very sophisticated understanding of local politics and within their capacity played off politicians. Fifth, in the frequent absence of a functioning government, they relied very heavily on social networks, which helped them cope but not escape poverty. Sixth, they valued their freedom and dignity, even in dire poverty as seen in villages in Tanzania or in Bihar, India. And finally, violence against women was prevalent.

The report was written in accessible language such that beyond influencing the World Bank’s “World Development Report,” it was also picked up by a number of journalists too. The findings catalyzed in some of the countries a mind-set shift in antipoverty policy and programming across sectors, including education, health, infrastructure, communication, journalism training, and how poverty is measured. As one example of national policy impact, the 2003 National Solidarity Program implemented by the Afghan government was a direct outcome of *Voices of the Poor*. The program aimed to support rural reconstruction and development, shifting accountability, and self-governance norms through supporting elected community development councils, ultimately reaching upward of 35,000 communities as of 2017.

A randomized evaluation at the village level showed positive impacts on perceived economic well-being, access to water and electricity, attitudes toward democratic processes, and attitudes toward women (Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov 2015).

This indirect approach targeting claims-making begins with the recognition that the social process of policy making occurs through sense-making (Bevan et al. 2017; Coburn, Hill, and Spillane 2016). That is, perceptions and meaning making by stakeholders (all groups potentially affected by a policy, including the policy makers themselves) drive when and how information, evidence, or data are used in day-to-day or more momentous policy decisions. This suggests that when policy makers in a position to propose or implement policy have experiences that shift their assumptions or decisions, those experiences, despite not having the characteristics of generalizable impact, may have powerful influence. Immersive experiences may occur vicariously through study reports, as in *Voices of the Poor*. Alternatively, immersion may occur directly, guided and accompanied by qualitative research, as was the case in the development of Modalidad Propia, one of the world’s only inclusive mechanisms at the national level for multiple indigenous groups to define and implement their own vision of quality, multisectoral early childhood development services (Motta and Yoshikawa 2018).

**Pathway 2: Research on the Societal Monitoring of Inequality**

Ongoing monitoring efforts by governments, nongovernmental organizations, or civil society of inequality are intended to inform strategy, planning, and budgeting in the policy process. An exemplar of how monitoring has been designed to influence policy relevant to child and youth inequality is in the approach known as results-based budgeting. In this approach, policy decision making regarding specific budget lines is driven by stipulated and quantifiable change in the outcomes a policy or program is meant to achieve. A logic model links budget items, which may be assembled across sectors, to achieve the quantified goal (e.g., reduction by 50 percent in juvenile incarceration). Results-based budgeting was introduced as a major policy initiative of the United Nations by then secretary general Kofi Annan in 1999 (United Nations 1999) and has been adopted by many international development agencies as well as U.S. states (Melkers and Willoughby 1998).

The rapid reduction of chronic child malnutrition in Peru was a successful case example of the application of results-based budgeting in recent years. Between the 1990s and mid-2000s, the rate of child stunting was virtually the same (roughly 28 percent to 30 percent). Between 2005 and 2011, the rate declined from 30 percent to 18 percent. Rather than input-based budgeting (e.g., planning how much change in immunizations and health education each of those agencies
gets from year to year), the per-case costs of reducing incidence of malnutrition were calculated from a logic model of the inputs required (specific human/staffing, material, capital, transportation, data system creation and management, etc.) and then applied to the national budget and the 24 regional-level budgets and their districts. This served to correct inequalities at the local level in access to nutrition programming. Prior to the policy initiative, there was no systematic relation between district-level malnutrition rates and nutrition service expenditure (in 2000, 28 percent of districts with elevated levels of stunting received no nutrition services, while 47 percent of those with low levels received nutrition services; Mejia Acosta and Haddad 2014). The policy reduced these disparities by linking the geographic distribution of the budget systematically to that of the outcome to be averted.

Isolating the impact of indicator-based goal setting and monitoring is difficult. In fact, by itself, monitoring may not be sufficient to reduce inequality. That is because consensus has developed more quickly on the socioeconomic and health measures that are at the foundation of much of distributional inequality assessment—income, education, disease, mortality—than on the relational concepts of exclusion, discrimination, inclusion and empowerment. For example, the developmental goals (e.g., the Millennium Development Goals more generally helped spur national action as well as global, regional, and national financing for targets between 2000 and 2015 that ultimately reduced inequality in health outcomes and absolute poverty; Asadullah and Savoia 2018). Yet the relational mechanisms of exploitation and opportunity hoarding, and the associated claims, at the upper end of the distribution remained intact and entrenched inequality.

