




# The changing geography of social mobility in the United States

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Edited by Susan Hanson, Clark University, Worcester, MA, and approved October 13, 2020 (received for review May 20, 2020)

**New evidence shows that intergenerational social mobility—the rate at which children born into poverty climb the income ladder—varies considerably across the United States. Is this current geography of opportunity something new or does it reflect a continuation of long-term trends? We answer this question by constructing data on the levels and determinants of social mobility across American regions over the 20th century. We find that the changing geography of opportunity-generating economic activity restructures the landscape of intergenerational mobility, but factors associated with specific regional structures of interpersonal and racial inequality that have “deep roots” generate persistence. This is evident in the sharp decline in social mobility in the Midwest as economic activity has shifted away from it and the consistently low levels of opportunity in the South even as economic activity has shifted toward it. We conclude that the long-term geography of social mobility can be understood through the deep roots and changing economic fortunes of places.**

intergenerational mobility | geography | inequality | race | economic history

**T**he United States has long been heralded as the land of opportunity, offering unique opportunities for hard-working people to escape poverty. This reputation has come under scrutiny in light of recent evidence showing that Americans' prospects of climbing the income ladder are no better than those of their counterparts living elsewhere (1–4). The long-term de-

long-term trends. We examine influences across 467 subregions of the country or “state economic areas” (SEAs) and further aggregate up to the scale of six broad regions. SEAs, rather than neighborhoods, are a more suitable scale for which to pursue a long-term analysis because the spatial boundaries and populations of neighborhoods can be particularly variable over time; we therefore do not attempt to replicate the neighborhood focus of recent studies. There have also been considerable changes in regional migration patterns over the long term and, thus, between places of childhood, where children are exposed to environments that affect their schooling and development, and the locales where, as adults, they intersect with economic opportunities and, hence, are (or are not) upwardly mobile. Thus, we also consider how changing migration patterns across regions relate to ISM.

We reach back to the early 20th century via a longitudinal sample of more than 1 million individuals (observed in 1920 and 1940) from the restricted complete-count decennial censuses of the United States. We build these data by applying record linkage algorithms to restricted census data made available through a collaboration between the Minnesota Population Center and Ancestry.com. To ascertain long-term changes in intergenerational mobility we combine these estimates with recently published data for the late 20th century from Opportunity Insights. These data allow us to follow children born to low-income parents from childhood to adulthood. ISM is defined as the average adult income rank of children born to parents at the 25th