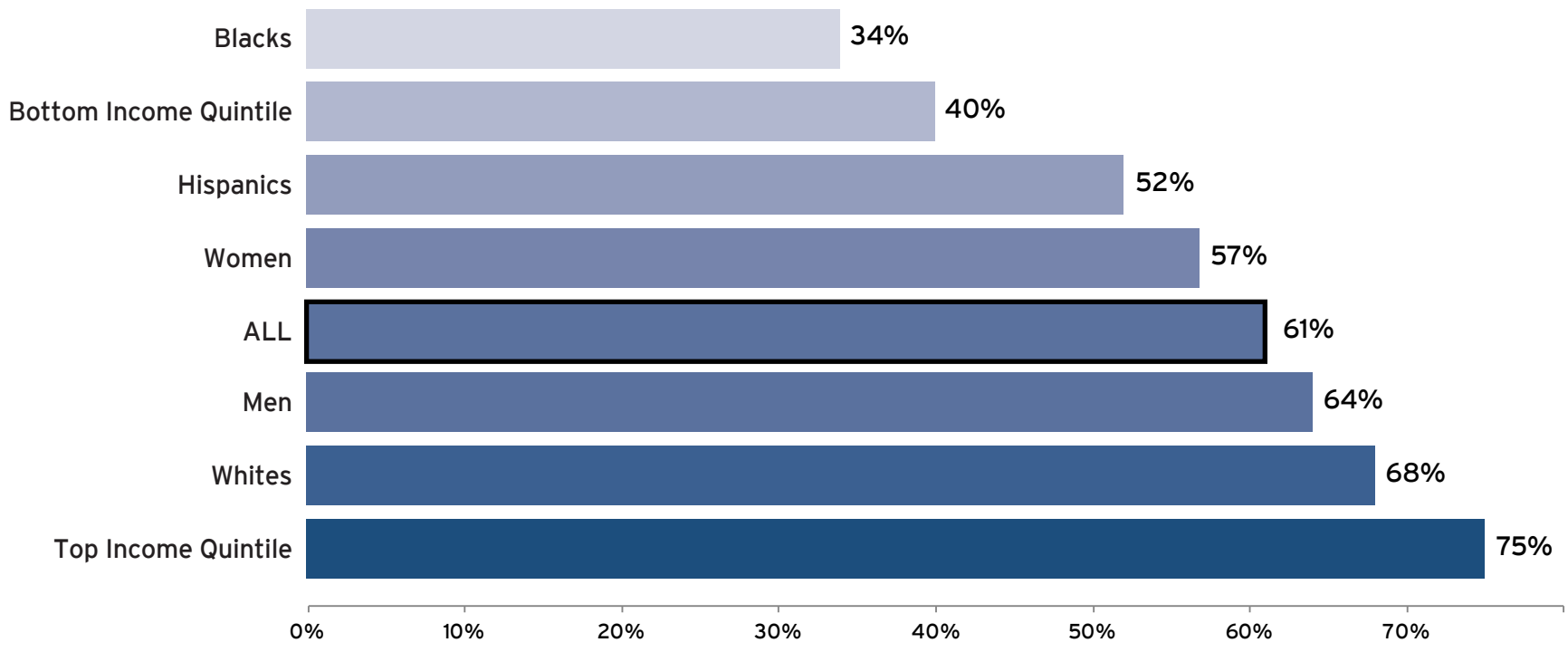
Pathways to the Middle Class

Recent research has shown that America has less upward mobility than most people believe. New data from the Brookings Center on Children and Families sheds light on some of the reasons less advantaged children fall behind their more advantaged peers at every stage of life.

