Pathways to the Middle Class:
Balancing Personal and Public Responsibilities

Isabel V. Sawhill, Scott Winship, and Kerry Searle Grannis

September 20, 2012

Center on Children & Families
at BROOKINGS

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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 can help to improve the long-term prospects of children and ultimately enable more Americans to reach middle class by middle age.

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Introduction

The defining narrative of the United States of America is that of a nation where everyone has an opportunity to achieve a better life. Americans believe that everyone should have the opportunity to succeed through talent, creativity, intelligence, and hard work, regardless of the circumstances of their birth. Our leaders share this support for opportunity. In a speech last fall, President Obama said that Americans should make sure that "everyone in America gets a fair shot at success."[1] Mitt Romney has repeatedly spoken about an opportunity society, where people can "engage in hard work, and pursue the passion of their ideas and dreams. If they succeed, they merit the rewards they are able to enjoy."[2]

Americans have an unusually strong belief in meritocracy. In other nations, circumstances at birth, family connections, and luck are considered more important factors in economic success than they are in the U.S. This meritocratic philosophy is one reason why Americans have had relatively little objection to high levels of inequality—as long as those at the bottom have a fair chance to work their way up the ladder. Similarly, Americans are more comfortable with the idea of increasing opportunities for success than with reducing inequality. When the American public is asked questions about the importance of tackling each, a far higher proportion is in favor of doing something about ensuring that more people have a shot at climbing the economic ladder than is in favor of reducing poverty or inequality.[3]

One way of thinking about opportunity is in terms of generational improvement in living standards. Among today's middle-aged Americans, four in five households have higher incomes than their parents had at the same age, and three in five men have higher earnings than their fathers. The extent to which this will be true for today's children remains to be seen. More importantly, if everyone grows richer over time, but the economic fates of Americans are bound up in their family origins, then in an important sense opportunities are still limited. If a poor child has little reason to believe she can "grow up to be whatever she wants," it may be of little comfort to her that she will likely make more than her similarly constrained parents. A better-off security guard may still have wanted to be a lawyer.

The reality is that economic success in America is not purely meritocratic. We don't have as much equality of opportunity as we'd like to believe, and we have less mobility than some other developed countries. Although cross-national comparisons are not always reliable, the available data suggest that the U.S. compares unfavorably to Canada, the Nordic countries, and some other advanced countries.[4] A recent study shows the U.S. ranking 27th out of 31 developed countries in measures of equal opportunity.[5]

People do move up and down the ladder, both over their careers and between generations, but it helps if you have the right parents. Children born into middle-income families have a roughly equal chance of moving up or down once they become adults, but those born into rich or poor families have a high probability of remaining rich or poor as adults. The chance that a child born into a family in the top income quintile will end up in one of the top three quintiles by the time they are in their forties is 82 percent, while the chance for a child born into a family in the bottom quintile is only 30 percent. In short, a rich child in the U.S. is more than twice as likely as a poor child to end up in the middle class or above.[6]

Why do some children do so much better than others? And what will it take to create more opportunity? The remainder of this paper addresses these two questions.

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 find their prospects diminished 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 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.

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, parents do. 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 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.

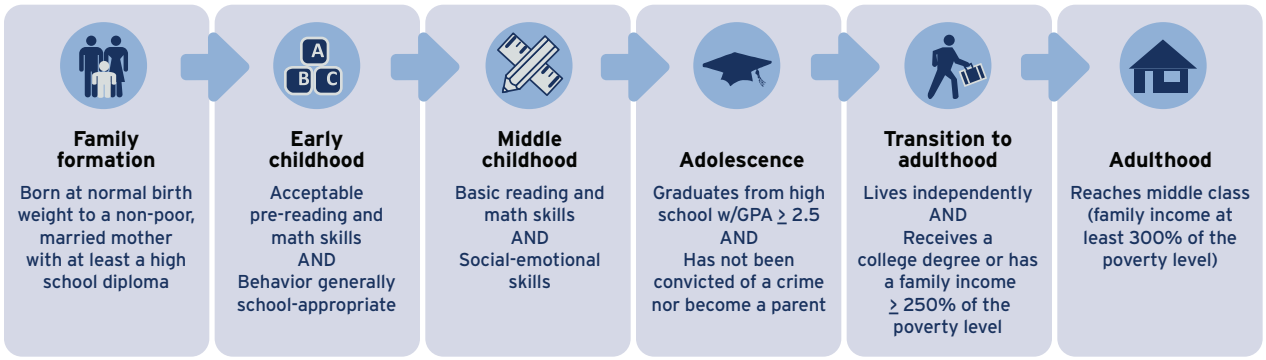
Who Succeeds and Why?

In order to better understand the life course of children—especially those who are disadvantaged—the Brookings Center on Children and Families has developed a life-cycle model called the Social Genome Model (SGM). The SGM divides the life cycle into six stages and specifies a set of outcomes for each life stage that, according to the literature, are predictive of later outcomes and eventual economic success. These stages and indicators of success for each life stage are detailed in Figure 1. The success indicators include being born to parents who are ready to raise a child; being school-ready by age 5; acquiring core competencies in academic and social skills by age 11; being college- or career-ready by age 19; living independently and either receiving a college degree or having an equivalent income by age 29; and finally being middle class by middle age.

The data we use, from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, follow children born primarily in the 1980s and 1990s starting in 1986 through 2010. We have projected their adult incomes using a statistical model. Our projections in childhood and adulthood in our final dataset closely track estimates from independent sources such as the Census Bureau and other surveys.[7]

Figure 2 shows that by the time they are forty years old, six out of ten children we follow to adulthood live in a family with income greater than 300 percent of the poverty line (about $68,000 for a married couple with two children).[8] In short, more than half have achieved the middle class dream. At the same time, a large proportion (about 2 out of 5) has not achieved the dream. The reasons are many, but by looking at where children get off track earlier in life, we can begin to see the roots of the problem.

Figure 1: Benchmarks for Each Life Stage



As the figure shows, about two-thirds or more of all children get through early and middle childhood with the kinds of academic and social skills needed for later success. However, a large portion of adolescents fall short of achieving success even by a relatively low standard. Only a little over half manage to graduate from high school with a 2.5 GPA, having not been convicted of a crime or becoming a parent by the time they turn nineteen.[9]

Success is nevertheless more common a decade later. Sixty percent of children will live on their own at the end of their 20s, either with a college degree in hand or with family income greater than 2.5 times that of a poor family. Exceeding 250 percent of the poverty line amounts to about $45,000 for a married couple with one child.[10] It is roughly equivalent to what a college-educated individual the same age can expect to earn working full-time.[11] People in their late twenties without a college degree might achieve this college-equivalent income through on-the-job training, living in a dual earner household, or by other means.

> Boys and girls enter the world on an equal footing, but they take different paths on the way to adulthood.

