

**KEY FINDINGS FROM SOCIOLOGY ... AND  
FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN MOBILITY RESEARCH**

David B. Grusky  
Monday, February 14, 2022

*Workshop on Strengthening the Evidence Base  
to Improve Economic and Social Mobility in the  
United States*

# THE DIFFICULTY OF TEASING OUT SOCIOLOGY'S NET CONTRIBUTIONS

**The rise of a single mobility field ... makes it harder to identify sociology's *net* contributions**

## **Forces behind this convergence**

- *Shared tools*: Cross-disciplinary methods and data (esp. administrative data)
- *Mixed teams*: Cross-disciplinary research teams
- *Shared period effects*: A common zeitgeist in favor of rigorous causal inference, qualitative work, and so forth

# OUTLINE

## **Key Developments**

- A more expansive examination of the many types of mobility
- A return to the field's demographic roots
- A shift from descriptive to causal analysis
- A new capacity to understand the long arc of history
- The rise of qualitative work on intra-organizational processes (family, primary school, college)

## **New Directions**

- Build an integrated mobility model
- Build formal theory for integrated mobility model
- Illuminate key inequality trends (e.g., trends in segregation) via intergenerational processes
- Integrate qualitative and quantitative mobility research
- Prepare for the big data storm

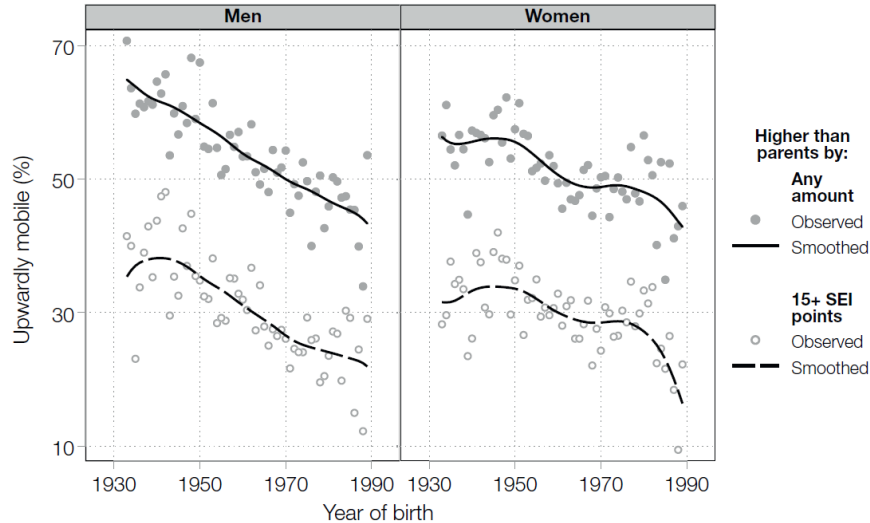
## **DEVELOPMENT #1: NO LONGER LASER-FOCUSED ON CLASS MOBILITY (VIEWED IN RELATIVE TERMS)**

A more expansive examination of many *types* of mobility

Illustrative new findings pertaining to these many types

- Absolute mobility
- Educational mobility
- Income mobility
- Wealth mobility

## EXPLOSION OF RESEARCH ON DECLINING ABSOLUTE MOBILITY



**Fig. 5.** Upward mobility by year of birth: persons with nonfarm origins, 25–69 y old, living in the United States currently and at the time they were in high school, 1994–2016. Note: Mobility is defined relative to the combined parents' SEI measure, the weighted average of father's and mother's SEI. See text for details. Observed data were smoothed by locally estimated regression (bandwidth = 0.5). Source: Author's calculations from the GSSs, 1994–2016 (9).

Dramatic decline in absolute socioeconomic mobility (see, e.g., [Hout 2018](#))

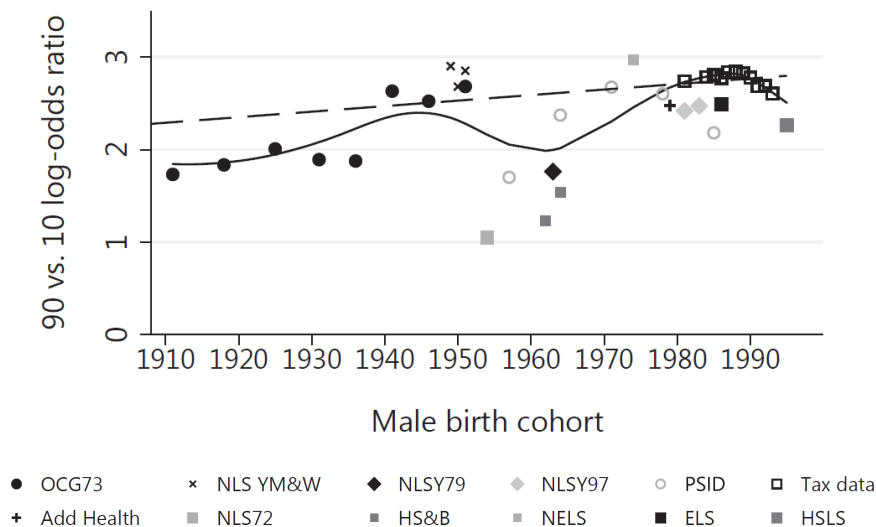
### *Occupational causes*

- Decline in middle-status occupations (e.g., production occupations)
- Increase in low-status service occupations

