SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC MOBILITY: ARE DESTINIES DIVERGING?

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THREE QUESTIONS

1. Are destinies diverging in the US?
2. Are patterns similar across countries?
3. What can be done to reduce educational inequalities and improve social/economic mobility?
1. ARE DESTINIES DIVERGING IN THE US?

Educational inequalities are one of the most important drivers of social and economic inequalities.

Fortunately, racial/ethnic gaps in achievement have narrowed in the US.

But Sean Reardon’s work has called attention to large and growing achievement gaps between children from low and high socioeconomic status (SES) families.
Trend in 90/10 Income Gap in Reading, 1940-2005 Cohorts

Reardon, 2011, in Whither Opportunity
These growing SES gaps in achievement have occurred in parallel with growing gaps in family resources — a phenomenon that Sara McLanahan called “diverging destinies”
Mothers' Median Age (among those with children under age 5), 1960 to 2010

McLanahan, 2004 “Diverging Destinies”
As family incomes have become more unequal, so too have investments in children.

2. ARE PATTERNS SIMILAR ACROSS COUNTRIES?

In a recent book from Russell Sage Foundation, Bruce Bradbury, Miles Corak, Liz Washbrook, and I use cohort data to compare educational inequalities in:

US, UK, Canada, Australia
## Box 1.1 The Child Cohort Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey name</th>
<th>U.S.</th>
<th>U.K.</th>
<th>Australia</th>
<th>Canada</th>
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<tr>
<td>5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 14</td>
<td>5, 7, 11</td>
<td>5, 9, 11</td>
<td>5, 7, 9, 11</td>
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<td>8,370</td>
<td>11,762</td>
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MEASURING SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS (SES)

We use parental education as our measure of SES – it is a good proxy for permanent income, can be comparably measured, and is an important input to child development.

Based on the highest educated parent, we code families as:

- low SES (HS or less)
- medium SES (some education beyond HS)
- high SES (BA or more)
Although family resources are skewed by SES in all four countries, this inequality is starkest in the US (often followed by UK) (Fig 3.2-3.7)
Figure 3.2 Over one in five children in US families with low educated parents were born to a teen mother, but only three in one hundred in high-educated households.
Figure 3.3 Children in the U.S. are least likely to be living with both biological parents.
Figure 3.4 Although all four countries have many immigrant parents, in the U.S. children of the least educated parents are most likely to have an immigrant parent – but selective immigration policies means that the reverse applies in Australia and Canada.
Figure 3.7 Highly educated parents are much more likely to read to their children every day. However, Canadian parents with low education read to their children as often as highly educated parents from the other three countries.
Figure 3.6 Incomes of high-educated families in the US are 1.8 times as large as in medium-educated families and three times as large as in low-educated families. Income differentials are markedly smaller in the UK, Canada, and particularly Australia.
SES & RESOURCES FOR CHILDREN

But, the US safety net and supports for working families do the least among the four countries to combat income inequality (Fig 3.8, Fig 4.4)
Figure 3.8 In the absence of government taxes and transfers, child poverty would be as high in the other countries as it is in the US. But government benefits do more to reduce poverty in the other countries than they do in the US.

Source: Bradbury and Jantti (2001)
Figure A4.11 Australia and UK provide universal preschool, but in the US and Canada, enrollment varies by SES.
SES & ACHIEVEMENT – THE US IS MOST UNEQUAL (OFTEN FOLLOWED BY UK)
Figure 5.1 Achievement gaps by parental education are largest in the US
Panel B

At age 7/9

Std dev difference

0.56  0.53
0.43  0.34
0.31  0.30
0.28  0.26

US reading  US math  UK reading  UK math  AU reading  CN reading  CN math
And at age 11

Panel C

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Std dev difference</th>
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<tr>
<td>US reading</td>
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<tr>
<td>US math</td>
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<td>UK reading</td>
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<td>0.45</td>
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<tr>
<td>AU math</td>
<td>0.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CN math</td>
<td>0.37</td>
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3. WHAT CAN BE DONE TO REDUCE EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES & PROMOTE ECONOMIC/SOCIAL MOBILITY?

1. Evidence-based parenting and preschool programs to provide more support for early learning

2. Income support policies to raise family incomes for the poor and near-poor

3. Education policies to improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools
IN CONCLUSION: TOO MANY CHILDREN ARE BEING LEFT BEHIND — BUT WE CAN DO BETTER

The gaps and challenges in the US — and UK - are sobering.

But the experience of peer countries suggests the US — and the UK - can and should do better.

And, recent trends in school readiness within the US offer reason for hope.
Change in Kindergarten Readiness 90-10 Income Gaps, 1998-2010


Sean Reardon & Ximena Portilla, 2016, AERA Open
Narrowing gaps in parents reading books at least 3 times/week with children, use of a home computer for reading or math, and visits to library

Daphna Bassok, Rae Lee, Sean Reardon, & Jane Waldfogel, 2016, AERA Open
Countries like the US and UK should commit to reduce educational inequalities — which cut across and underlie other forms of economic and social inequality.

As rich nations, we can and should do better.
THANKS

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