

Who's getting ahead?



Social Mobility Commission

State of the Nation 2026: Who's getting ahead?

Presented to Parliament pursuant to section A1C
of the Life Chances Act 2010

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About the Commission

The Social Mobility Commission is an independent advisory non-departmental public body established under the Life Chances Act 2010 as modified by the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016. It has a duty to assess progress in improving social mobility in the UK and to promote social mobility in England. The Commission board comprises:

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Note

The colour palettes for our charts and maps are consistent with industry standards and the accessibility guidance available on gov.uk. Colours at opposite ends of the colour spectrum provide a clear contrast which helps to make the data more accessible for the widest variety of user needs possible.

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Foreword



We are pleased to publish this year's *State of the Nation* report, fulfilling the Commission's statutory responsibility to report to Parliament on the condition of social mobility in the UK.

This report should be read as the next stage in the programme of work we began several years ago. Our starting point was that the national debate on social mobility needed to be grounded more securely in evidence.

Since introducing our new Social Mobility Index in 2022, we have continually expanded its reach and rigour by adding demographic breakdowns across sex, ethnicity and disability, as well as launching our interactive Data Explorer Tool. Subsequent iterations have deepened our geographical precision down to upper-tier local authorities and broadened our scope to include long-term trend tracking and international comparisons. Together, these steady enhancements make this body of work the most comprehensive reporting on social mobility ever produced in the UK.

Our approach to social mobility

Since 2022, we have advocated using this foundation of monitoring data to reshape how we understand and address social mobility in public policy. For too long, public debate has focused on a “lucky few” model of social mobility: identifying a small number of high-performing individuals from lower socio-economic starting points and supporting their entry into elite universities and professions. This approach treats social mobility as a zero-sum game, managing a fixed supply of opportunities rather than expanding them. It addresses neither the “stickiness” at the top that protects entrenched privilege, nor the stickiness at the bottom that leads to long-lasting cycles of low opportunity and poor outcomes for some individuals, families and communities.

Our approach shifts away from this distributional view toward a framework grounded in economic growth theory. The evidence points to the fundamental role of the economy in producing as well as distributing opportunities, linking innovative growth directly to upward social mobility. This challenge is not best understood through conventional equality, diversity and inclusion methodologies for analysing inequality. Instead, upward social mobility is fostered by open elites, created through competition, enterprise, business development and the creation of higher level occupations. Drawing on the work of Philippe Aghion and others, this framework shows that in a stagnant economy, relative mobility becomes increasingly positional, where one person's advancement comes at the expense of another. By contrast, dynamic economies generate new firms, industries and routes to success. The central policy challenge is therefore not simply who gets access to existing elite roles, but whether the economy generates sufficient opportunity for broad-based advancement across all regions. This perspective connects social mobility directly to growth, innovation, entrepreneurship, skills and place.

Viewed in this way, social mobility's greatest contribution is not that it tells us who gets ahead, but that it reveals whether our economic and social institutions are working properly. A society characterised by open competition, innovation, economic dynamism and widespread opportunity should produce both growth and mobility. Conversely, a society characterised by monopolisation, inherited advantage and geographical exclusion will tend to produce both low growth and low mobility. The value of the social mobility lens is therefore that it reveals the connections between these moving parts. It can help policymakers distinguish between symptoms and causes, outcomes and mechanisms, and interventions that merely reshuffle opportunities versus those that genuinely expand them. This offers a more powerful vantage point for public policy than frameworks that focus only on redistribution, representation or access in isolation.

Our ambition has been that this analysis of social mobility would provide an organising framework for addressing regional inequalities. It reinvigorates the “growth and reform” mantra that characterised the first devolution deal in England, in Greater Manchester in 2014, treating the two as intimately connected within a single coherent framework. As such, our recommendation is that social mobility should sit squarely within the emerging framework of devolution. This provides a coherent focus for each deal, establishing a strong framework for setting targets and measuring performance through place-based approaches to innovation, growth and improved life chances.

To support this ambition, we have produced a large body of evidence and practical tools. This portfolio of work includes detailed geographical data across 203 local authorities, alongside research into the cultural and perceptual issues associated with social mobility and place. Through our Economic Growth and Innovation Group (EGIG) framework and associated tools, we enable the measurement of growth and innovation across the UK. We have also published research on the developmental factors and family circumstances most strongly associated with positive child outcomes. Furthermore, our growing body of work on the “sticky bottom”, where opportunity is least evident, examines youth unemployment, Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) rates and those in long-term receipt of welfare. As local structures take shape, we continue to make the case for integrating these evidence-based solutions directly into devolution deals.

Key advances in the 2026 report

Our State of the Nation report for 2026 builds directly on this foundation. It marks three major analytical advances. First, we have used newly available linked census records from the Office for National Statistics Longitudinal Study to follow people from childhood into adulthood and compare their education, occupation and housing with their parents'. This is gold-standard data that allows us to examine long-term mobility outcomes in England and Wales over the last thirty years. Second, we have also developed new analysis using travel-to-work areas, which better reflect real local labour markets than administrative boundaries. And third, we have used census data to examine how the occupational structure of local areas has changed over 20 years across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

This robust evidence base challenges the sweeping claims that too often dominate public debate: that the UK is in a permanent state of crisis, that mobility is uniformly worsening, or that the only question that matters is how to widen access to a narrow range of elite professions. The reality is far more nuanced. Understanding this complexity allows us to be precise about what the barriers are, where they exist and what targeted improvements are required.

Our findings show significant variations across time, domain, geography and demographic groups. Recognising these patterns is essential if we are to design policy that delivers real, lasting opportunity across every corner of the UK.

Changes over time

In 1991, before the great expansion of higher education at the end of the 20th century, higher education inequalities were extremely high (around 40 percentage points between people from graduate and non-graduate families), but housing inequalities were particularly low (around 20 percentage points those from owner and renter families). Occupational inequalities were in between.

By 2021, the inequalities in all three domains had converged. Higher educational inequalities fell to 33 points (for both men and women), occupational inequalities to 25 points and housing inequalities rose to 36 points. In other words, intergenerational educational, occupational and housing inequalities of opportunity were much less different from each other (for early-career young men and women).

Relative occupation and occupational-wage mobility nuanced but stable

Much of the debate on social mobility focuses on relative mobility, which compares the chances of people from different socio-economic backgrounds reaching a particular outcome. Although some point to a decline, the new data confirms that relative mobility has been much more stable than suggested, though important nuances exist.

Relative occupational mobility has improved among early-career people, but has shown little change among those in mid-career. At the same time, relative occupational-wage mobility has recently improved among early- and mid-career men and women after a long period of increasing stickiness. But among young women, relative mobility still remains significantly worse than it was among young women thirty years ago.

Despite drawing on different data sources and methodologies, both State of the Nation 2023 and 2025 reached this exact same conclusion. National survey cohorts and cross-national studies show a consistent pattern of broad stability rather than systematic decline. This alignment across distinct approaches reinforces our core argument that improving life chances depends fundamentally on expanding opportunity, which means creating more professional jobs and reducing regional disparities across the UK.

Absolute mobility matters

Relative mobility is an important measure, but absolute mobility is equally important, if not more so. Absolute mobility measures the overall percentage of the population who achieve a different or higher socio-economic position than their parents, showing whether a society is expanding total opportunity and real-term progress across generations. What enhances people's outcomes is when the absolute number of opportunities increases, because the economy generates more managerial and professional occupations. This expansion is what allows large numbers of people to "move up" and it has been the defining story of social mobility in the UK since the 1970s.

Our new analysis offers a more reliable assessment of these long-term trends. It reveals that upward occupational mobility from the working class has risen substantially over the last 30 years. This means that more young people from working-class backgrounds have obtained professional jobs than in their parents' generation. However, this upward momentum has recently slowed.

Education mobility improving

Upward educational mobility has improved substantially. Among people from non-graduate families, the proportion gaining degrees has risen sharply since 1991, reaching 33% for men and 42% for women aged 28 to 37 in 2021. And this has been associated with an improvement in equality of opportunity for higher education. Long-range upward occupational mobility from working-class origins has also increased. These are important gains and they should not be ignored.

Housing mobility declining

Housing mobility has moved in the opposite direction. In 1991, 67% of men and 65% of women aged 28 to 37 who had grown up in rented accommodation were homeowners. By 2021, these figures had almost halved, to 37% and 33%. This matters, because social mobility is not only about education or occupational class; it is also about the ability to build security, family life and independence. If housing becomes increasingly dependent on family background, then inherited advantage becomes more important.

Different outcomes for different groups

The report shows why we cannot treat social mobility as a single “national average”, whether good or bad. Girls and young women continue to do better than boys and young men in education, yet this advantage does not translate fully into occupational level or pay. Many ethnic minority groups show strong educational outcomes, but some do not receive the same rewards in the labour market. Disabled young people, especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, continue to face persistent barriers.

Immediate concerns for young people

There are also immediate concerns for the next generation. Some of the drivers of mobility remain positive: parental education and professional employment have continued to rise, and business investment in research and development has nearly returned to its recent peak. But the transition from education into work has become more difficult. NEET rates among 16- to 18-year-olds reached 9% in 2024, the highest since 2012, and youth unemployment among 16- to 24-year-olds was around 16% in 2025. We need to ask whether enough young people are finding a place in education, training and work.

The importance of place and geography

And of course, geography runs through all of this. Our analysis of travel-to-work areas shows that opportunity cannot be understood properly by looking only at local authority boundaries. Some city regions generate strong labour-market opportunities across wider commuting zones. At the same time, some smaller coastal, rural and former industrial labour markets face weaker conditions, which can be hidden in broader area averages. The census analysis tells a similar story. The UK has shifted towards higher-professional employment, but those opportunities are not evenly spread across the country.

Turning evidence into action

For the Commission, the implication is clear. Social mobility policy should not be concerned only with helping a small number of people move into elite occupations. Nor should it reduce itself to identifying disparities and assuming that all gaps can be closed in the same way. Disparity analysis can be useful, but it is not enough.

We must actively build the supply of opportunity, driving enterprise, innovation and private-sector growth to expand the total volume of higher-level, higher-paid occupations across every nation and region. Placing this challenge at the heart of the devolution mission will ensure that growth is felt in local labour markets rather than concentrated in traditional hubs.

At the same time, policy must align education and housing directly with this growth narrative. Education remains vital, but it must operate in lockstep with economic demand by widening routes into employment, embracing technical qualifications alongside academic paths and dismantling the systemic barriers that cause persistent educational underperformance in specific communities. Similarly, housing must be treated as a pillar of growth and mobility alike; without restoring homeownership and housing security for young people, inherited backgrounds will continue to overshadow talent and effort.

Addressing the challenges highlighted in this report demands a joined-up strategy centered on economic growth, absolute opportunity and place. Only with this renewed focus will social mobility become a meaningful reality for every individual and community across the UK.

