What Do People Mean by Social Mobility?

Dimensions, Indicators, and the Great Gatsby Curve

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October 2026

Rankings of social mobility depend critically on the dimension and indicator used. Societies that rank highly on one measure may rank poorly on another, yet existing research offers limited guidance for selecting among competing measures. We provide the first systematic evidence on preferences over four dimensions of social mobility (education, occupation, income, and wealth) and three indicators of income mobility: the rank–rank slope (RRS), absolute mobility (AM), and upward mobility from the bottom (CER25). Using a conjoint experiment and a within-subject rating design, we examine how a broadly representative US sample (N = 1,002) and experts (N = 99) rate different dimensions and indicators of social mobility. We embed these preference-based approaches in a social-welfare framework to shed light on the underlying assumptions of the different indicators of social mobility. We report five sets of findings. First, each indicator is an exact welfare-sufficient statistic for a distinct social objective, and no indicator satisfies all normatively appealing axioms. Second, income is the dimension the public values most, in a ranking that is stable across demographic subgroups. Third, the RRS, the indicator most prominent in the academic literature, receives the least public support. AM and CER25 receive greater support, with roughly 70% of the gap associated with lower perceived fairness. Fourth, experts share the public's ranking of dimensions but support CER25 more and AM less. Finally, incorporating these preferences into a social mobility composite measure substantially attenuates the Great Gatsby curve and shifts US state rankings by up to 32 positions. These findings provide an empirical basis for selecting social mobility measures and designing evidence-based policy targets aligned with public preferences.

Keywords: Social mobility, intergenerational persistence, public preferences, Great Gatsby curve, social welfare

JEL Codes: D63, J62, C83

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We thank Alessandra Basso, Ulrich Berger, Nathan Deutscher, Franziska Disslbacher, Mark Fabian, Gerlinde Fellner-Röhling, Simone Häckl, Astrid Pennerstorfer, Anna Schwarz, Jan Stuhler and Nina Xue for valuable comments and suggestions. We are also grateful to participants at the Venice Summer School on Inequality and Vulnerability, the Inequality and Opportunities Conference in Bari, the INEM Summer School 2026, and the Atkinson Conference on Economic and Social Inequality at Nuffield College, Oxford. We gratefully acknowledge financial support from the WU Junior Faculty Small Scale Projects Fund. We thank Boris Schmidjell and Moritz Sint for excellent research assistance. All errors are our own.

1 Introduction

Which societies are socially mobile? The answer depends, to a striking degree, on how social mobility is measured. Countries diverge across dimensions and indicators. The Nordic countries consistently rank among the societies with the highest levels of income mobility (Blanden, 2013; Bratberg et al., 2017), yet the evidence for a comparable advantage in educational or occupational mobility is much weaker (Breen et al., 2016; K. Karlson, 2021; K. B. Karlson & Landersø, 2025; Landersø & Heckman, 2017; Pfeffer, 2008). The divergence across dimensions has been described as a "mobility paradox" (Breen et al., 2016; K. Karlson, 2021). Similarly, Switzerland and Austria exhibit high income mobility but middling educational mobility (Chuard & Grassi, 2020; Disslbacher et al., 2026). The same divergence holds true for indicators. Across Australian regions, pairwise correlations between three standard indicators of income mobility – the rank-rank slope (RRS), absolute mobility (AM), and the conditional expected rank at the 25th percentile (CER25) – range from just 0.10 to 0.28 (Deutscher & Mazumder, 2023). A region that ranks among the most mobile on one indicator can rank among the least mobile on another.

These differences demonstrate the importance of how social mobility is measured. When governments seek to increase social mobility, the policies they pursue depend in part on which dimension and indicator they prioritize. In principle, each of these dimensions and indicators captures a distinct aspect of intergenerational transmission and is therefore relevant to understanding social mobility (Corak, 2020b). In practice, however, policy design frequently requires prioritization - allocating scarce resources toward improving social mobility along one dimension rather than another, or selecting a single headline indicator to set targets and evaluate progress. Mobility rankings can, for example, be used to identify places for policy intervention, as in experiments in which families living in low-ranked neighborhoods are offered housing vouchers to move to higher-ranked areas (Bergman et al., 2024). More generally, rankings provide a way to compare societies systematically and to identify where intergenerational persistence is relatively strong or weak. (Blanden, 2013).

Despite the stakes of this choice, there is almost no empirical evidence on which dimensions or indicators the public considers most important. Connolly et al. (2019) report that Americans and Canadians endorse both "being able to succeed regardless of family background" and "your children being better off financially than you," but their evidence is confined to two indicator conceptions and offers no insight into how the public weighs different dimensions against one another. Our paper provides the first systematic evidence on public preferences over both the dimensions of social mobility (education, occupation, income, and wealth) and the indicators used to measure it, focusing on three prominent income mobility measures:

the rank-rank slope (RRS), absolute mobility (AM), and the conditional expected rank at the 25th percentile (CER25).

Understanding these preferences matters for two reasons. First, as argued by Corak (2020a), to fully understand social mobility researchers must remain agnostic about the "right" statistic and use indicators that are appropriate to the measurement challenges at hand and sensitive to the concerns citizens actually hold. If empirical estimates of social mobility are to inform evidence-based policymaking, then policymakers must ultimately commit to a particular dimension and indicator. It is therefore essential to identify which dimension and indicator of social mobility the public most closely identifies with, so that policy efforts target the relevant conception of social mobility.

Second, a large and growing literature analyses whether perceived social mobility increases support for redistribution (Alesina et al., 2018; Günther & Martorano, 2025; Heiserman et al., 2020), strengthens trust in institutions (Day & Fiske, 2017), and reduces support for far-right populism (Jacobs & Kayser, 2025). This literature typically adopts a single social mobility operationalization without asking whether it corresponds to the concept that shapes public perceptions. But if the selected dimension and indicator do not align with what people think social mobility is, then the research does not capture perceived social mobility as such – it captures perceptions of a particular conception of social mobility that the public may not consider to be social mobility at all. The same concern applies to the Great Gatsby curve, which relies almost exclusively on a single indicator.[1] Different indicators or a preference-weighted composite index might alter the cross-sectional relationship between inequality and social mobility.

To provide this evidence, we combine a welfare-theoretic framework with a preregistered survey experiment on a broadly representative US sample ($N = 1{,}002$) and an expert sample of researchers with at least one empirical publication on social mobility ($N = 99$). Our conjoint experiment identifies preferences over education, occupation, income, and wealth as dimensions of mobility and the within-subject rating measures support for three of the most widely employed social mobility indicators. Open-ended questions provide additional evidence on how respondents understand and justify their choices, while experts are asked to predict public responses. Finally, we construct a preference-weighted social mobility measure and revisit two prominent applications. We report five sets of findings.

First, each indicator is a welfare-sufficient statistic for a distinct social objective, making the choice of indicator a normative rather than technical decision. Embedding the three

[1] The Great Gatsby curve refers to the positive cross-sectional relationship between income inequality and intergenerational income persistence (Corak, 2013).

indicators into a social welfare framework, we show that the RRS corresponds to origin independence, AM to generational progress, and CER25 to a prioritarian criterion that places greater weight on children from disadvantaged origins. The three indicators can therefore disagree sharply. When a child from a disadvantaged family rises and a child from an advantaged family falls by the same number of rank positions, the RRS attributes half of the welfare increase to the descent, AM treats the two movements as equal and opposite, and CER25 counts only the rise. Further, we show how the indicators vary in satisfying normatively plausible axioms.

Second, income is the mobility dimension the US public values most. In the conjoint experiment, switching a country's income mobility from low to high increases its probability of being preferred by 31.1 pp. This is substantially larger than the effects of wealth (23.1 pp), education (20.2 pp), and occupation (14.3 pp), which implies the ranking income > wealth > education > occupation, with all six pairwise differences being statistically significant. This ordering is robust to using logistic regressions and holds across most demographic subgroups.

Third, the indicator most widely used in the academic literature, the rank-rank slope (RRS), resonates least with the public. AM and CER25 each receive mean support ratings around 81 on a 0–100 scale, while the RRS receives only 64. Decomposing the gap, roughly 70% is associated with perceived fairness.

Fourth, experts largely share the public's low support for the RRS, suggesting that this divergence is not driven by unfamiliarity with the indicators. Experts rate the RRS (71.4) and AM (72.4) similarly, both below the CER25 (85.4). This is surprising given the RRS's prominence in the literature. The penalty is concentrated among economists, who rate the RRS 16.0 points lower than sociologists ($p = 0.003$). Experts correctly anticipate that the public would rank AM substantially above the RRS, but they do not anticipate the near-equal levels of public support for AM and CER25. On dimensions, the experts exhibit the same ranking as the public, with comparable effect magnitudes.

Finally, applying the estimated public preference weights to construct a preference-weighted social mobility composite measure substantially attenuates the Great Gatsby curve. Under the RRS, intergenerational persistence is positively associated with the state-level Gini coefficient (slope = 12.243; $p = 0.044$). By contrast, the preference-weighted composite yields a slope of 1.345, which is statistically distinguishable from the conventional relationship (difference = -10.899; $p = 0.001$) and close to a flat line. This attenuation arises because the income-based indicators differ in the sign of their association with state-level inequality. Intergenerational persistence measured by the RRS and CER25 rises with inequality, whereas

persistence measured by AM falls with inequality (slope $= -17.319$). In more unequal states, a larger share of children out-earn their parents.[2] State rankings also shift substantially between the rankings based on the different indicators and the preference-weighted ranking. The largest change is 32 positions, and 32 states experience rank changes whose bootstrap confidence intervals exclude zero.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the dimensions and indicators of social mobility and motivates the need for public preference elicitation. Section 3 develops a social-welfare foundation for the three mobility indicators. Section 4 describes the survey design. Section 5 presents the results, covering the sample description, dimension preferences, indicator preferences, the qualitative evidence, and the expert sample. Section 6 applies the estimated preference weights to the Great Gatsby curve and examines how these weights affect state rankings. Section 7 concludes.

2 Reviewing the Measurement of Social Mobility

This section reviews the existing literature on measuring social mobility. We organize the discussion around four widely studied dimensions of social mobility and three prominent indicators, before motivating our contribution.

2.1 Dimensions of Social Mobility

Social mobility can be measured along several distinct dimensions. The empirical literature has largely focused on four: education, occupation, income, and wealth (Hällsten & Thaning, 2022). Educational mobility captures the link between parents' and children's educational attainments, serving both as an outcome in its own right and as a key mechanism connecting parental status to children's labor market position (Breen, 2010; Strömberg & Engzell, 2025). Occupational mobility reflects aspects that income misses, such as job autonomy, employment security, and social standing (Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992; Torche, 2014). Income mobility measures the intergenerational transmission of earnings or household income and occupies a central place in the economics literature as a continuous summary statistic for the overall transmission of advantage (Chetty, Hendren, Kline, Saez, & Turner, 2014; Nybom & Stuhler, 2024). Wealth mobility concerns the persistence of wealth across generations, encompassing accumulated assets and direct intergenerational transfers that operate through channels partially distinct from those governing income (Adermon et al., 2018; Pfeffer &

[2]Each indicator is standardized via z-scores so that all three enter on a common scale, with signs oriented such that higher values indicate lower social mobility.

Killewald, 2018).

The choice of dimension in any given study is typically driven by disciplinary convention and data availability.[3] Each discipline gravitates toward the outcomes its analytical framework is best equipped to measure. Sociologists have concentrated on education and occupation (Andrade & Thomsen, 2018; Van De Werfhorst, 2024), economists have focused on income (Chetty, Hendren, Kline, Saez, & Turner, 2014; Deutscher & Mazumder, 2023), and the more recent literature on wealth mobility has emerged from both disciplines (Gregg & Kanabar, 2023; Pfeffer & Killewald, 2018). Yet this specialization comes at a cost. The choice of dimension is not merely a measurement decision, but implicitly determines which aspects of social mobility are considered relevant.

This consequence would be less important if social mobility rankings were robust across dimensions. However, a growing body of evidence reveals systematic discrepancies between dimension-specific assessments of the same society. The most extensively documented case concerns the Scandinavian countries. Although Denmark, Norway, and Sweden consistently rank among the most mobile societies in studies of income mobility (Blanden, 2013; Bratberg et al., 2017), the evidence for a comparable advantage in educational or occupational mobility is considerably weaker (Breen et al., 2016; K. Karlson, 2021; K. B. Karlson & Landersø, 2025; Landersø & Heckman, 2017). Breen et al. (2016) and K. Karlson (2021) have termed this pattern a "mobility paradox". The same institutional configuration that leads to high income mobility appears to coexist with middling educational and occupational mobility. Analogous discrepancies have been documented in Switzerland and Austria, where high income mobility coincides with low educational mobility (Chuard & Grassi, 2020; Disslbacher et al., 2026). Recent work on the occupational channel underscores a further subtlety. Haeck and Laliberté (2025) document substantial occupational segregation by parental income, showing that children of high-income parents are disproportionately more likely to enter high-paying occupations. Yet occupational mobility accounts for only about ten percent of the intergenerational income relationship, suggesting that the intergenerational transmission of income and occupation is governed by largely distinct mechanisms. This tension between occupational and earnings mobility has been observed already more than two decades ago. Björklund and Jäntti (2000, p. 25) posed the question directly: "Is it possible that a country with higher occupational mobility has lower earnings mobility? We believe it is." Recent work also highlights the distinction between occupational and wealth mobility. Bell et al. (2023) find a negative correlation between occupational and homeownership mobility, suggesting

[3] A small but growing literature compares social mobility across dimensions within the same institutional context (see Chuard and Grassi (2020), Disslbacher et al. (2026), and Landersø and Heckman (2017) for recent examples).

that areas that perform well on occupation-based measures may perform poorly on wealth mobility.[4]

Consequently, a society that appears highly mobile along one dimension may appear far less so along another, even when the indicator and estimation strategy are held fixed. For researchers conducting comparisons, this sensitivity poses a serious methodological challenge. For policymakers, the problem runs even deeper. A government that pledges to "increase social mobility" without specifying the dimension risks pursuing interventions that improve social mobility in one dimension while neglecting or even diminishing it in others. Plausible arguments exist for prioritizing each dimension. Income mobility is central to material living standards. Educational mobility shapes opportunities and civic engagement beyond earnings. Occupational mobility captures non-pecuniary attributes such as autonomy and security, while wealth mobility reflects insurance against shocks and the capacity for intergenerational transfers outside the labor market. As Bell et al. (2023, p. 103) note, "Unless one is willing to make value judgements on the relative importance of various dimensions of mobility, it will generally be difficult to rank areas in terms of overall mobility." Yet no empirical basis exists for ranking these dimensions. So far research has implicitly outsourced the choice to disciplinary convention and data availability.

2.2 Indicators of Income Mobility

The multiplicity problem does not end with the choice of dimension. Even after a dimension is selected, the researcher faces a second, equally consequential choice. Which indicator to use within that dimension? Just as social mobility rankings are not robust across dimensions, they are not robust across indicators within a single dimension.[5] We examine this indicator-level divergence in detail, focusing on income, the best-documented case.

Income-based measures have long dominated the economics literature on social mobility (Mazumder, 2018; Nybom & Stuhler, 2017; Solon, 1999), and this sustained research effort has produced a rich array of indicators, all derived from the joint density of parental and child income.[6] Following the taxonomy of Deutscher and Mazumder (2023), these indicators

[4]Homeownership is often viewed as a proxy for household wealth, given the importance of housing in household asset holdings.

[5]Engzell and Mood (2023) and Strömberg and Engzell (2025) show that even within a single dimension and indicator, analytical choices such as sample restrictions and the assumed functional form can substantially alter estimated social mobility levels. Our framework abstracts from this within-dimension, within-indicator ambiguity by assuming that, once a dimension and indicator are selected, a common methodology is applied across all societies under comparison. In practice, such specification sensitivity can be addressed through multiverse analysis (Engzell & Mood, 2023).

[6]An additional class of measures incorporates information beyond the bivariate parent-child income dis-

can be organized into three broad categories. *Global relative measures*, such as the intergenerational elasticity (IGE) and the rank-rank slope (RRS), summarize the overall strength of the parent-child association across the entire income distribution. *Global absolute* and *movement measures*, such as absolute mobility (AM) or aggregate income movement (Aggr), capture absolute income gains across generations. *Local measures*, such as conditional expected ranks (CER) at specific percentiles or transition probabilities, characterize how child outcomes vary at particular points across the joint income density.[7] Indicators within each category are conceptually closely related and tend to yield similar social mobility assessments. However, Deutscher and Mazumder (2023) demonstrate that indicators drawn from different categories can produce markedly divergent rankings of the same societies. For our analysis, we select one representative indicator from each category – the rank–rank slope (RRS), absolute mobility (AM), and the conditional expected rank at the 25th percentile (CER25) – ensuring that our design spans the conceptual space of different mobility indicators rather than concentrating on a single category of related measures.

In the following, we describe each indicator in turn and conclude with an empirical comparison. We denote y_i^c as the permanent lifetime income of child i and y_i^p as the permanent lifetime income of child i's parents.

RRS. The rank-rank slope (RRS) measures the persistence of economic status across generations by relating children's and parents' positions in the income distribution (Bell et al., 2023). It is estimated as the slope coefficient γ in

$$\text{rank}(y_i^c) = \delta + \gamma \, \text{rank}(y_i^p) + \eta_i \tag{1}$$

where $\text{rank}(y_i^c)$ and $\text{rank}(y_i^p)$ denote the percentile ranks of child i and their parent, respectively. A value of $\gamma = 0$ indicates complete independence from parental origins, children's positions in the income distribution are statistically unrelated to those of their parents. Conversely, $\gamma = 1$ indicates complete rank persistence. The RRS therefore conceptualizes social mobility as the extent to which parents' economic positions predict their children's relative positions in the income distribution.

AM. Absolute mobility (AM) measures the fraction of children who earn more than their

tribution, including sibling correlations, neighborhood correlations, and indices of inequality of opportunity (Deutscher & Mazumder, 2023). We restrict attention to joint-density-based indicators, which constitute the large majority of the applied literature on income mobility.

[7] Absolute and relative measures are sometimes also referred to as structural and exchange mobility (Amiel et al., 2015).

parents in real terms (Chetty et al., 2017):

$$AM = \Pr(y_i^c > y_i^p)\,. \tag{2}$$

When AM is high, most children surpass the income of the previous generation. Unlike the RRS, AM is not a measure of the parent-child association but of generational progress: it captures whether each cohort achieves higher incomes than the last.

CER25. The conditional expected rank at the 25th percentile (CER25) measures the expected income rank of children whose parents are at the 25th percentile of the parental income distribution (Chetty, Hendren, Kline, Saez, & Turner, 2014):

$$\text{CER25} = \mathrm{E}[\text{rank}(y_i^c) \mid \text{rank}(y_i^p) = 25]\,. \tag{3}$$

The CER25 can be estimated non-parametrically by directly calculating the conditional mean of children's income rank at the 25th percentile of parental income rank, without imposing a linear relationship between parental and children's ranks. This allows the relationship between parental and children's ranks to vary along the income distribution. The CER25 is often interpreted as a measure of upward mobility among children from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds (Deutscher & Mazumder, 2023). Unlike the RRS, the CER25 focuses on a specific point in the distribution. Unlike AM, which captures whether children surpass their parents in real income terms, CER25 measures the relative position attained by children from disadvantaged origins within their own generation.

Empirical Comparison. Deutscher and Mazumder (2023) compare a range of income mobility indicators across subnational regions in five countries and document striking divergences among the three indicators. In Australia, the pairwise correlations between the RRS, CER25, and AM are low, ranging from 0.10 to 0.28, indicating limited overlap between these measures. A region that appears highly mobile under one indicator can thus rank among the least mobile under another. The modest association between the RRS and CER25 is not primarily an Australian peculiarity. Deutscher and Mazumder (2023) report correlations of 0.59 in Denmark and 0.66 in Italy.[8] Although the correlation between the RRS and CER25 is higher in Denmark and Italy, it remains moderate in both countries. Thus, even where the indicators are more closely aligned, they do not yield identical rankings. These divergences are not merely statistical artifacts. Instead, they reflect the fact that the three indicators

[8]The correlations between the IGE and CER25 and AM are even lower across countries, further underscoring the limited overlap between measures from different categories of social mobility indicators (Deutscher & Mazumder, 2023).

capture different features of the joint distribution of parental and child income. The practical consequence is that social mobility rankings are not robust even within a single dimension. For example, a government seeking to promote income mobility may need to pursue different policies depending on which indicator it targets. Combined with the cross-dimensional discrepancies documented above, this implies that both the choice of dimension and the choice of indicator can generate divergent social mobility assessments of the very same society.

2.3 The Missing Input: Public Preferences

The preceding sections established that measuring social mobility requires consequential choices across dimensions and indicators. Measured mobility can change substantially when the dimension and/or indicator changes. This measurement dependence matters because it carries through to how social mobility statistics are subsequently used. It affects cross-country and cross-regional comparisons, the evaluation of policy interventions, the design of information treatments in experimental research, and the selection of headline indicators for evidence-based policy. The measurement of social mobility is therefore not merely a technical exercise. The choice of dimension and indicator can shape the conclusions drawn about which societies are more or less mobile and, consequently, which policies appear most relevant for promoting social mobility.

One response to this multiplicity is transparency. For example, depicting different operationalizations of social mobility in a dashboard to provide a comprehensive picture across alternative measures (Thoma, 2024). But this alone does not resolve the problem when a single measure must be chosen – as when an information experiment presents respondents with a description of social mobility in a society (e.g., Alesina et al., 2018; Fehr et al., 2024), or when a government adopts a headline target against which policy will be evaluated. In such settings, the researcher or policymaker must commit to one measure, and the choice shapes both the conclusions drawn and the policies pursued.

This problem is not unique to social mobility. In the analogous context of measuring economic inequality, Sen (1983) already argues that descriptive measures of inequality can entail different rankings of the same distributions. Consequently, choosing among indicators necessarily involves normative judgments. Even ostensibly purely descriptive measures embed normative assumptions. For instance, the Theil index, an entropy-based measure of income dispersion, is strictly equivalent to a utilitarian social welfare function (Sen & Foster, 1997). In practice, however, the measurement problem is less acute for economic inequality than for social mobility. Standard inequality indicators like the Gini coefficient, Theil index, and percentile ratios tend to be highly correlated across countries and over time, so that the choice

among them rarely alters substantive conclusions (Leigh, 2007). The same cannot be said for social mobility, where, as documented above, indicators drawn from different categories can produce markedly divergent rankings of the same societies (Deutscher & Mazumder, 2023). The stakes of the measurement choice are therefore considerably higher.

How then should these choices be made? Corak (2020a) argues that researchers should remain agnostic about the right social mobility statistic and instead select indicators that are sensitive to the concerns citizens actually hold. In this view, the choice of measure should be guided not only by the statistical properties and data requirements that have dominated the methodological debate, but also by the types of inequalities that motivate public policy. A parallel argument has emerged in philosophy of science. Schroeder (2021) proposes that when a measure embeds normative judgments, those judgments ought to be grounded in democratic preferences rather than disciplinary convention. Alexandrova and Fabian (2022) also argue that measures used to evaluate social outcomes and allocate public resources derive legitimacy from alignment with the values of the citizens they affect. If the public conceives of social mobility primarily as opportunity for the disadvantaged rather than as the statistical independence of children's incomes from parental incomes, then policy targets framed around the RRS may fail to command public support. This is not because the policy is ineffective, but because it optimizes a concept that does not correspond to what citizens mean when they demand greater social mobility.[9]

The impact on research is equally direct. A growing experimental literature studies how information about social mobility shapes preferences for redistribution (see e.g., Alesina et al., 2018; Fehr et al., 2024). These experiments necessarily operationalize social mobility through a single measure when constructing their information treatments. If the measure does not capture what respondents understand by social mobility, the treatment may be less informative or may capture something other than what the researchers intend. This mismatch could attenuate estimated treatment effects and potentially bias conclusions about the relationship between social mobility and attitudes towards redistribution.[10] Despite these stakes, very little empirical evidence exists on which dimension or indicator of social mobility best aligns with the public. This paper provides the first such evidence, using multiple elicitation methods that go beyond the binary endorsement questions in Connolly et al. (2019).

[9] Our work therefore relates to Amiel and Cowell (1999), who examine whether the economist's conception of inequality aligns with how the public thinks about inequality, and to Benjamin et al. (2014), who construct a well-being index based on stated public preferences over the components of well-being.

[10] Relatedly, Siniakova et al. (2026) show that the choice of inequality indicators shapes how people perceive and normatively evaluate income distributions, as well as their redistributive preferences.

On their own, support ratings for different social mobility indicators provide descriptive evidence about which measures people say they prefer. They become substantively meaningful only when each indicator is connected to the social objective it implicitly represents. The measurement of inequality took precisely this step by recognizing that every indicator embodies a social welfare function (Sen & Foster, 1997). The next section takes this step for social mobility by placing the three indicators within a common class of social welfare functions. We show that each indicator is the welfare-sufficient statistic for a distinct social objective, making explicit the normative assumptions embedded in each indicator.

3 A Social-Welfare Foundation for Mobility Measurement

The previous section established that measuring social mobility requires normative choices. Consequently, how an increase in measured mobility affects social welfare depends on the concept of social mobility being used. These choices are not innocuous: because the three indicators can rank the same societies very differently, the normative assumptions embedded in each determine which societies appear mobile and which policies appear successful. This section makes these assumptions explicit by developing a welfare-theoretic foundation for the three indicators studied in this paper. Rather than deriving the appropriate social mobility measure from first principles or from an axiomatic approach, we begin with the indicators that dominate the empirical literature and ask what social welfare criterion each implicitly represents. We show that each indicator is an exact welfare-sufficient statistic for a distinct social welfare function: the RRS for origin independence, AM for generational progress, and CER25 for priority to disadvantaged origins. Placing all three within a common welfare class serves a second purpose. It allows us to interpret public support for an indicator as support for the corresponding social objective, and ensures that a preference-weighted combination of the indicators is itself a well-defined social welfare function.

The literature on welfare foundations for social mobility measurement is relatively small. Early contributions include Atkinson and Bourguignon (1982), Markandya (1984), and Gottschalk and Spolaore (2002), who analyze social mobility within explicit social welfare frameworks. More recent work has adopted an axiomatic approach. D'Agostino and Dardanoni (2009) characterize concordance as a measure of rank mobility in a discrete transition-matrix framework and obtain a cardinal measure by normalizing against maximal mobility. Ray and Genicot (2023) show that panel-independent mobility measures can be constructed when social welfare depends solely on the progressivity of income growth. Cowell and Flachaire (2018) propose a general framework that separates the valuation of social positions from movement

between them, representing mobility through axiomatic distance measures between positions.

We first characterize each indicator as the welfare-sufficient statistic of a distinct social welfare function. We then extend the framework to multidimensional social mobility and illustrate the differences between the indicators through the example of downward mobility. Finally, we complement the welfare analysis with an axiomatic comparison of the measures, highlighting the distinct normative properties they satisfy. All formal proofs can be found in Appendix D.

3.1 Setup

We describe a society by the joint distribution F of parental and child permanent income, (y^p, y^c), with continuous marginal distributions F_p and F_c. Let $\mathcal{F}$ denote the class of all such societies.

For each society, we define the *copula ranks*

$$u = F_p(y^p), \qquad v = F_c(y^c).$$

These ranks are uniformly distributed within each society and capture individuals' relative positions in the parental and child income distributions. By construction, they isolate positional mobility from changes in income levels or marginal distributions.

We evaluate societies using the rank-dependent class of social welfare functions

$$W_\Phi(F) = \int \Phi(y^p, y^c, u, v)\, dF(y^p, y^c), \tag{4}$$

where the kernel Φ assigns a social value to each parent–child pair as a function of their income levels and relative positions in the income distributions. Social welfare functions are defined only up to increasing affine transformations. Accordingly, we say that a statistic T is welfare-sufficient for a class of kernels if every welfare function in the class is an increasing affine transformation of T, so that the statistic and the corresponding welfare class induce identical rankings of societies.

3.2 Social Mobility Indicators as Social Welfare Functions

The three indicators correspond to three distinct normative conceptions of social mobility. The RRS embodies a concern for origin independence: social welfare increases when

children's outcomes become less determined by their parents' position in the income distribution. AM embodies a concern for generational progress: social welfare depends only on whether children attain outcomes above those of their parents. CER25 adopts a prioritarian perspective, assigning greater social weight to improvements experienced by children from disadvantaged origins.

Origin independence (RRS). The RRS evaluates societies according to the extent to which parental background predicts children's outcomes. A welfare criterion with this objective values weaker intergenerational dependence, regardless of whether mobility occurs through upward or downward movements. The following proposition shows that the RRS is the welfare statistic associated with this objective.

