

State of the Nation 2022: A Fresh Approach to Social Mobility

Introduction and background

This report from the Social Mobility Commission challenges traditional approaches to social mobility which have focussed on widening access to university and enabling more people to gain access to elite universities. It points out how many interventions have focused on getting people to leave the place where they grew up, acquire high academic credentials, and gain entry into an elite professional occupation. The Commission argues for a more nuanced and broader approach which goes beyond a rigid focus on the 'top' and the 'bottom'. It sets out a new framework within which it examines the key drivers of social mobility and how outcomes have changed over recent years. In the forward to the report, the Commission's Chair, Katherine Birbalsingh states that 'through this report and our wider agenda, we wish to chart a new course for the Commission.' Moving forward, the Commission will undertake research to gain a better understanding of what real people think about social mobility, so that the work of the Commission is aligned to their needs and wants. The full report provides a number of examples of social mobility.

Key points and findings

A new social mobility index

- 'Social mobility' refers to the link between our starting point in life, and where we end up. When our starting point strongly determines where we end up, mobility is low. But if people from all starting points and backgrounds have a good chance of achieving any outcome, then mobility is high.
- The term 'social mobility' has been widely used, with a range of different meanings. But to have a useful basis for public discourse and policy, there is a need to look at a range of clearly defined social mobility outcome measures, consistently over time.
- Without dismissing the importance of work undertaken to date, the Commission will adopt a fresh approach, which sees social mobility as the process of enabling everyone to find and apply their talents in ways that they enjoy and gives them purpose.
- The previous Social Mobility Index focused on differences in children's educational performance across English local authorities, together with some measures of social conditions such as poverty. It did not include any final social mobility outcomes, i.e., it did not examine where those children ended up in life, to understand how their starting conditions might have harmed or helped them. The new index will therefore distinguish between mobility measures and drivers of mobility, drivers being the background conditions which make social mobility easier.
- To select drivers for the index, the Commission conducted a thorough review of the literature and consulted with experts. Drivers were included if there was good enough evidence that they had a causal influence on rates of social mobility. Other drivers may be added, or some which are included may be removed as evidence evolves over time.
- There are likely to be other drivers of social mobility which cannot be included due to lack of data. Many of these 'hidden drivers' may be personal and cultural,

such as work ethic, perceptions of success, parenting styles, and the home learning environment. If the Commission identifies ways to measure hidden drivers, and the evidence is strong enough to justify their inclusion, then they may be added to the index.

- The new index will look at social mobility outcomes themselves. It will focus on the mobility outcome of occupational class, and add further outcomes like income, wealth, education, and housing, in line with the data available.
- The new index will look at 5 yearly measures of intermediate outcomes – i.e., what young people are doing when still in education or in early working life. They will be based on pooled data of intersectionality between socio-economic background and other characteristics (such as sex, ethnicity, disability, and place). It will also look at annual measures of intermediate outcomes such as educational attainment and post-school transitions into the labour market.
- The Commission has identified important data gaps, which make reporting on social mobility, and targeting policies on those most in need, more difficult. For example, there is no administrative dataset covering income at the family level.
- Reporting mobility measures clearly and up front makes it easier to define the state of social mobility in the UK and understand what is going well, and where improvement is needed.

Mobility outcomes

- The dominant view in politics and the media has been that social mobility in the UK is in decline and that the UK compares very badly with other countries. But the evidence is not as gloomy as the popular narrative. The absolute rates in the UK are similar to those of other European countries that are at a similar stage in the evolution of their labour markets.