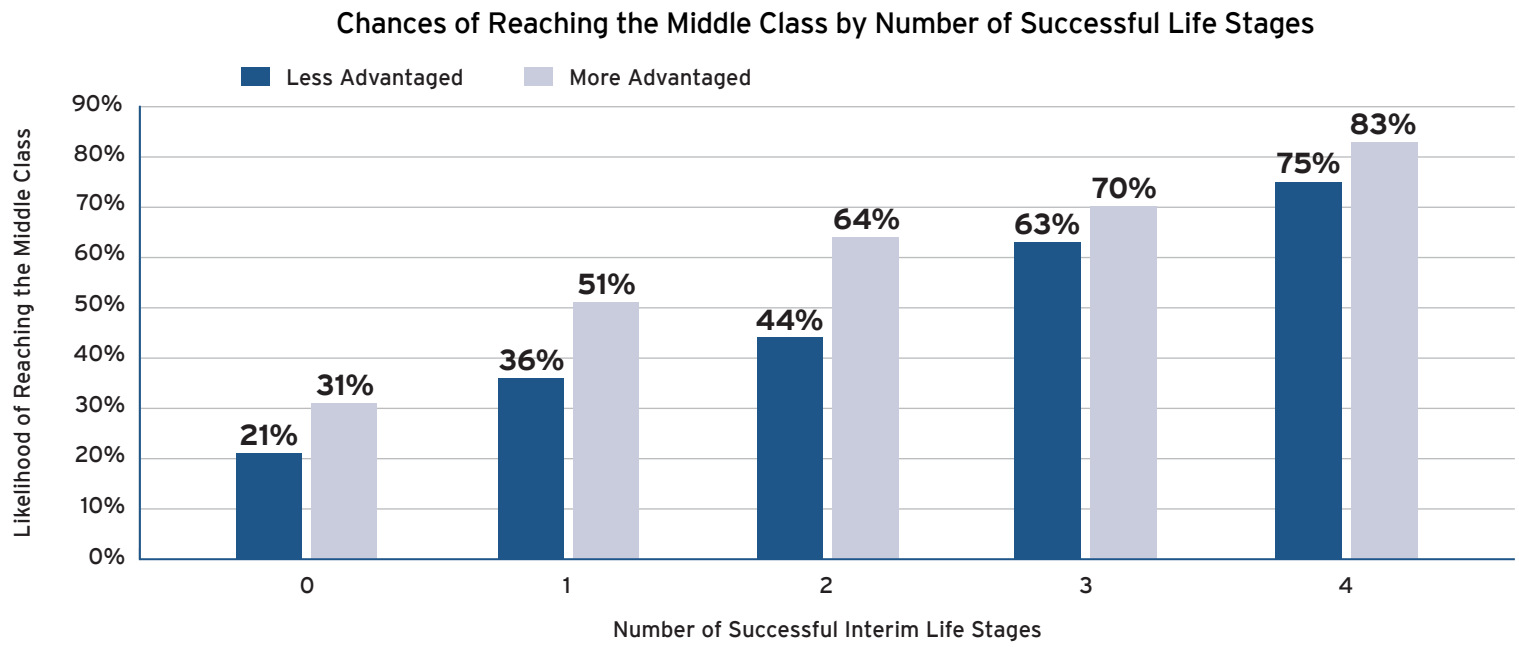
Chances of Reaching the Middle Class by Middle Age Vary.



