Record low mobility reflects US social crisis

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Geographical mobility in America has fallen to the lowest level on record dating back to 1948, according to figures released by the US Census Bureau on Thursday. The sharp fall in mobility—one year after the supposed end of the recession—is one reflection of a deepening social crisis engulfing millions of working people.

The US Census found that only 11.6 percent of the population moved to a new home sometime in the past year, a fall of nearly one percentage point from a year ago (12.5 percent).

There are a number of factors that underlie the sharp decline, including: record levels of poverty, a catastrophic jobs situation affecting most parts of the country, and the collapse of the housing market, which has left many families unable to sell homes that are worth less than they owe.

Young adults, while traditionally the most mobile age group, saw one of the sharpest declines in 2010, falling nearly 2 percentage points, from 25.9 percent to 24.1 percent. Many college graduates and young workers, facing high unemployment rates and record levels of debt, are unable to afford to start a family and are forced to move back in with their parents.

According to a survey conducted last year, 85 percent of college graduates planned to move back in with their parents, up nearly 20 percentage points from 2006. Total college debt in the US is now more than $1 trillion.

Other students are forced to drop out of college altogether, unable to afford soaring tuition rates brought on by budget cuts at the state and federal levels.

In its analysis of the Census data, the Associated Press noted, “The biggest drop-off occurred in local moves, down to 15.4 percent from 17.7 percent in 2010. It’s a sign that young adults in the prolonged slump weren’t even willing to venture outside their counties, continuing instead to live with relatives or on college campuses.”

At the same time, traditional retirement destinations for older Americans, such as Florida and Arizona, are seeing sharp population declines, in part due to the collapse of the housing bubble in these areas. An analysis of government data by Kenneth Johnson of the Carsey Institute, cited by the *New York Times*, found that migration into Florida fell for the first time in 2008-10, as compared to 2005-07.

More elderly Americans have also been forced to return to work and delay retirement as a result of the economic crisis.

The decline in mobility is closely linked to a falloff in home ownership. A census report released earlier this month found that homeownership fell to 65.1 percent in 2010, down 1.1 percentage points from a decade earlier. This is the sharpest fall since the 1930s.

On the other hand, the regions of the country with the largest increases in population—such as New York, California, and Illinois—are also those that have some of the highest levels of inequality.

Another Census Bureau report released this week found that the most unequal state in the country is New York, though it does trail the nation’s capital, Washington, D.C. The most unequal metropolitan area in the country is the New York City area, which includes parts of New Jersey and Connecticut.

Other Census reports released this month document record levels of poverty (46.2 million people living in the United States were poor in 2010, up 3 million from a year before) and a sharp increase in public assistance (up 10 percent between 2009 and 2010).

Several articles on the census data noted the relationship between mobility and the “American Dream.” The AP commented that it marked a decisive “shift from America’s long-standing cultural image of ever-changing frontiers, dating to the westward migration of the 1800s and more recently to the spreading out of whites, blacks and Hispanics in the Sun Belt's housing boom."

The decline in mobility, while particularly sharp since the beginning of the economic crash three years ago, is a long-term phenomenon. Peak mobility in the United States occurred in the early 1950s, in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. It fluctuated during the post-war period, but reached a temporary peak of more than 20 percent in the early 1980s.

Mobility has fallen steadily since then, in part a reflection of the growth of two-income families, which makes moving more difficult. This was itself a response to the stagnation or decline of incomes for most workers, making multiple jobs necessary to meet increasing costs.

The inflation of the housing bubble in the decade leading up to the crash of 2008 also allowed working class families to sustain living standards on the basis of home equity and debt. All of this now has come crashing down.

The past three decades have at the same time seen an unprecedented concentration of wealth in the hands of the richest section of the population, which has monopolized almost all of overall income growth. A report from the Congressional Budget Office this week found that after-tax income for the top 1 percent increased 275 percent from 1979 to 2007, compared to only 18 percent for the bottom 20 percent.

This divergence has only increased since 2008, as a result of the bailout of the banks, overseen by the Obama administration, and wholesale attack on the jobs and income of the working class.

The response of the ruling class in the US and internationally to the economic crisis has been a sharp turn toward austerity and the destruction of whatever remains of the social programs won by the working class in the 20th Century.

The class tensions that have been building up in the United States and internationally for decades, artificially suppressed by the trade unions, are now coming to the fore. The Occupy movement, which has widespread support in the population as a whole, is only a small indication of the immense struggles of the working class on the horizon.