Alun Francis,
Chair of the Social Mobility Commission



Executive summary



The Social Mobility Commission (SMC) monitors social mobility across the UK and makes recommendations to improve social mobility in England.

Our annual report looks at the relationship between a person's socio-economic background and where they end up in life, and at the conditions that support mobility across the UK. This year, we've strengthened the evidence base in 3 main ways: by adding analysis from the Office for National Statistics Longitudinal Study (ONS-LS), by using census data to examine long-term changes in occupational structure, and by introducing travel-to-work area (TTWA) analysis to reflect real local labour markets rather than administrative boundaries. This has given us more reliable measures using gold-standard evidence and has allowed us to undertake new analysis in underexplored areas like Northern Ireland.

Once again, our report is organised around our Social Mobility Index, which is our long-term project to develop and publish social mobility statistics enabling comparison over time.¹ The Index has 3 linked pillars: mobility outcomes, intermediate outcomes and drivers. Mobility outcomes show where people end up later in life compared with their parents; intermediate outcomes show earlier points in the life course, such as educational attainment and early labour-market position; and drivers show the social and economic conditions that may make future mobility easier (or harder).

Across these chapters, the evidence shows some signs of improving mobility, especially on education and aspects of occupational mobility. For example, we see that parental education is now a much less important factor in whether children get degrees or not. However, there are also clear causes for concern, especially on housing, youth labour-market conditions and unequal access to good jobs.

In chapter 2, the clearest positive long-term trend is in upward educational mobility. Among people from non-graduate families, the proportion who went on to gain degrees rose from 11% of men and 7% of women in 1991 to 33% of men and 42% of women in 2021. Relative educational mobility has also improved, meaning that parental education has become a weaker predictor of whether children go to university, although inequalities remain.

Occupational mobility also shows some improvements. Among early-career adults, long-range upward mobility from working-class families into professional occupations rose from 25% of men and 20% of women in 1991 to 36% and 38% respectively in 2021. However, the pace of increase has slowed and relative occupational mobility has changed much less among people in mid-career.

In contrast to many other mobility outcomes, upward housing mobility, meaning movement from rented accommodation in childhood to owner-occupation in adulthood, has fallen sharply. Among early-career adults, it fell from 67% of men and 65% of women in 1991 to 37% and 33% respectively in 2021. By 2021, around 1.7 million people aged 28 to 37 years in England and Wales had experienced downward housing mobility, compared with around 850,000 who had experienced upward housing mobility. This means that parental homeownership has become an increasingly important factor in whether young adults can own their own homes. The evidence on occupational-wage mobility is more cautious, because wages are inferred from occupations. However, it also suggests that relative wage mobility for young women remains worse than it was in 1991.

¹ Social Mobility Commission, '[State of the Nation 2022: A fresh approach to social mobility](#)', 2022. Published on GOV.UK.

Chapter 3 shows that educational success does not always translate into similar labour-market rewards. Girls outperform boys from age 5 years through to university, but since the pandemic GCSE results for girls have fallen more sharply than those for boys. Among non-disadvantaged girls, the share achieving a grade-5 pass in English and maths fell from 61% in 2020 to 55% in 2025, while among disadvantaged girls it fell from 34% to 27%.

The ethnicity findings also show contrasting outcomes. By age 16 years, nearly 73% of free-school-meal-eligible pupils from the Chinese ethnic group met the benchmark level of a grade 5 or above in both GCSE English and maths, compared with 4% of Gypsy or Roma pupils. Yet strong educational outcomes do not always lead to equivalent labour-market outcomes for all groups. Disabled young people face especially persistent barriers. For those from lower working-class backgrounds, the disability gap in economic activity remained at 32 percentage points and disabled graduates earned 8% less than non-disabled graduates with the same level of qualification.

Chapter 4 gives a mixed picture of the conditions shaping future mobility. There are positive signs in parental resources. In 2025, 45% of adults living in households with dependent children had a degree or above and 48% were in professional roles. Business investment in research and development also rose to £55.6 billion in 2024, close to its 2021 peak, which may support future growth in high-skilled opportunities. However, the data suggests that the immediate outlook for young people remains challenging. The proportion of 16- to 18-year-olds who were not in education, employment or training (NEET) reached 9% in 2024, the highest level since 2012, while youth unemployment among 16- to 24-year-olds rose to around 16% in 2025. The vacancy-to-jobseeker ratio also fell from 0.7 in 2023 to 0.4 in 2025, suggesting fewer opportunities for those entering the labour market.

Chapter 5 shows that geography can make these opportunities look different depending on the boundaries used. Local authorities (LAs) often do not reflect the realities of labour markets, because people frequently live in one area and work in another. TTWA analysis therefore reveals opportunities and disadvantages that LA analysis can hide. The most favourable labour-market opportunities for young people and the strongest environments for innovation and growth remain concentrated in the south of England and in major city regions, with London, Oxford, Reading, Bristol and Edinburgh standing out. But the analysis also shows more favourable opportunities outside the South East, including Leeds, Derby, Preston and York. The main concern is that some smaller and more remote labour markets, including coastal areas such as Cromer & Sheringham, Skegness & Louth, Boston, and Margate & Ramsgate, appear much less favourable when analysed as real commuting zones rather than as parts of larger administrative areas.

Chapter 6 adds a longer and more precise picture of how the job mix has changed across the UK. Over the last 20 years, the higher professional class has grown and the higher working class has declined, reflecting the continuing shift towards a post-industrial, knowledge-intensive economy. But the gains have been unevenly distributed. In England, the higher professional class grew by 6.8 percentage points in Leeds and 7.7 points in Bristol, while places such as Birmingham, Middlesbrough, Stoke-on-Trent and Kingston upon Hull saw much smaller increases. London was unusual: its 5.9-point increase in the higher professional class was offset by a matching 5.9-point fall in the lower professional class. Northern Ireland showed particularly strong growth in the higher professional class and had largely caught up with Wales's class profile by 2021.

Taken together, the chapters show that the UK has made real gains in education and in some forms of occupational mobility, but these gains do not guarantee equal access to secure, well-paid work or affordable housing. Social mobility policy therefore cannot rely on education and skills alone. People also need access to good jobs, fair pay, affordable housing and local economies that provide real opportunities without requiring people to leave the places where they grew up.



1

Introduction





Highlights

- The Social Mobility Commission (SMC) monitors intergenerational social mobility across the UK. This means that we look at how many people are able to move upwards from their socio-economic background (SEB, the circumstances that they grew up in) and also at whether this background affects their chances of moving up.
- Our Social Mobility Index is structured around 3 pillars: mobility outcomes (measured later in life), intermediate outcomes (measured at an earlier stage) and drivers (underlying conditions that help mobility). All outcome measures are broken down by a person's SEB.
- Mobility is quantified using absolute measures (the total number of people who have changed position) and relative measures (comparing chances between different groups, reflecting 'stickiness' or 'fluidity'). Occupational class is a main metric and composite indices are used for more accurate geographical reporting.
- The 2026 report incorporates major data improvements, including the Office for National Statistics Longitudinal Study (ONS-LS) and travel-to-work area (TTWA) analysis. But it still faces challenges due to data limitations, such as the lack of linked tax/educational records and the decreased reliability of the Labour Force Survey (LFS).

The Social Mobility Commission

The SMC exists to monitor social mobility across the UK and to make recommendations in England. We aim to understand how many people are socially mobile, which parts of the country see the most change and whether a person's background is limiting opportunity. Social mobility is important because it means the circumstances of birth do not limit what someone can achieve – no matter what your starting point, you can go on to achieve positive life outcomes.

What is social mobility?

The term 'social mobility' can have many meanings. In this report, we use it to refer to intergenerational social mobility. This means that a person experiences social mobility when they have different life outcomes from their parents.

This could mean a different income level, a different occupational class or other differences such as housing or education. Mobility can be upwards or downwards. What all these approaches have in common is a concern with the chances of people shifting from where they started: moving up or down the social ladder to a higher or lower position than their parents, or staying in the same position.

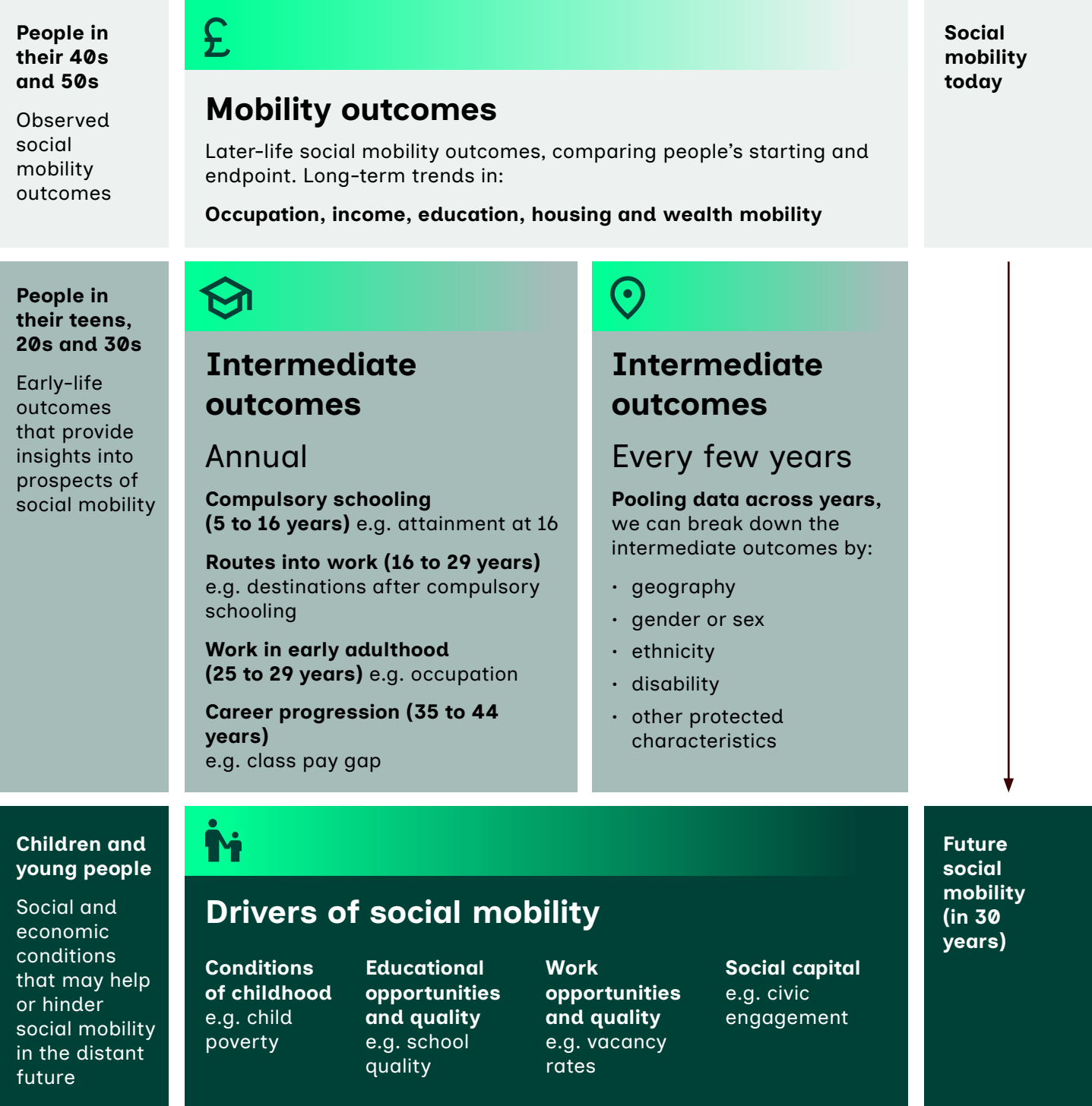
For example, if you have a professional occupation and your parents had a working-class occupation, you have experienced upward occupational mobility. If you have a high income and your parents had a lower income at the same age, you have experienced upward income mobility.



