



Who moves up the social ladder in the UK?

Who moves up (and down) the social ladder and how has this changed over time? This briefing looks at social mobility in the UK between 1991 and 2015. Our findings show that since 2005 there has been less social mobility, with fewer people moving up or down the social ladder. However certain groups do better; the young, men and those who move around the UK have higher levels of upward social mobility.

Key Points

- In general, between 1991 and 2015 more people moved up the social ladder than down.
- In 2005 there was a sharp decline in social mobility, with fewer people moving either up or down the social ladder, this trend has persisted.
- Men had higher rates of both upward and downward social mobility, whilst women were more likely to stay in the same social strata.
- Immobility was more likely among older people, while younger people experienced higher rates of social mobility.
- Movers (within the UK) had higher levels of both upward and downward social mobility, whilst non-movers had higher levels of immobility.
- As unemployment rises, social mobility declines.

Introduction

The chance of moving up or down the social ladder has long been a central issue of social and political concern. By understanding who is achieving upward social mobility and who isn't we can better shape policies to reach those who might be 'left behind'. This new research adds to the contemporary debate by using a unique dataset to look at patterns before and after the 2008 recession.

The Study

In this study we define social mobility as the transition from one level on the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NSSEC) scale to another. Upward social mobility denotes movement up the NSSEC strata while downward social mobility is the reverse.

We combined data from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) and UK Household Longitudinal Survey (UKHLS).

To account for the fact that the sample sizes of the separate household surveys are different and to deal with drop-out between survey waves, we used complex paired panel survey weights in the modelling (logistic regression). Our analysis based on 85,393 individuals aged 16 and over between 1991 and 2015, controlled for age and other personal characteristics.

Main findings

During the study time period people were more likely to experience upward social mobility in comparison to downward social mobility. However, on the whole, it was much more likely for people to not experience any change in their social status at all (immobility rates varied from about 7 in 10 in the late 90s to early 00s up to 9 in 10 after 2007). Overall our results indicate that age, gender and spatial mobility have a measurable effect on the likelihood of upward social mobility of a given individual in the UK between the years 1991 to 2015.

Does age affect social mobility?

Our findings show that overall, the 16-30 age group experienced comparatively higher levels of social mobility (both upward and downward) throughout the period (Figure 1).

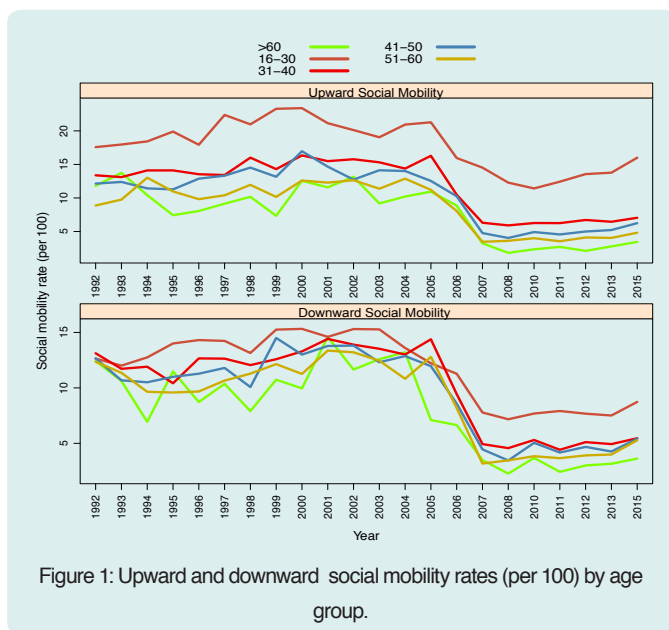


Figure 1: Upward and downward social mobility rates (per 100) by age group.

Interestingly, after about 2005 the level of downward social mobility for this group diverges from the other age groups increasing the distance between them.

Strikingly, we see a decline in social mobility rates across all age groups (and a corresponding increase in immobility rates) from 2005 onwards. Alongside this we found that there is an inverse relationship between unemployment and upward social mobility rates; as unemployment increases, upward social mobility declines (figure 2).

