

What is Social Mobility?

Redefining Opportunity in Britain

The Sutton Trust

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Overview

- A country with high social mobility is one where someone's background – the place they were born, the school they went to or their parent's income or occupation – has little influence on their own life chances.
- Income inequality is closely tied to social mobility. In more equal societies, the gaps between social and economic 'rungs' on the ladder are smaller. This not only likely makes it easier for people to move upwards, but also reduces the consequences of falling down the ladder.
- Social mobility is not just about 'rags to riches', but widening opportunity at every level. That means reducing the number of lower income young people becoming NEET (not in education, employment, or training), increasing the number going on to gain both technical and academic qualifications, and closing the access gaps to university.
- It also means ensuring educational and economic opportunities are spread across the country in every community.
- Despite being a core goal of multiple governments for decades, from the Conservative's '*Levelling up*' to today's Labour government's '*Opportunity Mission*' – social mobility in the UK remains low, and has barely shifted for decades. Young people born today have similar income mobility rates to those born in 1970.
- Internationally, the UK performs well on educational mobility. However, it is ranked middle to low on both income and social class mobility when compared to other high-income countries – with the country ranking below Nordic countries like Denmark, Norway, Finland and Sweden, as well as countries like Spain, Canada, Australia and Japan on an OECD measure of intergenerational income mobility.

Introduction

For decades, governments across the political spectrum have focused on improving social mobility. From Thatcher to Starmer, there has been widespread agreement that someone's background should not determine their future life chances.

The public are on side too, with Sutton Trust polling finding 9 in 10 people think it's important to level the playing field and improve social mobility in the UK.¹

But despite such wide-ranging support for action, social mobility in Britain remains low, with background still heavily related to an individual's outcomes. Internationally, the UK performs poorly on several social mobility measures.

And although politicians have long referenced the ideas and issues underlying the social mobility challenge, the term itself has ebbed and flowed in fashion – with the phrase at times both misunderstood and fairly criticised, both by decision makers and in public debate.

Too often, the term has been artificially narrowed - to only mean 'rags to riches' mobility, or to only refer to outcomes in education and employment, to the exclusion of other major factors - from housing to family, identity, pride in community, happiness and general wellbeing.

This brief will lay out a modern, relevant definition for social mobility in 2025, one that fully reflects the nuances and complexity of the term. Using the latest data on national and local social mobility measures, this report will also review how well the UK performs across key social mobility measures, and how it performs in an international context. Finally, drawing on 30 years of research from the Sutton Trust and others, it explores factors linked to better social mobility, and how the UK can best improve its level of social mobility going forward.

9 in 10

The proportion of people who think it's important to level the playing field and improve social mobility in the UK.

What do we mean by social mobility?

Social mobility is the link between someone's socio-economic (or "class") background - the social and economic circumstances they grew up in - and their own outcomes as adults. A country that has high social mobility is one where this link is weak, where the circumstances someone grows up in have little impact on where they themselves end up. Whereas a country with low social mobility is one where someone's socio-economic background is highly related to the type of job and income level they themselves go on to in adulthood. An individual's socio-economic background is made up of several different factors, some primarily social, some primarily economic, and others a mix of both. Many different aspects of someone's socio-economic background will also interact with one another. These issues are outlined in more detail below:

Social: The social aspect of someone's background includes things like their parents' level of education, their parents' occupations, the neighbourhood and wider environment they grew up in, their networks and support systems, and the social and cultural capital they had access to, for example whether they were able to read a wide range of books or visit museums. All of this contributes to the advice and knowledge they have available, which in turn can impact their future life chances.

Economic: The economic aspect of someone's background is the financial and material conditions they grew up in; impacted by factors like their parents' earnings and occupation, and their family's wealth. These economic factors will impact on the area someone grows up in - from the housing their family can afford, to other resources they have access to, such as the school they attend or the private tutoring their family can afford. Later on, it may impact on whether and where they can afford the living expenses needed to study at university, or whether they can afford to take unpaid work experience. These economic opportunities also impact on individual's life chances.

Importantly, the social and economic aspects of someone's background interact considerably. The school someone attends is impacted by their income, for example whether their family can afford a place at a private school, or a house in the catchment area of a top state school. And in turn, the school someone attends will then impact their social capital, for example, through the friends they make and the networks they form for later life. Similarly, someone's parent's occupation will be related both to their household income and also to

the wider networks they can access, for example via their parents' professional networks.

How has the definition changed over time?

A traditional or more stereotypical conception of social mobility tended to revolve only around high attainers and the pathways of elite universities and elite occupations, also known as bottom-to-top mobility or long-range mobility.

