

WHAT THE POLLING SAYS

Sutton Trust
Polling by Ipsos MORI
– July 2017



1. Equality of opportunity

In June this year, Ipsos MORI conducted a poll of 2001 adults, aged-16-64 in Great Britain for the Sutton Trust, seeking their perceptions of the state of social mobility. This follows a similar exercise conducted by the Trust almost ten years ago in 2008 which, along with other surveys conducted by Ipsos, allows us to examine how public perceptions of mobility, opportunity and fairness have changed over time.

Research has indicated that social mobility has been largely stagnant in the UK for decades and, as the issue has grown in the public consciousness, there appears to be a growing pessimism. In 2008, just over half of respondents (53%) agreed that ‘people have equal opportunities to get ahead’, 18% more than disagreed. In 2017 however, the consensus has switched, with people more likely to disagree with the statement (42%, compared to 40% who agree). While this is concerning, it is nonetheless also indicative of increased awareness of the barriers to equal opportunities and the necessity for change.

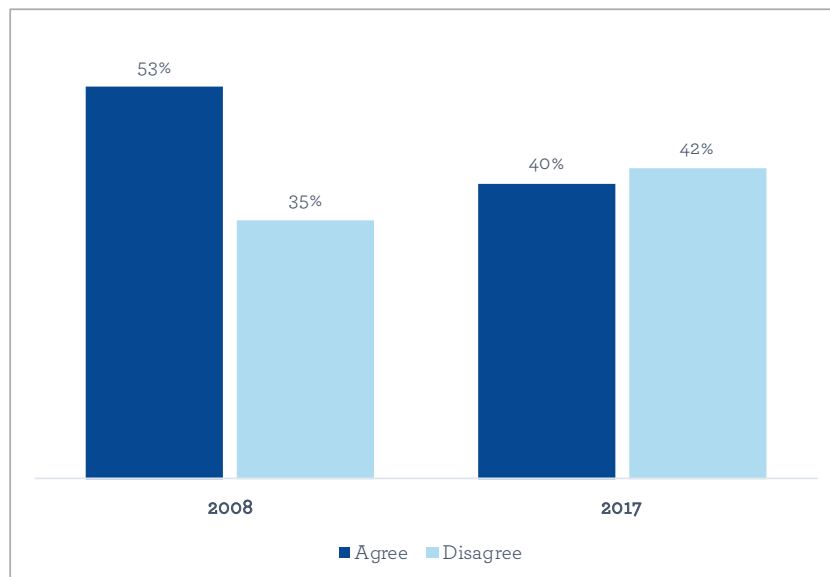


Figure 1. % agreeing that “people have equal opportunities to get ahead”

Those in the middle/lower of the income and social grade spectrum were most likely to disagree, with 25-34 year olds the most pessimistic age group. Those with the highest incomes were most likely to agree, along with those with lower levels of education.

In order to understand the drivers of this perception of the lack of a level playing field, respondents were also asked about what factors help people get ahead in life. The British Social Attitudes survey has been tracking this question for 30 years now, covering the entire lifespan of the Sutton Trust, and while our survey is not directly comparable due to methodological differences, it does suggest potential trends.¹ Personal attributes such as having ambition (76% said it was essential or very important), and a good education (72%) are regarded as by far the most important factors for

1. British Social Attitudes, conducted by NatCen Social Research, is an annual face-to-face random probability sample of the population in Great Britain over 18. See notes at the end of this report for full details of the methodology for the 2017 survey, which was conducted online using quota sampling and uses a slightly different age profile.

getting ahead. These numbers have been relatively stable over the past thirty years. However, while the value of coming from a wealthy family declined from 21% in 1987 to 14% in 2009, it has shot up to 26% in our results. ‘Knowing the right people’ similarly fell in importance to 33% in 2009, but in 2017 is perceived as very important or essential by over half of respondents (54%). With the expansion of higher education in the UK since the 90s, we haven’t seen substantial jumps in social mobility. One of the reasons commonly offered for this is the ability for advantaged groups to find other ways of protecting their position. The perceived increased importance of ‘who you know’ is indicative of one of the ways privileged groups hold on to their advantage in the labour market.

