

Five Strong Starts for Social Mobility

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We are true to our creed when a little girl born into the bleakest poverty knows that she has the same chance to succeed as anybody else, because she is an American; she is free, and she is equal, not just in the eyes of God but also in our own.

--President Obama, second inaugural address

President Obama describes the lack of upward mobility, alongside inequality, as the “defining challenge of our time.” He is right. But there is no definitive solution. Improving rates of social mobility means narrowing social and economic gaps in a wide range of domains—and, critically, across the whole life cycle. We could reduce income inequality tomorrow, given sufficient political will, simply by increasing taxes at the top and benefits at the bottom. Improving intergenerational mobility is, by definition, a lifetime’s work.

Social mobility—in terms of intergenerational movement by income group—is lower than most people think, and lower than in most comparable nations. A child raised in a household in the poorest fifth of the income distribution has a 39% chance of being stuck at the bottom as an adult, and just a 7% chance of making it to the top. Those raised at the top have a 37% chance of staying there, and a slender 8% chance of tumbling to the bottom of the ladder. While 82% of affluent high school graduates attend college, just 52% of the poorest do – and the gap has only narrowed slightly over the past two decades. The U.S. income distribution, from an intergenerational perspective, is sticky at the top and the bottom.

These facts are simple, stark, and largely undisputed. But the search for explanations is complex and contested. A vast range and number of factors influence individual outcomes: health, education, character, communities, family background, networks, aspirations—and some plain luck. Those on the political right typically highlight family dynamics, community strength, individual initiative and effort as vital factors: and they are right. Meanwhile those on the other side of the aisle focus on child poverty, pre-k, school quality, and college access: and they are right, too. To borrow a phrase from Robert Putnam, there are “red truths” and “blue truths” when it comes to social mobility. Getting closer to the whole truth means accepting both.

America is suffering from a yawning opportunity gap. Behind it lies an early childhood gap, a schooling gap, a college gap, an employment gap, and a marriage gap. In this brief, we identify the five starts that are critical for life chances: our start in life; how we start school; starting college; the start we make in the workplace; and the way we start our own families.

Based on the best available evidence and our previous work at Brookings, we have identified two components of a strong start for each stage. For example, a strong start in life means being born to an educated mother with adequate parenting skills; a strong start to a family life means getting into the labor market and getting married before having children of your own.

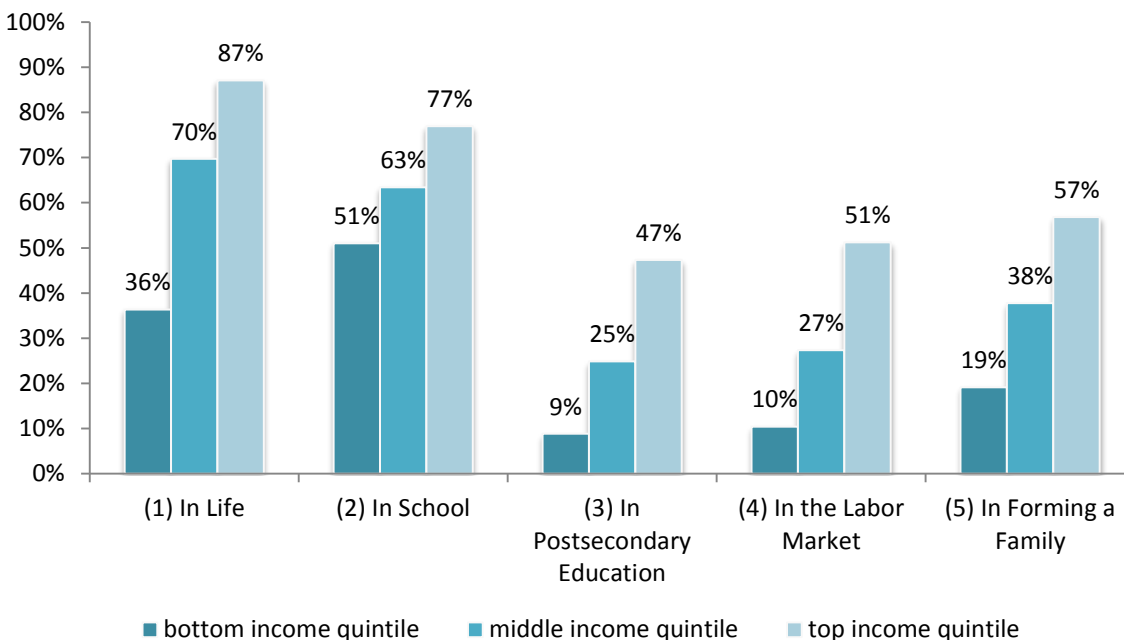
Improving social mobility is not a one-shot policy. Life chances are not determined at birth, or at school, in college, or in the workplace: they are shaped at every stage of life. There is no magic moment for the promotion of social mobility. Yes, the early years are critical. But so are the school years, getting into college, finishing college, getting a good start in employment, and starting your own family on a stable foundation. In terms of promoting social mobility, only a life-cycle approach stands any chance.

