

Mapping Pathways to the Middle Class

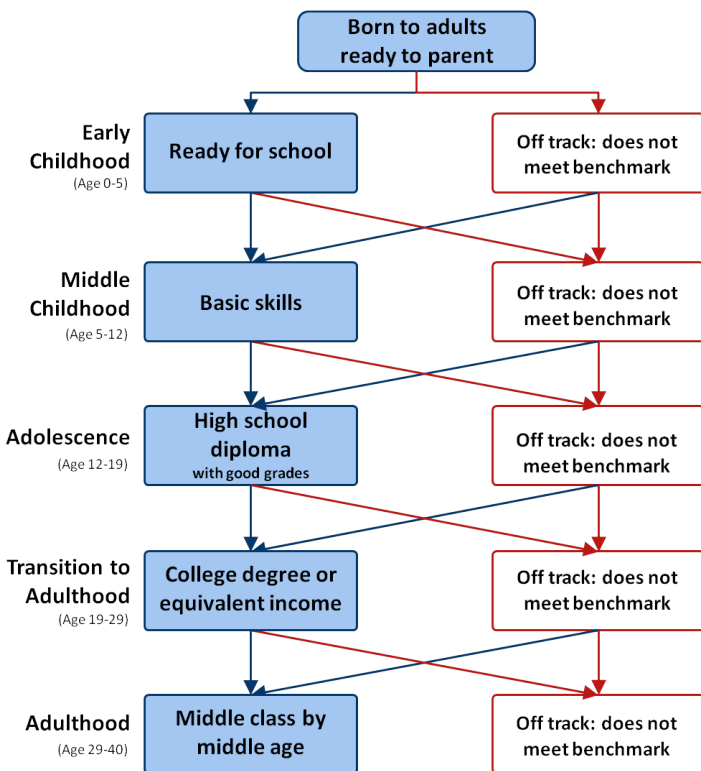
Is the United States still an opportunity society? Can people achieve the American Dream? How can we help more people reach the middle class?

The **Brookings Institution Center on Children and Families** is answering these questions with the **Social Genome Project**, a data-rich model using the best research on what determines success in each stage of the lifecycle. The model is a tool for researchers, practitioners, and government officials to

explore the various pathways to success, and to **assess the likely success of any strategy designed to increase opportunity for children and youth** by conducting virtual policy experiments.

Only 64% of American children reach the middle class by middle age.

Pathways to the Middle Class



Achieving the American Dream depends on being born to adults who are ready to be parents, and then succeeding at each subsequent stage in life. We've identified five benchmarks that are good predictors of eventual economic success: being **born to a non-poor, two-parent family**, being **ready for school** at age 5, mastering **basic academic and social skills by age 11**, **graduating from high school** with decent grades and avoiding risky behaviors during adolescence, and obtaining a **postsecondary degree** or the equivalent income before age 30.

For those who consistently do well throughout school and in early adulthood the chances are 85% that they will be middle class by middle age. For those who have persistent problems at earlier stages, the chances are much lower (33%).



The Social Genome Project at BROOKINGS

Major Findings to Date

A majority of Americans (64%) achieve the American Dream, defined as an income of at least 300% of poverty, or \$66,000 for a family of 4, by age 40.

Disadvantaged children who succeed in each early life stage are just as likely to achieve the American Dream as advantaged children.

The **chances are considerably lower for some groups**, especially children born into disadvantaged families. Nineteen percent never meet a single benchmark for economic success. Policies that reduce such births, either by providing young women with good information and access to more effective forms of birth control, or by improving the education and earnings of their parents, would **help improve opportunity.**

Moreover, those disadvantaged children who do achieve success in school—through some combination of their own efforts and supports from society—are just as likely to achieve the Dream as more advantaged children. Unfortunately, this is a very small group.

Only 9% of disadvantaged children meet every benchmark for economic success.

Likelihood of Achieving the American Dream

<i>Born to Disadvantaged Family</i>	<i>56%</i>
<i>Born to Advantaged Family</i>	<i>72%</i>
<i>Lower Income Families</i>	<i>52%</i>
<i>Upper Income Families</i>	<i>72%</i>
<i>Blacks</i>	<i>50%</i>
<i>Hispanics</i>	<i>59%</i>
<i>Whites</i>	<i>70%</i>

**Advantaged children are born at 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. Upper and lower income refers to the top and bottom family income quintiles.*

Our data show that **a sizeable number of children** get off track during early childhood or the schooling years but manage to **do well despite these early setbacks**. Still, success at each stage of life greatly enhances the chances of success at the next stage. For example, a child who is ready for school is about twice as likely to complete elementary school with strong academic and social skills. Such advantages ripple through the entire life cycle: **success at one stage begets success at later stages.**

To learn more about the **Social Genome Project** at the **Center on Children and Families**, please visit <http://www.brookings.edu/ccf> or contact Kerry Grannis at kgrannis@brookings.edu or (202) 797-6168.

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