

Greater academic achievement in high school increases likelihood of moving away

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High school students who completed higher levels of math, performed better academically, and had a greater sense of control of their future were more likely to migrate and work in labor markets with larger shares of college-educated workers, according to a new study by sociologists at The University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin).

The United States has one of the highest internal migration rates in the world, with nearly one in four adults moving from one U.S. city to another in the past five years, as reported in a Gallup survey. Migration shapes the national landscape—sometimes at the expense of equality of opportunity across labor markets. "Innovative" labor-markets with higher shares of college-educated workers expand due to economic growth and technological innovation and attract even more highly skilled workers, leaving other labor-markets behind, the researchers said.

"The uneven expansion of high-skilled jobs creates geographic inequalities in the workforce opportunities and differential opportunities for upward social mobility across generations," said lead-author Chandra Muller, a UT Austin sociology professor and research associate in the university's Population Research Center.

In their paper, which they will present at the 111th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association (ASA), Muller and her team of researchers analyzed the evolution of spatial inequality by examining the role of [high school](#) curriculum and performance in an individual's decision to move by midlife.

The researchers used data from the High School and Beyond sophomore cohort—a nationally representative sample of 14,825 sophomores in 1,015 U.S. high schools initially surveyed in 1980 and surveyed again in 1984, 1986, 1992, and 2014, when the respondents were around 50 years old—to weigh the influence of cognitive and non-cognitive skills, college preparatory courses, and academic degrees attained on migration between adolescence and midlife, over a time period that saw a rise in technology that drastically changed occupational demands.

In the sample, 36 percent of people moved across labor markets between high school and midlife, and they migrated an average distance of 676 miles. A person's level of internal locus of control, or the extent to which people believe they control their own destiny, was one predictor of who moved, with those ranked in the 68th percentile of locus of control being 3 percent more likely to move than those with average (50th percentile) levels of locus of control.

The researchers also found that people who had achieved more academically in high school—as indicated by their test scores, their GPAs, and taking advanced math coursework—were all more likely to move. For example, people who performed in the 68th percentile of the math achievement test were 2.3 percent more likely to move than those at the 50th percentile. Having a GPA in the 68th percentile increased the probability of moving by 2.5 percentage points over having an average GPA. And students who completed advanced mathematics were 6.2 percent more likely to move than students who only completed algebra 2, who were 4.2 percent more likely to move than students who had completed neither algebra 2 nor advanced mathematics.

"Data showed that some of the effects of academic preparation on moving were due to students attending college—some likely first moved to attend college," Muller said.

The researchers also found that by midlife, individuals who had earned at least a bachelor's degree lived in areas with larger shares of college-educated workers than their high school classmates who had not graduated from college. Having college-educated parents also predicted who lived in areas with a larger share of educated workers by midlife.

"Indeed, the educational gradients in employment, health, and many indicators of well-being have become steeper and opportunities for intergenerational social mobility have declined," Muller said. "Although the data do not allow us to establish whether early skills and education cause migration and living in a labor market with a better economy, the evidence is consistent with the possibility."

The paper, "Migration Within the United States: Education and Skills for Pursuing the American Dream," will be presented on Monday, Aug. 22, in Seattle at the American Sociological Association's 111th Annual Meeting.

Provided by American Sociological Association

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