Putting the adolescent and adult results together, it appears that F. Scott Fitzgerald was wrong. There *are* second acts in American lives; lots of people make it to the middle class in adulthood despite entering life inauspiciously. But they would almost certainly be better off if they had acquired more skills at an earlier age, and especially if they had navigated adolescence more wisely.

Another way to give meaning to the success probabilities in Figure 2 is to look at how success varies by different segments of the population. Figure 3 shows success rates by gender. Boys and girls enter the world on an equal footing, but they take different paths on the way to adulthood. By age five, girls are much more likely than boys to be academically and behaviorally ready for school. That advantage persists into middle childhood and adolescence. Men catch up in early adulthood and then surpass women in terms of economic success. At age 40, 64 percent of men but just 57 percent of women have achieved middle class status.

The finding that girls do better than boys during the school years is not new. Girls mature earlier than boys and are better able to sit still, follow directions, and thus benefit from classroom learning at a young age. Although girls are more likely to experience depression and face the risk of a pregnancy during adolescence, they are less likely to act out, drop out of school, or engage in behaviors such as delinquency, smoking, and substance abuse.[12]

Women are not only much more likely to graduate from high school, but they now earn 57 percent of all college degrees, and more graduate degrees, as well. Despite their

Figure 2: Percent of Children Succeeding at Each Life Stage

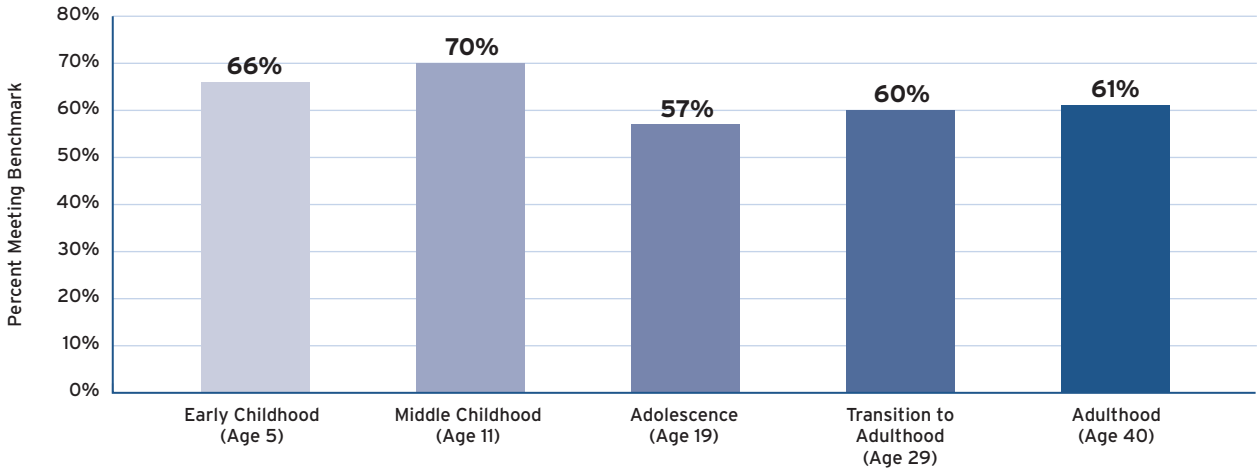
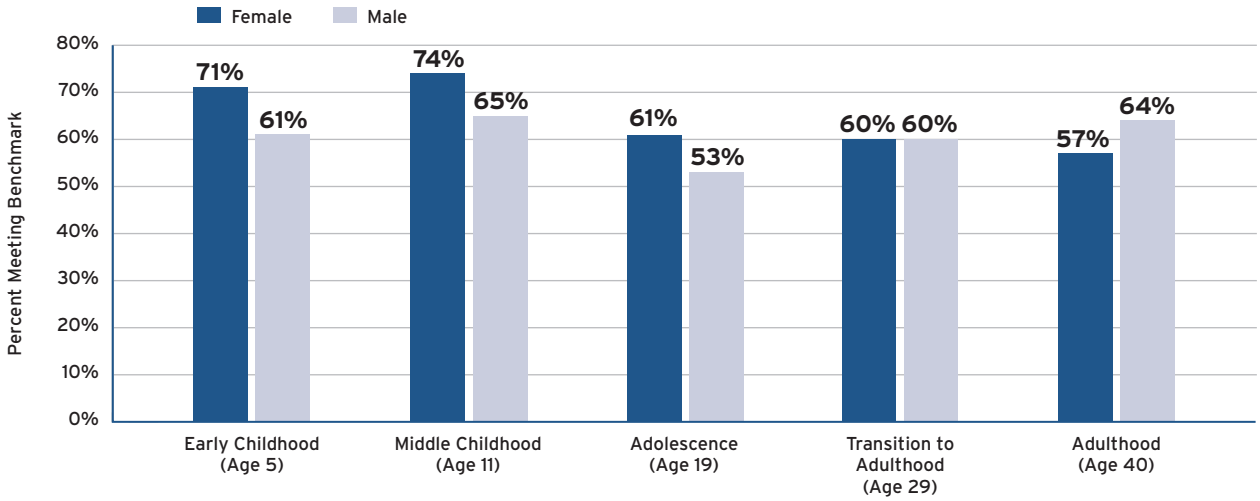
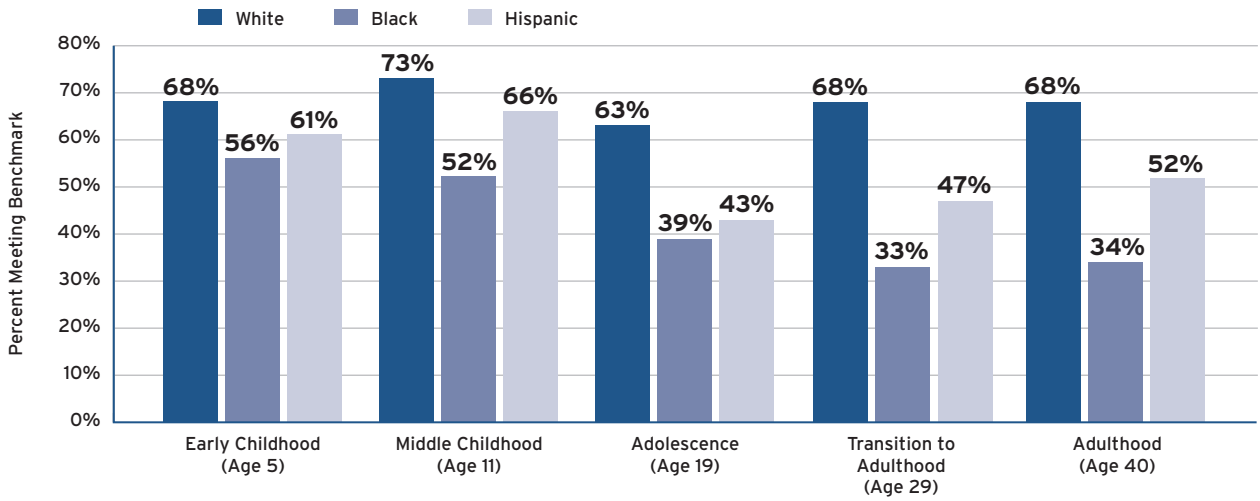


