

# Efforts to boost social mobility must move away from escapist 'helicopter' policies, experts warn

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Efforts to boost social mobility must move away from "helicopter" policies designed to encourage some chosen few children to "escape"

their communities, a study warns.

Government and charity schemes based around giving young people a new life in a different location don't address the issues which put young people in need, it says. Instead, efforts should be made to enhance good local academic and vocational education options and linked employment opportunities and lifelong learning.

The [study](#), by Professor Anna Mountford-Zimdars and Professor Neil Harrison from the University of Exeter and Julia Gautler, is published in the *British Educational Research Journal*.

The researchers first interviewed 10 beneficiaries of a U.K. charity-led program that supported disadvantaged students in applying to elite U.S. universities in 2015 during their early university days in the United States.

For this new study, they spoke to them again four years later. All had graduated. Six remained in the United States and four had returned to the United Kingdom, with only one returning to their pre-university community.

All participants reported benefitting immensely from their international opportunities and were nearly all in high-paying graduate jobs or high-profile graduate programs. The majority had undergone a "wholesale escape" from their way of life when they started out in their neighborhoods in the U.K.

The "helicopter mobility" program they had enrolled in allowed them to leave their disadvantaged community behind.

Professor Mountford-Zimdars said, "Such helicopter schemes are not designed to challenge the structure of social reproduction of educational

inequalities, nor do they enhance local employment opportunities. Such helicopter schemes have value for individuals, and they might work as a short-term 'circuit breaker' to disrupt specific patterns of deprivation, but without an effort to disrupt the [opportunity](#) structure for the many.

"Our internationally mobile disadvantaged students were catapulted into outstanding outcomes regarding further study/employment. Yet the theory of change underpinning their mobility was akin to a helicopter: individuals are rescued but structural disadvantages in education and poverty remain unchallenged. As such, the helicopter may inadvertently legitimize and thus perpetuate inequalities by rescuing the few 'deserving' poor and leaving behind those who then might perhaps inadvertently be labeled 'undeserving' poor.

"Helicopter mobility can provide a feel-good smokescreen behind which the education and labor market system does not provide opportunity for many [young people](#)."

Researchers say the students' original identities—associated with growing up in poverty—were not easily recognizable when they interviewed them a second time.

"They spoke about their decision to study abroad with great confidence and recognized that it was a life-changing decision that they did not regret. They were grateful for the opportunity and did not articulate the experience of any sacrifices regarding their decision. Participants recognized that relationships had changed with friends and family. However, they felt this was a natural process and the time away from family was an inevitable part of pursuing bigger dreams and getting older.

"The participants reported a tendency to be 'super-adaptable,' to easily connect with others and build large networks, and by using their

exceptional engaging personalities, interpersonal and academic abilities, acquired valuable cultural and [social capital](#) through creative means. Because of this, they experienced very little maladjustment when transitioning into their first jobs or selective graduate programs."

Researchers say they did not find evidence these students' newfound elite positions are directly influencing structural inequalities in the communities from which they came. Only one had returned to live in their pre-university community—and was indeed struggling to fit in. Those who had remained in the U.S. had no plans to even return to the United Kingdom. This meant there is no feedback mechanism in this helicopter mobility model of inspiring change in their home communities.

**More information:** Anna Mountford-Zimdars et al, Helicopter mobility: Changing habitus without challenging structural inequalities, experiences of an international elite education programme, *British Educational Research Journal* (2023). [DOI: 10.1002/berj.3947](https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3947)

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