Existing research suggests that when actions explicitly aimed at indicator-based progress are combined with building administrative capacity, as well as other accountability and motivational mechanisms such as social campaigns, they may be more effective. An example of the former is the finding that low- and middle-income countries with longer histories of government administrative capacity (local rather than foreign governance over larger proportion of territory) were more likely to achieve poverty reduction at national scale in the Millennium Development Goals era (2000–2015; Asadullah and Savoia 2018). As an example of the latter, the Goalkeepers campaign of the Gates Foundation aims to raise consciousness about the Sustainable Development Goals and has activated the commitment of multiple actors, especially young people, civil society organizations, private foundations, and governments, to work toward these goals by 2030 (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation 2020). Future research in this area could illuminate the conditions necessary for successful pairing of strategies (i.e., monitoring and campaigning) to reduce inequality at scale. Specifically, action research that uses a relational inequality lens might illuminate how combined strategies disrupt (or not) key exclusionary, exploitative, or claims-making inequality mechanisms that shape youth’s outcomes and access to opportunities. Additionally, research could catalyze global consensus on relational inequality assessment; for example, there is no global consensus regarding how to measure social cohesion or the related construct of social capital as national indicators (Agampodi et al. 2015).

Pathway 3: Bring Data on Inequality of Opportunity, Not Just Outcomes, into the Policy Process
Research on inequality typically focuses on the distribution of outcomes in society (e.g., economic or educational). Inequality of outcomes, as measured by disparities in achievement or income, has certainly influenced the policy process by defining reductions in achievement gaps, for example, as meaningful goals of educational policy. These have been investigated not only in terms of overall societal levels of inequality, as in the Gini coefficient (Ceriani and Verme 2012), but also geographically at the levels of neighborhoods or districts (e.g., Jang and Reardon 2019). A sole focus on outcome distributions inadvertently often falters in blaming or fixing individuals and communities rather than addressing the unequal access to opportunity through shifting policy. A recent National Academies report recommended indicators for educational equity for the United States. They suggested not only traditional indicators of equity in educational outcomes, such as achievement, social-emotional outcomes, and individual educational progress, but also a set they framed as exposure or access indicators, for example, degree of exposure to racial, ethnic, and economic segregation within and across schools; access to advanced coursework; disparities in access to curricular breadth, including foci in the arts, sciences, social sciences, and technology; and access to supports for emotional, behavioral, and mental health (Edley et al. 2019). These constitute for the educational sector what we signal here as indicators of opportunity, not just youth outcomes.

Data on inequality of opportunities should be powerful in influencing policy. For example, data on racial differences in school discipline practices have informed multiple states’ efforts to reduce the kinds of policies (zero-tolerance and other policies that emphasized suspension and expulsion) that were highly subject to racial bias. California, Michigan, Ohio, and Colorado shifted their state policies away from these bias-prone approaches to alternative forms of discipline and support of social-emotional learning. The Obama administration also passed a federal guidance on school discipline along these lines (which the Trump administration rescinded in December 2018; Cardichon and Darling-Hammond 2019). Unfortunately, monitoring data on inequality of opportunity, although powerful at certain moments in time, is less powerful at others.
Inequality in school finance is another example of an important part of the puzzle of what drives inequality of youth opportunity. Spending per student has been disaggregated in analyses of equity across schools within districts, across districts within states, and across states within the United States. U.S. funding formulas such as Title I aim to address inequities based on the U.S. funding system for education, which is based largely on local property taxes and is therefore subject to local geographic differences in wealth. These geographic differences are themselves powerfully correlated with race and income differences due to racial and socioeconomic segregation. Nora Gordon and Sarah Reber delineated how two policies contrast in their approach to providing extra financing for low-resource districts. Title I, because of its formula of basing future funding on preexisting levels of state spending and its emphasis on addressing cross-district, within-state equity in per-student spending, does not adequately address across-state differences in average student spending. This means that states with very similar rates of child poverty have quite different per-child Title I spending (e.g., in three states that vary less than .8 percentage points in child poverty rates, Title I spending is $104 per child in Colorado, $163 per child in Maryland, and $280 per child in Vermont; Reber and Gordon 2020). Thus, the traditionally low-spending states in the United States remain stuck at the bottom of state-level student spending rankings. In contrast, in the recent 2020 coronavirus disease 2019 stimulus, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act Governor’s Emergency Education Relief Fund, more state aid goes to poorer states, thus addressing some of the limitations of Title I funding formulas. This analysis represents a research-based rationale to inform federal efforts to address inequality in opportunity at the cross-state, national level.