Other illustrative examples:  
[Manduca et al. 2020](#); Hell and Jackson 2021

# EXPLOSION OF RESEARCH ON EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AND MOBILITY

## Long-term trend in effects of origins on college enrollment

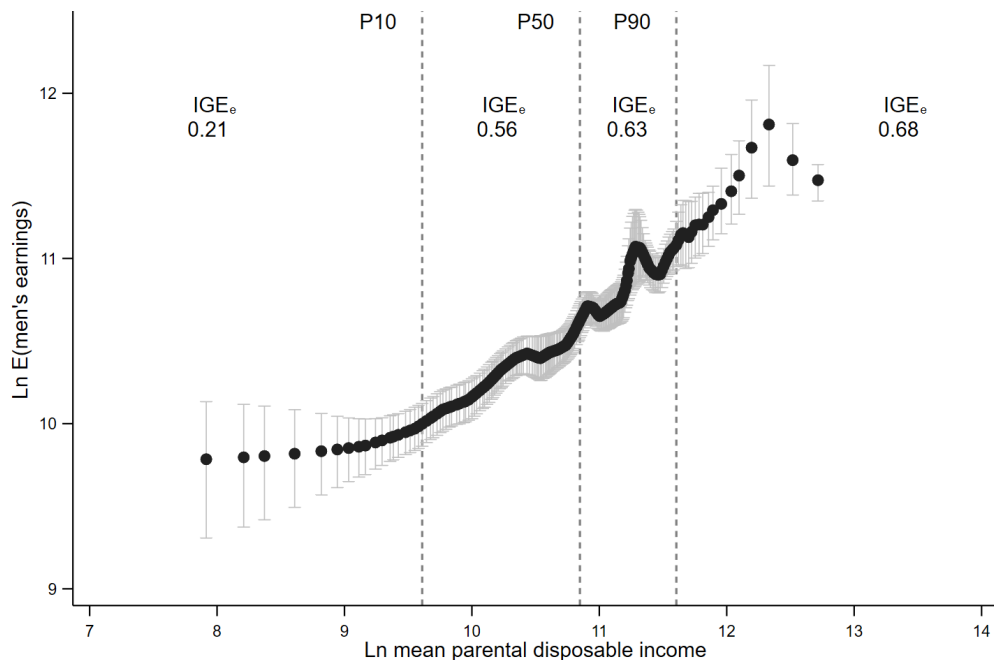


U-turn in educational mobility that mimics U-turn in income inequality (see [Jackson and Holzman 2020](#))

Also see [Breen and Müller 2020](#); [Hertel and Pfeffer 2020](#)

# EXPLOSION OF RESEARCH ON INCOME MOBILITY (WITHIN SOCIOLOGY)

## Intergenerational elasticity for U.S. men born between 1972 and 1975

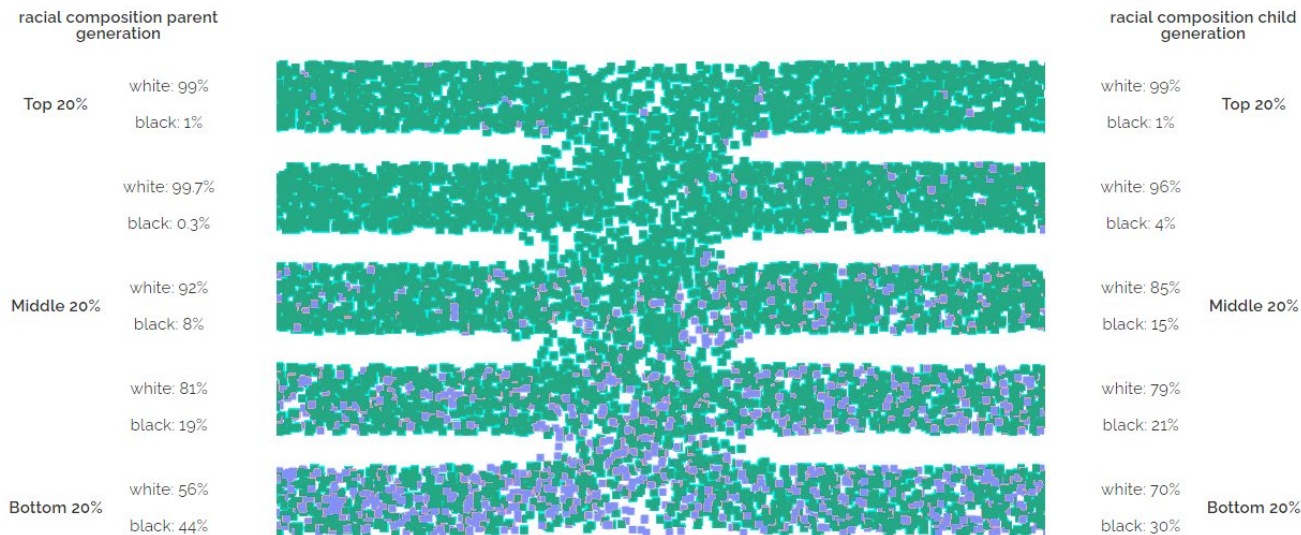


Corrected intergenerational elasticity reveals extreme immobility in US (see [Mitnik and Grusky 2020](#))