While this is an important facet of social mobility, and an indicator of fairness and opportunity in society, it is only one facet. More modern definitions of social mobility tend to also encompass shorter-range mobility (e.g. coming from a low-income family and ending up on a middle income yourself), as well as wider issues around the importance of high-quality jobs, wellbeing and wealth, ultimately focused on ensuring young people have the opportunity to flourish.

Social mobility has been a key topic across economics and sociology for many decades, and has proliferated in research over time. It has also grown in popularity in media and policy, in particular since 2005, with the term itself reaching a peak around 2016/17, with regular references in Parliament throughout that time period (Figure 1).²

Figure 1: Mentions of social mobility in the Houses of Parliament 2000-2025

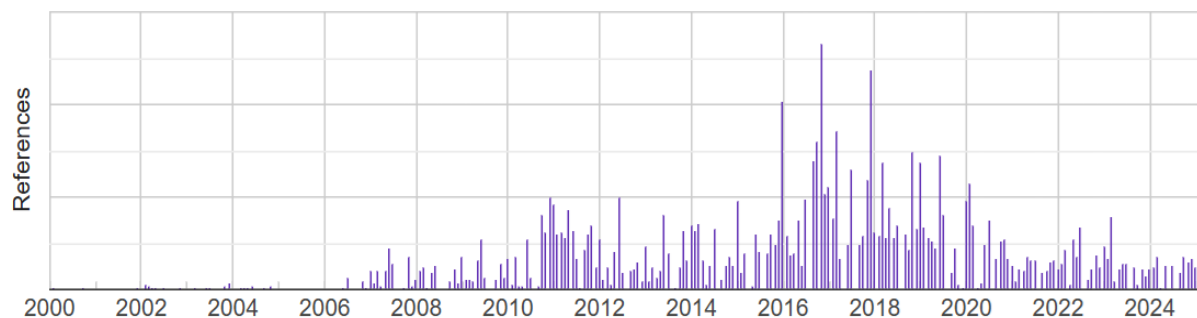


Figure source: Hansard

Disputed definitions

Even during periods where the term “*social mobility*” itself has fallen out of popularity, the underlying issues it refers to have remained firmly on the political and social agenda.

At different times, various concepts have been used in its place or to refer to closely related issues, including “*equality of opportunity*”, “*equity*”, “*social justice*”, or “*levelling up*” – issues all essential to each other although not fully interchangeable.

So what do these terms mean, and how do they relate to social mobility?

Equality of opportunity means everyone having an equal chance to succeed, regardless of their background. It is a *core principle* behind social mobility, but does not itself involve looking at the end result - whether or not people are ultimately socially mobile. There is a considerable overlap between this term and social mobility, depending on how widely the term is applied. For example, when talking about equality of opportunity, someone might only be referring to early life opportunities e.g. early education and school, or they could also mean wider societal issues like housing and transport links, that themselves then allow for more equal access to employment opportunities. This issue is at the heart of the current government’s Opportunity Mission.

Equity recognises that people face unique barriers to opportunity. While an equality approach treats everyone in the same way (for example giving access to the same opportunities or resources), regardless of their starting point, equity ensures that everyone has an equal chance to succeed in practice by providing tailored support to meet their level of need.

Social justice is a broader concept focused on fairness and equality in a society, including the systems and structures that are in place. In a socially just society, all individuals would have access to core services and rights, including those closely related to social mobility, like education. But social justice can also cover wider state services, which while related, are less closely associated with social mobility – for example having a socially just police and criminal justice service or health care system. While social justice is broader than social mobility, the two issues are very closely related - a society with high social mobility is likely to be socially just, as equality and opportunities go hand in hand.

Levelling Up is a term that was popular in UK political debate in the early 2020s, particularly under Boris Johnson’s Conservative government. Its focus was on place based and regional inequalities, and the importance of ensuring

opportunities are available across the country. Again, this relates closely to social mobility, as where someone is from is a part of their socio-economic background and the opportunities available to young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds varying substantially by region.

Regardless of the terminology used, public opinion reflects a desire for action on these issues, with 87% saying it's important to improve social mobility in the UK, 87% saying it's important to level the playing field in the UK, and 93% saying it's important to ensure every young person has equal opportunities regardless of their background.³

Social mobility is also crucial to achieving a fairer, more productive, more prosperous society for all. When everyone can reach their full potential, more talent can flourish, businesses grow and so does the economy, making social mobility key to inclusive growth. In fact, Sutton Trust research found that a modest increase to the UK's social mobility could be associated with an increase in annual GDP of 2%.⁴

How can social mobility be measured?

Commonly used measures

There are many different ways to measure social mobility, as there are multiple ways to look at the strength of the relationship between an individual's socio-economic status and their parents'. The section below looks at some of the most commonly used measures:⁵

Income mobility is the relationship between an individual's income at adulthood and their parents' income.⁶ Parental income is usually measured by looking at the combined parental household income during childhood or during someone's teenage years.