Indicators focused on opportunities might also be extended to those that focus on relational indicators such as instances of discrimination. One instance of a project with implications for disrupting relational inequality is the Mapping Prejudice project of the University of Minnesota. It provides the first national mapping of racial covenants: the local real estate regulations that have historically prohibited black families from buying housing in certain desirable neighborhoods, thereby reinforcing disparities in employment, education, and health care access. Although initially focused on Minnesota, where contemporary racial disparities are among the largest nationwide, the project is expanding to support communities across the country in mapping their own racial covenants. The data from these mapping efforts are intended to inform more equitable land use policy development and implementation through integrating interdisciplinary scholarship (geography, history, digital humanities) with community activism (Bakelman and Shoenfeld 2020). Another example is the Amsterdam Donut Coalition, a collaborative, network initiative with the ambitious aim of transforming the city of Amsterdam into a place where everyone has equal opportunity to thrive and to do so while respecting the health and well-being of people worldwide and the planet as well. The coalition applies the principles of doughnut economics, a theory proposed by economist Kate Raworth (2017), that reimagine successful societies from those that achieve increase in their gross domestic product to those with (1) a robust “social foundation” guaranteeing each individual what they need to lead healthy and happy lives (e.g., an end to homelessness) and (2) a commitment to living below the “environmental ceiling,” which represents the conditions beyond which biodiversity and ecological balance are threatened (e.g., climate change and ocean acidification). The ideal conditions for societies, Raworth proposed, lie between this social foundation and the environmental ceiling—the so-called doughnut. Stakeholders in the Amsterdam Donut Coalition, in collaboration with Raworth’s Doughnut Economics Action Lab, use a diagnostic tool known as “the city portrait” to decide benchmarks that would bring them inside the doughnut (DEAL 2020). Although it is still too soon to make any conclusions about the impact of the coalition, it challenges widely taken-for-granted claims of capitalism that limit preference for models of redistributive economies while also catalyzing participatory decision making and actionable progress toward a more sustainable and equitable planetary existence. Conducted at a national scale and in partnership across marginalized communities, research of this kind may counteract seemingly intractable regulatory mechanisms that shape unequal access to opportunities for youth and their communities.

**Pathway 4: Contribute Research to Legal Cases and Actions That Aim to Reduce Distributional and Relational Inequality**

Social scientists have argued and analyzed how federal, state, and local political institutions have the capacity to effect fundamental social change through legal mandates that alter and compel different social, economic, and political outcomes. On one hand, as Bobo, Kluegel and Smith (1996) discussed, a “laissez-faire” (or hands-off) approach from political institutions such as the courts and Congress facilitates the persistence of inequality and myriad ills pertaining to social-group differences. Thus, legal mandates’ success can be either enduring or weak, depending on subsequent legal or judicial rulings and/or public attitudes. This interplay between court rulings and public attitudes is worth emphasizing given the typical sole focus among social scientists on crafting amicus briefs or serving as expert witnesses in legal cases.

Consider the cases of legalizing gay marriage and ending school desegregation. In 2015, the Supreme Court issued a historic ruling, **Obergefell v. Hodges**, affirming that the gay marriage is a constitutionally protected right. This decision was informed, in part, by scientific evidence for homosexuality as normal expression of human sexuality through a brief
from the American Psychological Association. Experimental evidence suggests that the Supreme Court ruling legalizing gay marriage led to shifts in individuals’ perceptions of social norms supporting gay marriage and people who identify as gay, even when individual opinions remained unchanged (Tankard and Paluck 2017).

Similarly, contributions from researchers across the fields of education, sociology, and psychology influenced the 1954 Brown v. Topeka, Kansas Board of Education decision to rule school segregation unconstitutional. Subsequently, a series of Supreme Court decisions starting in the early 1990s have bit by bit dismantled and weakened the legal impact of Brown. Consequently, these decisions have ushered in a pattern of increasing racial segregation. Today’s U.S. classrooms are now as segregated as they were before Brown (Orfield et al. 2019). This occurred despite the fact that children attending racially desegregated schools have shown improved educational outcomes in the short and long run (Johnson 2019). Counter trends such as these suggest that possibly thresholds and/or “tipping points” of social change exist, as studies of continuous, albeit somewhat improved, neighborhood segregation reveal (e.g., Logan 2013). Thus, beyond legal mandates, public attitudes may be additional mechanisms that remain in play to maintain power of privileged or advantaged groups and therefore exacerbate inequality.

