

The New York Times on race and class

What determines social mobility in America?

Part two

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6 April 2018

This is the second part of a two-part article. Part one was published on April 5.

The Equality of Opportunity study itself points to several trends that undercut the notion that race and gender are the fundamental dividing lines in society.

First, the study shows that across race and gender, the most important determinant of a child's income quintile position is the income quintile of the parent. The *Times* neglects this obvious fact in its conclusion that race determines socioeconomic position.

Second, according to the identity narrative, mobility should be consistently higher for all white people and consistently lower for all minorities, regardless of parental income or gender. Also, mobility should be higher for all subgroups of men and lower for women. As the *Times* writes in its article recapping the study, "Another way to think about this data is that white men earn more than almost anyone else. They earn more than black men *and* they earn more than white women. Both gender and race contribute to inequality, and white men hold advantages in both ways."

The study shows that this is not a correct appraisal of the data. The following examples from the study explode the lie that "white privilege" and "male privilege" determine social position.

Case 1: Black women compared with white women [1]

The study shows that black women have a higher economic mobility than both black men and white women. The study takes the income of black and white women born of parents in the bottom quintile.

This shows that very few children born to the poorest parents of either race make it to the top 20 percent, and even far fewer will make it to the top 5 percent. But white women born to Q5 parents are nearly a third more likely than their black counterparts to stay in the bottom quintile.

Among those born with parents in Q3, both white and black women are still equally likely to reach the top quintile while white women are a third more likely to fall into the 5th quintile. Among those with parents in the top quintile, though white girls are slightly more likely to stay in the top quintile, they are also more likely to fall from the top into the poorest quintile (15 percent vs. 11 percent for black girls).

Case 2: Black women compared with white men

According to the study, black women are *less* likely than white men to stay in the lowest quintile. Though white men born to Q5 parents are still far more likely than black girls to make it to the first and second quintiles, 26 percent of white men will stay in Q5 compared with 21 percent for black women.

The study notes: "high school completion and college attendance rates are uniformly higher for black women than for white *men* across the parental income distribution." (pp. 22-23) (emphasis in the original).

Case 3: White men and women compared with Hispanic men

Hispanic men born to parents in the poorest quintile tend to have a higher upward mobility than white men (by a slim margin) and a higher upward mobility than white women by a larger margin. This tends to indicate that race is not the determinative factor.

One conclusion to draw from this is that the mobility handicap women have from their gender "outweighs" the handicap Hispanics have from their race. But this is contradicted in cases 2, 3, and 5, where women have higher mobility than men.

Case 4: Household income of white women compared with white men

When individual income is measured, white men have higher mobility than white women. But when the *household* income of white women and white men is measured, white women born to Q5 parents have higher mobility than white men born to Q5 parents because they have a higher rate of marriage than white men (and a substantially higher rate than black men and women) and are more likely to benefit from having a second wage-earner in their family.

Case 5: Black women compared with black men

According to the study, poor black women have significantly higher upward social mobility than poor black men.

This holds up for black children with parents born in the middle quintile: The data shows that black men are much more likely to fall into deep

poverty than women. “Male privilege” cannot explain this.

The data confirms what all socialists acknowledge: there are substantial racial gaps on the whole in terms of upward mobility and average wealth, especially between whites and black men. But it also proves that “white privilege” and “male privilege” are not the main determinants of income, and that in certain cases whites and men are less able to climb the economic ladder than blacks or women. There are broader, more fundamental social processes playing out beneath this data.

The roots of the social catastrophe confronting black men

The study and the census data show black men are the most deeply impoverished of any segment of the population. The study notes, “The black-white intergenerational gap in individual incomes is driven almost entirely by men.” While finding that black men lagged white men by 11 percentage points, compared to their respective parents, the study found that black women have 1 percent *higher* individual income than white women relative to parental income.

The outlier among all races and genders is black men. Aside from Native Americans (long ignored by the identity politics crowd), black men’s upward mobility is substantially more limited than any other racial/gender combination.

The study points to why this is the case. It cites the fact that 21 percent of the black men in the bottom 1 percent in terms of income were incarcerated on census day 2010, when the data for the children born between 1978 and 1983 was drawn. The study notes that “as parental income rises, the incarceration rates decline for both white and black males” but that “among children with parents in the top 1%, only 0.2% of white males were incarcerated, whereas 2.2% of black males were incarcerated—the same rate as for white boys who grew up in families at the 34th percentile of the parental income distribution.”

The study also notes that while black and white women work the same hours for the same wages, “The gaps in employment rates for men are particularly stark, especially for children growing up in low-income families. Black men with parents at the 25th percentile are 18.9 percent less likely to work in a given year than white men. ... The employment rates of black men with parents at the 75th percentile are comparable to those of white men with parents at the 9th percentile.”