Figure 3: Percent Succeeding at each Life Stage by Gender



educational advantages, once they are adults, women still earn less than men. Although the earnings gap between men and women has declined sharply over the last half century, women who work full-time still earn about 80 percent of what men earn.[13] The reasons for their lower earnings are related to the fact that, mainly as a result of their family responsibilities, women's labor force participation and hours worked are still lower than men's, and they are concentrated in occupations that pay less than those held by men. The extent to which these occupational differences reflect social constraints on women's roles versus their own preferences has been hard to sort out.[14]

Figure 4: Percent Succeeding at Each Life Stage by Race



Single parenthood also accounts for some of the gender gap in adulthood. Single mothers are much more common than single fathers. Even if they work, many single mothers disproportionately bear the burden of feeding additional mouths with their paycheck compared to noncustodial fathers, whose child support is often modest.

> ...parental income affects the likelihood of economic success in adulthood, with 75 percent of those born into the top fifth achieving middle class status by forty versus just 40 percent of those born into the bottom fifth.

Other patterns of inequality are much stronger. Figure 4 shows that 68 percent of white children are school ready at kindergarten, compared with 56 percent of black children and 61 percent of Hispanic children.[15] In middle childhood, African American children fall further behind, and by adolescence, both African Americans and Hispanics are far behind white children. By age 30, both are still lagging, though Hispanics have done some catching up. By age 40, a whopping 33 percentage point difference between blacks and whites persists. Only a third of African Americans have achieved middle class status by middle age. Even amongst those who do reach the middle class, their children are much more likely to fall down the ladder than the children of white middle class families.[16] While not shown, black-white gaps—and to a lesser extent Hispanic-white gaps—are sizable for both boys and girls, though they are bigger among boys at the start of school and at the end of the high school years.

If success at each stage varies by race and gender, it varies even more by the income of one's parents (Figure 5). Only 48 percent of children born to parents in the bottom fifth of family income are school ready, compared with 78 percent of children in the top fifth at birth. The disparity is similar in middle childhood. Perhaps most stunningly, only one in three children from the bottom fifth graduate high school with a 2.5 GPA having not been convicted or become a parent. The figure among children from the top fifth is 76 percent. Finally, parental income affects the likelihood of economic success in adulthood, with 75 percent of those born into the top fifth achieving middle class status by forty versus just 40 percent of those born into the bottom fifth.

Finally, we have examined success rates for children who are born into more or less advantaged circumstances,

Figure 5: Percent Succeeding at Each Life Stage by Family's Income Quintile at Birth

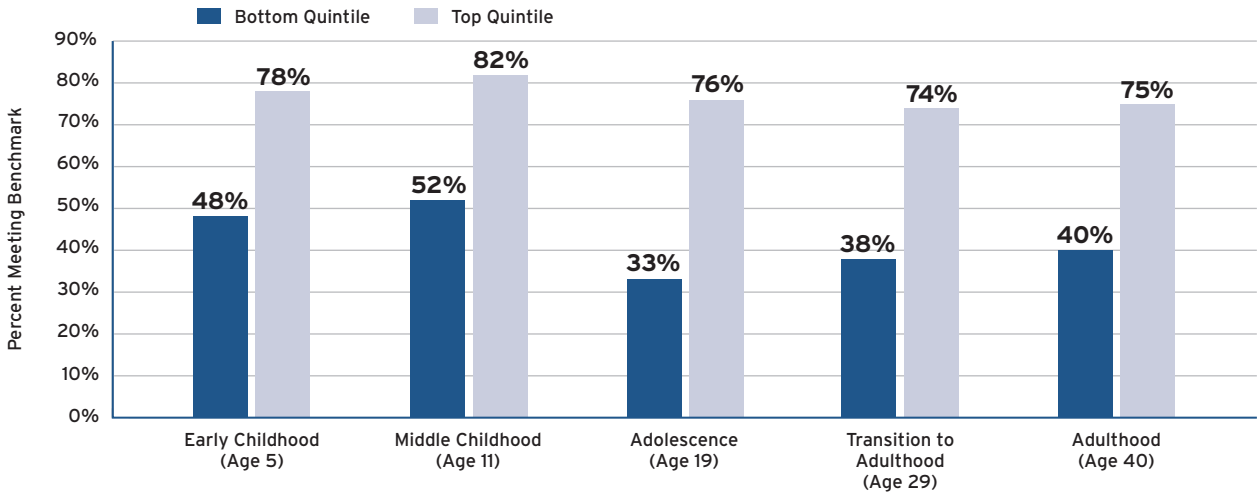
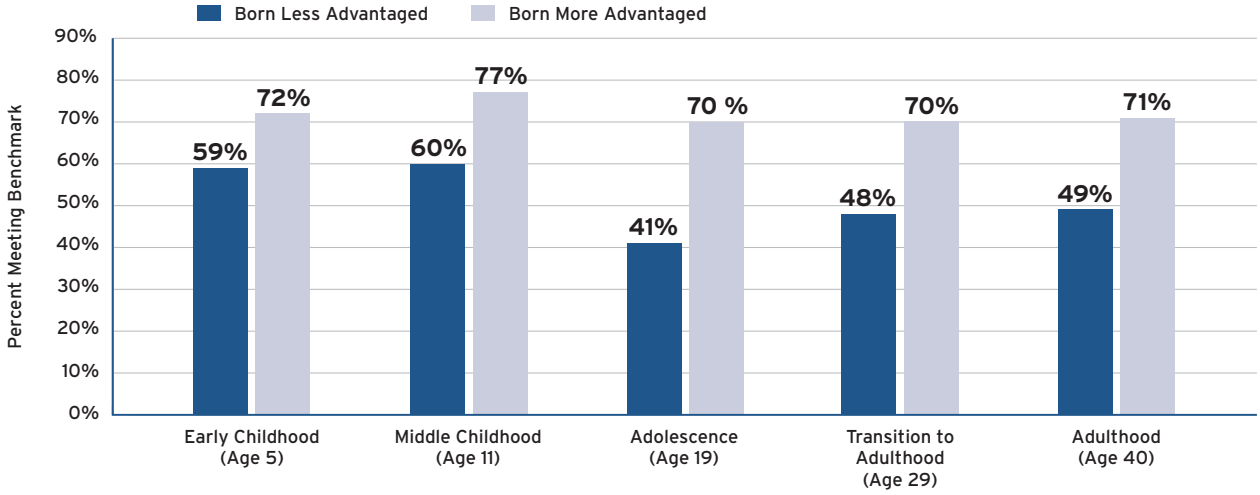