The role of our Social Mobility Index

In 2022, we launched our Social Mobility Index to measure mobility clearly and systematically across a person’s lifetime. The Index includes over 40 indicators that cover early years through to late adulthood.

Figure 1.1: The updated Social Mobility Index.



Note: ‘Social capital’ refers to the social connections and the relationships that come from them, which enable a society to function well. Social capital’s role in social mobility is less well understood than that of education or work. However, it has been suggested that it can promote a more dynamic economy and society.

The Social Mobility Index includes social mobility outcomes, looking at people's jobs and earnings at different life stages, in comparison with their parents'. It also reports on some drivers or background conditions that might help or hinder social mobility in the future.

What are mobility outcomes, intermediate outcomes and drivers?

Mobility outcomes show the changes that people make from their starting point in life to a later endpoint, such as employment or income when they are in their 40s.² We break outcome measures down by people's socio-economic background (SEB), so that we can see how different starting points affect change to endpoints. Analysis of most mobility outcomes relies on data from panel or birth cohort studies, which aren't always updated yearly. For this reason, we don't update these figures annually.³

Intermediate outcomes show the development that people make from their start point to an earlier endpoint, such as employment in their 20s or educational attainment at age 16 years. We also break these down by SEB. We track these figures because a person's early outcomes can be a very good indicator of how their later life will turn out. This gives us an early snapshot of mobility without having to wait to assess outcomes much later in life.

Drivers show the underlying social and economic conditions that make social mobility easier (or harder). For example, the availability of good education is a driver, because it helps people get better jobs and improve their circumstances (upward mobility). So our measures of drivers tell us about these nationwide background conditions. They do not tell us what the UK's rates of mobility have been and they are not broken down by SEB.

These 3 categories of measures – mobility outcomes, intermediate outcomes and drivers – form the comprehensive framework of our Index, allowing for a more detailed assessment of mobility across a person's lifespan.

“We break outcome measures down by people's socio-economic background, so that we can see how different starting points affect change to endpoints.”

² We use this age range because people have generally reached occupational maturity, meaning that their career has stabilised. At this stage, their job title more accurately reflects their long-term socio-economic position. Different studies use varied age ranges for this measurement, but a typical range is 37 to 44. Data availability may also be important. In this report, when using the Office for National Statistics Longitudinal Study (ONS-LS), we examine 2 age ranges: 27 to 36 and 37 to 46.

³ We last updated these figures in the State of the Nation 2023. That report covered education, income, housing and wealth data up to 2020 and occupational data up to 2022. For this year's report, we use ONS-LS data, which covers outcomes up to 2021.



Measures of social mobility

To effectively monitor and report on social mobility across the UK, the SMC employs a range of different measures. This section explains the building blocks of our measurement framework.

What is a social-mobility measure?

All measures of social mobility have to start with a measure of SEB. This is because, without knowing someone's starting point, we cannot say what progress they have made. Once the SEB is determined, we can see where someone has ended up and measure the difference between the starting and finishing points.

This can present a challenge, because someone's starting point can be decades in the past and finding appropriate data can be difficult. For this reason, we have to rely on a range of different measures of SEB, depending on the context, and some are better than others.

Once we have a measure of someone's SEB, we can then go on to measure their current status, whether they are at an earlier point in their life (for intermediate outcomes) or a later one (for mobility outcomes).

When we do this for the whole population or for a sample representing the population, we get the social mobility rates that feature in this report. These rates can either be absolute or relative, a distinction that is explained on page 21. Finally, we can combine several different measures into a 'composite index' to give us an overall picture of social mobility in a geographical area.

Understanding the full framework, from SEB determination to the use of absolute and relative rates, is important when interpreting the findings on social mobility. This is why we next turn our attention to the foundational concept of SEB.

Socio-economic background

SEB is the crucial starting point for any analysis of social mobility, as any mobility measure consists in looking at the difference between a person's SEB and where they end up later in life. This section defines SEB and outlines the various data sources and proxies, such as parental occupation, income and education, that we use to capture this in our reporting.

What is socio-economic background and how do we measure it?

SEB is a person's starting point, measured by their parents' socio-economic situation when the person was growing up.

SEB is not just a matter of parental income and income is not the only thing that matters for a child's life chances, although it has a critical role to play. That is why we also consider parental occupational class, income and education. For example, we might look at whether one or both parents had a degree when the person was a child. There are, of course, other elements that influence outcomes, like family dynamics, community structures, and culture, which we are unfortunately not able to measure.

Throughout our report, we often report SEB as it's recorded in the Labour Force Survey (LFS), a representative sample survey that gives information on the UK's labour market. In this survey, participants are asked about their current jobs and what job the main earner in the household did when they were aged 14 years. This enables us to look back at someone's SEB without having to track the same individual across all the intervening years. The LFS also covers the whole of the UK, in line with the Social Mobility Commission's statutory obligations.

Sometimes, the LFS isn't available, so we have to use other measures of SEB. For example, for children still in school, the only measure of SEB available is their eligibility for free school meals (FSM). This is a rough measure of family income, as children in low-income families are eligible for FSM.



Absolute and relative mobility

Social mobility measures can be categorised into 2 distinct types: absolute and relative. Both are essential for a complete picture, as they measure different things. This section explains the difference between absolute measures, which quantify the total number of people who have moved up or down the social ladder, and relative measures, which concentrate on the comparative chances between different groups.

What are absolute and relative mobility measures?

Absolute measures capture the number of people who have experienced mobility. They are usually expressed as percentages of the population. For example, the absolute occupational mobility rate is the percentage of people who are in a different occupational class from their parents. For income mobility, a common absolute measure is the percentage of people whose income is higher than their parents' income was, at the same age. We can compare these rates across different regions of the UK.

We can think of it like escalators in a building: improving absolute mobility would be like adding more escalators, so that more people can get to the top floor.

Relative measures compare the chances that at least 2 groups have of reaching a particular outcome. It is this element of comparison that makes such measures relative. A relative mobility measure tells us that one group has better chances than another, rather than telling us the total number of socially mobile people. Low relative mobility means that those who start life in a particular position are more likely than others to be in the same position later in life. For that reason, low relative mobility can be thought of as 'stickiness', while high relative mobility can be thought of as 'fluidity'.

To go back to the escalator analogy, improving relative mobility would mean giving people who start lower down access to faster escalators, so the floor they begin on doesn't determine where they end up. In a society with perfect relative mobility, those starting at the bottom would have just as much chance as anyone else of reaching the top.

The distinction between absolute and relative mobility is vital for a complete assessment, as it allows us to track both the overall change in and the distribution of opportunity. There is an important policy question about where we should focus our efforts – will we increase societal welfare more by increasing the number of people who can move upwards, or by making the distribution of opportunity more even? However, in practice, the 2 types of measure are generally strongly correlated over time. That is to say, in periods where one improves, the other also tends to improve.

“Absolute measures capture the number of people who have experienced mobility. Relative measures compare the chances that at least 2 groups have of reaching a particular outcome.”

Composite indices for geographical reporting

To assess social mobility across different geographical areas of the UK with greater confidence, this report uses a set of composite indices. These indices are powerful tools that combine multiple individual measures – both drivers and intermediate outcomes – into a single summary score. This approach helps to reduce the risk of coming to conclusions based on random sampling errors in single-measure estimates. This provides a stronger picture of regional differences.

What are composite indices?

As in last year's report, we feature 5 composite indices, covering some of our drivers and intermediate outcomes. We call them composite indices because they summarise multiple drivers or intermediate outcomes in a single score. They give us a summary of how different geographical areas of the UK compare on the main dimensions of mobility.

The composites also allow us to be more confident in coming to conclusions about differences between geographical areas. Estimates for individual areas often involve sampling errors (since they are based on sample surveys, like the LFS).⁴ There is therefore always a risk that differences between areas on a single measure could be due to random sampling errors. To get around this inaccuracy, we summarise findings across multiple indicators that seem to be related. When multiple measures all give a similar picture, we can confidently say that there are real differences between the areas. We can then ask whether these differences are due to the areas themselves or the individuals living there. For example, the Conditions of Childhood index summarises a number of factors connected with the socio-economic situation of parents with dependent children.

By combining multiple indicators into composite indices, we are able to provide a stable, geographically detailed picture of mobility drivers and intermediate outcomes, a process that relies heavily on clear and consistent measures, such as the classification of occupational class.

⁴ The Labour Force Survey (LFS) is a study of the employment circumstances of the UK population. It is the largest household study in the UK and provides the official measures of employment and unemployment. Office for National Statistics (ONS), '[Labour force survey](#)', 2021. Published on ONS.GOV.UK.



Occupational class

Occupational class is one of the main things we track to find out an individual's SEB and to measure their ultimate mobility outcomes. Table 1.1 details the framework we use to classify occupations throughout this report, which is based on a simplified 5-part grouping derived from the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC).⁵

Table 1.1: Our 5-part grouping of occupational classes based on the NS-SEC.

NS-SEC	Previous 3-part grouping	5-part grouping	Example occupations
1	Professional and managerial	Higher professional including higher managerial, administrative and professional	Chief executive officer of large firm, doctor, clergy, engineer, senior army officer
2		Lower professional including lower managerial, administrative and professional	Teacher, nurse, office manager, journalist, web designer
3	Intermediate⁶	Intermediate including intermediate occupations, small employers and freelance workers	Clerical worker, driving instructor, graphic designer, shopkeeper, hotel manager, taxi driver, self-employed roofer
4			
5	Working class	Higher working class including lower supervisory, technical and semi-routine workers	Foreman, mechanic, electrician, train driver, printer, shop assistant, traffic warden, housekeeper, farmworker
6			
7		Lower working class and workless families	Cleaner, porter, waiter, labourer, refuse collector, bricklayer
8			

The NS-SEC categorises individuals by economic security and workplace power rather than income. It looks at 2 areas. The first is labour-market situation, which includes source and form of income (for example, monthly salary or payment for hours worked), job security, predictability of earnings, career development, and long-term rewards. The second is work situation, which includes whether the worker has authority over others, how closely they are monitored and how much discretion and autonomy they have.

