

PERCEPTIONS OF RISING OPPORTUNITY

*ACROSS RICH NATIONS
AND OVER TIME*

by Dr. Scott Winship



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Introduction

Recent research by Raj Chetty and his colleagues finds a long-term decline in the United States in absolute mobility—being better off in terms of inflation-adjusted family income than one’s parents at the same age.¹ Very little is known about absolute mobility levels or trends in other countries, largely due to insufficient data. To fill this gap, the Archbridge Institute recently commissioned polling across 60 nations around the world, assessing men’s perceptions of absolute mobility.²

The Archbridge polling focused on men for two reasons. First, variation in women’s labor force participation around the world—and variation in the change in participation over the past generation—makes cross-national comparisons of women’s absolute mobility difficult to assess. Second, a goal of the polling was to produce results for the United States that could be compared with previous polls conducted as early as 1939, which did not always ask absolute mobility questions consistently among women.

The polling included questions asking men to compare their “opportunities to succeed” with those they believed

their own fathers had and with those they thought their sons would have. I restricted the analyses to men surveyed during their prime working years (age 25–54 in the cross-national analyses, age 26–40 in the US trend analyses) in order to reduce the impact of differences in the age distribution across countries. Of the 60 nations included in the polling, I designated 17 of them as “rich,” and I focus on them in this analysis. These nations include several English-speaking countries that emerged from the British Empire; several countries in Northern, Western, and Southern Europe; and a few industrialized Asian countries and city-states.

Cross-National Comparisons

Perceptions of Greater Opportunity Relative to Fathers

In six of the rich countries, over half of working-age men said that their opportunities had improved relative to those enjoyed by their fathers. Those countries included Singapore (56 percent); Sweden, Hong Kong, and Portugal (53); and the Netherlands and United Kingdom (51).³ In Austria, Germany, and Taiwan, just under half of men said their opportunities had improved (48 to 49 percent). (In addition to saying opportunities were worse, men could respond that opportunities were the same or say they didn’t know. All of the results presented here exclude responses of “don’t know.”) (**Figure 1**)

One tier down from this group, a second group of six

countries were somewhat less optimistic. Between 37 and 44 percent of men in Japan (44), the United States (44), Spain (42), Belgium (41), Italy (38), and Canada (37) indicated they believed their opportunities had improved relative to those of their fathers.

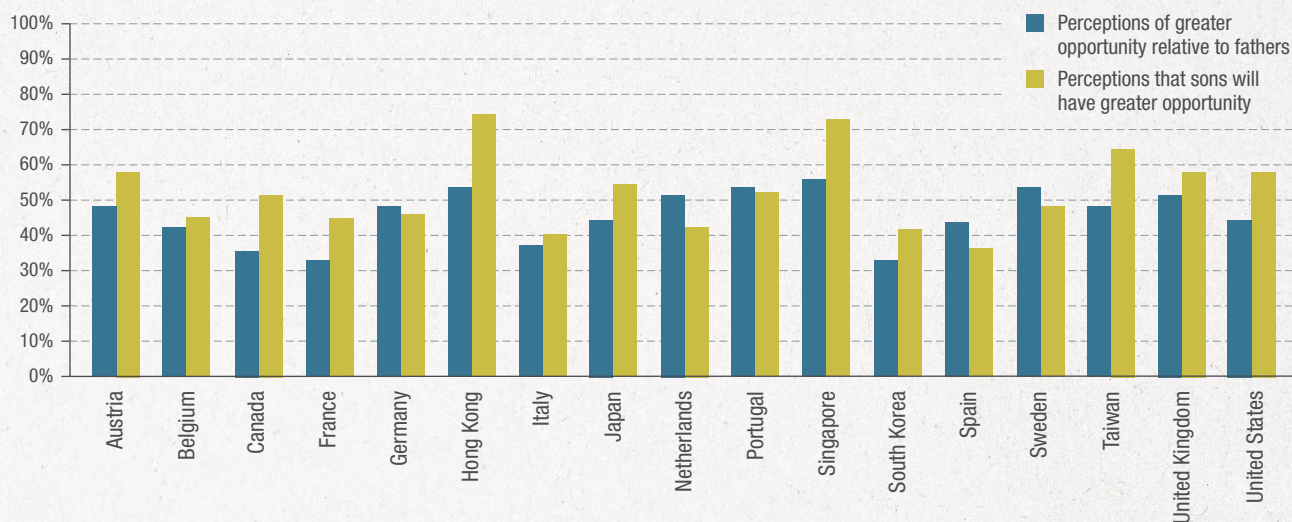
In France and South Korea, however, just 32 percent said their opportunities had improved. In those two countries—and in Italy—more men thought their opportunities were worse relative to those enjoyed by their fathers than thought they were better (ignoring those who thought their opportunities were unchanged). In the other 14 rich countries, perceptions of improvement were more common than perceptions of decline.

