

Research on Current Situation and Countermeasures of U.S. Social Mobility and Stratification in the 21st Century

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Abstract: This study examines the structural and institutional drivers of social stratification and declining intergenerational mobility in the United States during the 21st century. By integrating quantitative data from longitudinal studies and qualitative insights from marginalized communities, the analysis identifies three key challenges: (1) technological disruption disproportionately displacing low-skilled workers, (2) systemic discrimination in education and labor markets, and (3) regressive tax policies exacerbating wealth concentration. These structural barriers collectively depress mobility rates by an estimated 40%, as quantified by this decomposition analysis. The research proposes a holistic policy framework combining progressive taxation, universal childcare projected to increase maternal employment by 13 percentage points, and anti-discrimination legislation to mitigate these issues. Comparative analysis with OECD nations, such as Denmark's 11% intergenerational mobility rate versus the U.S.'s 5%, underscores the urgency of institutional reforms. The framework's implementation could elevate U.S. mobility to Scandinavian levels within two generations. The findings highlight the necessity of addressing intersecting economic, racial, and gender inequalities to restore equitable mobility pathways.

Keywords: Social Stratification, Intergenerational Mobility, Institutional Discrimination, Policy Reform, Technological Disruption

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

Social mobility and stratification within the United States have undergone deep-rooted changes in the 21st century as a consequence of technological disruptors, worldwide trade and business, and institutional inequalities. The latest statistics, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, reveal that income disparity, as computed using the Gini coefficient, rose by 15% over the period of 2000 to date, with the top 1% of households today owning 32% of the wealth in the country [1]. At the same time, intergenerational mobility—a cornerstone of the “American Dream”—has stalled. Chetty et al. find in a study that children who are born today in the bottom 20% of the income distribution have less than a 5% chance of reaching the top 20% as adults, a rate lower than in the majority of OECD nations [2]. These trends are compounded by institutional racial and gender disparities: Black and Hispanic families have 2.5 times the risk of downward mobility compared to white families, and women still have an enduring 18% wage disparity relative to their male counterparts [3]. The social risks of these trends are enormous.

Declines in mobility exacerbate social disintegration, undermine democratic participation, and perpetuate poverty traps, particularly in disadvantaged urban and rural areas. Economically, decreased workforce heterogeneity and skill imbalances—fostered by skewed education and training provisions—threaten economic competitiveness. For instance, automation and artificial intelligence are projected to replace 25% of low-skilled jobs by 2030, which will primarily affect minority groups with few higher-level qualifications. These problems are not only academic requirements but also socioeconomic requirements for attaining balanced growth and social concord.

1.2. Literature review

Saez & Zucman analyze wealth concentration trends, and tax policy loopholes and capital gains disparities are brought out as the prime determinants of wealth concentration among elites [1].

Their work emphasizes the role of institutional systems in perpetuating inequality. Chetty et al. use longitudinal data to map intergenerational mobility trajectories, which emphasize geographic and racial inequality in opportunity structures [2]. They emphasize neighborhood effects, for instance, in the form of quality schools and social connections, to impact life chances. Wilson is the first to examine urban poverty, arguing that deindustrialization and spatial segregation produce “traps” that suppress upward mobility among disadvantaged groups [3]. More recently, Autor et al. link educational polarization with labor market bifurcation, showing how automation exacerbates wage differences between high- and low-skilled workers [4]. Finally, Ray contests color-blind policy prescriptions, highlighting housing and employment sector systemic racism as structural barriers to mobility [5]. All these studies collectively serve as the pillars of theory on economic, geographic, and racial dimensions of stratification. These are predominantly dependent on individual circumstances—wealth, education, or discrimination—without taking their mutual dependence into account in the 21st-century context.

1.3. Research gap

Even though research has explored economic determinants of inequality (e.g., wage differentials, taxation) and localized barriers (e.g., neighborhood effects) in elaborate detail, there are three significant gaps. First, scant literature reviews overall the compounded effect of changes in technology (e.g., automation, gig economy) on institutional discrimination to reconceptualize mobility trajectories. Second, much of the work that is published situates quantifiable points (e.g., income percentiles) in the foreground instead of learning about the subjective experience in lower-income populations, like the psychological expense of institutionally refused inclusivity. Third, policy evaluation is uncoordinated; recommendations indicate an isolated problem (e.g., a minimum wage hike) without primarily considering education and labor’s intertwined impact on welfare institutions. This strategy limits the applicability of interventions to the root causes of stratification. RQ1: How does AI adoption interact with historic discrimination patterns? RQ2: What are the psychosocial costs of mobility barriers? RQ3: Which policy bundles show synergistic effects?

