

The Issues Note

The only way is up? Social Mobility and Equal Opportunities

Centre for Opportunity
and Equality - COPE



I N C L U S I V E G R O W T H

Opening Session: Equal opportunities as a lever to mobility

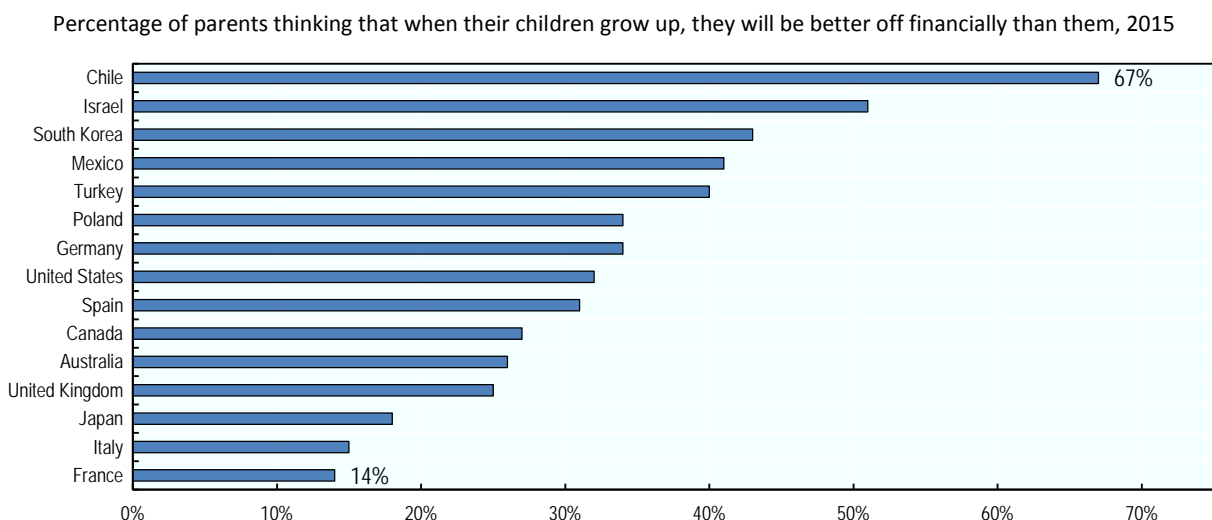
Key facts

- Many people think that opportunities to move up the social ladder have fallen over time and are concerned about prospects for the next generation.
- There has been, in fact, considerable absolute social mobility over time and most people are better off than their parents as education opportunities have increased and more people have moved to managerial professions.
- At the same time, *relative* social mobility is moderate in many countries. Social background continues to determine life chances in many of the OECD countries: on average across the OECD if a father had twice the earnings of another father, his son will have 40% higher earnings than the son of the poorer father.
- The chance that you move up the ladder if your parents were at the bottom of the distribution has stagnated or declined in many advanced economies.

Equality of opportunity is a desirable outcome for governments across the globe. Intergenerational social mobility – the movement between social classes or social groups– is an important driver for ensuring that individuals succeed and prosper in a society regardless of their socio-economic background as long as they have talent, try hard and work hard.

There are two types of intergenerational social mobility: *absolute mobility* that measures whether (and by how much) living standards have increased or the extent to which people do better than their parents, and *relative mobility* that refers to the extent to which an individual's chances depend on their parents' education, class or income. Social mobility can be measured in terms of education, occupational status, individual earnings or household income.

Figure 1. In most OECD countries, not many parents see a bright future for their children



Source: Pew Research Center, Global Indicators Database, <http://www.pewglobal.org/database/indicator/74/survey/17/>.

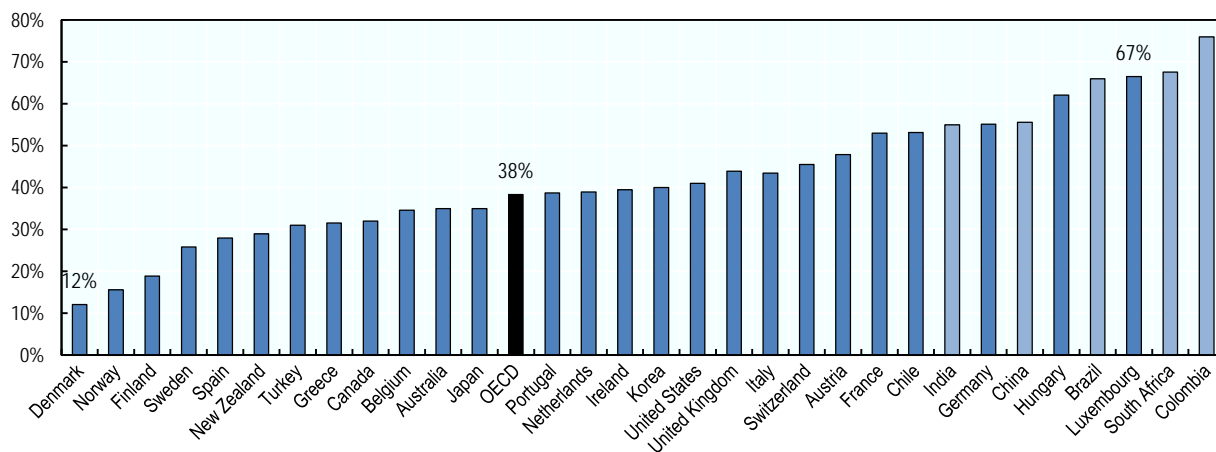
Rapid economic growth witnessed up until early 2000s has lifted living standards and the quality of life for many individuals across European and OECD countries. The changes in the labour market – namely an expansion in managerial and professional jobs – provided greater opportunities, not only to those at the

top but to also less advantaged individuals to climb up the ladder. In other words, absolute upward income mobility, had been strong, and helped many individuals from every income class.

