



***Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, Spring 2023***  
**Economic Inequality**

Olli – Boise State University  
August, 2023

Host: Jon Haveman, Ph.D.  
National Economic Education Delegation

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**Available NEED Topics Include:**

- US Economy
- Healthcare Economics
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- Economic Mobility
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- Minimum Wages
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- Black-White Wealth Gap
- Autonomous Vehicles
- Healthcare Economics

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## Course Outline

- **The Economics of Inequality**

- Week 1: Economic Inequality (Adina Ardelean, Santa Clara University)
- **Week 2 (8/21): Economic Mobility (Kathryn Wilson, Kent State Univ.)**



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## Submitting Questions

- **Please submit questions of clarification in the chat.**
  - I will try to handle them as they come up.
- **We will do a verbal Q&A once the material has been presented.**
- **Slides will be available from the NEED website tomorrow**
  - ([https:// NEEDEcon.org/delivered\\_presentations.php](https://NEEDEcon.org/delivered_presentations.php))



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## Economic mobility



Kathryn Wilson, Ph.D.  
Kent State University  
August 21, 2023



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- **This slide deck was authored by:**

- Oana Tocoian, UCSD
- Kathryn Wilson, Kent State University
- Jon Haveman, NEED

- **Disclaimer**

- NEED presentations are designed to be nonpartisan.
- It is, however, inevitable that the presenter will be asked for and will provide their own views.
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# Outline

**I. What do we mean by economic mobility?**

**II. Empirical patterns of economic mobility**

Q&A and Break

**III. What is the desirable level of economic mobility?**

**IV. Exploring channels/barriers to upward mobility and policy options**



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# I. What do we mean by economic mobility?

Definition and motivation



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## I. What do we mean by economic mobility?

## Economic Mobility – Defined

- **Economic Mobility – Our working definition:**

- Ability to advance beyond the status of your parents.

- **Variety of measures:**

- Income
- Wealth
- Education level
- Occupation
- Home ownership

**More Broadly:**

The ability to improve your socioeconomic class.

We will consider *intergenerational mobility in INCOME*.

## I. What do we mean by economic mobility?

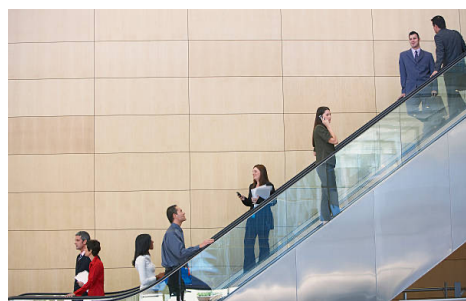
## Absolute and Relative Mobility

- **Absolute mobility:** the difference in income from one's parent.

- You're higher on the escalator than your parents were at that same age.
- It is possible for *everyone* to experience upward absolute mobility, especially if the escalator is going up.

- **Relative mobility:** the change in income rank from one's parent.

- You have fewer people above you on the escalator than your parents did.
- Increased relative mobility requires both upward and downward movement.



I. What do we mean by economic mobility?

## More on Absolute vs Relative Mobility

- **Can there be absolute mobility with NO relative mobility?**
  - Yes: if everybody experiences the same increase in income, there will be no relative mobility.
- **Can there be relative mobility with NO absolute mobility?**
  - Yes: There can be a dramatic reshuffling of the distribution even if there is no increase in average income.

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I. What do we mean by economic mobility?

## Economic Growth and Mobility

- **Economic growth should drive absolute mobility**
  - It has the potential to raise all incomes.
  - But the extent of mobility that results depends on how income is distributed.
- **Economic growth and relative mobility are unrelated**
  - Growth does not have implications whether kids are more or less likely to rise above their parent's position in the income distribution.

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## II. Empirical patterns of Economic Mobility

What are the facts?

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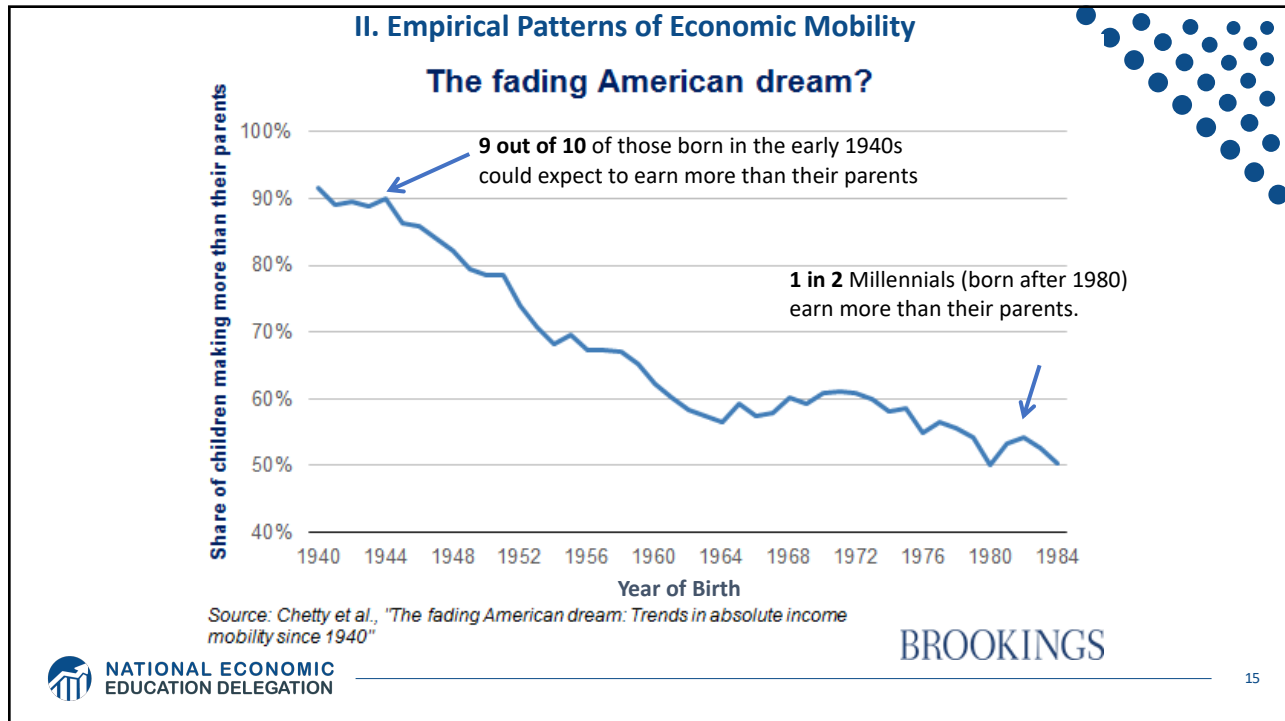
## II. Empirical Patterns of Economic Mobility