The US estimates appear broadly consistent with the actual experiences of American men. The middle birth cohort in my sample was comprised of men 39 years old in late 2016 or early 2017 and therefore born primarily in 1977. According to Chetty et al.’s estimates, 60 percent of men born that year had a family income at age 30 that exceeded their parents’ at the same age.⁴ In the Archbridge polling, 61 percent of American men between the ages of 25 and 54 believed their opportunities had been greater than those enjoyed by their fathers.⁵

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FIGURE 1

Perceptions of Opportunity: Cross-National Comparisons, 2016-17



One way of assessing whether these perceptions suggest high or low levels of opportunity is to compare them to perceptions in poorer countries. In fact, none of the 17 rich countries appears in the top 25 nations (of 60) in terms of perceived opportunity versus fathers. Of the 18 countries with the lowest perceived opportunity versus fathers, 11 were rich nations.

However, before proclaiming the death of opportunity in rich countries, some context is valuable. Having more “opportunities to succeed” than the previous generation does not mean that one has high levels of opportunity. In the United States, according to Chetty et al., exceeding the income of one’s parents is much more likely among men who grew up poor than it is among men who grew up rich. This fact reflects the reality that it is easier to exceed a parental income of \$10,000 than it is to surpass one of \$250,000. However, few parents would prefer that their children be raised in poverty so that they can have a greater chance of upward mobility.

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In the same way, it makes no sense to say that men in Bangladesh—where 70 percent perceived more opportunity than their fathers had—have more opportunity than men in France, where just 32 percent said they had more opportunity than their fathers. France is much richer than Bangladesh, so it is less important there that each generation perceive or have more opportunity than the previous one.

Perceptions that Sons Will Have Greater Opportunity

Asked whether their sons would have more or fewer opportunities to succeed than they have had, men were generally more optimistic. (In these analyses, I focus only on fathers, who were asked about the opportunities of their own sons.) At the top of the pack, over seven in ten fathers in Hong Kong (73) and Singapore (71) thought their sons’ opportunities would be better than their own.⁷ In Taiwan, 63 percent of fathers were optimistic about the opportunities their sons would enjoy. Fathers in the United States and Austria were somewhat less optimistic, but 58 percent in both countries thought their sons would have greater opportunities. Majorities of fathers were optimistic in the United Kingdom (55), Japan (54), Portugal (52), and Canada (51) as well, and Sweden (49) and Germany (48) were close behind. The least optimistic fathers were in Belgium (45), France

(43), the Netherlands (41), South Korea (41), Italy (40), and Spain (36). (*Figure 1*)

It is somewhat ambiguous how to interpret these assessments of sons’ opportunities. Fathers in poor countries may be on objectively firmer ground in believing their sons will have better opportunities, since there is more room for improvement than there is in rich countries. Indeed, none of the 17 rich countries is represented in the 20 nations most optimistic about sons’ opportunities, and they constitute 11 of the 12 nations that are least optimistic.