Two people doing the same type of work can be in different classes if one is an employee and the other is self-employed, since the self-employed tend to be classed as intermediate. For example, a bricklayer who is an employee would be in NS-SEC 7, lower working class, while a self-employed bricklayer would be in NS-SEC 4, intermediate class. The earned incomes in these 2 cases may also be very different.

⁵ The ONS collects, analyses and shares statistics about the UK's economy, society and population. ONS, '[The national statistics socio-economic classification \(NS-SEC\)](#)', 2021. Published on ONS.GOV.UK.

⁶ Some routine occupations can count as intermediate if the worker is self-employed.

Occupational class versus earnings

All of this means that occupational class is not about how much you earn. Sometimes people in lower occupational classes earn more than those in higher occupational classes. For example, speech and language therapists count as higher professionals, NS-SEC 1, because their job requires a first degree for entry, experience-related training and the practical application of a body of knowledge to instruct others. Yet their average salary is lower than that of many working-class occupations, including some routine manual occupations.

Example occupations, their NS-SEC classes and median salaries

Speech and language therapists – NS-SEC 1:

Higher professional. Median salary: £31,932.

Train and tram drivers – NS-SEC 5:

Higher working class. Median salary: £63,807.

Air conditioning and refrigeration installers and repairers – NS-SEC 6:

Higher working class. Median salary: £39,818.

Large goods vehicle drivers – NS-SEC 7:

Lower working class. Median salary: £36,847.⁷

Limitations of NS-SEC

While NS-SEC is a very powerful analytical tool, it has limitations and cannot capture every aspect of someone's labour-market or work situation. These limitations fall broadly into 2 types: change over time and the breadth of the NS-SEC categories.

Change over time presents a particular challenge, because the nature of the work involved in certain jobs may change and new types of jobs will appear. Revisions are carried out every decade to take account of this, but that means that comparisons over time can be disrupted. For example, if a certain occupation is reclassified at a higher level, this could create an illusion of upward social mobility, as everyone who does that occupation is now reclassified.

The second challenge arises from the breadth of the categories. The professional and managerial classes (NS-SEC 1 and 2) have expanded dramatically and now contain a large proportion of the population. This broad category now conceals huge variations in pay, prestige and career trajectories, yet the social stratification taking place within the category may be missed. It also means that an individual might make significant progress within a category, which would also be missed, because their classification would not change. Finally, the classification of managers and professionals is vulnerable to job-title and educational qualification inflation, because it relies on subjective self-description in surveys.

“Occupational class is not about how much you earn. Sometimes people in lower occupational classes earn more than those in higher occupational classes.”

⁷ ONS, [‘Earnings and hours worked, occupation by four-digit SOC: ASHE table 14a’](#), 2023. Published on ONS.GOV.UK.

Improvements to our reporting

Last year, we added 2 important elements to our Index: systematic international comparisons and a more thorough analysis of change over time. This allowed us to compare the UK with other countries and track how the UK has changed over time.

This year, we have made a major improvement by adding the ONS-LS to our data sources.⁸ The ONS-LS, which uses data from the census, allows us to look in more geographical detail at changes in the drivers and also to check national trends in the mobility outcomes.

Improvements for 2026

We have made significant improvements across all 3 core components of the Index: mobility outcomes, intermediate outcomes and drivers (see page 18).

In particular, the report has incorporated the ONS-LS as a major new data source for mobility outcomes. This has established national trends across occupational, educational, income and housing mobility, building on our past work of adding a more thorough analysis of change over time. Each section has also included comparisons with other authors and data sources to provide a richer picture.

The ONS-LS offers significant benefits. It uses a 1% sample of the census, a much larger sample size, with very few people dropping out over time. It also directly links children's and parents' census records, instead of relying on people remembering their parents' jobs. We also have data every 10 years from 1971, which allows us to look at long-term trends. Finally, we can follow the same individuals over time, which allows us to track life-cycle effects (for example, how the same person's income varies over their lifetime).

Regarding intermediate outcomes, we have updated the standard indicators as per usual. In addition, for the protected characteristics, we have broken down the LFS pooled data into 2 even time periods – 2014 to 2019 and 2020 to 2025 – to assess how outcomes for those groups have changed over time. This pooling approach has been necessary to address the challenges of the LFS's significantly decreased reliability and falling response rates over the last decade. We discuss more in the section on data limitations, on page 26.

Finally, the analysis of drivers has been enhanced in 2 significant ways. We have used census data from 2001 to 2021/22 to examine changes in occupational structures over time at the local authority (LA) level, which has allowed us to look at Northern Ireland LAs individually for the first time. Furthermore, we have introduced TTWA analysis to better understand local labour market opportunities for young people, and innovation and growth. This geographical approach supports our use of composite indices to draw more confident conclusions about real differences between areas.

⁸ ONS, '[About the ONS Longitudinal Study](#)'. Published on ONS.GOV.UK.

What are travel-to-work areas?

Travel-to-work areas (TTWAs) are geographical units designed to represent self-contained labour market areas where the majority of people both live and work. They are a valuable tool for labour-market analysis and planning.⁹

To be defined as a TTWA, an area must meet the following criteria: (1) at least 75% of the resident workforce must work within the area; (2) at least 75% of the people who work in the area must also live there (known as the “self-containment rate”); (3) the area must have a minimum economically active population of 3,500. For areas with a working population over 25,000, a self-containment rate as low as 66.7% is accepted as a compromise.

This definition results in some areas being significantly larger than others. For example, much of London and its surrounding area is grouped into a single TTWA.

TTWAs are useful because they reflect the real geographical clustering of work.

Data limitations in the UK

Tracing trends over extended periods offers deeper insights into how social mobility has evolved. However, analysing such changes at a granular level, for instance by protected characteristics or by area, remains challenging due to data limitations.¹⁰ This highlights the need for better data to support social mobility analysis and broader discussions on data improvements for informing future reports. This need for better data was previously explored in detail in the SMC’s 2022 report, [Data for social mobility](#).¹¹

Linking parents’ outcomes with children’s

Linking parents’ and children’s tax records and educational records would give us a much more detailed and refined picture of mobility. The records already exist, but are not linked across generations. Without this linkage, researchers cannot look at the earnings or education of today’s adults and compare them with the earnings or education of their parents. Countries such as Sweden and the USA already have linked tax records, enabling pioneering work on the causes of mobility.¹² While the ONS-LS gives us some linking across generations, it is not administrative data and is therefore still based on a sample of the population. Furthermore, the ONS-LS is based on decennial data from the census (collected every 10 years), so we cannot use it to track annual changes.

A household-level dataset

Household-level data would help us understand the socio-economic circumstances of schoolchildren more clearly. At the moment, administrative data generally views people as individuals, rather than as belonging to a household. For example, an administrative household-level dataset would help target children who are most in need, rather than relying on the current, rather basic, FSM eligibility marker.

⁹ ONS, [‘Travel to work area analysis in Great Britain: 2016’](#), Published on ONS.GOV.UK.

¹⁰ Analysis of intermediate outcome trends is exclusively reliant on the UK LFS. Due to limited sample sizes, ranging from 30,000 to 90,000 respondents depending on the annual iteration, it’s not possible to break down the data by year and demographic characteristics (for example, sex, ethnicity, disability) or geographical area (for example, local authority). Such granular analysis would give statistically unreliable estimates with high levels of uncertainty.

¹¹ Social Mobility Commission, [‘Data for social mobility: improving the collection and availability of data across government’](#), 2022. Published on GOV.UK.

¹² Raj Chetty and others, [‘Is the United States still a land of opportunity? Recent trends in intergenerational mobility’](#), 2014. Published on NBER.ORG.

Occupational data

There is currently no administrative data on people's occupation type in the UK. His Majesty's Revenue and Customs collects data on income, but not on occupation, although it has consulted on this.¹³

Birth cohort studies

There have only been 4 major birth cohort studies in the UK since 1945, leaving gaps of up to 30 years between studies. The most recent one, the Millennium Cohort Study, began fieldwork 25 years ago. The Centre for Longitudinal Studies manages most of these studies. Gaps have occurred because maintaining long-term studies over decades is expensive.

The Labour Force Survey

As in the previous State of the Nation reports, we rely on the LFS to understand trends in intermediate outcomes and drivers because it is the only UK data source that collects people's socio-economic backgrounds and other relevant labour market information. However, the reliability of this data has significantly decreased over the last 10 years. The number of people surveyed has roughly halved, falling from about 99,300 in 2014 to 50,800 in 2025. This is largely due to a decline in the survey's response rate, which dropped from 48% in 2014 to 39% in 2019, and further dropped to just 17% by early 2024.¹⁴ To make our analysis stronger, we have used a 3-year rolling average to increase the effective sample size and smooth out large swings in the data. We have also carried out specific statistical checks that account for the smaller sample size to ensure that any observed changes are genuinely meaningful and not just random variations.

The problems with the LFS are now partially improved by the publication of the latest ONS-LS data, but the ONS-LS is only updated once every 10 years (because it is based on the census). For annual updates, we still rely on the LFS.

¹³ See His Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) consultation '[Improving the data HMRC collects from its customers](#)', 2023. After the consultation HMRC decided against the collection of Standard Occupational Classification codes. These are four-digit numbers which categorise jobs based on skills, qualifications and responsibilities.

¹⁴ Office for National Statistics, '[Labour Force Survey performance and quality monitoring report: January to March 2025](#)'. Published on ONS.GOV.UK.



2

Long-term trends of social mobility outcomes



Highlights

- Upward educational mobility increased steadily from 1991 to 2011. The rate of degree attainment among men aged 28 to 37 years from non-graduate families rose from 11% in 1991 to 32% in 2011 and from 7% to 37% for women. However, the rate of increase then slowed: upward educational mobility was 33% for men and 42% for women in 2021.
- Relative educational mobility improved both in the first decade analysed (1991 to 2001) and in the most recent (2011 to 2021). In other words, parents going to university (or not) seems to have had less influence on children's chances of doing so.
- Upward occupational mobility from the working class to the professional class increased considerably, especially between 1991 and 2001. Among early-career individuals aged 28 to 37 years, 25% of men and 20% of women experienced this long-range upward mobility in 1991, rising to 34% and 36% in 2011. It has continued to increase slowly over the last decade, reaching 36% and 38% in 2021.
- Relative occupational mobility has improved among early-career people aged 28 to 37 years, but has shown little change among people aged 38 to 47 years in mid-career. This means that the strength of the link between parents' occupational class and their children's occupational class has stayed fairly steady.
- The calculations of income mobility from the Office for National Statistics Longitudinal Study (ONS-LS) are better called occupational-wage mobility. This is because we cannot measure income directly in the ONS-LS. Instead, we can analyse 'occupational wages', which are the average wages for each occupation and are estimated indirectly from other data sources. This measure does not include non-salary income.
- Relative occupational-wage mobility among early-career men and women worsened notably up until 2001, but improved in the most recent decade. However, relative occupational-wage mobility for young women remains significantly worse than it was in 1991. So parents' wages now predict young women's wages more strongly than they did in 1991. Relative occupational-wage mobility among mid-career men and women also decreased between 1991 and 2011.