### Mobility – Big Picture for Absolute Mobility

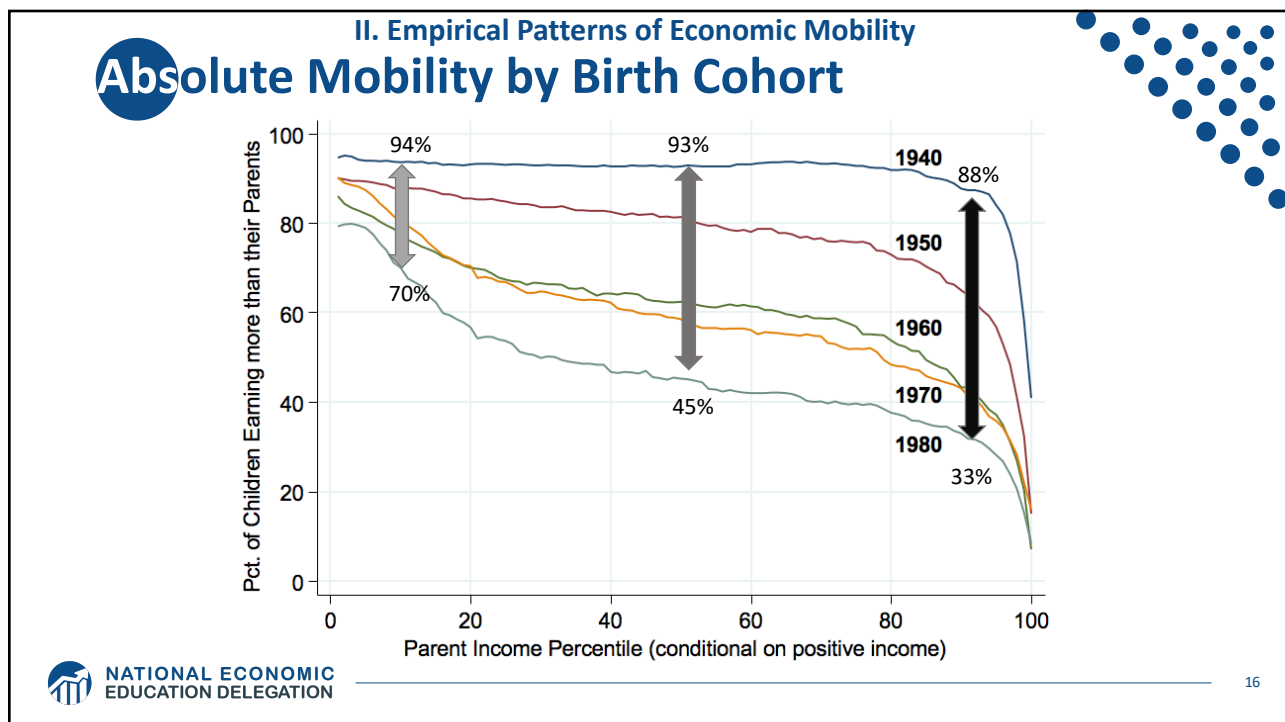
**Decline in *absolute* mobility in the United States:**

- 90% of those born in the early 1940s could expect to earn more than their parents in real terms. For millennials, the fraction is closer to 50%
- Below-median earnings have not increased in real terms since the 1970s.