Figure 6: Percent Succeeding at Each Life Stage by Circumstances at Birth

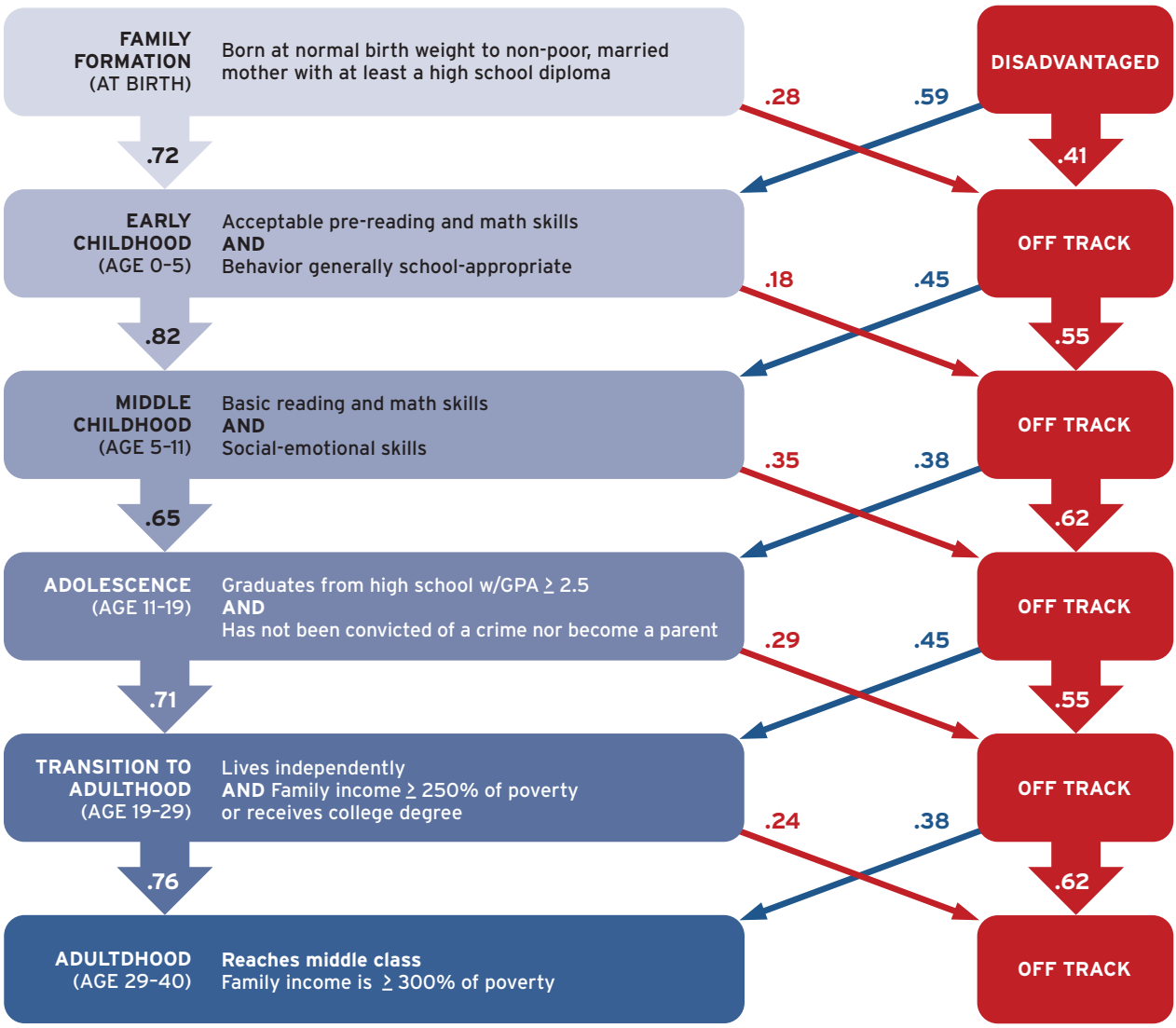


defined more broadly than by their income quintile. Among children born of normal birth weight to married mothers who have at least a high school education and who were not poor at the time of the child's birth, 72 percent can be expected to enter kindergarten ready for school. Otherwise, only 59 percent do. This gap never narrows, and by the end of adolescence, children with less advantaged birth circumstances are 29 percentage points less likely to succeed. At age 40, there is a 22 percentage point gap between "advantaged-at-birth" and "disadvantaged-at-birth" children in the likelihood of being middle class.

Climbing the Ladder or Slipping from the Rungs

As Figure 6 shows, children born advantaged retain a large advantage at the end of the next stage, early childhood. The same pattern prevails for subsequent stages—success begets later success (Figure 7). In middle childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, those who succeeded in the previous stage are much more likely than those who did not to succeed again. For example, 82 percent of children in our sample who enter school ready to learn master basic skills by age 11, compared with just 45 percent of children who were not school ready. Acquiring basic academic and social skills by age 11 increases by a similar magnitude a child's chances of completing high school with good grades and risk-free behavior—which, in turn, increases the chances

Figure 7: Probability of Being On Track or Falling Off Track, Conditional on Previous Experience



that a young person will acquire a college degree or the equivalent in income. Finally, success by age 29 doubles the chances of being middle class by middle age. In short, success is very much a cumulative process. Although many children who get off track at an early age get back on track at a later age—and can be helped to do so—these findings point to the importance of early interventions by government or parents that keep children on the right track.

Note that the probabilities in Figure 7 are conditional only on success or failure at the previous stage. In the real world, mobility processes are not so memory-less; success depends on one's entire history of previous successes and failures. What's more, some of these paths are rarely traveled while others are far more typical.

These features of social mobility processes are captured in Table 1, which shows the chance of becoming middle class for eight paths through the transition to adulthood. These are the paths taken by 76 percent of the children in our sample. The table shows that success in all four stages before adulthood is actually the most common pathway for children to take between birth and age 29, with over one-quarter of children taking that route, and 81 percent of them achieving middle class status. Of those who fail in all four life stages, a group that is only 8 percent of our sample, just 24 percent become middle class by age 40.

Table 1 also shows how early success or failure can matter even among those succeeding in the transition to adulthood. If children consistently fail before succeeding at age 29 (path 7), they have a 60 percent chance of being in the middle class at age 40. If they consistently succeed in the earlier stages, they have an 81 percent chance. Similarly, people failing during the transition to adulthood have a 24 percent chance of making it to the middle class if they have a consistent history of failure but a 51 percent chance (path 2) if they have a consistent history of success.

Although many children who get off track at an early age get back on track at a later age—and can be helped to do so—these findings point to the importance of early interventions by government or parents that keep children on the right track.