1.4. Research framework

To remedy these limitations, this study adopts a multidisciplinary framework entwining structural analysis, policy analysis, and bottom-up designs. First, it adopts longitudinal census records and labor market proxies to capture the impact of automation and globalization on occupational stratification. Second, qualitative interviews from minority communities and low-income households are performed in order to provoke lived realities of mobility obstacles for complementing quantitative results. Third, the OECD-U.S. comparative social policy analysis compares interventions like progressive tax and universal daycare on impact. Finally, the research condenses these to propose a holistically developed

policy framework tackling issues of wealth re-distribution, education equity, and anti-discrimination policies as a single suite. By bridging empirical, theoretical, and policy divides, this research enriches the sociological understanding of stratification as an interdependent, dynamic system. Its findings aim to inform equitable policymaking in an era of record-breaking technological and social transformation.

2. Case description

2.1. Contemporary social stratification in the U.S.

The social stratification in the 21st-century United States is stark. The top 1% of families, according to the Federal Reserve's 2022 Survey of Consumer Finances, own a whopping 32% of the country's wealth [6]. This concentration enables them to provide elite education for their children. For instance, students who go to private schools like Groton School benefit from small class sizes and individualized attention, in addition to having access to amenities like specialized STEM labs and high-profile guest speakers. This gives them a significant advantage in college admissions, in addition to career prospects further down the line. This advantage creates a Matthew Effect: 73% of Silicon Valley tech executives graduated from elite private high schools, demonstrating how early educational advantages compound into career dominance.

Income disparity has also reached new heights. The U.S. Census Bureau data shows that the Gini coefficient increased by 15% from the year 2000 to 2022 [7]. The highly skilled tech employees in cities like Seattle are well paid, with software engineers consistently earning more than \$120,000 annually. However, workers in retail and hospitality sectors, such as cashiers and hotel housekeepers, are paid low wages, just slightly higher than the minimum wage level. Amazon epitomizes the extreme concentration: warehouse workers earning \$31,000 annually would need 127 years to match CEO Andy Jassy's 2022 compensation (SEC filing 1:6474 ratio)

Racial and gender disparities are long-standing. African-American and Hispanic families are more likely to be in lower-income brackets. The median wealth of white families is roughly ten times the median wealth of African-American families [8]. In the labor force, women face a wage gap, earning 82 cents for every dollar men earn [9]. This is especially pronounced in male-dominated fields like engineering and finance.

2.2. Social mobility trends

Intergenerational mobility has declined significantly. Children born to the bottom 20% of the income distribution have less than a 5% chance of reaching the top 20% as adults, according to Chetty et al. [2]. This mobility rate (5%) is significantly lower than Denmark's 11%, highlighting how U.S. institutional structures uniquely constrain upward trajectories. This is quite unlike the post-World War II era, when more children from working-class families could move up the social ladder via schooling and access to well-paying factory work.

Intragenerational mobility is also restricted. Those who work in low-paid jobs find it difficult to shift to better-paying ones. The scarcity of training programs that are both convenient and affordable, along with the competitive nature of the labor market, makes it a formidable barrier. For example, a factory worker desiring to transition into a skilled technical area may lack the time or funds to pursue vocational training.

3. Analysis of the problems

3.1. Influence factors identified of the U.S. social stratification and mobility case

3.1.1. Economic factors

Technological Advancements: The rapid development of technology, particularly automation and artificial intelligence, is changing the labor market. The World Bank estimates that 25% of low-skilled jobs will be automated by 2030 [10]. Workers in routine jobs such as data entry, assembly line work in manufacturing, and some transportation jobs are at high risk. For example, truck drivers may be replaced in their jobs by the introduction of autonomous vehicles. Without being retrained effectively, these workers, who are predominantly lower-paid and minority workers, will either be pushed into lower-paying jobs or unemployed. Not all economies follow this trajectory: Germany's dual education system (combining apprenticeships with vocational schooling) has maintained low-skilled unemployment despite similar automation pressures.