Housing mobility shows more significant deterioration. While there were high rates of upward housing mobility – moving from rented to owned accommodation – until 2001, rates declined markedly after this. In 1991, 67% of men and 65% of women aged 28 to 37 years experienced upward housing mobility, compared with 37% of men and 33% of women in 2021.

There were low rates of downward housing mobility in the first 2 decades analysed (11% for men and 12% for women aged 38 to 47 years in 2001), but in 2021, there were higher rates of 21% for men and 23% for women.

In 2021, around 1.7 million people aged 28 to 37 years in England and Wales experienced downward housing mobility, compared with 850,000 who experienced upward mobility.¹⁵ In contrast, during the 1991 Census, when the proportions whose parents had been owners and renters were evenly balanced, upward housing mobility was 3 times as common as downward.

Men were more likely to be upwardly mobile in housing terms than women and less likely to be downwardly mobile throughout, with the gap possibly widening.

There was worse relative housing mobility (how strongly parental ownership predicts children's ownership) after 2001. This worsened further after 2011.

¹⁵ To calculate these national estimates, the raw Office for National Statistics Longitudinal Study (ONS-LS) sample counts of 11,918 (downward) and 5,959 (upward) are scaled up using a 0.7% scaling factor to arrive at 1.7 million and 850,000 people respectively. This scaling factor is lower than the study's standard 1% census sample because the analysis only includes individuals who could be successfully linked back to their childhood homes.



Introduction

In the State of the Nation 2023, we traced mobility outcomes over time at a national level. We reported trends in 4 domains: occupational, income, educational and housing mobility, using a variety of sources.¹⁶

We also investigated both absolute and relative mobility. By ‘absolute mobility’, we mean the proportion of adults who have been upwardly or downwardly mobile (for example, the proportion of people from working-class origins who gained access to a professional occupation). By ‘relative mobility’, we mean the difference in mobility chances between people from different class origins. For example, how much more (or less) likely people from professional backgrounds are to enter professional occupations, compared with people from working-class backgrounds.

Some of the headlines from the Social Mobility Commission’s (SMC) State of the Nation 2023 report were:

“For absolute mobility, the most common pattern was to find more upward than downward mobility, though the contrast was more marked in previous decades than it is today.”

“For relative mobility, there continue to be quite high levels of intergenerational persistence in most domains, although the trends over time differ – in the case of housing mobility there has been a marked increase in persistence in contrast to educational mobility where there has been a marked decrease in persistence.”

(State of the Nation 2023, page 43)

¹⁶ Preliminary trends on wealth were also examined.

The Office for National Statistics Longitudinal Study

We are now able to update and verify the conclusions of the 2023 report using newly released data from linked censuses, the ONS-LS. The Census is the most authoritative data available, because it provides almost complete coverage of the population. However, it does not include measures of people's social backgrounds.

The linked census data that ONS has constructed adds this missing piece of the data, helping us link people's social origins with their current position.¹⁷ By linking records across decades, it allows us to follow individuals' long-term career paths. Specifically, we identify individuals when they were aged 8 to 17 years and living at home during the 1971, 1981 or 1991 Censuses. This allows us to record their parents' occupations. We then find those same people in later censuses, including the most recently linked 2021 data, to see which occupational class they reached as adults in their 30s and 40s. We can only use the linked censuses for England and Wales at present, although eventually we hope to add analysis of the linked censuses for Northern Ireland and Scotland as well.

Using the linked censuses of the ONS-LS, we can directly investigate intergenerational occupational, educational and housing mobility over the last 50 years. We can also make some indirect estimates of occupational wage mobility.¹⁸ The ONS-LS is now the best resource for studying educational, occupational and housing mobility over time. Its strengths are the large sample sizes, the length of the period covered, the quality of its coverage of the population and the low levels of non-response and attrition (see the technical annex for more details).

However, the ONS-LS does have some limitations. It is not able to provide estimates of mobility for the whole population, but only for specific cohorts. To establish a person's social background, individuals must be captured in a census while they are still living at home as children. This is the only way to link their record to their parents' data.¹⁹

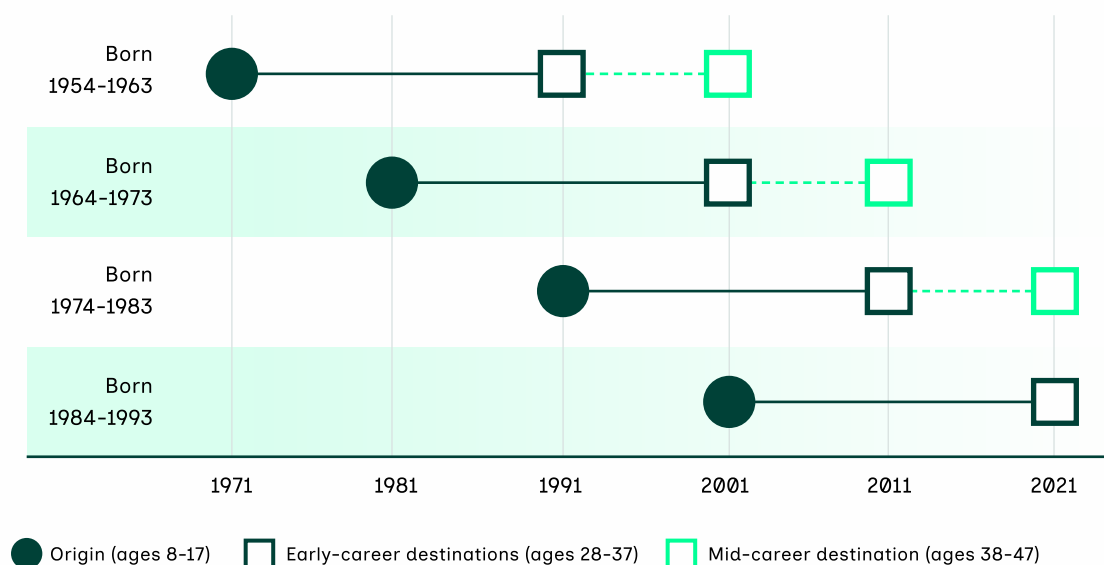
We therefore have to focus on specific cohorts, such as young people aged 28 to 37 years at the time of the 2021 Census (see figure 2.1). These young people will have been aged 8 to 17 years at the time of the 2001 Census 20 years earlier and are likely to have been living at home with one or both parents at that age. After age 16 years, young people are more likely to leave home and so can no longer be linked with a co-resident parent's data. In addition to these early-career young people, we can also study mid-career people aged 38 to 47 years by linking them to their co-resident parents in the census 30 years earlier.

¹⁷ The ONS-LS securely tracks a representative 1% sample of the population of England and Wales, meaning it is based on records for over 500,000 people.

¹⁸ We have used the New Earnings Survey (NES) to estimate wages from employment for the 1971 and 1981 cohorts, and the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE) for later cohorts. It was not possible to estimate income from other sources.

¹⁹ In addition to limitations connected with timing of the censuses, there are 3 further important issues. First, because we link people with the parents identified in a previous census of England and Wales, the ONS-LS excludes recent migrants. Second, ONS emphasises that the **National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification system** (NS-SEC) – the basic building block of the analysis of occupational mobility – is not strictly comparable over time because of the regular re-coding of occupations. Finally, NS-SEC could not be fully constructed for parents in the 1971 and 1981 Censuses, and this may have introduced bias as self-employed parents with working-class occupations were coded as working class, whereas in later censuses, they would have been coded as belonging to the intermediate class.

Figure 2.1: Cohort and ages tracking matrix.



Note: Because the Census is conducted in the spring, a person's age on the day of the Census does not perfectly align with a single calendar birth year, making their derived birth year slightly imprecise. Therefore, the year of birth shown in the figure is approximate. For example, people born in the later months of 1953 will have been aged 17 at the time of the 1971 Census.

The period covered by the linked censuses – from 1971 when the first set of parents were studied until 2021 – has been one of remarkable social change in England and Wales, and the UK as a whole. There has been a significant increase in overall population size driven by immigration, alongside a continuing shift to a post-industrial society, a huge expansion of tertiary education in the 1990s and 2000s and a major expansion of owner-occupation following the Right to Buy council housing reforms of the 1980s. These changes have occurred alongside a long-term rise in real-term house prices.





Odds ratios

Sociologists and economists use several statistical tools to measure the gap in outcomes between groups (often called relative mobility). One useful technique when comparing 2 groups is the odds ratio, which measures the relative odds of people from 2 different origins of achieving one of 2 outcomes and avoiding the other. For example, what are the relative odds of someone from a professional Socio-economic background (SEB), compared with someone from a working SEB, of attaining a degree (rather than no degree)?

What are odds ratios?

An odds ratio is a comparative (or relative) measure. It compares the chances of a particular outcome between 2 groups and shows us the 'gap' in chances between them using a single number. An odds ratio always shows us the difference between 2 groups, not the chances of any one group.

For example, in figure 2.11 we see that, in 2001, just over 11% of mid-career men whose parents were homeowners had become renters. This must mean that the remaining 89% became homeowners themselves. So the odds of being a homeowner for this group are simply 89:11, or around 8 to 1. In other words, for every person in this group who became a renter, 8 became homeowners.

What if we look at a different group, men whose parents were renters in 2001, in figure 2.10? As expected, they have a higher chance of being a renter themselves. Just over 75% of them became homeowners, which must mean that around 25% became renters. So this group's odds of being homeowners are much lower, at only 75:25, or around 3 to 1. There are still more homeowners than renters, but the odds are much smaller than for men whose parents were homeowners.

If we divide the first odds by the second, we get the figure reported in figure 2.12, the 'odds ratio' of 2.57. This incorporates all 4 of the percentages above, as the calculation is roughly 89:11/75:25.

The odds ratio is helpful, because it summarises the difference between the 2 groups in a single number, using all 4 percentages. This is particularly useful when we look at change over time.

For example, we see that 20 years later, in 2021, the odds ratio had increased from 2.57 to 3.94 for men at mid-career. This is because, while everyone's chances of becoming a homeowner worsened in that 20-year period, the chances of men whose parents were renters worsened more severely. The higher odds ratio (3.94 in 2021, compared with 2.57 in 2001) shows this increased inequality in just one number.

