

Economic Inequality, Intergenerational Mobility, and Belief in Meritocracy in the United States

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Abstract

How does the context in which people live affect their belief in their ability to get ahead through hard work? In a prominent recent study, Newman, Johnston, and Lown (2015) argue that higher levels of local income inequality lead people to become more likely to reject the dominant U.S. ideology of meritocracy, but the results of this research are not reproducible and so the question remains open. The present work brings more and better data as well as an improved specification to examine how, if at all, local contexts shape Americans' beliefs that people can get ahead if they are willing to work hard. Although there is no evidence at all that local income inequality affects beliefs in meritocracy among people of any income, local levels of intergenerational mobility are substantially associated with rejection of the claim that most can get ahead if they are willing to work hard.

References

Newman, Benjamin J., Christopher D. Johnston, and Patrick L. Lown. 2015. “False Consciousness or Class Awareness? Local Income Inequality, Personal Economic Position, and Belief in American Meritocracy.” *American Journal of Political Science* 59(2):326–340.