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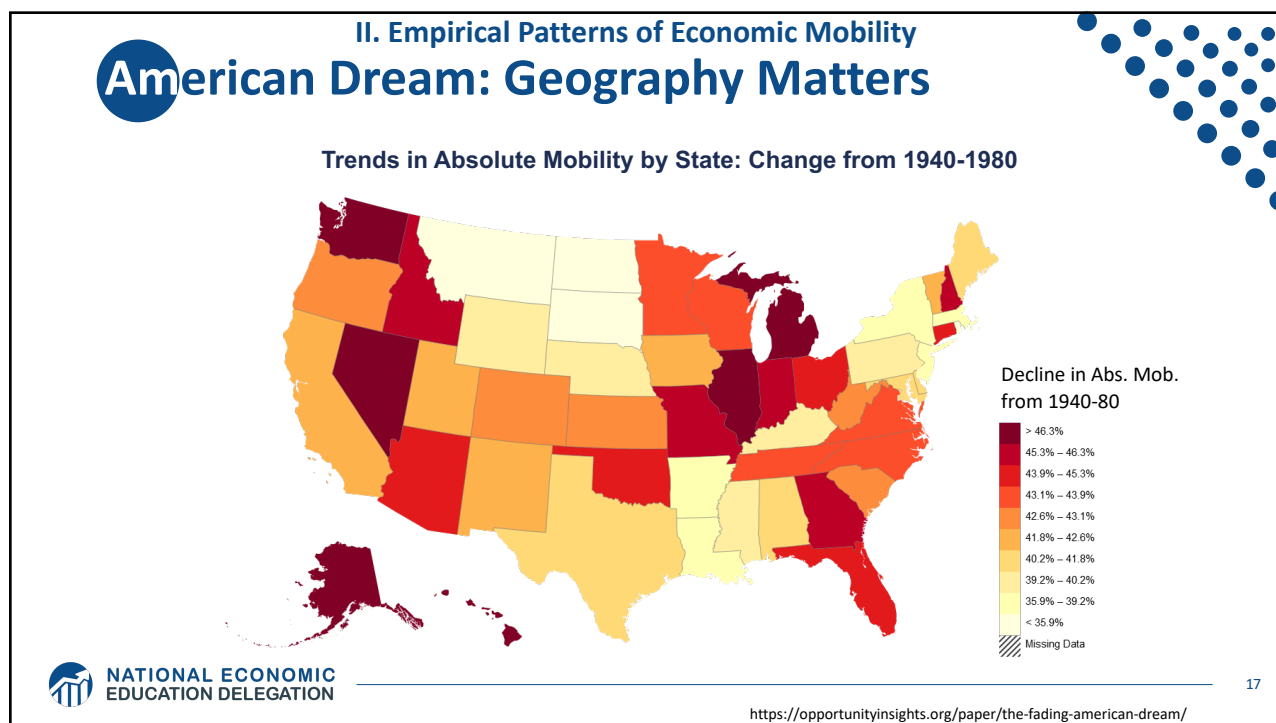


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II. Empirical Patterns of Economic Mobility

## Measuring Relative Mobility

- **Reminder:** *Relative mobility* is the change in income rank from one's parent.
- **Transition Probabilities:** Likelihood that an individual ends up in a different income quintile than their parents.
- **Perfect Mobility:** For each of the parental income quintiles, 20% of their offspring end up in each income quintile as adults.

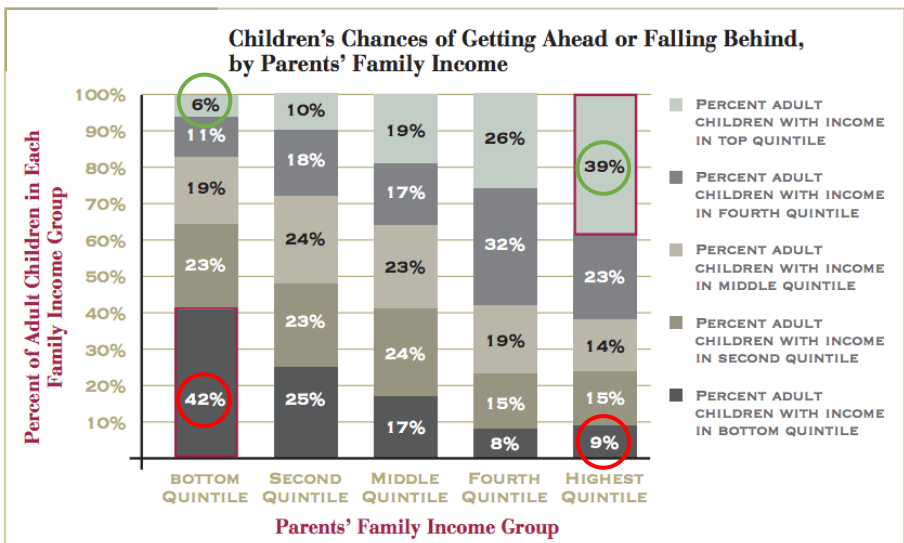
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## II. Empirical Patterns of Economic Mobility

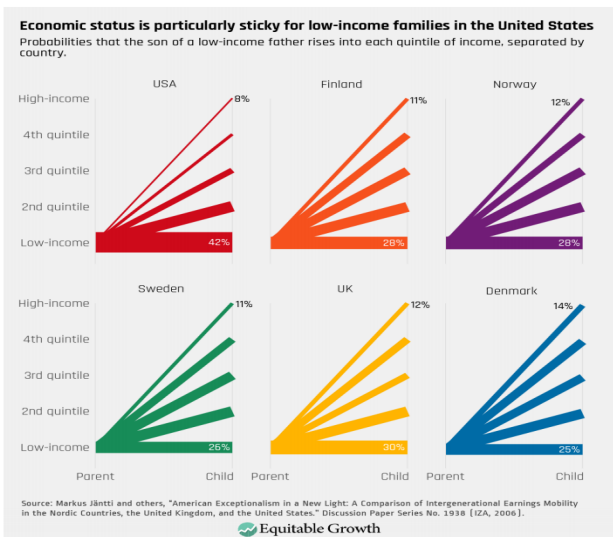
# Transition Probabilities in the United States