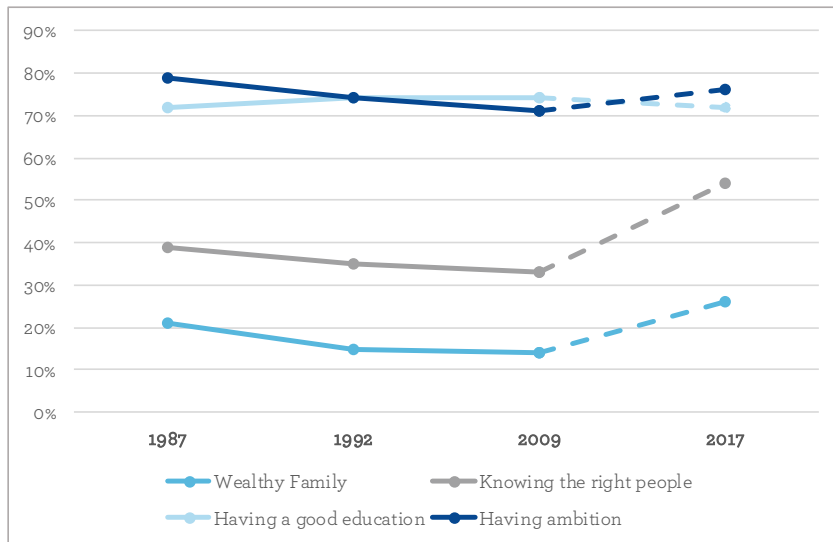


Figure 2. % saying that a factor is essential or very important for getting ahead in life

This is supported by the age breakdown, which shows that those aged under 34 were more likely to emphasise the importance of connections than older age groups.

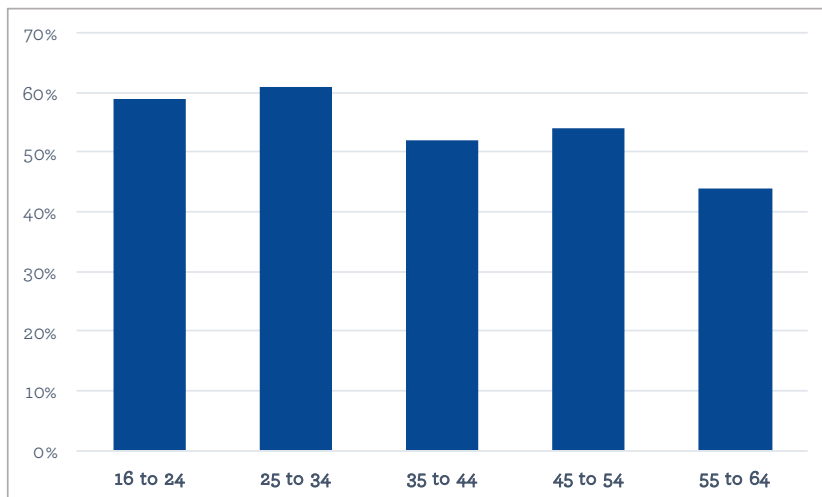


Figure 3. % saying that ‘knowing the right people’ is essential or very important for getting ahead in life, by age

2. Intergenerational trends

While these two issues capture a ‘relative’ conception of social mobility, where people have equal chances to move around the social hierarchy, also important is ‘absolute’ social mobility, which occurs when the life chances of the population as a whole increase together. However, as has been well documented in recent times, progress between generations has also stalled, with young people today facing greater economic challenges and barriers than their parents. This is reflected in public perceptions. In 2003, just after the Sutton Trust celebrated its fifth birthday, 43% of the public believed ‘today’s youth’ would have a better quality of life than their parents’ generation. However, by 2011, in the aftermath of the financial crisis, this figure had plummeted to 23%, with 35% believing the new generation would have a lower quality of life. In line with the increased polarisation of British politics, 2017 has seen a diverging trend. While optimism among a certain proportion of the population has rebounded slightly to 29%, pessimism has also substantially increased, with almost half of people now agreeing that today’s youth will have a worse life than their parents.