Consider kernels that are additively separable up to a bilinear interaction in copula ranks:

$$\Phi(u, v) = f(u) + g(v) + d\,uv, \qquad d < 0, \tag{5}$$

where f and g are integrable. The restriction $d < 0$ implies that welfare decreases as the association between high parental ranks and high child ranks becomes stronger. The canonical normalization is $\Phi_{\text{RRS}}(u, v) = -12(u - \frac{1}{2})(v - \frac{1}{2})$.

Proposition 1. *Let (u, v) denote within-society copula ranks and let $\gamma(F)$ denote the rank–rank slope, defined as the coefficient from the linear projection of v on u. For every kernel of the form (5), welfare can be written as*

$$W_\Phi(F) = \kappa_0 + \frac{d}{12}\gamma(F),$$

where κ_0 is constant across societies. Hence $-\gamma(F)$ is welfare-sufficient for the class and $W_{\Phi_{\text{RRS}}}(F) = -\gamma(F)$ exactly under the canonical normalization.

Thus, the RRS embodies an origin-independence criterion. Any reduction in the statistical association between parents' and children's outcomes is welfare-enhancing, regardless of the direction of mobility. This symmetry arises because the criterion values a weakening of intergenerational dependence rather than the direction of individual movements. The underlying normative premise of the RRS is therefore that social mobility is desirable insofar as children's economic outcomes become less dependent on their parents' position.

Generational progress (AM). The second welfare criterion evaluates mobility relative to the previous generation. Mobility is valuable whenever children exceed their parents'

income, regardless of their position in the income distribution.

Proposition 2. *Suppose the kernel depends on (y^p, y^c) only through $\operatorname{sign}(y^c - y^p)$, is monotone in y^c, and non-constant. For societies where $y^c - y^p$ is atomless at zero,*

$$W_\Phi(F) = a + b\,\mathrm{AM}(F), \qquad b > 0,$$

where $\mathrm{AM}(F) = \Pr_F(y^c > y^p)$. Hence, the absolute mobility rate is welfare-sufficient for this class, and with $\Phi_{\mathrm{AM}}(y^p, y^c) = \mathbf{1}\{y^c > y^p\}$, $W_{\Phi_{\mathrm{AM}}}(F) = \mathrm{AM}(F)$ exactly.

AM therefore corresponds to a welfare criterion centered on generational progress rather than positional mobility. Because it is defined in terms of income levels rather than ranks, it is sensitive to changes in the marginal income distributions across generations. Its underlying normative premise is that a mobile society is one in which successive generations experience improvements in income, regardless of how those gains are distributed across families.

Priority to disadvantaged origins (CER25). The third welfare criterion assigns greater social weight to improvements among children from disadvantaged origins. Unlike the origin-independence criterion, which values reductions in intergenerational dependence symmetrically, this criterion explicitly weights outcomes according to parental background.

Consider the class of prioritarian kernels

$$\Phi_\omega(u, v) = \omega(u)v,$$

where $\omega(u)$ is a non-negative welfare weight assigned to parental origins. Let $m(u) = \mathbb{E}[v|u]$ denote the expected child rank conditional on parental rank.

Proposition 3. *For kernels $\Phi_\omega(u, v) = \omega(u)v$ with normalized weights $\int_0^1 \omega(u)\,du = 1$,*

$$W_\omega(F) = \int_0^1 \omega(u)m(u)\,du.$$

If $m(u) = \delta + \gamma u$, every prioritarian welfare function in this class is ordinally equivalent to a CER evaluated at the weighted average origin

$$\bar{q} = \int_0^1 u\omega(u)\,du.$$

Moreover, if ω is prioritarian (nonincreasing), then $\bar{q} \leq \frac{1}{2}$, so any bottom-weighted prioritarian welfare function corresponds to a CER at or below the median. Hence CER25

corresponds to the prioritarian welfare function whose weights are concentrated at the first quartile of parental income ($\bar{q} = 0.25$).

CER25 therefore has a direct welfare interpretation as a prioritarian criterion. It evaluates mobility by placing greater importance on improvements among children from disadvantaged origins. The normative premise underlying CER25 is that mobility matters most for those starting at the bottom – whether a society provides genuine prospects of relative upward movement for the disadvantaged. This conception aligns with prioritarian theories of justice, which hold that improving the position of the worst off carries greater moral weight than equivalent gains elsewhere in the distribution (Parfit, 1997).

3.3 The Public's Social Welfare Function

The previous subsection connected each mobility indicator with a distinct normative criterion. A social welfare function that places weight on multiple criteria therefore combines these underlying welfare functions. This aggregation provides a representation of the social welfare criterion associated with a public that values different indicators of social mobility.

Let S denote the set of societies under comparison. Using cardinalization, each indicator is standardized across S and oriented such that higher values represent higher welfare:

$$\widetilde{W}_{\mathrm{RRS}} = -\tilde{\gamma}, \qquad \widetilde{W}_{\mathrm{AM}} = \widetilde{\mathrm{AM}}, \qquad \widetilde{W}_{\mathrm{CER}} = \widetilde{\mathrm{CER}}_{25}.$$

For weights $\alpha = (\alpha_{\mathrm{RRS}}, \alpha_{\mathrm{AM}}, \alpha_{\mathrm{CER}}) \in \Delta^2$, define the aggregate welfare function

$$W_\alpha(F) = \alpha_{\mathrm{RRS}}\widetilde{W}_{\mathrm{RRS}}(F) + \alpha_{\mathrm{AM}}\widetilde{W}_{\mathrm{AM}}(F) + \alpha_{\mathrm{CER}}\widetilde{W}_{\mathrm{CER}}(F). \tag{6}$$

Proposition 4. *The welfare function W_α belongs to the class in* (4)*, with the kernel given by the corresponding mixture of the canonical kernels in Propositions 1–3. Hence any weighted combination of the three mobility criteria remains a social welfare function within the same class.*

The weights assigned to different indicators represent the relative importance attached to alternative normative conceptions of social mobility. A society that values multiple aspects of mobility can therefore be represented by a social welfare function that combines origin independence, generational progress, and priority to disadvantaged origins.

The framework extends naturally to multidimensional evaluations of socioeconomic status. If welfare depends on multiple dimensions, such as income, education, occupation, and wealth,

a general separable representation is

$$W_{\theta,\alpha} = \sum_d \theta_d W_d,$$

where θ_d captures the importance assigned to each dimension and α captures the relative valuation of the different indicators within each dimension.

3.4 What Separates the Evaluators

An illustrative example of how the three welfare conceptions differ concerns their evaluation of downward mobility among children from advantaged families. This disagreement reflects fundamentally different conceptions of what constitutes a mobile society. Consider the following thought experiment. The marginal income distributions of parents and children are fixed. One child from a disadvantaged family (below the median) moves upward in the income distribution, while, simultaneously, one child from an advantaged family (above the median) moves downward by the same number of rank positions. We then consider how each welfare criterion evaluates these two movements.

Proposition 5. *Under a progressive rank exchange, let $\Delta W^{\uparrow}$ denote the welfare contribution of the disadvantaged child's upward movement and $\Delta W^{\downarrow}$ the contribution of the advantaged child's downward movement.*

(i) **The RRS assigns welfare value to both sides of the exchange.** *The upward movement and the downward movement both increase welfare because both reduce the association between parental origin and child outcomes:*

$$\begin{aligned}
\Delta W^{\uparrow}_{RRS} &= -12(u_\ell - \tfrac{1}{2})(v_h - \tfrac{1}{2}) - [-12(u_\ell - \tfrac{1}{2})(v_\ell - \tfrac{1}{2})] \\
&= 12(u_\ell - \tfrac{1}{2})[(v_\ell - \tfrac{1}{2}) - (v_h - \tfrac{1}{2})] \\
&= 12(u_\ell - \tfrac{1}{2})(v_\ell - v_h) > 0
\end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned}\Delta W^{\downarrow}_{RRS} &= -12(u_h - \tfrac{1}{2})(v_\ell - \tfrac{1}{2}) - [-12(u_h - \tfrac{1}{2})(v_h - \tfrac{1}{2})] \\ &= 12(u_h - \tfrac{1}{2})[(v_h - \tfrac{1}{2}) - (v_\ell - \tfrac{1}{2})] \\ &= 12(u_h - \tfrac{1}{2})(v_h - v_\ell) > 0\end{aligned}$$

The downward-attribution share is

$$\begin{aligned}D(\Phi_{RRS}) &= \frac{\Delta W^{\downarrow}_{RRS}}{\Delta W_{total}} \\ &= \frac{12(u_h - \tfrac{1}{2})(v_h - v_\ell)}{-12(u_\ell - \tfrac{1}{2})(v_h - v_\ell) + 12(u_h - \tfrac{1}{2})(v_h - v_\ell)} \\ &= \frac{12(u_h - \tfrac{1}{2})(v_h - v_\ell)}{12(v_h - v_\ell)[(u_h - \tfrac{1}{2}) - (u_\ell - \tfrac{1}{2})]} \\ &= \frac{12(u_h - \tfrac{1}{2})(v_h - v_\ell)}{12(v_h - v_\ell)(u_h - u_\ell)} \\ &= \frac{u_h - \tfrac{1}{2}}{u_h - u_\ell}\end{aligned}$$

which equals $\frac{1}{2}$ for a symmetric exchange around the median and thus exactly half of the welfare gain is generated by the advantaged child's descent. Origin independence therefore interprets the fall of the advantaged child as part of the welfare gain because it weakens the link between family background and child outcomes.

(ii) **AM counts the rise as a welfare gain and the fall as a loss.** *AM evaluates whether a child's income exceeds her parents' income, rather than her position in the overall income distribution. The disadvantaged child's upward movement constitutes an instance of absolute progress and therefore increases welfare, while the advantaged child's downward movement constitutes an instance of absolute decline and therefore reduces welfare:*[11]

$$\Delta W^{\uparrow}_{\mathrm{AM}} = \varepsilon > 0, \qquad \Delta W^{\downarrow}_{\mathrm{AM}} = -\varepsilon < 0, \qquad \Delta W_{\mathrm{AM}} = 0.$$

[11] Both movements are evaluated on the same scale because the thought experiment holds the parental and child income distributions fixed and identical, so that a child's income exceeds her parent's income if and only if her rank does.

(iii) **CER25 counts the rise as a welfare gain but not the fall.** *Each leg is weighted by the welfare weight attached to the child's origin:*

$$\Delta W_{\omega}^{\uparrow} = \varepsilon\, \omega(u_{\ell})(v_h - v_{\ell}) \;\geq\; 0,$$
$$\Delta W_{\omega}^{\downarrow} = -\varepsilon\, \omega(u_h)(v_h - v_{\ell}) \;\leq\; 0,$$

with equality in each case if and only if the weight vanishes at u_{ℓ} and u_h respectively. CER25 concentrates its weight around the first quartile, so $\omega(u_{\ell}) > 0$ while $\omega(u_h) = 0$ for advantaged origins outside the support of ω. The disadvantaged child's rise is treated as a welfare gain, while the advantaged child's fall receives zero weight and therefore does not affect welfare. The net effect is

$$\Delta W_{\omega} = \varepsilon\, [\omega(u_{\ell}) - \omega(u_h)](v_h - v_{\ell}) = \varepsilon\, \omega(u_{\ell})(v_h - v_{\ell}) \;>\; 0.$$

Priority therefore evaluates the exchange solely through the gain to the disadvantaged child, and is indifferent to movements of advantaged children.

The thought experiment highlights three distinct normative interpretations of the same change. The RRS regards both movements as welfare-improving because they reduce the persistence of advantage across generations. AM evaluates the upward movement positively and the downward movement negatively. CER25 assigns a positive welfare value to the upward movement because it benefits a child from a disadvantaged origin, but treats the downward movement of a child from an advantaged origin as neutral with respect to welfare improvements.

3.5 Axiom Satisfaction: The Normative Trade-Off

The downward-mobility example illustrates a more general normative trade-off. All three indicators satisfy basic regularity requirements – anonymity, replication invariance, and continuity.[12] Therefore, they do not differ in their technical properties but in the substantive principles they embody. We focus on five evaluative axioms, stated formally in Appendix D.3:

- *Pareto in parent outcomes (PP)* and *Pareto in child outcomes (PC)*: welfare does not decrease when, holding the outcomes of the other generation fixed, every parent, or every child, is at least as well off and at least one is strictly better off.
- *Monotonicity (M)*: larger mobility movements generate larger changes in welfare.

[12] AM additionally satisfies separability. Formal statements and proofs are provided in Appendix D.2.

- *Positional purity (X)*: welfare depends only on relative positions. Societies with the same parent–child rank relationship are evaluated identically regardless of income levels.
- *Priority to disadvantaged origins (D)*: consider a progressive rank exchange in which a child from a lower origin moves upward and a child from a higher origin moves downward by the same amount. The exchange should receive more weight when it occurs lower in the origin distribution.

Table 1 summarizes which indicators satisfy each axiom with formal proofs provided in Appendix D.4. No indicator satisfies PP. An increase in parental income can alter parental ranks or raise the benchmark against which children's outcomes are evaluated. Consequently, it may decrease social mobility.

Table 1: Axiom Satisfaction of the Income Mobility Indicators

Axiom	RRS	AM	CER25
Pareto in parent outcomes (PP)	×	×	×
Pareto in child outcomes (PC)	×	✓	×
Monotonicity (M)	✓	×	✓
Positional purity (X)	✓	×	✓
Priority to disadvantaged origins (D)	×	×	✓

Notes: ✓ = satisfied; × = violated. Formal definitions of the axioms are given in Appendix D.3 and proofs in Appendix D.4.

RRS. The RRS treats mobility as purely positional. It satisfies X and M because it depends only on ranks and responds to the size of rank movements. However, it violates PC. Suppose all children become richer, but children from high-income families move up the child rank distribution relative to children from low-income families. The association between parent and child ranks then rises and welfare falls, even though every child is better off. The RRS also violates D. It values a progressive exchange only by the size of the rank gaps involved, not by where in the distribution it occurs.

AM. AM makes the opposite normative choice. Because it records only whether children's incomes exceed their parents', it satisfies PC. Making a child richer can never turn a gain into a loss. For the same reason, it violates X, since it depends on income levels rather than ranks alone, and M, since a child who barely surpasses her parents counts as much as one who surpasses them by far. It also violates D. When the ascending child rises above her parents' income and the descending child falls below her parents', the gain and the loss cancel, wherever in the distribution the exchange occurs.

CER25. CER25 shares the positional structure of the RRS. It satisfies X and M, and violates PC for the same reason. It is, however, the only indicator to satisfy D. Its implicit welfare weights decline with origin rank (Proposition 3), so an upward movement counts more the more disadvantaged the origin it starts from, while movements among origins that receive zero weight do not affect the indicator.

These trade-offs are not artifacts of the functional forms considered here. No evaluator that is sensitive to social mobility can satisfy both X and PC. Any reshuffling of children's ranks can be produced by a change that makes every child richer. For example, one can shift the entire child-income distribution upward while reassigning children to ranks arbitrarily (see the construction in Appendix D.4). PC then requires every such reshuffling to be weakly welfare-improving. Because the reverse reshuffling can be produced in the same way, X forces the evaluator to rank all rank patterns equally. Consequently, no such evaluator satisfies PC, X, and D simultaneously. Choosing a mobility indicator therefore entails a normative choice about which principle to relax.

4 Survey Design

The welfare analysis characterizes the normative content embodied in each indicator, but it does not determine which indicator, or which dimension of social mobility, individuals support most. We therefore turn to the survey evidence, which allows us to assess which dimensions and indicators of social mobility align most closely with the public's normative preferences. The survey consists of three parts, a conjoint experiment on social mobility dimensions (Part A), a within-subject rating on social mobility indicators (Part B), and a battery of belief elicitation items (Part C). Each part is described in detail below. The full survey instructions are in Appendix E. At the start, respondents provide a free-text definition of social mobility, ensuring that the concept is activated from their own understanding rather than primed by our framing. They are then shown a brief definition of social mobility to ensure everybody understands the concept in a similar way. Respondents then complete a comprehension check in which they classify a country description as having either high or low social mobility. Those who initially fail are shown the correct answer with an explanation before proceeding to part A. We retain all respondents in the main analysis and verify in the robustness sections 5.2.4 and 5.3.3 that restricting to first-attempt passers (87%) does not affect our results. The study received ethical approval from the WU Ethics Board and was preregistered at OSF. Deviations from the PAP are discussed in Appendix A. All data

and code will be publicly available.[13] The analysis was carried out using RStudio (Version 2025.09.2) (R Core Team, 2025).

4.1 Part A: Conjoint Experiment on Mobility Dimensions

In Part A we use a forced-choice conjoint experiment to identify the relative importance of the four dimensions of social mobility – education, occupation, income, and wealth.

We provided respondents with two country profiles side by side in a table from which they needed to select their preferred country. Each country profile describes a fictitious country characterized by binary attributes (High/Low) in the four social mobility dimensions. The left–right positioning of the profiles in the comparison is randomized, and the countries are called A (left) and B (right).[14]

With four binary attributes, the full factorial comprises 16 ($= 2^4$) profiles. We employ a fractional factorial design yielding 8 ($= 2^{4-1}$) distinct profiles that maintain orthogonality among all main effects and pairwise interactions (see Table 2). This design ensures that each attribute is statistically independent of every other attribute, enabling clean identification of the marginal effect of each dimension. Each respondent evaluates a random subset of 10 of the 28 ($= \binom{8}{2}$) possible pairwise comparisons.[15]

Table 2: Orthogonal fractional factorial design (8 country profiles).

	C1	**C2**	**C3**	**C4**	**C5**	**C6**	**C7**	**C8**
Education	Low	Low	Low	Low	High	High	High	High
Occupation	Low	Low	High	High	Low	Low	High	High
Income	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High
Wealth	Low	High	High	Low	High	Low	Low	High

Note: This table shows all eight country profiles with their binary attributes in the four social mobility dimensions.

After the ten conjoint tasks, respondents rank the four dimensions from most to least important using a drag-and-drop interface and explain their ranking in an open-ended response.

[13] For all accompanying files follow this link: https://osf.io/dzuqs

[14] Because the profiles vary only in their social mobility attributes, any systematic preference for one profile over another reflects the respondent's valuation of the social mobility dimensions that differ between them. This framing encourages respondents to internalize the trade-offs, as they would when evaluating an actual society, rather than making an abstract assessment of which dimension "matters more."

[15] Jenke et al. (2021) show that respondent fatigue in simple conjoint experiments does not set in until well beyond ten tasks. We assess robustness to task-order directly in Section 5.2.4.

Comparing the conjoint-based and ranking-based orderings allows us to assess the sensitivity of dimension preferences to the elicitation method.

Empirical Strategy

To identify the relative importance of the four social mobility dimensions, we estimate Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs) from the conjoint experiment via a linear probability model. The dataset is constructed at the profile-choice level. For each of the choice tasks $T = 10$ faced by respondent i, the two profiles $j \in \{A, B\}$ each generate one observation, yielding $1{,}002 \times 10 \times 2 = 20{,}040$ profile-level observations. We estimate the linear probability model:

$$\text{Chosen}_{ijt} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{EDUC}_{jt} + \beta_2 \text{OCC}_{jt} + \beta_3 \text{INC}_{jt} + \beta_4 \text{WEALTH}_{jt} + \varepsilon_{ijt}, \tag{7}$$

where Chosen_{ijt} equals one if respondent i selected profile j in task t, and the regressors are binary indicators equal to one when the respective dimension is set to "High". Standard errors are clustered at the respondent level. Each coefficient β_k represents the AMCE, which is the change in the probability of selecting a country profile when dimension k switches from Low to High, averaging over all other $k-1$ attribute configurations (Hainmueller et al., 2014). Identification relies on the standard assumptions for conjoint experiments (random assignment and no carryover effects) which we assess in Section 5.2.4.

We complement the linear probability model with a logistic regression, from which we recover the AMCEs by computing average marginal effects, with cluster-bootstrapped standard errors (500 iterations). We additionally analyze the direct ranking results using pairwise Wilcoxon signed-rank tests on the mean ranks with the Benjamini-Hochberg correction for multiple testing.

4.2 Part B: Rating Experiment on Mobility Indicators

Part B identifies which of the three indicators receives most public support. We focus specifically on the income dimension, where the multiplicity-of-indicators problem is best documented (Deutscher & Mazumder, 2023).

Respondents see each indicator presented as the policy orientation of a fictitious country (without the actual indicator name):

- **Rank-Rank Slope (RRS):** "In Country [X], people care about reducing the link between children's income and their parents' income. The country works to weaken

this link so that children's income depends less on their parent's position in the income distribution."

- **Absolute Mobility (AM):** "In Country [X], people care about each generation progressing beyond the last. The country works to create conditions where children can achieve higher incomes than their parents."
- **Conditional Expected Rank at the 25th Percentile (CER25):** "In Country [X], people care about helping children from low-income families build a better future. The country works to ensure that these children move upward and become part of middle or high-income families."

The ordering and, therefore, the assignment of country labels (X = {A,B,C}) to indicators is randomized across all six possible orderings to eliminate positional effects. We verify that ratings do not depend on ordering in Section 5.3.3. Each respondent rates each indicator on a 0-100 scale for support, fairness and achievability. Our main variable of interest is the support for each policy.

Empirical Strategy

We test for differences in support using pairwise two-sided t-tests with the Benjamini-Hochberg correction for multiple testing. We assess equivalence between closely ranked indicators using a two one-sided tests procedure (TOST). As a complementary specification, we reshape the data to long format and estimate:

$$S_{ip} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \mathbb{1}[\text{CER}] + \beta_2 \mathbb{1}[\text{RRS}] + X_i'\Gamma + \varepsilon_{ip}, \tag{8}$$

where S_{ip} is respondent i's support for indicator p. Standard errors are clustered at the respondent level. The indicator dummies use AM as the reference category, and X_i is a vector of demographic controls. This setup also allows us to examine how differences in support across indicators are associated with perceived fairness and achievability, by adding respondents' ratings of each indicator on these two dimensions, measured on the same 0–100 scale as support, as regressors in equation (8).

4.3 Part C: Belief Elicitation and Open-Ended Questions

Following Parts A and B, respondents complete a battery of belief and attitude items. For each of the four dimensions, respondents rate on 0–100 scales: (i) their personally experienced mobility relative to their parents, (ii) the level of social mobility they perceive currently exists

in the United States, and (iii) the extent to which government policies can increase mobility.

5 Results

This section begins by describing the sample, followed by a separate presentation of the results for the dimensions and indicators. We then bring the two perspectives together before turning to the results from our expert sample.

5.1 Sample

We recruited participants from the United States via Prolific, using their representative sampling feature, which balances on age, sex, ethnicity, and political affiliation.Data collection took place in March 2026. We have a total of 1,002 respondents approved, one rejected, 95 returned and seven timed out. Prolific's built-in screening ensured that only participants who passed one of two embedded attention checks could complete the survey. In our sample of 1,002 respondents, only one respondent failed the first attention check and all passed the second attention check.[16] We flag one respondent who completed the survey in under five minutes, our preregistered threshold for speeding.[17] We also included a comprehension check on whether a described country had high or low social mobility, which 868 of 1,002 respondents (86.6%) answered correctly on their first attempt. Those who failed, received the correct answer and an explanation before proceeding. We retain all respondents in the main analysis and verify in section 5.2.4 and 5.3.3 that restricting the sample to first-attempt passers and non-speeders does not affect our results. About one month after the main data collection, we administered the same core questions to social mobility experts. We report these results in Section 5.5.

Table 3 shows summary statistics for the main analysis sample as well as the restricted sample and the Prolific target shares for a representative sample of 1,000 respondents. The average respondent is 45.6 years old (SD = 16.1), and the sample spans ages 18 to 84. Women make up 49.7% of respondents. The racial composition is 62.9% White, 11.7% Black, and around 6.0% Hispanic and Asian, with the remainder identifying with multiple or other categories.[18] Political affiliation is balanced. 31.8% identify as Democrats, 24.0% as Republicans, and 37.6% as Independents. A majority of respondents (65.2%) hold a college

[16]The attention checks asked participants to select a pre-specified color and food item, respectively.

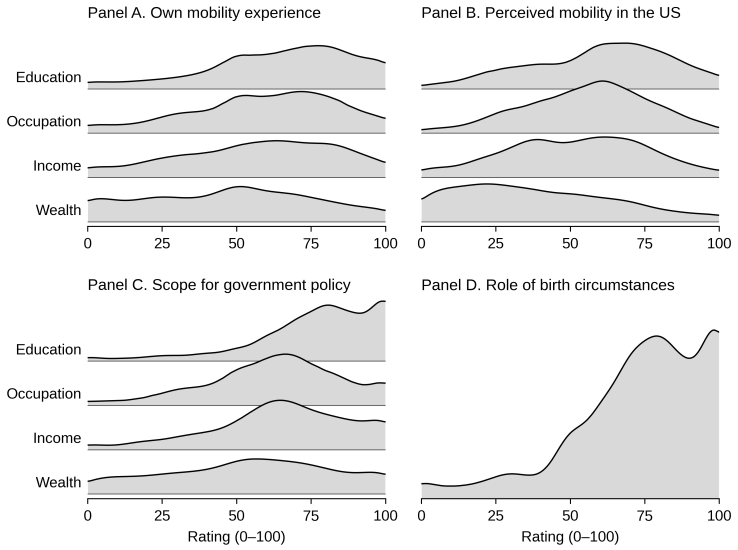
[17]The median completion time was 17.4 minutes, well above the five-minute cutoff.

[18]Race was self-reported, and respondents could select more than one category. We classify respondents who selected a single category into White, Black, Asian or Hispanic groups. Multiple answers and other categories are classified as "Other/Multiple".

degree or higher. Household income is spread across the distribution, with a meaningful share in each bracket from below $25,000 (12.6%) to above $150,000 (12.7%). The sample is geographically dispersed, with the South (41.1%), Northeast (20.8%), West (20.3%), and Midwest (17.1%) all well represented. The average self-reported risk preference on a 0-10 scale is 5.3 (SD = 2.5; median = 6) and self-reported answer reliability is high (0-10 scale; mean = 9.6; SD = 0.9; median = 10).

Figure 1 summarizes respondents' experiences and beliefs about social mobility across the four dimensions. Self-reported social mobility is highest for education, followed by occupation and income, and lowest for wealth. The same ordering, although more pronounced, characterizes respondents' beliefs about general social mobility developments in the United States. In addition, participants perceive governments as having the greatest scope to increase social mobility in education, followed by income and occupation, while respondents perceive government intervention to be least feasible for wealth mobility. Finally, a large majority of respondents acknowledges that their life trajectory would have differed substantially had they been born into different circumstances.

Figure 1: Social Mobility Experiences and Beliefs across Dimensions



Notes: Kernel density estimates of respondents' ratings on 0–100 scales (N = 1,002). Panel A: respondents' own experienced mobility relative to their parents. Panel B: perceived social mobility in the United States. Panel C: perceived scope of government policies to increase social mobility. Panel D: perceived extent to which respondents' life trajectories would have differed had they been born into different circumstances.

Table 3: Sample Characteristics

	Main sample	Restricted sample	Prolific target
Age (years)	45.6 (16.2)	45.6 (16.1)	
18–24	12.2	11.9	12.1
25–34	17.5	17.9	17.3
35–44	17.2	17.1	16.8
45–54	16.2	16.4	15.7
55+	37.0	36.9	38.1
Gender			
Female	49.7	50.0	50.7
Male	48.6	48.3	49.3
Non-binary / Not say	1.7	1.8	—
Race			
White	62.9	64.6	63.4
Black	11.7	9.3	11.6
Hispanic	6.2	6.0	—
Asian	5.9	6.0	6.3
Other / Multiple	13.4	14.1	18.7
Political affiliation			
Democrat	31.8	34.0	29.5
Independent	37.6	37.3	42.6
Republican	29.0	27.1	27.9
Other /Not say	1.5	1.7	—
College degree or higher	65.2	66.2	—
Household income			
<$25k	12.6	12.2	—
$25–50k	20.1	19.6	—
$50–75k	18.2	18.6	—
$75–100k	16.1	15.8	—
$100–150k	18.6	18.4	—
>$150k	12.7	13.8	—
Not say	1.9	1.6	—
Geography			
Northeast	20.8	20.3	—
Midwest	17.1	16.7	—
South	41.1	41.5	—
West	20.3	20.7	—
Not say	0.8	0.8	—
Risk preference (0–10)	5.3 (2.5)	5.3 (2.5)	—
Self-reported answer reliability (0-10)	9.6 (0.9)	9.7 (0.8)	—
Duration (minutes)	20.1 (11.4)	20.1 (11.7)	—

Note: This table provides an overview of all sample characteristics for the full sample (N = 1,002) the restricted sample (N = 868) and the Prolific target (if applicable). Numbers show percentages for categorical variables and the mean with the standard deviation in parentheses for numeric variables.