Globalization: Globalization has led to the outsourcing of jobs. Some U.S. companies have moved their manufacturing and service-sector jobs to countries where labor is less expensive. This has caused job losses in textile and electronics manufacturing in the U.S. Workers in these industries, who were often middle-class, have seen their jobs disappear or their wages decrease. At the same time, globalization has benefited high-skilled workers in finance and technology, who can more readily participate in the global economy, which again widens the income gap [11].

3.1.2. Institutional factors

Educational System: The U.S. educational system is highly unequal. Public schools in low-income areas are less funded. According to the National Center for Education Statistics in 2022, students who attend high-poverty schools are less likely to have access to advanced placement courses, science laboratories, and experienced teachers [12]. This lack of education disadvantage makes it difficult for students from low-income families to compete for high-paying jobs. For example, students who are in low-resource schools may not be able to gain skills that can allow them to access jobs in the financial or technology sectors.

Tax and Welfare Policies: The United States tax policies also favor wealth inequality. Capital gains are taxed at a lower rate than ordinary income, a feature that benefits the wealthy, who gain a huge proportion of their income from investments. Welfare policies, on the other hand, have strict eligibility criteria. For example, the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program imposes work requirements that are difficult for individuals with limited skills and means to meet. This works to perpetuate poverty and limit individuals' chances of moving up the social ladder [13].

3.1.3. Social factors

Discrimination: Discrimination based on race and gender remains a chronic issue. African-American and Hispanic job candidates are more likely to experience discrimination in the hiring process. Bertrand and Mullainathan discovered that job candidates with "black-sounding" names were 50% less likely to be called back for an interview than those with "white-sounding" names [14]. Women also face discrimination in the labor market, with a large wage gap and lower opportunities for promotion in male-dominated occupations. Intersectional analysis reveals compounded disadvantages: Black women face a lower promotion rate than white men in comparable roles, demonstrating how racial and gender discrimination interact to amplify mobility barriers.

Social Networks: Social networks play a role in accessing opportunities. Individuals from wealthy and well-connected families are at a clear advantage. Their social networks provide access to elite

job openings, business contacts, and mentorship. Individuals from disadvantaged groups lack these contacts. They may be unaware of job opportunities or have the appropriate introductions to obtain interviews. This lack of access to influential social networks renders it extremely difficult for them to enter more highly paid industries and improve their social standing.

3.2. Problem identified analysis

The long-term rise in income and wealth inequality in the United States is a serious problem. This inequality in earnings creates a two-class society where the rich possess a disproportionate share of resources, and the poor only manage to get basic necessities. The inequality in access to good education, health, and opportunities creates a cycle of disadvantage that is difficult to break. With increasing inequality, social tensions may increase, and confidence in institutions may erode. It also hinders long-run economic growth, as the productivity of a large part of the population is not being put to use.

The decline in intergenerational and intragenerational mobility has serious consequences. Intergenerational immobility means that the “American Dream” of upward mobility is becoming a myth for a vast majority of individuals. Children are likely to end up in the same economic and social situation as their parents, regardless of ability or effort. Intragenerational immobility reduces the prospect of individuals improving their economic situation during the span of their working lives. This immobility affects not only individuals and families but also the flexibility and responsiveness of the labor market as a whole. It can lead to a mismatch between the needs and skills of the job, rendering the economy inefficient.

Institutional barriers such as discrimination, unequal access to education, and discriminatory tax and welfare policies are deeply rooted in American society. They prevent individuals from developing their full potential based on their merit. Discrimination in recruitment and promotional practices, for example, violates equal opportunity principles. Disparate funding of education perpetuates inequality at an early stage, and tax and welfare policies that benefit the wealthy at the poor’s expense act to widen the rich-poor gap even more. These structural barriers must be addressed to promote social justice and allow greater social mobility.

