Understanding downward social mobility

1 in 5 people experience downward mobility in their lives, with some moving into a vicious cycle of low pay and low self-esteem, a new Social Mobility Commission report has found.

The research carried out for the Commission by Ipsos MORI shows how unfairly that downward movement is shared. Women, notably with children, and non-graduates are more likely to move down than others. But so are children of front-line workers and those from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds, particularly those born outside the UK.

While most policy experts look at ways of helping people move up occupational groups to become more socially mobile, many ignore the fact that to do so others have to move down.

In the post-war decades there was room at the top following a mushrooming of professional and managerial jobs. But this is no longer the case and progress is stagnant. Those from professional classes at the top often hang on to their jobs, through networking and help from their parents. While others, whose parents may have struggled to get into high status jobs, have shifted down.

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has already made us re-evaluate and give higher recognition to key workers such as nurses, porters, cleaners and shop workers and the Commission believes they should also be better rewarded. The Commission calls for a new debate to ensure fairer recognition for a broader range of occupations.

The report Changing gears: understanding downward mobility, is the first to look in depth at the reasons behind downward mobility and the impact it has. It defines those who are downwardly mobile as those who have dropped at least one occupational class below their parents. It also looks at the difference between voluntary and involuntary downward mobility.

The first reason, by choice, could be to improve work life balance or explore a more interesting career. However, others are forced to move down because they don’t have the right qualifications, they lose their jobs, or their circumstances change. This in-depth qualitative research looks at the impact on both these groups. Some felt content to shift down a gear. Others felt undervalued and had lost their sense of purpose.

Steven Cooper, interim co-chair of the Social Mobility Commission said:

> Downward mobility can be an acute struggle for many and there has never been a more important time to recognise this. The pandemic has highlighted the essential role played by nurses, porters, supermarket workers and carers. These workers have always been underpaid and often undervalued. Together, we need to start recognising and rewarding them more fairly.

- 1 in 5 men (21%) and 1 in 4 women (24%), aged 30 to 59, experienced downward mobility between 2014 and 2018 in the UK
- 48% of women whose parents worked in the police, fire or military were downwardly mobile. The equivalent figure for men was 43%
- The downward mobility rates for the children of nurses are 48% for men and 40% for women
- 38% of men and 40% of women from Black African backgrounds, born outside the UK, are likely to be move down an occupational group compared to just over 20% from white British backgrounds
- Nearly a third (32%) of women with 4 or more children experienced downward mobility, compared with 23% with no children
- Graduates have a 15% chance of experiencing downward mobility compared to about 30% for those with GCSEs or below – those studying arts, languages and design are more likely to be downwardly mobile than those studying medicine, education or maths
- Downward mobility is lowest for children of lawyers, doctors, teachers and scientists

The Commission does not make direct recommendations but wants to open up the debate about downward mobility and reassess what 'up' and 'down' look like. For example, the data shows that many children of front line workers have moved 'down' an occupation group partly because occupations such as nursing, the police and the military are now much more likely to be graduate-led than in the past.

The Commission argues that those who do not choose to be downwardly mobile need support and recognition for the work they do. Sometimes this will be higher pay, but it will also be about greater use of apprenticeships, extra training in the right skills and better career progression. The Commission has already drawn up an employers' toolkit to help employers attract and recruit a higher proportion of workers from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Professor Lindsey Macmillan (Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities, UCL) said:

> Downward mobility is the elephant in the room for policy makers hoping to improve rates of social mobility. With the slow-down in growth in top occupations, the only way that people can move up is for others to move down. While it is hard to identify those who have chosen to move down, the balance of the evidence suggests that this is too often a forced state for many, which is accompanied by long-periods of lower wages.

Ben Page, Chief Executive, Ipsos MORI said:

> While there is a lot of attention on upward social mobility, much less attention is paid to downward social mobility. This new study shows that it is much more likely to affect BAME people, and children of some key workers than professionals and white people.

> If this continues, Britain won’t get any more equal. Already the proportion of people who think there is equality of opportunity in Britain has fallen from 53% to 35% in the last 10 years. The consequences of Covid-19 on top of existing trends could be stark.

The study uses three occupational groupings:

- professional occupations – includes directors, doctors, lawyers, teachers, nurses, journalists
- intermediate occupations – includes police officers, secretaries, shopkeepers, garage proprietors, electricians, chefs
- working occupations – includes dental nurses, fitness instructors, bus drivers, hairdressers, cleaners

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Notes to editors

The Social Mobility Commission is an independent advisory non-departmental public body established under the Life Chances Act 2010 as modified by the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016. It has a duty to assess progress in improving social mobility in the UK and to promote social mobility in England.

The Commission board comprises:

- Sandra Wallace, Interim Co-Chair, Joint Managing Director Europe at DLA Piper
- Steven Cooper, Interim Co-Chair, Chief Executive Officer, C. Hoare & Co
- Alastair da Costa, Chair of Capital City College Group
- Farrah Storr, Editor-in-chief, Elle
- Harvey Matthewson, Aviation Activity Officer at Aerobility
- Jessica Oghenegweke, Presenter, BBC Earth Kids
- Jody Walker, Senior Vice President at TJX Europe (TK Maxx and Home Sense in the UK)
- Liz Williams, Chief Executive Officer of Futuredotnow
- Pippa Dunn, Founder of Broody, helping entrepreneurs and start-ups
- Saeed Atcha, Chief Executive Officer of Youth Leads UK
- Sam Friedman, Associate Professor in Sociology at London School of Economics
- Sammy Wright, Vice Principal of Southmoor Academy, Sunderland

Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute brings together methodological and public policy experts dedicated to developing and conducting customised research for clients in the government and public sector to help them make better, evidence-based decisions.

The research was carried out with Dr Luke Sibieta (Sibieta Economics of Education) and Professor Lindsey Macmillan from the Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities, UCL

Quantitative analysis by Professor Lindsey Macmillan and Dr Luke Sibieta

based on secondary analysis of major social surveys. Data were taken from:

- the Labour Force Survey (LFS)
- the National Child Development Study (NCDS), a cohort of all people born in one week in March 1958, and the British Cohort Study (BCS), a cohort of all people born in one week in April 1970
- Understanding Society, a household panel survey that followed 40,000 households from 2010 onwards