On the other hand, early failures need not be determinative if children can get back on track. A child who is not school ready has a similar chance of being middle class as someone who is school ready if they can get on track by age ten and stay on track (see paths 1 and 5). Indeed, a striking feature of Table 1 is how well success at age 29 predicts success at age 40, as is apparent from comparing paths 1, 3, 5, 6, and 7 to paths 2, 4, and 8. This may be an

Table 1: Probability of Reaching the Middle Class by Number of Successful Outcomes and Possible Pathways

Path Number	Early Childhood	Middle Childhood	Adolescence	Transition to Adulthood	Percent Middle Class	Percent of Cohort
1	✓	✓	✓	✓	81%	28%
2	✓	✓	✓	X	51%	9%
3	✓	✓	X	✓	74%	9%
4	✓	✓	X	X	36%	8%
5	X	✓	✓	✓	80%	6%
6	X	X	✓	✓	75%	4%
7	X	X	X	✓	60%	4%
8	X	X	X	X	24%	8%

Table 2: Probability of Reaching the Middle Class by Number of Successful Outcomes and Possible Pathways – Ignoring Transition to Adulthood

Path Number	Early Childhood	Middle Childhood	Adolescence	Percent Middle Class	Percent of Cohort
1	✓	✓	✓	74%	37%
2	✓	✓	X	57%	17%
3	X	✓	✓	71%	8%
4	X	✓	X	52%	7%
5	X	X	✓	59%	6%
6	X	X	X	37%	12%

artifact of the way we define success at age 29. Since it includes having an income of 250 percent of poverty, an individual need only increase his or her income by about 20 percent over the next decade to become middle class by middle age.

For this reason, in Table 2 we ignore the transition to adulthood and consider how well particular paths through age 19 predict middle class status at age 40. These six paths through adolescence cover 88 percent of the children in our sample, and the two paths involving three consecutive successes or failures account for nearly half of all children. At first glance, success or failure in early childhood seems less important than in subsequent stages. Children who succeed in all three stages have a 74 percent chance of being middle class at age 40, while those who are not school ready but succeed in middle childhood and adolescence have a 71 percent chance—essentially no difference. Comparing paths 2 and 4, which are identical except for early childhood, gives a similar impression.

Concluding that early childhood success is unimportant, however, would be wrong; if the primary way that school readiness affects the likelihood of becoming middle class is by directing people into more successful paths, that fact would be obscured by comparisons such as these. If a child is school ready, there is a good chance she will continue to succeed in later stages. If she is not, it is relatively unlikely she will get on track. Paths 1 and 2 are much more common than paths 3 and 4; recovery from early failure is relatively rare.

The Importance of Cumulative Success

To summarize the data further, we calculate the probability of reaching the middle class by middle age based on the number of life stages in which the individual experienced success (see Table 3). As already noted, 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. An individual who hits just one speed bump has a 67 percent chance of reaching the middle class, dropping to 54 percent if there are two unsuccessful outcomes, 41 percent with three unsuccessful outcomes, and only 24 percent for those who are not successful under our metrics at any earlier stages in life.

Who are the children who succeed throughout life? They are disproportionately from higher-income and white families, while those who are never on track are disproportionately from lower-income and African American families. For example, 19 percent of children from top-quintile families stay on track throughout their early life while only 2 percent of children from bottom-quintile families do. The figures by race show that 32 percent of white children but only 10 percent of black children stay on track.

Table 3: Probability of Reaching the Middle Class by the Number of Successful Life Stages Prior to Adulthood

Number of Successful Life Stages	Probability of Reaching the Middle Class	Percent of Sample
4	81%	28%
3	67%	28%
2	54%	22%
1	41%	15%
0	24%	8%
All	61%	100%

The fact that nearly one quarter (24 percent) of our off track sample of individuals (those failing at every one of our metrics) manages to achieve middle class status is a reminder that there are quite a few individuals who are economically successful despite lack of success during school. Such individuals may be successful purely out of luck, due to skills or personality traits that are not captured by our metrics, or by relying on support from another family member.

Unfortunately, birth circumstances are highly predictive of the likelihood of achieving success in the four life stages preceding middle age. 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"—that child has only a seventeen percent chance of achieving all four interim markers of success. Figure 8, below, shows the likelihood that an individual achieves success at any particular number of life stages conditional on their circumstances at birth.

Figure 8: Number of Successful Life Stages by Circumstances at Birth

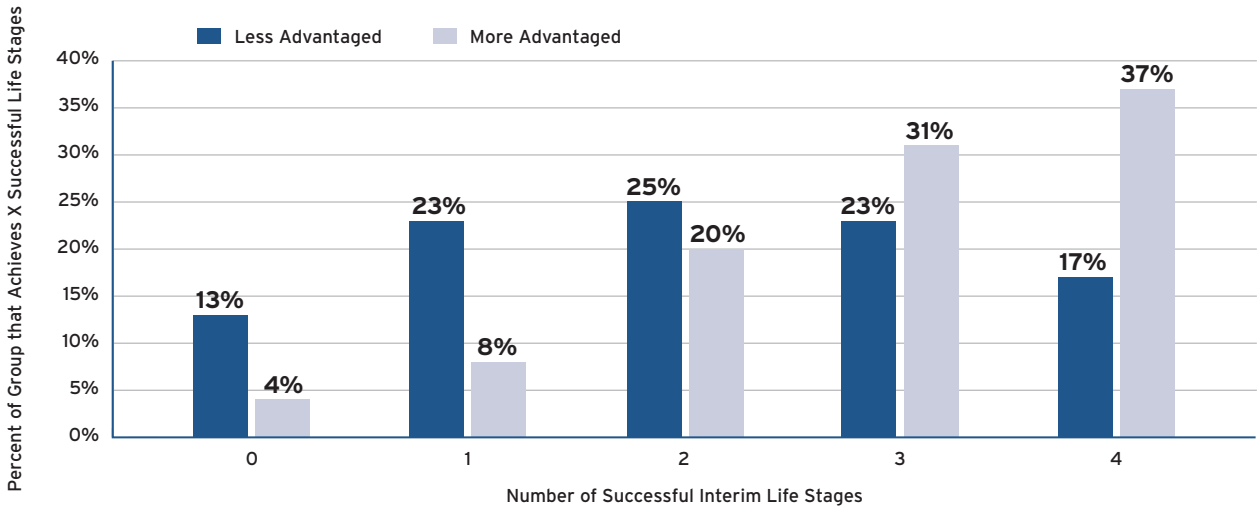
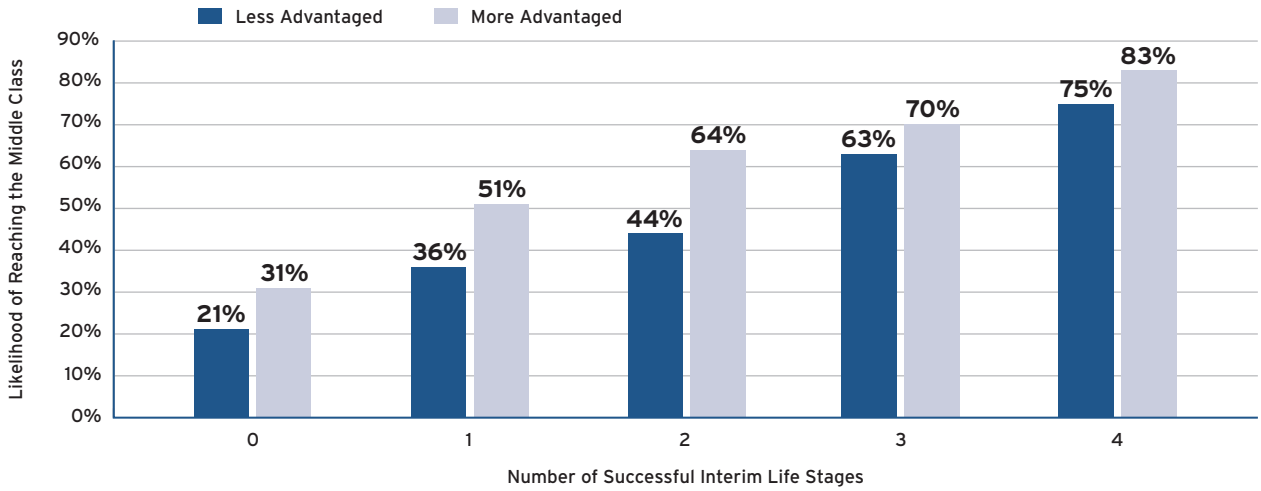