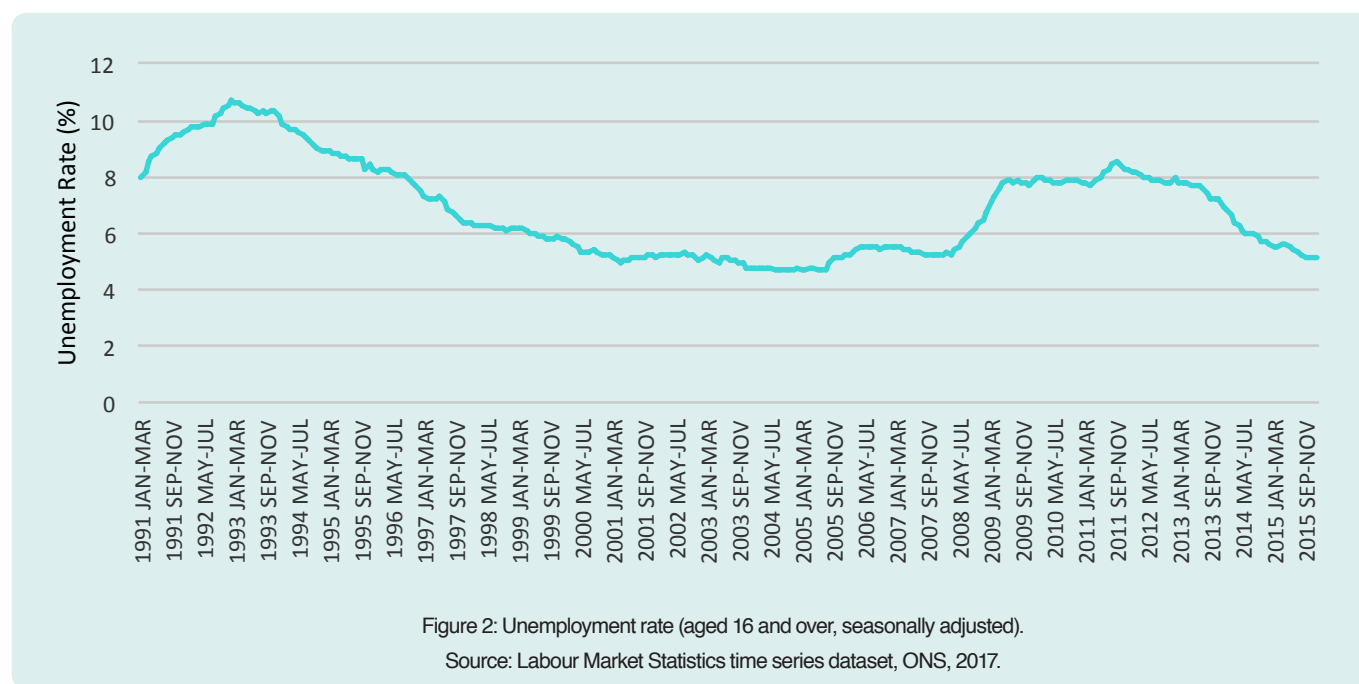


Figure 2: Unemployment rate (aged 16 and over, seasonally adjusted).
Source: Labour Market Statistics time series dataset, ONS, 2017.

Is there a gender effect?

Women were found to be slightly less likely to move up or down the social ladder than men. In parallel with this we see that women experience higher levels of social immobility than their male counterparts (Figure 3)

