

“Getting Ahead: Economic and Social Mobility in America”

Urban Institute Press, 2100 M St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20037. 100 pp. \$49.50; paper, \$18.95

Authors: Daniel P. McMurrer and Isabel V. Sawhill

Even as racial bias and other barriers to equal economic opportunity have fallen away in recent decades, an important part of the proverbial American Dream—which promises individuals that they will be able to live better than their parents did—has been receding from view for many Americans. So report McMurrer, a senior researcher at the American Society for Training and Development, in Alexandria, Virginia, and Sawhill, a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution, in Washington.

The “good news” is that the economic and social status of one’s parents, while still important, is now less of a determining factor in one’s fortunes than it was in the past. Its importance diminished by one-third in less than a generation, according to one study. By 1988, the son of a blue-collar worker had a nearly 40 percent chance of reaching white-collar status. More meritocratic hiring practices, reduced self-employment, and increased access to higher education are responsible for the trend, the authors say.

But stalled economic growth has almost offset the effects of increased intergenerational upward mobility, producing fewer “good” jobs and stagnant income growth rates for workers who fail to rise. Lagging productivity keeps

their wages down. Though the college educated have seen their pay rise sharply, entry-level wages for a male high school graduate working full-time were less than \$16,000 in 1995—more than \$6,000 (in constant dollars) lower than entry-level wages in 1973.

There is substantial movement up and down the economic ladder during people’s working years, the authors note. Some move up as they acquire skills and experience or find better jobs; some move down because of a layoff, divorce, or business failure. If the population is segmented into fifths by income, an estimated 25 to 40 percent shift to a new quintile each year. The mobility rate has hardly changed in a quarter-century, but in recent years, college graduates have been more likely than others to be upwardly mobile.

The edge enjoyed by the college educated has become a major source of inequality, the authors maintain, and family background very strongly influences whether youths go to college, where they go, and whether they stay on to graduate. Although many employers now insist on a college degree, they often are really only looking for strong basic skills, the authors believe. The best available way to fight inequality, they argue, is to restore the value of a high school diploma.

Cover: Illustration by Alan Brown, Photonics Graphics; p. 9, Culver Pictures, Inc.; p. 17, © Sygma/J. P. Laffont; p. 19, Property of AT&T Archives. Reprinted with permission of AT&T; p. 21, © 1995 T. J. Florian/Photo Network; p. 22, *Doonesbury*, © 1998 Garry Trudeau. Reprinted with permission of Universal Press Syndicate. All rights reserved; p. 25, AP/Wide World Photos, Charles Bennett; p. 29, *Fin de Siècle Man* (1992), by Nam June Paik. Photograph by Chris Gomien, Courtesy of Carl Solway Gallery; p. 31, Courtesy of Jason Kelly, JK Press; p. 35, *Moon, Antares, Earth, Sun* (1990), by Nam June Paik. Courtesy of Carl Solway Gallery; p. 39, AP/Wide World Photos; pp. 41, 45, Courtesy of Intel Corporation; p. 49, *Universal Man III*, © 1992 Paul Giovanopoulos; p. 52, Xinhua-Chine Nouvelle/Gamma Liaison; p. 54, © Black Star; pp. 55, 120, UPI/Corbis-Bettmann; p. 57, *Banality of Evil/Struthof*, From the *Holocaust Project* © Judy Chicago, 1989, Sprayed acrylic, oil and photography on photolinen, 30 1/4" x 43 1/4", Photograph © Donald Woodman; p. 61, *Feather River* (1992), by Chuck Forsman, Courtesy of Robischon Gallery, Denver, Colo.; p. 67, Irina Andreescu-Treadgold, Courtesy of Warren Treadgold; p. 71, The British Library; p. 72, Giraudon/Art Resource, N.Y.; pp. 73, 76, 77, 79, 87, From the Madrid Chronicle of John Skylitzes, Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid, Spain; pp. 74, 75, Photo by Soprintendenza per i Beni Ambientali e Architettonici, Ravenna, Courtesy of Warren Treadgold; pp. 80, 132, © Erich Lessing/Art Resource, N.Y.; p. 82, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Courtesy of Warren Treadgold; p. 88, Bildarchiv der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek, Courtesy of Warren Treadgold; p. 93, *The County Election*, mezzotint by John Sartain after George Caleb Bingham, The Granger Collection, New York; p. 96, Reproduced from *Anton Chekov: A Life*, by Donald Rayfield, Courtesy of Henry Holt Publishers; pp. 99, 104, Corbis-Bettmann; p. 101, Courtesy of Harper Collins Publishers; p. 102, Courtesy of Daniel Molloy, New York State Museum; p. 108, Rich Freeda, © Titansports, Inc.; p. 118, Courtesy of Chicago Historical Society; p. 123, Photograph by Scott Eklund; p. 127, © 1995 Eli Reed/Magnum Photos, Inc.; p. 128, © 1998 Wiley Miller, Washington Post Writers Group; p. 134, Crucifixion (c. 1585-1590), Attributable to Kesu Das, Lucknow State Museum, Lucknow, India, Courtesy of the Sackler Museum, Smithsonian Institution, and Gauvin Alexander Bailey; p. 136, *Sunday, Women Drying Their Hair* (1912), by John Sloan, oil on canvas, 26 x 32 inches, 1938.67, © Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Mass.; p. 139, © Mirek Szepietowski, Sovfoto/Eastfoto; p. 144, Photo by James Carman.