Further, “Black children have substantially lower marriage rates across the parental income distribution, with a gap of 32 percentage points for children with parents at the 25th percentile and 34 percent at the 75th percentile.”

The study shows that among the most important factors in reducing the intergenerational white-black gap is the presence of black fathers in low-income areas. The study also found that “black boys’ employment rates are significantly higher in tracts with higher levels of black father presence.” According to the study, 66.3 percent of black children grow up in neighborhoods with high poverty rates and low rates of black father presence.

Other factors that reduce the black-white gap (controlling for income and other variables) are: parental marriage rate, parental education, and, interestingly, the presence of a higher number of *white* fathers in low-income neighborhoods.

Indeed, the study finds that racism among whites (measured somewhat arbitrarily by Internet search engine results) is only minimally responsible for a wider racial income gap. The lack of upward mobility facing black men is therefore not the product of racism among poor whites. If backwardness among sections of white people was eliminated, black men would still face the same levels of poverty and inequality.

The powerful social and economic barriers for black men—lack of jobs, high incarceration rates, racist police and prosecutors, family ties that break under conditions of immense economic stress—are the product of the brutality of capitalist class rule in America.

Consider the social and political conditions in which the study’s second generation was born. The years 1978 to 1983 marked a turning point in American and world history. In the US and internationally, reactionary governments began to roll back the social gains of the mass movements of the earlier 20th century, spearheaded by Ronald Reagan in the US, Margaret Thatcher in the UK, and Helmut Kohl in Germany.

From 1978 to 1983, the trade unions in the US isolated and sold out a number of important strikes and workers’ protests, paving the way for 30 years of unchained corporate exploitation, including the PATCO (1981), Greyhound (1983), and Phelps-Dodge (1983) strikes. In 1983, the United Auto Workers officially adopted the position of “corporatism”—i.e., integration of the union apparatus into the structure of corporate management, through the proliferation of union-management committees, training centers and the like. The decline in strike activity is responsible for a decline in labor’s share of income and the growth of inequality.

During the same period, a number of African-American participants of the civil rights movement transformed themselves more nakedly into corrupt and right-wing Democratic Party politicians. In 1981, Andrew Young was elected mayor of Atlanta and John Lewis to the Atlanta city council. In the early 1980s, United Farm Workers leader Cesar Chavez made a corrupt deal with a millionaire slum real estate developer to use workers’ dues money to purchase and flip foreclosed houses. A relative handful of affluent members of oppressed racial groups were promoted while the horrific social conditions and police violence that sparked the urban rebellions of the 1960s in Watts, Detroit, and Newark only worsened.

Throughout this period, the globalization of the world economy set in motion the elimination of millions of jobs in coal and manufacturing, leading to the economic destruction of broad swaths of Appalachia and the industrial Midwest. Both the Democratic and Republican parties slashed social programs and lowered taxes on the wealthy. Bill Clinton’s administration in particular passed a set of reactionary “tough on crime” laws that drastically expanded the black prison population and set mandatory minimum sentences under which millions remain locked up.

The study includes a series of maps measuring mobility by geographic region (commuting zones, or “CZs”). Black men with parents at the 75th percentile, representing a somewhat more stable section of the working class that would have benefited from higher manufacturing wages of the mid-century, have lower average income ranks in Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, Illinois, Eastern Missouri, Upstate New York—all former manufacturing centers.

Among white women with parents at the 25th percentile, for example, the worst areas are the former coalfields of Kentucky, Tennessee, West Virginia, Virginia, as well as the Ozarks area of Southern Missouri and Arkansas, and the industrial regions of Ohio and Indiana.

The study’s authors conclude by calling for policies that benefit “specific racial subgroups” across “class lines.” But under conditions where the wealthiest 5-10 percent of each racial group possesses the vast majority of wealth and income, enacting policies that benefit specific racial subgroups across class lines means enacting policies that benefit the affluent only.

The degree of inequality within races is the material basis for identity politics. The *Times* study is explicitly aimed at covering up the fact that the bottom 90 percent of each racial group has far more in common with one another—in terms of income, culture, employment, the problems they confront—than they do with the affluent of “their own” race. In fact, the increasing material homogenization of different races of workers shows that the objective basis for racial politics among the broad masses of

people is declining.

Improving the actual social conditions of workers—minority and white alike—requires the building of a mass movement of the working class aimed not at establishing racial privileges at the top but at expropriating the wealth of the rich and affluent and redistributing it to meet the urgent social needs of workers of all races.

Note:

[1] Using individual income unless otherwise indicated

Concluded



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