Social class/occupational mobility refers to the relationship between an individual's social class in adulthood and their parent's social class. Social class can be measured in many ways, but often relies on occupational classifications. Parental social class is usually measured as the social class of the parent with the highest level of occupation or the highest earner at the age of 14.

Education mobility is the relationship between an individual's highest level of education and their parent's education level. Parental education is usually measured by the parent with the highest qualification.

More recently, other measures have also been examined, including wealth, which has been acknowledged as an important indicator.⁷ Measures can also use a mixture of these socio-economic indicators, for example the relationship between an individual's income and their parents' education. Other issues have also been recognised as important to capturing people's life chances, including housing, health and wellbeing.

Absolute vs relative mobility

Measures of social mobility can also be relative or absolute, as outlined below:

Relative measures refers to the extent to which an individual's socio-economic status differs from that of their parents, focusing on the *movement within the social hierarchy*. It captures how fluid or rigid a society is - whether people can move up or down regardless of the general level of economic growth.

Absolute measures refers to the *overall change in income or conditions from one generation to the next*, typically comparing whether children are better or worse off than their parents at a similar age. It reflects improvements or declines in living standards across generations, often driven by economic growth or decline.

For example, someone may go to university as the first in their family to get a degree, or be the first in their family to work in a professional job, but if overall education levels have gone up, or professional jobs are paid less on average as more of the population become professional workers, then someone can have been socially mobile in an absolute sense, but not in a relative sense.

While both measures offer insight into social mobility, absolute mobility has a greater focus on general economic progress between generations, while relative mobility reflects the fairness or openness of the system to upward or downward movement.

Criticisms of commonly used measures

Traditionally used measures have faced criticisms, for example for often only measuring men's social mobility, and for a lack of regional focus.⁸ Now, more attention is being paid to geographical differences in social mobility within a country, with evidence of great disparities between neighbourhoods.⁹ Differences across characteristics such as sex, ethnicity, and disability are also important to keep in mind when measuring mobility.¹⁰ For example, research by

the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) suggests that women have lower intergenerational mobility than men. However, gender also interacts with other characteristics - Black Caribbean men and Pakistani women had the lowest levels of upward mobility according to their research, while Indian men and women had the highest levels of upward mobility. These differences in mobility across regions and characteristics give important insight into patterns of mobility which can help target policy and understand the drivers of social mobility.

How can we measure social mobility over time?

Social mobility can only be fully measured in the rear-view mirror, once children have reached adulthood and their trajectory is known. That means there's always a lag between the circumstances young people are currently growing up in, and when we can find out what that means for their long-term life chances.

Due to this, other measures are used to reflect present opportunities and likely drivers of future mobility. This includes [educational attainment gaps](#), measures of educational inequality between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers. These gaps are especially important intermediate indicators of social mobility, as educational attainment is strongly linked to socio-economic outcomes later in life.

Reflecting this, the Sutton Trust's [Opportunity Index](#) provides a detailed look at the geography of opportunity and social mobility in England. The Index includes six key indicators of social mobility across the life course including GCSE grades, A level results, the percentage of young people in education or employment after Key Stage 4, the percentage of people with a degree by age 22, average earnings at age 28 and percentage of people in employment at age 28.



Glossary

Social mobility is a broad term that encompasses the link between socio-economic background and life chances. It can be examined using a range of different measures, including income, social class, education, occupation or wealth. Specific measures of mobility include **income mobility, occupation mobility, educational mobility and wealth mobility**.

Relative mobility refers to how similar a person's position in the social hierarchy is, relative to their parents' position.

Absolute mobility refers to the proportion of children doing better or worse than their parents at a similar age.

Intergenerational income elasticity (IGE) is one of the most used measures of social mobility, specifically it measures how much a parent's income influences their child's income in adulthood.

Opportunity Mission is one of the current government's five missions, focused on reforming childcare and education systems, and tackling the class ceiling.

Social justice refers to fairness and equality of rights and opportunities in society.

Levelling up is a policy of the previous government focused on reducing inequalities between areas.

Social mobility in the UK

How well the UK is performing on social mobility depends on the measure being used. Some of the main data available is outlined below.