However, concerns over the extent to which the next generation will be similarly better off have heightened following the global financial crisis and widening inequalities in many European and OECD countries. Parents are concerned about the financial future of their children, and these worries are particularly pronounced in advanced economies. For instance, only 14% and 15% of the population in France and Italy, respectively, believe their children will be better off (Figure 1). Perceptions of populations in Japan, the United Kingdom and Australia are not far behind.

Evidence suggests that parental background continues to be a strong driving force of social status. Across the OECD on average, intergenerational persistence of individual earnings is 38% – meaning that if a father earned twice the earnings of another father, then the son of the former will on average earn 38% more than the son of the latter (Figure 2). This figure ranges from 12% in Denmark 76% in Colombia.

Figure 2. Earnings persistence across generations is high



Note: The height of each bar represents the best point estimate of the inter-generational earnings elasticity. The higher the parameter, the higher is the persistence of earnings across generations, and thus the lower is inter-generational mobility.

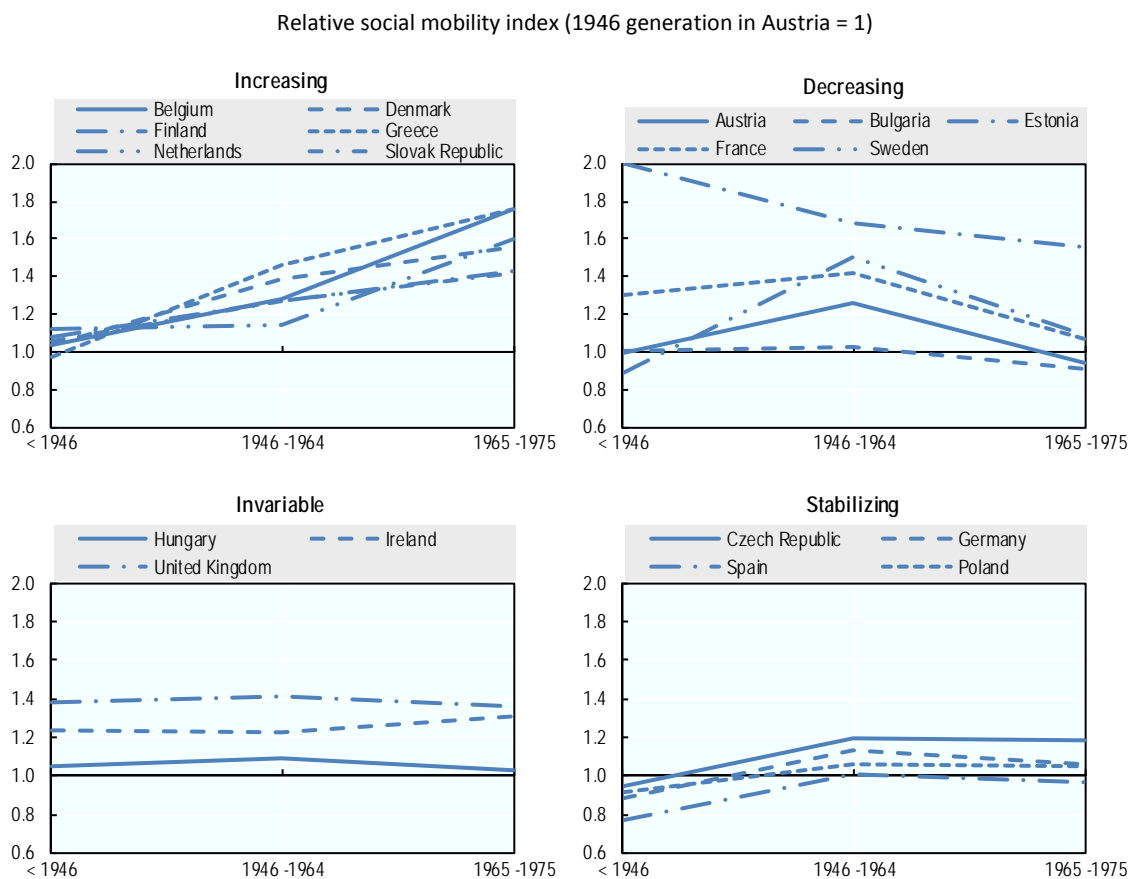
Source: OECD forthcoming (2017).

How fair and mobile are advanced economies and have opportunities for social mobility increased for more recent generations? According to Eurofound (2017), there has been an improvement in relative social mobility – measured as people’s chances of moving between certain occupational classes in Europe - over time, though it has not increased everywhere (Figure 3). Opportunities rose in most countries from the generation born before 1946 to the baby boomer generation (born 1946-1964). The picture after this is much more complex: in some countries social mobility has been decreasing (for example Austria, Bulgaria, France and notably Sweden and, to a lesser degree, Germany, Spain and Hungary) for the youngest generation (the so called Generation X). Meanwhile, in several countries, social mobility has continued to increase across the board, for example Denmark, Finland and the Netherlands.

Reducing the impact of family background on individual’s life chances is a major challenge but more should be done to break the cycle transmission of disadvantages (or advantages) from one generation to the next. A range of public policies have an important role to play, including: (i) early intervention at early stages of the lifecycle to reduce inequalities stemming from parenting skills, investment in health and education and education policies; (ii) improving the chances of individuals from disadvantaged background who do not have equal chances to find a good start to their careers; and (iii) urban policies that encourage more socially

mixed neighbourhoods to mitigate effects on economic inequalities and social mobility. The following sections of this note highlight how each of these factors affects social mobility and identify key policy levers to unlock the potential of individuals to get ahead in life.