Also see [Bloome 2018](#); [Torche 2018](#))

# A NEW STREAM OF RESEARCH ON WEALTH MOBILITY

## The intergenerational sources of the Black-white gap in wealth



The wealth gap between Black and white people is generated by unequal starting points and racial differences in transmission processes (see [Pfeffer and Killewald 2019](#))



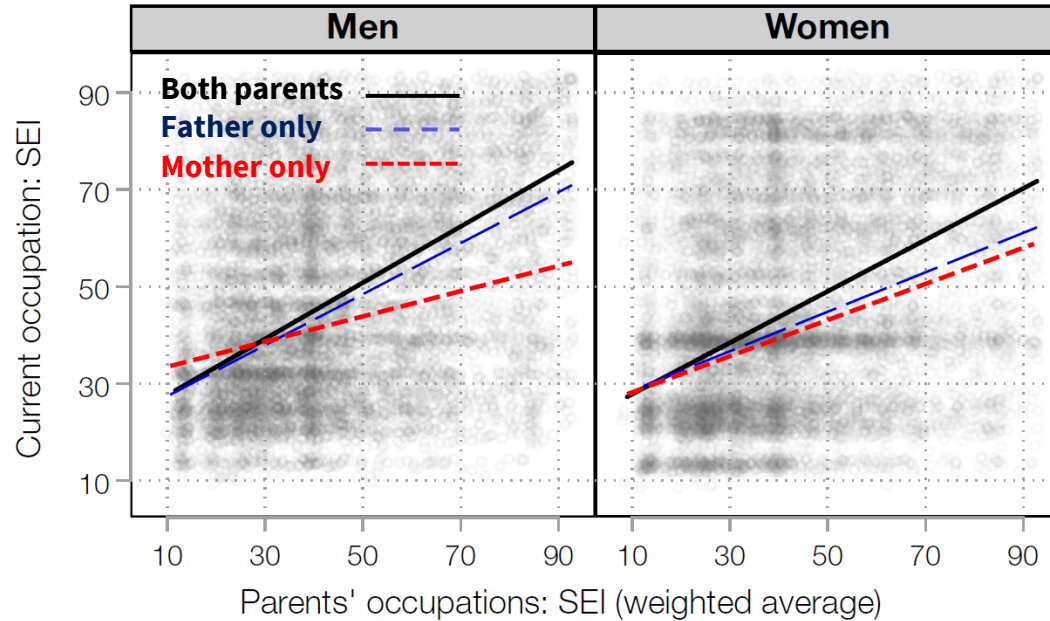
## DEVELOPMENT #2: A RETURN TO THE FIELD'S DEMOGRAPHIC ROOTS

The key question: How do changes in family structure, fertility, and other demographic processes affect mobility?

Illustrative examples

- Family structure models
- Family disruption models
- Multigenerational models (but I'll let Joe Ferrie talk about this ... see [Ferrie et al. 2021](#); for relevant work in sociology, see [Song 2021](#); [Pfeffer and Killewald 2017](#))

## TRENDS IN MOBILITY MAY PARTLY DEPEND ON TRENDS IN FAMILY STRUCTURE

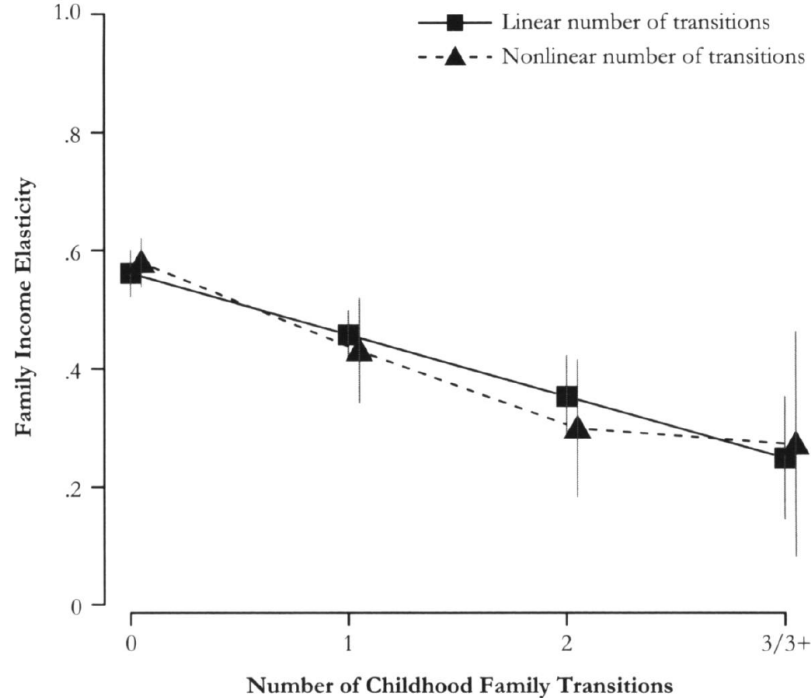


If two-earner families come to dominate, mobility will decline

If mother-only families come to dominate, mobility will increase

See [Hout 2018](#)