The work of developmental psychologist Laurence Steinberg and the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Adolescent Development and Juvenile Justice is one notable example in which research has influenced both legal cases and public attitudes to reduce inequality. Steinberg and the network not only placed the treatment of adolescents in the justice system on the national policy agenda but also contributed evidence to the 2005 case Roper v. Simmons, which influenced the Supreme Court’s decision to abolish the juvenile death penalty (Maton 2016). As Maton’s (2016) account of Steinberg’s efforts reveals, Steinberg and colleagues engaged a concurrent, multipronged strategy to disrupt inequality. First, they solicited input from policy actors and legal practitioners as they formulated research questions; hence, they set the stage for their research to remain relevant and actionable to policy makers. Second, they published academic articles in broad-interest journals such as American Psychologist. Third, they ensured that key actors (e.g., judges, defense and district attorneys, and state legislatures) had direct access to their findings through arranging organizational talks and communications with court clerks. Finally, they engaged in an extensive media outreach campaign (e.g., through newsletters and national press) to influence the public conversation. Incidentally, influencing the public conversation seemed to them more effective than attempting to influence policy makers.

Arguably, judicial rulings (including those that uphold affirmative action) target key relational mechanisms—exclusion and social closure or, alternatively, their opposites—through which societal inequality is either reproduced or diminished, respectively. The above examples suggest that social scientists can play a role in reducing inequality through bringing evidence to legal cases and leveraging that evidence in efforts to alter the public meanings (claims-making) ascribed to normative social categories that form the basis for exclusion and social closure.

Much has been written about the dangers of research use for advocacy (e.g., in family law; Sandler et al. 2016). Risks include distortion or selective use of research evidence, risking oversimplified policy solutions, and losing credibility in research circles. However, the lack of engagement with such cases risks the further loss of opportunity to advance inequality reductions at scale. Researchers should continue to bring to bear the evidence base on legal cases related to relational and distributional inequality, as such cases have the potential to effect societal change. Research in this area could be advanced by drawing on concepts from path dependence theories in economics and political science that emphasize understanding how institutions change by examining their histories or evolution. Prado and Trebilcock (2009) provided a compelling argument for how path dependence can indeed illuminate future institution change, albeit favoring incremental rather than hasty change. Specifically, the concepts of self-reinforcing mechanisms, switching costs, and critical junctures are particularly relevant. Self-reinforcing mechanisms draw attention to feedback effects that lock an institution on a particular trajectory after changes occur due to initial decisions or random events. Over time the trajectory set in motion may raise the cost of changing the trajectory especially when key institutional players (individuals, organizations, networks of organizations) benefit from maintaining the status quo. Finally, the concept of critical junctures attends to the reality that shifting institutions maybe easier at certain critical junctures (e.g., because of an economic, political, or social disaster) than during normal times.

Coupled with evidence of shifts in patterns of distributional inequality or the lack thereof, researchers can use these concepts to illuminate why past efforts to counter exclusion and social closure have failed; to delineate the conditions that maintain certain reinforcement of current arrangements, such as the relentless focus on incarcerating juvenile populations of color, and how these conditions close off exploration of alternatives; and to map out the sequence of actions (and the key players) necessary to produce institutional change (e.g., defunding incarceration efforts and investing resources in communities of color).

Pathway 5: Delineate and Counter the Mechanisms that Enhance the Power of Elite Institutions

Although social science research has overwhelmingly documented the plight of marginalized and resource deprived
people and communities, less research has focused on the lives of the elite and the exclusionary processes they enact to maintain power. Without a nuanced understanding of the ways through which elite institutions accrue and maintain power, targeting key levers to reduce inequality at scale will remain an elusive goal. Research can contribute to reductions in inequality by delineating such mechanisms and outlining ways to disrupt them.

For example, in his 2017 ethnographic study examining the link between poverty and housing, sociologist Matthew Desmond focused not only on poor people but also their well-to-do landlords, who created exploitive housing conditions for the former. Landlords in poor communities where property values are low charge their tenants exorbitant rent to the point of eviction, all the while earning high profits. With a dual focus on both poor tenants and rich landlords, Desmond discovered that eviction and homelessness are causes and not simply indicators of poverty. Informed by these discoveries, Desmond and colleagues have created the first nationwide database on evictions and made it publicly available at Eviction Lab at Princeton University to raise community awareness and inform local and national program and policy decisions. The Eviction Lab’s research was fundamental to the inclusion of a total of $50 billion for the federal Emergency Rental Assistance Program in two waves of federal COVID-19 stimulus legislation that were implemented in 2020 and 2021 (Kerrigan 2021).