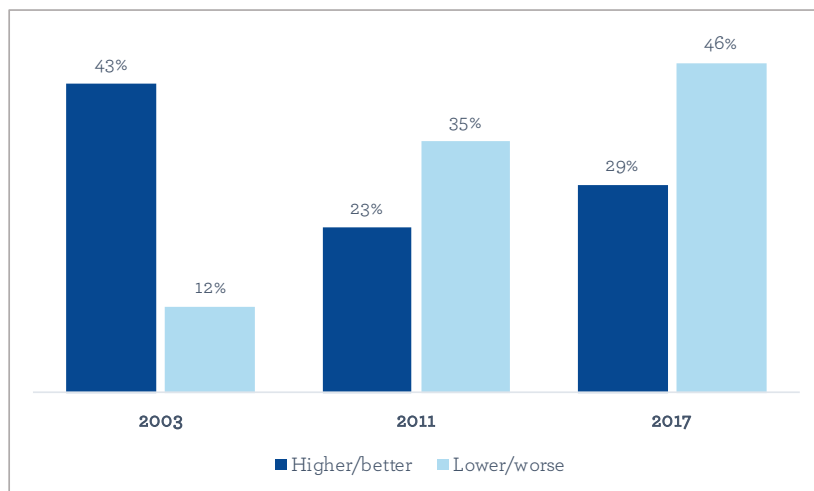


Figure 4. % agreeing that “today’s youth will have had a better or worse life than their parents’ generation”

Despite talk of pessimism among young people in the UK, it was actually the youngest age groups that were most likely to feel they had better prospects. In fact, 39% of school-age young people from 11-16, asked separately as part of Ipsos MORI’s Young People Omnibus, felt they had better prospects than their parents. The most pessimistic groups were in the 25 to 44 age range.

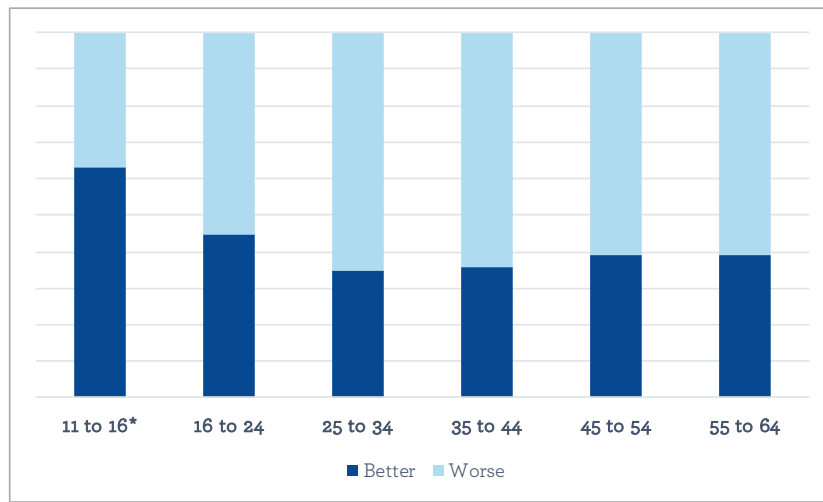


Figure 5. % agreeing that “today’s youth will have had a better or worse life than their parents’ generation” by age (*separate sample of young people in schools, asked about ‘your generation’²)

As is pointed out in the other research we publish today, due to a gap in longitudinal birth cohort studies between the 1970 British Cohort Study and the Millennium Cohort in 2000, there is a dearth of recent robust data on the life chances of people compared to their family background. However, British Social Attitudes has also been collecting data on self-perceived mobility in comparison to parents since 1987. When asked to compare their job with that of their father when the respondent was 16, a total of 40% said their job was of higher or much higher status, 22% about equal, and 26% lower or much lower. The trend over time is largely one of stagnation. As shown in figure 6, the sharp drop in self-perceived upward mobility in the nineties coincides with when those born in 1958 and the 1970 cohort turned about 30, previously identified in Sutton Trust research as a point where mobility in the UK fell. The pattern since 1999 has been one of stability, with upward mobility not improving in the past 18 years, while downward mobility has begun to creep up, perhaps as a result of the financial crash, along with the general trend towards casual, insecure and low paid work in the economy. Those who had reported downward mobility were particularly pessimistic across the range of other survey questions.