5.2 Dimension Preferences

We now turn to Part A of the survey, which elicits preferences over the four dimensions of social mobility. We first present the main results, followed by heterogeneity and robustness analyses and conclude with an analysis of respondents' open-ended explanations.

5.2.1 Main Results

Table 4 reports the AMCE estimates. Column (1) shows the estimates from the linear probability model, column (2) repeats the analysis using a logit specification and column (3) reports the average marginal effects from the logit model with cluster-bootstrapped standard errors in brackets (500 iterations).

Starting with column (1), we find that all four dimensions have large, positive, and highly significant effects on the probability of selecting a country profile ($p < 0.001$ for all coefficients), confirming that respondents systematically prefer higher social mobility in every dimension. The linear model implies that a profile with all four dimensions set to High is selected with a probability of 0.944, compared with a probability of 0.057 for a profile with all dimensions set to Low. Switching income from Low to High increases the probability of selection by 31.1 percentage points, roughly twice the effect of occupation (14.3 pp) and substantially larger than those of wealth (23.1 pp) and education (20.2 pp). Ordering the AMCEs leads to the following ranking:

$$\text{Income} > \text{Wealth} > \text{Education} > \text{Occupation}.$$

Table 5 reports formal pairwise tests of all six differences, based on the variance–covariance matrix of the linear probability model with respondent-clustered standard errors and Benjamini–Hochberg corrections for multiple testing. The largest difference is between income and occupation (16.8 pp; $p < 0.001$), while the smallest is between wealth and education (2.9 pp; $p = 0.038$). Therefore, the full ordering is identified at conventional significance levels, although the difference between wealth and education is relatively small.

Figure 2 complements the AMCEs by showing the marginal means. When income is set to High, the selection probability is 0.655 compared to 0.344 when Low. The corresponding figures are 0.615 vs. 0.385 for wealth, 0.601 vs. 0.399 for education, and 0.571 vs. 0.429 for occupation. These reinforce the AMCE ordering and confirm that the baseline selection probability is close to 0.50, as expected under the randomized design.

Turning to column (2) we see that the coefficient ordering is identical: income (1.766) >

Table 4: Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs) on Profile Selection

	Dependent variable: Profile selected		
	OLS	Logit	Logit AME
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Education (High)	0.202***	1.324***	0.243
	(0.009)	(0.066)	[0.009]
Occupation (High)	0.143***	1.085***	0.197
	(0.007)	(0.062)	[0.009]
Income (High)	0.311***	1.766***	0.336
	(0.008)	(0.067)	[0.008]
Wealth (High)	0.231***	1.442***	0.269
	(0.009)	(0.068)	[0.009]
Constant	0.057***	−2.810***	
	(0.006)	(0.116)	
Observations	20,040	20,040	20,040
Respondents	1,002	1,002	1,002
Adj. R^2 / Pseudo R^2	0.211	—	—
Log Likelihood	—	−11,362	—

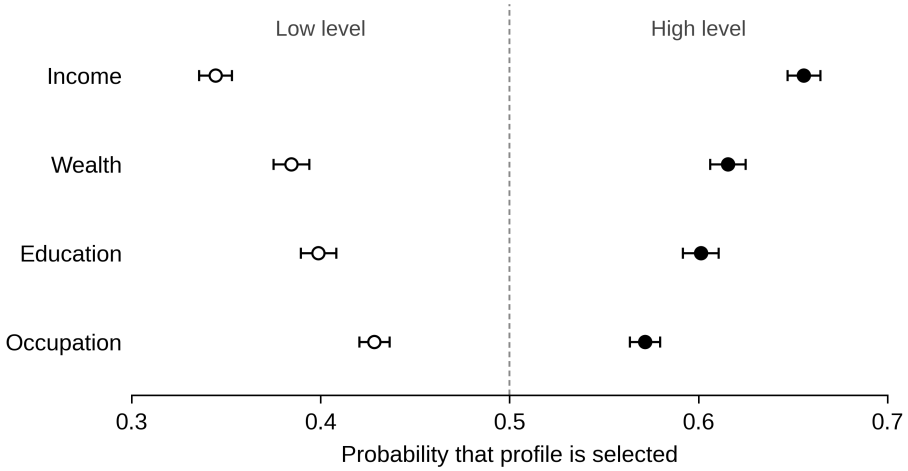
Note: This table reports the AMCEs for the social mobility dimensions. Each observation is a profile shown in a pairwise choice task (= 1,002 × 10 × 2). Regressors are binary indicators for High mobility. Columns (1) and (2) report OLS and logit estimates, respectively, with respondent-clustered standard errors in parentheses. Column (3) reports average marginal effects (AMEs) from the logit model on the probability scale, with cluster-bootstrapped standard errors in brackets (500 iterations). $^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$.

Table 5: Pairwise Tests of AMCE Differences

Comparison	Difference (pp)	SE (pp)	t-statistic	p-value
Income − Wealth	8.05	1.19	6.78	<0.001
Income − Education	10.92	1.29	8.47	<0.001
Income − Occupation	16.83	1.11	15.23	<0.001
Wealth − Education	2.86	1.38	2.07	0.038
Wealth − Occupation	8.78	1.21	7.23	<0.001
Education − Occupation	5.92	1.17	5.06	<0.001

Note: This table shows the six pairwise tests for AMCE differences in percentage points (pp). Differences and standard errors computed from the OLS variance–covariance matrix with respondent-clustered standard errors. P-values are adjusted with the Benjamini-Hochberg correction (N = 1,002).

Figure 2: Marginal Means by Attribute Level



Notes: Each point shows the average probability that a profile is selected when the given dimension is set to its low (open circles) or high (filled circles) level, averaging over all configurations of the remaining dimensions. Error bars are 95 percent confidence intervals based on standard errors clustered at the respondent level.

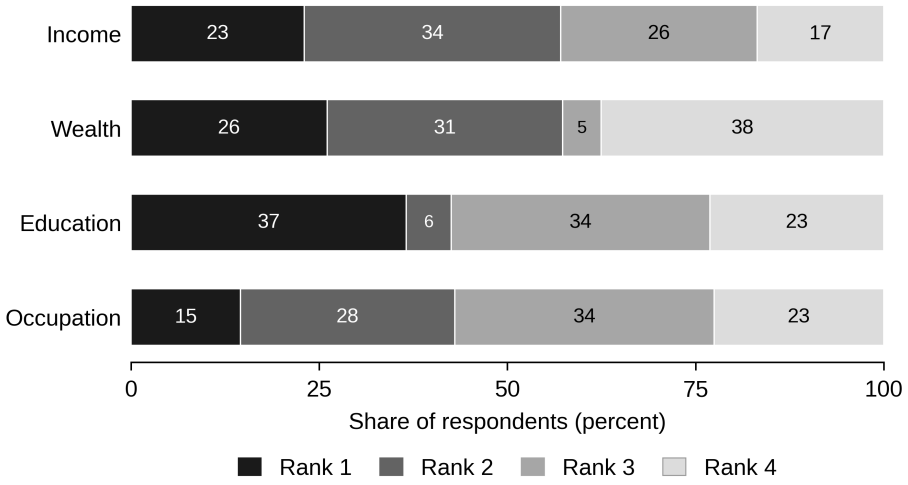
wealth (1.442) > education (1.324) > occupation (1.085). Column (3) reports average marginal effects from the logit model, which are comparable to the linear model estimates on the probability scale: 0.336 for income, 0.269 for wealth, 0.243 for education, and 0.197 for occupation. These estimates are larger than the OLS AMCEs, as expected given the logit's nonlinear probability structure with estimates centered around 0.5, but preserve the same ordering and relative magnitudes.

5.2.2 Direct Ranking

The direct ranking provides a complementary measure to the conjoint experiment (see Figure 3). Mean ranks (where 1 = most important) are: income (2.37), education (2.44), wealth (2.54), and occupation (2.65). Pairwise Wilcoxon signed-rank tests with Benjamini-Hochberg correction confirm that income is ranked significantly above both occupation and wealth ($p \leq 0.001$ for each), but the income-education ($p = 0.237$), education-wealth and occupation-wealth ($p = 0.106$ for each) comparisons are not statistically distinguishable (see Table 6).

The conjoint and direct ranking agree that income is the most valued dimension but diverge on the ranking of education and wealth. Education moves from third to second place in the direct ranking. To quantify the divergence between the direct and conjoint ranking, we compute Kendall's τ, a rank-correlation coefficient that measures agreement between two orderings based on the share of pairwise comparisons on which they concur. With

Figure 3: Distribution of Dimension Rankings



Notes: The figure shows the share of respondents assigning each rank to each dimension, where rank 1 denotes the most important dimension ($N = 1{,}002$).

Table 6: Pairwise Wilcoxon signed-rank tests

	mean rank	Education	Occupation	Income	Wealth
Education	2.44	—			
Occupation	2.65	<0.001	—		
Income	2.37	0.237	<0.001	—	
Wealth	2.54	0.106	0.106	0.001	—

Note: This table shows the mean rank and the p-values of the pairwise Wilcoxon signed-rank test with Benjamini-Hochberg correction for multiple testing (N = 1,002).

four dimensions, there are six such pairs, and τ can range from -1 (complete reversal) to $+1$ (perfect agreement). At the individual level, we compare each respondent's AMCE-implied ordering-to their direct ranking. The mean τ is 0.241 (SD = 0.50), with 60.0% of respondents showing positive concordance and 10.3% showing perfect agreement. At the aggregate level, comparing the pooled AMCE ordering to the overall mean-rank ordering yields $\tau = 0.67$, reflecting agreement on five of six pairwise comparisons (only the wealth-education comparison differs).

The τ estimates should be interpreted as a lower bound, since estimating four preference parameters from only ten binary choices introduces substantial measurement error. More importantly, the two methods place different demands on respondents. The conjoint requires respondents to make explicit trade-offs, choosing between profiles that differ in social mobility across dimensions, whereas the direct ranking does not.

5.2.3 Heterogeneity

We test for heterogeneity along six dimensions: age, gender, race, education, income, and political affiliation.[19] The dimension ranking is remarkably stable across demographic subgroups. Income mobility has the highest AMCE in every subgroup without exception and occupation the lowest. The most notable source of heterogeneity is political affiliation. Democrats assign a larger AMCE to education than Republicans (0.237 vs. 0.170), while they weight wealth less heavily (0.220 vs. 0.258; see Table B.1).[20] Formal interaction tests in Table B.2 show significance for a difference in education ($p = 0.002$) but not for wealth ($p = 0.071$). Income, by contrast, is valued nearly identically across partisan lines (0.305 for Democrats, 0.308 for Independents and 0.327 for Republicans). Turning to education, we see that college-educated respondents weigh education somewhat more than non-college respondents (0.225 vs. 0.178; interaction $p = 0.006$), consistent with a domain-specific valuation of one's own channel of advantage. Differences by age, gender, race, and income do not yield significant interactions.

5.2.4 Robustness

We test the robustness of our results in three ways. All tables can be found in Appendix B.1.2.[21]

[19] We did not explicitly preregister these dimensions, except for age and gender, thus this should be interpreted as exploratory. All tables are reported in Appendix B.1.1.

[20] Values for Independents are 0.203 and 0.218 respectively.

[21] Further, we verify the integrity of the conjoint design. Each dimension appears at the "High" level in almost exactly 50% of profiles.

Column order. First, we test for positional effects by including the profile's left–right position as a covariate. Respondents are 2.2 pp more likely to select the second profile ($p = 0.008$), but the four AMCEs shift by less than 0.4 pp, confirming that the attribute estimates are unaffected (see Table B.3).

Task order. Second, we estimate AMCEs separately for the first five and last five tasks (see Table B.4). Education and occupation have somewhat lower AMCEs in later tasks (-5.4 pp and -5.3 pp; $p < 0.001$), while the AMCEs for income and wealth are higher ($+5.4$ pp and $+7.5$ pp; $p < 0.001$). This pattern does not appear consistent with a simple fatigue explanation, which would generally predict declining effect magnitudes across dimensions.[22] One possible interpretation is preference crystallization, whereby respondents become more consistent in the trade-offs they make as they gain experience with the task (Hoeffler & Ariely, 1999). Under this interpretation, the task-order pattern suggests that the pooled AMCEs may somewhat understate the relative importance of income and wealth, which leaves the ranking unaffected.

Sample restrictions. Third, we verify robustness by restricting the sample to respondents who passed the comprehension check on their first attempt ($N = 868$). AMCEs remain within 1.1 pp of the baseline, with identical orderings (see Table B.5).

5.2.5 Why Respondents Rank Dimensions as They Do

The ranking task identifies the dimensions that respondents value most, but it does not reveal the reasoning underlying these choices. This matters for interpretation: a dimension may rank highly because respondents value it in itself or because they see it as a route to other outcomes. Immediately after completing the ranking, respondents were therefore asked to explain their reasoning in an open-ended text box. We use these responses to identify the considerations associated with respondents' rankings and, in particular, to distinguish dimensions that respondents view as ends from those they view as means.

We follow Haaland et al. (2025) and developed the codebook on a pilot subsample, revised it based on coder feedback before production coding. Two coders independently coded a subset of responses and reconciled disagreements to construct a gold standard. Inter-coder agreement on a newly coded subsample was $\alpha = 0.758$ according to Krippendorff's α. The remaining responses were coded using a large language model (ChatGPT-4o mini) prompted with the frozen codebook. Agreement between the model and the gold standard was $\alpha = 0.660$. These levels of agreement indicate substantial consistency in the application

[22] Jenke et al. (2021) find that fatigue in conjoint experiments does not typically emerge until well beyond ten tasks.

of the coding scheme, while also suggesting some residual classification error inherent in coding open-ended responses. The use of large language models for the coding of open-ended survey responses has been validated in prior work, including Gilardi et al. (2023) and Haaland et al. (2025).

Table 7 shows that instrumental reasoning is the most common justification. In 37.0% of responses, respondents defend their top-ranked dimension on the grounds that it enables progress in another dimension. The next most common frames appeal to freedom, autonomy, or opportunity (32.1%) and to quality of life or living conditions (24.6%).

Table 7: Reasoning behind Dimension Rankings

Theme	**n**	**% of respondents (N=1,002)**
Mediator: enables another dimension	371	37.0
Freedom, autonomy, opportunity	322	32.1
Quality of life / living conditions	246	24.6
Intrinsic personal or societal value	113	11.3
Own personal experience	36	3.6
Non-substantive	241	24.1
Sum	1,329	132.7

Note: This table reports the themes in respondents' open-ended explanations of their dimension rankings. Among the 761 respondents with at least one substantive code, the mean number of codes is 1.44, so percentages do not sum to 100.

The distinction between means and ends is particularly pronounced for education and income. Among respondents who rank education first (36.6%), 54.1% justify their choice instrumentally, compared with 27.2% among respondents who rank another dimension first. Among respondents who rank income first (23.7%), 38.3% invoke quality of life or living conditions, compared with 17.4% among respondents who rank another dimension first. These patterns suggest a systematic distinction between means and ends in respondents' conceptions of social mobility. Education is most often described as a means. Respondents who rank it first frequently justify its importance in terms of the other outcomes it enables. Income, by contrast, is more often justified in terms of the outcomes it provides directly, particularly material living conditions.

The instrumental responses also reveal the direction of the relationships respondents have in mind. Because the claim that one dimension enables another implicitly specifies an ordering, we coded the direction of each dimension relationship. Following Andre et al. (2026), who represent respondents' accounts as directed graphs, this procedure yields 542 directed

relationships from 369 respondents. The resulting mediator ordering is highly asymmetric. Respondents describe education as a mediator for occupation 129 times, compared with only 2 descriptions of the reverse direction. Occupation is producing income 104 times, compared with 10 descriptions of the reverse direction, and income as producing wealth 120 times, compared with 6 descriptions of the reverse direction. Together, these responses reveal a remarkably consistent perceived ordering from education to occupation to income to wealth.[23]

5.3 Indicator Preferences

We now turn to the results from Part B, which elicits preferences over the three income mobility indicators. We first present the main results, followed by heterogeneity and robustness analyses. We conclude by decomposing the support gap across indicators.

5.3.1 Main Results

Figure 4 plots the distribution of support ratings. Absolute Mobility and CER25 receive nearly identical mean support: 80.6 (SD = 18.5) and 80.5 (SD = 21.7). The RRS receives substantially lower support, with a mean of 63.4 (SD = 27.1). Pairwise t-tests with Benjamini-Hochberg correction confirm that the RRS receives significantly less support than both AM and CER25 (both $p < 0.001$), while the difference between AM and CER25 is not statistically significant ($p = 0.894$). The observed ordering is therefore:

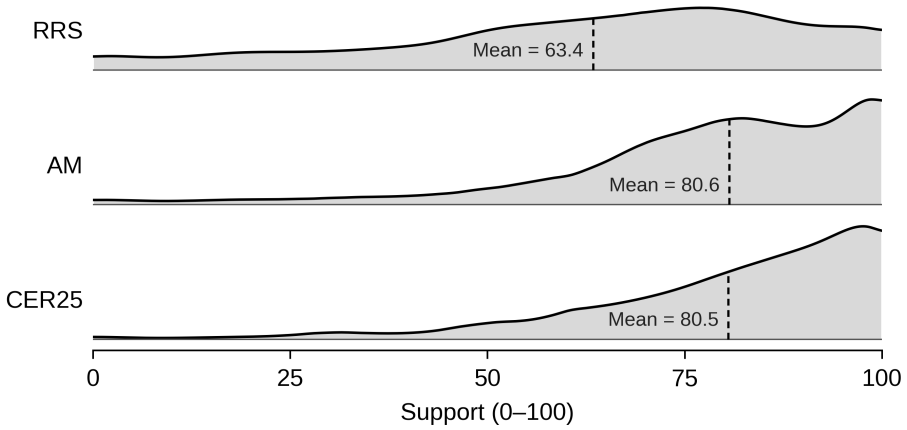
$$\text{CER25} \approx \text{AM} \gg \text{RRS}.$$

The gap between the RRS and the other two indicators is not only statistically significant but also sizeable with a 17 points difference on a 0-100 scale, corresponding to a paired Cohen's d of 0.74 (AM) and 0.70 (CER25) respectively. The mean paired difference between AM and CER25 is 0.11 (90% CI: $[-1.24, 1.45]$), and the TOST p-value for equivalence bounds of ± 3 points is below 0.001, confirming that these two indicators are statistically equivalent within a substantively narrow margin.

Beyond the aggregate means we examine individual ordering. The modal individual-level ordering is CER25 > AM > RRS, held by 24.2% of respondents, followed by AM > CER25 > RRS (19.4%) and CER25 = AM > RRS (10.8%). Together, 54.4% of respondents rate

[23] We also use the mediator chains to construct alternative rankings of the dimensions based on the frequency with which each dimension is ranked first, assigning greater importance either to the first dimension in each chain (the means) or to the last dimension (the ends). Under the former approach, the ranking of first ranks is Education (402), Occupation (237), Wealth (231), and Income (132). Under the latter, it is Wealth (333), Education (268), Occupation (260), and Income (141).

Figure 4: Distribution of Indicator Support Ratings



Notes: Kernel density estimates of support ratings on the 0–100 scale for RRS, AM, and CER25 (N = 1,002). Dashed vertical lines indicate mean support for each indicator.

both CER25 and AM above the RRS. 9.2% support all indicators equally and only 9.1% of respondents together support the RRS more than AM and the CER25. We conclude that the RRS penalty is a majority pattern rather than an artifact of extreme ratings by a vocal minority, and we analyze this penalty in more detail in Section 5.3.4.

5.3.2 Heterogeneity

We examine heterogeneity along six dimensions: age, gender, race, education, income, and political affiliation.[24] The RRS penalty holds in every demographic subgroup. Nevertheless, several dimensions of heterogeneity are noteworthy (see Table B.6). Women rate CER25 substantially higher (83.3; $p = 0.005$), while AM and RRS support is similar across gender. Women are thus more drawn to the "upward mobility from the bottom" framing than men, but equally skeptical of the RRS. People self-identifying as black, are more supportive of the CER25 (85.6; $p = 0.013$) and the RRS (68.7; $p = 0.044$). People with at least a college degree are less supportive of the CER25 (78.7; $p = 0.035$). Republicans give lower support to the CER25 (74.2; $p < 0.001$) and the RRS (58.6; $p = 0.001$). The CER25 framing (opportunity for the disadvantaged) and the RRS framing (reducing parent-child dependence) thus resonate strongly along partisan lines, while the AM framing (each generation doing better than the last) commands bipartisan support (see Table B.7).

[24]We did not explicitly preregister these dimensions, except for age and gender, thus this should be interpreted as exploratory. All tables are reported in Appendix B.2.1.

5.3.3 Robustness

Again we test the robustness of our results in three ways. All tables can be found in Appendix B.2.2.

Order effect. First, we verify that support ratings are not driven by the order in which indicators were presented. ANOVA tests show no significant order effects for CER25 ($F = 0.78$; $p = 0.567$) or AM ($F = 0.34$; $p = 0.889$). RRS support exhibits some order sensitivity ($F = 2.99$; $p = 0.011$), varying from 58.0 to 68.0 across the six orderings, but the pooled regression with ordering fixed effects yields an unchanged RRS penalty (-17.27; see Tables B.8 and B.9).

Experience. Second, we examine whether preferences over the indicators reflect respondents' own experiences and beliefs about social mobility in the United States (see Table B.10). Respondents with greater personal experience of upward income mobility express less support for AM, while those who perceive greater income mobility in the United States express less support for CER25. Respondents who have greater confidence in the government's ability to promote social mobility, as well as those who believe that life outcomes are strongly determined by circumstances beyond individual control, express greater support for all three indicators. Importantly, while being statistically significant, none of these associations attenuate the relative discount placed on the RRS.

Sample restrictions. Third, restricting the sample to respondents who passed the comprehension check on their first attempt ($N = 868$) leaves mean support within 1 pp of the baseline (see Table B.11).

5.3.4 Decomposing the RRS Penalty

Table 8 reports the OLS regression for the indicator support (see equation (8)). In column (1), estimated without controls, the CER25 coefficient is essentially zero (-0.109; $p = 0.894$), confirming that CER25 and AM receive similar levels of support. The RRS coefficient is -17.27 ($p < 0.001$), indicating that the RRS receives 17 points less support than AM on a 0-100 scale. Column (2) adds age, gender, education, race, income, region, and risk preferences as controls. The indicator coefficients stay virtually unchanged.

To shed light on this gap, we use respondents' fairness and achievability ratings of each indicator, again measured on a 0–100 scale. The RRS is rated substantially less fair than CER25 or AM (by roughly 14 points), while the gap in perceived achievability is smaller (roughly 9 points). To assess how much of the support gap these perceptions account for, we add them stepwise (Columns (3)–(6) of Table 8). Fairness is strongly associated with

Table 8: Support decomposition

	Dependent variable: Support (0-100)					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Constant (=AM)	80.641***	79.283***	15.671***	63.232***	13.525***	13.789***
	(0.585)	(3.930)	(1.300)	(1.662)	(1.341)	(2.443)
CER25	−0.109	0.270	1.354***	0.359	1.419***	1.542***
	(0.817)	(0.872)	(0.504)	(0.766)	(0.503)	(0.553)
RRS	−17.265***	−16.949***	−5.400***	−14.434***	−5.082***	−4.853***
	(0.976)	(1.060)	(0.591)	(0.930)	(0.595)	(0.640)
Fairness			0.786***		0.768***	0.765***
			(0.015)		(0.017)	(0.018)
Achievability				0.277***	0.058***	0.060***
				(0.023)	(0.014)	(0.016)
Controls	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
Observations	3,006	2,568	3,006	3,006	3,006	2,568
Respondents	1,002	856	1,002	1,002	1,002	856
Adj. R^2	0.113	0.118	0.692	0.192	0.695	0.693

Note: This table reports regression estimates decomposing support for the mobility indicators into fairness, achievability, and control variables. The reference category is Absolute Mobility (AM). Fairness and achievability are measured on a 0–100 scale. Controls include age, gender, education, race, income, region, and risk preferences. The 3,006 observations correspond to three observations per respondent (one for each mobility indicator). Specifications including controls have fewer observations due to missing sociodemographic information for 146 respondents. Respondent-clustered standard errors are reported in parentheses. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

support: a one-point higher fairness rating is associated with 0.79 points higher support. Controlling for fairness reduces the RRS coefficient from -17.27 to -5.4, a 69% reduction, and raises the adjusted R^2 from 0.113 to 0.692. Achievability is also statistically significant but much less strongly associated with support (0.28). Controlling for achievability reduces the RRS coefficient only to -14.3, a 17% reduction, and raises the adjusted R^2 to 0.192. Adding both ratings jointly, together with control variables (Columns (5) and (6)), changes the estimates and adjusted R^2 only marginally relative to the fairness-only specification. Once fairness is controlled for, CER25 receives slightly higher support than AM, but the difference is economically negligible (1.35; $p = 0.007$).

We interpret these results as descriptive decompositions of the support gap rather than as evidence for a causal mediation channel. In particular, the fairness and achievability ratings are themselves endogenous. Respondents may rationalize a low support judgment through low perceived fairness. Bearing this caveat in mind, the decomposition suggests that roughly 70% of the RRS support penalty is associated with perceived fairness. The residual 30%, a penalty of about 5 points, represents a gap that persists even after respondents' fairness and achievability judgments are taken into account.

A natural concern is whether the RRS penalty reflects a less appealing description rather than a less appealing concept. The AM and CER25 framings ("children can achieve higher incomes than their parents" and "helping children from low-income families build a better future") are arguably more vivid and emotionally immediate than the RRS framing, which asks respondents to evaluate "reducing the link between children's income and their parents' income". If the descriptions differ in persuasive force, the measured support gap may overstate the true difference how the public values the alternative normative indicator commitments. We take this concern seriously but believe it does not undermine our conclusions. The descriptions were designed to be faithful plain-language translations of what each indicator actually measures, and the indicators do differ in their proximity to everyday experience. AM asks whether children earn more than their parents, a comparison most adults can evaluate from their own lives. CER25 asks whether children from poor families move up, a concrete and readily visualizable prospect. The RRS, by contrast, captures a distributional property, the degree to which parental income predicts child income across the entire joint distribution, which has no direct counterpart in individual experience. The abstraction of the RRS description is thus not an artifact of our framing. Instead, it mirrors the abstraction of the concept itself. In our view any description that accurately conveys what the RRS measures will inevitably be more removed from lived experience than descriptions of AM or CER25, because the normative content of the RRS is more removed from

lived experience.

The lower support for the RRS may simply reflect a substantive moral judgment about what the indicator measures. Because the RRS summarizes the parent–child association across the entire income distribution, it can fall—signalling greater mobility—through changes occurring anywhere in that distribution, including among already advantaged families. Respondents may evaluate this property as morally less compelling than indicators that isolate upward movement from disadvantage or societal progress. Lowering the RRS among advantaged families also implies limiting parents' ability to pass on their advantage, which many people may regard as legitimate. Consistent with this, recent experimental evidence shows that a considerable share of parents intervene in a competition to give their own child an advantage (Sund, 2023).

5.4 Combining Dimension and Indicator Preferences

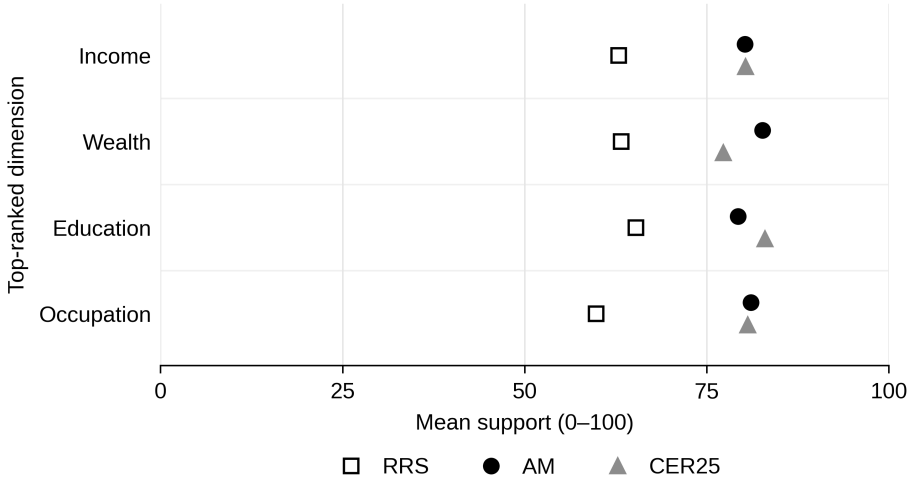
A natural question arising in this setup is whether dimension preferences from Section 5.2 are associated with indicator preferences from Section 5.3. Figure 5 shows mean indicator support grouped by respondents' self-reported top-ranked mobility dimension. Two patterns stand out. First, the RRS penalty is universal, regardless of which dimension respondents ranked most important. Second, respondents who ranked wealth first give substantially lower CER25 support relative to AM (-9.09 pp interaction; $p < 0.001$), consistent with wealth-oriented respondents favoring generational progress over bottom-up opportunity. The opposite holds true for education-oriented respondents (3.70 pp; $p = 0.004$).[25]

5.5 Expert sample

Researchers play a central role in shaping how social mobility is conceptualized, measured, and understood. They determine which dimensions and indicators to estimate, generate the empirical evidence that informs public debate and policy, and bear responsibility for communicating these findings accurately and in ways that foster public trust. Assessing the extent to which experts' priorities align with those of the public, and whether experts can accurately anticipate public preferences, is therefore relevant not only to research practice but also to the effective communication of scientific evidence. To complement our results from the general-public sample, we therefore contacted experts by e-mail and invited them to complete a shortened version of the survey that retained the core questions and added two prediction questions. The full expert survey can be found in Appendix F, following the

[25]For the full results see Table B.12 in Appendix B.3.

