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## Higher Education and the Economic Mobility Gap

By Carina Zaragoza

A study released Tuesday, February 19, examines the correlation between earning a college degree and economic mobility. Among the findings: economic mobility has not changed significantly for children of poor or middle-class backgrounds. The researchers concluded that this could lead to a severe decline in opportunities for poor and even middle-class families in the future.

The study, *Getting Ahead or Losing Ground: Economic Mobility in America*, was compiled by scholars of the Brookings Institute in collaboration with the Pew Charitable Trusts. The study represents a comprehensive attempt to observe and track economic mobility between generations. The survey followed families from the 1960s. The study concluded that a college degree is essential to economic mobility, but background plays a large role.

Economic mobility, defined as the ability to climb up the income ladder, is difficult to achieve without a college degree. The study has found that individuals from certain economic and ethnic backgrounds are falling behind in earning college degrees, thus inhibiting their ability to increase their income. The gap between those higher on the income ladder and those lower on the income ladder will widen in the upcoming years, suggesting the economic mobility for these sectors of the population will deteriorate even further in the future.

The study's findings point to a stagnating development wherein those earning the least remain at the same level while those from upper-class families remain the highest earners. Children from the top fifth of income earners scored the highest in earning college degrees (53%). These numbers show that the top fifth of income earners in the country continue to move up the economic ladder and thus secure their places at the top. Conversely, the bottom fifth of income earners earn the fewest college degrees (11%). With nearly half of the bottom fifth of income earners not receiving college degrees, a large percentage of these individuals and their families will remain in the bottom fifth of income earners.

The study found that part of the reason children from poor backgrounds do not earn college degrees is a lack of college advising. One of the authors of the study, Ron Haskins, is adamant that early outreach to children from poor backgrounds will greatly increase the percentage of college-degree earners, thus improving economic mobility. However, future studies and

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proposed policy implementations are still needed.

The study also includes a comparison to international trends, which finds, despite opinions otherwise, individuals in the United States have less economic mobility overall than those in other industrialized nations. An examination of wealth and economic mobility is conducted as well.

In addition to Ron Haskins, the report was authored by Julia B. Isaacs and Isabel V. Sawhill of the Brookings Institute. The entire report is available on the Economic Mobility Project website as well as the Brookings Institute website.

## **On the Net**

The New York Times

Report on Economic Mobility

The Brookings Institute