



Seminar on Social Mobility

A summary of the Jain Family
Institute's inaugural six-part
seminar on social mobility

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The Study of Mobility

Background

Social mobility refers to the change in wealth, economic or social status of an individual or a family. The focus of our seminar was vertical social mobility, which is the movement of individuals or groups up or down, from one socio-economic level to another. Social mobility can also be intragenerational or intergenerational. Social mobility is intergenerational when a child attains a higher or lower status than their parents held.

Our seminar participants were fortunate to have six outstanding social mobility researchers and policy specialists guide us through the many factors that influence both downward and upward intergenerational mobility.

Session 1: Job Markets

Most social mobility researchers agree on one thing: upward social mobility in the United States is not the norm. In fact, you're far more likely to hold a high-status job if your parents held a high-status or high-paying job. There is a dearth of studies tracking intergenerational social mobility.

Despite the limited data, our first guest speaker, Jesse Rothstein, Professor of Public Policy and Economics at UC Berkeley and Director of the California Policy Lab, contended that primary education and high school quality do not directly lead to upward mobility. School quality, according to Rothstein, only has a modest impact on one's future income. His final conclusion was that policymakers can make an impact on the future income of children by equalizing access to higher minimum wages, encouraging stronger labor unions and creating more career pathways for young people to be employed in local industries.^[1]

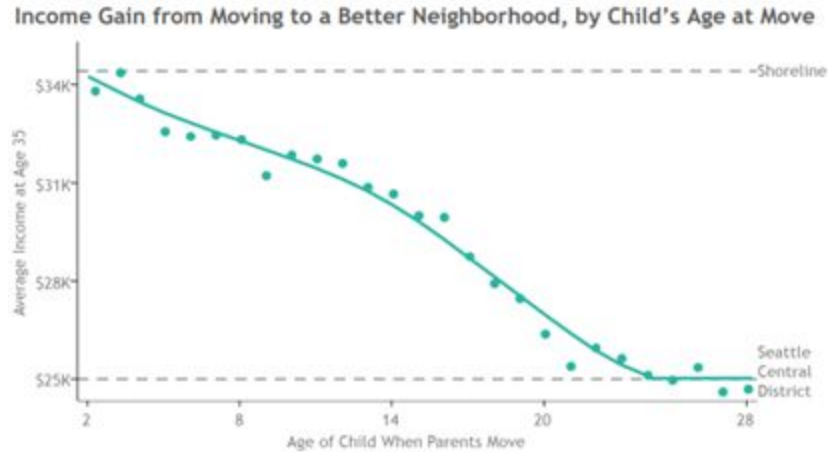
Session 2: Micro-Level and Macro-Level Effects

In session two, we had two guest lectures provide an overview of Social Mobility both inside and outside of the U.S.

Our first guest speaker was Caroline Dockes, a research fellow with the Opportunity Insights Institute at Harvard University. The Opportunity Insights Institute focuses on studying how the U.S. can provide children from disadvantaged backgrounds better chances to succeed. Dockes presented her team's findings based on a review of the tax records for over 20 million families. One of their conclusions: opportunity mostly depends on the neighborhood in which you reside. Children found to have the best outcomes in their adulthood came from neighborhoods with high-performing elementary schools; a higher share of two-parent families where the parents are both employed; greater levels of involvement in civic and religious groups; and more residential integration of affluent, middle-class and poor families.^[2] Additionally, even for "good neighborhoods," positive outcomes for children varied based on race, background and nationality.

What should be done in response to these findings? Dockes explained that the Institute encourages governments and nonprofits to use their data to identify which "not so good" neighborhoods towards which to direct more resources.^[3]

Our second invited speaker was Laurie Maldonado. Maldonado is a leading scholar on single-parent families^[4] and the Assistant Professor at Medgar Evers College. Maldonado's presentation showcased how the U.S. continues to lag behind peer countries in terms of public policies that support single parents and their families in becoming upwardly mobile. For example, the U.S. does not provide a governmental benefit/an allowance for each child; paid maternity leave policies that last more than 14 weeks; guaranteed paid leave for both parents; guaranteed paid leave for sick children; and laws that place restrictions on working hours (i.e. prohibitions of a work week that surpasses 40 hours). Lastly, Maldonado noted that the above-mentioned policies would help all families in the U.S., especially single parents, become upwardly mobile.