Income

In the UK, a significant chunk of one's income is linked to that of one's parents, according to intergenerational income elasticity (IGE) measures, although this is likely an underestimate.¹¹ In other words, roughly 29% of the differences in individuals' incomes' can be explained by differences in parents' incomes. IGE measures how much a parent's income influences their child's income in adulthood. It ranges from zero to one, with values closer to zero meaning higher income mobility where individuals' income is less dependent on their parents' earnings, and values closer to one meaning lower income mobility where individual's earnings are strongly tied to their parents'. This measure of intergenerational income mobility in the UK has been at best stagnant, and at worst in decline for the past 50 years (Table 1).¹²

Table 1: Trends in relative income mobility in the UK

Year	IGE	95% confidence interval
2020	0.29	0.15-0.43*
2009 to 2016	0.27	0.22-0.32**
2004	0.33	0.27-0.36***
1991	0.21	0.15-0.27***
1975 to 1978	0.36	0.14-0.57****

Table sources:

*Social Mobility Index (Social Mobility Commission, 2023)

**Intergenerational income mobility (Rohenkohl, 2023)

***Up and down the generational income ladder in Britain (Blanden & Machin, 2008)

****Evidence on Intergenerational Income Mobility in Britain (Atkinson et al., 1981)

Absolute income mobility (the proportion of individuals who earn more than their parents did at a similar age) has also been gradually declining. While roughly 77% of people born in 1975 could expect to earn more in real terms than their parents at age 30, this proportion fell ten percentage points to 66% for those born in 1985.¹³

There are important geographical differences in income mobility too. Research by the IFS found substantial differences in income mobility between regions, with low mobility areas including Yorkshire and the North East for women and particularly in the major Northern cities for men, with high mobility in areas spread across London and the South East.¹⁴ The Sutton Trust's new [Opportunity Index](#) goes into even greater geographical detail, to look at social mobility indicators at the constituency level, for example finding that free school meal (FSM) pupils in the highest ranked constituency for income mobility were over six times more likely to be in the top 20% of earners by age 28 than those in the lowest ranked constituency.¹⁵

Social class

On the other hand, relative social class mobility (measured using NS-SEC) has been increasing over the decade, which may reflect changes in occupational structure such as an increase in intermediate and professional occupations and a decline in working class occupations.¹⁶ Research has also suggested there are nuances in these patterns, for example high mobility in London may be concealing high rates of downward occupational mobility.¹⁷

Measuring social class

There are several ways to measure social class. The most commonly used method is the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC). This puts occupations into either five or three categories based on their occupation and job characteristics. The three-category classification is outlined below:

- **Managerial or professional occupations** such as solicitors, accountants, large business owners, retail managers, teachers, nurses, etc.
- **Intermediate occupations** such as secretaries, call centre agents, clerical workers, plumbers, gardeners, train drivers etc.
- **Routine and manual occupations** such as postal workers, caretakers, sales assistants, cleaners, bar staff etc.

While there is a lot of variation in earnings between these different occupations, people in managerial or professional occupations on average earn roughly £13,000 more per year than people in intermediate occupations.¹⁸ There's also a simplified version of the NS-SEC outlined in the Sutton Trust [Employer's Guide](#), that employers can use to measure socio-economic background.

Education

While relative education mobility has increased moderately over the past few decades in the UK,¹⁹ absolute education mobility has showed signs of stalling. According to a paper by researchers at the Centre for Economic Performance, the most recent data available suggests that children of degree holders born 1974-1983 had an 80% chance of going to university, compared to 35% of those whose parents did not attend university, with this gap in fact rising over time.²⁰

Wealth

While there is less data available on the intergenerational transmission of wealth in the UK, a recent report by the IFS found that relative wealth mobility was substantially lower than income mobility, and that this will likely continue to decline in the future due to the growing importance of wealth and inheritance.²¹

In line with this, previous Sutton Trust analysis highlighted growing gaps in home ownership by parental home ownership status since 2000.²² While 74% of those aged 42 who grew up in rented accommodation owned their own home in 2000 compared to 88% of those who grew up in their parents' own homes, this fell to 51% of those who grew up in rented accommodation, compared to 81% in 2017 - the gap rising by 16 percentage points (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Home ownership by parental ownership status, age 42