Wealthy elites in the private sector can have profound influence on politics and policies in the public sector. Political scientists Hertel-Fernandez, Skocpol, and Sclar (2018) examined the mechanisms through which two wealthy donor consortia raise and distribute donor money to fundamentally shape the politics and governance terrain. To work around the secrecy of these fund-raising dynamics, Hertel-Fernandez et al. systematically gathered and coded data from investigative journalists, conservative and liberal muckrakers, and conference materials from the Koch seminars and the Democratic Alliance. The Koch seminars advance adoption of ultra-free-market ideology, while the Democratic Alliance seeks to build center-left institutional infrastructure. Hertel-Fernandez et al. showed how the organizational structure and rules of these consortia are central to member recruitment, fundraising, and distribution of money for widespread and sustained political influence, not simply through individual or business philanthropy and lobbying efforts but through a range of networked political organizations that shape government’s distribution of resources.

Reinterpretation of public policy impacts, driven by elites in American governance, as achieving racist aims can powerfully spark massive grassroots movements and policy change. Legal scholar and historian Michelle Alexander’s (2010) The New Jim Crow is an example of a landmark scholarly book in legal and policy history that reinterprets criminal justice policy over the past several decades from the standpoint of race. The book shows that the unprecedented mass incarceration of black men stemming from racialized enforcement of federal drug laws, starting in the 1980s and through the 2000s, was analogous in scale and impact to the Jim Crow laws following Reconstruction in the United States. The outcome has been a decoupling of incarceration rates from actual crime rates unprecedented among rich countries since World War II. Although we cannot quantify the impact of the book with regard to reducing inequality, it has been influential in the Black Lives Matter movement and arguably is one of the most important instances of historical and legal analysis influencing a mass social movement in recent decades.

Future research can similarly interrogate and interrupt seemingly neutral and widely accepted claims of elite institutions, for example by exposing how terms like “school choice” or “workforce development” enter public discourse while obscuring framings of youth rooted in racism and classism. In an ethnographic study, Reclaiming Community: Race and the Uncertain Future of Youth Work, Baldridge (2019) demonstrated how certain framings of youth of color such as “at risk” and “disadvantaged” benefited the fiscal interests of a nonprofit youth-serving organization but disrupted its culture of equitable relationships that were fundamental to promoting positive youth development outcomes. Similarly, Jack (2019) depicted how policies and cultures at Ivy League institutions impede the success of college students from historically underrepresented and marginalized backgrounds, despite lauded efforts of diversifying these institutions. Within the juvenile legal sphere, Cox (2019) depicted how progressive reforms in the system such as those emphasizing trauma responsiveness, healing, and “carceral humanism” unwittingly also advance middle-class sensibilities about appropriate youth behavior and reify the category of the “bad child.” In so doing, Cox explained, such reforms shift the responsibility of change away from the state (and the harm it perpetrates) to individual children (and the danger they present to the state or community). Future studies such as these, conducted at a larger scale and geared toward reducing inequality will be consequential. We underscore this future direction as a crucial one considering the fact that although there is a burgeoning youth population in the Global South, most youth-related research has been conducted and framed in the Global North; even approaches to reduce distributional inequality (e.g., Global Goals) are shaped from the standpoint of the latter (see Alldred et al. 2018; Sukarich and Tannock 2014).

Pathway 6: Create or Strengthen a Social Movement or Civil Society Organization That Brings Evidence into Advocacy and Policy Making

Social movements and civil society organizations play a key role in ensuring institutional accountability, resisting
harmful policies, and advocating for just ones. Here too, researchers can and have provided evidence to strengthen these advocacy efforts. Renowned Reverend William J. Barber II (2019) noted eloquently that “One of the quickest ways for a movement to lose its integrity is to be loud and wrong. . . Researchers help to protect the moral integrity of a movement by providing sound analysis of the facts and issues at hand.”

Voices of Youth in Chicago Education (VOYCE), a youth-led coalition aimed at reforming Chicago Public Schools policy, demonstrates the influence of research-informed advocacy. Shortly after its inception in 2007, VOYCE youth members partnered with Charles Payne, then a professor at the University of Chicago, to conduct action research to end harmful zero-tolerance policies—predetermined and exclusionary disciplinary policies such as suspension, arrest, or expulsion for minor school discipline infractions such as talking back to school personnel or violating the school dress code—mandated by the State of Illinois. The predetermined nature of such policies was intended to bypass the influence of students’ background characteristics on teachers’ assignment of punishments. Through its research, VOYCE documented the cost of “getting tough” or how such zero-tolerance policies not only resulted in loss of instructional time but also disproportionately targeted students of color, with Illinois exhibiting some of the highest disparities nationwide. In 2009, 78 percent of the 4,597 school-based arrests in Illinois were due to minor infractions, and these arrests would cost the state $240 million that year. Black students were more than 30 times more likely to be expelled and were 46 percent more likely to have their “misconduct” result in an out-of-school suspension than white students. With such evidence in hand, the coalition wrote, campaigned for, and in 2016 successfully lobbied the state to pass what was at the time arguably the strongest anti-zero tolerance legislation (S.B. 100) in the country. VOYCE’s success catalyzed similar policy changes in other states across the nation (Warren and Goodman 2018).