Figure 3. In most advanced economies, opportunities remain linked to individual’s origins



Note: Social mobility is measured using occupation-based social classes according to the European Socioeconomic Classification (ESeC). For each cohort and country, it is indexed to the level of mobility of the 1946 generation in Austria (equal to 1). A value higher than 1 means higher mobility than for the Austrian 1946 generation. A value lower than 1 means lower mobility than for the Austrian 1946 generation. A decreasing trend corresponds to decreasing mobility, an increasing one to increasing mobility.

Source: Eurofound own calculations, based on ESS waves 1-5.

Key questions for discussion

- As social mobility is a zero-sum game, how should policymakers deal with promoting upward mobility if this involves a corresponding downward mobility?
- How can the governments promote social mobility in times of sluggish growth?
- What are the most promising examples of policy to foster equality of opportunities for different groups of the population?
- What role is there for other stakeholders such as employers and trade unions to promote equal opportunities for all?

Session 1: Moving up the ladder via education

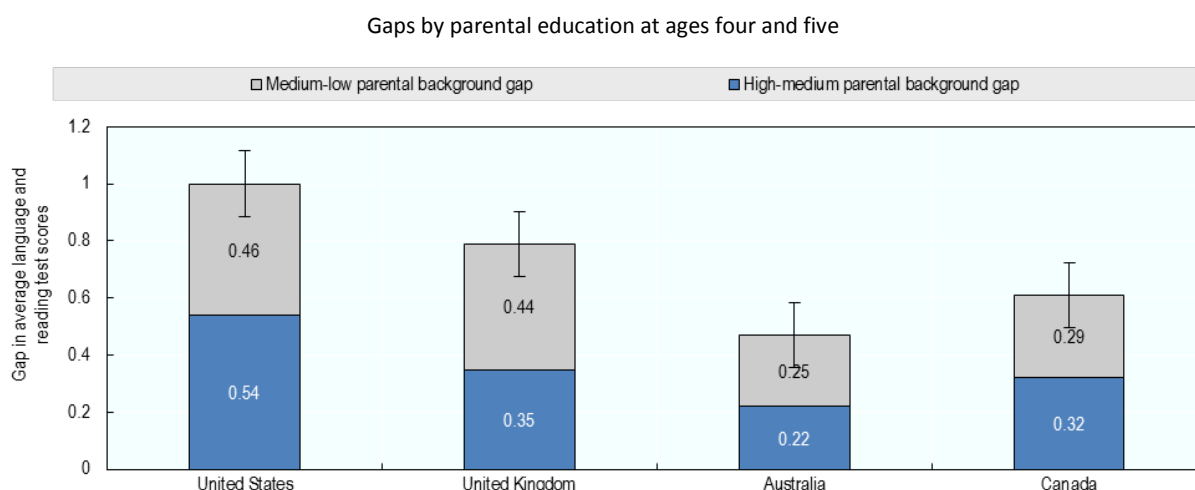
Key facts

- Children with poorly educated parents fall considerably behind in learning outcomes at the age of four or five
- Socio-economically disadvantaged students across OECD countries are almost three times more likely than advantaged students not to attain the baseline level of proficiency in science
- Equity in education has improved slightly in the past decade on average across OECD countries, and some countries have made substantial improvements, such as the United States (from high inequity levels) and Denmark
- In some countries (e.g. Japan, Estonia), children with low socio-economic backgrounds have a better chance of obtaining high educational outcomes

Inequality in learning opportunities begins at birth, and often widens as individuals grow older. Disparities in families' capacity to support their children (including by getting them into good schools) continue to translate into differences in children's achievements. Children from more affluent families tend to develop better skills in reading and problem-solving, are less likely to drop out of school without a diploma, and are more likely to complete tertiary education.

An early learning gap is already apparent when looking at four and five-years-old children. In the United States, children with poorly educated parents (upper secondary education attainment or less) lag significantly behind in reading and mathematics in comparison to their peers with highly educated parents (tertiary education or higher). A similar pattern, though to a much lesser degree, exists in Australia, Canada and the UK (Figure 4). It is interesting to note that the substantial gap in children's learning outcomes is also found between children with high and medium socio-economic status within all four countries. Children from the highest socio-economic status families are more likely to benefit from abundant household resources such as quality learning environments in countries where the income distribution is highly skewed towards the top. On the other hand, middle-class children may struggle to prepare for school. Their parents work longer hours and have relatively higher household expenditures since they are not always entitled to the government support and childcare services that are typically targeted at low-income families. This suggests that public policy attention needs to be given to children from the lowest socio-economic status families, but also to children from the middle status families in order to prepare them for school entry.

Figure 4. Inequality in language and reading skills is already present in early childhood



Source: Bradbury et al. (2015).