Educational mobility

Summary

Among young people aged 28 to 37 years, there were large increases in upward educational mobility from non-graduate families until 2011. This increase had slowed by 2021. Relative educational mobility improved both between 1991 and 2001 and between 2011 and 2021. In other words, opportunities to gain a university degree have become much more equal. Moreover, women have caught up with and then overtaken men in upward educational mobility.

There was a great expansion of university education in England and Wales (just as in other developed Western countries) in the 50 years covered by the ONS-LS. In the UK in 1971, around 5% of young people aged 25 to 29 years had degrees (Anthony Heath and others, 2018, figure 7.3).²⁰ By 2021 the figure was approaching 50% although the rate of growth had slowed down. This expansion had been driven by the Robbins Report of 1963 and the creation of many new universities in the 1960s.²¹ A further expansion happened in the 1990s when most polytechnics were converted into degree-awarding higher educational institutions.

Absolute educational mobility

The expansion of higher education (HE) means that there will have been a great deal of upward educational mobility. Most students at university will have been the ‘first generation’ from their families to gain a degree. This is reflected in figure 2.2, which shows the percentages of men and women in their late 20s and early 30s who were upwardly mobile in educational terms. This is defined as the proportion of young people coming from families where neither parent had a university degree, who gained a degree themselves.

Figure 2.2 shows that at the time of the 1991 Census, before the major acceleration in the growth of university education of the 1990s, 11% of young men from non-graduate families had obtained degrees and so were upwardly mobile educationally. The figure for young women was significantly lower at 7%. By 2001 upward mobility had increased to nearly 20% and young women had largely caught up with young men. By 2011 young women had moved ahead, with 37% from non-graduate families being upwardly mobile compared with 32% of young men. A similar pattern is seen in the intermediate outcomes (see chapter 3). In 2021, young women moved further ahead, although the rate at which upward mobility grew began to level out (reflecting the stabilising growth in HE generally). However, chapter 3 shows that these improvements in education are not always translated into higher earnings for women and other groups.

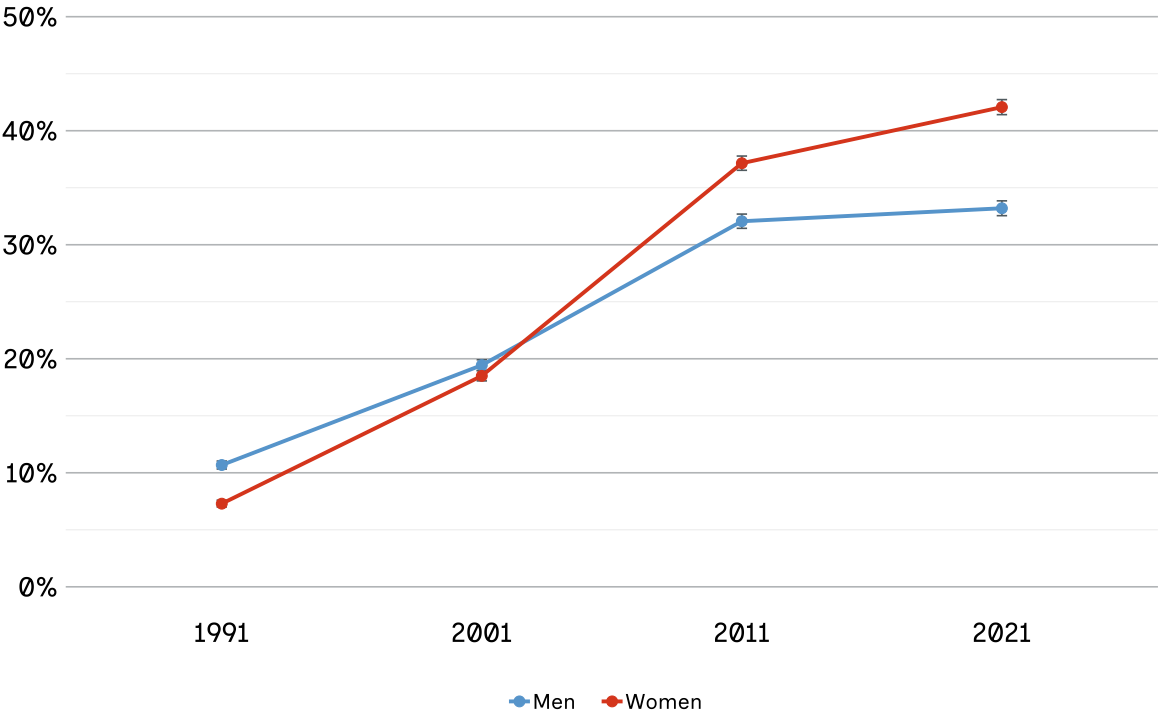
**“Opportunities to gain a university degree
have become much more equal.”**

²⁰ The 1971 figures are for men in work at the time of the census – reported in figure 7.3 of Anthony Heath and others, *Social progress in Britain*, 2018. Published on GLOBAL.OUP.COM.

²¹ *Higher education: report of the committee appointed by the prime minister under the chairmanship of Lord Robbins 1961–63*, 1963. Published by HMSO.

Figure 2.2: There were large increases in upward educational mobility among young people from non-graduate families, with the rate of increase levelling out in 2021.

Probability of becoming a graduate among those coming from non-graduate families (expressed as percentages), men and women aged 28 to 37 years.



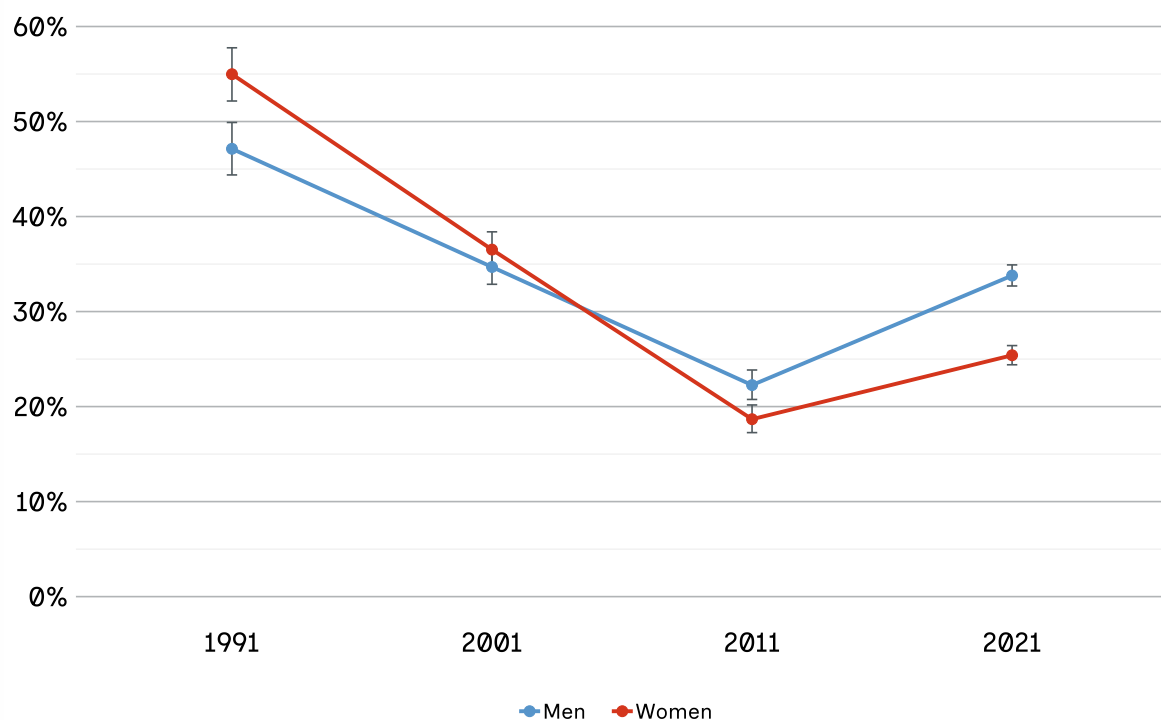
Source: Office for National Statistics Longitudinal Study (ONS-LS).

Note: This chart tracks mobility trends over time by year of destination (the census year in which the mobility outcome was observed). Each destination year corresponds to specific birth cohorts as defined in figure 2.1. The error bars show 95% confidence intervals. Non-graduate families are where neither parent has a university degree.

“There were large increases in upward educational mobility among young people from non-graduate families.”

Figure 2.3: Downward educational mobility fell up until 2011 but then rose again in the most recent decade.

Probability of downward educational mobility (expressed as percentages) among those coming from graduate families, men and women aged 28 to 37 years.



Source: ONS-LS.

Note: This chart tracks mobility trends over time by year of destination (the census year in which the mobility outcome was observed). Each destination year corresponds to specific birth cohorts as defined in figure 2.1. The error bars show 95% confidence intervals. Graduate families are where at least one parent has a university degree.

Downward educational mobility among young people declined up until 2011 (a smaller percentage of young people were ending up with lower qualifications than their parents), but went back up in 2021. As with upward mobility, women initially had less favourable chances of gaining university education than men, but by the end of the period had greater chances and lower rates of downward mobility.

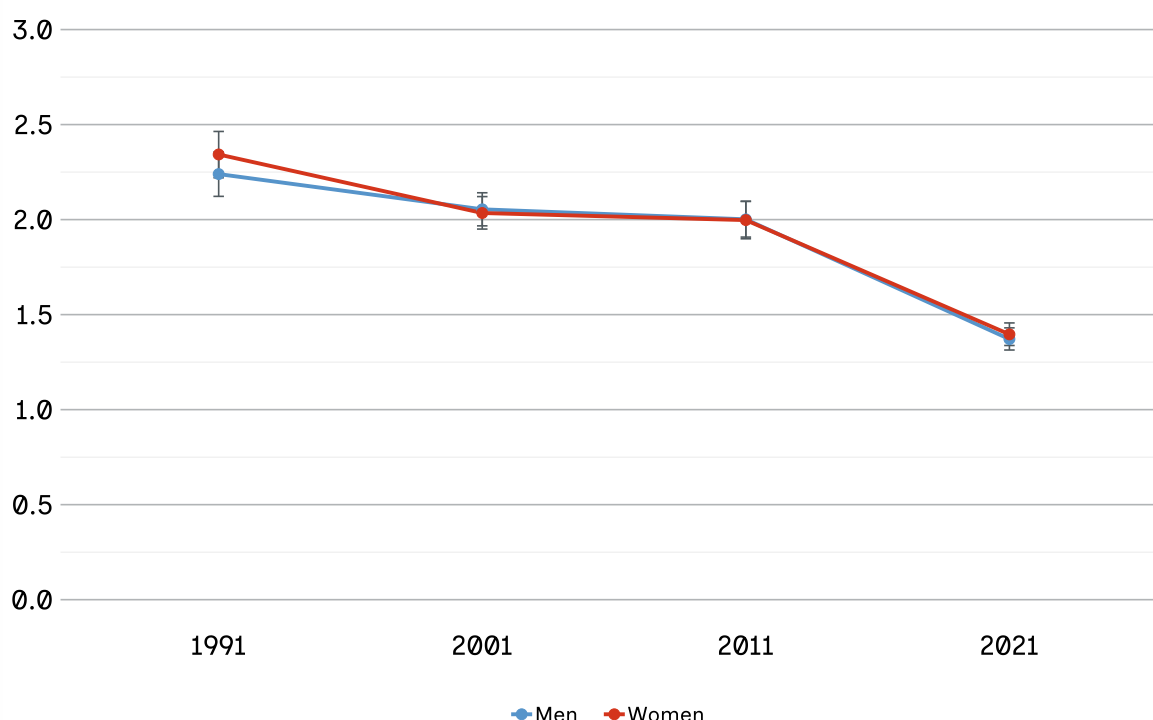
Relative educational mobility

Figures 2.2 and 2.3 show that young people reaching adulthood towards the end of the 20th and in the first 2 decades of the 21st century had much more favourable chances of obtaining university degrees than their parents had done. In addition, figure 2.4 shows that the chances of young people from non-graduate families obtaining a university degree themselves also improved over these decades relative to those of people from graduate families. In other words, there was increasing equality of opportunity for HE.

