

## Podcast Interview: Mike Hout

**PNAS:** Welcome to Science Sessions. I'm Paul Gabrielsen.

The concept of the United States as a land of opportunity holds that children can choose a career path and status in life independent of their origin. How well is that ideal realized? In a recent PNAS article, sociologist Mike Hout of New York University investigated that question. He measured intergenerational persistence, or the degree to which children's occupational outcomes follow those of their parents, using data from the General Social Survey for the years between 1994 and 2016. Hout explains what his research suggests about social mobility in America.

**Hout:** The fact of the matter is, we've never quite achieved that. And the point of this research is that we're falling even farther short than we thought. Are people doing occupations that are far better than the kinds of work and social standing and employment outcome where their parents were, or are they pretty similar? And the answer is they're quite similar and even more similar than previous research had shown.

**PNAS:** Hout calculated the socioeconomic index score for each person in his dataset. The index takes into account factors such as an occupation's average pay and required credentials and scores the occupation on a 100-point scale. Jobs such as janitorial service or basic food preparation might fall at the low end of the scale. Highly-paid professions such as law and medicine might fall at the high end. With this score, Hout can correlate the socioeconomic index of a child with his or her parents. That correlation is called intergenerational persistence and for the ideal American dream, that measure would be zero.

**Hout:** On the other hand, if everybody is stuck in the place they were born into, you get a statistical measure of intergenerational persistence of 1.0. 0.5 is halfway in-between there, and that's pretty much where we stand these days. For every ten points increase in the parents' social standing, the adult offspring's standing is rising about five points. And that's a lot of inequality, actually. Inequality of opportunity. It means that - let's take a hundred people. Half of them are at 25 and half of them are at 75 on the parents score, that is, their parents are 50 points apart. We'd expect those two samples of people to average out to be about 25 points apart. Half of the inequality that was present at birth is still present as they're adults. From these data we can only go back to 1994 and they indicate no change at all from 1994-2016 - a very steady pattern of intergenerational persistence. Dovetailing these data as well as we can with data that come before 1994, it's a hedgier conclusion here, is to say that it probably hasn't changed in 40 years. So if we take this back to the 1970s, there's probably been no change in this fundamental aspect of intergenerational mobility and intergenerational persistence for 40 years or more. As the title reflects the status of both parents, the fact that we don't go back before 1994 is we don't have data on moms before 1994. Mothers' employment, as it has become more prevalent, has also become a more important component of a person's start in life, and that's reflected in this research, which gives moms their due.

**PNAS:** What has changed over time, however, is the landscape of professions available. Hout addresses generational differences in the labor market, or a measure called absolute mobility.

**Hout:** For people born in the 1940s, two-thirds of the men and almost that many of the women were in an occupation that's at least one point better than their mom and dad's. For people born in the 1980s, on the other hand, that fraction has fallen below half. Right now we have a distribution of occupations that reflects a high concentration of people working in technical and professional occupations, a shrinking fraction of the population working in manufacturing, and a remnant, very tiny segment of the population, working in agriculture. 100 years ago the relative proportions would have been exactly flipped. Farming would be dominant, manufacturing would be rising, and the professions would be a tiny, but emerging segment of the labor force. And those kinds of changes over time in the distribution of occupations also contribute to mobility. So while high-status occupations are growing from 2, 3, 4 percent of the workforce to 20, 25, 30 percent of the workforce, there's an awful lot of headroom for upward mobility. Once we hit that 25, 30 percent and stop expanding that part, there's just not as much headroom for upward expansion as there was in a previous time.

**PNAS:** Hout says future trends in absolute mobility may approach zero, or a society where upward mobility is balanced by a roughly equal amount of downward mobility.

**Hout:** I think that there's too much persistence. I think 0.5 is high among the measures we have for other nations around the world. It's around 0.4 in Britain, and around 0.25 in the Scandinavian countries. So there are ways to organize societies that allow for more intergenerational movement than we've been able to achieve.

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