## TRENDS IN MOBILITY MAY PARTLY DEPEND ON FAMILY STABILITY



If children transition more frequently into new family types (via, e.g., divorce and remarriage), mobility will increase

See [Bloome 2017](#)

## **DEVELOPMENT #3: THE CAUSAL TURN**

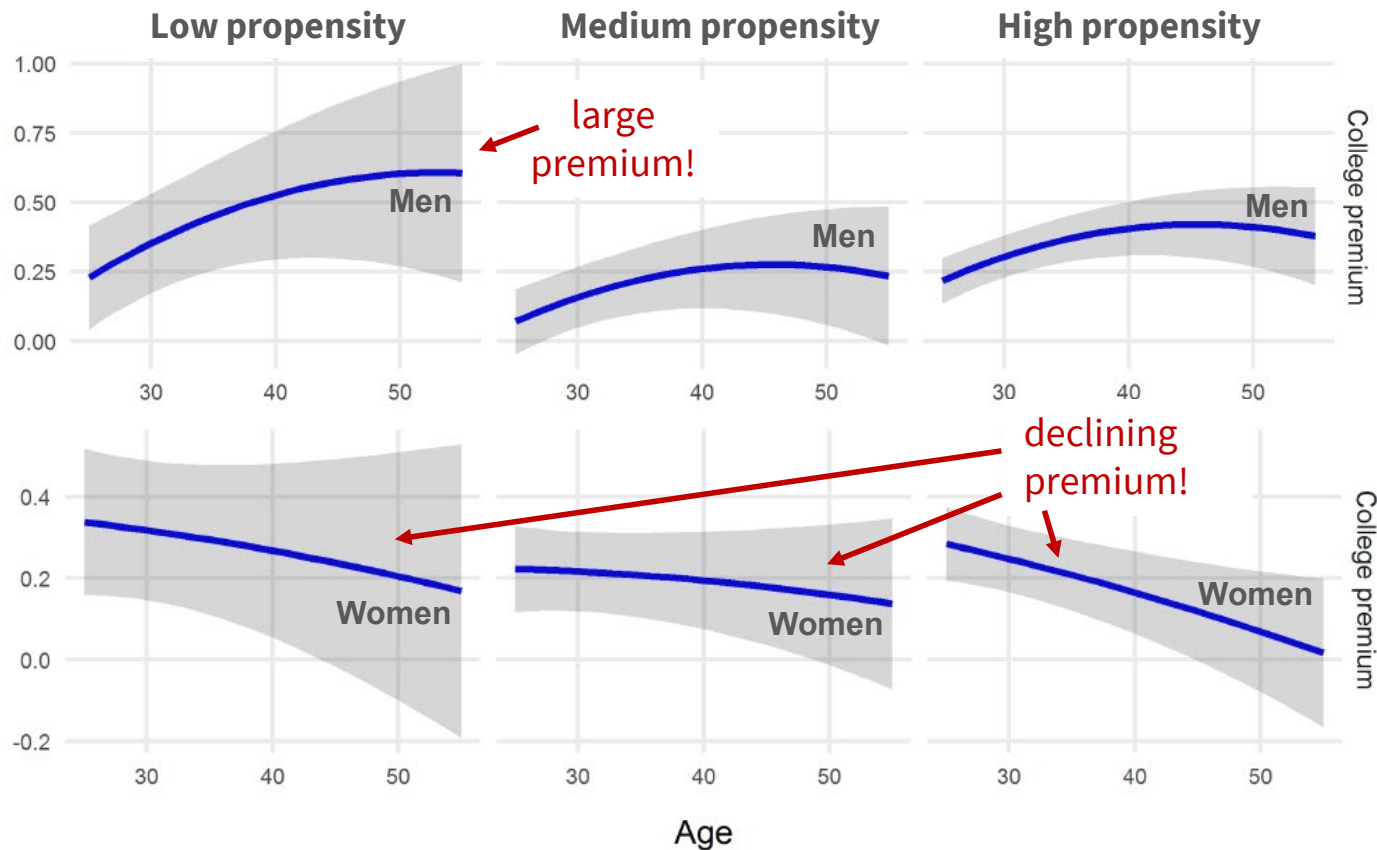
Field has historically been very descriptive

Growing interest on causal effects

Illustrative examples

- Causal effects of college
- Causal effects of neighborhood
- Causal effects of mobility (will omit for reasons of time)