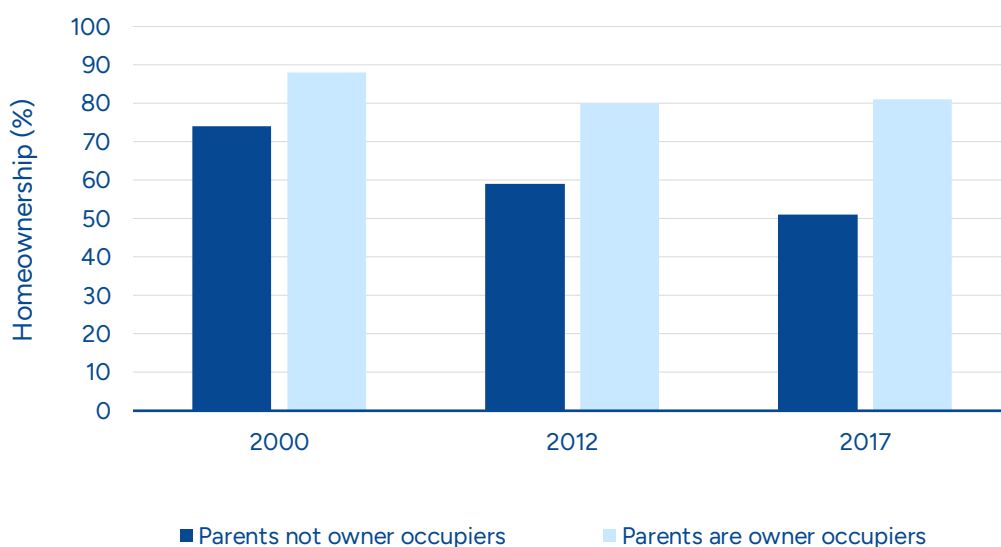


Figure source: Eyles et al. (2022)

Educational attainment

When it comes to more intermediate drivers of social mobility, research has suggested that post-pandemic educational inequalities combined with the cost-of-living crisis and various other issues in the education system, such as increased absenteeism and the teacher recruitment and retention crisis, mean that disadvantaged young people will be at even greater risk of not reaching their full potential compared to their peers.²³

In the UK, 4.3 million children (22%) are growing up in relative poverty, with poverty levels rising since the pandemic.²⁴ Ten years of progress on educational inequalities has been wiped out post-pandemic, ringing alarm bells for social mobility for the next generation.²⁵ According to work by the Education Policy Institute, disadvantaged primary school pupils were 4.6 months behind their more advantaged peers in their reception year, rising to more than 19 months at KS4 in 2023.²⁶

Meanwhile, free school meal eligible students are less likely to go on to higher education than those who aren't free school meal eligible, and even less likely to go onto selective universities compared to their peers.²⁷ Even when they do, those from disadvantaged backgrounds face pay gaps compared to their more advantaged peers with the same level of qualifications.²⁸ Overall, there are differences in various outcomes based on a person's background, especially when it comes to education. More information on this issue can be found in the Sutton Trust's briefing on [Closing the Attainment Gap](#).

How does the UK perform internationally?

In an international context, the UK tends to be ranked low to middle for high-income countries – dependent on the type of measure for social mobility used, with Norway, Denmark and Sweden consistently ranked among the top countries. However, it should be noted that cross country comparisons on these measures are challenging due to differences in the available data, as well as methods for collection and the wider context in the country in question.

Income

In influential research published by the Sutton Trust in 2005, Britain was found to have among the lowest intergenerational earnings mobility out of eight countries in Europe and North America, better only than the US.²⁹ Later research ranked Britain as low to middle in terms of intergenerational income

mobility in a group of 12 countries (Figure 3).³⁰ Another paper also ranked the UK amongst the lowest intergenerational income mobility amongst 13 countries, alongside other low mobility countries including the US and Italy.³¹ Additionally, the OECD classified Britain as a high-inequality country with low earnings mobility.³²

Figure 3: Intergenerational income mobility by country

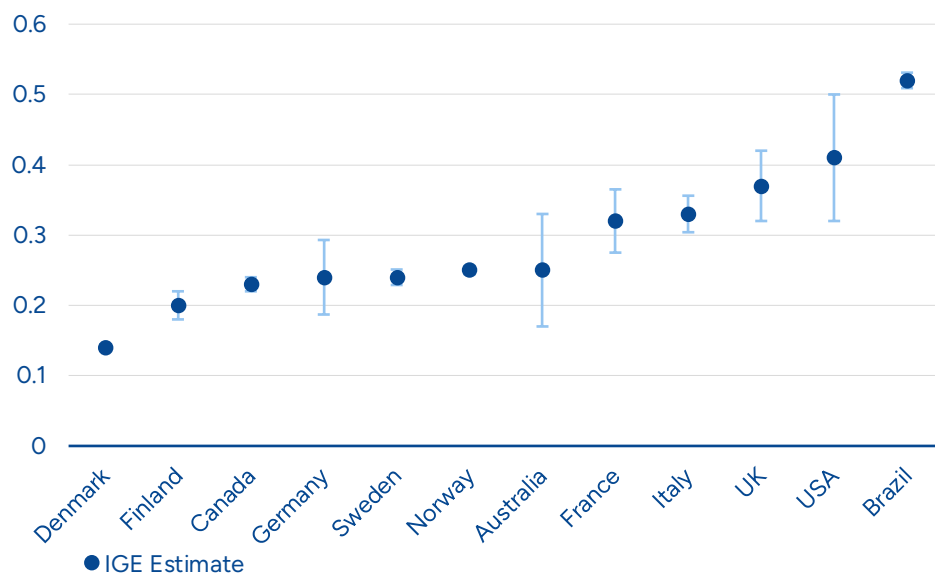


Figure source: Blanden (2013)

Social Class

The OECD has however classified Britain as having high occupational mobility. In fact, in terms of relative occupational mobility, the UK placed amongst the highest mobility countries, along with Iceland, Israel, Norway and Estonia and coming ahead of countries including the US, Ireland and France. This measure partly reflects changes in occupational structure in these countries. Countries that performed poorly included Korea, Australia and southern European countries.