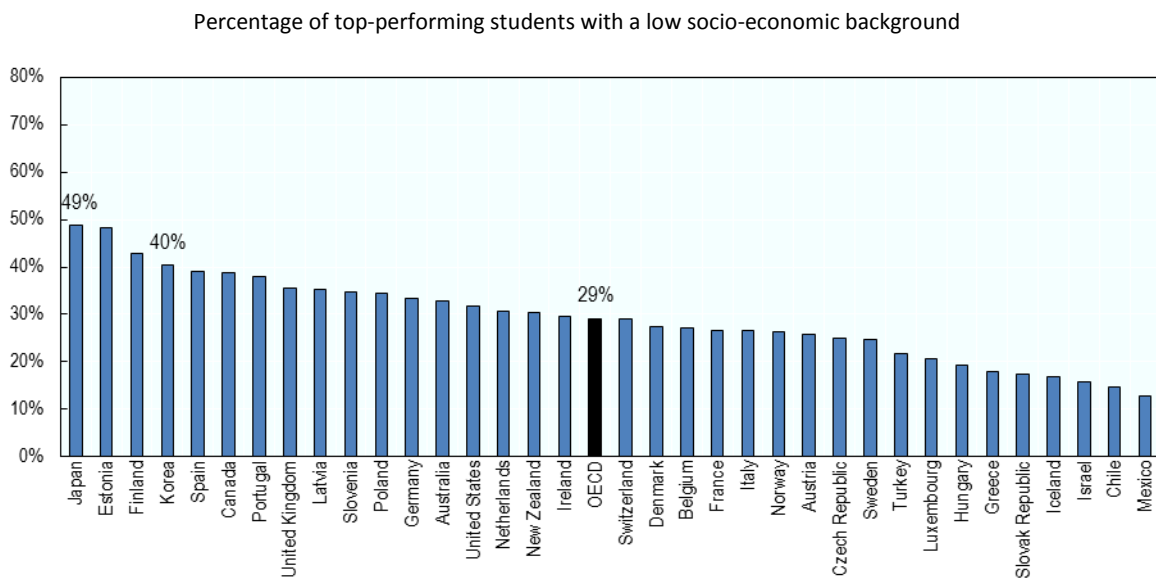
Those at the bottom of the ladder due to little endowment at birth not only have a long way to climb up, but also have less support (available socio-economic resources) to continue climbing up the ladder. A substantial gap in literacy scores is found between adults with highly educated parents and those with poorly educated parents. Even after accounting for socio-demographic factors, a significant gap in literacy skills remains between adults with highly educated parents and poorly educated parents in some OECD countries. If quality learning is a privilege for a small segment of population, it can continue to perpetuate inequalities and lower intergenerational mobility.

Social inequalities in education are not set in stone. Equity in education improved in 11 out of 52 PISA-participating countries, and on average across OECD countries. Between PISA 2006 and PISA 2015, the evolution of several equity indicators was predominantly positive. Take, for example, the indicator that measures how well a student's socio-economic status predicts his or her performance (defined in PISA as the strength of the socio-economic gradient). Over the past decade, the socio-economic gradient weakened by between 6 and 7 percentage points in Bulgaria, Chile, Thailand and the United States, and by between 2 and 6 percentage points in Brazil, Denmark, Germany, Iceland, Mexico, Montenegro and Slovenia.

A sign that greater equity is mainly benefiting disadvantaged students is the increasing proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds who beat the odds against them and perform at high levels (students whom PISA calls "resilient"). Between 2006 and 2015, the percentage of resilient students increased by 12 percentage points in the United States, and by between 4 and 9 points in Bulgaria, Denmark, Germany and Slovenia. The latest OECD PISA results show that on average across OECD countries, 29.2% of disadvantaged students beat the socio-economic odds against them and score among the top quarter of students in all participating countries, after accounting for socio-economic status. These students make up over 40% of disadvantaged students in Estonia, Finland, Japan and Korea (Figure 5).

What lies behind this improvement in equity? Policies that minimise any adverse impact of students' socio-economic status on their school outcomes include targeting additional resources to schools with high concentrations of low-performing and disadvantaged students, and ensuring that high and consistent teaching and learning standards are applied across all classrooms. Broader social policies to reduce differences in early life experiences between advantaged and disadvantaged children can also promote both equity and high performance when these children enter formal education.

Figure 5. Some students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds demonstrate high levels of performance



Note: A student is classified as resilient if he or she is in the bottom quarter of the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status (ESCS) in the country/economy of assessment and performs in the top quarter of students among all countries/economies, after accounting for socio-economic status.

Source: OECD, PISA 2015 Database, Table I.6.7.

Key questions for discussion

- How best to provide access to quality and affordable early childhood education for children from disadvantaged backgrounds? How cost-effective is it compared with investment in later years?
- How can countries best support parents in improving parenting skills in ways that improve children’s cognitive and non-cognitive skills?
- How can schools prevent low performers from falling behind and dropping out?
- How can mentoring programmes for students improve educational outcomes and skills?

Session 2: Making the labour market more inclusive

Key facts

- Disadvantaged youth with low skills face a difficult entry into the labour market, with heightened unemployment risk and poor career progression
- Low skilled workers tend to have less access than more skilled ones to on-the-job training , which tends to further widen career and earning progression, especially in the current rapidly changing labour market.
- Atypical forms of employment and repeated unemployment spells deeply affect the long-term earnings potential of affected workers
- Childbirth has a significant impact on women's careers and mobility prospects because it leads to long labour market withdrawal in some countries and limits job and career changes for those remaining at work

Children from poorer parents do not start on equal footing on the labour market because they are less likely to attain high education and to obtain a high-paying job. This would not matter if there was sufficient employment and wage mobility that could smooth out earnings differences between workers over time. Unfortunately, the concentration of unemployment and low-paid jobs among certain groups of workers shows that better policies are needed to help disadvantaged workers move up the jobs ladder.