Relatedly, men might think their sons will have better opportunities because they believe they live in a healthy, thriving, fair society, but they may simply believe they themselves are living through lousy times and that things can only get better. Combining the answers to the two survey questions—one comparing respondents to their fathers, the other to their sons—provides a useful way of thinking about the state of perceived opportunity in rich nations. In some countries, men may say that their own opportunities have been worse than those of their fathers and believe that since they’ve been unfortunate, their sons will have more opportunity. In other countries, men may feel they have seen rising opportunity and that their sons will continue to do so. Yet other countries may be disproportionately comprised of men who perceive diminished opportunity for themselves that will persist into their sons’ lives. Finally, in some countries, men may perceive they have benefited from rising opportunity but be pessimistic that it can continue improving into their sons’ lives.

It turns out that men who perceive rising or falling opportunity versus their fathers tend to believe trends will continue into the next generation.

It turns out that men who perceive rising or falling opportunity versus their fathers tend to believe trends will continue into the next generation. In Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, and the United Kingdom, a majority of fathers think their sons will have more opportunities than they have experienced, and a majority think their own opportunities have been better than those of their fathers. At the other extreme, in Belgium, France, South Korea, Italy, and Spain, less than half of fathers thought their sons would have more opportunities than their own, and less than half thought their own opportunities have been better than those experienced by their fathers.

In contrast, majorities of American and Austrian fathers

FIGURE 2

Perceptions of Opportunity: United States Trends

	1939	1946	1997	2011	2016-17
Men who believe their opportunities to succeed are greater than those of their fathers	66%	83%	—	—	64%
Men who believed their sons would have better opportunities to succeed	61%	63%	68%	—	60%
Excluding those answering ‘same’ or ‘don’t know,’ the percentage of fathers saying their sons would have better opportunities	83%	78%	82%	75%	73%

are optimistic about their sons’ opportunities despite being split as to whether their own opportunities were better than those of their fathers. In Portugal, fathers were split as to whether sons’ opportunities would expand, while a majority thought their own opportunities were greater than those of their fathers. Fathers in Sweden, Germany, Canada, and Japan split regarding sons’ opportunities and were also split as to their own opportunities relative to their fathers. Finally, only a minority of fathers in the Netherlands thought their sons would have more opportunities even though a majority thought their own opportunities were greater than those of their fathers.

Trends in the United States

Perceptions of Greater Opportunity Relative to Fathers

The survey questions commissioned by the Archbridge Institute were designed to be comparable to ones asked in the United States in previous polling. Specifically, the question comparing men to fathers used the same wording as those asked by the Roper Organization in 1939 and 1946.⁸ I obtained the microdata from these surveys from the Roper Center iPOLL archive. Because the age distribution changed over the 78 years examined, I display results for male respondents between the ages of 26 and 40 in each survey.⁹

The proportion of men who believed their opportunities to succeed had been greater than those of their father stood at 66 percent in 1939. In 1946, the figure was 83 percent. In the Archbridge poll, 64 percent of men thought they had experienced rising opportunity. By this measure, then, fewer men perceive opportunity to be rising than in 1946, which is perhaps not surpris-

ing given that income growth was so strong during the 1940s and the nation had successfully emerged from the Great Depression and World War II. (**Figure 2**)

What is more surprising is that men today feel they have experienced no more—and maybe less—opportunity relative to their fathers than men in 1939.

What is more surprising is that men today feel they have experienced no more—and maybe less—opportunity relative to their fathers than men in 1939. Objectively, while men today are far better off than in 1939, it is possible that the slow post-1960s income growth they have experienced has been no better than that experienced by men at the end of the 1930s.

As noted above, Chetty et al. found a large decline in the share of men who are better off than their parents, though the decline is smaller after making several advisable adjustments.¹¹ That paper compared the 1940 and 1984 birth cohorts, meaning that the earlier group would have been 26 to 40 years old between 1966 and 1980, while the more recent group is 33 today. Because different birth cohorts are assessed in the polling, it is difficult to compare them with the Chetty et al. results.