# COLLEGE PREMIUM BY AGE AND PROPENSITY TO GRADUATE FROM COLLEGE

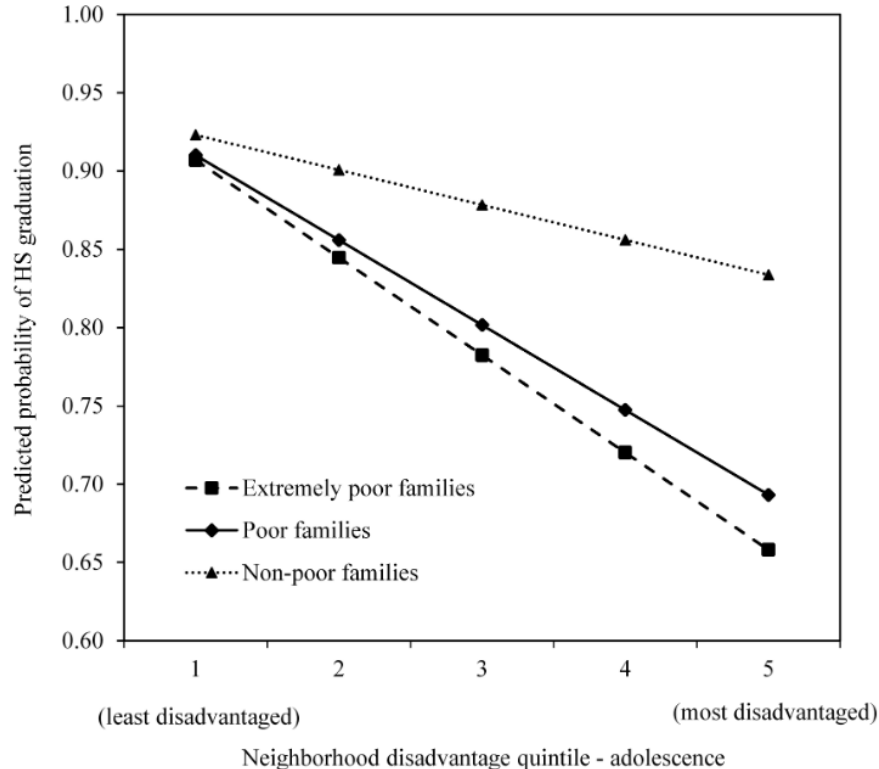


Class effect: Large premium when propensity is low

Gender effect: Decline in premium over life course (motherhood penalty?)

See Cheng et al. 2021

## NEIGHBORHOOD EFFECTS ON SCHOOLING



Strong effect of exposure to a low-amenity neighborhood during adolescence on HS graduation (for all levels of family income but especially for poor families)

See [Wodtke, Harding, and Elwert 2016](#)

Compare to [Chetty et al. 2016](#)

# NEIGHBORHOOD EFFECTS ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

## The acute effect of local homicides on children's cognitive performance

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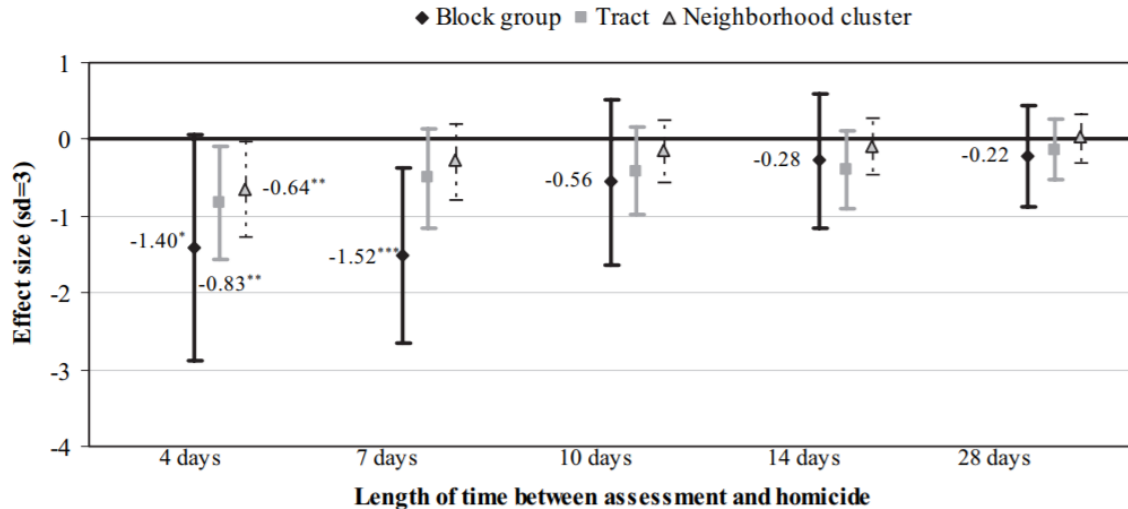


Fig. 1. Effect on WISC-R scores of a recent homicide occurring within the block group, census tract, or neighborhood cluster, respectively, among African-Americans in the PHDCN. Coefficient values are shown for all block group estimates and for significant estimates at all levels. Sample sizes: Block group estimates are based on 2,294 assessments among 1,082 respondents; census tract estimates are based on 2,381 assessments among 1,106 respondents; and neighborhood cluster estimates are based on 2,393 assessments among 1,111 respondents. \* $P < 0.10$ ; \*\* $P < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $P < 0.01$ .