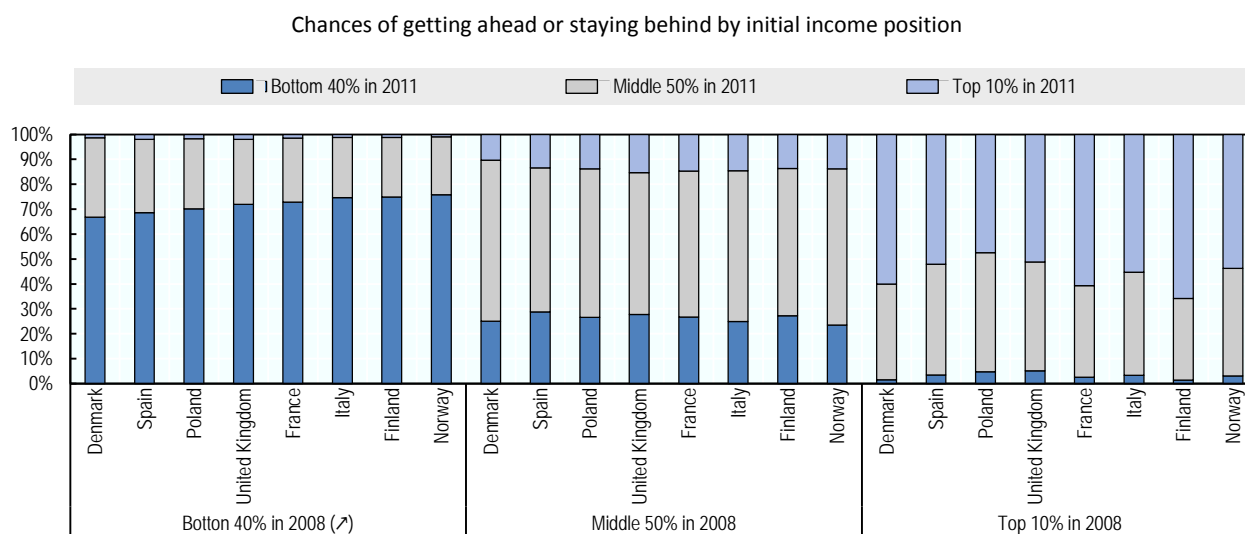
Inequality in learning opportunities is greatly influenced by parents' socio-economic status, and in turn results in very different employment status for young adults. Youth unemployment tends to be concentrated among disadvantaged populations and the scarring effects of early-career unemployment have implications for social mobility. Low education levels are decisive factors in being disconnected from the labour market: on average, the incidence of youth neither in employment nor in education or training (NEET) in the OECD is three times higher among young people with lower-secondary level of education and 1.5 times greater at medium level (upper-secondary) than among their highly educated peers with university-level (or tertiary) degrees. Even when at work, low-skilled youth risk a career trap in low-paid jobs because poor numeracy and literacy skills are associated with low long-term earnings. Many members of this vulnerable group require targeted assistance to improve their long-term career prospects.

Parental background has a strong influence in the type of job individuals do. For instance, some types of occupations are more often transmitted than others as they require job-specific human capital that can be easily and cheaply transmitted from parents to children. Many jobs are filled by relatives of those owning or working at the company, or the family of their friends. Lack of access to networks can limit possibilities for internships and first job offers. Finally, there might also be an unconscious or conscious recruiting bias in top firms or certain sectors: for instance, higher-class candidates may be seen as better fits with the elite culture and clientele and more likely to be hired.

Over a working career, the initial starting income position has a long-lasting influence in terms of income. Mobility within a four-year span is limited: 70% of individuals remain in their initial income group. The vast majority of those starting in the bottom and lower middle class – the bottom 40% - have little prospects to move up to the middle class or even top 10%. At the same time, half of those in the top income decile remain there after four years. Over the long run, spells of low paid employment and unemployment

accumulate to reinforce earning inequalities. Chronic unemployment, weak cognitive skills, atypical work arrangements and poor productivity in firms are major determinants of low long-term earnings. By allowing workers to move easily between jobs and adapt to changing circumstances at work, skills can also prevent getting stuck in a dead-end job. The minimum wage reduces the risk of experiencing extreme low pay at a point in time, but its impact on long-term earnings is not clear cut. Temporary contracts can provide a bridge to work, but also can be a source of insecurity, and, if used as a substitute to open-ended contracts, even become an obstacle to finding good-quality jobs.

Figure 6. The rich stay rich and the poor stay poor: Mobility over one’s career is low at both ends of the distribution



Note: The figures represent the likelihood for an individual in a given income group to move to the two other groups or stay in the same group. Equivalised household incomes, in real terms. Changes between 2008-2011.

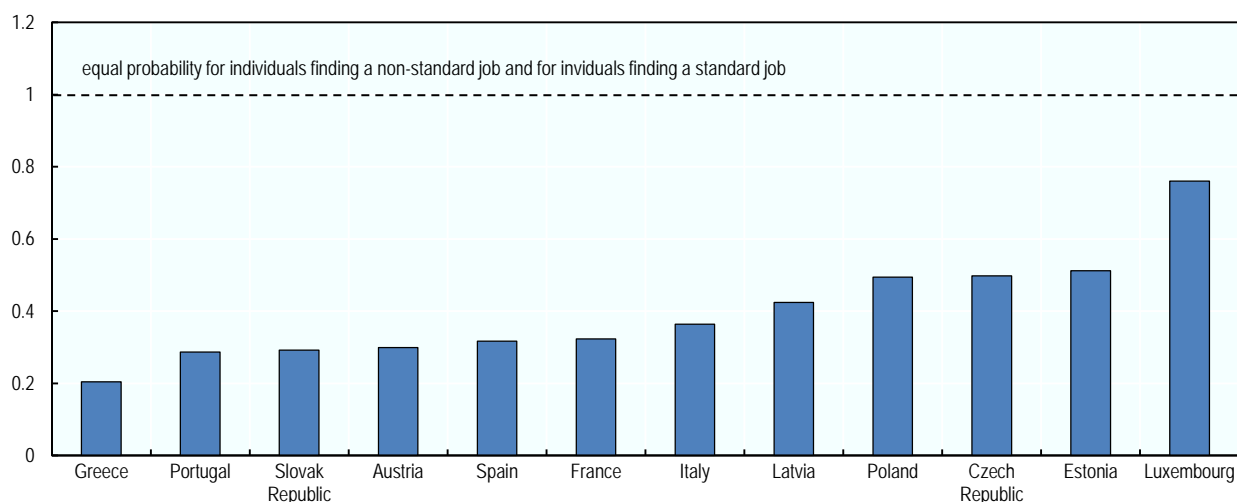
Source: OECD forthcoming (2017).