Figure 2.4 shows that inequality of opportunity for HE had been high in the years up to 1991 but then fell sharply in the next decade. There was also a marked improvement in 2021.

Figure 2.4: Intergenerational educational persistence fell between 1991 and 2001, and again between 2011 and 2021.

Relative educational mobility: degree:no-degree log odds ratios (respondents aged 28 to 37 years).



Source: ONS-LS.

Note: This chart tracks mobility trends over time by year of destination (the census year in which the mobility outcome was observed). Each destination year corresponds to specific birth cohorts as defined in figure 2.1. The error bars show 95% confidence intervals. Education is a binary measure of attainment of an undergraduate degree qualification. A higher odds ratio indicates greater intergenerational persistence while a lower odds ratio indicates greater relative mobility.

Figure 2.4 also suggests that educational persistence was at a similar level for men and women in each period (as seen from the overlapping confidence intervals).

The big story, then, is that equality of opportunity for HE among people from different educational backgrounds has improved over the last 3 decades, although substantial inequalities still remain. This improvement in equality of opportunity is likely connected with the overall expansion of HE, although from this descriptive data we cannot rule out the possibility that reforms to university admissions and recruitment procedures might have made a difference too.

However, we should also recognise that the expansion of HE has been associated with much greater heterogeneity among HE institutions.²² Improvements in equality of opportunity for access to high-tariff universities (those asking for high grades), such as Oxford, Cambridge and Imperial College London, may well have been more modest, but unfortunately the linked census data does not allow us to investigate this as it does not capture which university individuals attended.

Comparisons with previous research

These results for relative educational mobility are very similar to those reported in our State of the Nation 2023 report (page 80, figure 2.21), which showed the trend over time in relative educational mobility, using results updated with those from the UK Household Longitudinal Survey (UKHLS).^{23, 24}

Figure 2.5: There has been an increase in relative educational mobility among young adults, 1991 to 2020.

Parent:adult children log odds ratios relating to university degrees, UK, respondents aged 28 to 37 years.



Source: Bell and others (2023) and UK Household Longitudinal Survey (UKHLS), 1991 to 2020. Respondents aged 28 to 37 years in the UK.

Note: Education is a binary measure of attainment of an undergraduate degree qualification. A higher odds ratio indicates greater intergenerational persistence while a lower odds ratio indicates greater relative mobility (children are more likely to end up with the same education as their parents versus more likely to move beyond it). Odds ratios have been transformed to log odds ratios for consistency with this year's analysis. The error bars show the 95% confidence intervals for each estimate.

²² Vikki Boliver, '[How fair is access to more prestigious UK universities?](#)', 2013. Published on [ONLINELIBRARY.WILEY.COM](#).

²³ Brian Bell and others, '[Where is the land of hope and glory? The geography of intergenerational mobility in England and Wales](#)', 2023. Published on [RESEARCHONLINE.LSE.AC.UK](#).

²⁴ Social Mobility Commission, '[State of the Nation 2023: people and places](#)', 2023. Published on [GOV.UK](#).

Occupational mobility

Summary

Long-range upward occupational mobility from the working class increased considerably up to 2001 and has continued to improve (although at a slower rate over the last decade). Long-range downward occupational mobility from the professional class has been consistently low and has even declined recently among women. Relative occupational mobility has improved among early-career men and women but has shown little change among people in their mid career.

There has been a gradual but substantial evolution of the types of jobs people do (known as occupational structure) since 1971, with a decline in traditional manufacturing and heavy industry in many parts of the country and the emergence of a post-industrial economy. Britain has experienced a decline in the size of the working class, contrasting with growth in the number of people employed in the knowledge-intensive occupations of the professional and managerial classes (such as doctors and nurses, data analysts and IT managers).

In 1971, around 25% of the male workforce was in a professional or managerial occupation, while 45% were in working-class jobs (technical, semi-routine and routine occupations).²⁵ By 2021 these figures were more or less reversed. This transformation of the class structure has provided the opportunity for high levels of upward mobility out of the working class into the professional class. But it also means that “increasing numbers of individuals are now starting out in life from more advantaged class positions. So the numbers of those ‘at risk’ of downward mobility are steadily rising, and the number ‘at risk’ of upward mobility are steadily falling”.²⁶ To take an extreme illustration of this, in a society where everyone was professional, the only possible mobility would be downwards.

For our analysis of the ONS-LS, we distinguish 3 broad social classes, namely professional, intermediate and working class.²⁷



“Britain has experienced a decline in the size of the working class, contrasting with growth in the number of people employed in the knowledge-intensive occupations of the professional and managerial classes.”

²⁵ The 1971 figures are for men in work at the time of the census – reported in figure 7.3 of Anthony Heath and others, ‘[Social progress in Britain](#)’, 2018. Published on [GLOBAL.OUP.COM](#).

²⁶ John Goldthorpe, ‘[Social class mobility in modern Britain: changing structure, constant process](#)’, 2016. Published on [THEBRITISHACADEMY.AC.UK](#).

²⁷ These 3 broad classes are based on the 5 occupational classes distinguished in previous State of the Nation reports, which in turn are based on the NS-SEC. However, ONS has emphasised that the NS-SEC classification is not strictly comparable over time due to the regular revision of the occupational codes from which it is derived. Using broader class categories has been found to improve over-time comparability and we have therefore amalgamated the higher with the lower professional class, and the higher with the lower working class. Note that we have to exclude the long-term unemployed and never worked group, which previous State of the Nation reports included in the lower working class, as this category is not available consistently in the censuses. Class origins are based on the father’s class, if available, otherwise on the mother’s.

Absolute occupational mobility

Long-range upward mobility

By 'long-range upward mobility' we mean movement from working-class families (as measured by the class positions of a person's parents, if they lived with them) to a professional-class occupation for that person as an adult, 20 or 30 years later. Long-range downward mobility is the opposite – movement from professional parents to a working-class occupation for the adult children.²⁸

In figure 2.6, we show the proportions of 'early-career' men and women (aged 28 to 37 years) who had experienced long-range upward mobility compared with their parents 20 years earlier. We also show the proportions of mid-career men and women (aged 38 to 47 years) who had experienced long-range upward mobility compared with their parents 30 years earlier. Since the ONS-LS begins only in 1971, the first Census in which we can study the mobility outcomes of these mid-career people is 2001. In the case of occupational mobility, mid-career is a better stage of the life cycle to study mobility outcomes than the early career, as many people from advantaged homes take lower-level entry-level jobs but then move back up over the course of their careers (termed the 'counter mobility' thesis).

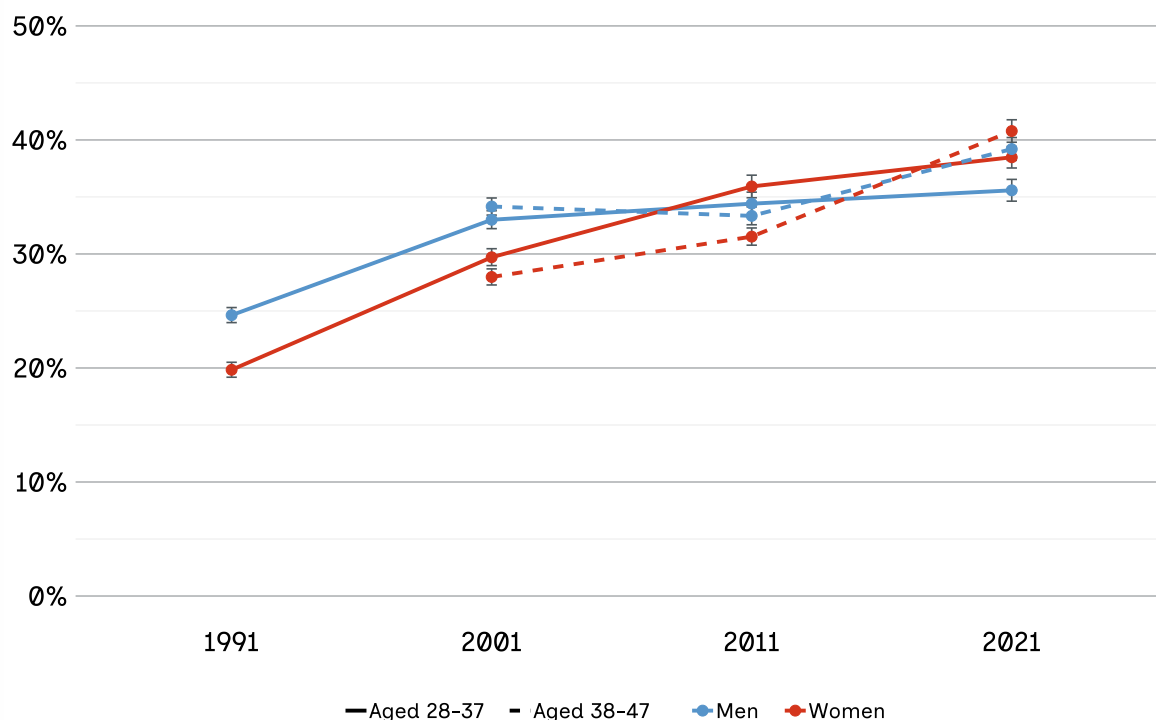
Figure 2.6 shows that, among early-career men and women, long-range upward mobility out of the working class increased substantially between the first 2 Censuses (1991 and 2001) but then levelled off among men. Women initially experienced a lower rate of upward mobility than men but had overtaken them by the end of 2021.