A good foundation at each critical stage of the life cycle reinforces earlier success and inoculates against future difficulty: nothing succeeds like success. There is growing evidence from the policy field that many interventions show effects that wear off over time unless there are additional, reinforcing interventions at the next life stage. To the question, “when should we intervene to promote opportunity?” the answer is: at each and every stage. Just as many of the factors influencing mobility are interconnected, so policy solutions need to be designed and evaluated as a series of interlocking programs.

Our collective goal should be to help as many of our citizens get as many strong starts as possible. But in terms of promoting greater intergenerational mobility, it is even more important to narrow the gaps between different income groups. Right now, 36% of children born into the poorest households get a strong start in life, compared to 70% of middle-income children and 87% of the most affluent. Similar gaps can be seen at each of the five starting gates.

If America is to be an opportunity society, we need a more equal start at each of these stages.

Five Strong Starts for Social Mobility



A Strong Start in Life

Born to an educated mother

Born to capable parents

[Parents are the key to a strong start in life. Children born to mothers who have at least a high school diploma are much less likely to fall behind later](#)—but only about half of children in the bottom income quintile have mothers who finished high school with decent grades. Policies that raise high school graduation rates and reduce early and teenage childbearing can help encourage young people to put education before parenthood.

Parents are also children's earliest and most important teachers: one study estimates that [parenting explains about 40 percent of the income-related gaps in cognitive skills](#) at age four. Kids from lower-income homes [hear fewer words](#), read fewer books, and [get less stimulation than better-off children](#). Nobody gets to choose their parents, of course, but parenting skills can be improved through programs like [home visiting](#).

A Strong Start in School

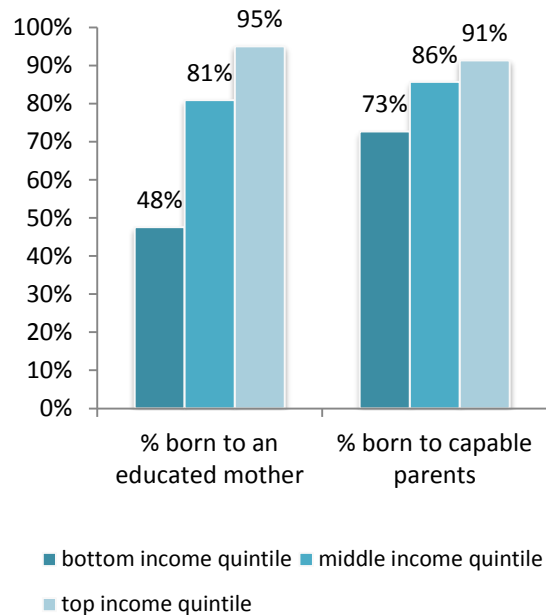
Acceptable pre-reading and math scores

School appropriate behavior

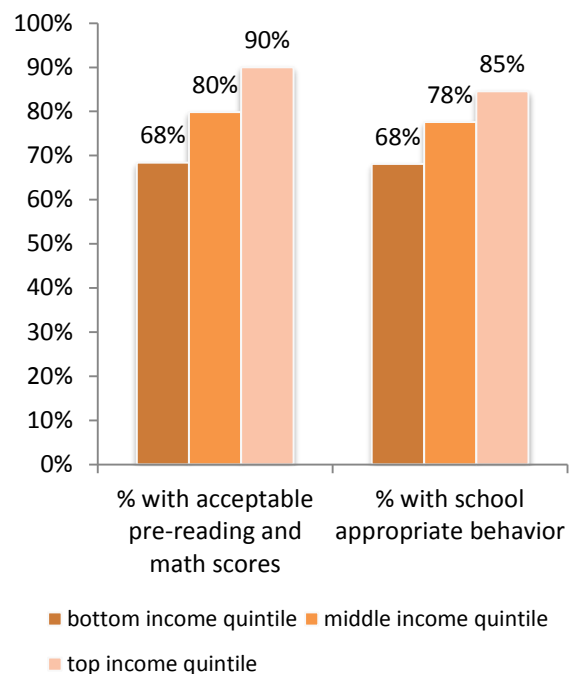
Making a strong start at school means being ready, both socially and academically. [Early math and reading skills best predict later academic performance](#). It is also increasingly clear that behavioral competencies matter a lot for both cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes. But [fewer than half the children born into poverty are school-ready by the age of 5](#).

Closing the gap in school readiness will require a [commitment to stronger preschool programs](#). Programs that teach both [parents and children how to mitigate the effects of childhood stress could help close the gap](#), too. Researchers are just scratching the surface of the complex relationship between toxic stress and a variety of cognitive and behavioral outcomes. One thing is clear: [strong parenting can protect children from the adverse impacts of toxic stress](#).

