

OCCUPATIONAL AND SOCIAL MOBILITY IN THE U.S.: IMPORTANT NEW DATA SOURCE

Job holding is the principal activity by which adults gain their livelihood in the United States. It also leads to a generally recognized social ranking. People asked to rank the social standing of occupations will find themselves in close agreement as to what that ranking is.

What job one holds may, thus, be the best single indicator of social standing; and, by the same token, the extent of intergenerational changes in occupational status may be the best single indicator of the degree of social mobility in this society.

How much hope can parents have that their children will achieve higher occupational status than they were able to manage for themselves? Are the differences between black and white achievement due to racial differences in equality of occupational opportunity? And did the decade of the 1960s see an increase in occupational mobility in the U.S.?

There is now a major new data source on occupational mobility to help us answer questions like these. Developed by Robert Hauser and David Featherman (sociologists at the University of Wisconsin who hold joint appointments between their respective departments and the Institute for Research on Poverty), this data base is essentially a 1973 replication of the 1962 *Occupational Change in a Generation* survey developed by Peter Blau and Otis Dudley Duncan.¹

The Two Surveys

The target population of both the 1962 and the 1973 surveys on *Occupational Change in a Generation* (OCG) was the civilian noninstitutionalized male population in the prime working ages. Each survey was carried out in conjunction with the March demographic supplement to the Current Population Survey (CPS).

There are no other data for the United States that (1) are based on a large enough sample to allow detailed age, ethnic, and geographic classification, and (2) include retrospective measures of the social and economic characteristics of the parents of persons old enough themselves to have completed their education. The quality of these retrospective reports has been checked carefully.

The 1962 survey required the CPS interviewer to leave behind a four-page questionnaire. More than 20,000 men aged 20 to 64 completed and returned it, constituting an 83 percent response rate.

In 1973, an eight-page questionnaire was mailed out six months after the March CPS, and followed by mail, telephone, and personal call-backs. More than 33,500 men aged 20 to 65 responded, adding up to a response rate of 88 percent. Unlike in 1962, blacks and persons of Spanish origin were sampled at about twice the rate of whites, and almost half the black men were interviewed personally.²

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SELECTED PAPERS

David L. Featherman and Robert M. Hauser, "Design for a Replicate Study of Social Mobility in the United States," in *Social Indicator Models*, edited by Kenneth C. Land and Seymour Spilerman, pp. 219-252. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1975. Institute for Research on Poverty Reprint no. 156.

Robert M. Hauser and David L. Featherman, "Occupations and Social Mobility in the United States," Institute for Research on Poverty Discussion Paper no. 336-76.

David L. Featherman and Robert M. Hauser, "Changes in the Socioeconomic Stratification of the Races, 1962-1973." *American Journal of Sociology* 82 (November 1976), forthcoming. Institute for Research on Poverty Reprint no. 209.

Robert M. Hauser and David L. Featherman, "Equality of Schooling: Trends and Prospects." *Sociology of Education* 49 (April 1976):99-120. Institute for Research on Poverty Reprint no. 193.

William T. Bielby, Robert M. Hauser, and David L. Featherman, "Response Errors of Nonblack Males in Models of the Stratification Process." Forthcoming in *Latent Variables in Socioeconomic Models*, edited by A. S. Goldberger and D. J. Aigner. Amsterdam: North Holland, 1976.

William T. Bielby, Robert M. Hauser, and David L. Featherman, "Response Errors of Black and Nonblack Males in Models of Status Inheritance and Mobility," Institute for Research on Poverty Discussion Paper no. 357-76.

Occupational and social mobility (continued from page 9)

Data tapes from the 1962 OCG survey are currently available at cost from the Data and Program Library Service, 4452 Social Science Building, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI 53706. The 1973 data are currently being analyzed by Hauser, Featherman, and others at the University of Wisconsin. They will be made generally available to researchers sometime in 1977.

Results of the Blau–Duncan 1962 Survey

Until 1962, there was a dearth of systematic information on social and occupational mobility. Views about it had to be based largely on anecdotal and, at best, indirect evidence.

Peter Blau and Otis Dudley Duncan changed that in 1962, by persuading the Census to field (as an adjunct to the Current Population Survey) a major sample survey of the extent and sources of social mobility for adult males in the U.S. Data were collected on socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of the families in which these men grew up, their residential backgrounds, and certain characteristics of their wives. The work was supported by several federal agencies, including the National Science Foundation.

The 1962 survey is well known, as are the extensive analyses Blau and Duncan have done on the processes of status attainment and social mobility made possible by the data.

They found substantial upward mobility in 1962. The pattern of recruitment to occupations was not, however, by any means random. Self-employed professionals, proprietors, and farmers displayed a marked tendency to “inherit” the self-employed occupations of their fathers—unlike the three lowest white-collar groups (clerical, retail sales, and service) and the two lowest blue-collar categories (both nonfarm labor).

Perhaps the most fundamental contribution of Blau and Duncan was their development of a framework for studying the process of status attainment. This framework enabled attention to be focussed on how much of the son’s eventual status is due to his origins (that is, the status of his father and the family in which he grew up), and how much to factors that intervene between those origins and the status he achieves for himself.

Years of formal schooling, they concluded, accounted in 1962 for nearly all the direct effects of the father’s occupation on the occupational standing of the son. The son’s education and the number of siblings he grew up with, moreover, explained virtually all the variations between those with a farm background (lower status) and those without.

Racial differences, however, told another story. Neither background characteristics nor differences in education

could account for the relative social and economic disadvantage of blacks vis-à-vis similar whites. There was, thus, little evidence of a “cycle of poverty” for whites, but substantial evidence of cumulative discrimination against blacks over the life-cycle.

