

DECLINE IN PROFESSIONAL JOBS FUELS INCREASE IN DOWNWARD MOBILITY

More people are moving down, rather than up, the social ladder as the number of middle-class managerial and professional jobs shrinks, according to an Oxford University study.

The experience of upward mobility – defined as a person ending up in an occupation of higher status than their father – has become less common in the past four decades, the study says, leaving children of those who benefited from it with worse prospects than their parents had. [...]

The UK's boom in managerial and professional level public services and industrial jobs during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s saw an increase in the proportion of children born into professional and managerial families. The decline in these jobs meant that the number of individuals at risk of downward mobility were higher.

The researchers from Oxford University added: "Politicians are saying that a new generation of young people don't have the same opportunities for social advancement as their parents, and these results seem to bear that out. The trend shows that, while social mobility has not stalled, more mobility is going in a downward direction than in the past. The emerging situation is one for which there is little historical precedent and that carries potentially far-reaching political and wider social implications."

The study looked at more than 20,000 British people born in periods from 1946, 1958, 1970 and 1980-84. Researchers used an adapted version of official socio-economic classifications that allocated individuals to seven classes ranging from "routine occupations" to "higher managers and professionals". They compared the class of each individual when in their late 20s or 30s to that of their father. The study found that contrary to popular opinion, social mobility as a whole had not declined or ground to a halt, it was simply more likely to be downward in nature.

Across all the birth cohorts, about three quarters of men and women ended up in a different class to the one they were born in, a proportion that has stayed roughly stable over time. However, the study found that inequalities in the relative chances of mobility were greater than thought, with the child of a higher professional or managerial father 20 times more likely to end up in a similarly high status job than a child with a working class father was to end up in a professional job.

Society needed to actively renew its stock of "top end" jobs if it did not want to consign graduates to lower level jobs than their parents. "We need a high-tech sector and a high-powered public sector to create demand for people with qualifications."