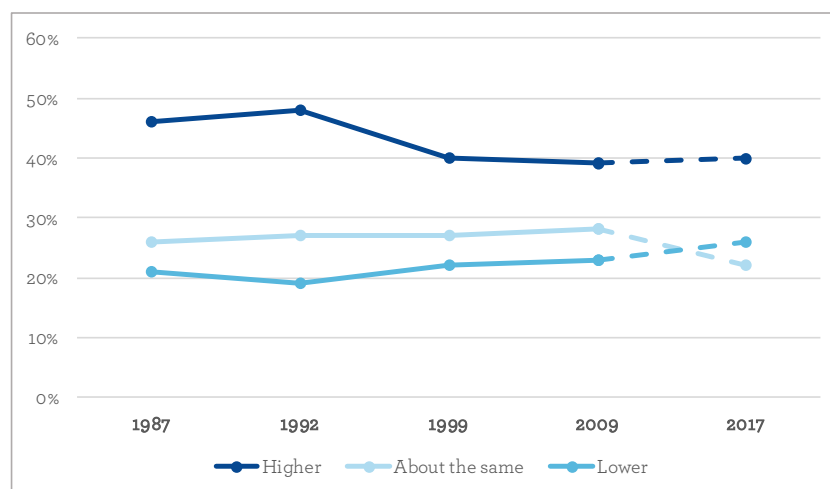


Figure 6. % comparing the level/status of their current job to their father’s when they were 16

2. The Ipsos MORI Young People Omnibus conducted 2,881 interviews with children aged 11-16 in schools in England, Scotland and Wales between February and May 2017.

3. Policy solutions

What do people think should be done to tackle these issues? When given a range of policies commonly put forward as potential solutions to the social mobility problem, almost half (47%) chose 'high quality teaching in comprehensives' as the measure that would most help those from disadvantaged backgrounds get ahead in life. This was more than double the next closest option, lower university tuition fees (23%). It is also notable that improving the quality of teaching in comprehensives was almost six times higher than those who thought increasing access to grammar schools was a priority for helping those from poor backgrounds (just 8%), despite the high profile nature of the grammars debate in the past 12 months. While good teaching has regularly been shown to have the greatest impact on the attainment of disadvantaged pupils, also notable was the very low percentage (4%) for high quality early years provision, suggesting that the professional consensus on the importance of early years for life chances has not necessarily translated to the public at large.

Interestingly, prioritising comprehensive teaching tended to be favoured by those of higher education, social grade and income, as shown in figure 7. Young people aged 16-24 were most likely to say lowering tuition fees would most help those from less advantaged backgrounds get ahead in life, compared to adults overall (28% vs 23%, respectively).

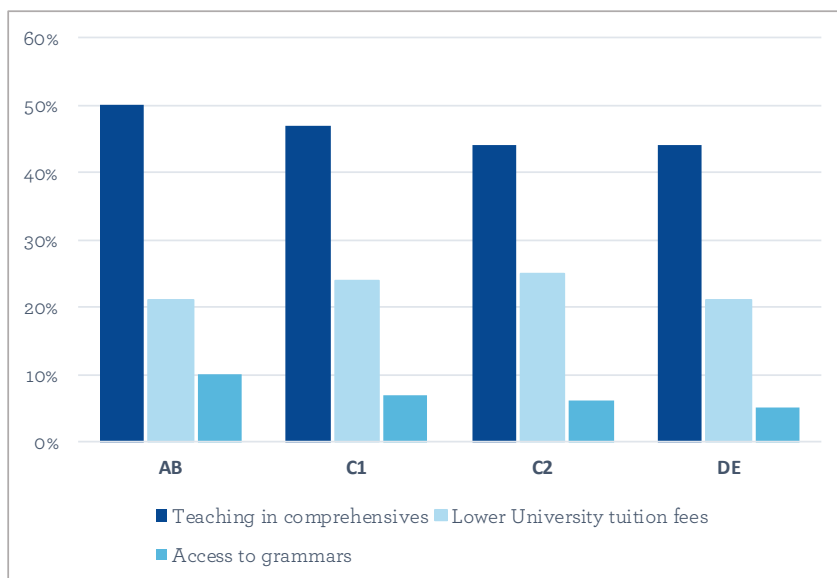


Figure 7. % saying proposal would most help those from less advantaged backgrounds, by social grade (AB highest, DE lowest)

Survey details

- 2,001 adults, aged 16-64 in Great Britain were interviewed by Ipsos MORI for this survey.
- The survey was conducted online by Ipsos Interactive Services between 6th-8th June 2017.
- Quotas were set for age, sex, and region (source: 2015 Mid-Year Population Estimates for Great Britain).
- Data are weighted to the known population profile for the population of Great Britain aged 16-64 (source: 2015 Mid-Year Population Estimates for Great Britain).