Education

While the OECD classified Britain as having low relative education mobility in comparison to other OECD countries, data from the World Bank suggests that the UK has higher absolute and relative educational mobility than the average for high-income countries.³³

Wider measures

Research by the World Economic Forum, using a broad range of measures including health, education, technology, work, social protection and institutions, ranked the UK as the 21st socially mobile country out of 82 countries. It ranked 18th out of the 36 countries in Europe and North America included, and 21st out of the 43 high-income countries included. The UK ranked behind countries such as Denmark, Norway and Finland but also countries such as Australia, Canada and Ireland, though ranking slightly ahead of countries including the US and New Zealand.³⁴

What influences social mobility?

A range of different factors influence social mobility. The sections below provide a brief review of international evidence relevant to the UK on factors that impact social mobility levels across the globe.

Education

Education is widely acknowledged as one of the main drivers of social mobility. It can function as a vehicle of social mobility, providing a pathway out of disadvantage for young people, but it can also act to ingrain disadvantage, when students from lower socio-economic backgrounds face worse educational outcomes than their peers.

One study found that 71% of intergenerational income persistence in the UK may be accounted for by education.³⁵ This is largely through higher educational attainment among children from better-off families, and through the higher wages associated with higher educational attainment.

International reports on social mobility by the OECD and the World Bank suggest that educational mobility was higher in countries where public spending on education was higher.³⁶ However, it's not only spending that's important, but also issues such as access and quality, especially for disadvantaged young people. OECD statistics showed that factors including enrolment in early childhood education, teacher wage progression, the share of qualified teachers, social mixing within schools, and government-supported loan systems for higher education were all associated with higher social mobility.³⁷

However, education cannot entirely explain differences in social mobility, and there are other important factors at play. For example, while education

71%

The estimated proportion of intergenerational income persistence in the UK accounted for by education.

accounted for a significant proportion of social mobility in the UK in general, it did not explain differences in social mobility across regions or by ethnicity.³⁸ In a similar vein, a paper comparing the UK, the US and Sweden found that while education accounted for a substantial portion of intergenerational mobility in each country, differences in intergenerational mobility *between* these countries came down to factors outside of education.³⁹ These findings imply that other areas outside of education are crucial to understanding differences in social mobility.

Employment

Employment and labour market factors also play an important role in social mobility. The labour market can provide pathways for young people to flourish, and crucially for social mobility. This includes providing pathways to success for young people who did not go on to higher education, giving them the chance to kickstart careers through apprenticeships or work experience, and progress over time.

However, in the UK there is a large disparity in earnings between graduates and non-graduates, which is referred to in research as returns to education. Research suggests that differences in returns to education that happen through the labour market are as important as differences in educational inequality in explaining different rates of intergenerational income mobility between the UK and Sweden.⁴⁰ Countries such as the UK and the US tend to have higher returns to education, whereas countries that perform well on social mobility tend to be more egalitarian and have lower returns to education, meaning less of a disparity in earnings between graduates and non-graduates.⁴¹ Good opportunities for school leavers are crucial for ensuring that those who do not choose higher education are not trapped in cycles of low pay.

While providing good employment opportunities is crucial to improving social mobility, many other labour market factors also present barriers to social mobility, such as conscious or unconscious discrimination or bias; elitist hiring practices; unpaid or unadvertised internships; informal networks and regional differences in access to good quality job opportunities.⁴² Issues such as these can present themselves both in relation to initial access to occupations and in later career progression. Some of these issues come down to lack of information available to those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Those without professional parents are perhaps less likely to know about the different careers available to them, and there are inequalities in careers advice in schools too. For example, Sutton Trust research has found that in the UK state school students are more likely to report not having taken part in careers related activities in school compared to pupils at private schools, and schools in more deprived areas are less likely to have access to a specialist careers advisor.⁴³ Research by the Sutton Trust has also found that unpaid and unadvertised internships can

1 in 5

internships in the UK offer no financial compensation.

also prove a barrier to students from disadvantaged backgrounds, with 1 in 5 internships offering no financial compensation, and only 1 in 10 internships found through open advertisements in the UK.⁴⁴