Income trajectories are durably shaped both by labour market events such as job changes and life events such as childbirth or health shocks. But labour market events tend to have a stronger impact on mobility. For instance, unemployment increases the probability of an income loss of 20% from one year to the next by four times on average across the OECD. The impact of income losses persists if ‘insurance mechanisms’ in place – such as savings, household or social network support, or public social safety nets- do not fully play their role. In such cases, short-term income shocks impact on long-term mobility. Besides, unemployment can lower long-term earnings as a result of lost labour market experience, depreciating skills and the negative signal to employers. On average across countries, workers in the bottom third of long-term earnings spend, over a span of ten years, more than one year in unemployment compared with just one month for those in the top third.

In addition to unemployment, the type of employment also plays a part in determining the magnitude of income mobility. In all countries, the probability to exit poverty is much smaller when finding a non-standard job than when finding a standard job (Figure 7). In Greece, for instance, this probability is five times lower. The concentration of temporary work in the bottom of the distribution of long-term earnings is likely to reflect a dual labour market where employment protection provisions diverge strongly across contract types.

Figure 7. Chances of exiting poverty when finding a non-standard job are limited in some countries

2007-12 average



Note: Being at-risk-of-poverty is defined as having a equivalised household disposable income inferior to 50% of the median household equivalised disposable income. Data refer to 2007-2009 and 2010-2012 for Estonia, and 2007-2012 for Portugal.

Source: OECD forthcoming (2017).

Health problems can cause problems at work and hamper earnings mobility. Men and women in bad health work less and earn less when they work, with the health-wage gap widening with age. Over the whole career, bad health reduces lifetime earnings by 33 and 17% for men with low and high levels of education, respectively, on average across European countries, Australia, Korea and the United States. This is largely due to higher risk of job loss for people in bad health. The health effects are much smaller for women, at 18 and 13%, respectively, as non-employment risks due to bad health are more limited for female workers.

Childbirth can have long-lasting effects on the careers of women, in terms of time spent out of the labour market and lost opportunities for upward mobility and career advancement. In some countries, the withdrawal from the labour market at childbirth is large and quite persistent (more than three years). This is the case for instance, in Australia, Central European countries and the United Kingdom. In other countries, such as the Netherlands due to a large increase in part-time work or in Sweden where childcare is heavily subsidised by state and local governments the effect is very limited. Even once back in work, women's earnings trajectories remain affected for a very long time. For instance, in Australia, if the deficit in career advancement opportunities is around 12 percentage points for a change of employer within the first year following childbirth, the cumulated effect over the next six years reaches a 25 percentage points lower probability of changing employer, and a 35 percentage points lower probability of changing contract or working status.

There are numerous policy implications. While a high-quality education and training system is key to give individuals the best possible start in the labour market, labour market policies can make a substantial difference in earnings mobility throughout the career. First, helping young people in the school-to-work transition is essential to get a right start. Second, policies and institutions need to enhance upward mobility and career development over the life-course, especially for the more disadvantaged groups. This includes policies ranging from mentoring programmes and internships to active labour market policies and adult education and training programmes that focuses in particular to the low-skilled but also policies to reduce

labour market duality. Third, certain policy tools such as unemployment insurance and in-work benefits need to be carefully designed to minimize the effects of income shocks and low pay on future career and earnings mobility prospects. Finally, other policies such as occupational health, sickness and disability and work-family balance policies are also needed to enhance social mobility on the labour market.

Key questions for discussion

- How can labour market policies reduce or break the inherited disadvantage that can prevent individuals to climb up the income ladder?
- Is career progression becoming harder as a result of structural changes such as technological change in the economy?
- What type of labour market policies are most effective in preventing people falling behind in the labour market or smooth out transitions as a result of labour market events such as job changes and life events e.g. childbirth or health shocks?
- How can we tackle discrimination in the labour market which can damage individual's chances of gaining access to the job market and ability to move upwards?

