

Indicators Of African American Social Mobility In The Past Century

The story of Black Americans in the US begins around 500 years ago. Through the transatlantic slave trade, many Africans were brought to the US by Europeans by force. Approximately over the next 350 years, these people would be the enslaved people that worked for their owners. Only in 1865, slavery in the US would be officially abolished after the civil war. Ironically, though slavery was officially abolished, the story of Black Americans would be a huge struggle, as the book *I Saw Death Coming* by Kidada Williams illustrates the immense amount of violence many Black Americans families would have to face, oftentimes inflicted upon them by those in their own communities. The story told by the data collected through IPUMS USA on the website “African American Social Mobility In The US” starts only around the 1920s, when it was a time directly preceding World War I, where there were complex racial tensions. It runs all the way through the 2020s, or the modern age.

The three main variables that I used as indicators of social mobility in the past century on the website “African American Social Mobility In The US” were socioeconomic status (quantified by SEI), income (quantified by OCCSCORE), and educational attainment (quantified by EDUC). These indicators have some research showing that they are valid indicators of social mobility. In *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Piketty writes, “By contrast, constant growth, even if it is only 0.5 or 1 or 1.5 percent per year, means that new functions are constantly being created and new skills are needed in every generation. Insofar as tastes and capabilities are only partially transmitted from generation to generation (or are transmitted much less automatically and mechanically than capital in land, real estate, or financial assets are transmitted by inheritance), growth can thus increase social mobility for individuals whose parents did not belong to the elite of the previous generation”. This indicates that economic growth is a good

indicator of the level of social mobility, and the economic wellbeing can be measured by socioeconomic status and income level. Piketty also writes, “Both countries attach a great deal of importance to the central role of schools and vocational training in fostering social mobility, yet theoretical discussion of educational issues and of meritocracy is often out of touch with reality, and in particular with the fact that the most prestigious schools tend to favor students from privileged social backgrounds”. Piketty points out the nuance of education as a way of fostering social mobility, but regardless an increase in educational attainment is another good indicator of social mobility.

The first time period that can be examined is from 1920 to 1960. During this time period, Jim Crow laws were present and many forms of terror and violence were inflicted by White Americans on Black Americans. Bowser writes in *The Black middle class: social mobility--and vulnerability*, “From the 1890s through the early 1960s, lynchings claimed hundreds of black lives each year. Between 1882 and 1968, it is estimated that 4,742 blacks were killed by lynch mobs; thousands more were murdered by individual whites, by “nigger hunts” during which victims’ bodies were dumped into rivers and creeks, and by legal lynchings—speedy trials with legally sanctioned executions (Litwack, 2000:12)”. Lynching was just one form of the many forms of terror and extreme violence inflicted upon Black Americans. This ties into Williams' claim in *I Saw Death Coming* that the narrative that reconstruction was simply a failure is not true, rather it was a systemically prevented from succeeding.

Given this context, the first three graphs plotting mean income, mean socioeconomic status, and mean educational attainment do not exactly reflect this. These three graphs represent a steady difference in these three variables between White and Black Americans, indicating a relatively constant social mobility. However, in the next two graphs representing income gains

given education and race and socioeconomic status gains given education and race reflect that the 1940s and 1960s were a time period with lower social mobility, when compared to the 1980s and beyond.

Bowser also writes in *The Black middle class: social mobility--and vulnerability*, “The growth of the black middle class between World War II and the civil rights legislation of the 1960s could be explained in part by two factors—the need for labor created by World War II and the accelerated migration of blacks out of the South after the war”. This can also be seen in the graphs four and five, as there is quite a significant improvement from 1940 to 1960 due to the need for labor created by World War II and the migration. The migration patterns from 1940 to 1960 can also be seen in the very last changing heat map, as there were some changes in the mean income score in different states from 1940 to 1960, even through the 1970s. Many of the states in Northeast, Midwest, and West saw higher mean income scores due to the fact that many Black Americans migrated to these areas.

From the data displayed in the graphs, there were major changes in social mobility between 1960 to 1980, as things seemed to drastically improve. This aligns well with the context of the given time, as Bowser also writes in *The Black middle class: social mobility--and vulnerability*, “The 1964 Civil Rights Acts and presidential Executive Order 11246 constituted the foundation of a new black middle class, just as the Civil Rights Act of 1866 had set the stage for the first”. Bowser also writes, “Between 1970 and 1977, blacks in white-collar jobs increased from 10 percent of black labor to 13 percent (US Census Bureau, 1979:74, 248). In seven years, there was as much progress as in the prior decade. Black college student enrollment more than doubled nationally; blacks made rapid progress toward parity with whites in the professions.” Following the Civil Rights movement and with the enforcement of the Civil Rights Acts and

affirmative action, things took a turn for the better. From the 1960s, moving into the 1980s, things seemed to drastically improve, according to Bowser and also according to the graphs.

The last time period examined is from the 1980s to the modern era or the 2020s. From the data shown in the graphs, progress seemed to slow down, or even went a little backward. According to Galston in his Wall Street Journal article “Not There Yet on Equal Opportunity; African-American social mobility climbed until 2000, then a troubling slide began” he writes, “But the 21st century has been a different story. Today, the real median income of black households stands at only \$35,400, down more than 13% from its peak”. Essentially, Galston observes that the progress made until 2000 in terms of decreasing inequality among White and Black Americans and increasing social mobility, seemed to stagnate or even move backwards in recent history.

According to an article by USA Today titled “Upward Mobility Makes It Worse for Minorities”, “Previous research has shown that racial disparities in health are more pronounced at the upper end of the socioeconomic spectrum. For example, college-educated black women are much more likely than less-educated white women to deliver babies who do not survive the first year of life.” This shows that while social mobility indicates one aspect of the amount of inequality and progress, the numbers do not show the full picture. Even if social mobility and progress were to come to an all time high, there still lie many issues deeper intertwined in society, including racism. According to a study done by Assari in a scholarly journal titled “Race, Intergenerational Social Mobility and Stressful Life Events”, “These findings are consistent with the theory of minorities’ diminished returns [23,24], which suggests that SES is less consequential for non-White than White Americans. African Americans experience SLE, regardless of their social mobility, a pattern that is very different for White Americans”. This is

consistent with the previous article's claim and shows that social mobility is just one of many issues that Black Americans face.

Ultimately, it is very crucial to be aware of the history and story of Black Americans in the United States. Though the situation has drastically improved over the past couple centuries, there is still so much progress to be made. The story that the numbers tell of the social mobility of Black Americans after being put into the context of its time is a compelling one, but it is important to remember that social mobility is just one of many crucial issues that need to be investigated.