FINDINGS

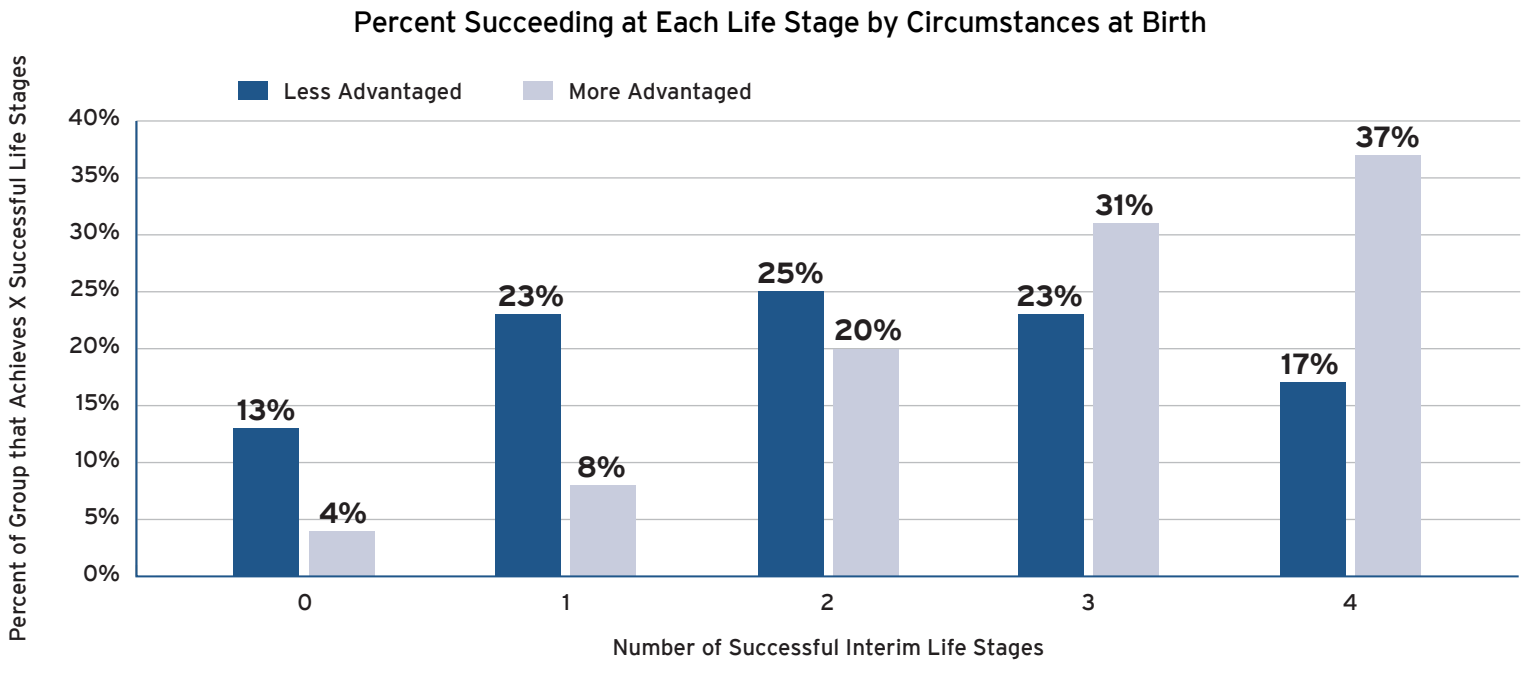
- The majority (61%) of Americans achieve the American Dream by reaching the middle class by middle age, but there are large gaps by race, gender, and children's circumstances at birth.
- Success begets further success. Children who are successful at each life stage from early childhood to young adulthood are much more likely to achieve the American Dream.
- Children from less advantaged families tend to fall behind at every stage. They are less likely to be ready for school at age 5 (59% vs 72%), to achieve core academic and social competencies at the end of elementary school (60% vs 77%), to graduate from high school with decent grades and no involvement with crime or teen pregnancy (41% vs 70%), and to graduate from college or achieve the equivalent income in their twenties (48% vs 70%).
- Racial gaps are large from the start and never narrow significantly, especially for African Americans, who trail by an average of 25 percentage points for the identified benchmarks.
- Girls travel through childhood doing better than boys only to fall behind men's success rates during the adult years.
- The proportion of children who successfully navigate through adolescence is strikingly low: only 57%.
- For the small proportion of disadvantaged children who do succeed throughout school and early adulthood (17%), their chances of being middle class by middle age are almost as great as for their more advantaged peers (75% vs 83%).
- Keeping less advantaged children on track at each and every life stage is the right strategy for building a stronger middle class. Early interventions that correct a child's course may prevent the need for later ones. As the data provided in this paper make abundantly clear, success is a cumulative process. One-time interventions may not be enough to keep less advantaged children on track.
- It's never too late to intervene—people who succeed in their twenties, despite earlier struggles, still have a good chance of making it to the middle class.

Disadvantaged children who succeed in early life stages greatly improve their chances of being middle class by middle age...