Session 3: How where you live affects your chances in life

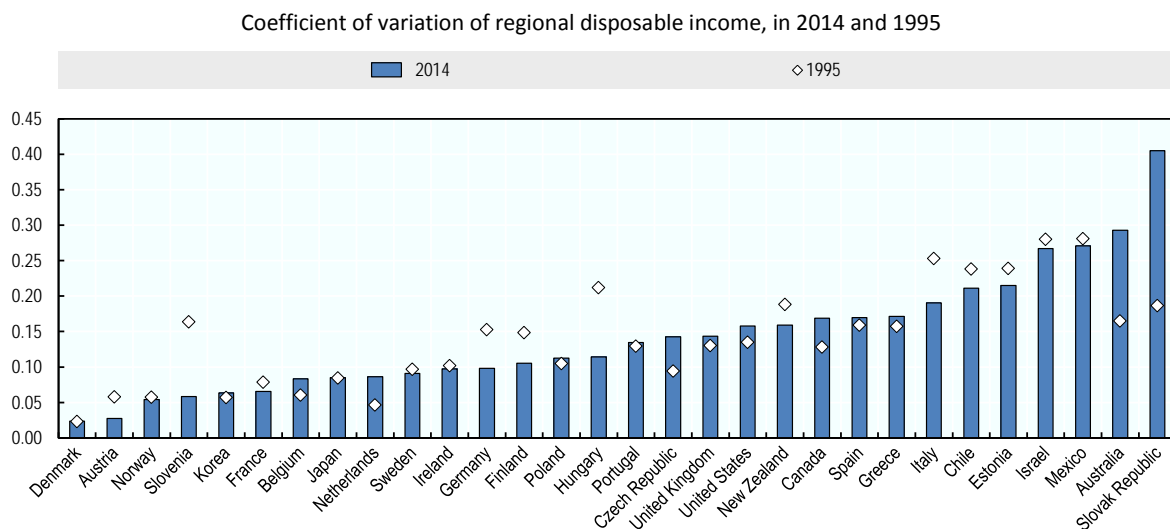
Key facts

- Regional disparities in income are wide in many countries, although most countries are closing the gap between regions in education.
- Rich and poor people often live in clearly separated neighbourhoods and the extent to which this occurs is positively associated with the overall level of income inequality in cities. Households in European cities are, on average, less spatially segregated by income than in North American ones.
- Subnational governments carry out around 40% of public spending and 60% of public investment in OECD countries. They play a key role in providing jobs, education and social services.
- Living in a disadvantaged neighbourhood is associated with lower outcomes for people in terms of income; moving to 'better' neighbourhoods can increase chances of upward social mobility.

Social mobility is generally discussed in a 'national' or 'country' frame of reference but the same elements that influence prospects for social mobility at the national level have an impact in different areas or regions of the country and in different neighbourhoods. Prospects for mobility may become more unequal when there is increasing spatial segregation of social groups and concentrations of more and less socio-economically advantaged groups in more and less disadvantaged areas.

Territorial disparities in income inequality and employment have increased in half of the OECD countries over the past two decades (Figure 8). Employment growth in many OECD countries was highly concentrated in specific regions, reinforcing interregional inequalities: on average, 40% of overall employment creation in OECD economies during 1999-2012 was generated in just 10% of their regions (OECD, 2015a). In contrast, improvement in the educational attainment of the workforce in less-educated regions has narrowed the gaps with more-educated regions in the past 15 years. Besides, in ten of eleven OECD countries studied, income inequality is higher, on average, in cities than in their respective countries.

Figure 8. Regional disparities in household disposable income have increased in half of the OECD



Source: OECD Regions at a Glance 2016, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933362897>.

When considered at the scale of cities, income inequality has a clear spatial dimension, where rich and poor people often live separated in different neighbourhoods. Spatial segregation is a particular situation in which the distribution of people within the metropolitan space is over-concentrated along specific socio-economic lines, such as income, race or ethnicity. Households in European cities are, on average, less spatially segregated by income than in North American ones (OECD, 2016). However, the patterns of spatial segregation within metropolitan areas differ across countries. In Denmark and in the Netherlands, for example, the poorest households show the highest levels of segregation, while in Canada, France and the United States the most affluent tend to concentrate the most in specific areas of the city.

Where people live in a city has an important impact on their education and well-being outcomes. The location of schools matters greatly in determining the quality of education. In the OECD area, 15-year-old students in urban schools outperform those in rural areas on the PISA test by more than 20 points on average - the equivalent of almost one year of education. Considerable disparities in education can be found within metropolitan regions as well. In the Chicago region, for instance, school districts record high school graduation rates that range from 57% in the city of Chicago to over 95% in suburban areas. In Aix-Marseille, the share of the working-age population without a diploma ranges from 39% in neighbourhoods in northern Marseille to 14% in Aix-en-Provence. Considerable disparities in health can be found within metropolitan regions as well. Life expectancies, for example, differ by a staggering 20 years across neighbourhoods in Baltimore and London (OECD, 2016).

Segregation becomes a problem when it prevents segments of the population from accessing the opportunities and services that would enable them to fully participate in the political and economic process and contribute towards societal progress. Highly segregated cities can lead to lower outcomes for individuals who start from a more disadvantaged situation. The existing literature on neighbourhood effects tends to suggest, although casual relationships are still to be fully proved, that living in poverty concentration neighbourhoods can have a negative effect on individual outcomes such as health, income, education and general well-being (van Ham et al., 2012). In addition, rising trends of segregation might also increase the spatial mismatches between affordable housing for low-income households and the jobs they can find (Love, 2016). Living in neighbourhoods that are spatially cut off from areas generating high employment is expected to harm the employment prospects of residents (Marcinićzak et al., 2016). In the Netherlands, a relatively egalitarian country by many standards, children who grew up in the poorest neighbourhoods have, on average, incomes when adults that are 5-6% lower compared to those who grew up in the most affluent neighbourhoods (OECD, 2016). In the United States, results from the "Moving to Opportunity" program show a significant improvement in the long-term outcomes for children who move to lower poverty neighbourhoods before the age of 13, pointing to potential strategies for reducing the intergenerational persistence of poverty (Chetty, Hendren and Katz (2015).