A second example is a case combating educational inequality in Chile. In 2011, Chile ranked 64th in terms of integration across social classes in its schools and colleges, out of the 65 countries that participated in the Programme for International Student Assessment tests. Mario Waissbluth, a member of the Faculty of Physical and Mathematical Sciences at the University of Chile, published a 2008 opinion piece for a magazine that outlined what he perceived as Chile’s education apartheid and the failures of the government-mandated teacher training policy. The piece (Waissbluth 2008) sparked a heated national debate on education reform, and together with students from the University of Chile, Waissbluth formed a civil society organization dubbed Educación 2020 to provide direct support to schools for pedagogical innovation, leadership, and networking as well as generate research-informed policy proposals and briefs to elevate public debates of primary, secondary, and higher education policy in Congress. Many of these policy proposals were adopted by the Chilean government between 2014 and 2018 to enact significant education reform, making Educación 2020 one of the most prominent civil society organizations to use research to address educational policy and both distributional and relational inequality in Chile.

More research is needed on how social movements translate their resources into actual political power. Han and Barnett-Loro (2018) argued specifically that beyond understanding the dynamics of activism, research should focus on uncovering how organizations and campaigns generate collective conditions that allow strategic leadership and sustained coalitions that result in reconfigurations of political power. Although previous research has documented the internal processes of transformative social movements (e.g., Branch 1988, 1998, 2006; Milkman and Voss 2004; Orleck 2018), much of the current research has emphasized individuals as the central actors and opinion change as the chief outcome of social movements. Transformative research to reduce youth inequality should focus instead on delineating the meso-level conditions (organizational, campaign, and network-oriented strategic actions and behaviors) and macro-level ones (structures, institutions, and processes that shape the playing field on which movements operate) that result in collective outcomes or common interests (see also Ganz 2010).

As Han and Barnett-Loro (2018) discussed, such was the case with the National Rifle Association, which exercised strategic leadership choices to build collective identity around gun ownership, weave a robust gun ownership coalitions across states, and form strategic mutually beneficial relationships with the Republican Party to wield political influence around gun rights in the United States. To this end, researchers will find it generative to draw on principles, theories, and methods in sociological and psychological research in organizational behavior, specifically organizational and interorganizational or network learning (Marshall Ganz, personal correspondence with first author, January 11, 2020). The pioneering work of political scientist Hahrie Han and the P3 (Possible, Probable and Powerful) lab at Johns Hopkins will be of particular interest to scholars interested in this line of inquiry. Han’s work considers the conditions of how grassroots organizations achieve political power and transform policy, in areas such as climate activism or health policy (Han 2014). Additionally, examining the uses of technology in youth organizing is critical, especially considering how youth, who are often relegated to the margins of culture, can exert influence and engage powerful actors through virtual platforms. With a relational inequality lens, research of this nature can be used across movement networks, as in the case of national and transnational coalitions, and civil society organizations to identify strategies for successfully
Researchers can also influence movement and advocacy work through evidence-informed counter-narratives that challenge pervasive ideologies that reify inequality at societal levels. Narrative history is particularly well positioned to provide such counter narratives aimed at tackling the roots of inequality. Historian Ibram Kendi generated a critical synthesis of the history of racism in the United States, challenging a predominant paradigm that racism was first and foremost a flaw of individual ignorance or hateful attitudes from which racist policies proceeded. In *Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, Kendi (2016) argued that racism is an ideology, or a set of claims invented to justify and rationalize discriminatory policies. In his *New York Times* best-selling book *How to Be an Antiracist*, Kendi (2019) challenged dominant ideas that a postracial America exists where individuals are “not racist,” arguing instead that individuals are either racist or antiracist with regard to the kind of policies they support. He then delineated steps individuals can take to actualize an antiracist world through the kinds of policies they choose to support. Subsequently, Kendi created the Antiracist Research and Policy Center at American University (now housed at Boston University as the Center for Antiracist Research), where collaborative partnerships among teams of researchers, journalists, policy makers, and funders aim to innovate actionable policies aimed at tackling the roots of racial inequality in the economy, education, environment, health, justice, and political arenas. Although conclusive evidence about impact is still lacking, Kendi’s work is an example of how targeting claims-making as a relational mechanism of inequality through narrative history can be a lever of change for reducing inequality at a societal level. Promising approaches from other fields in developing counter-narratives exist. On the basis of evidence from decades of human development research with adolescents and grounded in feminist philosophy, psychologists Niobe Way, Carol Gillian, and Alisha Ali and sociologist Pedro Noguera proposed an integrative framework to delineated a five-part story on the causes of, consequences of, and solutions to a “crisis of connection” that plagues modern society (Way et al. 2018). The framework provides a new paradigm for understanding how social stereotypes undergird a hierarchy among humans and thus engender insidious and detrimental influences on healthy human development across the life span and how a synthesis of multidisciplinary research on the roots and consequences of the societal crisis of connection also implies public narrative and community-based solutions for addressing the crisis among youth. This framework has informed research, curricular, and community-based innovations to disrupt the influence of social stereotypes through a think-and-do tank, the Project for the Advancement of Our Common Humanity, founded by Way and colleagues.

