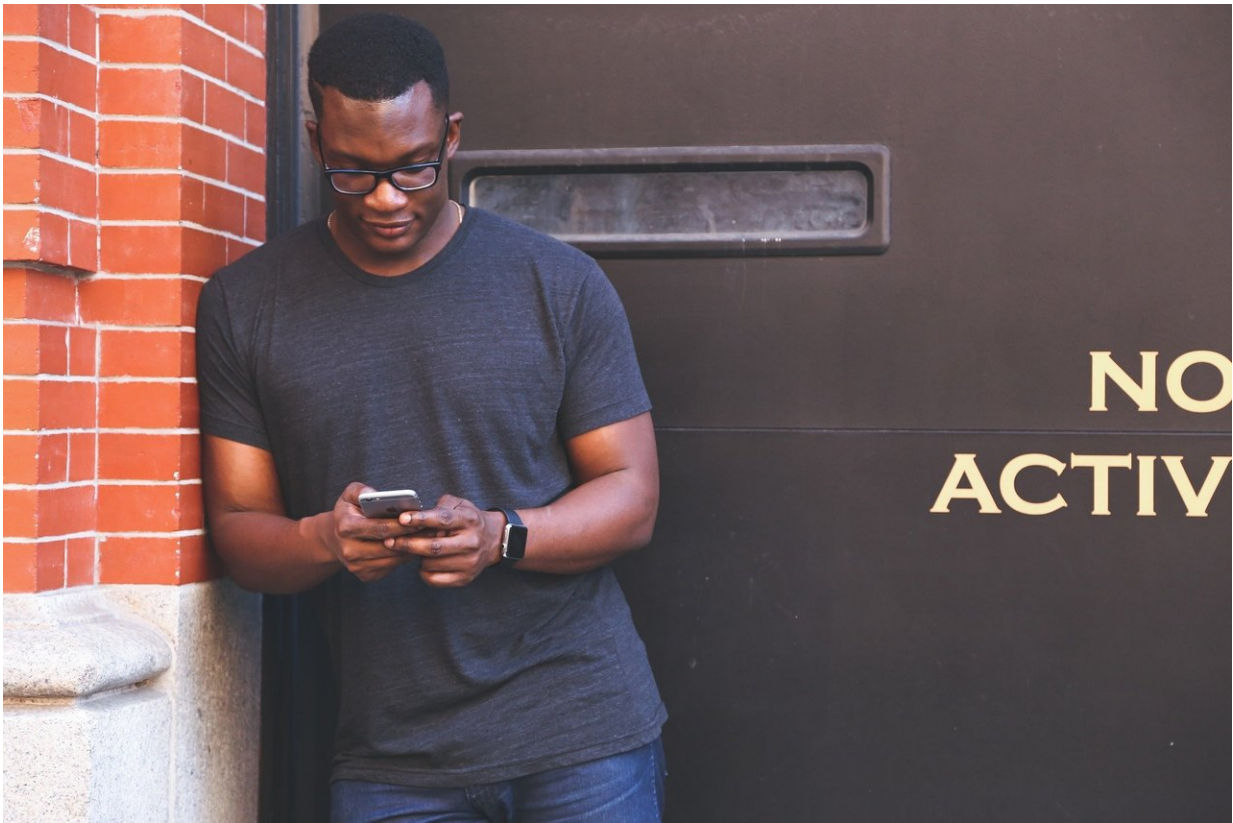


Lack of social mobility more of an 'occupational hazard' than previously known

September 3 2018



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

American workers' occupational status reflects that of their parents more than previously known, reaffirming more starkly that the lack of mobility in the United States is in large part due to the occupation of our

parents, finds a new study by New York University's Michael Hout.

"A lot of Americans think the U.S. has more social mobility than other western industrialized countries," explains Hout, a sociology professor. "This makes it abundantly clear that we have less."

Previous research had used occupation metrics that relied on averages to gauge social status across generations. This dynamic, also called "intergenerational persistence," is the degree to which one generation's success depends on their [parents'](#) resources.

While these studies showed a strong association between parental occupation and intergenerational persistence, they understated the significance of parents' jobs on the status of their children.

The new findings, which appear in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, reveal a more powerful link as they rely on data that use medians, or middle points, as opposed to average socioeconomic status, in gauging [occupations](#).

The findings, which take into account pay and education of those in a given occupation, are based on General Social Survey (GSS) data from 1994 through 2016.

To measure occupation, GSS interviewers asked respondents for detailed descriptions of their current occupation, their father's occupation when they were growing up, and (since 1994) their mother's occupation while they were growing up. Their replies were coded to 539 occupational categories, following protocols established by the U.S. Census Bureau, and then given a socioeconomic score ranging from 9 (shoe shiner) to 53 (flight attendant) to 93 (surgeon).

"The underlying idea is that some occupations are desirable and others

less so," explains Hout.

Notably, the study shows that the sons and daughters of high-status parents have more advantages in the labor force than earlier estimates suggested.

For example, half the sons and daughters whose parents were in the top tier of occupations now work in occupations that score 76 or higher (on a 100-point scale) while half the sons and daughters of parents from the bottom tier now work in occupations that score 28 or less on that scale.

Hout notes that earlier measures—tracking averages instead of medians—would underestimate that range and show less stark distinctions between the top and bottom tiers of occupation status.

Specifically, in the above instance, using averages would show half the sons and daughters whose parents were in the top tier of occupations work in occupations that score only 72 or higher while half the sons and daughters of parents from the bottom tier work in occupations that score up to 33 or less.

"Your circumstances at birth—specifically, what your parents do for a living—are an even bigger factor in how far you get in life than we had previously realized," observes Hout. "Generations of Americans considered the United States to be a land of opportunity. This research raises some sobering questions about that image."

More information: Americans' occupational status reflects the status of both of their parents, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2018). www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1802508115

Provided by New York University

Citation: Lack of social mobility more of an 'occupational hazard' than previously known (2018, September 3) retrieved 20 March 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-09-lack-social-mobility-occupational-hazard.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.