- The UK's total occupational mobility rate has remained stable for many decades. This is an absolute measure that gives the percentage of people in a different occupational class from their parents.
- In the late 20th century, there was a large surplus of upward over downward mobility. Men born in the 1930s had particularly favourable mobility chances because of the expansion of managerial and professional jobs. Nearly 40 per cent experienced upward mobility at or after the age of 35 and just less than 20 per cent. experienced downward mobility. This has been called the 'golden age' of social mobility.
- As a consequence, the working classes have steadily decreased over time. In 1951, around 11 per cent of economically active people were in professional and managerial jobs. By 2011, this had risen to 30 per cent. Meanwhile, the percentage in working-class jobs fell from around 69 per cent to 39 per cent.
- However, the expansion has slowed since 1991, so this 'room at the top' has been growing more slowly recently. This is, however, a sign of success – it is because the professional class has grown so much in the last 70 years.
- To explore mobility rates with the effects of labour-market changes taken out, we need to look at relative mobility. Relative mobility focuses on the question: how does people's social class background affect their chances of obtaining one class position rather than another? Measures of relative mobility can be thought of as describing the strength of the intrinsic link (or 'stickiness') between parents' and adult children's positions.
- There is clearly a relationship between class of origin and class of destination. For example, a man with NS-SEC 1 origins (a higher-professional family background) has 20 times better odds than a man with NS-SEC 7 origins (a routine working-class background), of reaching an NS-SEC 1 destination, rather than an NS-SEC 7 destination. But such disparities, while large, have not worsened over time. They may even have slightly narrowed.
- Occupational class is not the same as salary – it does not provide the full picture. For example, people in lower occupational jobs can have a higher income than those in professional jobs. For example, a plumber earns more than a nurse.
- There is less consensus on mobility in other outcomes such as income, wealth, housing, and education. Trends in these mobility outcomes may be different. For example, there probably has been a decline in absolute and relative income mobility for people born in the late 1970s and beyond.

Intermediate outcomes

- The popular narrative of worsening mobility prospects for young people in the UK is not supported when we take a careful look at a range of outcomes across education and employment.
- Almost every gap in our intermediate outcomes between young people from higher and lower socio-economic backgrounds has narrowed in the past decade. There are still disparities, but there has been progress across all measures.
- Intermediate outcomes in education and work have been trending in a positive direction. Educational attainment gaps between pupils from higher and lower socio-economic backgrounds have narrowed,

especially at key stages 2 and 4. At key stage 2, the gap is around 13 per cent narrower in 2019 than it was in 2013. At key stage 4, the gap has narrowed by around 7 per cent between 2011 and 2021.

- The rates of young people from professional class backgrounds undertaking full-time first degrees has remained relatively stable, especially for women (men 44.6% in 2014 and 37.2% in 2021 versus women 45.8% in 2014 and 43.7% in 2021). But the respective rates of men and women from working-class backgrounds have risen from 9.8 to 21.7 per cent and 16.4 to 32 per cent over time.
- In terms of early career, the gap between people from professional and working class backgrounds has decreased for most of our occupational and economic outcomes since 2014. The percentage of young people from working-class backgrounds in education, training or apprenticeships rose from 25% in 2014 to 28.9% in 2021. Over the same time, the percentage of those from professional class backgrounds remained relatively stable (from 34.1% to 33.9%).
- In some cases, there are different trends for men and women. For example, the gap in earnings between women of professional and working-class backgrounds has widened since 2014.

Drivers of social mobility

- Trends in the drivers of social mobility over the last 20 years are generally positive.
- The conditions of childhood have tended to improve over the past 2 decades, in terms of both finances and parental education levels.
- Opportunities for good-quality education and employment have also improved. The UK's education system has been performing at or above the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average since 2006. Maths, in particular, has improved recently.
- Job opportunities are currently high, and youth unemployment has trended downwards since the 2008 financial crisis.
- Young people's median real hourly pay has increased steadily and now exceeds its pre-financial crisis high. The balance of professional over working-class jobs taken by young people has also improved
- Levels of social capital (trust and community relationships) in the UK compare well with those in other countries, although civic engagement has declined since the 1990s, and feelings of safety have decreased sharply from 2020 to 2021.
- There are different trends in household finances when we consider the longer term because income inequality and relative child poverty rose significantly in the 1980s and have never fallen back to the levels seen in the 1960s and 1970s.
- The full effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are still unlikely to be shown in the data.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/state-of-the-nation-2022-a-fresh-approach-to-social-mobility>