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# Social Mobility: What We Know So Far

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Mobility is the wrong object to study

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Intuition: Who moves **up** and who does **not**?

Answers depend on too many factors; question itself invites **confusion**

Intuition: Mobility is **progress** (“Each child had a pretty good shot | to get at least as much as their old man got”)

No mobility table ever had an empty triangle showing no downward mobility

# Mobility is the wrong object to study

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To study equality of opportunity, fairness, justice, ... ask:

**To what degree does success in life — economic success at least — depend on the **circumstances of birth and upbringing**?**

**Recasts parents' attributes as attributes of the research subject**

Mobility is symmetrical in the absence of  
growth & immigration

# Mobility is symmetrical if no growth or immigration

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Downward moves offset upward moves if each origin category is the same size as each destination category (e.g., income quintiles normed separately)

A regression model with zero intercept also predicts a balance between up & down

Percent mobile depends on strength of association (so that part of intuition is correct)

Growth — a redistribution of the destination distribution away from less desirable and toward more desirable occupations or upward toward more money — nets more upward than downward mobility

In a regression model, look for a positive intercept (clearer when X and Y measured as deviations from mean origin)

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Immigration from poorer countries analogous to growth

Immigration from similar countries pretty neutral

Circumstances of birth and upbringing  
— “social origins” —  
meld several factors

# Social origins meld several factors

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**Economic** resources (family income and wealth)

**Employment** status and quality of employment of family members

**Genetic** endowment

**Cultural** endowment, particularly parents' educations

**Family location**: neighborhood, urbanity, state, nation

**Family structure**

Relationships: parents, siblings, grandparents

Stability: separation, divorce, death

**Family heritage**: race, ancestry, nativity, citizenship

**Timing**

Social origins constrain success to varying degrees

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Origin effects decrease as **education** increases (stronger for high school dropouts than college graduates)

Origins may matter more at some **times** than others

Origins probably matter more in some **nations** than others

In the USA, origins used to matter less for **African Americans** than others (probably not since the late 1960s)

**Divorce and non-marriage** may weaken intergenerational link

Decreasing variance in some factors — parents educations and number of siblings

Increasing variance in some others — economic resources.

# Implications for data collection

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Measure full array of origin factors

Economic resources, employment status & quality of employment, genetic endowment(?), parents' (and surrogates) educations, location, structure, stability, and heritage

Sample of sufficient size to detect variations

Broad age range to capture cohort variation

Link to other persons in household to gauge selection

Cluster observations to estimate context effects