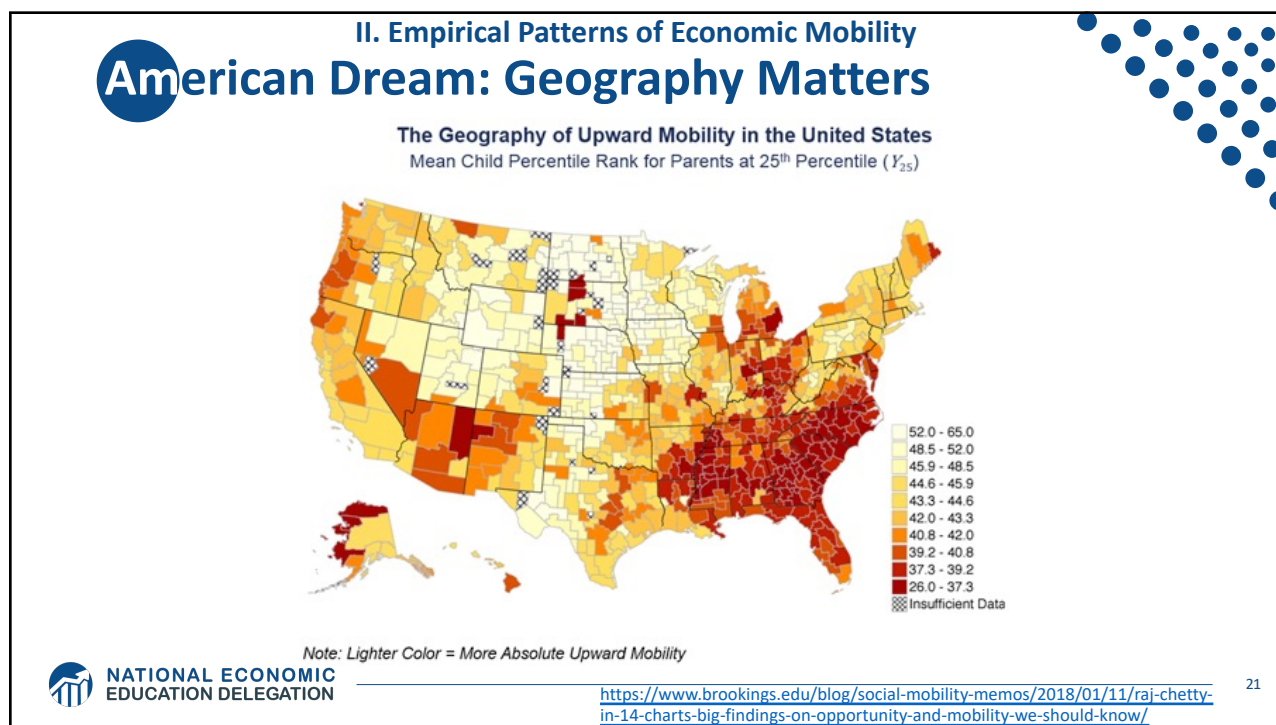
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## II. Empirical Patterns of Economic Mobility

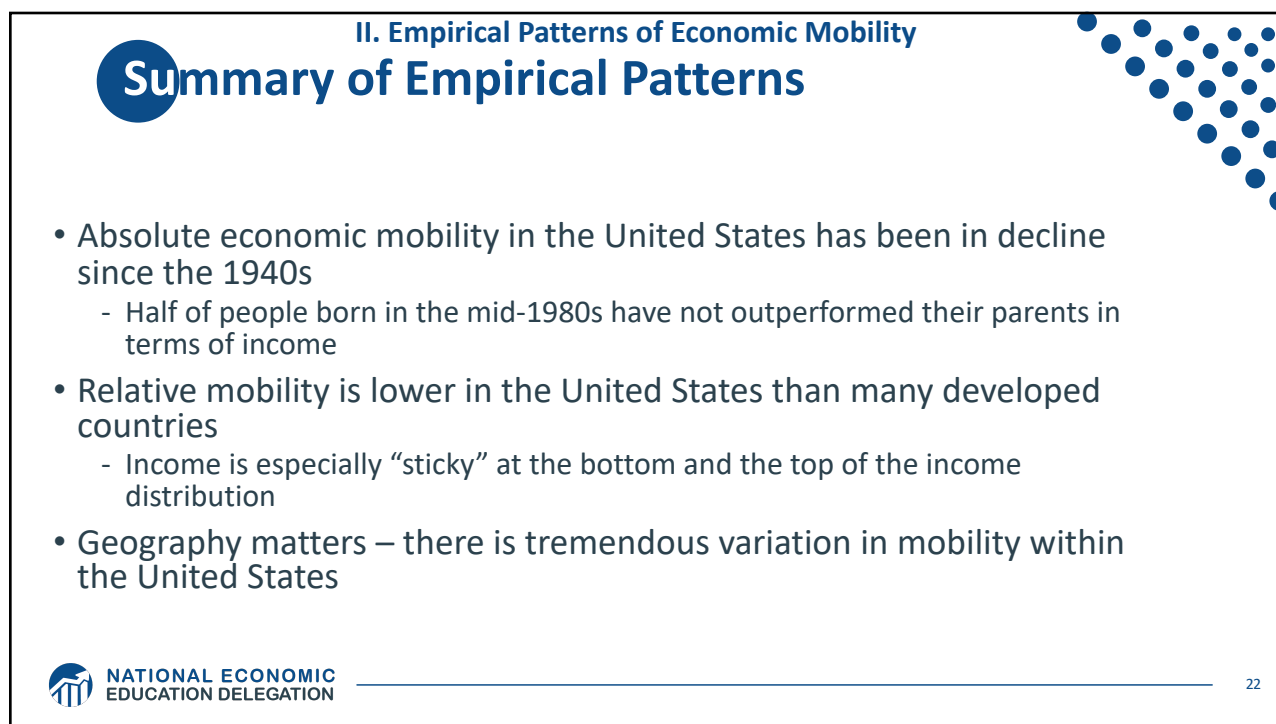
# Transitions: International Comparisons



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## III. What is the desirable level of economic mobility?