Importantly, we should keep in mind, as already discussed, that American men today are, in fact, typically better off than their fathers were. Indeed, about two in three believe this to be true, based on the Archbridge poll.

And just as most Americans today would not choose to live in Bangladesh, where more men believe they are doing better than their fathers, most would not choose to live in 1939 or 1946 and forego contemporary living standards.

Perceptions that Sons Will Have Greater Opportunity

The Archbridge question comparing men to their sons was also designed to resemble past questions. In addition to the 1939 and 1946 Roper polls, a 1997 Gallup Organization poll also asked men to compare their opportunities to those expected of their sons. A 2011 poll commissioned by the Pew Charitable Trusts Economic Mobility Project did the same.¹² (I obtained the micro-data from the Gallup survey from the Roper Center iPOLL archive, and I obtained the Pew data from its Financial Security and Mobility Project.¹³) In all of the polls except for the Pew survey, men who did not have sons were asked to assume they did, but I use only the responses of men who did have sons.

... 60 percent of fathers believed their son would have better opportunities.¹⁴

The share of men 26–40 reporting that their son would have better opportunities to succeed rose from 61 percent in 1939 to 63 percent in 1946, and again to 68 percent in 1997. In the Archbridge poll, however, just 60 percent of fathers believed their son would have better opportunities.¹⁴ The Pew data does not allow one to distinguish between respondents who thought their son would have the same opportunities they have had and those who said they did not know. If we drop both responses, the trend in the percentage of fathers saying their sons would have better opportunities was 83 percent in 1939, 78 percent in 1946, 82 percent in 1997, 75 percent in 2011, and 73 percent in the Archbridge poll. (*Figure 2*)

... the share of men perceiving improvement in opportunities to succeed across generations appears to have declined modestly, though significant majorities still believe opportunities are expanding.

In summary, over roughly three-quarters of a century, the share of men perceiving improvement in opportunities to succeed across generations appears to have declined modestly, though significant majorities still believe opportunities are expanding. This decline appears smaller than the drop found by Chetty et al. in the share of men who exceed their parents' income, though the analyses do not compare the same cohorts. Of course, the trend in perceptions of opportunity need not follow the trend in absolute mobility examined by Chetty et al.

The results of the analyses here—across countries and over time—do not suggest that opportunity in America is in danger of disappearing, as implied by many popular and academic accounts. (The Chetty et al. paper is titled, “The Fading American Dream.”) As the country grows richer, it becomes less important that “opportunity” be continually growing. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that around a fifth to a quarter of fathers believe their sons will have fewer opportunities than they have had. Especially to the extent that those fathers are not themselves well off, policymakers should be focused on ways to expand opportunities further.





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RIWI's partners include global organizations such as: Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Freedom House, Harvard School of Public Health, ILGA, Inter-American Development Bank, MasterCard Foundation, Omidyar Network, UNICEF, UN World Food Program, US State Department, World Bank and others seeking better opinion data and more effective ways for directly engaging citizens.

About the Archbridge Institute

The Archbridge Institute is a non-partisan 501(c)(3) non-profit public policy think tank. Our mission is to rekindle the American Dream of opportunity and earned success by producing, funding, and disseminating multi-disciplinary academic and policy research that will inform how to lift barriers to economic mobility based on the principles of personal responsibility, rule of law, and entrepreneurship.