Figure 5: Mean Indicator Support by Top-Ranked Dimension



Notes: Each row reports mean support (0–100) for RRS (open squares), AM (filled circles), and CER25 (gray triangles) among respondents who ranked the corresponding dimension first in Part A.

original survey instructions. The median completion time was 13 minutes. To encourage participation, we donated 5 Dollar to KIPP for each completed response.[26]

We imposed strict inclusion criteria to ensure that the sample is comprised of researchers with substantial expertise in social mobility. Specifically, we invited only researchers with at least one empirical publication on social mobility.[27] This resulted in invitations to approximately 265 researchers, of whom 115 started the survey and 99 completed it, constituting our expert sample. The analysis was not preregistered and should therefore be regarded as exploratory.

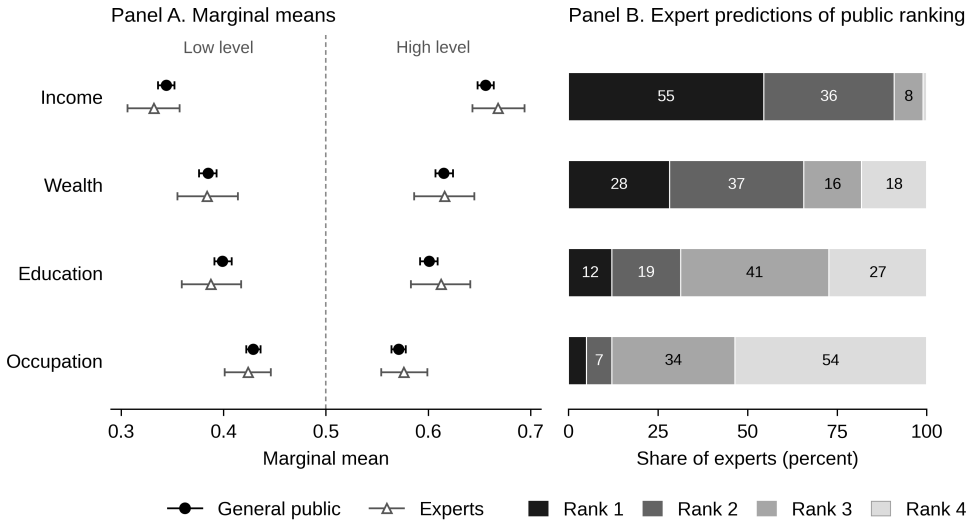
Our experts work in Economics (55%), Sociology (40%), and other fields (5%). They are currently at the PhD stage (21%), Postdoc stage (32%), Associate Professor (13%), Full Professor (31%), or Other (2%). The majority consider social mobility one of several topics they work on (57%). For 35% it is their primary research area, 7% state that they work on topics related to social mobility, and 1% report that they are generally familiar with the topic but do not research social mobility. These figures demonstrate that our selection procedure was successful. The expert sample consists of researchers with substantial expertise in social mobility. For comparison with the public sample drawn from the United States, it is also worth noting that most experts are affiliated with universities in Europe or the United States.

[26]KIPP is a nonprofit organization dedicated to expanding educational opportunity and has been designated a "standout organization" by GiveWell.

[27]We hand-selected these experts and made every effort to identify relevant researchers, but we cannot rule out that some researchers were missed.

Turning to the dimension results, experts and members of the general public agree to a striking degree (Figure 6). The ranking is identical across the two samples, and the estimated magnitudes are very similar, although the confidence intervals are naturally wider for the smaller expert sample. As part of the expert survey, experts were also asked to predict how the general public would rank the dimensions. The predictions correctly identify the ordering observed in the general-public sample, although experts slightly overestimate the magnitude of the differences between dimensions.

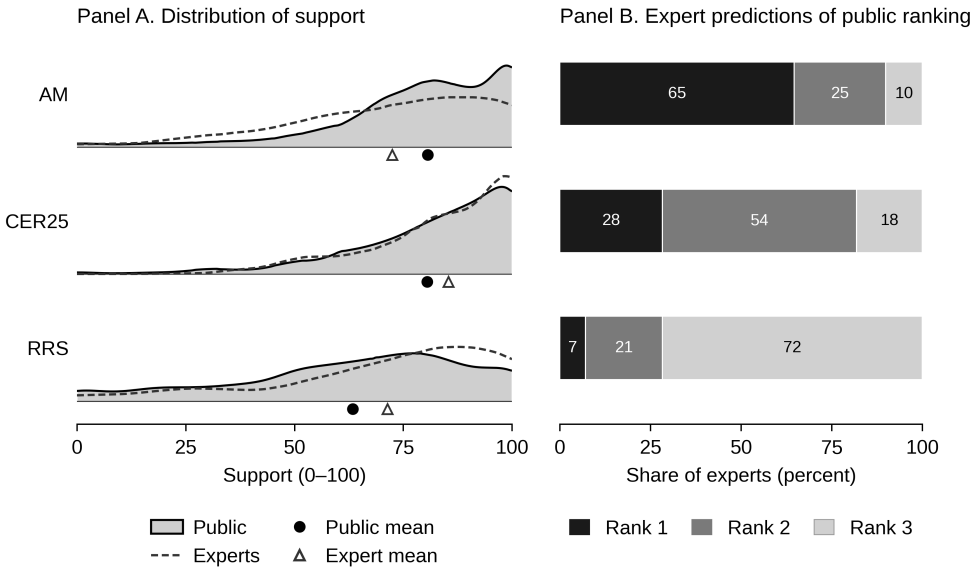
Figure 6: Dimension Preferences of the General Public and Experts



Notes: Panel A reports marginal means from the conjoint experiment for the low and high level of each dimension, with 95 percent confidence intervals, separately for the general public ($N = 1{,}002$) and experts ($N = 99$). Panel B reports the distribution of experts' predictions of how the general public ranks each dimension. Dimensions are ordered by the general public's marginal means.

The results for the indicators are slightly more divergent. Overall, experts express stronger relative support for all indicators combined than the general public, although support for AM is comparatively lower (mean = 72.44), as shown in Figure 7. Experts' assessments of the CER25 (mean = 85.42) and the RRS (mean = 71.37), by contrast, are broadly in line with those of the general public. Thus, experts express similarly low levels of support for the RRS and AM, which is notable given the widespread use of the RRS in social mobility research, while clearly favoring the CER25. This also further attenuates the concerns about the RRS framing, as experts probably focused more on the indicator than on the specific plain language framing. Turning to the predictions, experts correctly anticipate that the public will rank AM substantially above the RRS. However, they fail to predict the near-equal levels of public support for AM and CER25, instead predicting higher support for AM.

Figure 7: Indicator Support of the General Public and Experts



Notes: Panel A shows kernel density estimates of support (0–100) for each indicator, separately for the general public (N = 1,002) and experts (N = 99). Markers below each distribution indicate group means. Panel B reports the distribution of experts' predictions of how the general public ranks the three indicators. Indicators are ordered by the general public's mean support.

We also examine heterogeneity across disciplines by comparing economists ($N = 54$) to sociologists ($N = 40$).[28] For the dimensions, the results in Table 9 suggest disciplinary differences that align with the conventions of the two fields. Sociologists seem to place greater weight on education and occupation, whereas economists place greater weight on income and wealth, but these differences are not statistically significant.

For the indicators, there is no meaningful difference between economists and sociologists in their evaluation of CER25 (diff $= -2.00$; $p = 0.557$). The difference for AM is somewhat larger but statistically insignificant (diff $= 6.00$; $p = 0.236$). By contrast, economists and sociologists differ substantially in their evaluation of the RRS: economists rate it 16.0 points lower than sociologists ($p = 0.003$). The low expert support for the RRS is thus largely driven by economists, which is striking given the RRS's widespread use in economics.

5.5.1 How Experts Reason About Social Mobility

The open-ended responses allow us to compare not only how experts and the public weigh different dimensions of social mobility, but also how they reason about those rankings. Of the

[28] Five researchers reported belonging to two or more disciplines simultaneously and are therefore omitted in this comparison.

Table 9: Heterogeneity in Dimension Results by Discipline

	Dependent variable: Profile Selected
Education (High)	0.203^{***}
	(0.035)
Occupation (High)	0.121^{***}
	(0.035)
Income (High)	0.344^{***}
	(0.033)
Wealth (High)	0.265^{***}
	(0.042)
Sociology	0.001
	(0.030)
Education (High) × Sociology	0.068
	(0.060)
Occupation (High) × Sociology	0.073
	(0.045)
Income (High) x Sociology	−0.047
	(0.053)
Wealth (High) x Sociology	−0.076
	(0.062)
Constant	0.029
	(0.023)
Observations	1,880
Respondents	94
R^2	0.241
Adjusted R^2	0.237

Note: This table reports heterogeneity in the dimension results by discipline. The reference group consists of economists (N=54), and the interaction terms capture the difference between economists and sociologists (N=40). Respondents who identified with other disciplines (N=5) are excluded from the analysis. Each observation is a profile shown in a pairwise choice task. Regressors are binary indicators for High mobility. Respondent-clustered standard errors are reported in parentheses. $^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$.

99 experts, 91 provided a codeable justification. We coded these responses using the public codebook, augmented with categories capturing appeals to measurement or data availability and to the empirical literature. Across the double-coded responses, the two coders reached 89.0% agreement, with Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.638$.

Experts and the public exhibit remarkably similar reasoning concerning means and ends. Instrumental reasoning is invoked by 35.2% of experts, compared with 37.0% of the public, while freedom, autonomy, and opportunity are invoked by 37.4% and 32.1%, respectively. The main difference is that experts are substantially more likely to justify their rankings in terms of material living conditions. 42.9% do so, compared with 24.6% of the public. Professional considerations play little role in experts' stated reasoning. Only 7.7% appeal to measurement or data availability, and just 4.4% appeal to the empirical literature. Thus, although these considerations may help explain which dimensions are used in the empirical literature, experts rarely invoke them when explaining why a particular dimension of social mobility matters. The instrumental responses also reveal a causal structure similar to that found in the public sample. Coding the direction of the relationships described in mediator responses yields 71 chains from 91 experts. The individual links likewise point in the same direction as in the public sample. Experts overwhelmingly describe education as producing occupation, occupation as producing income, and income as producing wealth. Overall, the expert responses reinforce the public interpretation. Experts and the public appear to reason through a similar means–ends structure, with education viewed as an upstream mechanism and income and wealth as outcomes.

6 Application to the Great Gatsby Curve and State Rankings

The preceding sections established that the US public supports income mobility most among the four dimensions and, within income, weights CER25 and AM roughly equally while discounting the RRS. This section applies these results to the US in three ways. First, we revisit the Great Gatsby curve (GGC) in the US, the positive cross-sectional relationship between income inequality and intergenerational persistence (Corak, 2013). We examine whether this relationship persists once social mobility is measured in a way that reflects public preferences. To this end, we construct a preference-weighted index as a weighted sum of the three standardized income mobility indicators, with weights equal to each indicator's mean public support rating divided by the sum of all three mean ratings (RRS: 0.282, AM: 0.359, CER25: 0.359), which corresponds to the aggregate welfare function W_α in Proposition 4.

Second, we examine how US state-level social mobility rankings reshuffle when employing the preference-weighted index. Detailed descriptions of the data construction and robustness checks are provided in Appendix C.

Before turning to the Great Gatsby curve, we document how the three indicators relate to one another at the state level. Each of the three mobility indicators is standardized using z-scores, with signs oriented such that higher values indicate lower social mobility. Table 10 reports pairwise Pearson correlations across all 51 units (the 50 states and the District of Columbia). The RRS and CER25 are moderately correlated ($r = 0.679$). By contrast, AM is nearly orthogonal to the RRS ($r = -0.068$) and only weakly correlated with CER25 ($r = 0.383$). The three indicators thus capture substantially different features of the state-level income mobility landscape.

Table 10: Correlations of State-Level Income Mobility Indicators

	RRS	AM	CER25
RRS	-		
AM	−0.068	-	
CER25	0.679	0.383	-

Note: This table reports Pearson correlations across 51 states between the normalized mobility indicators. Each of the three mobility indicators is standardized using z-scores so that all three enter the composite on a common scale, with signs oriented such that higher values uniformly indicate lower social mobility.

6.1 The Great Gatsby Curve Under Alternative Indicators

Table 11 reports OLS slopes from regressing each z-scored social mobility measure on the state-level Gini coefficient. Column (1) presents the standard Great Gatsby curve. Intergenerational persistence measured as the RRS rises with inequality, with a slope of 12.243 (SE = 5.909; $p = 0.044$, $R^2 = 0.081$).[29] Column (3) shows that CER25 yields a comparable relationship, significant only at the 10%-level (slope = 11.456, SE = 5.942; $p = 0.060$, $R^2 = 0.071$). Column (2) reveals the opposite pattern, as AM is significantly negatively related to inequality (slope = −17.319, SE = 5.644; $p = 0.004$, $R^2 = 0.161$). In high-inequality states, a greater share of children surpass their parents' real incomes than in low-inequality states. The Great Gatsby curve is thus not a general feature of income mobility. Relative

[29]The Great Gatsby curve is typically calculated using the intergenerational earnings elasticity (IGE) (Corak, 2013). We use the RRS here for consistency with the rest of the analysis. In the taxonomy of Deutscher and Mazumder (2023), the IGE and the RRS belong to the same family of social mobility measures and exhibit very similar patterns of cross-regional variation.

income mobility measures (RRS, CER25) and absolute mobility (AM) disagree not only in magnitude but in sign about how inequality is associated with social mobility.

Table 11: The Great Gatsby Curve under Alternative Income Mobility Indicators

	RRS (1)	AM (2)	CER25 (3)	Preference-Weighted (4)
Gini coefficient	12.24^{**}	-17.32^{***}	11.46^{*}	1.37
	(6.20)	(7.23)	(5.77)	(5.53)
Observations	51	51	51	51
$\hat{\alpha}$	1/0/0	0/1/0	0/0/1	0.28 / 0.36 / 0.36
R^2	0.081	0.161	0.071	0.002

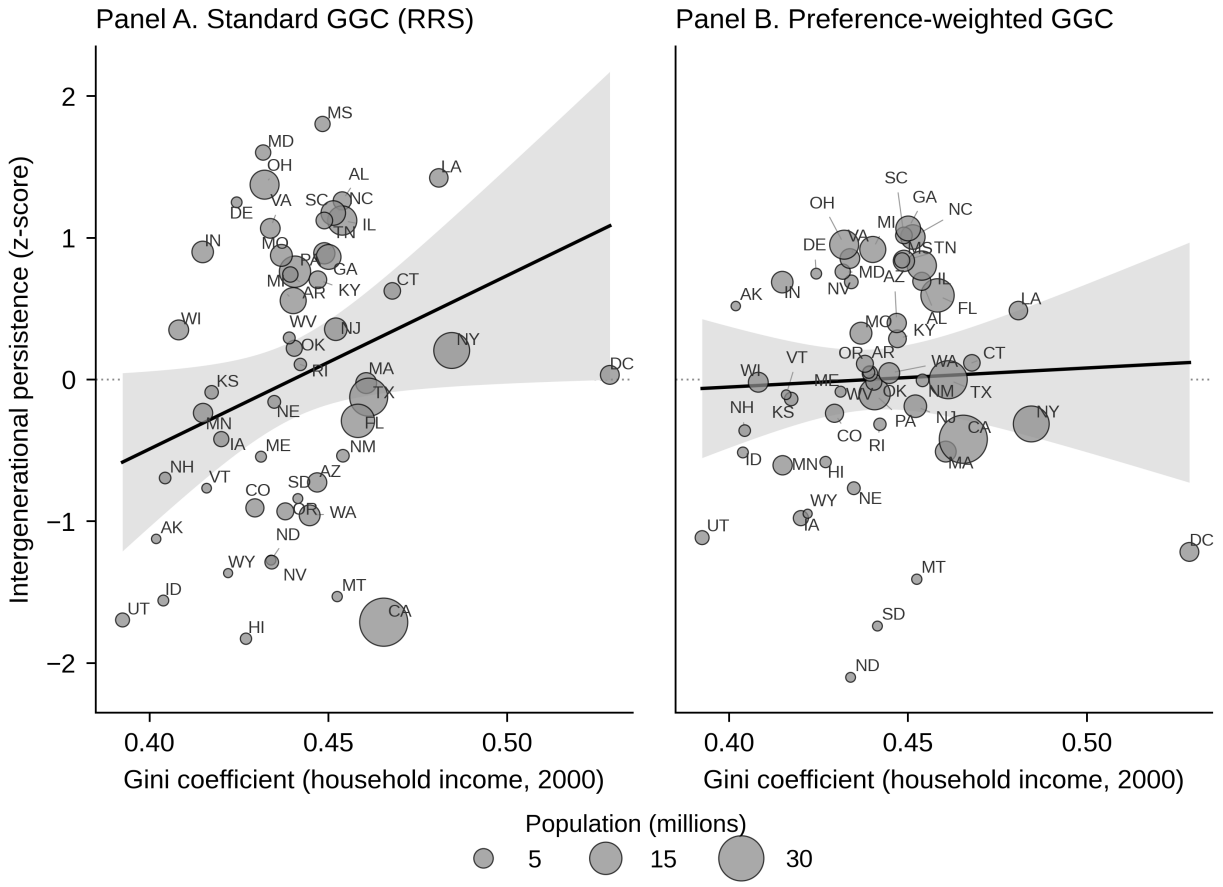
Notes: The table reports OLS slopes from regressions of standardized income mobility indicators on the state-level household-income Gini coefficient for 51 states (incl. District of Columbia). The Gini coefficient is computed at the state level from the 2000 Census Supplementary Survey (Hisnanick and Rogers, 2007). All indicators are oriented so that higher values indicate greater intergenerational persistence (i.e., lower mobility) and are standardized to have mean zero and unit variance. Column (1) reports the RRS, column (2) reports AM, and column (3) reports the CER25. Column (4) reports the preference-weighted composite, constructed using weights of 0.283, 0.358, and 0.359. Because OLS is linear in the dependent variable and the composite is a fixed linear combination of the three standardized indicators, the coefficient in column (4) is mechanically equal to the corresponding weighted average of the coefficients in columns (1)–(3). Standard errors for the preference-weighted composite are obtained from 2,000 bootstrap replications, holding the indicator scaling fixed at its full-sample values. $^{***}\,p < 0.001$; $^{**}\,p < 0.01$; $^{*}\,p < 0.05$.

Column (4) reports the preference-weighted composite, with an estimated slope of 1.345 (SE = 4.606; $p = 0.772$). The substantial attenuation of the slope reflects the fact that the three underlying indicators have coefficients of different signs. Because OLS is linear in the dependent variable and the composite is a fixed linear combination of the three z-scored indicators, the coefficient in column (4) is mechanically the weighted average of the coefficients in columns (1)–(3). The attenuation therefore does not hinge on the precise survey weights: weighting the three indicators equally yields a similarly flat slope of 2.127.

The preference-weighted composite is substantially different from the conventional Great Gatsby curve. The estimated difference is -10.899 (SE = 3.433, $p = 0.001$), therefore clearly statistically distinguishable from the conventional Great Gatsby relationship. At the same time, the composite slope is not statistically different from zero. Accounting for both sampling variation across states and uncertainty in the preference weights, its bootstrap standard error is 6.081, with a 95% percentile confidence interval of $[-7.850, 15.365]$. Taken together, these results question an association between inequality and social mobility as steep as the conventional Great Gatsby relationship. However, the data do not allow us to

distinguish a flat relationship from one of modest magnitude, so we cannot conclude that the relationship disappears altogether.

Figure 8: Standard vs. Preference-Weighted Great Gatsby Curve



Notes: Panel A plots the standard GGC using the RRS as the measure of intergenerational persistence. Panel B replaces it with a preference-weighted composite of income-based mobility indicators, where weights reflect normalized public support ratings from Part B of our survey. Both panels plot persistence against the state-level Gini coefficient from the Census 2000 Supplementary Survey (Hisnanick & Rogers, 2007). Bubble size is proportional to state population. Fitted lines and 95% confidence bands are from unweighted OLS.

Figure 8 graphically contrasts the conventional and preference-weighted Great Gatsby curves. Panel A shows the familiar upward-sloping relationship based on the rank-rank measure. States with higher inequality exhibit greater intergenerational persistence. Panel B presents a markedly different picture. When the three mobility indicators are combined using the weights elicited from public preferences, the fitted relationship is nearly flat. States that appear highly immobile under the conventional measure are repositioned along the vertical axis once AM and CER25 are accounted for. The Great Gatsby curve therefore depends on how social mobility is measured: the close link between inequality and low mobility found with the rank-rank slope does not carry over to a measure that reflects how the public weighs

different indicators.

6.2 State Rankings

The difference between the conventional and preference-weighted GGC reflects a broader pattern. The three indicators produce substantially different rankings of state income mobility. Table 12 reports the ten states whose ranks change most between the rank-rank slope and the preference-weighted index.[30]

Table 12: Largest Rank Changes: RRS vs. Preference-Weighted Index

State	RRS Rank (1)	Preference-Weighted Rank (2)	Δ Rank (3)
Nevada (NV)	7	39	$\downarrow$ 32
Alaska (AK)	9	36	$\downarrow$ 27
District of Columbia (DC)	26	4	$\uparrow$ 22
Arizona (AZ)	15	34	$\downarrow$ 19
Oregon (OR)	11	30	$\downarrow$ 19
Washington (WA)	10	28	$\downarrow$ 18
Florida (FL)	20	37	$\downarrow$ 17
Pennsylvania (PA)	37	21	$\uparrow$ 16
Louisiana (LA)	49	35	$\uparrow$ 14
Michigan (MI)	33	47	$\downarrow$ 14

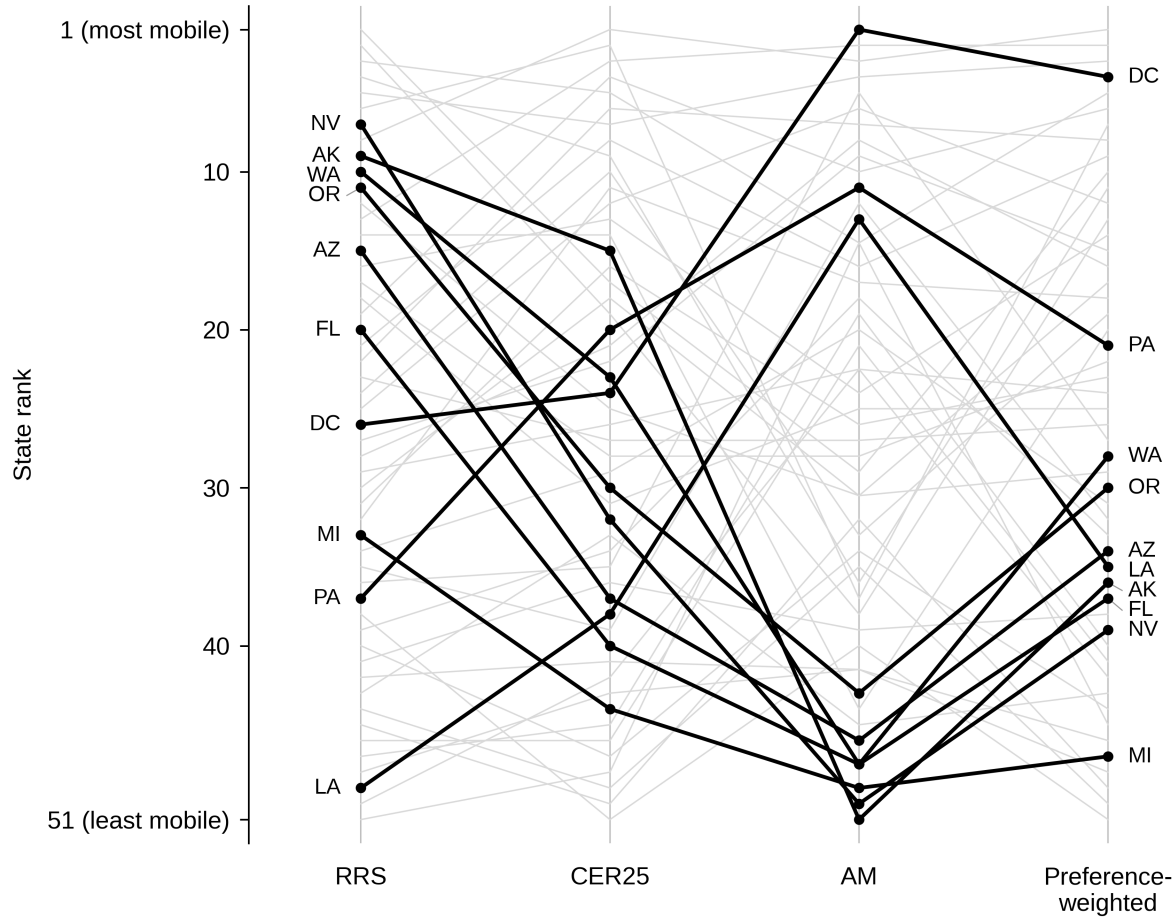
Notes: The table shows the ten states with the largest absolute rank change between the RRS and the preference-weighted index (rank 1 = most mobile). $\uparrow$ indicates that a state ranks higher (more mobile) and $\downarrow$ that it ranks lower under the preference-weighted index than under the RRS alone. Nebraska and New Jersey also change by 14 positions. The full ranking is reported in Table C.1.

States that fall in the ranking appear mobile under the RRS alone, but the apparent advantage does not extend to the other income mobility indicators. States that rise exhibit the opposite profile. The largest change is 32 positions (Nevada). The state-level rank changes are precisely estimated rather than artifacts of sampling variation: 32 of the 51 states have rank changes for which the 95% bootstrap confidence interval excludes zero, and the median confidence interval width is 11 rank positions. Figure 9 traces each state's rank across the three indicators and the preference-weighted composite, again highlighting the ten largest movers. These differences matter for policy whenever resources are allocated based on social mobility rankings. Suppose a program targets the five least mobile states: under the RRS, these are Alabama, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, and Ohio, whereas under the

[30]The full ranking for all 51 units is reported in Table C.1.

preference-weighted index they are Georgia, Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, and South Carolina. Only Ohio would be targeted under both measures.

Figure 9: State mobility rankings across indicators and the preference-weighted composite.



Notes: Each line traces a single state's rank (1 = most mobile). The ten states with the largest absolute rank change between the RRS and the preference-weighted composite are shown in bold.

7 Conclusion

Social mobility can be measured along several distinct dimensions and with different indicators. Rankings of places and groups can change substantially depending on which dimension and indicator is employed. This has potentially important implications for policy, including the targeting of areas with low opportunity and the evaluation of policies intended to increase equality of opportunity. Yet the choice of dimension and indicator is rarely informed by the preferences of those whom these measures are intended to affect. To inform this choice, this paper provides the first systematic evidence on how the public understands social mobility,

both across the dimensions along which mobility is commonly measured and across three prominent indicators of income mobility. We combine a social welfare framework with a pre-registered survey experiment on a broadly representative sample of US adults ($N = 1{,}002$), comprising a conjoint experiment on dimensions, a within-subject rating design on indicators, and a battery of belief elicitation questions. We complement these results with an expert sample of 99 researchers, allowing us to compare public preferences with those of researchers who study social mobility. Five sets of findings emerge.