Economically what is optimal? What do people think is optimal?  
Mobility and Inequality



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### III. What is the Desirable Level of Economic Mobility

## Absolute or Relative Mobility?

- Upward *absolute* mobility of the whole population is unambiguously desirable (it's hard to defend *not* wanting everyone to be better off!)  
The fact that half the population is treading water should worry us.
- But, *relative* mobility is a *zero-sum game*: for some people to rank higher than their parents did, others have to rank *lower*.



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### III. What is the Desirable Level of Economic Mobility

## The “Right” Level of Relative Mobility

- **Efficiency**
  - Want to provide incentives in order to get economic growth
- **Equity**
  - Want a system that is “fair”

**What is the *optimal* level of relative mobility?**  
 This is a hard question, one which we may not be able to answer or agree on.

**Is current relative mobility too low (or too high)?**  
 The answer would suggest the best incremental steps to take towards a better outcome, and policy changes are best done in incremental steps in any case.



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### III. What is the Desirable Level of Economic Mobility

## Survey Says on Upward Mobility from the BOTTOM


‘Ideal’ rates of upward mobility from the bottom

Group	End up in poorest 20%	End up in 2nd poorest 20%	End up in middle 20%	End up in 2nd richest 20%	End up in richest 20%
Liberals (ideal)	18	23	28	17	14
Conservatives (ideal)	18	22	25	18	17
Pew data (actual)	43	27	17	9	4

Group

Percent

Source: Davidai, S., & Gilovich, T. (2015). *Building a more mobile America—One income quintile at a time. Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 10, 60–71.

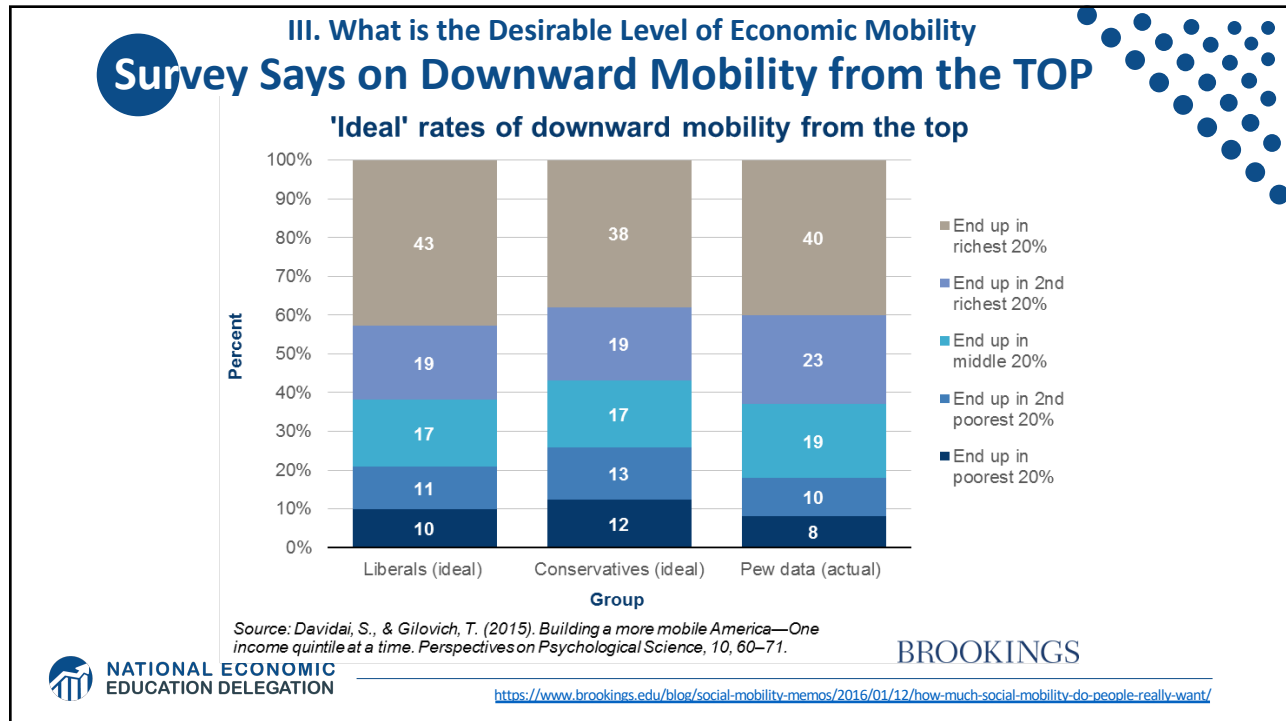


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**BROOKINGS**

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/social-mobility-memos/2016/01/12/how-much-social-mobility-do-people-really-want/>

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### III. What is the Desirable Level of Economic Mobility

## Preferences hit Awkward Truth: Math

- **Again: relative mobility is a zero-sum game**
  - There are only so many spots in the top quintile (only 20% of population can be there)
    - o Preferences want:
      - 43% of them for kids born into the top
      - 16% for those born into the bottom
      - Leaves about 14% for each of the other 3 quintiles
    - o Preferences are inconsistent
      - Greater upward mobility for the bottom than the middle?
- **Results are intuitive:**
  - Stickiness at the top
  - Mobility from the bottom
- **...but inconsistent:**
  - What about the middle?