An International Labour Organisation report on social mobility found that the existence of well paid jobs for those with basic education was important for fostering social mobility. The report also highlighted an association between trade union membership and greater social mobility.⁴⁵ A report by the OECD also cited labour market factors such as access, participation, discrimination and protection among others as key to facilitating social mobility across countries.⁴⁶

Home and family environment

In the UK there are already developmental gaps between children from the most and least advantaged households by the age of three, with 32% of children in the top income quintile in the top 20% of cognitive scores compared to only 10% of children in the bottom income quintile to do so, demonstrating the importance of parenting and the home environment to social mobility.⁴⁷

Home life is important to social mobility in several ways. For instance, how engaged parents are in their children's school and learning makes a difference. It can include activities such as helping their children with homework, reading to them, and getting engaged with their school. Work by Heckman et al. found that parental engagement was a key component of programmes that promoted social mobility in the US.⁴⁸ Home life can also influence social mobility through participation in cultural and extracurricular activities such as going to the zoo, the theatre or getting involved in sports or music.⁴⁹

The home environment can also be important simply in whether there is a quiet space for children to study. The importance of inequalities outside of school were highlighted in the global pandemic, with inequalities in the home learning environment linked with large socio-economic learning gaps worldwide.⁵⁰ For example, research from the COVID Social Mobility and Opportunities (COSMO) study in the UK found that students who did not have access to a suitable device for learning spent on average 8 hours per week working during lockdowns compared to 14 hours for those with a laptop or tablet.⁵¹

Further evidence has shown that differences in parenting that are linked with socio-economic background are related to gaps in a range of children's outcomes including academic attainment and socio-emotional skills.⁵² An OECD report found that education mobility tended to be higher in countries that spent more on family policies, with key areas for intervention including

10%

The proportion of children in the bottom fifth by household income who score in the top 20% for cognitive scores at age 3.

support for parents at work, and support during family-related events such as childbirth or divorce, and resources for families in need.⁵³

Broader inequalities

Evidence shows that income inequality is linked with social mobility. The Great Gatsby curve refers to the international pattern of higher income inequality being associated with lower income mobility (Figure 4), although some academics have questioned this, citing the lack of a similar pattern between inequality and social class mobility, and lack of causal evidence for this relationship.⁵⁴

While it is unclear the exact mechanisms behind this association, it is suggested that making the space between the rungs of the ladder smaller can make it easier to climb, and conversely less consequential to move down the ladder. The relationship may go both ways too, meaning that a more socially mobile society may foster a more equal society.⁵⁵ While some have viewed social mobility and equality to be in opposition, arguing that social mobility can be used to justify inequality,⁵⁶ this evidence demonstrates the importance of both issues, and how closely they are intertwined.

Figure 4: The association between earnings mobility and income inequality, international comparison

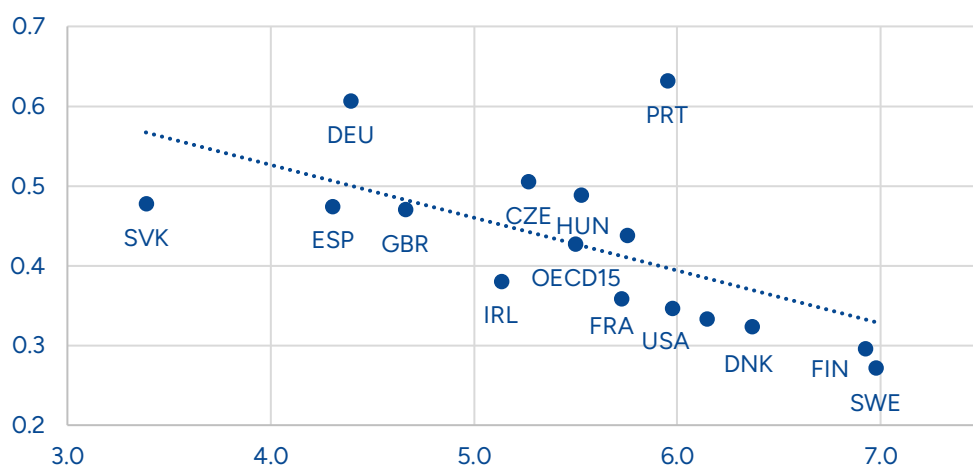


Figure source: OECD (2018)

Other types of inequality are also important to social mobility including wealth inequality, poverty levels and neighbourhood segregation among others. International research shows that poverty rates, progressive taxation and higher

short-term unemployment benefits were linked with higher social mobility outcomes.⁵⁷