First, the choice among mobility indicators is fundamentally normative rather than merely technical. Each of the three indicators is a welfare-sufficient statistic for a distinct social objective. The rank-rank slope (RRS) for origin independence, absolute mobility (AM) for generational progress, and CER25 for a prioritarian criterion that places greater weight on children from disadvantaged origins. These objectives can yield sharply different assessments of the same mobility pattern. For example, when a child from a disadvantaged family rises and a child from an advantaged family falls by the same number of rank positions, the RRS attributes exactly half of the measured welfare gain to the descent, AM treats the two movements as equal and opposite, and CER25 counts only the upward movement. In addition, the three indicators differ in how they balance competing normative axioms. The RRS and CER25 achieve positional purity at the expense of Pareto in child outcomes, whereas AM satisfies Pareto by sacrificing both positional purity and origin-sensitive priority. Choosing an indicator therefore entails choosing which normative principle to relax. In current practice, this choice is often made implicitly through disciplinary convention and/or data availability.

Second, the public's conception of social mobility is anchored in income. In forced trade-offs, switching a country's income mobility from low to high increases its probability of being preferred by 31.1 percentage points, approximately twice the effect of occupation (14.3 pp) and substantially larger than those of wealth (23.1 pp) and education (20.2 pp). The ordering income > wealth > education > occupation holds across every demographic subgroup examined, except for Democrats. Respondents' open-ended explanations provide further insight into this ordering. Instrumental reasoning is the most common justification (37.0 pp), and the relationships respondents describe are remarkably consistent, running from education to occupation to income to wealth.

Third, the indicator most prominent in the academic literature, the rank-rank slope, resonates least with the public. AM and CER25 each receive mean support ratings of approximately 81 on a 0–100 scale, compared with 64 for the RRS, a difference of roughly 0.75 standard deviations. Decomposing this difference suggests that approximately 70 percent

is associated with lower perceived fairness ratings. Taken together, the evidence indicates that the public conceptualizes social mobility primarily in terms of generational progress and upward movement from disadvantaged positions, rather than in terms of the statistical independence of children's and parents' income ranks.

Fourth, experts also largely share the public's relatively low support for the RRS, suggesting that the public response is not simply a consequence of unfamiliarity with the indicators. They rate CER25 highest (85.4), while placing the RRS (71.4) and AM (72.4) substantially below it. The RRS penalty is particularly pronounced among economists, who rate it 16.0 points below sociologists ($p = 0.003$) – a notable pattern given the prominence of the RRS in the academic literature. On dimensions, experts reproduce the public's ordering with comparable magnitudes and invoke a similar means–ends structure in their explanations.

Fifth, these public preferences have substantive implications for empirical applications. For example, the three income mobility indicators produce different conclusions about the relationship between inequality and social mobility (i.e., the Great Gatsby Curve). Intergenerational persistence measured by the RRS and CER25 rises with state-level inequality (slopes of 12.243 and 11.456), whereas persistence measured by AM falls with inequality (slope of -17.319). In more unequal states, a larger share of children out-earn their parents. Weighting these indicators by the public's stated preferences produces a Great Gatsby slope of 1.345. This estimate is statistically distinguishable from the conventional relationship (difference $= -10.899$; $p = 0.001$), and even weighting the indicators equally yields a similarly flat slope (2.127). The resulting state rankings also change substantially. The largest change is 32 positions, and 32 of the 51 units exhibit rank changes whose bootstrap confidence intervals exclude zero. Thus, the association between inequality and low social mobility that features prominently in academic and policy debates changes substantially when incorporating public preferences.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the indicator descriptions necessarily simplify complex statistical concepts into accessible language, and the mapping between the concepts respondents evaluated and any particular estimator is therefore imperfect. Second, our sample is restricted to the United States, leaving open whether the same preference ordering would emerge in countries with different institutional arrangements and social mobility experiences. Third, the expert sample is drawn predominantly from European and US institutions, which limits the extent to which these results can be interpreted as representative of the broader research community. Fourth, the Great Gatsby application relies on commuting-zone data aggregated to the US state level, and the resulting estimates should therefore be interpreted in light of this level of aggregation. Finally, the preference weights

are estimated from a single cross-section, leaving their stability over time and their responsiveness to changing economic conditions as important avenues for future research.

These limitations also suggest several directions for future work. Replicating the design across countries would establish whether the public's relatively weak resonance with the RRS is a general feature of social mobility perceptions or a consequence of the US institutional and economic context. Expanding the indicator set to include transition matrices, sibling correlations, and measures of inequality of opportunity would provide a more comprehensive map of the measurement space. Another approach would be to depart from the spectator view and incentivize the decisions by linking preferences for social mobility measures directly to experimental payoffs. Future work could also examine whether preference-weighted measures of mobility predict downstream attitudes and behaviors differently from conventional measures, including support for redistribution, institutional trust, and subjective well-being. Such analyses would test whether greater alignment between the measurement of social mobility and public conceptions improves our ability to understand the relationship between social mobility and related attitudes.

Taken together, these findings speak to the two concerns that motivate the paper. For policy, they identify the conception of social mobility that reflects public understanding: progress relative to one's parents and upward movement from disadvantaged positions, measured primarily in income. For research, they demonstrate that the operationalization of social mobility cannot be treated as a neutral choice. Application to the Great Gatsby curve further demonstrates that the choice of indicators can materially alter empirical relationships, changing the estimated association between inequality and social mobility substantially.

Importantly, these findings do not imply that indicators receiving less public support should be abandoned. The RRS and related measures provide important information about the intergenerational transmission of advantage and remain valuable precisely because different dimensions and indicators capture different aspects of social mobility. Reporting multiple measures therefore remains important for transparency and to foster our understanding of intergenerational persistence. The contribution of our findings is to make explicit a consideration that is often left implicit. When the choice of a mobility measure has normative consequences, the preferences of those whom the measure is intended to describe can provide relevant information. If social mobility statistics are intended to evaluate how well a society enables its citizens to improve their circumstances, then citizens themselves should have a voice in determining what is important to them.

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Appendix

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A Deviations from the PAP

First, we use the RRS rather than the IGE in our analysis because the RRS is more directly aligned with the theoretical social welfare framework. The descriptions in the survey align with both measures and they are empirically very closely connected. Second, we refrain from explicitly stating and testing hypotheses in the paper. For completion and to connect with the PAP in our analysis, we confirm hypotheses 1, 2, and 6 and reject hypotheses 3, 4, and 5. Third, the pre-registered Plackett-Luce model estimates are omitted for readability, as they add nothing to the interpretation. For completeness, using education as the reference category, income has a significantly positive coefficient (0.136; $p = 0.015$), wealth a significantly negative one (-0.171; $p = 0.004$), and occupation falls in between (-0.094; $p = 0.081$). Further, we did not preregister the full robustness and heterogeneity checks (only age and gender) and the social welfare foundation as well as the application section with the Great Gatsby Curve and the state rankings.

B Additional Survey Results

Here we present the additional results and analysis referred to in the main text, following the structure of the main text. Therefore, we start by heterogeneity and robustness of dimension and indicator results and end with the regression combining dimensions and indicators.

B.1 Dimension

B.1.1 Heterogeneity

Table B.1: AMCEs by Demographic Subgroup

Subgroup	N	Education	Occupation	Income	Wealth
Age: 18-34	297	0.200 (0.016)	0.156 (0.013)	0.306 (0.016)	0.213 (0.016)
Age: 35-54	334	0.189 (0.015)	0.140 (0.013)	0.305 (0.013)	0.251 (0.015)
Age: 55+	371	0.215 (0.014)	0.134 (0.012)	0.321 (0.013)	0.227 (0.014)
Gender: male	487	0.208 (0.012)	0.155 (0.010)	0.316 (0.011)	0.229 (0.012)
Gender: female	498	0.192 (0.012)	0.130 (0.010)	0.307 (0.012)	0.234 (0.013)
Race: White	630	0.208 (0.011)	0.149 (0.009)	0.317 (0.010)	0.229 (0.011)
Race: Black	117	0.205 (0.025)	0.134 (0.020)	0.305 (0.025)	0.244 (0.025)
No college	477	0.178 (0.012)	0.148 (0.011)	0.314 (0.012)	0.227 (0.013)
College+	521	0.225 (0.012)	0.138 (0.010)	0.308 (0.011)	0.234 (0.011)
Income tercile 1	328	0.182 (0.015)	0.153 (0.013)	0.294 (0.015)	0.220 (0.016)
Income tercile 2	329	0.215 (0.015)	0.141 (0.012)	0.329 (0.014)	0.228 (0.014)
Income tercile 3	328	0.207 (0.015)	0.137 (0.012)	0.310 (0.013)	0.242 (0.015)
Party: Democrat	319	0.237 (0.015)	0.156 (0.012)	0.305 (0.013)	0.220 (0.014)
Party: Independent	377	0.203 (0.015)	0.137 (0.012)	0.308 (0.013)	0.218 (0.015)
Party: Republican	291	0.169 (0.016)	0.133 (0.014)	0.322 (0.015)	0.258 (0.016)

Note: This table shows estimates for subgroup AMCEs with respect to age, gender, race, education, income, and political affiliation. Respondent-clustered standard errors in parentheses.

Table B.2: Key Demographic Interactions (OLS)

	Dependent variable: Profile Chosen		
	Gender	Education	Party Affiliation
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Education (High)	0.208***	0.178***	0.237***
	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.015)
Occupation (High)	0.155***	0.148***	0.156***
	(0.010)	(0.011)	(0.012)
Income (High)	0.316***	0.314***	0.305***
	(0.011)	(0.012)	(0.013)
Wealth (High)	0.229***	0.227***	0.220***
	(0.012)	(0.013)	(0.014)
Female	0.021		
	(0.013)		
Occupation x Female	−0.025		
	(0.014)		
College		−0.016	
		(0.013)	
Education x College		0.047**	
		(0.017)	
Republican			0.015
			(0.015)
Independent			0.020
			(0.014)
Education x Republican			−0.067**
			(0.022)
Wealth x Republican			0.038
			(0.021)
Constant	0.046***	0.065***	0.044***
	(0.008)	(0.010)	(0.009)
Observations	19,700	19,960	19,740
Respondents	985	998	987
R^2	0.211	0.212	0.213
Adjusted R^2	0.211	0.212	0.213

Note: This table reports the key interactions ($p < 0.1$); the remaining interactions are omitted for readability. The reference category for gender is male (non-binary and other are excluded). The reference category for education is below college and for party affiliation it is Democrat (Independents are omitted). Varying number of respondents due to missing sociodemographic information. Respondent-clustered standard errors are reported in parentheses. $^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$.

B.1.2 Robustness checks

Table B.3: Column Order Effects (OLS)

	Dependent variable: Profile Chosen
Education (High)	0.202***
	(0.009)
Occupation (High)	0.143***
	(0.007)
Income (High)	0.308***
	(0.008)
Wealth (High)	0.231***
	(0.009)
Position (right)	0.022**
	(0.008)
Constant	0.025
	(0.014)
Observations	20,040
Respondents	1,002
R^2	0.212
Adjusted R^2	0.211

Note: This table reports the OLS regression with position included as an additional control variable. The reference category is the left position. Respondent-clustered standard errors are reported in parentheses. $^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$.

Table B.4: Task Order Interactions (OLS)

	Dependent variable: Profile Chosen
Education (High)	0.297^{***}
	(0.012)
Occupation (High)	0.215^{***}
	(0.010)
Income (High)	0.306^{***}
	(0.010)
Wealth (High)	0.197^{***}
	(0.011)
Late Half (Tasks 6-10)	-0.196^{***}
	(0.012)
Education × Late Half	-0.054^{***}
	(0.015)
Occupation × Late Half	-0.053^{***}
	(0.014)
Income × Late Half	0.054^{***}
	(0.012)
Wealth × Late Half	0.075^{***}
	(0.012)
Constant	0.092^{***}
	(0.006)
Observations	20,040
Respondents	1,002
R^2	0.241
Adjusted R^2	0.241

Note: This table reports the AMCE regression separately for the early and late halves of the decisions. The reference category is the early half (i.e., the first five decisions). Respondent-clustered standard errors are reported in parentheses. $^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$.

Table B.5: Full vs. Restricted Sample (OLS)

	Dependent variable: Profile selected	
	Full sample	Restricted sample
	(1)	(2)
Education: High	0.202***	0.210***
	(0.009)	(0.007)
Occupation: High	0.143***	0.147***
	(0.007)	(0.007)
Income: High	0.311***	0.322***
	(0.008)	(0.007)
Wealth: High	0.231***	0.234***
	(0.009)	(0.007)
Constant	0.057***	0.044***
	(0.006)	(0.116)
Observations	20,040	17,360
Respondents	1,002	868
Adj. R^2 / Pseudo R^2	0.211	0.224

Note: This table shows the AMCEs for the social mobility dimensions split into the full sample and the restricted sample (i.e., those who failed the comprehension check). Each observation is a profile shown in a pairwise choice task (20 choices per respondent). Regressors are binary indicators for High mobility. Respondent-clustered standard errors in parentheses. $^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$.

B.2 Indicators

B.2.1 Heterogeneity

Table B.6: Support by Demographic Subgroup

Subgroup	N	CER25	AM	RRS	CER25-AM	AM-RRS
Age: 18-34	297	81.2	81.3	64.1	0.0	17.1
Age: 35-54	334	81.9	80.5	66.0	-1.3	15.8
Age: 55+	371	78.8	80.2	60.4	1.5	18.4
Gender: male	487	77.7	80.1	63.2	2.4	14.5
Gender: female	498	83.3	81.1	63.6	-2.2	19.8
Race: White	630	79.3	80.1	62.7	0.8	16.6
Race: Black	117	85.6	80.2	68.7	-5.5	17.0
No college	477	82.6	80.9	63.5	-1.7	19.1
College+	521	78.7	80.4	63.4	1.7	15.3
Income tercile 1	328	83.6	79.8	65.5	-3.7	18.1
Income tercile 2	328	79.8	81.2	61.2	1.4	18.6
Income tercile 3	327	78.5	80.7	63.9	2.1	14.7
Party: Democrat	319	86.1	81.7	67.3	-4.4	18.8
Party: Republican	291	74.2	81.1	58.6	6.9	15.5
Party: Independent	377	80.6	79.7	63.5	-0.9	17.1

Note: This table reports support ratings for the three indicators, as well as the gaps between CER25–AM and AM–RRS, by age, gender, race, education, income, and political affiliation.

Table B.7: Key Demographic Interactions (OLS)

	Dependent variable: Support (0-100)			
	Gender	Race	Education	Party Affiliation
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Constant (=AM)	80.133***	80.704***	80.914***	81.749***
	(0.813)	(0.610)	(0.860)	(0.966)
CER25	−2.384*	−0.848	1.709	4.361***
	(1.184)	(0.868)	(1.102)	(1.185)
RRS	−16.922***	−18.029***	-17.390***	-14.433***
	(1.355)	(1.027)	(1.377)	(1.574)
Female	0.985			
	(1.180)			
CER25 × Female	4.615**			
	(1.634)			
RRS × Female	−0.610			
	(1.964)			
Black		−0.542		
		(2.051)		
CER25 × Black		6.326*		
		(2.510)		
RRS × Black		6.542*		
		(3.222)		
College			−0.528	
			(1.175)	
CER25 × College			−3.434*	
			(1.627)	
RRS × College			0.373	
			(1.952)	
Republican				−0.660
				(1.417)
CER25 × Republican				−11.295***
				(2.069)
RRS × Republican				−8.021**
				(2.465)
Observations	2,955	3,002	2,994	2,961
Respondents	985	1,002	998	987
Adj. R^2	0.117	0.116	0.114	0.133

Note: This table reports the key interactions ($p < 0.1$), the remaining interactions are omitted for readability. The reference category for gender is male (non-binary and other are excluded). The reference category for race are all non-Black, for education it is below college, and for party affiliation it is Democrat (Independents are omitted). Varying number of respondents due to missing sociodemographic information. Respondent-clustered standard errors are reported in parentheses. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

B.2.2 Robustness checks

Table B.8: Indicator support by Randomization Order

Indicator Order	N	CER25	AM	RRS
B1 (CER25/AM/RRS)	167	81.5	81.5	68.0
B2 (CER25/RRS/AM)	167	80.3	80.8	64.7
B3 (AM/CER25/RRS)	167	79.0	81.3	65.7
B4 (AM/RRS/CER25)	167	81.9	79.3	63.2
B5 (RRS/AM/CER25)	166	81.9	80.0	58.0
B6 (RRS/CER25/AM)	168	78.6	81.0	60.7
ANOVA				
CER: F = 0.78, p = 0.567				
AM: F = 0.34, p = 0.889				
RRS: F = 2.99, p = 0.011				

Note: This table reports mean support by the order in which the indicators were presented. With three indicators, there are six possible orders. The bottom row reports the ANOVA results for each indicator.

Table B.9: Order Effects (OLS)

	Dependent variable: Support (0-100)
Constant (= AM)	82.785^{***}
	(1.190)
CER25	-0.109
	(0.817)
RRS	-17.265^{***}
	(0.976)
B2 (CER25/RRS/AM)	-1.725
	(1.561)
B3 (AM/CER25/RRS)	-1.681
	(1.688)
B4 (AM/RRS/CER25)	-2.200
	(1.630)
B5 (RRS/AM/CER25)	-3.675^{*}
	(1.635)
B6 (RRS/CER25/AM)	-3.589^{*}
	(1.705)
Observations	3,006
Respondents	1,002
Adj. R^2	0.114

Note: This table reports the OLS regression with indicator order included as additional control variables. The reference category is the first order (B1 = CER25/AM/RRS). Respondent-clustered standard errors are reported in parentheses. $^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$.

Table B.10: Association Between Mobility Perceptions and Support for Indicators

	Dependent Variable: Support (0-100)		
	CER25	AM	RRS
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Panel A: Mobility Experience (Income)			
Coefficient	−0.022	0.062**	−0.012
Std. Error	(0.026)	(0.022)	(0.032)
Panel B: US Mobility (Income)			
Coefficient	−0.068*	0.046	−0.067
Std. Error	(0.029)	(0.025)	(0.036)
Panel C: Government Scope (Income)			
Coefficient	0.303***	0.109***	0.226***
Std. Error	(0.027)	(0.024)	(0.035)
Panel D: Own Trajectory			
Coefficient	0.158***	0.070***	0.156***
Std. Error	(0.030)	(0.025)	(0.037)
Observations (each panel)	1,002	1,002	1,002

Note: This table reports regressions of support ratings. Each cell presents the results of a bivariate regression of support on the respective measure of mobility perceptions. *Panel A:* Respondents' own experienced social mobility relative to their parents. *Panel B:* Perceived level of social mobility in the contemporary United States. *Panel C:* Perceived scope of government policy in increasing social mobility. *Panel D:* The extent to which respondents believe their life trajectory would have differed had they been born into different circumstances. Standard errors are reported in parentheses. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

Table B.11: Full vs. Restricted Sample

	Full sample (1)	Restricted sample (2)
AM	80.641 (18.512)	80.705 (17.683)
CER25	80.532 (21.684)	80.676 (21.182)
RRS	63.375 (27.088)	64.037 (26.332)
Observations	1,002	868

Note: This table compares the mean (SD) support for each policy between the full and restricted samples.

B.3 Combining Dimensions and indicators

Table B.12: Interacting Dimensions with Indicators

	Dependent variable: Support (0-100)
Constant (= AM + Education first)	79.303***
	(1.040)
CER25	3.694**
	(1.291)
RRS	−14.090***
	(1.648)
Occupation first	1.724
	(1.852)
Income first	0.979
	(1.535)
Wealth first	3.314*
	(1.506)
CER25 x Occupation first	−4.163
	(2.561)
RRS x Occupation first	−7.165*
	(3.161)
CER25 x Income first	−3.624
	(1.985)
RRS x Income first	−3.345
	(2.447)
CER25 x Wealth first	−9.092***
	(2.188)
RRS x Wealth first	−5.262*
	(2.564)
Observations	3,006
Respondents	1,002
Adj. R^2	0.116

Note: This table reports the regression results for the full interaction between dimensions and indicators. The reference category is AM, with education as the first reported dimension. Respondent-clustered standard errors are reported in parentheses. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

C Application

This section describes in detail the construction of the dataset used to estimate the Great Gatsby Curve, assesses the robustness of our aggregation approach, and presents the full ranking of states.

C.1 Data and Construction

We draw state-level measures of income mobility from the Opportunity Insights project (https://opportunityinsights.org/data/). The RRS and CER25 values come from Chetty, Hendren, Kline, and Saez (2014), who link federal income tax records across generations. Their baseline specification regresses children's income ranks on parents' income ranks at the commuting-zone level. AM values come from Chetty et al. (2017), who combine CPS and tax data to estimate the share of children earning more in real terms than their parents.

We aggregate the CER25 and the RRS values from commuting zones to states using 2000 population weights, following the assignment of Chetty, Hendren, Kline, and Saez (2014) of each CZ to a single state. Because Chetty, Hendren, Kline, and Saez (2014) define parent and child ranks relative to the national income distribution, CZ-level mobility estimates are comparable across CZs and their population-weighted average is a consistent estimator of state-level CER25. For the RRS, the population-weighted CZ average approximates the slope that would be obtained by pooling micro-data at the state level, but does not recover the between-CZ covariance component of parent-child rank variation. Since Chetty, Hendren, Kline, and Saez (2014) do not release state-level estimates or micro-data, this aggregation is the only feasible route to state-level slopes. We assess the resulting aggregation error directly in Section C.2 and find that it does not materially affect the cross-state Gatsby relationship.

State-level inequality is measured by the Gini coefficient of household income in 2000, computed by Hisnanick and Rogers (2007) directly from the Census 2000 Supplementary Survey. The reference year 2000 aligns with the window over which parental income is measured in Chetty, Hendren, Kline, and Saez (2014).

Each of the three mobility indicators is standardized via z-scores so that all three enter the composite on a common scale, with signs oriented such that higher values uniformly indicate lower social mobility.

The preference-weighted index combining all three indicators is

$$M_s^{\text{pref}} \;=\; \hat{\alpha}_{\text{RRS}} \cdot \widetilde{M}_s^{\text{RRS}} \;+\; \hat{\alpha}_{\text{AM}} \cdot \widetilde{M}_s^{\text{AM}} \;+\; \hat{\alpha}_{\text{CER}} \cdot \widetilde{M}_s^{\text{CER}}\,, \tag{9}$$

where $\widetilde{M}_s^k$ denotes the normalized value of indicator k in state s and the weights $\hat{\alpha}_k$ are normalized mean support ratings from Part B ($\hat{\alpha}_{\text{RRS}} = 0.282$, $\hat{\alpha}_{\text{AM}} = 0.359$, $\hat{\alpha}_{\text{CER}} = 0.359$).

C.2 Robustness of the Aggregation

A natural concern about the analysis of the Great Gatsby curve is that the rank-rank slope and CER25 are aggregated from commuting zone (CZ) to state level using population weights, which need not exactly recover the slope a researcher would obtain by pooling microdata at the state level. The state-level slope decomposes into a within-CZ component, which the population-weighted CZ average consistently estimated, and a between-CZ covariance term that the aggregation does not capture. We assess whether this between-CZ component materially distorts the cross-state Gatsby relationship through three diagnostics.

First, the substantive finding that the income-based indicators disagree in sign about the inequality–mobility relationship does not depend on the aggregation procedure. Re-aggregating CZ-level slopes using unweighted averages, child-cohort weights, or the within-state median preserves the sign pattern and yields preference-weighted composite slopes ranging from 1.345 under the population-weighted baseline to 2.836 under the median specification. These differences are small relative to the magnitude of the individual-indicator slopes, which range from 12.243 to -17.319.

Second, we run a CZ-level placebo test for the two indicators observable at both geographic scales. Regressing z-scored CZ-level RRS and CER25 on the state-level Gini coefficient, with standard errors clustered at the state level, yields coefficients of 18.981 (SE = 6.621) and 25.244 (SE = 9.436), respectively, across 709 CZs. These estimates agree in sign and statistical significance with the corresponding state-level results.

Third, the between-CZ component can generate bias in the cross-state regression only if within-state dispersion in CZ-level slopes is correlated with state-level inequality. We find no clear evidence of such a relationship. The population-weighted within-state standard deviation of CZ-level rank-rank slopes correlates with the state Gini coefficient at $r = -0.105$ (95% CI $[-0.378, 0.184]$, $p = 0.476$), using the 48 states with at least two CZs.

Taken together, these diagnostics indicate that the attenuation of the preference-weighted Great Gatsby relationship is not generated by CZ-to-state aggregation error. The central finding instead reflects systematic sign disagreement across the mobility indicators, with the negative association for AM offsetting the positive associations for the RRS and CER25.

C.3 Full state ranking

Table C.1: Full State Rankings

State	RRS (1)	CER25 (2)	AM (3)	Pref. (4)	Δ Rank (5)
Nevada	7	32	50	39	↓ 32
Alaska	9	15	51	36	↓ 27
District of Columbia	26	24	1	4	↑ 22
Arizona	15	37	46	34	↓ 19
Oregon	11	30	43	30	↓ 19
Washington	10	23	47	28	↓ 18
Florida	20	40	47	37	↓ 17
Pennsylvania	37	20	11	21	↑ 16
Louisiana	49	38	13	35	↑ 14
Michigan	33	44	49	47	↓ 14
Nebraska	22	6	7	8	↑ 14
New Jersey	32	11	17	18	↑ 14
Georgia	38	51	40	51	↓ 13
Iowa	19	4	10	6	↑ 13
Massachusetts	25	12	6	12	↑ 13
Minnesota	21	8	16	9	↑ 12
New York	28	21	8	16	↑ 12
Rhode Island	27	22	9	15	↑ 12
California	2	19	38	13	↓ 11
South Dakota	13	3	2	2	↑ 11
Arkansas	36	35	5	27	↑ 9
Hawaii	1	17	29	10	↓ 9
Maryland	50	42	22	42	↑ 8
Wisconsin	31	16	26	23	↑ 8
Alabama	47	45	19	40	↑ 7
Idaho	4	9	36	11	↓ 7
New Mexico	18	31	25	25	↓ 7
North Dakota	8	1	3	1	↑ 7
Mississippi	51	48	14	45	↑ 6
Missouri	39	34	18	33	↑ 6
South Carolina	44	49	35	50	↓ 6
Vermont	14	14	44	20	↓ 6
Colorado	12	25	30	17	↓ 5
Delaware	46	46	21	41	↑ 5
Kansas	24	10	33	19	↑ 5
Maine	17	28	28	22	↓ 5
Oklahoma	29	26	22	24	↑ 5
North Carolina	45	50	32	49	↓ 4
Tennessee	40	47	34	44	↓ 4
Virginia	42	41	41	46	↓ 4
Connecticut	34	29	20	31	↑ 3
Indiana	41	36	39	38	↑ 3
Kentucky	35	39	12	32	↑ 3
Texas	23	27	27	26	↓ 3
Montana	5	7	4	3	↑ 2
New Hampshire	16	13	24	14	↑ 2
Utah	3	5	14	5	↓ 2
West Virginia	30	18	30	29	↑ 1
Wyoming	6	2	37	7	↓ 1
Illinois	43	33	45	43	0
Ohio	48	43	41	48	0

Notes: Rankings of all 51 states (including the District of Columbia) under each mobility indicator and the preference-weighted composite (rank 1 = most mobile). The table is sorted by column (5), the absolute rank change between the RRS and the preference-weighted composite. ↑ indicates that a state ranks higher (more mobile) and ↓ that it ranks lower under the preference-weighted composite than under the RRS alone. Rankings are based on z-scored indicators; tied AM values receive the same rank. The preference-weighted composite applies weights from normalized mean support ratings (RRS/AM/CER25 = 0.282/0.359/0.359).

D Welfare Foundations and Axiomatic Analysis

This appendix contains the formal material behind Section 3. Appendix D.1 proves Propositions 1-5. Appendix D.2 records four measurement-regularity axioms and establishes which indicators satisfy them. Appendix D.3 states five evaluative axioms on which the three mobility indicators disagree. Appendix D.4 verifies which indicator satisfies which.