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### III. What is the Desirable Level of Economic Mobility

## Public Perception and Sentiment

- **Perception: “American Dream” vs “Old World”**
  - General belief is that the U.S. has *greater mobility* than elsewhere.
    - Fewer explicit barriers – no nobility titles.
    - More meritocratic – “rags to riches”, Heratio Alger
    - The American Dream plays a significant part in national identity.
  
- **Reality: Overestimate of actual mobility**
  - Common perception is incorrect.



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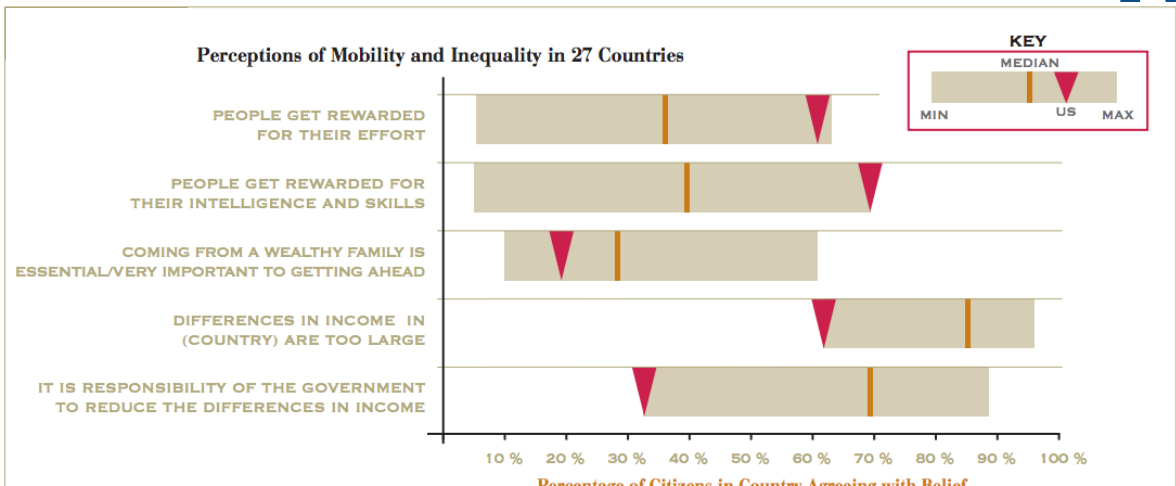
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### III. What is the Desirable Level of Economic Mobility

## The “American Dream” Shapes Perceptions


Perceptions of Mobility and Inequality in 27 Countries



Statement	MIN (%)	MEDIAN (%)	US (%)	MAX (%)
PEOPLE GET REWARDED FOR THEIR EFFORT	10	38	65	70
PEOPLE GET REWARDED FOR THEIR INTELLIGENCE AND SKILLS	10	40	70	75
COMING FROM A WEALTHY FAMILY IS ESSENTIAL/VERY IMPORTANT TO GETTING AHEAD	15	30	20	65
DIFFERENCES IN INCOME IN (COUNTRY) ARE TOO LARGE	60	85	65	95
IT IS RESPONSIBILITY OF THE GOVERNMENT TO REDUCE THE DIFFERENCES IN INCOME	35	70	35	90

Percentage of Citizens in Country Agreeing with Belief

Source: Brookings tabulation of data from the International Social Survey Program, 1998–2001.



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[https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/02\\_economic\\_mobility\\_sawhill.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/02_economic_mobility_sawhill.pdf)

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## IV. Exploring channels/barriers to upward mobility and policy options

Focus on Education and Career Opportunities



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## IV. Exploring Channels/Barriers to Upward Mobility and Policy Options

### Barriers to Upward Mobility

- **Key Question:**

What are the factors that might prevent someone born in a low-income household from doing as well as their richer counterpart?

- **Answers:**

- Birth Lottery
- Structural barriers



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## IV. Exploring Channels/Barriers to Upward Mobility and Policy Options

### Barriers to Upward Mobility – Birth Lottery

- **Early advantages**

- *Innate (genetic) advantages:*
  - Inherited ability, medical conditions, psychological traits
- *Environmental factors:*
  - **In utero:** pre-natal care, mother's nutrition, exposure to abuse or stress.
  - **Home environment** which promotes healthy development, transmission of family values
  - Availability of **role models**, mentors, neighborhood effects.
  - Availability of **good educators**, facilities, peers