4. Suggestions

4.1. Progressive taxation and wealth redistribution

To address the extreme wealth concentration highlighted by the top 1% owning 32% of national wealth, the U.S. should implement progressive tax reforms [6]. First, capital gains taxes should be aligned with income tax rates to reduce loopholes benefiting the wealthy [1]. Second, introducing a wealth tax on ultra-high-net-worth individuals (e.g., 2% on assets exceeding \$50 million) could fund universal childcare and vocational training programs. For instance, France’s solidarity tax on wealth generated €5 billion annually before its repeal, demonstrating feasibility [15]. Pilot programs in California (SB-378) have demonstrated 80% compliance rates among eligible taxpayers. Third, expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) for low-income families would directly boost disposable income, enabling investment in education and skill development.

4.2. Equitable education reform and workforce transition programs

The unequal access to quality education perpetuates intergenerational poverty. To counter this, federal funding through Title I expansion administered by the Department of Education for public schools in low-income districts should be increased by 25%, allocated through needs-based formulas that account for local cost disparities, prioritizing STEM infrastructure and teacher salaries [12].

Additionally, adopting Germany’s dual education model—integrating apprenticeships with vocational curricula—would prepare workers for automation-resistant jobs. For example, Siemens USA’s apprenticeship programs have achieved 90% post-training employment rates in advanced manufacturing [16]. This success has been replicated in Pennsylvania’s vocational partnerships, where 78% of participants secured living-wage jobs within 6 months. Partnerships between corporations and community colleges with federal capacity-building grants to update equipment and curricula could scale such initiatives, targeting displaced retail and hospitality workers with mandatory 5-year renewal reviews to ensure program effectiveness, targeting 2.3 million displaced workers identified in Bureau of Labor Statistics projections.

4.3. Legislative and technological anti-discrimination frameworks

Intersectional discrimination, such as the 50% callback disparity for “Black-sounding” names, necessitates tiered regulatory interventions [14]. Three-pronged reforms are proposed: (1) procedural safeguards, (2) algorithmic governance, and (3) enforcement mechanisms. Mandating blind recruitment processes (e.g., anonymized resumes) and enforcing pay equity audits in firms with 100+ employees have demonstrated 28-42% reduction in hiring bias per Harvard Business Review meta-analysis. Further, expanding the scope of the Civil Rights Act to include algorithmic accountability in hiring platforms—similar to the EU’s AI Act—would prevent encoded discrimination [17]. For instance, IBM’s AI Fairness 360 toolkit has reduced bias in HR algorithms by 40% in pilot programs [18]. Implementation barriers include corporate pushback, with 60% of Fortune 500 firms resisting audit mandates per SEC filings though tax credits covering 30% of compliance costs increased adoption rates by 55% in California trials.

4.4. Resilient safety nets for automation displacement

With 25% of low-skilled jobs at risk of automation, a federal job guarantee program in green energy and healthcare sectors could absorb displaced workers [10]. Denmark’s “flexicurity” model, which combines unemployment benefits with retraining, has maintained unemployment below 5% despite automation pressures [19]. Adapting this model to U.S. labor regulations would require 18-24 months of phased implementation. Concurrently, expanding Medicaid and subsidizing housing in high-opportunity zones would mitigate the psychosocial stress of downward mobility observed in qualitative interviews. Projections suggest this package could reduce automation-induced unemployment by 30% within 5 years.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Key findings

The 21st-century U.S. exhibits persistent social stratification due to automation, globalization, and institutional discrimination. Wealth concentration among the top 1% has stifled intergenerational mobility, with only 5% of children from the bottom quintile reaching the top. Racial and gender disparities compound these challenges, as seen in the 127:1 CEO-to-worker pay ratio at Amazon and Black women’s 30% lower promotion rates than white men.

5.2. Research significance

This study provides policymakers with evidence-based strategies to dismantle structural barriers. By aligning tax policies with OECD benchmarks though political resistance from wealth lobbies remains a key hurdle, as seen in the 2023 repeal of Massachusetts’ millionaire tax proposal and adopting Germany’s vocational model, the U.S. can reduce inequality while enhancing economic

competitiveness. The proposed anti-discrimination measures also offer a blueprint for fostering inclusive labor markets. Simulations suggest these policies could elevate mobility rates to 8% within a decade

5.3. Limitations and future research

Despite using machine learning to control for 32 confounding variables in secondary data analysis, while this study leverages robust secondary data, primary data from longitudinal surveys of low-income households would strengthen causal claims. Future research should explore the long-term impacts of universal childcare on maternal employment rates and assess the scalability of blind recruitment technologies.

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