Neighbourhood characteristics

International comparisons can be enlightening, but as recent research has pointed out, geographical differences within a country can also be crucial to finding out what impacts social mobility. In fact, one study suggested that up to 70% of differences in intergenerational income mobility across counties and neighbourhoods in the US could be due to place-based factors, with the difference in social mobility greater between neighbourhoods than across generations.⁵⁸

There are many local factors that can impact on social mobility, including access to high-quality schools, residential segregation, levels of poverty, exposure to crime and violence, employment and internship opportunities, and role model and peer effects among others.⁵⁹ Research conducted in the US found that economic connectedness- the share of friends from higher socio-economic backgrounds with individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds and an indicator of neighbourhood socio-economic segregation- is a strong predictor of upward income mobility, stronger even than other neighbourhood characteristics including median income, racial segregation, income inequality, and educational attainment.⁶⁰

A study in the UK supported these findings, showing that cross-social class connections were associated with upward income mobility, with disadvantaged children who grew up in the most economically connected areas earnings 38% more per year on average as adults than disadvantaged children in the least economically connected areas.⁶¹

Furthermore, the quality of state schools is variable across neighbourhoods in the UK, and often the quality of the schools drives up house prices, which can price out lower income families and exacerbate segregation.⁶² There is also a clustering of highly paid jobs in London and the South East, to a larger degree in the UK than in other European cities, which can also harm social mobility prospects across different regions.⁶³ This is reflected in regional differences in Key Stage 4 results, with 53.7% of students in Outer London achieving a grade 5 or above in English and maths compared to 42.1% of the pupils in the North East, a gap of 13.7 percentage points.⁶⁴

38%

The earnings boost disadvantaged children in the most economically connected areas have, compared to the same group in the least economically connected areas.

Discussion

Social mobility has been a core part of the political debate in Britain for decades. The terms used to talk about it have changed and shifted with time. But regardless of the language used, at its core, politicians across the political divide have long had a focus on the opportunities available to young people. Social mobility is about ensuring that all young people have the chance to reach their full potential, regardless of their socio-economic background. This is the key to a fairer, more productive and prosperous society, and an issue that is also popular with the British public.⁶⁵

Over the years, we have also seen the concept of social mobility evolve. While at times a more “traditional”, and much more narrow concept of the term dominated – focused only on elite education and professional pathways – this definition always left out much of the social mobility story.

This type of top to bottom mobility does matter, as it determines the socio-economic diversity of those in influential roles that impact all of us day to day, for example who becomes our MPs, judges, civil servants and journalists. It also matters for individuals, to ensure those from lower income homes have equal access to well-paid and often highly sought after roles. But it is not the full story. Social mobility is just as much about whether someone whose parents were not in work is able themselves to move into the workplace. It’s about ensuring young people from lower income families are not disproportionately likely to become NEET and are equally able to secure a decent job and a good standard of living as their more advantaged peers. And it’s about ensuring access for those from lower income homes to high quality vocational and technical training routes.

And similarly, far too often previous understandings of the term left out core interactions of social background with other diversity characteristics, like gender, race and disability. The term has also broadened from income and social class to acknowledge the importance of wealth, life quality and general wellbeing. With the broadening of the term, in turn, measures of social mobility have also broadened, reflecting a wide range of issues linked with social mobility, including levels of poverty, educational inequality, and job opportunities.⁶⁶

The landscape has also evolved. When the Sutton Trust was founded in 1997, it began with a single summer school programme, to support disadvantaged young people looking to experience the University of Oxford. Fast forward to now, 30 years of research and advocacy work has shone a light on injustices across education and employment, and we’ve seen a proliferation of widening

participation initiatives and a commitment to equal opportunities across successive governments. The Sutton Trust itself has evolved along with the landscape, with programmes now across apprenticeships, and a range of professions, alongside our flagship summer school programme. As well as a research agenda that examines broad inequalities in education by socio-economic background.

Despite this progress, substantial challenges remain to improve social mobility in the UK. Intergenerational income mobility hasn't improved for people today compared to those born in the 1970s.⁶⁷ 54% of people believe that it's harder to move from the working class to the middle class today than it was 50 years ago.⁶⁸ While internationally, the UK performs well on educational mobility, it's ranked middle to low for indicators of income and social class mobility.⁶⁹ Contemporary issues challenge social mobility including high levels of child poverty, high rates of absenteeism, funding crises in higher education and global economic turmoil, as well as ongoing challenges to diversity, equity and inclusion. These contemporary issues are accompanied by long-standing issues of access to higher education and certain occupations.

Our report [Fair Opportunity for All](#) outlined a roadmap for the Government across five key areas including early years, schools and colleges, higher education, apprenticeships and access to the workplace. In order for the Government to deliver on its opportunities mission, it is vital to continue working toward a goal of improving opportunities for social mobility across the UK.

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