www.archbridgeinstitute.org

Endnotes

- ¹ Raj Chetty, David Grusky, Maximilian Hell, Nathaniel Hendren, Robert Manduca, and Jimmy Narang, “The Fading American Dream: Trends in Absolute Income Mobility Since 1940,” National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 22910, 2016, http://www.equality-of-opportunity.org/papers/abs_mobility_paper.pdf.
- ² The poll was conducted by the RIWI Corporation from November 2016 through January 2017. RIWI serves anonymous opt-in surveys to people who mistype website addresses in their browsers (typically, mistakes such as “.cm” instead of “.com”). The resulting samples are disproportionately male and skewed to younger age groups; RIWI weights the data to make it nationally representative by twelve sex-by- age groups. The critical assumption to its methodology is that within each sex-by- age group, those who participate in the survey (by virtue using a web browser, mistyping a website address, and opting into the survey) resemble other people in the country who do not participate.
- ³ In general, the 95 percent confidence intervals (margin of error) for these percentages are between 2.5 and 4.0 in either direction. Strong inferences about which countries have higher percentages are unwarranted, especially given the possibility of nonrandom error introduced by the survey methods and differential response rates.
- ⁴ These estimates are from Chetty et al., Online Data Table 4, available at http://www.equality-of-opportunity.org/data/absolute/table4_robustness_by_cohort.xlsx. They use the Personal Consumption Expenditures (PCE) deflator to adjust incomes for inflation, unlike the headline estimates emphasized by Chetty and his coauthors.
- ⁵ These estimates exclude men who gave responses of “same” or “don’t know.”
- ⁶ If men did not have a son, the Archbridge poll asked them about the opportunities they thought their hypothetical son would have.
- ⁷ In general, the 95 percent confidence intervals for these percentages are between 3.0 and 6.5 in either direction.
- ⁸ The 1939 question read, “Do you think your opportunities to succeed are better than, or not as good as, those your father had?” In 1946, it was, “Do you think your opportunities to succeed (have been) are better than, or not as good as, those your father had?” That was also the wording in the Archbridge survey. Surveyors in 1946 were instructed to use “have been” for retired respondents but to otherwise use “are.” In the Archbridge survey, respondents saw the text “(have been) are.”
- ⁹ The 1939 and 1946 surveys only include age ranges rather than individual ages, and both include 26–40 as a range, with the highest age range being 41 and older.
- ¹⁰ These estimates exclude responses of “same” and “don’t know” (and “not comparable” in 1939). Trends estimated other ways show a larger drop between 1946 and 2016. If “same” is included as a category, the trend saying “better” was from 56 percent to 72 percent to 49 percent. If “don’t know” is also included, it is from 54 percent to 70 percent to 43 percent. The basic issue is that more respondents chose “same” and “don’t know” in the Archbridge survey, when they were listed as specific options. While not completely clear, in the 1939 and 1946 surveys, it appears that respondents were not offered “same” or “don’t know” as possible responses, but they were options for surveyors to record on the paper survey itself (as well as “not comparable” in 1939).
- ¹¹ Scott Winship, “Economic Mobility in America: A State-of-the-Art Primer,” Archbridge Institute, March, 2017. <https://www.archbridgeinstitute.org/2017/03/20/economic-mobility-in-america/>.
- ¹² The 1939 question was, “Do you think your sons [sic] opportunities to succeed will be better than, or not as good as, those you have?” Respondents without a son were asked as if they had a son, and single women were asked as if they had a daughter. I used only male respondents who actually had a son. In 1946, the question given to men who had a son was, “Do you think your son’s opportunities to succeed will be better than, or not as good as, those you have had?” That was also the wording in the 1997 Gallup question and in the Archbridge question. The 2011 Pew question read, “Will your son’s opportunities to succeed be better than or not as good as those you’ve had?”
- ¹³ As a disclosure, I was involved in the design of the poll while working for the Economic Mobility Project in 2011. For full polling results, see [http://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/legacy/uploadedfiles/pcs_assets/2011/emp_2011_poll_toplines\(1\).pdf](http://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/legacy/uploadedfiles/pcs_assets/2011/emp_2011_poll_toplines(1).pdf).
- ¹⁴ If “same” and “don’t know” are included as categories, the trend saying “better” was from 61 percent to 63 percent to 68 percent to 45 percent.



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