

Is Britain unfair and unequal?



FRANZ PELEGLI/PHOTOLIA

Social changes such as a minimum wage, equal-pay legislation and the expansion of higher education were introduced to raise levels of social mobility. **Joan Garrod** asks whether this actually happened

In November 2016 the Social Mobility Commission presented its annual report to Parliament. It made for depressing reading. The opening words were: 'Britain has a deep social-mobility problem.'

The report pointed out that, despite successive governments putting social mobility ever higher on the social-policy agenda, the expectation that each generation would be better off than the one before is no longer being met. Those born in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s have lower incomes than their parents did

at the same age. Those born in the 1980s are the first post-war cohort to start their working lives with lower incomes than their predecessors. In Britain today, only one in eight children from low-income families is likely to become a high earner as an adult.

What are the barriers to social mobility?

The report identifies four factors keeping social mobility low. These are:

- an unfair education system
- a two-tier labour market
- an imbalanced economy
- an unaffordable housing market

Education

Despite some narrowing of the gap between the achievements of those from poorer and better-off backgrounds, the report points out that 'from the early

JAMs may not be in poverty, but their financial position is precarious



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years through to universities, there is an entrenched and unbroken correlation between social class and educational success.' It urges the government to rethink its plans to introduce more grammar schools, which it says are 'at best, a distraction, and at worst a risk to efforts aimed at narrowing the significant social and geographical divides' that are a feature of England's school system.

The labour market

There is a growing gap between those with skills and those without. Most of those on low pay are trapped, with little chance of escape. The report says that 'they have jobs but don't have careers'. A contributory factor has been that vocational education has been starved of resources.

The economy

People's chances of success are increasingly influenced by where they live. Policy has been based on the idea that those from weaker economic areas who wanted to get on would have to get out. This has resulted in what the report terms the 'socially hollowed-out' towns, cities and counties of 'left-behind Britain'.

Housing

The gap between homeowners and renters is increasing. Home ownership rates among the under-44s have fallen sharply, as their household incomes have grown at only half the rate of their housing costs.

'Treadmill' families and JAMs

The report identifies 'treadmill' families, who are not in extreme poverty, usually have at least one person in work, but who are 'running harder and harder but simply standing still'. Another term for such families

is 'just about managing', or JAMs. It is estimated that there are some 6 million such families on low-to-middle incomes, with at least one person in work. Their position is precarious — more than two-thirds of them have less than a month's income in savings, so anything that results in a fall in their income can be disastrous.

The government's response

Theresa May has said that it is a priority to help such families, and has promised to introduce policies to do so. The commission's report suggests that there is a long way to go.

Questions

- 1 Which of the four barriers to social mobility is the most important? Why?
- 2 Do schools do enough to equip people with the skills needed for work? What else could they do?
- 3 What does the report mean by 'socially hollowed-out' towns and cities, and 'left-behind Britain'?
- 4 What are the advantages of a society with high rates of upward social mobility?

Weblinks to follow up

The Social Mobility Commission's November 2016 report can be found here: www.tinyurl.com/gocvu37

'Britain's social mobility problem', a special report on BBC's *Newsnight* programme:

www.tinyurl.com/z7lnuoc

Watch Theresa May's speech on social mobility and grammar schools: www.tinyurl.com/hwulxv4

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