**Implications for the Practice of Research**

As social science research shifts focus away from merely describing youth inequality and examining its effects to actually counteracting the roots and mechanisms of its reproduction, research institutions and researchers will need to consider what it will take to support the emergent, transformative research agenda of the kind laid out in this article. We conclude with reflections on three strategic levers that may provide infrastructural support and motivation for social scientists to work toward reducing youth inequalities at scale.

**Don’t Be Afraid to Act on the Basis of Your Personal Experiences and Interrogate the Uses of Evidence**

A transformative research agenda to reduce societal inequality in youth outcomes and opportunities necessarily entails altering power relations among key organizational and institutional actors. History is replete with examples of how scientific evidence has been weaponized to control, subjugate, and exploit vulnerable populations. Similarly, research spaces have historically trivialized researchers’ own social identities (such as race, gender, age, and class) and lived experiences as inconsequential (and in some cases detrimental) to scientific rigor (examples of such trivialization appear in a viral Twitter conversation among black psychologists, #BeingAPsychologistWhileBlack). As actors of organizations that shape the distribution of resources and access to opportunities through knowledge production and legitimization, researchers must explicitly interrogate how their affiliations and activities propagate inequality. Researchers should not be afraid to critically reflect and act on their own personal experiences to catalyze the use of research to counter mechanisms for the reproduction of social inequality.

History offers examples of scientists whose lived experience inspired them to act against social injustices with consequential results. The physicist Albert Einstein, who fled Nazi rule in Germany, led efforts to form an organization that offered relief to Germans fleeing to the United States during Hitler’s regime; this organization later merged with another group to form the International Rescue Committee, which aims to improve the lives of those affected by conflict and disaster (International Rescue Committee 2020). Similarly, after marine biologist and nature enthusiast Rachel Carson (1962) received a letter from a friend about birds that had died after pesticide spraying, she embarked on writing *Silent Spring*, a landmark volume that exposed the detrimental effect of DDT on the environment and its cancerous consequences to humans. Although she faced much resistance from the chemical industry, with accusations that she was a communist, Carson eventually was called upon to testify before a congressional committee about the effects...
of pesticides; in part because of her influence, DDT was eventually banned nationwide, an environmental movement ensued, and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency was formed in 1970.

To be clear, we are not merely advocating that researchers study aspects of their own social identities (the problem we are highlighting is not one concerned with the subject or “the what” of research but the how-to thereof). Rather, researchers must recognize that the use of research evidence not only occurs within systems of power, but is itself a system of power, as Kirkland (2019) and others have outlined. Thus, not only must researchers critically examine why, who, and for whom research is used, they must also examine the assumptions undergirding the very logics that give rise to research questions about youth inequality. At the very least, transformative research to reduce youth inequality must explicitly foreground and integrate principles of equity around which each aspect of the research endeavor is designed. One example is the Equitable Evaluation framework (Equitable Evaluation Initiative 2017) developed by Jara Dean-Coffey and colleagues that is being leveraged to center equity in philanthropy and nonprofit work.

The transformative research agenda discussed in this article necessitates a “critical turn” in social science research (Doucet 2019) similar to that in other fields such as critical legal studies and critical feminism, among others. By interrogating how lived experiences and social positions shape their own research endeavor and convictions, and integrating this awareness into the way research activities are conducted, social scientists may more effectively orient their research toward reductions rather than unwitting reproductions of youth inequality.

Integrate Research Synthesis, Communication, and Research-Policy and Research-Practice Partnerships

For research to counter inequality at scale through any of the pathways discussed above, social scientists could ensure that their research is not only rigorous but also relevant and accessible to key actors and entities that influence resource distribution and relational structures. Although traditional research within universities proceeds separate from the applied context of policy making and program implementation, achieving the tripartite goals of rigor, relevance, and access is possible through policy, practice, and communication partnerships, or what is commonly labeled as translational research.