Results of the Hauser–Featherman 1973 Survey

What has happened to the picture since 1962? Did social mobility, as measured by job status and the factors determining it, change during the decade of the Great Society?

The overall similarity between the results of the two surveys is most striking. Hauser and Featherman found a similar pattern of net upward mobility, similar patterns of status attainment and status persistence, and an even greater influence of education.

In contrast to the overall results, however, they found marked changes in mobility patterns within the *black* population.

In 1962, black men seem to have been subjected to a perverse form of equality of opportunity in the world of work. There was little relationship between the occupational position of a black and that of his father. Black men born at the bottom stayed at the bottom; and even those few born into white-collar families were, in the main, destined to become blue-collar workers themselves.

By 1973, the mobility of blacks had become more like that of whites—particularly among the young men who got their first job between 1962 and 1973. Among whites, the correspondence between the status of a son and his father had decreased slightly; but, among blacks, there was a marked increase in the continuity of occupational status between father and son. Blacks, in this sense, have become more nearly equal to whites.

It is paradoxical that a trend toward convergence of black and white processes of achievement should have come about at the cost of increased inequality of opportunity *within* the black population.

Whether schools impart skills and attitudes that lead to occupational success, or whether they serve merely as certifying agencies for the job market, is a matter of controversy (as discussed in the *New Challenges to Orthodox Labor–Market Theory* article on p. 7). In any event, length of schooling in 1973 had an even more powerful effect on a man’s occupational standing than in 1962; and this effect increased relatively more for blacks than for whites.

To measure such effects, each of the several hundred occupations identified by the Census Bureau was assigned a status score ranging from 0 to 96. This score represents an average of the schooling and income of men in the occupation. One year of schooling was worth 3.6 units in occupational status for whites in 1962—almost three times as much as one year of schooling for blacks in that year. By 1973, one year of schooling was worth 4.3 status units for

whites—but the worth of schooling for blacks had increased to such an extent that this was now one and one-half times as much as it was worth for blacks.

The relative influence of schooling on black–white differences deserves a closer look. The racial difference narrowed—in years of school completed—to imply an occupational status differential of only 2.5 units in 1973, compared to nearly 8 units a decade earlier. The large gap in occupational status between black and white men who did have the same schooling and social background, in contrast, has remained unchanged. In both 1962 and 1973 the occupational standing of black and white men was separated by about 6 units when they shared the same levels of schooling and social background.

Most of the effects of social background on occupational standing are due to the facts that men with advantaged backgrounds stay in school longer and men with more schooling gain higher status jobs. The recent equalizing trends in schooling and in its effects on occupations have enabled black men to begin to experience the intergenerational gains in social standing that had earlier been largely restricted to whites. If these trends continue, the passage of time may one day eliminate the contribution of social background and schooling to the black–white status gap.

There is no such optimistic outlook for the effects of discrimination (that is, effects beyond background and schooling), however. The persistence of the black–white gap between men who did have the same schooling and social background means that time is *not* narrowing the status difference between blacks and whites that is due to the effect of race *per se*.

¹Seed money for the project came from the Institute for Research on Poverty. The major funding for the survey itself came from the RANN program of the National Science Foundation.

²In both samples, unfortunately, women were represented only through their husbands. But Featherman and Hauser have been able to make some comparisons of the socioeconomic opportunities of married men and women. See David L. Featherman and Robert M. Hauser, "Sexual Inequalities and Socioeconomic Achievement in the U.S., 1962–1973." *American Sociological Review* 41 (June 1976):462–483. Institute for Research on Poverty Reprint no. 202.

Note: FOCUS/Institute for Research on Poverty Newsletter should be distinguished from *Sociological Focus* (and from the Focus on Policy Series within it), information about which can be obtained from Margaret M. Poloma, Co–editor, Department of Sociology, The University of Akron, Akron, Ohio 44325. We apologize that this distinction was not noted in our first issue.

Trends in economic inequality (continued from page 6)

Income Inequality and Social Policy

The final session of the conference was devoted to the importance (or lack of it) of the income inequality issue for domestic social policy. It was pointed out that Americans have never made the lessening of income inequality an explicit policy goal. Whatever economists may conclude about the income trends, the public seems relatively satisfied on that score.

Policy goals that are related to the issue have certainly been articulated: among them full employment, the alleviation of income poverty, and the elimination of race and sex discrimination. Some of these, it was realized, might conflict with the goal of reducing income inequality as such. An end to discrimination against women was cited as a prime example of a social policy goal that, as it becomes increasingly realized, creates greater income inequality. More women are finding jobs and, since the social norm in this country is for highly educated people to marry each other, increased work among women will disproportionately increase the earnings of high income families.

No ranking of social objectives was attempted at the conference. But it was generally agreed that evidence of a pronounced trend in inequality would alter perceptions of the performance of both the public and private sectors. This, in turn, would be likely to affect substantially any ranking of public policy goals.

¹Edgar Browning. "The Trend Toward Equality in the Distribution of Net Income." *Southern Economics Journal*, July 1976.

²Morgan Reynolds and Eugene Smolensky. "Why Changing the Size Distribution of Income Through the Fisc is Now More Difficult." Institute for Research on Poverty Discussion Paper no. 356–76.

³Morton Paglin. "The Measurement and Trend of Inequality: A Basic Revision." *American Economic Review*, September 1975.

⁴Sheldon Danziger, Robert Haveman, and Eugene Smolensky. "The Measurement and Trend of Inequality: A Basic Revision: Comment." *American Economic Review*, March 1977 (in press).

⁵The income series includes money wages and salaries; net income from self–employment; income other than earnings (such as dividends, interest, and rent); public cash transfers (such as Social Security, welfare payments, and Unemployment Compensation); and regular private cash transfers (such as annuities, alimony, and private pensions).