D.1 Proofs of Propositions 1-5

Proof of Proposition 1. Copula ranks are uniform in every society, so $\mathbb{E}(u) = \mathbb{E}(v) = \frac{1}{2}$ and $\mathrm{Var}(u) = \mathrm{Var}(v) = \frac{1}{12}$. Hence $\mathbb{E}[f(u)]$ and $\mathbb{E}[g(v)]$ are constants across societies, absorbed into κ_0', and

$$W_\Phi = \kappa_0' + d\,\mathbb{E}[uv] = \kappa_0' + d\big[\mathrm{Cov}(u,v) + \tfrac{1}{4}\big]\,.$$

The rank–rank slope is $\gamma = \mathrm{Cov}(u,v)/\,\mathrm{Var}(u) = 12\,\mathrm{Cov}(u,v)$, so $W_\Phi = \kappa_0 + \frac{d}{12}\gamma$ with $\kappa_0 = \kappa_0' + \frac{d}{4}$, strictly decreasing in γ for $d < 0$. Every member of the class is therefore an increasing affine transformation of $-\gamma$, which is the definition of welfare-sufficiency. For the canonical kernel, $\Phi_{\mathrm{RRS}}(u,v) = -12uv + 6u + 6v - 3$, so

$$W = -12\,\mathbb{E}[uv] + 6\cdot\tfrac{1}{2} + 6\cdot\tfrac{1}{2} - 3 = -12\big[\mathrm{Cov}(u,v) + \tfrac{1}{4}\big] + 3 = -12\,\mathrm{Cov}(u,v) = -\gamma.$$

Proof of Proposition 2. By hypothesis the kernel takes at most three values, $\Phi = \psi(\mathrm{sign}(y^c - y^p))$. The monotonicity hypothesis is that Φ is *non-decreasing* in y^c. Since Φ is a step function of $\mathrm{sign}(y^c - y^p)$, strict monotonicity is not available and none is required. Non-decreasingness orders the values, $\psi(-1) \le \psi(0) \le \psi(1)$, and non-constancy makes $b := \psi(1) - \psi(-1) > 0$. Because $y^c - y^p$ has no atom at zero the tie value $\psi(0)$ is irrelevant, and with $a := \psi(-1)$,

$$W_\Phi = \psi(-1)\Pr(y^c < y^p) + \psi(1)\Pr(y^c > y^p) = a + b\,\mathrm{AM}(F).$$

For the canonical kernel $\Phi_{\mathrm{AM}} = \mathbf{1}\{y^c > y^p\}$ we have $a = 0$, $b = 1$, so $W_{\Phi_{\mathrm{AM}}}(F) = \mathrm{AM}(F)$ exactly.

Proof of Proposition 3. By iterated expectations, and using the fact that u is uniform on $[0,1]$ under the maintained convention,

$$W_\omega = \mathbb{E}[\omega(u)\,\mathbb{E}(v \mid u)] = \int_0^1 \omega(u)m(u)\,du.$$

If $m(u) = \delta + \gamma u$ and $\int_0^1 \omega = 1$, then $W_\omega = \delta + \gamma\bar{q} = m(\bar{q})$ with $\bar{q} = \int_0^1 u\,\omega(u)\,du$. For nonincreasing ω, let $\Omega(x) = \int_0^x \omega$ denote the CDF of the weights. Ω is concave with $\Omega(1) = 1$, hence $\Omega(x) \geq x$ on $[0,1]$, and by integration by parts $\bar{q} = 1 - \int_0^1 \Omega(u)\,du \leq 1 - \int_0^1 u\,du = \frac{1}{2}$.

Remark D.1 (Scope of Proposition 3). Proposition 3 identifies CER25 with a prioritarian evaluation of $m(\cdot)$ at a low origin, but the identification comes with a caveat. If m is linear, then under the within-society convention $CER_{25} = \frac{1}{2} - \gamma/4$, and every prioritarian evaluator ranks societies exactly as $-\gamma$ does. Empirically the linear case is a poor description of the data. Taking $m(\cdot)$ to be estimated nonparametrically, as the sample sizes available in administrative data permit and as is standard, so that curvature is not assumed away at the estimation stage, the rank–rank slope and CER25 correlate at $r = 0.68$ across states rather than perfectly (Table 10).

Proof of Proposition 4. The class of function 6 is linear in the kernel, so a convex combination of kernels induces the same convex combination of welfare values. Each standardisation $\widetilde{W}_k = (W_k - \mu_k)/\sigma_k$ is an increasing affine map, and an increasing affine transformation of a kernel in the class is again a kernel in the class, so $W_\alpha = \sum_k \alpha_k \widetilde{W}_k$ has kernel $\sum_k (\alpha_k/\sigma_k)\Phi_k$ plus a constant, which lies in the class of 6.

Proof of Proposition 5. Throughout, $u_\ell < \frac{1}{2} < u_h$ and $v_\ell < v_h$.

(i) RRS (Origin Independence) With $\Phi_{\mathrm{RRS}}(u,v) = -12(u - \frac{1}{2})(v - \frac{1}{2})$,

$$\Delta W^{\uparrow}_{\mathrm{RRS}} = -12(u_\ell - \tfrac{1}{2})(v_h - \tfrac{1}{2}) - \big[-12(u_\ell - \tfrac{1}{2})(v_\ell - \tfrac{1}{2})\big] = 12(u_\ell - \tfrac{1}{2})(v_\ell - v_h) > 0,$$
$$\Delta W^{\downarrow}_{\mathrm{RRS}} = -12(u_h - \tfrac{1}{2})(v_\ell - \tfrac{1}{2}) - \big[-12(u_h - \tfrac{1}{2})(v_h - \tfrac{1}{2})\big] = 12(u_h - \tfrac{1}{2})(v_h - v_\ell) > 0,$$

the first because $u_\ell < \frac{1}{2}$ and $v_\ell < v_h$, the second because $u_h > \frac{1}{2}$. Summing, $\Delta W_{\mathrm{RRS}} = 12(v_h - v_\ell)(u_h - u_\ell) > 0$, and the downward-attribution share is

$$D(\Phi_{\mathrm{RRS}}) = \frac{\Delta W^{\downarrow}_{\mathrm{RRS}}}{\Delta W_{\mathrm{RRS}}} = \frac{12(u_h - \frac{1}{2})(v_h - v_\ell)}{12(v_h - v_\ell)(u_h - u_\ell)} = \frac{u_h - \frac{1}{2}}{u_h - u_\ell},$$

which equals $\frac{1}{2}$ when the exchange is symmetric around the median, $u_h - \frac{1}{2} = \frac{1}{2} - u_\ell$.

(ii) Absolute Mobility (Generational Progress). By definition, the exchange is reference-crossing. The ascending child crosses her parental reference from below and the descending child crosses hers from above, so with $\varepsilon = 1/n$,

$$\Delta W^{\uparrow}_{\mathrm{AM}} = \varepsilon > 0, \qquad \Delta W^{\downarrow}_{\mathrm{AM}} = -\varepsilon < 0, \qquad \Delta W_{\mathrm{AM}} = 0.$$

(iii) CER25 (Prioritarian). With $\Phi_\omega(u,v) = \omega(u)v$,

$$\Delta W_\omega^{\uparrow} = \omega(u_\ell)(v_h - v_\ell) \ \geq 0, \qquad \Delta W_\omega^{\downarrow} = -\,\omega(u_h)(v_h - v_\ell) \ \leq 0,$$

with equality in each case if and only if the weight vanishes at u_ℓ, respectively u_h. The net effect is

$$\Delta W_\omega = \big[\omega(u_\ell) - \omega(u_h)\big](v_h - v_\ell) \ \geq 0,$$

strictly positive whenever the disadvantaged origin receives strictly greater weight, which holds for any strictly decreasing ω.

D.2 Measurement Axioms

We begin with four regularity requirements. They ensure that the evaluator depends on a society only through the distribution of family outcomes, is invariant to population replication, varies continuously with that distribution, and admits consistent aggregation.

Axiom 1 (Anonymity; A)**.** W depends on a society only through its joint distribution F; families with identical (y^p, y^c) pairs are interchangeable.

Axiom 2 (Replication invariance; R)**.** W is unchanged when the population is replicated k times, for every $k \in \mathbb{N}$.

Axiom 3 (Continuity; C)**.** If $F_n \Rightarrow F$ then $W(F_n) \to W(F)$.

Axiom 4 (Separability; S)**.** For all $F, G, H \in \mathcal{F}$ and $\lambda \in (0,1]$,

$$W(F) \geq W(G) \iff W\big(\lambda F + (1-\lambda)H\big) \geq W\big(\lambda G + (1-\lambda)H\big).$$

A subpopulation common to two societies does not affect their ranking.

Proposition D.1 (Measurement regularity)**.** *W_{RRS}, W_{AM}, W_ω (including CER25), and every mixture W_α satisfy Axioms 1–3 on $\mathcal{F}$. Axiom 4 is satisfied by W_{AM} and violated by W_{RRS} and W_ω.*

Proofs:

Anonymity and replication invariance. All four evaluators are defined as functionals of F alone and are invariant to relabeling of families, so Axiom 1 holds. Replicating the population leaves F unchanged, hence leaves every functional of F unchanged, so Axiom 2 holds.

Continuity. For W_{RRS} and W_ω the relevant functionals are the copula moments $\mathbb{E}_C[uv]$ and

$\int_0^1 \omega(u)m(u)du$, which are weakly continuous on $\mathcal{F}$ because the marginals are continuous and the rank transformations are therefore continuous in the topology of weak convergence. For W_{AM} the kernel is the indicator of the open set $\{y^c > y^p\}$. Its only discontinuity is on $\{y^c = y^p\}$, which has probability zero under the maintained no-atom assumption.

Separability holds for AM. The kernel $\mathbf{1}\{y^c > y^p\}$ is a fixed function of (y^p, y^c) that does not depend on F, so W_{AM} is affine in F: $\text{AM}(\lambda F + (1-\lambda)H) = \lambda\text{AM}(F) + (1-\lambda)\text{AM}(H)$. Hence $\text{AM}(\lambda F + (1-\lambda)H) - \text{AM}(\lambda G + (1-\lambda)H) = \lambda[\text{AM}(F) - \text{AM}(G)]$, which has the same sign as $\text{AM}(F) - \text{AM}(G)$, and the ranking is preserved in both directions.

Separability fails for W_{RRS} and W_ω. These evaluators are *not* affine in F. Their kernels are functions of $(u, v) = (F_p(y^p), F_c(y^c))$, so the kernel itself depends on the society being evaluated. Mixing with a common population H changes the marginals and hence the rank transformation applied to every family. They are affine in the copula, but the map $F \mapsto C_F$ is not affine. Table D.1 gives an explicit counterexample. Take $\lambda = \frac{1}{2}$ and let H consist of the two families $E_1 = (2, 1)$ and $E_2 = (2.5, 1.5)$, so that $F' = \frac{1}{2}F + \frac{1}{2}H$ and $G' = \frac{1}{2}G + \frac{1}{2}H$. Before H is added, G is strictly more mobile than F on both evaluators ($\gamma_F = +1$ vs. $\gamma_G = -1$), and $CER(0)$ equals 0 in F vs. 1 in G. The added families enter above A but below C so the rank transformation is perturbed asymmetrically, and after H is added both orderings are strictly reversed. $\gamma_{F'}$ is 0.4 while $\gamma_{G'}$ is 0.8, and $CER(0)$ equals 2 in F' and 0 in G'. The table exhibits the failure for $CER(0)$ and, by the same rank displacement, for any ω concentrated on the lowest origins. For the class of nonincreasing ω as a whole the failure follows from the non-affineness of $F \mapsto C_F$ established above.

D.3 Evaluative Axioms

This section states and evaluates five axioms that capture principles about what constitutes a socially desirable pattern of social mobility.

Axiom 5 (Pareto in parent outcomes; PP)**.** If F' is a parent improvement of F, then

$$W(F') \geq W(F).$$

Axiom 5 is the weakest Pareto principle available in this setting. It requires only that a society cannot become socially worse when every parent is at least as well off as before and at least one parent is better off, holding children's outcomes fixed. It does not require strict welfare gains, only that unanimous improvements are never judged harmful.

Table D.1: Separability counterexample for W_{RRS} and W_{ω}

		Parent		Child			
Society	Family	Income	Rank	Income	Rank	$CER(0)$	Rank–rank γ
F	A	1	0	2	0	0	$+1$
	B	8	1	7	1		
G	C	3	0	16	1	1	-1
	D	8	1	6	0		
Adding $H = \{E_1, E_2\}$, $E_1 = (2, 1)$, $E_2 = (2.5, 1.5)$, *to both societies* ($\lambda = \frac{1}{2}$)							
F'	A	1	0	2	2	2	$+0.4$
	E_1	2	1	1	0		
	E_2	2.5	2	1.5	1		
	B	8	3	7	3		
G'	E_1	2	0	1	0	0	$+0.8$
	E_2	2.5	1	1.5	1		
	C	3	2	16	3		
	D	8	3	6	2		

Note: $CER(0)$ is the child rank of the family at the lowest origin rank; γ is the OLS slope of child rank on parent rank. Ranks are integers $0, \ldots, n-1$. Before H is added, G is strictly more mobile than F on both evaluators (γ: -1 vs. $+1$; $CER(0)$: 1 vs. 0). After H is added both orderings are strictly reversed (γ: $+0.4$ vs. $+0.8$; $CER(0)$: 2 vs. 0). AM, by contrast, mixes linearly and is exactly tied in both comparisons: $\mathrm{AM}(F) = \mathrm{AM}(G) = \frac{1}{2}$, $\mathrm{AM}(E_1) = \mathrm{AM}(E_2) = 0$, and $\mathrm{AM}(F') = \mathrm{AM}(G') = \frac{1}{4}$.

Axiom 6 (Pareto in child outcomes; PC)**.** If F' is a child improvement of F, then

$$W(F') \geq W(F).$$

Axiom 6 is the same as Axiom 5 but for child outcomes, holding parental outcomes fixed.

Axiom 7 (Monotonicity; M)**.** Given that a change increases (decreases) welfare, a larger change leads to a larger increase (decrease) in welfare

This axioms reflects the notion that changes in welfare should be sensitive to the magnitude of the underling changes in income and/or rank.

Axiom 8 (Positional purity; X)**.** W depends on a society only through its copula:

$$C_F = C_{F'} \quad \Longrightarrow \quad W(F) = W(F').$$

Axiom 8 formalizes the view that social mobility is fundamentally about relative positions rather than income levels. Two societies with identical parent–child rank relationships are therefore evaluated identically, even if their income distributions differ substantially.

Axiom 9 (Priority to disadvantaged origins; D)**.** Let $G(u_\ell, u_h)$ be the welfare change from a reference-crossing elementary progressive rank exchange between origins $u_\ell < u_h$.[31] Then $G(u_\ell, u_h) \geq 0$, and for every $t > 0$ with $u_h + t \leq 1$,

$$G(u_\ell, u_h) > 0 \implies G(u_\ell, u_h) \geq G(u_\ell + t, u_h + t),$$

with strict inequality for at least one pair and shift.

Axiom 9 captures the principle that the same upward step counts for more the further down it starts. The first part orders origins. The second requires that priority be concentrated at the bottom, so that sliding a progressive exchange up the origin distribution, holding both gaps fixed, cannot raise its social value. An evaluator satisfying only the first part may credit a five-rank climb from the fifteenth percentile and one from the eighty-fifth identically, and so may purchase its measured mobility anywhere in the distribution.

[31] The exchange swaps the child ranks of two families, giving the child of the lower origin u_ℓ the higher rank v_h and the child of the higher origin u_h the rank v_ℓ. Following the transfer principles of inequality measurement, it is *elementary* because only two families are involved and *progressive* because child rank passes from the more to the less advantaged origin. Being a swap, it leaves both rank marginals unchanged. It is *reference-crossing* if the ascending child thereby comes to exceed their parental reference and the descending child comes to fall below theirs.

D.4 Axiom Satisfaction

Proposition D.2 (Axiom satisfaction of the three conceptions)**.** *Let W_{RRS} be the evaluator associated with any kernel in class (7) with $d < 0$, let $W_{\mathrm{AM}}(F) = \Pr_F(y^c > y^p)$, and let $W_\omega(F) = \mathbb{E}_F[\omega(u)v]$ with $\omega \geq 0$ nonincreasing, non-constant, and constant on $[\bar{u}, 1]$ for some $\bar{u} < 1$, all under the within-society convention. Then:*

(i) ***RRS (Origin independence).*** *W_{RRS} satisfies Axioms 7 and 8. It violates Axioms 5, 6 and 9.*

(ii) ***AM (Generational progress).*** *W_{AM} satisfies Axiom 6. It violates Axioms 5, 7, 8 and 9.*

(iii) ***CER25 (Prioritarian evaluation).*** *W_ω satisfies Axioms 7, 8 and 9. It violates Axioms 5 and 6.*

Proof. (i) RRS (Origin independence).

Axiom 7. For the canonical kernel $\partial\Phi_{\mathrm{RRS}}/\partial v = -12(u - \frac{1}{2})$, which is nonzero for every $u \neq \frac{1}{2}$, so $\Phi_{\mathrm{RRS}}(u, \cdot)$ is strictly monotone in v and the welfare change is strictly increasing in the magnitude of the rank movement. Monotonicity holds.

Axiom 8. By the proof of Proposition 1, $W_{\mathrm{RRS}} = \kappa_0' + d\,\mathbb{E}_C[uv]$, a functional of the copula alone, so Axiom 8 holds.

Axiom 6. Satisfying Axiom 8 already forces a violation. We give the construction explicitly because it is reused below. Take $2n$ families in two blocks. Block L has the n lowest origin ranks and initially holds the n highest child ranks; block H has the n highest origin ranks and initially holds the n lowest. Order the child incomes $c_1 < \cdots < c_{2n}$ and choose $\Delta > c_{2n} - c_1$. Construct F' by giving the block-H child who held c_i $(i \leq n)$ the income $c_{i+n} + \Delta$, and the block-L child who held c_{i+n} the income $c_i + \Delta$. Every child is strictly richer, since $c_{i+n} + \Delta > c_i$ and, by the choice of Δ, $c_i + \Delta > c_{i+n}$. The child marginal is the original one translated by Δ, so the change is purely positional: the two blocks have exchanged the top and bottom halves of the child rank distribution. Writing $\bar{u}_H > \bar{u}_L$ and $\bar{v}_H > \bar{v}_L$ for the block means,

$$\Delta\mathbb{E}[uv] = \big(\bar{u}_H\bar{v}_H + \bar{u}_L\bar{v}_L\big) - \big(\bar{u}_H\bar{v}_L + \bar{u}_L\bar{v}_H\big) = (\bar{u}_H - \bar{u}_L)(\bar{v}_H - \bar{v}_L) > 0,$$

so $\Delta W_{\mathrm{RRS}} = d\,(\bar{u}_H - \bar{u}_L)(\bar{v}_H - \bar{v}_L) < 0$. A unanimous child improvement has strictly reduced welfare.

Axiom 5. The mirror construction of the previous proof. Take two families with parental ranks $u_1 < u_2$ and child ranks $v_1 > v_2$. Raise the income of parent 1 above that of parent 2, holding all child incomes fixed. This is a parent improvement. The parental ranks swap, so the family holding the higher child rank now also holds the higher parental rank, $\mathbb{E}[uv]$ rises, and $W_{\mathrm{RRS}} = \kappa_0' + d\,\mathbb{E}[uv]$ falls.

Axiom 9. Since $d < 0$, the kernel is strictly submodular, so for a progressive exchange between origins $u_\ell < u_h$,

$$G_{\mathrm{RRS}}(u_\ell, u_h) = d\big[u_\ell v_h + u_h v_\ell - (u_\ell v_\ell + u_h v_h)\big] = -d\,(u_h - u_\ell)(v_h - v_\ell) > 0,$$

and the ordering requirement holds strictly. But this depends on the origins only through the gap $u_h - u_\ell$, so $G_{\mathrm{RRS}}(u_\ell + t, u_h + t) = G_{\mathrm{RRS}}(u_\ell, u_h)$ for every shift t. An exchange between the fifteenth and twentieth percentiles is credited exactly as much as one between the eighty-fifth and ninetieth. The strictness required by the second part fails, and with it Axiom 9.

(ii) AM (Generational progress).

Axiom 6. Under any child-improvement coupling, $\mathbf{1}\{Y^{c\prime} > Y^p\} \geq \mathbf{1}\{Y^c > Y^p\}$ pointwise, so W_{AM} is weakly increasing and Axiom 6 holds.

Axiom 5. Take a family with $y^c > y^p$ and raise the parental income above y^c, holding child incomes fixed. The indicator falls from one to zero and welfare decreases.

Axiom 7. The kernel is constant on $\{y^c > y^p\}$ and on $\{y^c < y^p\}$, so it does not distinguish shallow from deep gains or losses. Monotonicity fails.

Axiom 8. Child ranks are invariant to strictly increasing transformations of child income, so scaling child incomes leaves C_F unchanged while moving the child marginal freely. With parental incomes supported on $[\underline{y}, \bar{y}]$, scale every child income below $\underline{y}$ in one society and above $\bar{y}$ in another. The two have the same copula but $\mathrm{AM} = 0$ and $\mathrm{AM} = 1$ respectively. Axiom 8 fails, and maximally so.

Axiom 9. On a reference-crossing exchange $\Delta\mathrm{AM} = 0$, so $G_{\mathrm{AM}} \equiv 0$. The ordering requirement holds with equality, but the antecedent $G > 0$ in the second part is never met, so no strict instance exists. Axiom 9 fails. The evaluator registers no gain from shifting upward mobility toward disadvantaged origins.

(iii) CER25 (Prioritarian evaluation).

Axiom 7. $\partial\Phi_\omega/\partial v = \omega(u) > 0$ on $\operatorname{supp}\omega$, so the evaluator values larger progress margins strictly. Outside $\operatorname{supp}\omega$ the derivative is zero and a bottom-focused evaluator (in the limit the point evaluator CER25) registers no change when children from those origins gain, satisfying Axiom 7.

Axiom 8. Under the within-society convention $\Phi_\omega(u, v) = \omega(u)v$ is a function of the copula ranks alone, and by Proposition 3 $W_\omega(F) = \int_0^1 \omega(u)m(u)\,du$ depends on F only through C_F. Axiom 8 holds.

Axiom 9. By Proposition 5(iii), $G_\omega(u_\ell, u_h) = [\omega(u_\ell) - \omega(u_h)](v_h - v_\ell) \geq 0$ since ω is nonincreasing, and strictly whenever the two origins receive different weights. Since ω is constant on $[\bar{u}, 1]$, sliding such an exchange far enough up the origin distribution sends its value to zero. For $CER25$, with $\omega = \mathbf{1}\{u \leq q\}$, an exchange straddling q has value $v_h - v_\ell > 0$, while any exchange above q has value zero. Axiom 9 holds.

Axiom 5. A parent improvement re-ranks origins and therefore reassigns the weights $\omega(\cdot)$. Let ω be supported on the bottom quartile, let the family currently at the bottom origin have a high-ranked child, and let the family just above the quartile boundary have a low-ranked child. Raising the first parent's income past the second's moves the high-v family out of the support of ω and the low-v family into it, so W_ω falls, which violates Axiom 5.

Axiom 6. Satisfying Axiom 8 forces a violation. Explicitly, run the block construction of part (i) with block L inside the support of ω. Every child is strictly richer, the child marginal is translated, and the weighted origins' children have moved from the top half to the bottom half of the child rank distribution, so $\Delta W_\omega = [\omega(\bar{u}_H) - \omega(\bar{u}_L)](\bar{v}_H - \bar{v}_L) < 0$ whenever $\omega(\bar{u}_L) > \omega(\bar{u}_H)$, which holds for any non-constant nonincreasing ω.

Table 1 (repeated): Axiom satisfaction of the mobility evaluators

	Axiom	RRS	AM	CER25
5	Pareto in parent outcomes (PP)	×	×	×
6	Pareto in child outcomes (PC)	×	✓	×
7	Monotonicity (M)	✓	×	✓
8	Positional purity (X)	✓	×	✓
9	Priority to disadvantaged origins (D)	×	×	✓

Note: This table repeats Table 1 for convenience and shows an overview of the axiom satisfaction of each indicator. RRS = rank-rank-slope; AM = Absolute Mobility; CER25 = Conditional earnings rank 25; ✓ satisfied; × violated