For example, a traditionally synthetic research initiative of a National Academy of Sciences consensus study ultimately resulted in both a communications framework to translate research for policy makers all over the world. Building on a National Academy of Sciences report (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council 2000), Shonkoff and colleagues created a research and development platform at Harvard’s Center on the Developing Child to translate scientific evidence directly into innovative policy and practice to reduce childhood adversity at scale. In building the platform, the center worked in partnership with a nonprofit science-to-policy communications organization, the Frameworks Institute, that provided capacity and guidance for framing scientific research into easy-to-access concepts such as “brain architecture” and “serve and return” for non-academic audiences (Shonkoff and Bales 2011). These have been used as the scientific basis for establishing three national centers composed of networks of local and federal policy makers, practitioners, and researchers in the United States, Brazil, and Mexico that bring research to bear on child development policy and practice initiatives.

Shift Training of Future Researchers

Social science research training does not prepare young scholars to aim to reduce inequality at scale. Three areas may require attention in the training processes for scholars in the social sciences.

First, training that considers the two types of inequality discussed in this article, distributional and relational, as the aim of social interventions may be required. When social scientists train in methods relevant to impact evaluation, for example, training is usually focused on improving specified outcomes measured in some way as central tendencies (i.e., mean differences between a treatment and control group, in a classic experimental design). An aim of distributional impacts on outcomes to reduce inequality may require new theory, conceptualization, logic models, and evaluation methods that contrast with the typical approaches to applied social science. Both qualitative and quantitative research, as we have demonstrated in the examples in this article, are valuable in illustrating distributional and relational aspects of inequality. To understand these two dimensions together requires a range of methods that can capture everyday and systemic aspects of the two kinds of inequality, as well as inform the conceptualization, development, implementation, and evaluation of efforts to reduce them.

In addition, the study of how to achieve reductions of inequality in society requires training in the conceptualization and measurement of processes affecting scale. This is an emerging and active area of research in impact evaluation, related to implementation science but focusing more heavily on systems and institutions. Two kinds of scale have been proposed as topics of study of national policy systems: “small to bigger” and “big to better.” The former represents the well-known sequence of a small-scale pilot study followed by an initial efficacy trial and an ultimate effectiveness trial on the way to large-scale implementation research (for a successful example, see Banerjee et al.’s [2017] account of the series of experiments on the Teaching at the Right Level approach to targeting educational interventions in India that led to the approach being scaled to multiple
states in that country). The latter (big to better) depicts how systems already working at scale might be improved to reduce inequality or achieve another specified outcome. Both require attention to the institutional and organizational contexts of distributional and relational inequality that link national to local, community, and individual change.

Finally, training in research-policy or research-practice partnerships is required in order to build into applied social science training the possibility of informing efforts to reduce youth inequality at scale. Several formal fellowship programs exist that embed researchers in the legislative or executive branches of government (e.g., the American Sociological Association, American Psychological Association, and Society for Research in Child Development). Other fellowships have focused on the state or district level to bring social science training in policy evaluation to career analysts in district or state level education agencies (e.g., the Strategic Data Project at Harvard University). However, few explicitly focus on the goal of reducing inequality. Equity-focused partnership approaches may represent productive models to shift such fellowships and broader training programs toward reducing distributional and relational inequality (e.g., Gutiérrez and Jurow 2016).

Conclusion

In an era of unprecedented inequality in youth outcomes and opportunities, social science can play a key role in targeting the mechanisms through which inequality is reproduced. In this article we have discussed six pathways for achieving societal reductions in inequality using social science research. These pathways entail a transformative agenda that shifts researchers’ focus toward actual reductions rather than mere description of youth inequality and its effects and challenges research efforts to consider how such reductions may be possible at a national scale. Countering mechanisms that facilitate and reinforce unequal distributions of youth outcomes and opportunities is necessary but insufficient to disrupt the roots of inequality.

At-scale reductions in youth inequality also demand that we delineate and counter relational mechanisms of othering—including those acting through the maintenance of social categories such as race, gender, age, ability, and symbolic markers such as narratives and ideologies—that justify and rationalize distributional inequality. An intersectional and interdisciplinary stance is required for this kind of research as well as innovative institutional collaborations beyond the ivory tower that include communities, policy makers, communication agencies, and funders. We hope that in embracing the transformative agenda laid out here, researchers will find new ways of asking questions about age-old problems of youth inequality and, in doing so, generate methods, training, and partnerships with an overarching purpose of making a dent in undoing youth inequality.

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