



Absolute Income Mobility Obscures Marginalized Children's Disadvantages

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Intergenerational mobility captures the distance between the socioeconomic positions of parents versus their adult children. Researchers measure this distance in absolute and relative units, such as absolute dollars and relative ranks. Absolute and relative mobility often diverge. For example, absolute mobility can rise while relative mobility declines. How should scholars and policymakers understand this divergence? We conclude that they should understand it as follows: absolute mobility is less reflective than relative mobility of marginalized children's socioeconomic disadvantages. We base this conclusion on analyses of survey, administrative, and simulated data on income mobility in the contemporary United States. We analyze multiple points of difference in mobility, which facilitates the recognition of several asymmetries. First, high-income children's experiences weigh more heavily in absolute-mobility trends than low-income children's experiences, particularly when economic growth is positive. Second, this asymmetry is more characteristic of absolute-than relative-mobility trends. Third, absolute-mobility differences across demographic groups are more prone than relative-mobility differences to obscure marginalized groups' socioeconomic disadvantages. These asymmetries have policy implications: We caution that focusing on absolute mobility as a policy target can divert attention away from society's most disadvantaged children.

Deirdre BLOOME is the Peter and Isabel Malkin Professor of Public Policy and Professor of Sociology at Harvard University, where she serves as the Director of the Stone Program in Wealth Distribution, Inequality, and Social Policy and the Chair of the Ph.D. program in Social Policy. Her work focuses on socioeconomic mobility, racial inequality, family demography, and quantitative methods. She holds a Ph.D. in Sociology and Social Policy and an A.M. in Statistics from Harvard University. Her research has been published in outlets including the American Journal of Sociology, the American Sociological Review, Demography, and the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences; it has been supported by funders including the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, and the Russell Sage Foundation; and it has been recognized by awards including the William Julius Wilson Early Career Award from the American Sociological Association's section on Inequality, Poverty, and Mobility.

Upcoming talk from "Intergenerational Mobility Webinar Series"

- Prof. Hong Wing TAM @CUHK (March 17, 2025)