E Experimental instructions

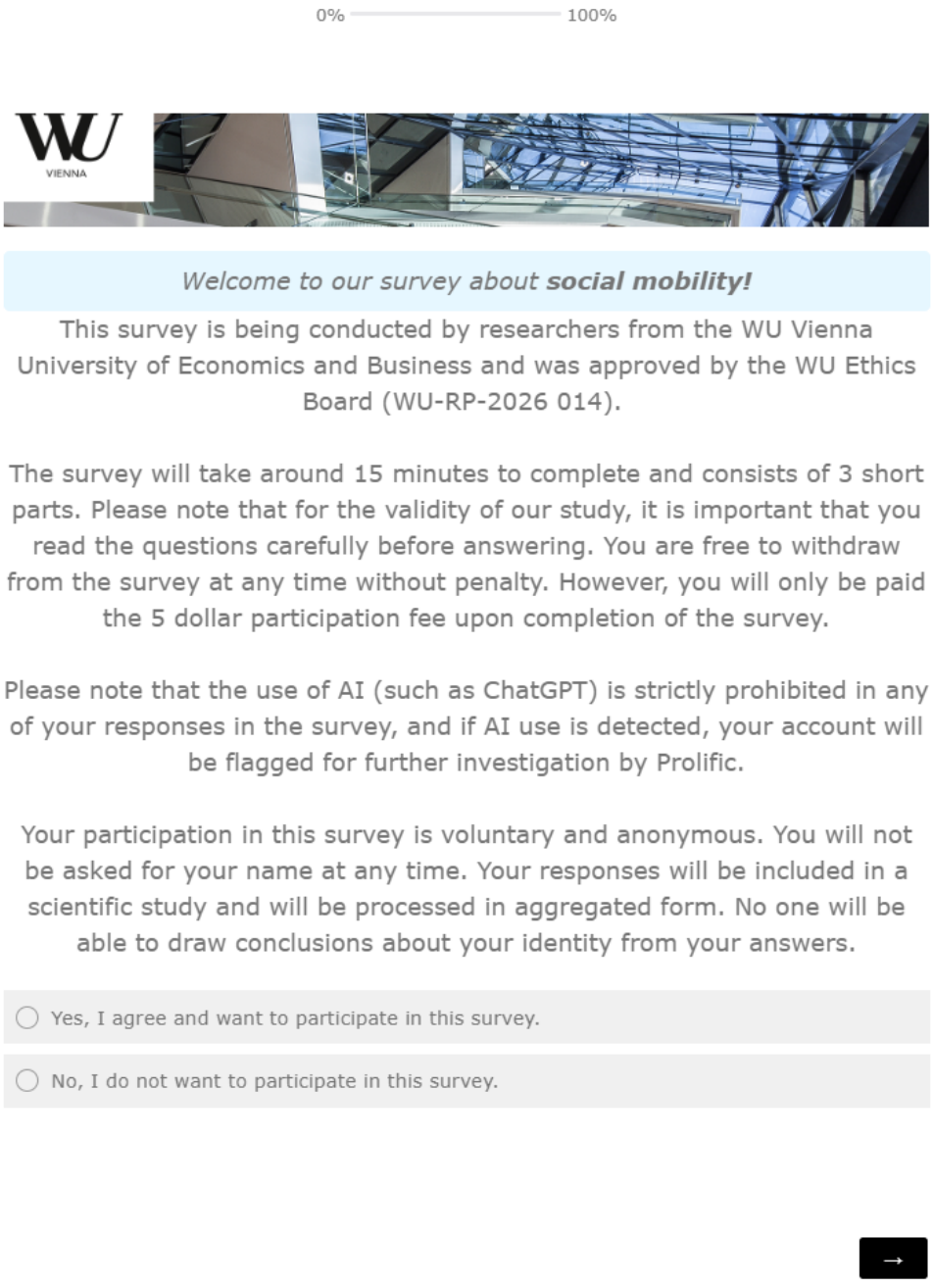


Figure E.1: Survey 1

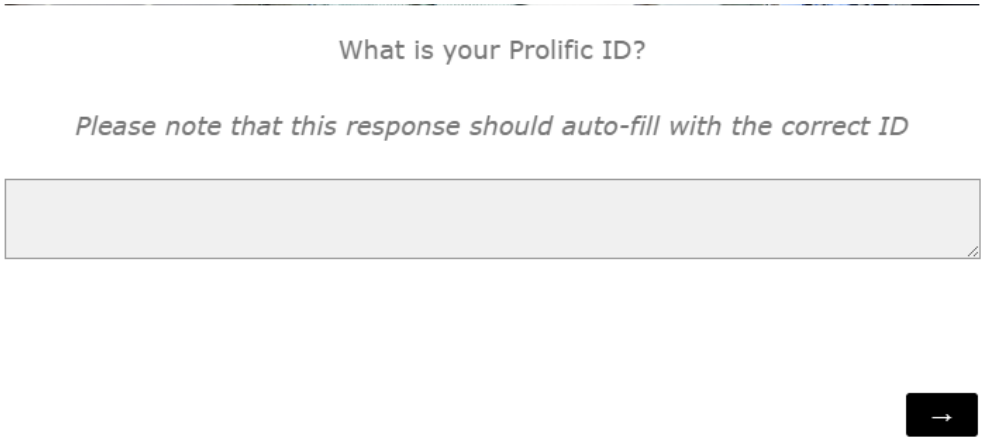


Figure E.2: Survey 2

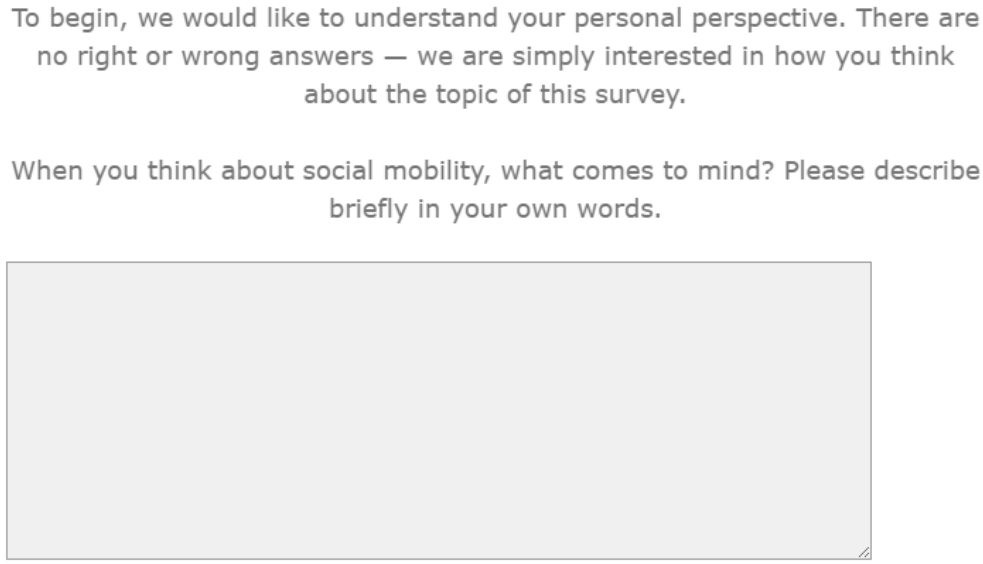


Figure E.3: Survey 3

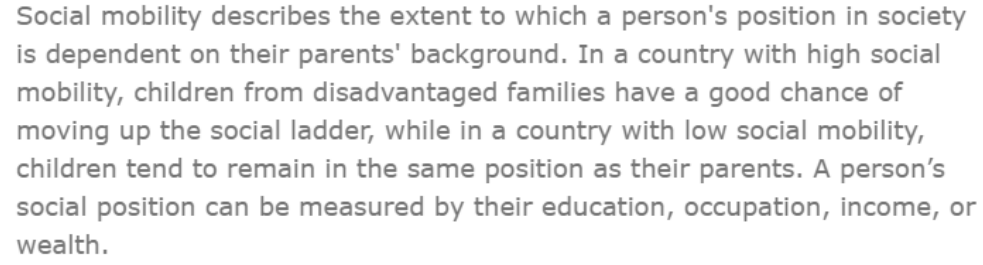


Figure E.4: Survey 4

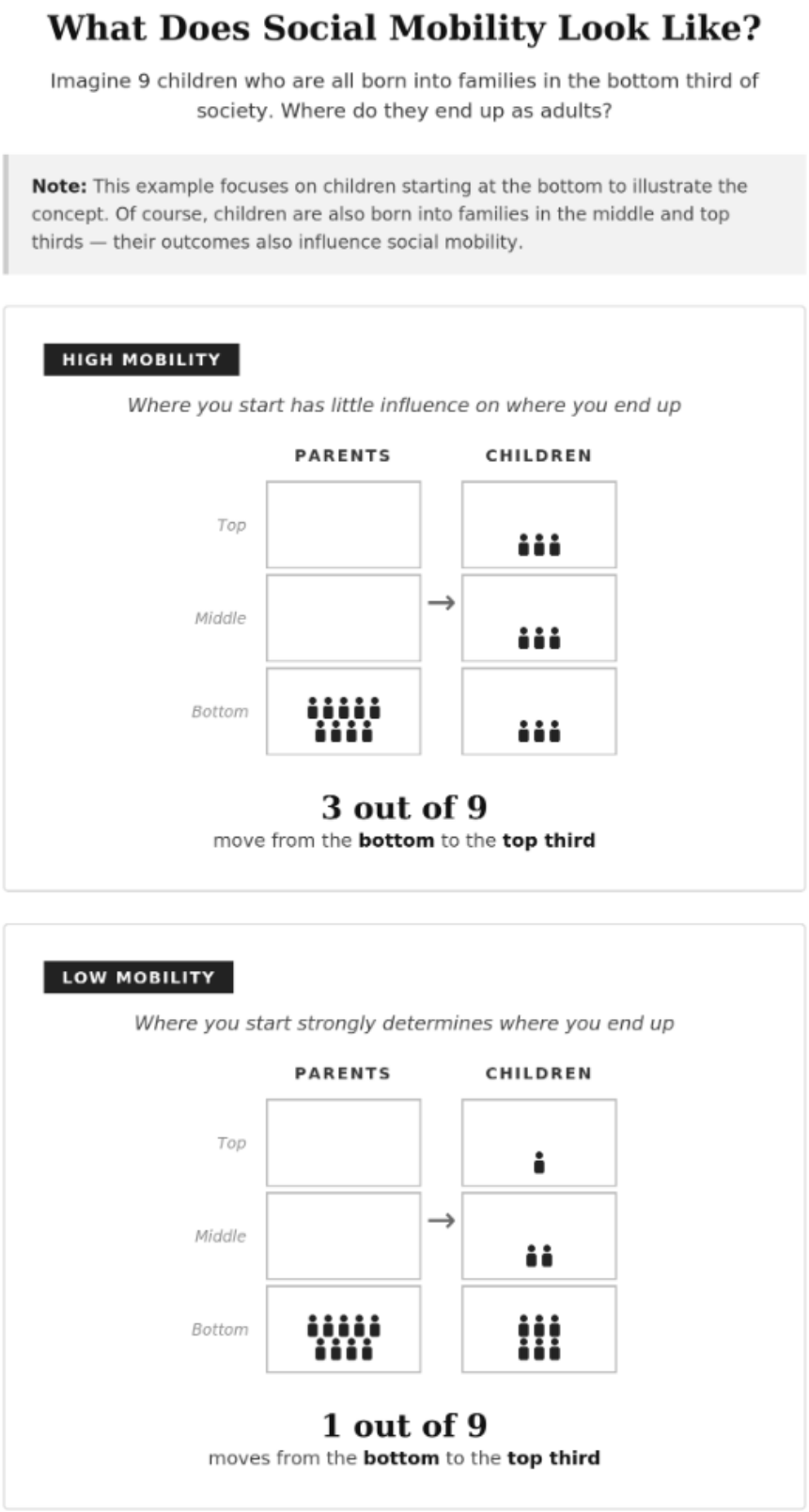


Figure E.5: Survey 5

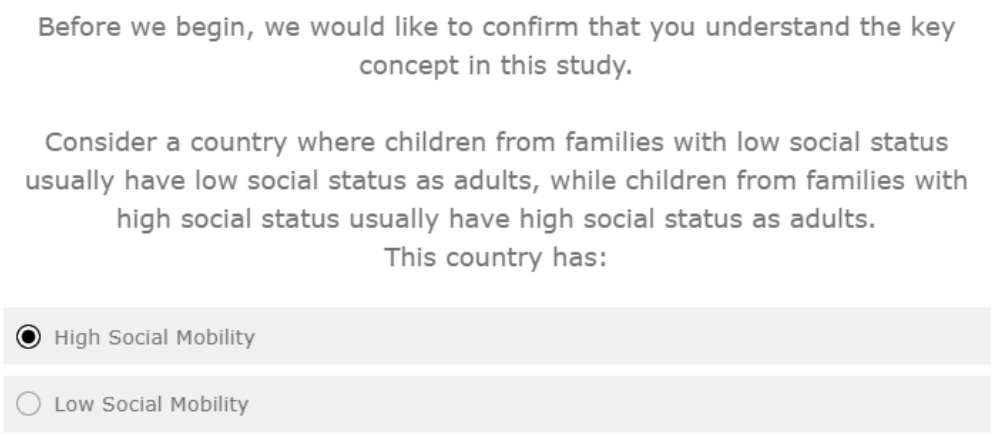


Figure E.6: Survey 6

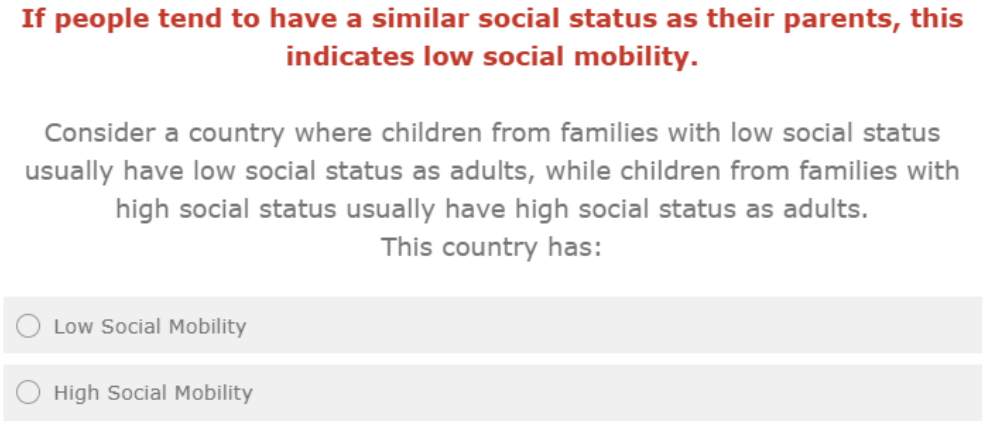


Figure E.7: Survey 7

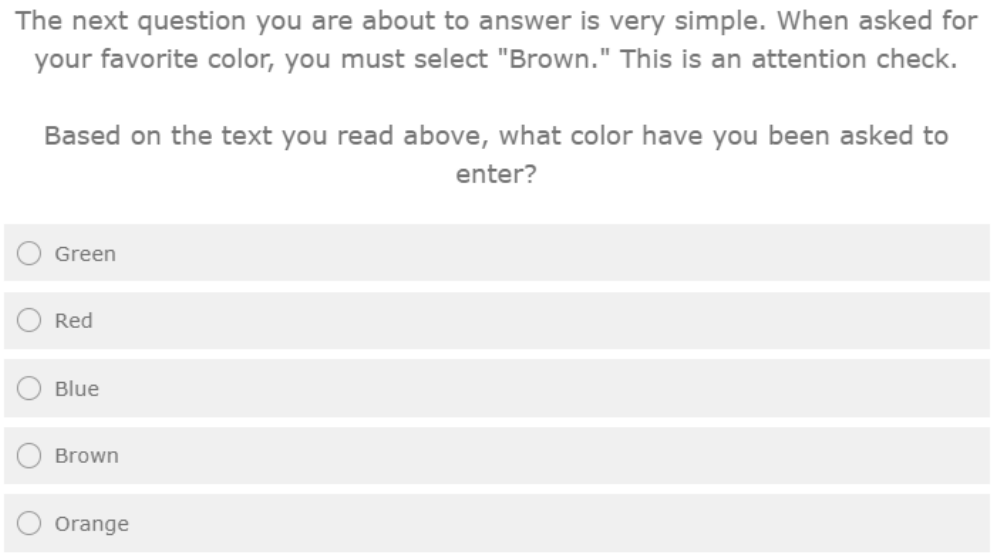


Figure E.8: Survey 8

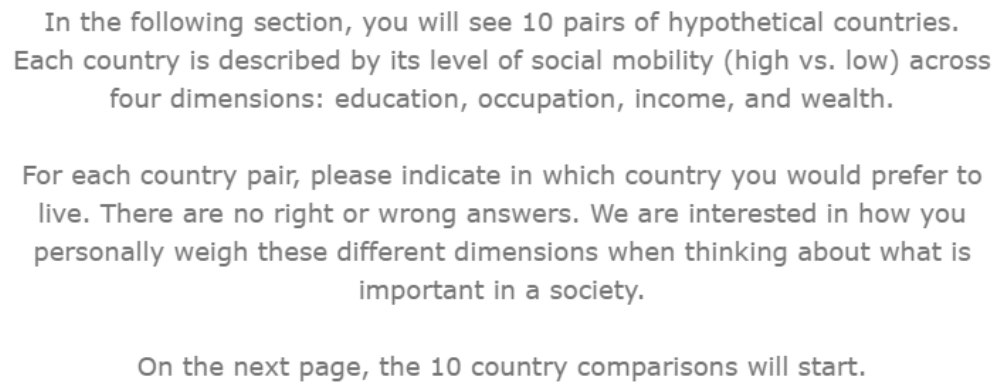


Figure E.9: Survey 9

Imagine two different countries with differing levels of social mobility:
(High social mobility in a dimension means that parents' position in that dimension has little influence on the position their children reach as adults in that dimension. Low social mobility in a dimension means that parents' position in that dimension strongly influences the position their children reach as adults in that dimension.)

Mobility Dimension	Country A	Country B
Education	High	High
Occupation	Low	Low
Income	High	Low
Wealth	Low	High

Which country would you prefer to live in?

Country A ◯ Country B ◯

Figure E.10: Survey 10

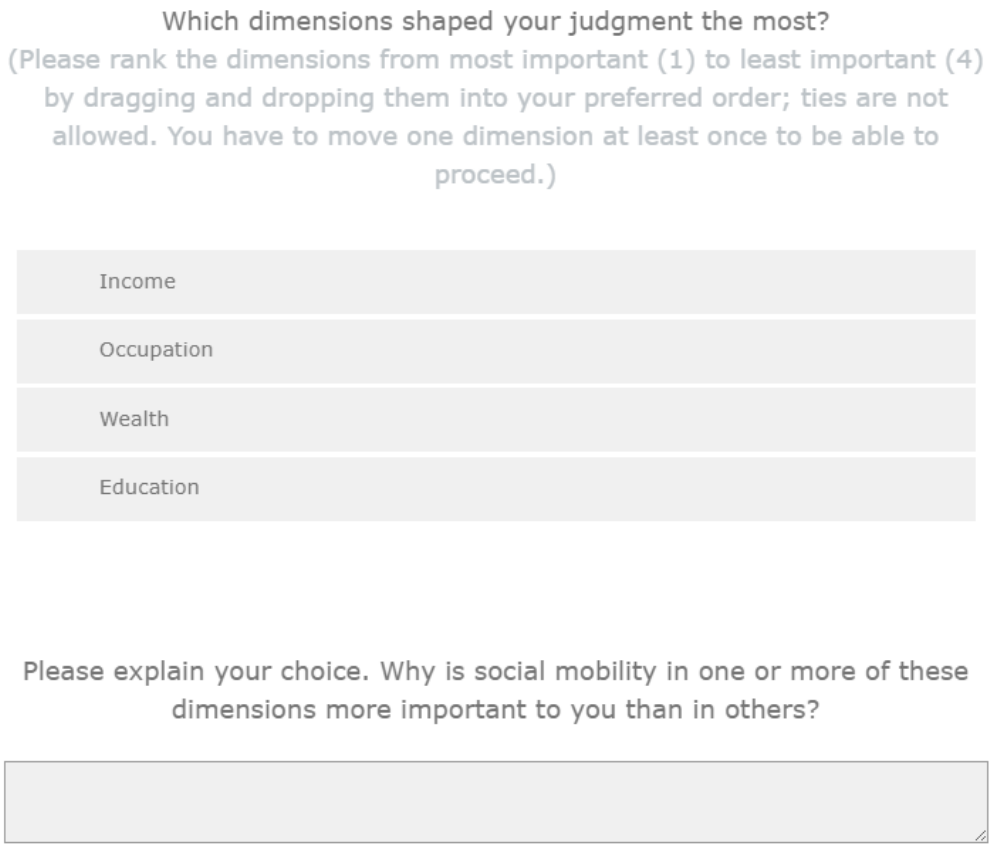


Figure E.11: Survey 11

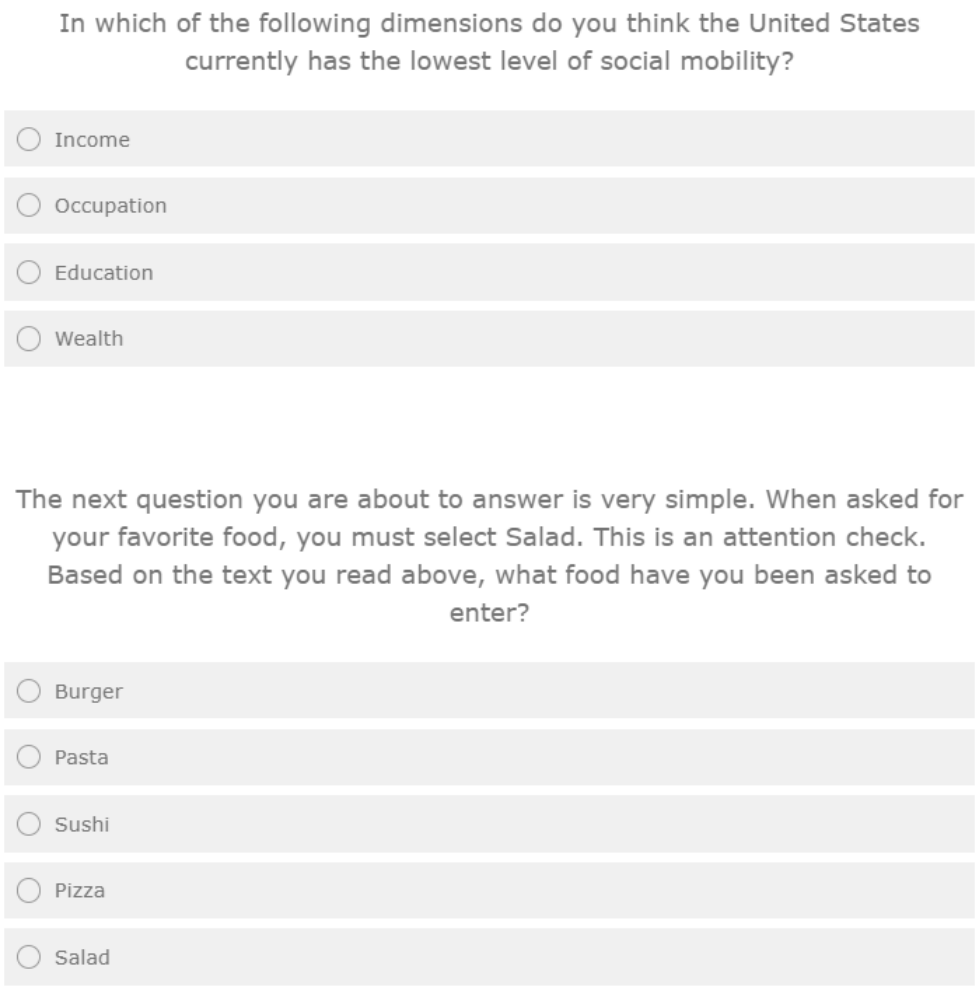


Figure E.12: Survey 12

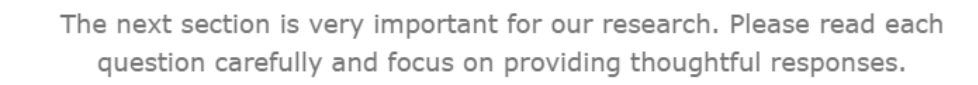


Figure E.13: Survey 13

In the following questions, you will read brief descriptions of different countries. The scenarios are hypothetical, but they are based on real policy debates about how societies should promote income-related social mobility. Please read each description carefully and evaluate the policies based on your own values and beliefs (there will be 4 questions):

In **Country A**, people care about each generation progressing beyond the last. The country works to create conditions where children can achieve higher incomes than their parents.

In **Country B**, people care about helping children from low-income families build a better future. The country works to ensure that these children move upward and become part of middle or high-income families.

In **Country C**, people care about reducing the link between children's income and their parents' income. The country works to weaken this link so that children's income depends less on their parent's position in the income distribution.