An individual who experiences a successful outcome at every life stage has an 81 percent chance of achieving middle class status. The probability of achieving the American Dream decreases with each additional unsuccessful outcome. If a child is born at a low birth weight or has a mother who is poor, unmarried, or a high-school dropout—circumstances we denote as "disadvantaged"—but manages to succeed in each earlier life stage, that child has nearly the same chances of being middle class by middle age as a more advantaged child.

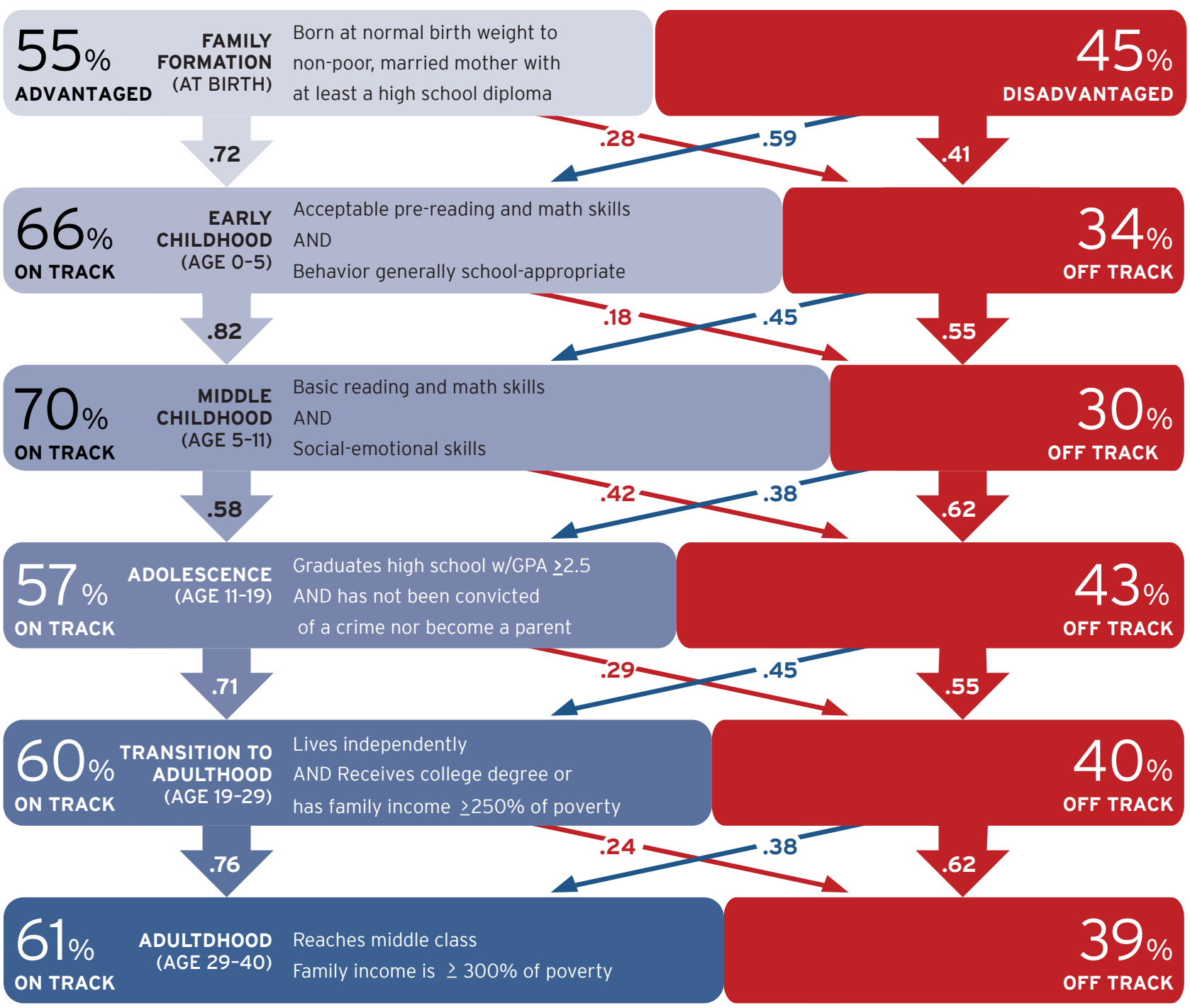
...but far too few disadvantaged children are able to succeed at every life stage.