Appendix: Sutton Trust Social Mobility Summit 2017 Polling Tables



- 2,001 adults, aged 16-64 in Great Britain were interviewed for this survey.
- The survey was conducted online by Ipsos Interactive Services between 6-8th June 2017.
- Quotas were set for age, sex, and region (source: 2015 Mid-Year Population Estimates for Great Britain).
- Data are weighted to the known population profile for the population of Great Britain aged 16-64 (source: 2015 Mid-Year Population Estimates for Great Britain).
- Where results do not sum to 100%, this may be due to multiple responses, computer rounding or the exclusion of don't knows/not stated.
- Results are based on all 2,001 respondents in each case.
- Trend data included where available.

Table 1. To what extent do you agree or disagree that people have equal opportunities to get ahead?

	2017 (%)	2008 (%)
Strongly agree	11	11
Tend to agree	30	42
Neither agree nor disagree	17	10
Tend to disagree	31	25
Strongly disagree	11	9
Don't know*	1	
<i>Agree</i>	<i>40</i>	
<i>Disagree</i>	<i>42</i>	

2008 survey conducted by Ipsos MORI for Sutton Trust, 2,060 GB adults (May 2008).
*Don't know combined with 'Neither' in 2008 results.

Table 2. To what extent, if at all, do you feel that today's youth will have had a better or worse life than their parents' generation, or will it have been about the same?

	2017 (%)	2011 (%)	2003 (%)	2017 YPO* (%)
Much better	8			13
Slightly better	21			26
About the same	21			15
Slightly worse	33			15
Much worse	13			8
Don't know	4			16
<i>Better/Higher</i>	<i>29</i>	<i>23</i>	<i>43</i>	<i>39</i>
<i>Lower/Worse</i>	<i>46</i>	<i>35</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>23</i>

2011 survey conducted by Ipsos MORI, 506 GB adults (November 2011)
2003 survey conducted by Ipsos MORI, c.1,000 GB adults

*Ipsos MORI 2017 Young People Omnibus Survey (Base: 2,881 11-16 year olds in England, Scotland and Wales). Wording slightly differs 'To what extent, if at all, do you feel that your generation will have had a better or worse life than your parents' generation, or will it be the same'.

Table 3. Please think of your present job (or your last one if you don't have one now). If you compare this job with the job your father had when you were 16, would you say that the level or status of your job is (or was) ...?

	2017 (%)	2009* (%)	1999* (%)	1992* (%)	1987* (%)
Much higher than your father's	16	12	14	18	16
Higher	25	27	26	30	30
About equal	22	28	27	27	26
Lower	18	16	15	14	17
Much lower than your father's	8	7	7	5	4
I have never had a job	2	1	1	2	2
Don't know	5				
Not applicable	4				

*British Social Attitudes Survey, 1987, 1992, 1999, 2009

Table 4. Please select one option for each of these to show how important, if at all, you think it is for getting ahead in life. How important is...

	Essential	Very important	Fairly important	Not very important	Not important at all	Can't choose
coming from a wealthy family?	8	17	33	27	12	3
having well-educated parents?	6	23	41	21	7	2
having a good education, yourself?	28	44	24	3	1	1
having ambition?	36	39	21	2	1	1
knowing the right people?	19	35	35	8	2	1

% saying factor is essential or very important

	2017 (%)	2009* (%)	1999* (%)	1992* (%)	1987* (%)
coming from a wealthy family?	26	14	19	15	21
having well-educated parents?	29	31	n/a	28	27
having a good education, yourself?	72	74	n/a	74	72
having ambition?	76	71	n/a	74	79
knowing the right people?	54	33	41	35	39

*British Social Attitudes Survey, 1987, 1992, 1999, 2009

Table 5. Which one, if any, of the following would most help those from less advantaged backgrounds get ahead in life?

	2017 (%)
High quality teaching in comprehensive schools	47
Lower tuition fees at university	23
Access to grammar schools	8
Access to private schools for families who can't afford it	7
High quality nurseries/child care	4
None of these	6
Don't know	6