Figure E.14: Survey 14

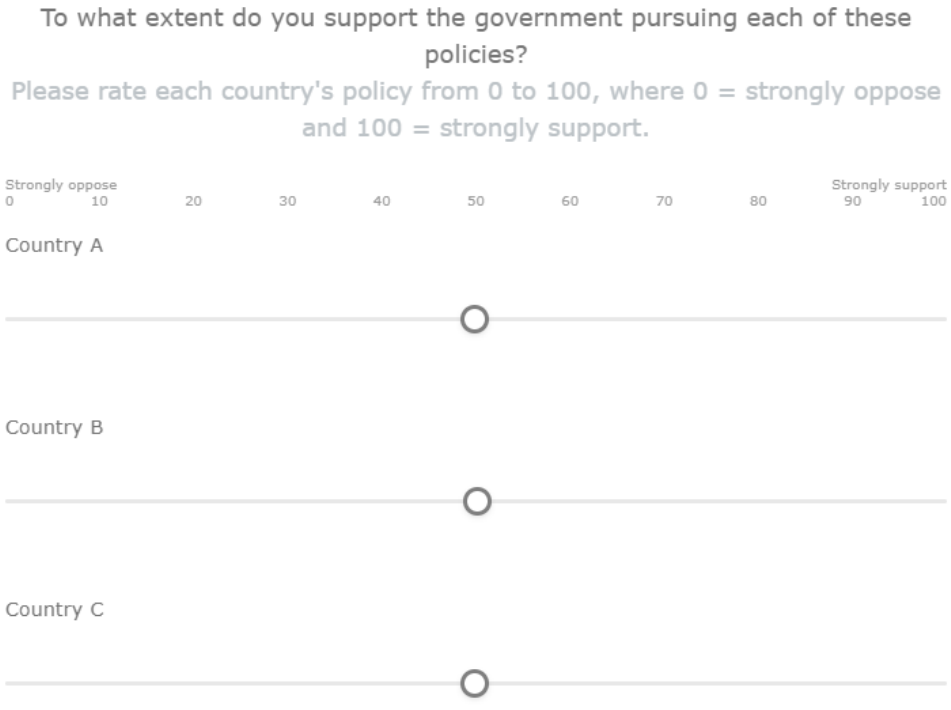


Figure E.15: Survey 15



Figure E.16: Survey 16

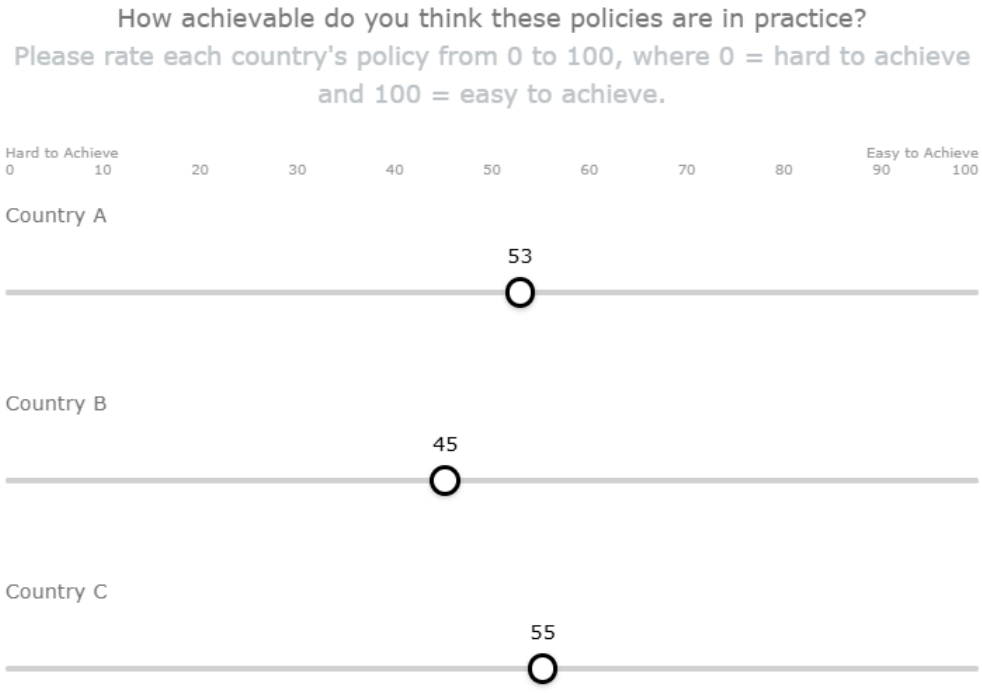


Figure E.17: Survey 17

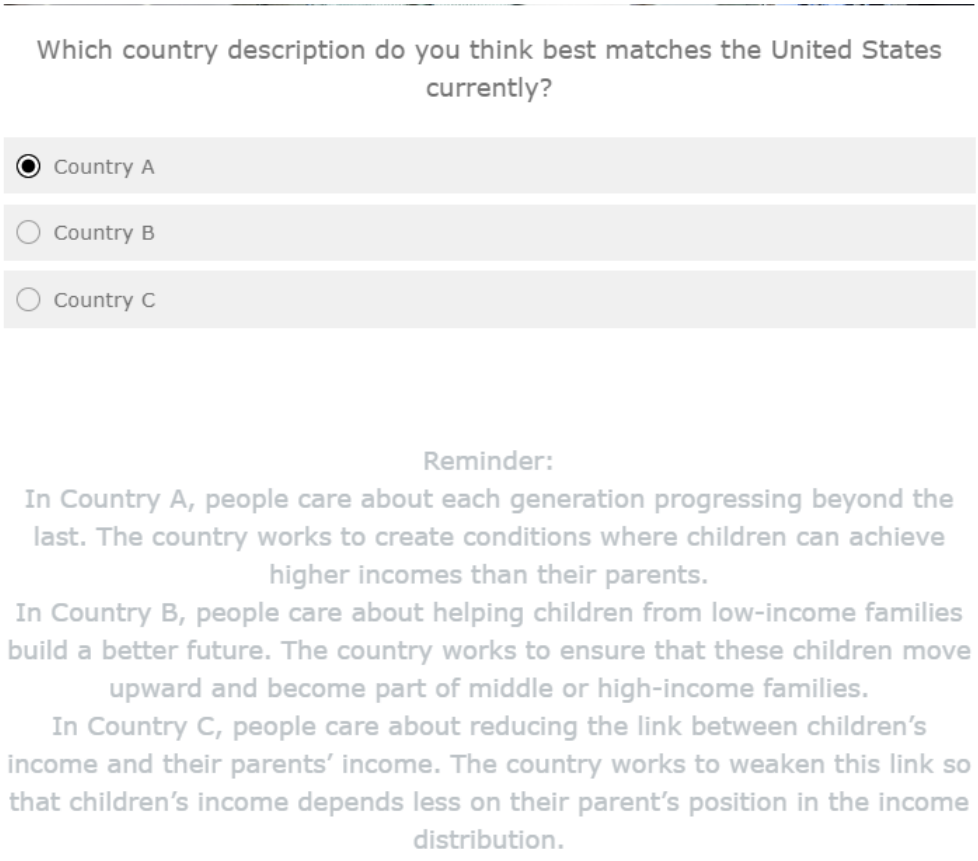


Figure E.18: Survey 18



Figure E.19: Survey 19

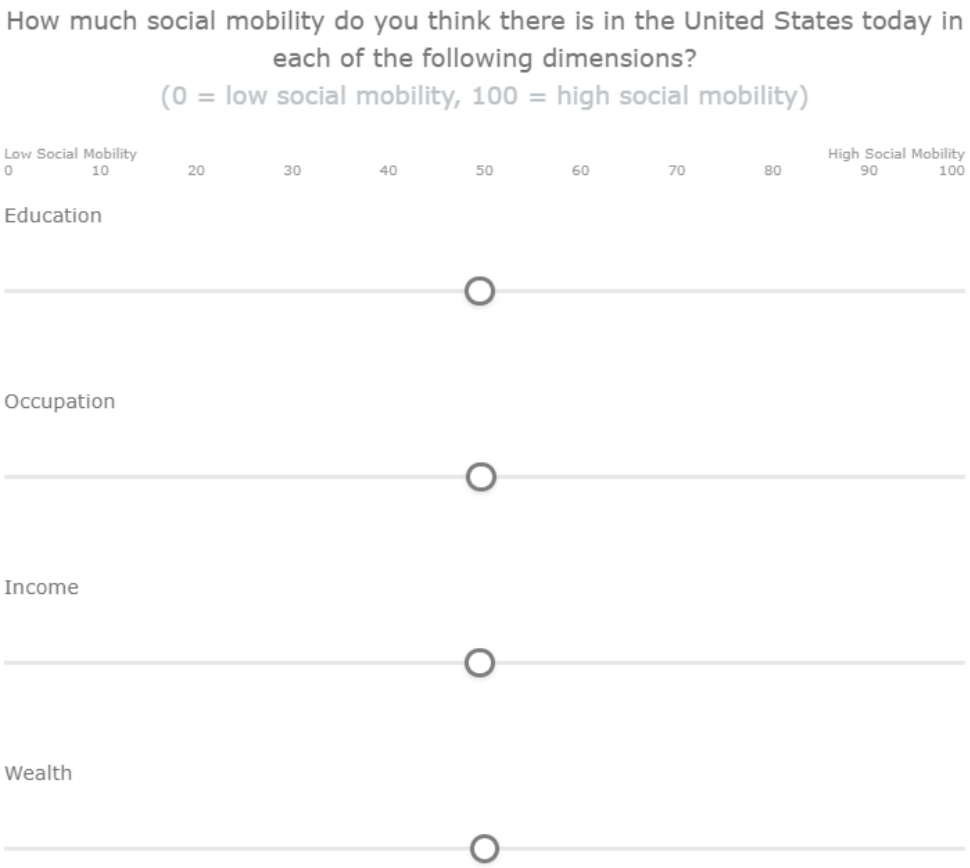


Figure E.20: Survey 20

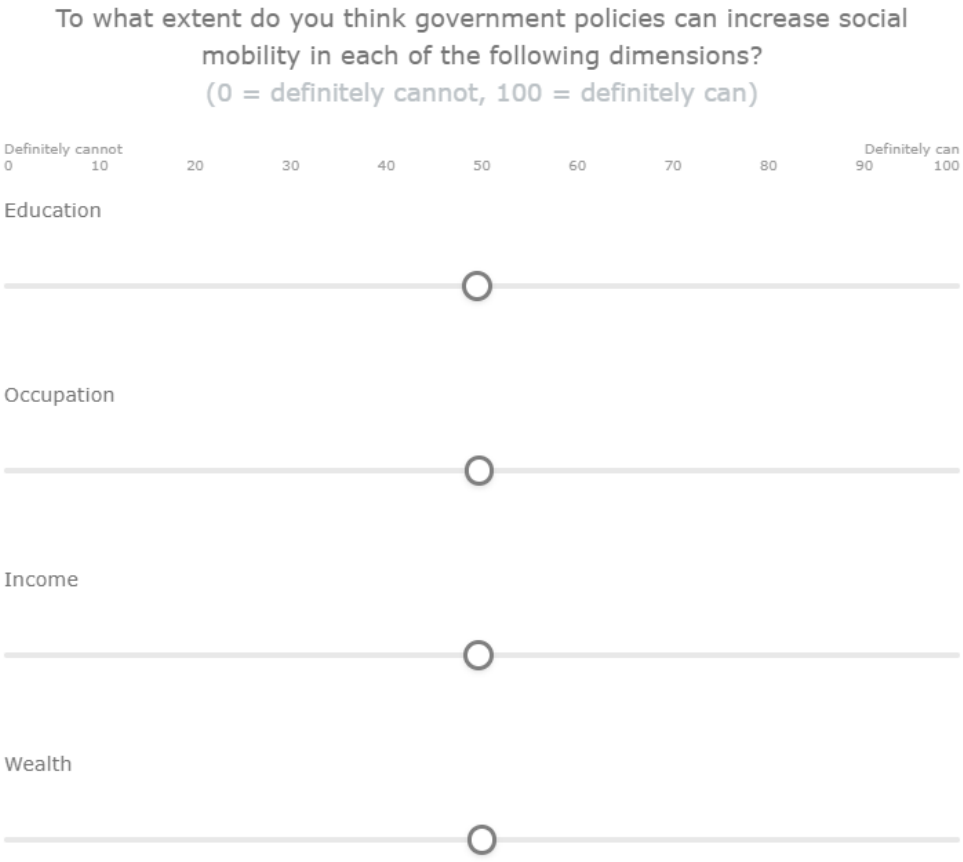


Figure E.21: Survey 21



Figure E.22: Survey 22

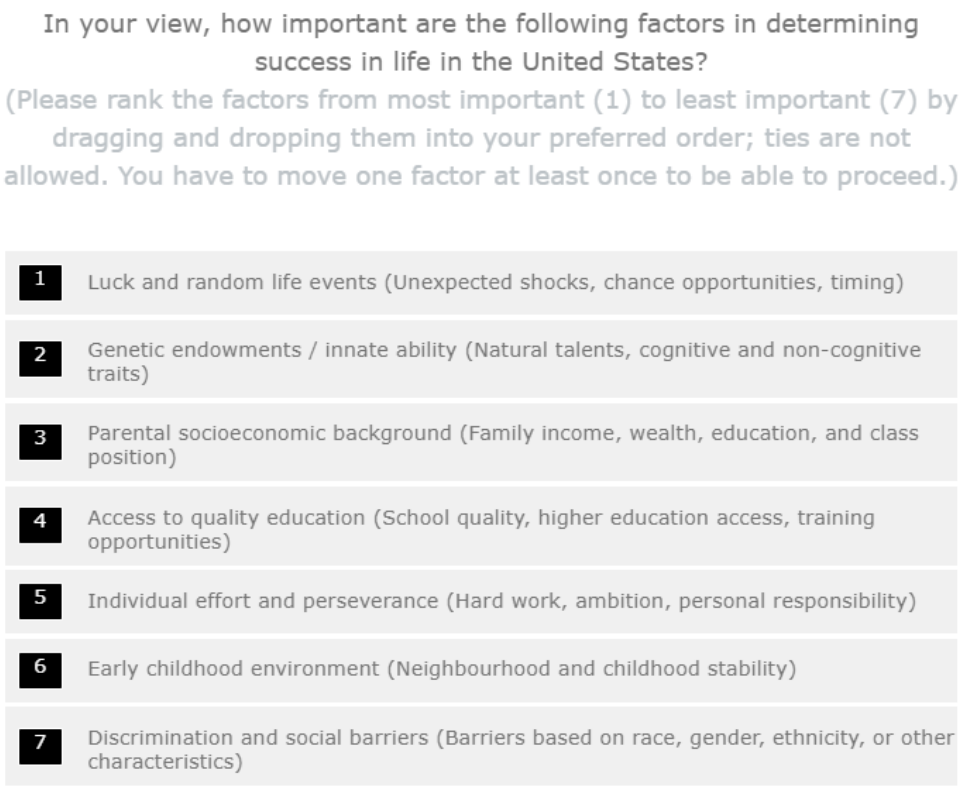


Figure E.23: Survey 23

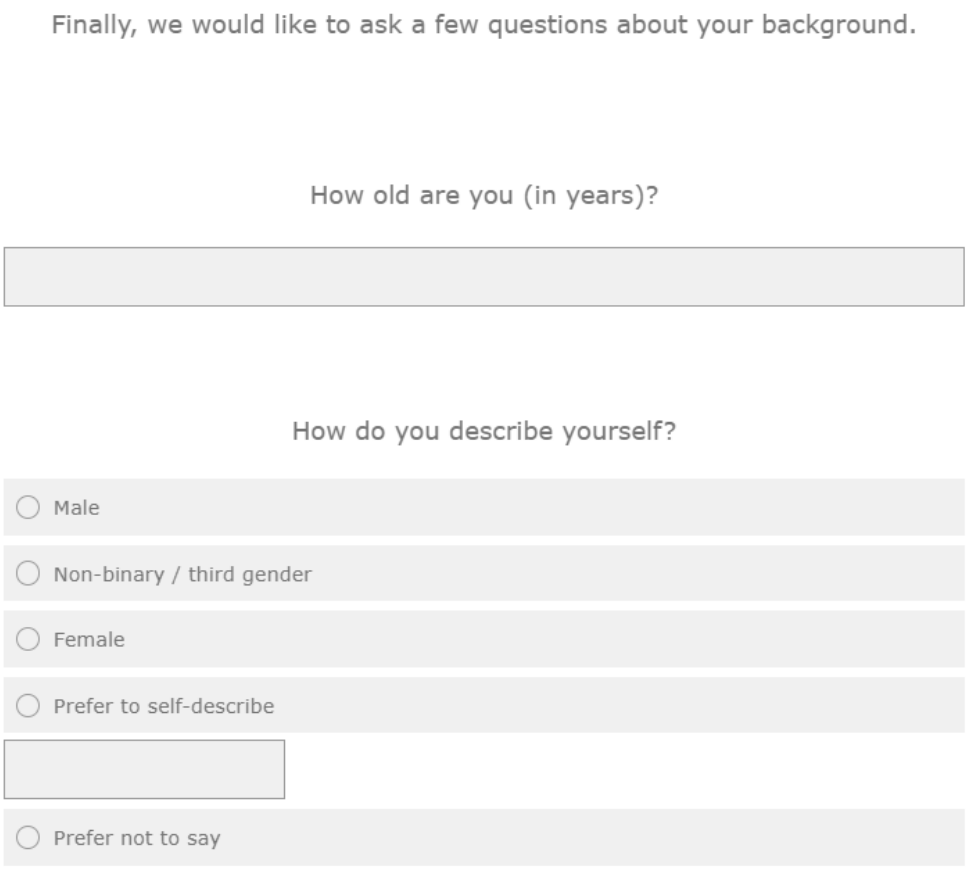


Figure E.24: Survey 24

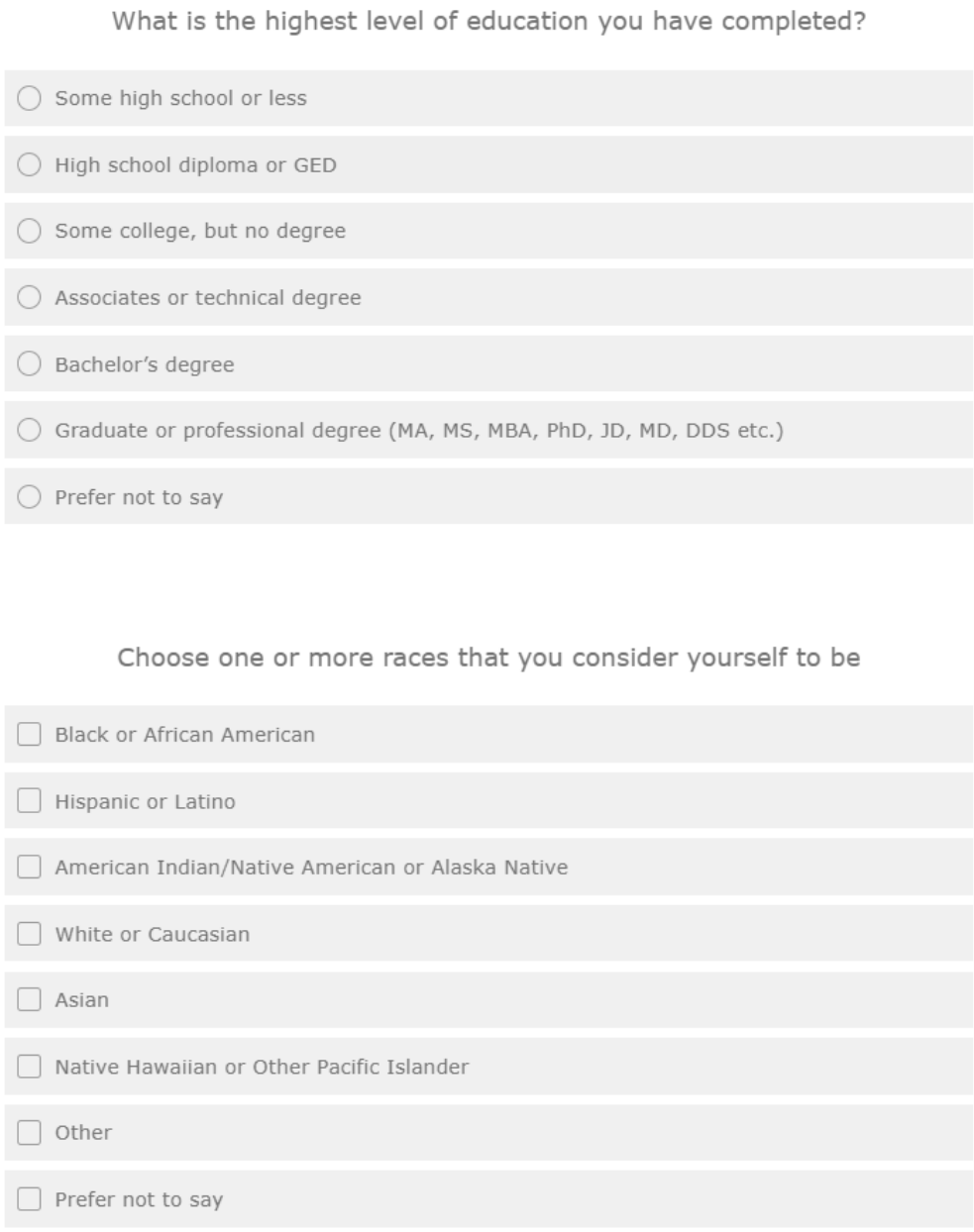


Figure E.25: Survey 25

What was your total household income before taxes during the past 12 months?

- ◯ Less than $25,000
- ◯ $25,000-$49,999
- ◯ $50,000-$74,999
- ◯ $75,000-$99,999
- ◯ $100,000-$149,999
- ◯ $150,000 or more
- ◯ Prefer not to say

In which US region do you live?

- ◯ South
- ◯ West
- ◯ Northeast
- ◯ Midwest
- ◯ Prefer not to say

Figure E.26: Survey 26

How would you describe yourself: are you generally willing to take risks, or do you tend to avoid taking risks?
(0 = not at all willing to take risks, 10 = very willing to take risks)

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

Figure E.27: Survey 27

With which political party do you most closely identify?

- ◯ Democrat
- ◯ Independent
- ◯ Republican
- ◯ Other
- ◯ Prefer not to say

Figure E.28: Survey 28

Please indicate on the scale below how reliable your answers to this survey are.
(0 = not reliable at all, 10 = very reliable)

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

Is there anything you would like to share with us?
We welcome any feedback you may have. (If not, please proceed to the next page.)

Figure E.29: Survey 29

Thank you for taking part in this study. Please click the button below to be redirected back to Prolific and register your submission.

Figure E.30: Survey 30

F Expert instructions



*Welcome to our survey about **social mobility!***

This survey is being conducted by researchers from the WU Vienna University of Economics and Business

This survey takes approximately 5–10 minutes and consists of two short parts. Upon completion, we will donate $5 to KIPP, a nonprofit network of public charter schools in the United States dedicated to expanding educational opportunity. GiveWell, which evaluates charities using evidence-based methods, has designated KIPP a "standout organization" — an outstanding giving opportunity.

Your participation is voluntary and anonymous. You may withdraw at any time. We will not ask for your name, and your responses will be analyzed only in aggregate form as part of a scientific study. No individual respondent can be identified from the data.

◯ Yes, I agree to participate in this survey and have $5 donated to KIPP on my behalf.

◯ No, I do not want to participate in this survey.

Figure F.1: Expert Survey 1

Part 1:

In the following section, you will see 10 pairs of hypothetical countries. Each country is described by its level of social mobility (high vs. low) across four dimensions: education, occupation, income, and wealth.

For each country pair, please indicate in which country you would prefer to live. There are no right or wrong answers. We are interested in how you personally weigh these different dimensions when thinking about what is important in a society.

Figure F.2: Expert Survey 2

Imagine two different countries with differing levels of social mobility:

Mobility Dimension	Country A	Country B
Education	High	High
Occupation	High	Low
Income	High	Low
Wealth	High	High

Which country would you prefer to live in?

Country A ○ Country B ○

Figure F.3: Expert Survey 3

Which dimensions shaped your judgment the most?
(Please rank the dimensions from most important (1) to least important (4) by dragging and dropping them into your preferred order; ties are not allowed. You have to move one dimension at least once to be able to proceed.)

Education
Income
Occupation
Wealth

Figure F.4: Expert Survey 4

Please explain your choice. Why is social mobility in one or more of these dimensions more important to you than in others?

Figure F.5: Expert Survey 5

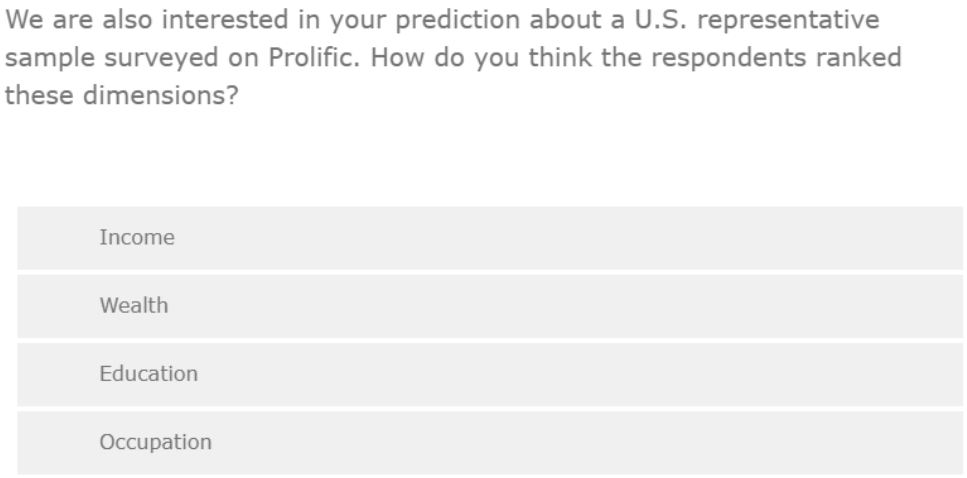


Figure F.6: Expert Survey 6

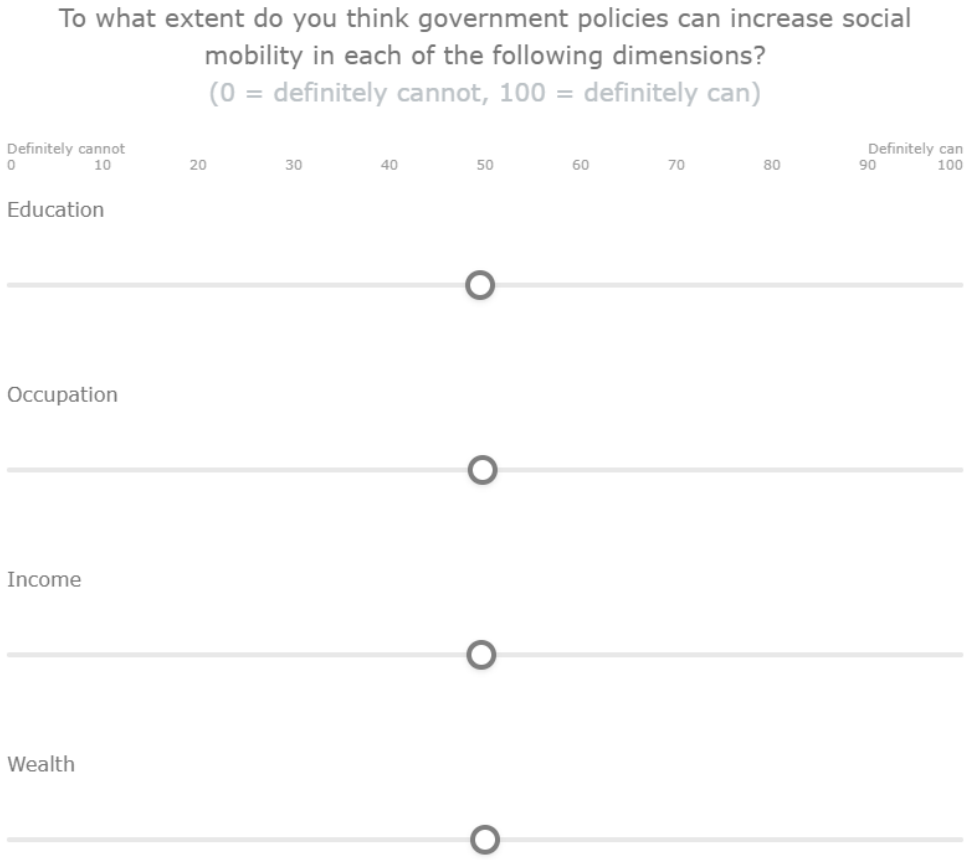


Figure F.7: Expert Survey 7

Part 2:

In the following questions, you will read brief descriptions of different countries. The scenarios are hypothetical, but they are based on real policy debates about how societies should promote income-related social mobility. Please read each description carefully and evaluate the policies based on your own values and beliefs (there will be 4 questions):

In **Country A,** people care about reducing the link between children's income and their parents' income. The country works to weaken this link so that children's income depends less on their parent's position in the income distribution.

In **Country B**, people care about each generation progressing beyond the last. The country works to create conditions where children can achieve higher incomes than their parents.

In **Country C**, people care about helping children from low-income families build a better future. The country works to ensure that these children move upward and become part of middle or high-income families.

Figure F.8: Expert Survey 8

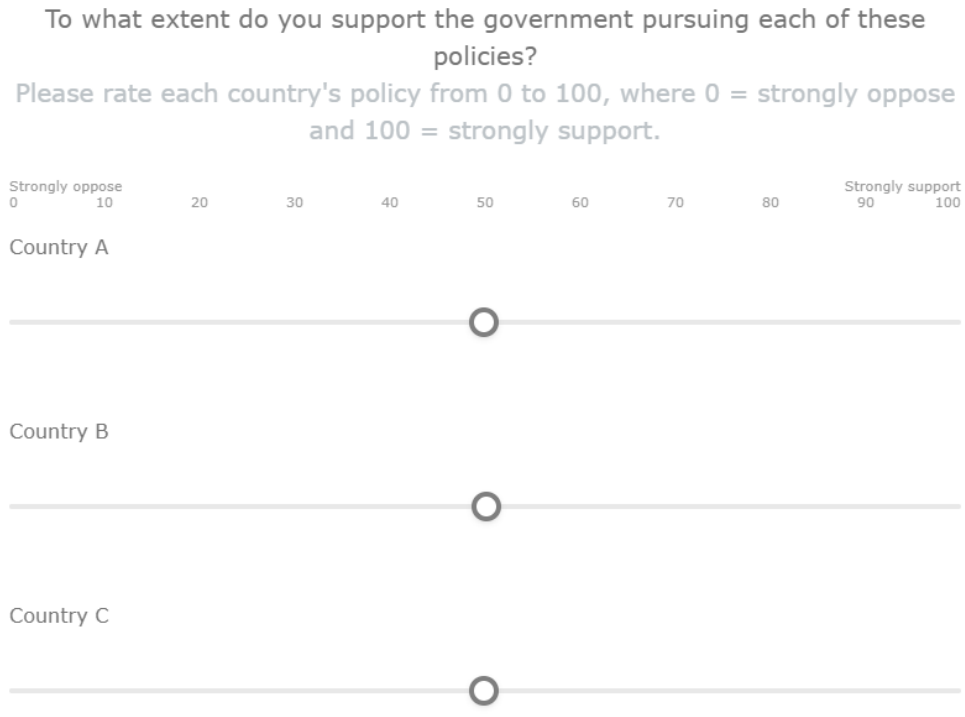


Figure F.9: Expert Survey 9



Figure F.10: Expert Survey 10



Figure F.11: Expert Survey 11

We are again also interested in your prediction about a U.S. representative sample surveyed on Prolific. How do you think the respondents ranked the support for each policy?

People care about helping children from low-income families build a better future. The country works to ensure that these children move upward and become part of middle or high-income families.

People care about each generation progressing beyond the last. The country works to create conditions where children can achieve higher incomes than their parents.

People care about reducing the link between children's income and their parents' income. The country works to weaken this link so that children's income depends less on their parent's position in the income distribution.

Figure F.12: Expert Survey 12

The following questions concern your personal views on and experiences with social mobility.

If you imagine having been born into different circumstances, to what extent do you think your life trajectory would have differed from your current one?
(0 = no difference, 100 = completely different)



Figure F.13: Expert Survey 13

In your view, how important are the following factors in determining success in life in the United States?
(Please rank the factors from most important (1) to least important (7) by dragging and dropping them into your preferred order; ties are not allowed. You have to move one factor at least once to be able to proceed.)

- Luck and random life events (Unexpected shocks, chance opportunities, timing)
- Discrimination and social barriers (Barriers based on race, gender, ethnicity, or other characteristics)
- Access to quality education (School quality, higher education access, training opportunities)
- Early childhood environment (Neighbourhood and childhood stability)
- Individual effort and perseverance (Hard work, ambition, personal responsibility)
- Parental socioeconomic background (Family income, wealth, education, and class position)
- Genetic endowments / innate ability (Natural talents, cognitive and non-cognitive traits)

Figure F.14: Expert Survey 14

Finally, we would like to ask a few questions about your background.

What is your primary academic discipline?

- ◯ Economics
- ◯ Sociology
- ◯ Political Science
- ◯ Other (please specify):

Figure F.15: Expert Survey 15

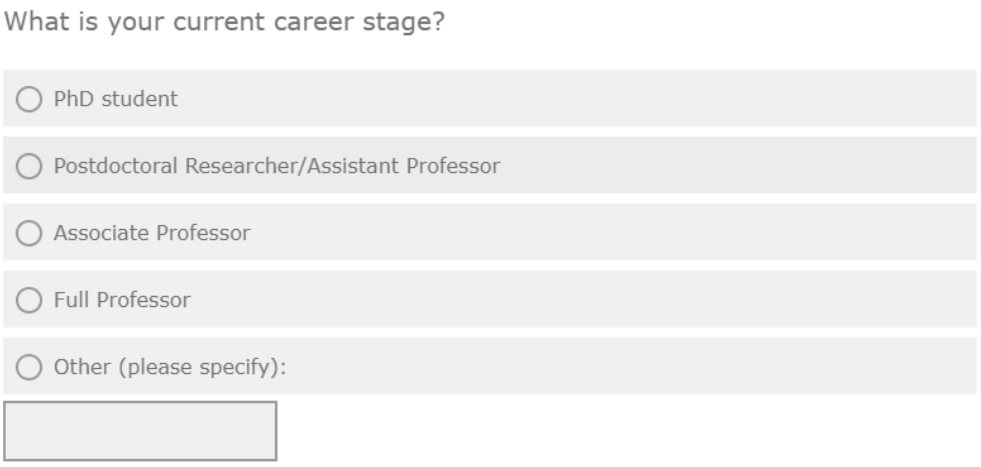


Figure F.16: Expert Survey 16

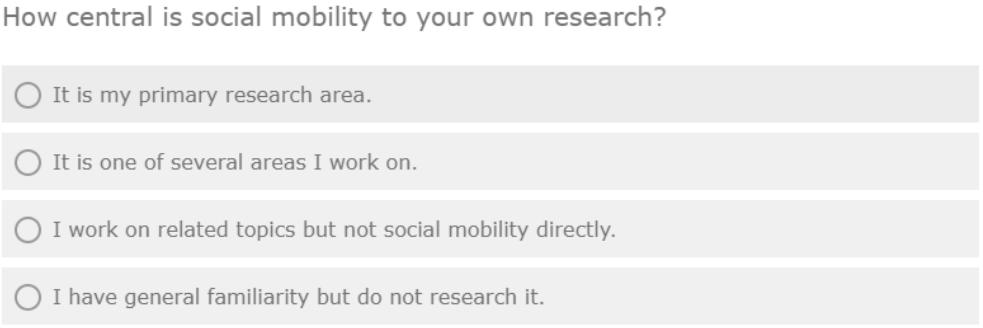


Figure F.17: Expert Survey 17

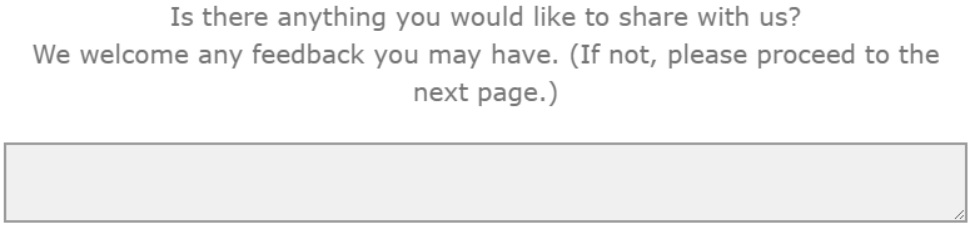


Figure F.18: Expert Survey 18

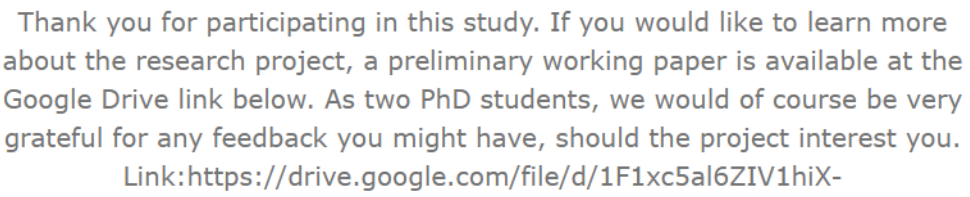


Figure F.19: Expert Survey 19