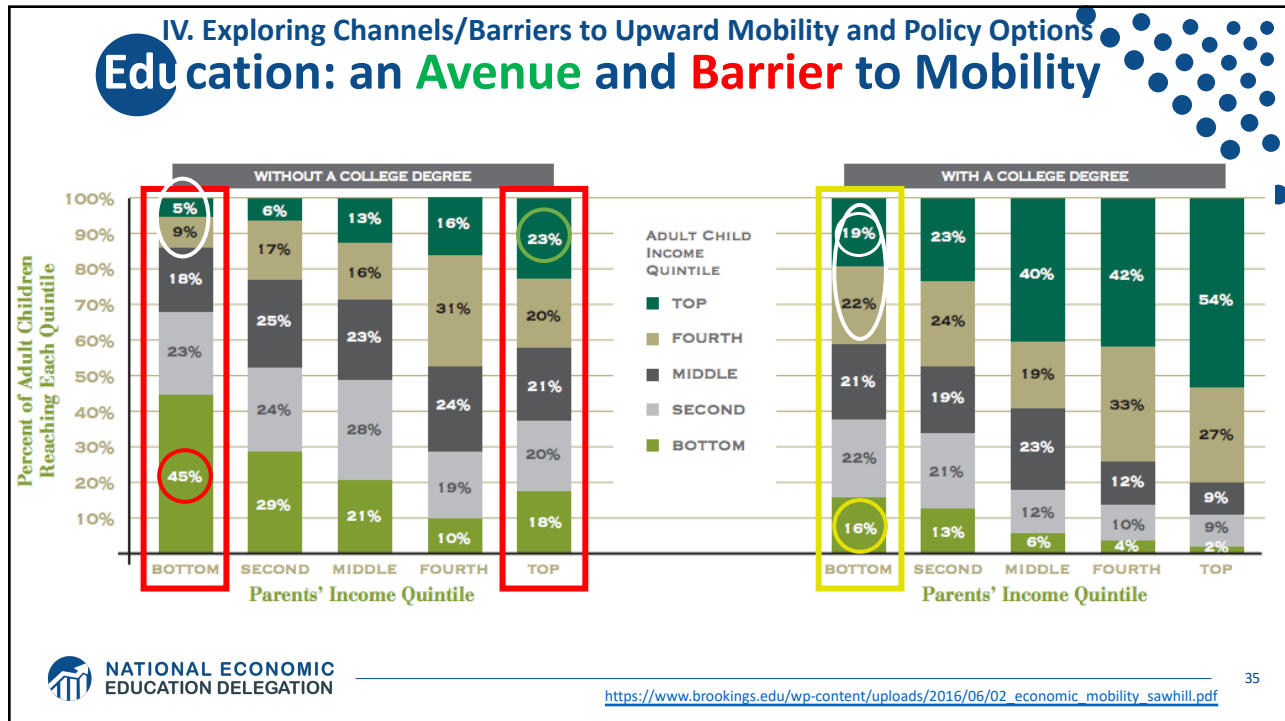


## IV. Exploring Channels/Barriers to Upward Mobility and Policy Options

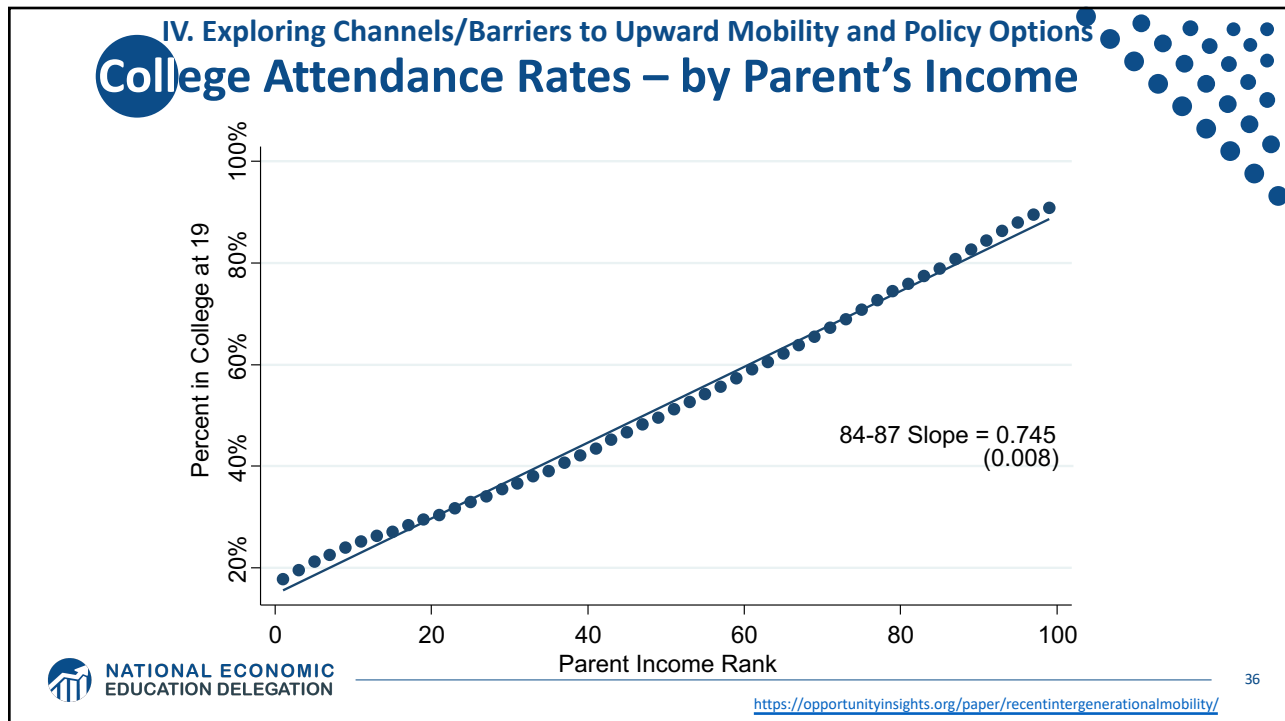
### Barriers to Upward Mobility – Structural