The problem is that only a small proportion is able to do so: just 17%. What's more, while additional successes do increase the chances of ending up middle class for disadvantaged children, they often increase the chances more for advantaged children. In fact, advantaged children are as likely to end up middle class as disadvantaged children who have an additional success under their belt. Family background matters because it tends to affect childhood success at each stage of the life cycle but also because it affects the likelihood of ending up middle class even for children experiencing similar trajectories through early adulthood.

The Social Genome Project has identified five benchmarks on the path to the American Dream of a middle class life. Children who have attained success at one benchmark are more likely to continue to be successful at the next benchmark. The diagram below illustrates the proportion of children attaining success ("on track") at each benchmark, as well as the likelihood of staying on track or falling off track, based on previous experience.

For example, in the early childhood stage, 66% of children meet the benchmarks and are on track for success. Of these children who succeed in early childhood, a full 82% will go on to succeed in middle childhood; only 18% will have fallen off track at the end of the elementary school years. The 34% of children who are off track in early childhood are nearly half as likely to succeed in middle childhood as their more successful peers: only 45% will cross over to the successful track in elementary school, while the majority (55%) will remain off track in middle childhood.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- Creating more opportunity will require a combination of greater personal responsibility and societal interventions that have proven effective at helping people climb the ladder. Neither alone is sufficient. Government does not raise children, but government can lend a helping hand.

- If one believes that good behavior and good policy must go hand in hand, programs should be designed to encourage personal responsibility and opportunity-enhancing behaviors.

- There are not just large, but widening gaps by socioeconomic status in family formation patterns, test scores, college-going, and adult earnings. These gaps should be addressed or the nation risks becoming increasingly divided over time.

- Budget cuts necessitated by the nation's fiscal condition should discriminate between more and less effective programs. The evidence now exists to make some of these discriminations. Some programs actually save taxpayer money.

- Too little attention has been given to ensuring that more children are born to parents who are ready to raise a child. Unplanned pregnancies, abortions, and unwed births are way too high and childbearing within marriage is no longer the norm for women in their twenties, except among the college-educated. Government has a role to play here, but culture is at least as important.

- As many have noted, a high-quality preschool experience for less advantaged children and reform of K-12 schooling could not be more important.

- Increasing the number of young people who enroll in college is important, but increasing the proportion who actually graduate is critical. Graduation rates have lagged enrollment. A major problem is poor earlier preparation. In addition, disparities in ability to afford the cost of college mean that even equally qualified students from low- and high-income families do not have the same college-going opportunities.

FURTHER READING

Isabel V. Sawhill, Scott Winship, and Kerry Searle Grannis. 2012. "Pathways to the Middle Class: Balancing Personal and Public Responsibilities." Washington: Brookings.

Scott Winship, Stephanie Owen, Jeff Diebold, and Alex Gold. 2012. "Guide to the Social Genome Model." Washington: Brookings

About the Social Genome Project

The Social Genome Project is a cutting-edge simulation model of social mobility and social policy over the life cycle. The model translates complex research on learning and earning behaviors into policy-relevant results that help to improve the long-term prospects of children and ultimately enable more Americans to reach middle class by middle age. The data are drawn from a Bureau of Labor Statistics survey of the children born to women in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth of 1979. The data cover a representative sample of 5,783 children born to women who, in 1978, were in the U.S. and between the ages of 14 and 21. The survey tracked their children from the time they were born until 2010. We use the actual data on the children when available at birth, age five, age 11, and age 19. Where necessary, we simulate key outcomes including most importantly outcomes at ages 29 and 40 (since the children are not yet old enough for us to have data on their adult outcomes). These estimates are based on the characteristics of the children and research on the relationship of their characteristics to later outcomes. We then compare these simulated outcomes to independent sources of data, including Census data, to validate our estimates.