Session 3: Historical Segregation

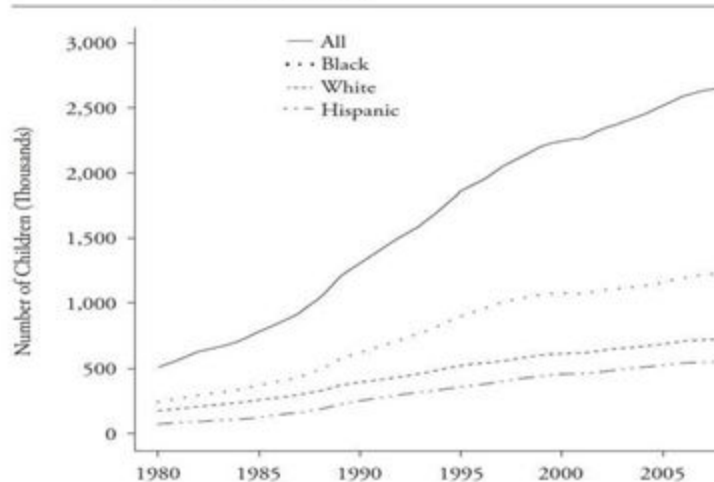
In our third session, our seminar turned to policies that have significantly contributed to the downward mobility of particular racial groups in the U.S. Richard Rothstein, a leading authority on housing policy and author of “The Color of Law,” identified specific laws and policy decisions, passed by local, state, and federal government, that lead to the current racial wealth gap.^[5] Examples of historical discriminatory policies include racial-based zoning; the creation of segregated public housing; subsidies provided to builders to create whites-only suburbs; tax exemptions for institutions that enforce racial segregation; government officials condoning violent resistance to African Americans trying to move into white neighborhoods; and, lastly, state and federal court orders evicting African Americans who moved to white neighborhoods. Rothstein concluded his presentation with an invitation for all seminar participants to acquire knowledge of the actual history of racial inequality in this country.

Session 4: Incarceration

Since the 1980s, the U.S. prison population has more than quadrupled. One in every 160 adults are in prison. In the fourth session, Professor Christopher Dennison, of the University of Buffalo, provided the group with an overview of the interplay between downward mobility and incarceration. Dennison argued that incarceration unequivocally decreases future earned income. In particular, however, Professor

Dennison’s research affirms a previously established finding: the future earnings of African Americans with criminal histories are more negatively impacted than White Americans with criminal histories. Seminar participants also reviewed additional studies which found that children whose parents are in prison have higher rates of homelessness and infant mortality.^[6]

Figure 6.1 Number of Children with a Parent in Prison or Jail, by Race, 1980 to 2008



Session 5: Higher Education

Another common myth of upward mobility: college is the “great equalizer.” Research completed within the past 15 years have shown that higher education is actually far from the “great equalizer.” Our guest speaker for session five, Professor Xiang Zhou of Harvard University, described the nuanced role that higher education plays in advancing social mobility. Professor Zhou’s research found that attempts to expand the pool of college graduates did not boost intergenerational income mobility. Professor Zhou’s two policy recommendations are 1) that colleges should target more need based financial aid toward lower-income youth, and 2) that elected officials should invest in skills formation for all kids by funding evidence-based early childhood interventions such as the Perry Preschool Program.^[7]

Session 6: Public Policy Frameworks

We concluded our seminar with a presentation by Meghan McCann, Senior Policy Specialist at the National Conference of State Legislators (NCSL). McCann introduced our seminar group to an innovative policy strategy referred to as “two-generation policymaking.” The vast majority of public policies focus exclusively on the needs of parents or exclusively on the needs of children. Two-generation policies, in contrast, focus on both the child and the parent. Two-generation policymaking presumes a parent’s physical, mental, and economic well-being strongly influences their child’s development. Similarly, a child’s well-being affects a parent’s success in school and the workplace. As described by McCann, two-generation policies can help families meet their most immediate needs while also preparing children for future success.^[8]

Notes

^[1]For a quick 10-minute overview of the important concepts within the study of social mobility, check out this video created by Crash Course that makes highly engaging educational content available to the public for free.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GjuV-XdYHhA>

^[2]<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/04/upshot/an-atlas-of-upward-mobility-shows-paths-out-of-poverty.html>

^[3]For a deeper dive into the data briefs and policy briefs of the Opportunity Insights Group, you can visit <https://opportunityinsights.org/>

^[4] [The triple bind of single-parent families: resources, employment and policies to improve wellbeing.](#)

^[5]https://www.demos.org/sites/default/files/publications/RacialWealthGap_1.pdf

^[6]<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/social-mobility-memos/2013/09/05/will-less-incarceration-mean-more-social-mobility/>

^[7] <https://highscope.org/perry-preschool-project/>. The Perry Project was a research study conducted from 1962 to 1967 which found that early education can have lasting human and financial effects including having fewer teenage pregnancies, fewer arrests and were more likely to graduate from high school.

^[8] For more background on which states are implementing two-generation policies, check out McCann's publication: Two-Generation Strategies Toolkit:<http://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/two-generation-strategies-toolkit.asp>

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