Figure 9: Chances of Reaching the Middle Class by Number of Successful Life Stages



Although Figure 8 shows that few children from less advantaged backgrounds succeed at every life stage through their twenties, it appears that when they do, they are nearly as likely to reach the middle class as children born into more advantaged families. Figure 9 indicates that children from less advantaged families who stay on track have a 75 percent chance of joining the middle class, compared with 83 percent for their more advantaged peers. On the other hand, 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 Figure 9, advantaged children are about as likely to end up middle class as disadvantaged children who have an additional success under their belt. For example, an advantaged child with no successes through their twenties is nearly as likely to end up middle class as a disadvantaged child with one success. 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.

When children stay on track at each life stage, adult outcomes change dramatically.

How Can We Help More Americans Climb the Ladder?

Since gaps between more and less advantaged children are large and getting larger, without a clear plan to prevent the less advantaged from getting stuck at the bottom, we risk developing a society permanently divided along class lines.[17] But the results above reveal that while staying on track is very difficult, especially for disadvantaged children, birth circumstances absolutely do not have to become destiny. Only a quarter of children succeed in all of the life stages before adulthood, while six in ten children manage to reach the middle class at forty. Less advantaged children who stay on track do almost as well as their more advantaged peers. To be sure, there will always be unequal outcomes. Part of the correlation between parental socioeconomic status and children's later success may reflect differences in genetic endowments, and family environments will always matter to some extent.[18]

When children stay on track at each life stage, adult outcomes change dramatically. Parents who tell their children to study hard and stay out of trouble are doing exactly the right thing. As President Clinton used to

say, government doesn't raise children, parents do. Government policy has a limited role to play. However, intervening during every life stage, as needed, could help to keep less advantaged children on track and change their life trajectories in a significant way. The research community has now identified, using rigorous randomized controlled studies, any number of successful programs, some of which pass a cost-benefit test even under very conservative assumptions about their eventual effects. We mention some of them in what follows, but the list is illustrative not exhaustive.

Family Formation. The first responsibility of parents is not to have a child before they are ready. Yet 70 percent of pregnancies to women in their twenties are unplanned and, partly as a consequence, more than half of births to women under 30 occur outside of wedlock.[19] In the past, most adults married before having children. Now childbearing outside of marriage is becoming the norm for women without a college degree. To many people, this is an issue of values; to others, it is simple common sense to note that two parents are more likely to have the time and financial resources to raise a child well. Many young people in their twenties have children with a cohabiting partner, but these cohabiting relationships have proven to be quite unstable, leading to a lot of turmoil for both the children and the adults in such households.[20] Government can help to ensure that more children are born into supportive circumstances by funding social marketing campaigns and nongovernmental institutions that encourage young people to think and act responsibly. It can also help by providing access to effective forms of contraception, and by funding teen pregnancy prevention efforts that have had some success in reducing the nation's high rates of very early pregnancies, abortions, and unwed births. A number of well-evaluated programs have accomplished these goals and they easily pass a cost-benefit test and end up saving taxpayers money.[21]

Early Childhood. An extensive body of research shows that the early childhood period is critical and that home visiting programs and high-quality preschool programs, in particular, can affect readiness for school.

Home visiting programs, such as the highly regarded Nurse Family Partnership (NFP), focus on the home environment. Eligible pregnant women are assigned a registered nurse who visits the mother at home weekly during pregnancy and then about once a month until the child turns two. Nurses teach proper health behaviors (pre- and post-natal), skills for parenting young children, and strategies to help the mother improve her own prospects (family planning, education, work). The program is available to low-income first-time pregnant women, most of whom are young and unmarried and enroll during their second or third trimester. The program has had impressive success in improving health (reductions in smoking during pregnancy, maternal hypertension, rates of pre-term and low-birth weight births, and children's emergency room visits). NFP also appears to affect the timing and number of subsequent births. Children whose mothers participate in NFP also see modest improvements in their school readiness.[22]

Unlike home visiting programs, preschool programs emphasize improving children's academic skills more than their health or home environments. Preschool attendance is one of the strongest predictors of school readiness.[23] Income and racial gaps in academic and social competencies are evident as early as age 4 or 5, and compensating for what these more disadvantaged children do not learn at home is a highly effective strategy.[24] These programs have an impact not only on school readiness but also on later outcomes. For example, a child that is school ready is almost twice as likely to acquire core competencies by age 11, and having achieved those competencies, to go on to graduate from high school and to be successful as an adult. There's even some evidence that school-ready children go on to do better in the labor market even if it doesn't affect their test scores in later grades—perhaps because it affects their social skills, their self-discipline, or their sense of control over their lives.[25]

Middle Childhood. The period from school entry, around age 5, until the end of elementary school, around age 11, is often overlooked by policy makers. Yet it is the time when most children master the basics—reading and math—as well as learn to navigate the world outside the home. The standard we use to measure competence at this age includes

acquiring both the academic and the social skills needed for success in the later school years and beyond.

