

Income not enough to break British class barriers, research finds

James Tapper, *The Observer*, 11 September 2022

People from a prosperous background are more likely to move, and end up in richer areas, than those with working-class parents

Class background remains a barrier to accessing opportunities in later life, even among those who are successful, new research has found.

A study of 8,118 professionals and higher-level managers found that those who came from a prosperous background were much more likely to move around the UK, and ended up in richer areas when they did move, than those with working-class parents.

Moving to a richer area meant better access to well-paid jobs and better schools, which meant that people from poorer backgrounds were “unable to close the gap” on their peers.

In an article to be published this week in the British Sociological Association’s journal *Sociology*, Dr Katharina Hecht, of Northeastern University, in Boston, US, and Dr Daniel McArthur, of the University of York, said that it was likely that wealthy parents had more resources to help their children buy a house.

The two researchers carried out a longitudinal analysis of census data about people born between 1965 and 1981 who were working in higher managerial and professional occupations by the age of 30 to 36.

They examined whether people had moved home over a distance of at least 28km from when they were aged 10 to 16, and compared the occupations of their parents, how often they moved home and the level of affluence of the local authority district they moved to.

Of those with higher managerial and professional parents, around 60% made at least one long-distance move, while only 30% of those whose parents’ occupations were classed as “semi-routine” or “routine” had moved areas.

“Among higher managers and professionals, those with advantaged backgrounds lived in more affluent areas as children than those from disadvantaged backgrounds,” said McArthur and Hecht, who was formerly based at the Politics of Inequality research centre at the University of Konstanz in Germany.

“This area gap persists during adulthood: when the upwardly mobile move, they are unable to close the gap to their peers with privileged backgrounds in terms of the affluence of the areas they live in—they face a moving target.

“Therefore, even when the upwardly socially mobile—who grew up in less-advantaged places and are less likely to move long-distance—do move area, they are unable to close the gap to their intergenerationally stable peers who started out in more affluent areas.”

The researchers say that for women in higher professions, differences in family background correspond to the difference between “living in economically mixed areas on the south coast, such as Portsmouth, and living in affluent areas of the London commuter belt, such as Brentwood”. The difference was less dramatic for men.

“Geography shapes access to opportunities to accumulate wealth including the highest paying jobs, higher house prices, and opportunities for entrepreneurship,” they said.

“Affluent parents will be better able to facilitate ... moves to high cost but opportunity-rich areas such as London or the South-East.

“The children of higher managers and professionals are likely to have wealthier parents and hence receive larger transfers of wealth. They will be able to afford houses in more expensive areas, net of income, than their counterparts from less advantaged backgrounds. As a result, wealth is likely to play an important role in explaining why those from advantaged backgrounds move to more affluent areas than the upwardly mobile.”

The head of the Social Mobility Commission, Katharine Birbalsingh, has said there should be less focus on getting poor pupils into Oxbridge and more moves to improve people’s lives in smaller steps.

In her first report as commissioner, she said that occupational mobility had been fairly stable for decades and that it was not true that social mobility had been getting worse on all counts.

Research by the Sutton Trust earlier this year found that social mobility had become much more limited, with those who lived in rented accommodation as children now far less likely to own their own homes in later life.

It found that many people now had a greater chance of falling down the class structure than moving up.