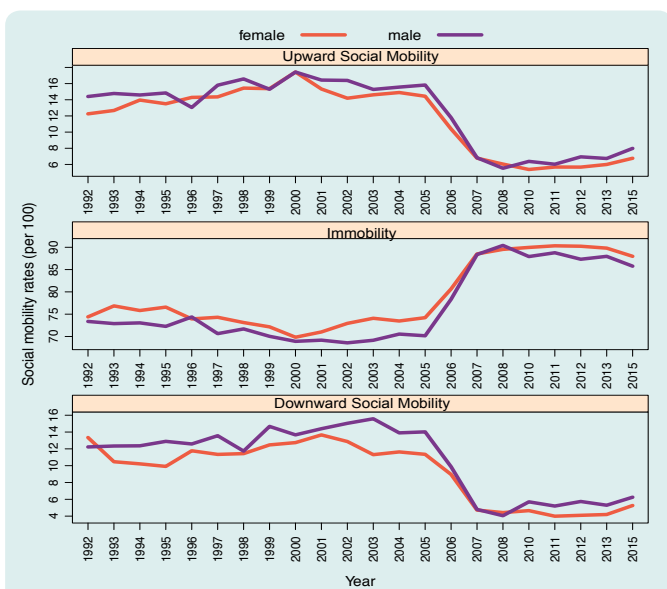


Figure 3: Upward and downward social mobility and immobility rates (per 100) for men and women in the UK.

Moving address and social mobility

Our research finds that movers experience higher levels of both upward and downward social mobility compared with non-movers. Those who making long distance residential moves tended to have a higher chance of moving up the social ladder than those making shorter distance moves (Figure 4). Again we see that social mobility has declined in recent years, particularly after 2005.

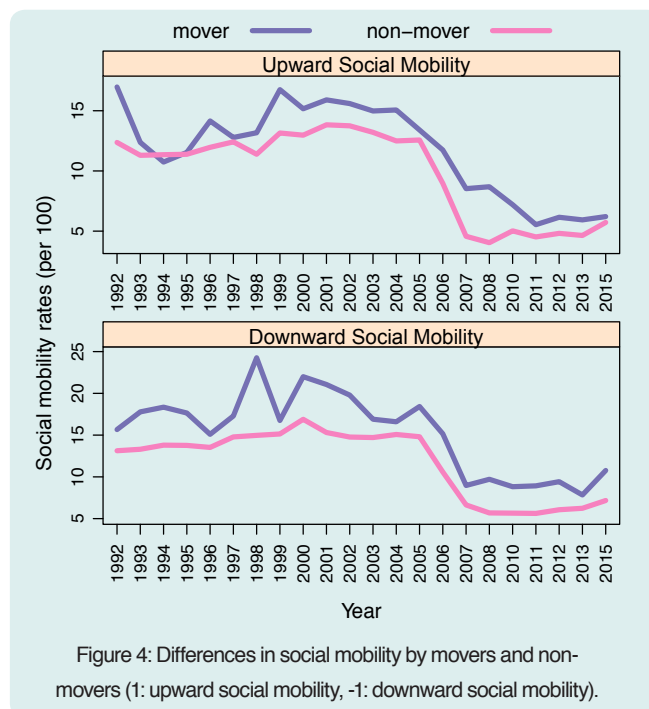


Figure 4: Differences in social mobility by movers and non-movers (1: upward social mobility, -1: downward social mobility).

Policy implications

Since the financial crisis in 2008, much emphasis has been placed on enabling upward social mobility. Interestingly, our results show that, on average, social mobility declined from 2005 (three years before the 2008 recession year). This ties in with national unemployment rates that began to rise from autumn 2005. By 2015, social mobility levels had begun to rebound, but not reaching levels as high as those before 2005.

Inequality in social mobility appears to exist according to age and gender. It is questionable as to the reasons behind these trends, particularly as individuals who are older may have achieved their social mobility goals – or more worryingly, may have abandoned them.

The association between residential mobility and social mobility is complex, our continued research will measure the impact of residential migration on social mobility in the period encompassing the 2008 recession.

Post print: The authors have decided to withdraw this research submission due to the fact that the results presented are highly subject to changes in the wording of interview questions asked to respondents between waves (see the ISER working paper at: <https://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/research/publications/working-papers/iser/2007-07>). In particular, between the years 2005 and 2006, where our graphs show a dramatic decrease in occupational mobility, we acknowledge that this may be largely due to the change in the interviewing strategy between those years - with the effect that occupational change before 2006 is overstated.

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