

# For Some, This Is Not a New Problem



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A few decades ago when I was working as a research assistant for Sidney Verba, a Harvard professor of political science, I was stunned by the levels of wealth disparity revealed through his and his colleagues' research. The U.S. had far greater disparities of income and wealth than any of its peers. Now the other shoe has dropped, and once again the U.S. has fallen far behind its peers: the probability that those at the bottom of the income distribution can move up the economic ladder is much lower in the U.S. than in other developed countries.

Some on the right see the continued high levels of immigration as evidence that we still live in the land of opportunity — that the American dream is still alive. But immigrants' reasons for moving here often have as much to do with conditions in the country of origin — levels of violence, economic collapse, civil war and political persecution — as they do with the perception of social mobility within the U.S. Indeed, [recent research](#) by Edward Telles and Vilma Ortiz carefully documents the lack of social mobility among Mexican immigrants over five generations. Disturbingly, they conclude that lack of Mexican-American economic assimilation is a result of ingrained racial exclusion, with similar results to the exclusion of African Americans in their migration from the rural South to the country's urban areas during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The lack of social mobility is not new for our black and Mexican-American communities.

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*If social mobility continues to decline, more Americans will agree with Malcolm X: there is no American dream, only an American nightmare.*

It is arguably a new reality for an increasing number of white Americans. Some major shifts have largely eliminated key engines that led to the growth of the middle class for the descendants of European immigrants as well as African Americans: stunning disinvestment in K-12 public education and higher education; the increasing proportion of the population for which higher education is now unaffordable; the decline of the influence and scope of unions and the decline in the manufacturing sector of the economy; and the decline in government employment.

If there is a growing consensus that the U.S. is falling behind in social mobility, the question becomes what to do about it. Here there is no consensus. My analysis suggests some starting points: First, a huge reinvestment in education. This is particularly necessary to attempt to stay

competitive not only with Western Europe, but also with the growing economies of Asia and elsewhere — which are investing in education and seeing substantial returns on their investment. Second, we have to end digital redlining and ensure that broadband access (another area in which the U.S. lags behind its competitors) is available to more households. College applications, job applications and critical information of all types necessary for survival and advancement are increasingly found only online. Finally, the state needs to invest in people — not only in education, but also in jobs. Our infrastructure is crumbling, and we need to invest in greening the cities. Without such investment, the country becomes increasingly less competitive and its residents more impoverished.

If social mobility continues to decline, an ever-widening expanse of Americans will come to agree with Malcolm X's angry argument a generation ago that for blacks in the U.S., there is no American dream, only an American nightmare.