

Rags to Riches in U.S. Largely a Myth, Scholars Write
Education seen as key to chance for moving out of lowest income groups.

October 25, 2006 - Education Week, by Debra Viadero

Among Americans' most cherished beliefs is the idea that the United States is a land of opportunity, a place where all children have an equal shot at success regardless of the circumstances of their birth. A growing body of research suggests, however, that idea may be a myth.

Going from rags to riches in this country, some studies conducted over the past 10 to 15 years say, may be harder than it used to be. In fact, newer international studies suggest that children born into poor families in the United States have a smaller chance of rising out of poverty than their counterparts in many other industrialized nations.

Given those bleak assessments, some analysts say that education—perhaps now more than ever—is critical to breaking or perpetuating that intergenerational cycle.

“Education is the quintessential way in which people move beyond the circumstances of their birth,” said Isabel V. Sawhill, a senior fellow in economics at the Brookings Institution, a think tank based in Washington that is generally seen as centrist in its political orientation. “Yet when you look at education under a microscope, you discover it's not as much of an opportunity-enhancing vehicle as many of us thought it was.”

Ms. Sawhill edited a volume of papers published by Brookings last month that explores education's potential for increasing intergenerational mobility. Focusing public attention on that issue is particularly important now, she said, because statistics show that the income gap between America's poorest and richest citizens has widened since the 1980s.

“Greater inequality means it takes longer for any income differences to disappear in subsequent generations,” Ms. Sawhill writes. “The United States could be in danger of creating a poverty trap at the bottom and an enclave of wealth at the top.”

Better Data

Experts differ, though, over how much social mobility has changed in the United States. Some contend opportunities to get ahead were more plentiful in the 19th century, when frontier land was still widely available. The Brookings scholars say opportunities to move forward—or fall behind—remained high for much of the next century but appeared to diminish in the 1980s.

Other scholars contend that the nation may never have been as open a society as it was believed to be.

“It's just that now, researchers have gotten more interested in this, and they've gotten better data,” said Gary Solon, an economics professor at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. “We don't have good data from 100 years ago.”

There is more consensus around the idea that the United States has no unique claim, among nations, as a land of opportunity. Measured in terms of income, studies over the past two or three years have shown, the nation offers less opportunity for upward or downward mobility than Britain, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, and possibly Germany. In terms of occupational mobility, the United States remains around the middle of pack, according to the Brookings report.

Moving On Up?

These data, showing intergenerational wealth from 1979 to 2000, illustrate that there is less mobility for people who start out in life in the poorest and richest groups of Americans.

A study released in January by the Institute for the Study of Labor, a research group based in Bonn, Germany, suggests one reason for the United States' poor showing. While wealth begets wealth in most countries, the United States is different in that there is “stickiness” across generations at both ends of the income scale. Compared with other industrialized nations, such as the Scandinavian countries, relatively smaller proportions of poor American children ever rise out of poverty, those scholars say.

In the new Brookings volume, “Opportunity in America: The Role of Education,” the writers contend that opportunities to break those persistent economic cycles exist across the education spectrum—in preschool, in K-12 schools, and in higher education. The problem, though, is that education systems operate in some ways that can reinforce the gaps between the haves and have-nots.

During early childhood, for instance, children from wealthier families are still more likely than poor children to attend preschool, and more likely to attend a better-quality preschool, the Brookings authors say. That is true, they add, even though more than half of poor 3- and 4-year-olds now attend some form of preschool.

Likewise, school districts in poorer areas spend on average about the same per pupil as wealthier districts do, according to another essay.

Class Disparities

Yet disadvantaged children are more likely to attend elementary and secondary school in buildings with fewer certified or experienced teachers, less adequate facilities, and fewer Advanced Placement courses than is the case in the schools that more advantaged children attend. Children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are also more likely to drop out of school and rack up low test scores than their better-off peers, the volume points out.

At the postsecondary level, the scholars find, class disparities are widening even as college attendance rises. Nearly three-quarters of students enrolled in top-tier colleges and universities come from families in the highest socioeconomic group. Three percent are from the lowest group.

The Brookings scholars explore a variety of strategies for increasing intergenerational mobility. At the preschool level, they write, policymakers get stymied over whether to increase access to preschool for all children or to target more-intensive programs to disadvantaged children. A better idea, the authors say, is to do both.

“That way, you're moving everybody up the ladder, and you're moving the bottom of the ladder up more steps,” said W. Steven Barnett, who is the director of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University, in New Brunswick, N.J., and the co-author of the essay on early-childhood education.

After reviewing research on strategies for improving K-12 schools, Princeton University economist Cecelia E. Rouse and her co-author conclude that programs aimed at reducing class sizes and raising the quality of teachers in the schools that poor children attend may be a better bet than school choice programs or measures, such as the federal No Child Left Behind Act, that hold schools accountable for improving students' test scores.

“We have a lot of theories in education, but not as much direct evidence,” Ms. Rouse said in an interview. “But we see larger gains with interventions, such as reducing class sizes, that are much more expensive.”

To even the playing field in higher education, policymakers have to pay attention to both preparing precollegiate students to be able to succeed and to increasing public financing of college tuition, argue Robert H. Haveman, a professor of economics and public affairs at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Timothy M. Smeeding, a public-policy professor at Syracuse University in Syracuse, N.Y.

Colleges can also cut tuition costs, they say, by focusing on their core educational missions and letting others provide services such as room and board. They also call for funneling state aid for higher education directly to students, rather than to institutions.

Though education “may be the best escalator we've got,” said Christopher S. Jencks, a professor of social policy at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, such solutions to reducing social disparities also raise a lot of questions.

“How on earth would you imagine getting the best teachers to the most disadvantaged kids?” said Mr. Jencks, who was not part of the Brookings project. “I don't know how far down that road we can get before there would be a revolt in the upper classes.”

Coverage of education research is supported in part by a grant from the Spencer Foundation. [Vol. 26, Issue 09, Page 8](#)