What happens when there's a homicide in close proximity (within block group, census tract, or neighborhood cluster)?

Lower performance on vocabulary and reading assessments when

- the exposure is recent
- the exposure is close

See [Sharkey 2018](#)

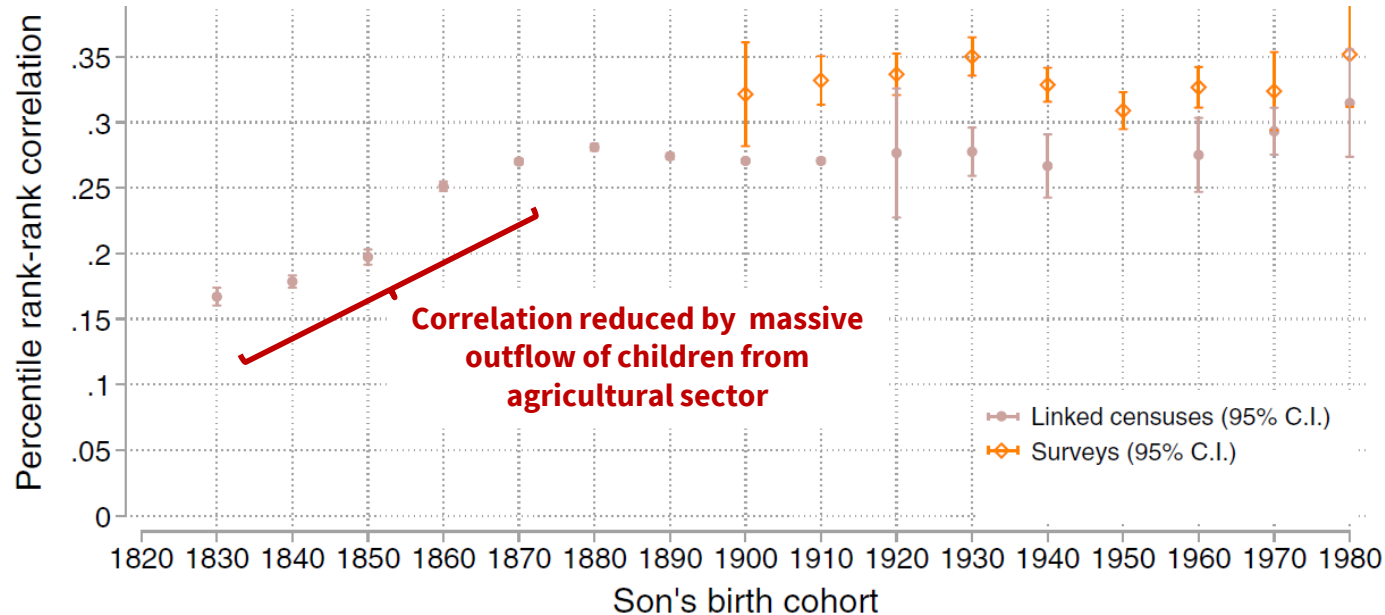
## **DEVELOPMENT #4: LONG ARC OF HISTORY**

It's been very difficult – until recently – to reach back into pre-survey history, with the result that trend analyses have covered relatively limited period

With administrative data, researchers can now reach back into the more distant past



# SHARP DECLINE IN MOBILITY WITH INDUSTRIALIZATION



See [Song, Massey, Rolf, Ferrie, Rothbaum, and Xie 2019](#)

For results in other countries, see [Breen and Müller 2020](#); [Bukodi et al. 2019](#); [Jackson and Evans 2017](#)

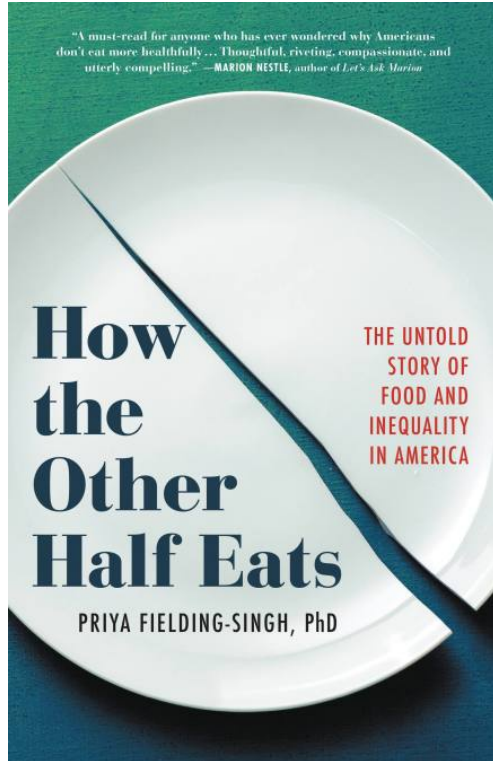
## **DEVELOPMENT #5: THE RISE OF QUALITATIVE STUDIES OF MOBILITY**