Scores on math and reading, especially the latter, have improved very little in recent decades. Gaps by race have narrowed only modestly, while gaps by income have widened dramatically.[26] These academic skills will be much more important in the future as the economy sheds routine production and administrative jobs and demands workers with higher-level critical thinking abilities.[27] For these reasons, almost everyone agrees that the education system needs to be transformed. School reform could include more resources, more accountability for results, more effective teachers in the classroom, smaller class sizes, more effective curricula, longer school years or days, and more competition and choice via vouchers or charter schools. Although a full review of the debate about school reform is beyond the scope of this paper, we note that most experts do not believe that more resources by themselves will have much impact unless they are targeted in effective ways. They also agree that accountability is important but must be combined with providing schools the capacity to do better, that teachers are critical but that it's hard to identify good teachers in advance, and that class size (holding teacher quality constant) matters but is a comparatively expensive intervention. Few curriculum reforms have been well-evaluated or have demonstrated big effects. Finally, some charter schools and voucher experiments have produced positive results, but charters as a whole do not do a better job than the public schools.[28]

> …just 57 percent of America's children graduate from high school with decent grades having avoided teen parenthood and criminal conviction.

In short, there is no simple solution. Most likely a combination of these or other reforms will be needed to improve children's competencies in the middle years. Indeed, more holistic approaches or "whole school reforms," such as Success For All, that involve simultaneously changing teacher training, curricula, testing, and the organization of learning have had some success.[29] It is also encouraging that national benchmarks in the form of the Common Core State Standards have now been endorsed by 45 states. The Obama administration has pressed for tracking children's progress in school, for rewarding teachers based in part on how much children learn, and for more innovation through charter schools. We are also going to need new experiments in the uses of technology and online learning. In the meantime, there are numerous more limited efforts that have had some success at improving reading or math and that could be expanded to more schools.[30]

It is not only academic skills that matter. Our data show that many children lack the behavioral skills that recent research indicates are important for later success. Interventions designed to improve children's social-emotional competencies in the elementary school years have produced promising results and need to be part of the solution.[31] Social-emotional learning has five core elements: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Learning to navigate these areas positively impacts children's behavior, reduces emotional distress, and can indirectly affect academic outcomes.[32]

Finally, our analyses suggest most children are reasonably healthy at age 11. For those who are not, access to health care is obviously important. We assume that between Medicaid, SCHIP, and the Affordable Care Act, most children are (or will be) covered by public or private health insurance. But important exceptions may include illegal immigrants, children who live in rural areas, or children whose parents fail to bring them in for care. In the latter context, a recent experiment in New York City, the Family Rewards program, in which parents were offered a reward for making sure their children had insurance and regular check-ups, found that there were only modest effects on the receipt of care, which is already quite high in New York City.[33] But making sure that children get dental checkups, immunizations, and other preventive care is worth pursuing.

Adolescence. Moving to adolescence, our data show that just 57 percent of America's children graduate from high

school with decent grades having avoided teen parenthood and criminal conviction.[34] Dropping out of high school, not learning very much during the high school years, and engaging in risky behaviors are all barriers to later success. There has been a rise in incarceration over the past thirty years, driven by patterns among young men, particularly African American men.[35] In contrast, and further reflecting the diverging trends for young men and women, teen births have declined to historically low levels—a consequence of historically low pregnancy rates (rates that nonetheless remain high by international standards).[36]

The teenage years have always been fraught with difficulty, but these data should be a wake-up call for parents, schools, community leaders, elected officials, and young people themselves. By the time they are teens, young people should begin to take some responsibility for their futures and need to be encouraged by parents and others to do so. At the same time, school reforms can make a difference. High school dropouts report high levels of disengagement and lack of motivation.[37] Education leaders and policy makers are attempting to respond to these issues of engagement with new types of high schools. One example, from New York City, is the conversion of a number of failing public high schools to small, academically nonselective, four-year high schools that emphasize innovation and strong relationships between students and faculty. These schools, dubbed "small schools of choice" (SSC) by researchers at MDRC, are intended to serve as viable alternatives to the neighborhood schools located in historically disadvantaged communities. Admission is determined by a lottery system after students across New York City select and rank the high schools they'd like to attend.

The random assignment of students to these schools allowed researchers to study their effect on various student outcomes. The results indicate that SSC enrollment had a substantial impact on student achievement. Throughout high school, SSC students earned more credits, failed fewer courses, attended school more dependably, and were more likely to be on track to graduate. SSC students earned more New York State Regents diplomas, had a higher proportion of college-ready English exam scores, and had graduation rates nearly 15 percent higher than the controls.[38]

Young Adulthood. The transition to adulthood is increasingly lengthy, with more young adults living at home, fewer of them marrying, and more of them continuing their educations well into their twenties or beyond. This makes defining success during this period difficult. We look at what proportion of young adults are living independently and have graduated from college or are in a household with an income above 250 percent of poverty (about $45,000 for a married couple with one child) by the end of their twenties.

One thing we know for sure is that a college degree is more important than ever for later success. Indeed, it is increasingly a prerequisite to being middle class by middle age. While earnings have stagnated or even declined for those without college degrees in recent decades, they have risen for those with a degree, especially among women. The earnings gains associated with being a college graduate have risen sharply.

One thing we know for sure is that a college degree is more important than ever for later success.

One very important barrier to college is inadequate preparation. As our data show, those who have graduated from high school with decent grades and no involvement in risky behavior are twice as likely to complete college, and have a 71 percent chance of achieving success by the end of their twenties while those who don't have only a 45 percent chance. But academic preparation is not all that matters. Research has shown that even among students with equal academic achievements, socioeconomic status has a large effect on who finishes college: 74 percent of high-scorers who grew up in upper income families complete college, compared to only 29 percent of those who grew up in low-income families.[39] Moreover, these income gaps in college-going have widened in recent years.[40]

There are a multitude of federal and state programs, tax credits, and loans that subsidize college attendance. One of the most important for closing gaps between more and less advantaged children is the Pell Grant program, since it is targeted to lower-income families (those with incomes below about $40,000 a year). The federal government

spends about 36 billion dollars on the program annually.[41] The evidence on the effects of Pell Grants is somewhat mixed. In part, this is because even if financial incentives matter (and they appear to, according to the best research), the process of applying for grants is daunting for lower-income families[42]. Ongoing reforms to simplify the process should help. One expert estimates that for each additional $1,000 in subsidies, the chance of college enrollment increases by about 4 percentage points.[43] Whether enrollment leads to graduation is another matter. While enrollment rates in postsecondary institutions, including community colleges, have shot upwards, graduation rates have increased very little.[44] Efforts to improve retention and graduation rates by coupling tuition assistance with more personalized attention and services have had only modest effects to date.

Adulthood. Once an individual has completed schooling, left home, and entered the work force, the most important determinant of their success is the labor market. Family formation also matters, since two can live more cheaply than one, can rely on more than one source of earnings, and can work in partnership to raise the next generation. Since we covered this topic earlier, here we only note that the life cycle does begin again and, for the next generation, it matters greatly *how* it begins.

