

Trends in Social Mobility in the UK – Evidence Briefing

What is social mobility?

The level of intergenerational social mobility in a society is widely taken as a yardstick of its fairness and equality, outwardly signalling whether citizens achieve social and economic status through hard work and ability, or as a result of advantages bestowed upon them by their parents.

In simple terms, social mobility can be thought of as the extent to which an individual's life-chances are determined by the socio-economic circumstances into which he or she is born.

There is particular interest in whether social mobility is increasing or decreasing over time and in how policy-interventions can affect rates of social mobility.

An important distinction in understanding social mobility is between its absolute and relative forms.

Absolute mobility is the simple difference between an individual's socio-economic position in adulthood and that of his or her parent(s) when the individual was a child. Absolute mobility makes no adjustment for structural change in an economy over time. For this reason, rates of absolute mobility will change if, for example, the ratio of middle to working class jobs in an economy alters, as was the case in Britain in the middle of the 20th Century. Through the creation of more middle class jobs, it was inevitable that the majority of citizens would experience upward mobility during this period.

Relative mobility, or 'social fluidity', in contrast, adjusts for changes in the size and composition of an economy over time, yielding measures of the relative risk of different socio-economic destinations across the distribution of origin states. Relative mobility is a 'zero-sum game'; if more people from working class backgrounds are to reach professional and managerial occupations, this must be compensated by the same number of middle-class children moving in the opposite direction.

Much of the confusion in political and policy debate around social mobility appears to stem from a misunderstanding of the difference between absolute and relative rates.

Income or Social Class?

Estimates of social mobility require measures of socio-economic position during adulthood ('destination state') and childhood ('origin state'). It is then possible to estimate the correlation between origin and destination states. A correlation of 1 would indicate that an individual's destination state is completely determined by their origin state, a correlation of 0 would indicate that destination state is completely unrelated to socio-economic origin.

There are different ways of measuring socio-economic position. Economists tend to prefer monetary measures such as income and earnings, while sociologists prefer measures of occupation-based social class.

Studies that contain accurate income data across generations are rare. The majority of studies on social mobility are based on social class, which is more straightforward to measure in surveys. This is because most people can remember what their father and/or mother's occupation was when they were children (usually taken when a child is aged 14).

How has social mobility changed over time?

The primary conclusions of the early studies undertaken in the 1970s and 1980s were that upward social class mobility had increased significantly during the middle decades of the twentieth century. This was as a result of the substantial expansion in 'white collar' and corollary retraction of 'blue collar' jobs that occurred at this time. This same pattern of increasing upward and decreasing downward mobility was confirmed by later studies covering the same period but using different data sets.

For the later decades of the twentieth century, studies have found that around 70-80% of the public experienced some form of social class mobility, with the remaining 20-30% ending up in the same social class as their parents. Of the socially mobile, somewhere between 35-45% were upwardly mobile and the remaining 25-35% were downwardly mobile. While these broad parameters appear to be quite robust, the direction and magnitude of change in upward and downward absolute mobility rates are less consistent across studies.

Despite these high rates of absolute mobility, the majority of existing studies have found rates of relative social class mobility to have remained more or less static from the early to the latter decades of the twentieth century. Analysis of more recent trends, using the birth cohort studies and linked census records, suggest that relative mobility increased somewhat over the final decades of the twentieth century.

However, the increase in social fluidity was small and the prevailing picture remains one of stark inequality. In the most recent cohorts considered - people born between 1975 and 1981 - the odds of an individual born into the highest social class group being in that class at the age of thirty were approximately 20 times higher than an individual born into the lowest social class group.

Nonetheless, there is no evidence that social class mobility has been 'grinding to a halt' or 'going into reverse' as is commonly believed to be the case.

Using earnings rather than social class, researchers have found a significant decrease in relative mobility between the cohorts born in 1958 and 1970.

It remains unclear whether the divergent trends with regard to earnings and social class are due to methodological differences between studies, or whether social class and earnings exhibit different trends over time.

What causes social mobility?

Much of the early work on social mobility has focused on estimation of over-time trends and, to a lesser extent, international comparisons. Attention is now increasingly turning to assessments of the factors which affect social mobility.

Here, it is crucial to distinguish between factors which, on the one hand, cause *individuals* to be upwardly or downwardly mobile and, on the other, factors which cause macro-level changes in rates of mobility over time.

In the former case, it seems clear that educational attainment is key; evidence abounds which shows that individuals who are upwardly mobile tend, disproportionately, to attain high educational qualifications and the reverse is also true.

It would, though, be a mistake to conclude that educational expansion leads in any straightforward way, to greater social fluidity. As scholars in the sociological tradition have observed, social class fluidity appears to have remained stubbornly resistant to change during the course of the 20th century, despite the many and varied expansionist educational reforms that were enacted during this period.

For example, a recent study has shown that the raising of the school leaving age from 15 to 16 years in 1973 had no effect on rates of social mobility.

Why this should be the case is not clear from the available evidence but it seems likely that higher social class groups respond to the equalization of human capital and credentials by drawing more heavily on social networks and accumulated cultural capital to maintain their advantage in the job market.

What does the future hold?

It is natural for policy-makers and commentators to wish to understand the effects of current and planned policies on rates of social mobility.

However, by definition, it is not possible to estimate rates of inter-generational mobility until a cohort has reached occupational maturity, which is generally taken to be at some point in the early to mid-thirties.

At the time of writing, therefore, the most up to date cohorts for which it would be possible to estimate social mobility rates are those who were born in the early 1980s.

It is possible to use what might be considered 'lead indicators' of future mobility rates, such as changes in the correlation between parental earnings and educational achievement across cohorts. However, any such measure is indirect and potentially misleading.

What data do we need?

Our current understanding of trends in social mobility is based on a very thin evidential basis. To address this in the future, we need to create a national data infrastructure for understanding social mobility. This will require a range of survey and administrative data sources. The existing set of longitudinal studies – the birth cohorts and Understanding Society – must be maintained and enhanced with new studies to measure mobility in future cohorts. The recent cancellation of Life Study is particularly troubling for our ability to understand future trends in social mobility.

More positively, much of the data that is needed to measure long-term trends in social mobility already exists in the form of administrative data. By linking individuals across decennial censuses and attaching this longitudinal information about the population to other data sources relating to earning and labour market outcomes held by HMRC and DWP, we can gain crucial insights into long-term trends in social mobility. Similar initiatives are proceeding in countries such as Canada, the US, and Italy. The barriers to accessing this data are not primarily financial - the costs would be very small relative to their informational value – but relate to the difficulty in accessing the relevant data sets from government departments. High level political support will be crucial if these data, which already exist and have been collected at great public expense, is to be made accessible in a way that will unlock their potential for answering key unresolved issues in the study of social mobility in the United Kingdom.

Professor Patrick Sturgis, 9 December 2015