Increasing prominence of qualitative studies of class reproduction

Illustrative examples

- Early childhood nutrition
- Primary and secondary school
- College

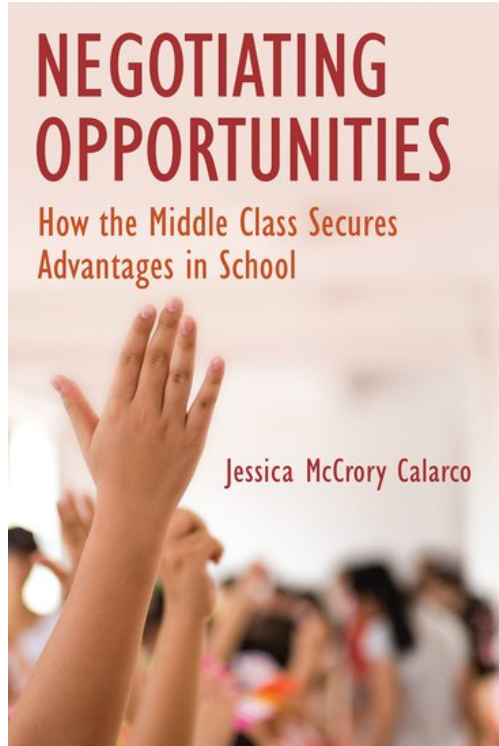
## QUALITATIVE WORK ON NUTRITIONAL DISPARITIES



Low-income parents resort to  
unnourishing food because it's the  
main affordable treat at their disposal

See [Fielding-Singh 2021](#)

## QUALITATIVE WORK ON PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL

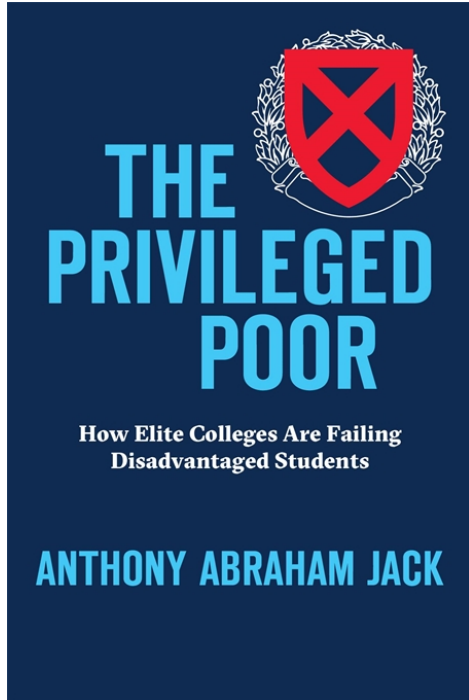


High-income “helicopter parents” ensure that their children are evaluated well

Primary schools are *not* the great equalizer!

See [Colarco 2018](#)

## QUALITATIVE WORK ON COLLEGES



Low-income students who haven't attended elite secondary schools (e.g., Exeter, Andover) are left to flounder on their own

Colleges are *not* the great equalizer!

See Jack 2020

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## NEW DIRECTIONS #1: AN INTEGRATED MOBILITY MODEL

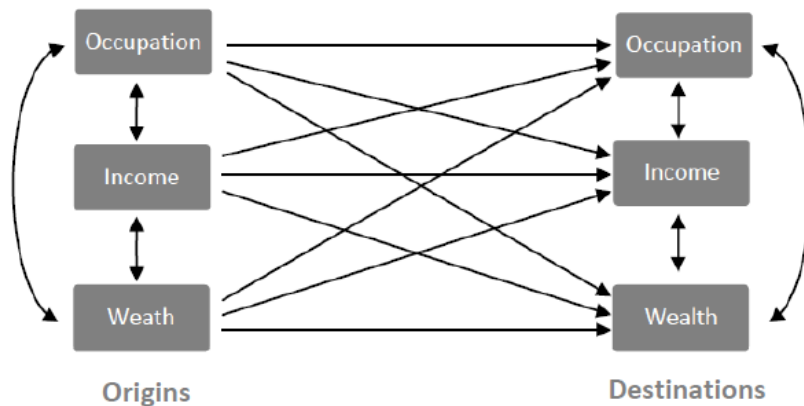
Simultaneously model all types of intergenerational reproduction (e.g., education, occupation, class, earnings, income, wealth, neighborhood). See [Breen et al. 2016](#).