Start 1: In Life



Start 2: In School



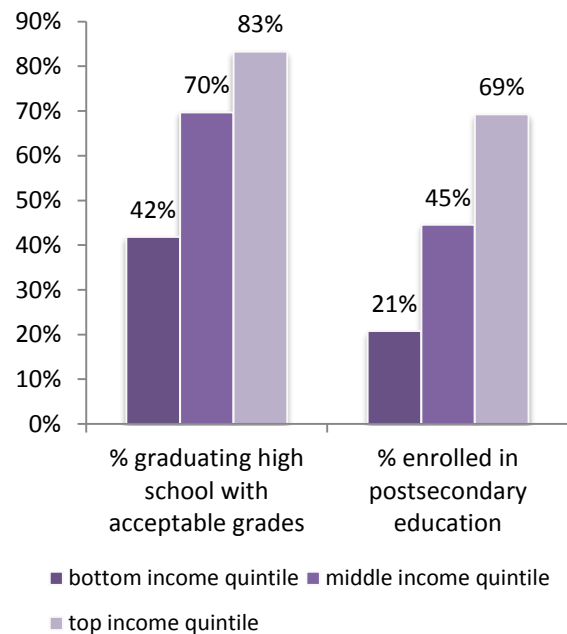
A Strong Start in Postsecondary Education

Graduate high school with acceptable grades
Enroll in postsecondary education

The first and most basic requirement for a strong start into post-secondary learning is a high school diploma. While [graduation rates have steadily risen for the past ten years](#), low-income students are still almost six times more likely to drop out than high-income students. But a diploma alone isn't enough: students must leave high school with sufficient skills to succeed at college and in the labor market. This is a huge challenge, especially for low-income students. For instance, [the proportion of students at or above basic level of achievement on the NAEP 12th grade math assessment was only 45% among students eligible for free or reduced price lunch](#). Among higher income students, 72% of students passed that bar.

So a decent high school degree is vitally necessary, but it is not sufficient. High school does not supply the skills and knowledge required for success in today's economy. Virtually every field requires some additional training or college. Attending college, even if not for a full four-year degree, results in labor market rewards: [each additional year of school means, on average, an extra 10% return in annual income](#). But there are large gaps in college attendance by family income background.

Start 3: In Postsecondary Education



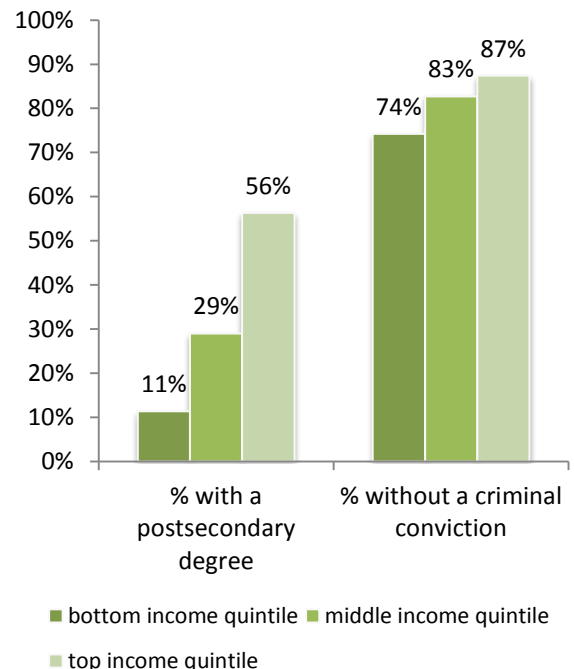
A Strong Start in Labor Market

A postsecondary degree
No criminal conviction

While some college is better than nothing, [the biggest returns are associated with earning a degree](#). Right now, the [most common higher education route for lower-income and older students is community college](#), but more than half of first time enrollees fail to graduate or transfer to a 4-year school within six years. Not only are these students failing to earn a degree, they're often racking up debt in the process. Pushing on to get the degree is worth it: [skilled low-income adolescents who go on to earn a bachelors degree have a 42% higher chance of making it into the top two-fifths of the income distribution than those who don't get a B.A.](#)

In addition to education, [a huge barrier to successful labor market entry is criminal conviction](#). A [criminal record is unattractive to potential employers on a good day](#); in a bad economy where unemployment is high, it's virtually a guaranteed barrier to a job. Employers are more averse to hiring ex-offenders than any other disadvantaged group, such as welfare

Start 4: In the Labor Market



recipients. A clean sheet in terms of crime and a college certificate make for a good start in working life: but, again, the gaps between rich and poor are stark.

A Strong Start for a Family

Get married before first child

Have a job before first child

Before starting a family, it is best to achieve some financial security, and to form a strong relationship: adults should hold down a job and marry before having children. Earning enough to support oneself seems like a good prerequisite for adding dependent children to the household. Creating jobs is a social mobility strategy—as long as all adults are able to secure them.

Marriage matters, too: [children born to married parents are much less likely to be in poverty](#). While unmarried, cohabiting relationships have become much more common, they are nowhere near as stable as marriages: [more than six in ten unmarried parents break up within 5 years of their child's birth](#). Married parents also have stronger parenting skills: [44% of single mothers fall into the category of the weakest parents, compared to only 14% of married mothers](#).

Starting a family on these firm foundations will improve prospects for all involved, adults and children alike. Critically, however, it also means that the children themselves are more likely to have a strong start in life: and so the cycle turns.

Start 5: In Forming a Family