Putting the full responsibility on government to close these gaps is unreasonable, but so is a heroic assumption that everyone can be a Horatio Alger with no help from society.

For those who reach adulthood without the academic and social skills to enter the middle class on their own, policies should be linked to personal responsibility and opportunity-enhancing behaviors. This includes education subsidies tied to academic performance; income assistance that encourages and rewards work, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit and child care subsidies; career and technical education tied to growing sectors of the economy; and more apprenticeship and on-the-job training.

These strategies will only be successful if jobs are available. If there were ever any doubt that the labor market matters for success, the Great Recession and its aftermath should have removed it. Even young people with college degrees are having difficulty finding jobs, especially the kinds of jobs to which they earlier aspired. Still, the biggest effects have been on the less well-educated, who have suffered not just a loss of employment opportunities but a decline in their earnings. As this paper goes to press, a fierce debate is underway about how to create more jobs and we do not intend to enter that fray. Our focus is on the longer-term prospects of American children and what society and individuals need to do to ensure that more people have a shot at the American Dream after the economy has recovered.

Conclusion

In previous research, Haskins and Sawhill found that if individuals graduate from high school, work full time, and wait until they're married and over 21 to become parents, they have a very good chance of joining the middle class.[45] These data have been cited by Senator Rick Santorum and also by Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney as showing that individuals who work hard, avoid pitfalls, and make responsible choices greatly improve their odds of success.[46] We would add that children from less advantaged backgrounds often see little reason to make these responsible choices, given the environments in which they live and the opportunities that are available to them. Indeed, by the time children can be reasonably held accountable for their choices, many are already behind because of choices their parents made for them. And of course, as the Great Recession has shown, working full time is only partly a choice. Putting the full responsibility on government to close these gaps is unreasonable, but so is a heroic assumption that everyone can be a Horatio Alger with no help from society.

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Endnotes

1. Obama 2011
2. Romney 2011
3. Pew Economic Mobility Project 2009; Isaacs 2008c; Haskins and Sawhill 2009
4. Jäntti et al. 2006, D'Addio 2008; Björklund and Jäntti 2009, Ermisch et al. 2012, Corak 2012, Corak 2009
5. The Annie E. Casey Foundation 2012
6. Isaacs 2008b; Economic Mobility Project 2012
7. It is worth emphasizing that the only way to avoid projecting adult data for children would be to use a survey with actual adult data. But in that case, the child outcomes would have occurred decades ago, with questionable relevance to understanding the likely mobility of today's children. We cannot know what will happen to today's children with certainty until they are older; our dataset, with its projections, attempts to model what will happen through careful statistical methods. For details on the model and its underlying data, see Winship et al. 2012.
8. In 2011, poverty threshold for family of 4 with 2 children was $22,811 (U.S. Census Bureau).
9. Note that due to data availability, this GPA is only for the individual's last year of high school.
10. 2011 poverty threshold for family of 3 with one child is $18,106 (U.S. Census Bureau).
11. U.S. Department of Education 2011
12. Sax 2009; Bell 2012; Bandy 2012
13. U. S. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration and Executive Office of the President Office of Management and Budget 2011
14. Kearney 2006
15. Caution should be used in interpreting the Hispanic numbers. In our data set, we only have children whose mothers were in the United States in 1979. We do not have the children of anyone who immigrated to the United States after that (or any immigrant children). Our data should be interpreted as applying to children born to women who are already in the U.S. by adolescence. In addition, the number of Asian American, Native American and other children in our data is too small to support reliable conclusions about their success rates, so they are not included in Figure 4.
16. Isaacs 2008a; Pew Economic Mobility Project 2012
17. As detailed below, socioeconomic gaps in test scores, in college-going, in marriage rates as well as in adult earnings are all widening. See also Sawhill 2012a; Murray 2012; Brooks 2012.
18. New research has shown that there is a complicated interaction between genes and the environment in which each affects the other. For example, neuroscientists are finding that toxic stress during childhood can affect a child's later functioning. See, for example, Tough 2012; and Shonkoff et al. 2012.
19. The National Campaign 2008; Wildsmith et al. 2011
20. McLanahan and Beck 2010
21. Thomas 2012; Sawhill, Thomas, and Monea 2010; Sawhill 2012b
22. The NFP program meets the Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy's top tier evidence standard, based on three well-conducted randomized controlled trials (Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy 2011). NFP is also rated as having the highest number of favorable impacts of any home visiting program (Paulsell et al. 2010). Its documented success stands out because a number of other home visiting programs have not had significant effects on child outcomes when tested under randomized assignment.
23. Isaacs 2012
24. Long-term experimental studies of preschool programs like the Perry Preschool Project and the Abecedarian Project show lasting benefits, but policy makers have struggled to replicate their success on a larger scale. Still, a recent meta-analysis of preschool program evaluations indicates that early childhood education has positive cognitive and social-emotional effects, though we don't yet know which program characteristics or combination of characteristics is responsible for the best outcomes (Barnett 2011; Camilli 2010).
25. Chetty et al. 2010
26. Reardon 2011
27. Murnane, Sawhill, and Snow 2012
28. For excellent reviews, see Jacob and Ludwig 2009; Figlio 2007–08; Loeb and McEwan 2010; Rouse and Barrow 2006.
29. Borman et al. 2007
30. For a discussion of programs that have demonstrated positive impact on elementary school reading, including including tutoring and summer reading programs, see Baron and Grannis 2012.
31. A recent meta-analysis of social-emotional learning research found that on average, such programs improved both conduct problems and academic performance by about a fifth to a quarter of a standard deviation (Durlak et al. 2011)
32. Payton et al. 2005; Zins et al. 2004
33. Riccio et al. 2010
34. High school dropout estimates are some of the most complicated indicators to track, but James Heckman and Paul LaFontaine have carefully shown that the graduation rate is lower than previously understood and has declined over time. The decline has been concentrated among young white men, which has exacerbated the situation, given the already low graduation rates of black and Hispanic men (Heckman and LaFontaine 2010).
35. Western and Pettit 2010
36. Kost, Henshaw, and Carlin 2010; National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy 2012
37. Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison 2006
38. Bloom, Thompson, and Unterman 2010; Bloom and Unterman 2012
39. College Board 2005 cited in Deming and Dynarski 2010
40. Bailey and Dynarski 2011
41. U.S. Department of Education 2012
42. Bettinger et al. 2012; Haskins, Holzer, and Lerman 2009
43. Deming and Dynarksi 2010
44. OECD 2011
45. Haskins and Sawhill 2009
46. Romney 2012; Santorum 2012

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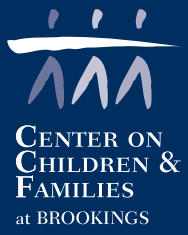

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