Integrate intergenerational and intra-generational mobility

Include multiple generations

Measure marital mobility and individual mobility

Represent assortative mating for origin and destination families



*Changing left-side associations:* Rising income inequality induces “artifactual” rigidification in occ. mobility

*Conflated mobility trends:* Declining occ. immobility induces artifactual trend in income immobility

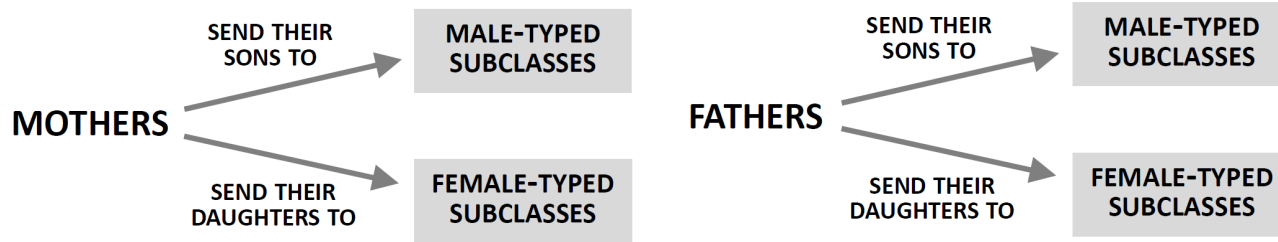
## **NEW DIRECTIONS #2: BUILD A FORMAL THEORY FOR THE INTEGRATED MOBILITY MODEL**

Goal of formal model: To understand how mobility is affected by changes in public and private human capital investments and other institutional forces (see [Becker and Toms 1979](#); [Solon 2018](#), Mitnik 2018)

What we need: An analogue to formal theory for an integrated mobility model that incorporates the requisite institutional detail (e.g., residential segregation, incarceration, college admissions policy, safety net policy)



## NEW DIRECTIONS #3: BUILD IN INTERGENERATIONAL PROCESSES TO UNDERSTAND KEY INEQUALITY TRENDS



**Example:** *An intergenerational account of trends in occupational gender segregation*  
Is the stalling-out of the long-standing decline in occupational gender segregation due to new types of familial mobility? Are fathers no longer willing to pass on their male-typed occupations to their daughters?

**Other examples:** *Examine role of intergenerational processes in accounting for trends in occupational racial segregation, assortative mating, residential segregation*

# NEW DIRECTIONS #4: INTEGRATE QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE APPROACHES

## CALL for journal articles: “Building an Open Qualitative Science”

September 13, 2021 / [Calls for Papers](#), [Journal Announcements](#), [Publishing Opportunities](#)



RUSSELL SAGE  
FOUNDATION

### CALL FOR ARTICLES

*RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*

**ISSUE ON:** *Building an Open Qualitative Science*

The qualitative research tradition appears to be on an upward trajectory. In the last five years alone, qualitative scholars have generated a raft of influential findings within such core social science areas as poverty and material deprivation, residential segregation, policing and the criminal justice system, health disparities, immigration and ethnicity, housing and eviction, public surveillance, populism and the radical right, and science and genetics. This influential line of recent qualitative scholarship is joined by an equally influential stream of “fast science” qualitative journalism appearing in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and all manner of other media outlets. The country depends heavily on these two streams of qualitative work to build a richer basic science, to develop policy, and to understand ongoing crises and new developments in real time.


The two forms shouldn't move on completely parallel tracks and simply “inform” one another

Typical mixed-method approach: A single study embodies a separate qualitative and quantitative component

Pathway to integration

- Link qualitative and administrative data and thereby merge the two forms
- Allow for secondary analysis
- Rely on representative samples

# NEW DIRECTIONS #5: PREPARE FOR THE BIG DATA STORM



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## American Opportunity Study (AOS)

The American Opportunity Study (AOS) is an initiative to use the Census Bureau's linked data infrastructure to enable new research on social and economic mobility. The AOS supports work to develop and improve the linkage of historical and modern Census Bureau and administrative data with the goal of using these data to investigate intergenerational mobility. Infrastructure building to advance the AOS has been supported by the Census Bureau, the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, Stanford University, Harvard University, Brown University, and the University of Michigan.

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Working Paper | April 01, 2016

### Creating the American Opportunity Study

Discusses the American Opportunity Study, its background, goals, envisioned data infrastructure, and project progress.

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Working Paper | December 02, 2015

### Creating the American Opportunity Study

Discusses the American Opportunity Study (AOS), its goals for studying social mobility, the process of creating the AOS, and its progress.

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Working Paper | April 21, 2015

### American Opportunity Study: Technical Challenges

Discusses technical challenges in creating the American Opportunity Study (AOS), such as coverage, cost, identification of people and family relationships.

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Working Paper | January 2015

### Challenges of Using Administrative Data Linkages to Evaluate Mobility

This article surveys available data and the issues surrounding the use of administrative records to vastly extend the study of intergenerational mobility.

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Linked census data will be available reasonably soon (see Katie Genadek's presentation)

## Illustrative new analyses

- Integrated mobility model
- Detailed occupational inheritance (i.e., micro classes)
- Disaggregated analysis of racial and ethnic disparities in mobility (based on, e.g., 100-category schemes)
- Effects of neighborhood interventions