- **Selective access to quality higher education**
  - Preferential admission for legacy and donor families.
  - Expectation of extra-curricular activities, AP classes, etc.
- **Effective access to family planning (sex ed, contraceptives, abortion)**
  - Teen births reduce outcomes for both mother and child.
- **Access to lucrative employment**
  - Reliance on personal connections, homophily, racism, sexism...
- **Access to entrepreneurship and invention**
  - initial capital and insurance against negative shocks, social networks.
- **Direct transmission of income-earning assets**





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IV. Exploring Channels/Barriers to Upward Mobility and Policy Options

## Career Opportunities: an Avenue and Barrier to Mobility

- Business Ownership
- Inventions
- Job Networks

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IV. Exploring Channels/Barriers to Upward Mobility and Policy Options

## Career Opportunities – Business Incorporation

- Ownership of a business is a big indicator of wealth accumulation
- Children from a wealthy family are more likely to incorporate a business


Average outcome rank by parent wealth decile - by business ownership

Parent Wealth Centile	Never owned a business (own wealth rank %)	Incorporated business (own wealth rank %)
0	~28	~35
10	~32	~38
20	~35	~42
30	~38	~45
40	~42	~48
50	~45	~52
60	~48	~55
70	~52	~60
80	~55	~65
90	~58	~70
100	~62	~75

Number of Records: 18, 50, 100, 144

Business ownership (det): Never owned a business, Unincorp. only, Incorporated business

Graph from Sarada and Toccoian (2018)

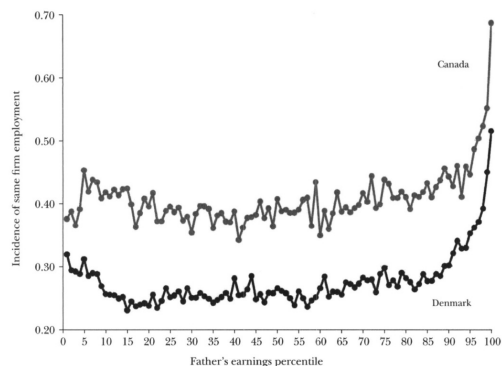
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## IV. Exploring Channels/Barriers to Upward Mobility and Policy Options Career Opportunities – employment networks

- 2 out of 3 sons of the top earners in Canada get access to their father’s employer.
- Much less access at lower levels of parental earnings.

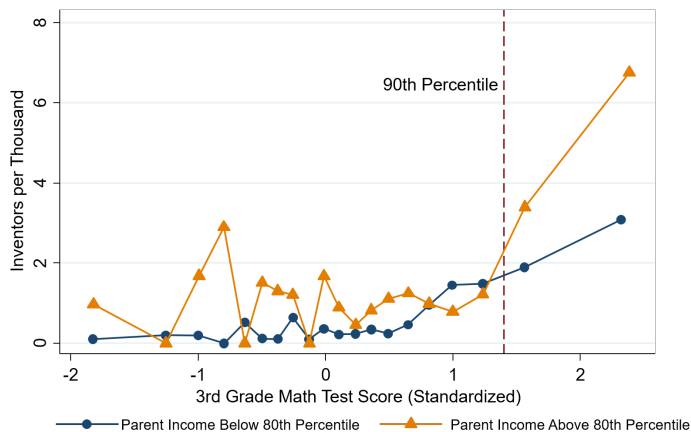
Proportion of Sons Currently Employed or Employed at Some Point with an Employer their Father had Worked for in the Past: Canada and Denmark (by father’s earnings percentile)



## IV. Exploring Channels/Barriers to Upward Mobility and Policy Options Career Opportunities – Inventions

High math-ability 3<sup>rd</sup> graders go on to become inventors *if* their family is well-off.

(Also if they grow up in high-innovation areas)



## IV. Exploring Channels/Barriers to Upward Mobility and Policy Options

# Policy Options

- **Investments in education**
  - Make preparedness for college more universally available.
- **Entrepreneurship**
  - Introduce children to it at an early age and seek to reduce barriers to starting a business.
- **Housing vouchers, public housing, zoning laws**
  - Help underprivileged children grow up in neighborhoods conducive to mobility.
- **Implement policies to reduce inequality.**



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## Summary: Economic Mobility

### I. What do we mean by economic mobility?

- Absolute vs Relative Mobility

### II. Empirical patterns of economic mobility

- Absolute mobility is in decline
- Relative mobility is much lower in the U.S. than elsewhere.
  - o Brings into question the notion of the "American dream".

### III. What is the desirable level of economic mobility?

- Absolute: concern that 50% of kids are treading water or falling behind.
- Relative: not as much as people seem to think there is.

### IV. Exploring channels/barriers to upward mobility and policy options

- Often what is an avenue to mobility at the individual level may be a barrier at the societal level due to structural factors (i.e., Education and Career Opportunities)
- There are plenty of levers to pull to increase mobility.



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**Thank you!**

# Any Questions?

[www.NEEDecon.org](http://www.NEEDecon.org)  
Kathryn Wilson, Ph.D.  
kwilson3@kent.edu

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