

Encyclopedia of World Poverty

Social Mobility

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FROM THE PERSPECTIVE of the individual, the term *social mobility* implies the degree to which social status may change for a person in the course of a lifetime. A person may begin life as a member of a relatively poor family and in time advance to a higher social status through education and the attainment of high-paying employment. An extreme example would be the rags-to-riches experience of Andrew Carnegie, who came to the United States as a poor immigrant and rose to become one of the wealthiest and most influential industrialists in history.

The study of social mobility is also applied to groups within a society. If a country has an accepted caste system, which essentially keeps individuals within a particular social level, there is little if any chance for mobility to occur for either the individual or the social group. Countries like the United States, on the other hand, do not have recognized class designations. Consequently, the potential for social mobility of individuals and groups is maximized.

Sociological research has correctly pointed out that the potential for increased social mobility is directly related to the degree of child poverty reduction that can be accomplished. This is exemplified in Norway, Denmark, and Finland, where high levels of social mobility are associated with flatter income distributions, which have the added benefit of reducing child poverty levels. In the United States, on the other hand, the range of economic inequalities is greater and levels of child poverty are consequently much higher.

For example, in the United States in 2005, 12.3 percent of the country's population were living below the poverty line. However, the percentage of children living in poverty was approximately 18 percent in that same year. Child poverty is a compelling problem. Being poor [p. 993 ↓] as a child will usually mean there will be deficiencies in nutrition, which can impair the development of sound cognitive abilities in the early years of life. It has also been shown that poor children are at a disadvantage in the educational system.

Perhaps no sociologist has contributed more to the study of social mobility than the Russian scholar Pitirim Alexandravitch Sorokin. He came from a peasant childhood in Russia and rose to prominence as an esteemed member of the sociology faculty at

Harvard University. Sorokin defined social mobility as the shifting of people within social space. He was less concerned with the study of individual social mobility than with the movements of social groups within a social structure.

Sorokin used the concept of social stratification in his studies of mobility. Social stratification, which he considered to be a permanent characteristic of a social system, can be seen in three distinct forms: 1) economic stratification, which is based on differences between the rich and the poor; 2) political stratification related to authority and power; and 3) occupational stratification, in which a system recognizes some occupations to be more respectable than others.

Sorokin extended his study of stratification to include the degree to which a social group may rise or decline within social strata, for example, the rise of the African American population from a position of slavery to a higher level in the 20th century. Sorokin also pointed out that the differences between the rich and poor can be reduced if sufficient equalizing forces can be applied. The example of flatter income distributions in northern European countries and reduced child poverty would apply in this case.

Sorokin also noted that social mobility would identify the movement of people to comparable positions within a social system. For example, a teacher who moves from one school system to another and occupies a similar position in the new system has accomplished what Sorokin calls a horizontal transition. Vertical transitions are also possible within Sorokin's schema. The climb from poverty to riches, as in Andrew Carnegie's case, is a clear example of upward mobility.

The reverse can also occur: a person may experience a downward move within the hierarchy, which can occur with rapidity. The 1929 stock market crash in the United States resulted in hundreds of wealthy people sliding to much lower levels within the economic strata.

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See Also:

- [Discrimination](#)

- [Social Exclusion](#)
- [Social Inequality](#)
- [Sociology of Poverty](#)

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