



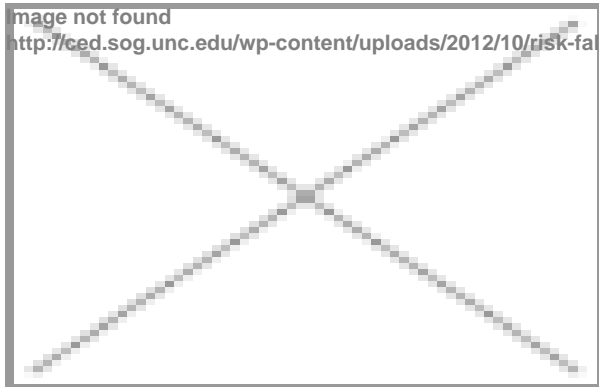
Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Middle Class in America – Circumstance or Meritocracy?

By CED Guest Author

Article: <https://ced.sog.unc.edu/middle-class-in-america-circumstance-or-meritocracy/>

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In a late September released policy paper, researchers with the

Brookings Institute's Center on Children and Families analyzed the social mobility prospects of American children. Two key questions lie at the core of the research presented by Sawhill, et.al in "Pathways to the Middle Class: Balancing Personal and Public Responsibilities" — *Why do some children do so much better than others? And what will it take to create more opportunity?* The authors employ a life-cycle model called the Social Genome Model (SGM) that "divides the life cycle into six stages and specifies a set of outcomes for each life stage that, according to the literature, are predictive of later outcomes and eventual economic success."

The identified stages are broken into six age groups: family formation (birth), early childhood (0-5), middle childhood (5-11), adolescence (11-19), transition to adulthood (19-29) and adulthood (29-40). After presenting a detailed analysis, the authors arrive at the following conclusions:

- The majority (61%) of Americans achieve the American dream by reaching the middle class by middle age, but there are large gaps by race, gender, and children's circumstances at birth.
- Success begets further success. Children who are successful at each life stage from early childhood to young adulthood are much more likely to achieve the American Dream.
- Children from less advantaged families tend to fall behind at every stage. They are less likely to be ready for school at age 5 (59% vs 72%), to achieve core academic and social competencies at the end of elementary school (60% vs 77%), to graduate from high school with decent grades and no involvement with crime or teen pregnancy (41% vs 70%), and to graduate from college or achieve the equivalent income in their twenties (48% vs 70%).
- Racial gaps are large from the start and never narrow significantly, especially for African Americans, who trail by an average of 25 percentage points for the identified benchmarks.
- Girls travel through childhood doing better than boys only to find their prospects diminished during the adult years. The proportion of children who successfully navigate through adolescence is strikingly low: only 57%.
- For the small proportion of disadvantaged children who do succeed throughout school and early adulthood (17%), their chances of being middle class by middle age are almost as great as for their more advantaged peers (75% vs 83%).



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- Keeping less advantaged children on track at each and every life stage is the right strategy for building a stronger middle class. Early interventions may prevent the need for later ones. As the data provided in this paper make abundantly clear, success is a cumulative process. One-time interventions may not be enough to keep less advantaged children on track.
 - It's never too late to intervene—people who succeed in their twenties, despite earlier struggles, still have a good chance of making it to the middle class.

The full text of the paper is available [here](#).

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