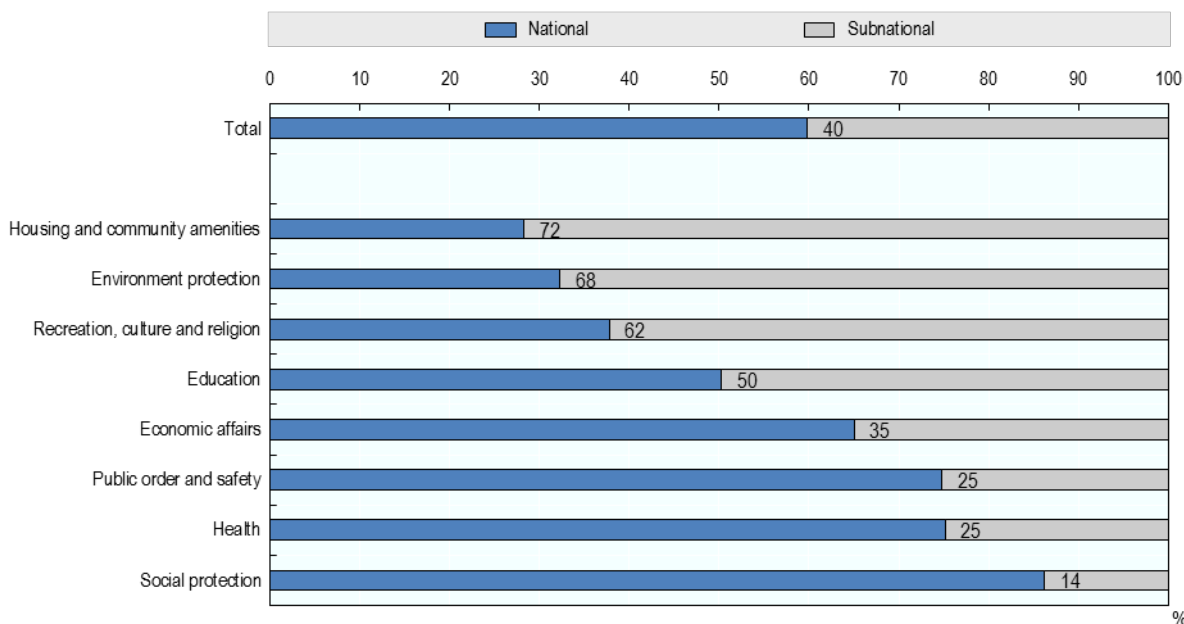
People living in disadvantaged areas often have lower quality public services, which undermines opportunities. There is an important role for sub-national governments to help address this challenge, given that they carry out 40% of total public expenditure (Figure 9). Moreover, they have an important economic role as employers, in the public procurement process, and as providers of essential services in areas such as education (50% of subnational expenditure), health (25%), and housing (72%). Cities can expand opportunities for all residents by strengthening human and social capital.

Access to employment may be an issue where public transport networks and other infrastructure put households in poorer neighbourhoods at a disadvantage. Carefully designed, locally tailored education and training programmes can help break school segregation rather than exacerbate existing inequalities between school districts. Controlled school choice schemes and school voucher programmes, for example,

can help low-income children pursue quality education and expand opportunities for all in cities. Finally, access to good-quality affordable housing is important for achieving a number of social policy objectives, including poverty reduction, equality of opportunity and social inclusion.

Figure 9. Public spending by regional and local governments is substantial

Breakdown of total public spending across levels of government by policy field, OECD average, 2013, % adding to 100%



Source: OECD Regions at a Glance 2016, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933363655>.

Key questions for discussion

- What strategies can be pursued at the local level to address spatial inequalities in terms of access to and quality of affordable housing and public services? What barriers must be overcome?
- How can local authorities manage the trade-offs between the need for short-term “wins”/progress, with the understanding that positive outcomes may only be evident over the long term?
- What are some effective strategies to support policy makers in addressing such challenges from a metropolitan or regional perspective, given that spatial disparities often spill across administrative/city borders?
- How can transport policies break down barriers in access to jobs and services, including social and leisure activities?

Closing Session: Policy interventions across the life cycle

The closing session will address the issue of how to intervene at the most important transition points during the life cycle and how can policymakers design more and better coordinated policy packages to promote upward mobility as well as prevent the accumulation of (dis) advantages from one generation to the next.

Panelists will discuss the role of three key policy levers as key elements of lifecycle approach and explore policies that go beyond the field of education, labour market and urban planning. This includes addressing health inequalities; the role of social assistance and family policies to buffer the impact of parental disadvantage. Notably, the session will hone upon wealth and tax policies as an avenue for addressing intergenerational mobility.

Key questions for discussion

- The underlying concept of social mobility is ‘fairness’ but there are clear opportunity gaps at key stages of life. How can policies in the field of education, labour market and urban planning be aligned to improve mobility from childhood to adulthood?
- Which policies (beyond labour market, education, and local/regional) can help avoid low income and vulnerable middle-class groups to accumulate disadvantages? In what ways can policies cushion impact of early disadvantage?
- How do family benefits, tax credits and wealth taxes help or hinder social mobility?
- What is the role of health in social mobility? How can policies on education and labour market be better connected to tackle the impact of parental disadvantage?
- Health inequality is one of the factors holding back mobility. How can the health sector have a positive influence on health, wellbeing and, over time, social mobility?
- How can family policy strive to help balance family and work so that children continue to receive the time and attention – the whole host of non-monetary resources – needed for their full development?
- In view tight budgetary resources and scarce resources, where in the lifecycle of individuals is an intervention most effective?

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