²⁸ We should think of these as conditional probabilities. We can also calculate unconditional probabilities. These refer to the overall likelihood of someone being upwardly or downwardly mobile despite their class origin or the distance that they move. These measures are not, however, straightforward to interpret, as the overall value will depend on the sizes of the relevant 'risk sets'. For example, in a population where everyone is professional, the only possible mobility would be downward.



Figure 2.6: Long-range upward mobility from the working class increased considerably at first among early-career men and women and has continued to increase at a slower rate.

Proportions (measured as percentages) of those growing up in working-class families who were upwardly mobile to the professional class, men and women aged 28 to 37 years with outcomes observed at the 1991, 2001, 2011 and 2021 Censuses, and those aged 38 to 47 years with outcomes observed at the 2001, 2011 and 2021 Censuses.



Source: ONS-LS.

Note: This chart tracks mobility trends over time by year of destination (the census year in which the mobility outcome was observed). Each destination year corresponds to specific birth cohorts as defined in figure 2.1. The error bars show 95% confidence intervals. To ensure fair comparisons across all decades, we use a simplified 3-category version of the NS-SEC social class measure – grouping occupations into working, intermediate and professional classes.

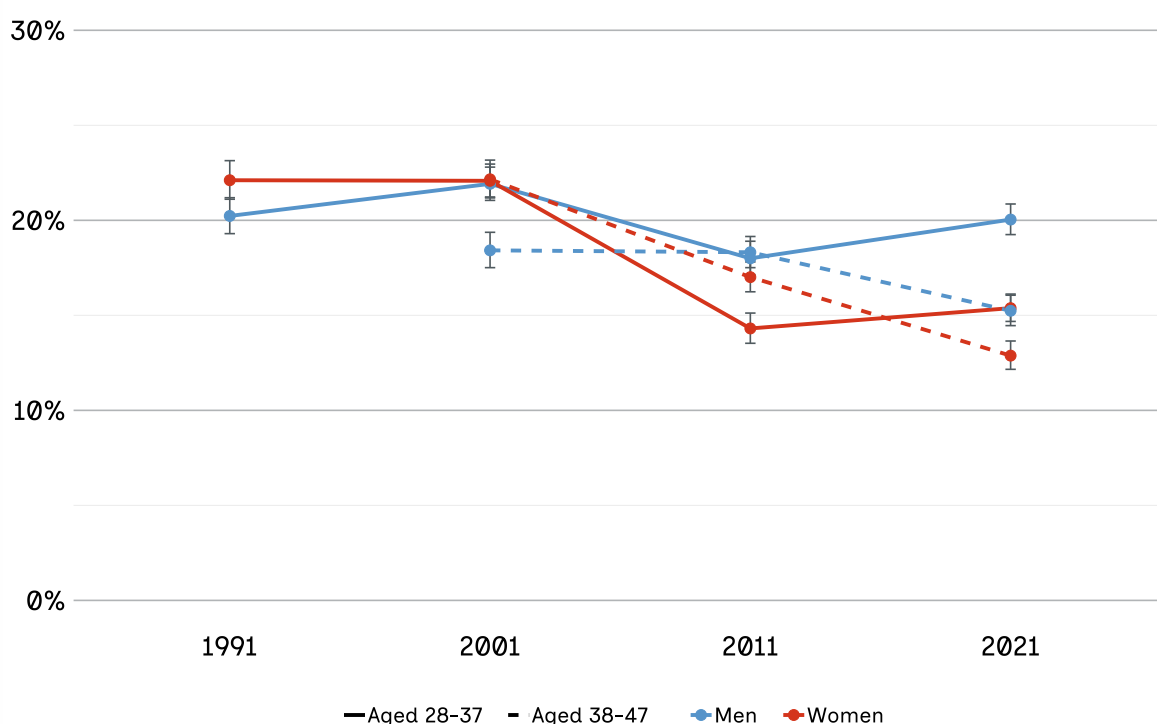
Trends among people in mid-career can only be observed in the period since 2001. These trends are broadly similar to those for early-career men and women, with a small increase for men and larger increases for women in rates of long-range upward mobility, especially between the 2011 and 2021 Censuses. As would be expected, people in mid-career also show a higher rate of upward mobility than the same cohort had shown a decade earlier when they were at the early-career stage. So among men aged 28 to 37 years in 1991, 25% had experienced long-range upward mobility from the working class; 10 years later, when members of this cohort were in mid-career and aged 38 to 47 years, the percentage had risen to 34%.

Long-range downward mobility

Figure 2.7 shows rather different trends for people in mid-career from those at an early-career stage. Among men aged 28 to 37 years, the proportion downwardly mobile from the professional class varied around 20% with no clear trend over time. But among men in mid-career it fell by around 3 percentage points between the 2001 and 2021 Censuses. Among women, there was a decline in downward mobility from the professional class both among the early career and the mid career, although the drop was larger among the latter (falling by 9 points between the 2001 and 2021 Censuses).

Figure 2.7: Long-range downward mobility from the professional class has been consistently low and has tended to fall over time, especially among women.

Percentages of young people growing up in professional-class families who were downwardly mobile to the working class, among men and women aged 28 to 37 years with outcomes observed at the 1991, 2001, 2011 and 2021 Censuses, and those aged 38 to 47 years with outcomes observed at the 2001, 2011 and 2021 Censuses.



Source: ONS-LS.

Note: This chart tracks mobility trends over time by year of destination (the census year in which the mobility outcome was observed). Each destination year corresponds to specific birth cohorts as defined in figure 2.1. The error bars show 95% confidence intervals. To ensure fair comparisons across all decades, we use a simplified 3-category version of the NS-SEC social class measure, grouping occupations into working, intermediate and professional classes.

These results for downward mobility from the professional class mirror the results for upward mobility from the working class. The expansion of the professional class essentially has given more opportunities to the children of professionals as well as to the children of working-class families to obtain professional and managerial jobs themselves.

In addition, the results are consistent with the ‘counter-mobility’ thesis. That is, people from professional backgrounds often have to take their first job at an ‘entry-level’ (for example in the intermediate classes) but then manage to return to the professional-class level of their parents through upward intragenerational mobility. Their early-career positions may be a poor indicator of their longer-term mobility prospects and outcomes.

It is striking that the proportion of people from working-class families experiencing upward mobility has been larger than the proportion of those from professional-class families experiencing downward mobility. This follows from the long-term expansion in the size of the professional class. At the same time, however, because of the past expansion of the professional class among the parental generation, increasing numbers of individuals are now starting out in life from more advantaged class positions. So the proportion of the age group as a whole experiencing long-range downward mobility could be increasing. And this is indeed what we find (although there are still more people moving up than down overall).

While the increasing opportunities for professional and managerial occupations are a major driver of rates of upward and downward mobility, they are not the only potential influence. Equality of opportunity for people from different origins can make a difference. When opportunities are more equal, mobility rises in both directions.

Relative occupational mobility

While absolute-mobility measures look at the percentages of people who experience mobility, relative-mobility measures instead compare the mobility chances of 2 (or more) different groups. As described earlier, a useful technique when measuring inequality of outcomes between different social origins is the odds ratio, a way of comparing how likely alternative outcomes are in one group versus another. We measure the relative odds of people from professional-class and working-class family origins achieving professional outcomes themselves and avoiding a working-class outcome.

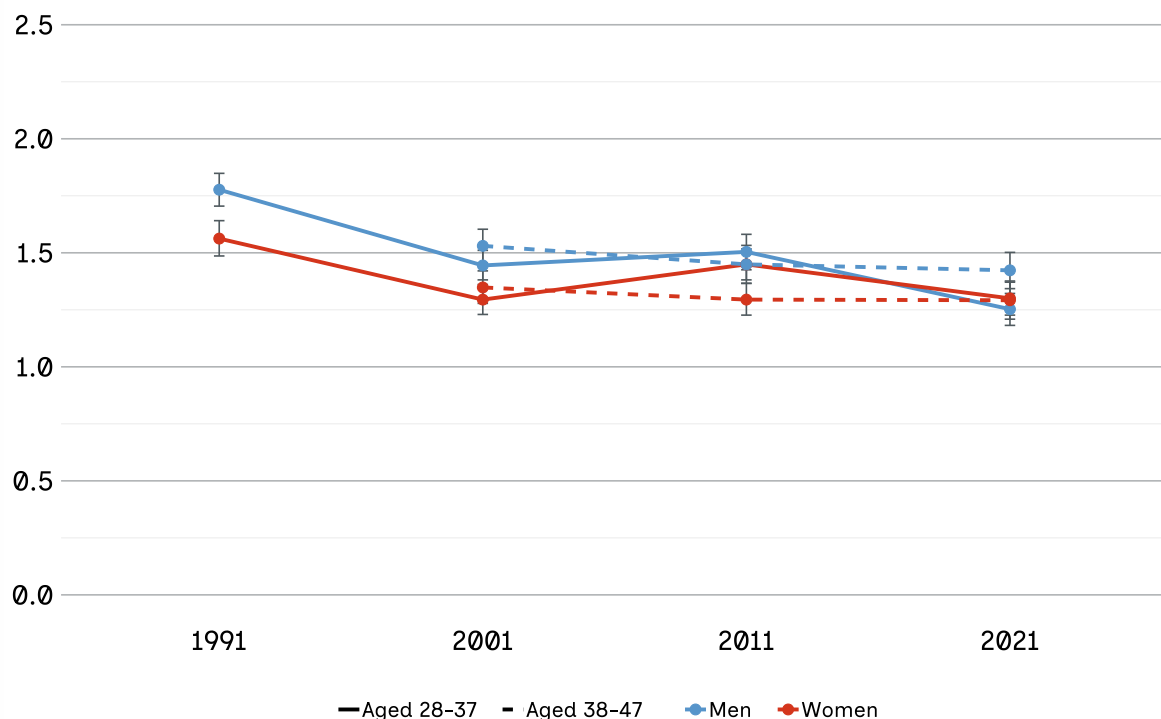
In figure 2.8, we show how this measure of inequality of class mobility chances (that is, of relative mobility) has evolved over recent decades. What we find is that the trends over time in relative mobility differ markedly between early-career and mid-career people. Among early-career young people (aged 28 to 37 years), we see an improvement in relative mobility for both young men and women between the 1991 and 2001 Censuses, and a further improvement for young men in the most recent intercensal period, 2011 to 2021.

In contrast, there is little change in relative mobility among either men or women in mid-career: among men the log odds ratios remain above 1.4 across the 2001, 2011 and 2021 Censuses, whereas among women they remain below 1.4, showing slightly better relative mobility for women. In both cases, there is a small and non-significant fall and of much smaller magnitude than the decline among early-career men and women. This pattern of small variations around a fairly steady long-term trend tends to confirm the finding of ‘trendless fluctuation’ by academic researchers such as John Goldthorpe.²⁹

²⁹ John Goldthorpe, ‘[Social class mobility in modern Britain: changing structure, constant process](#)’, 2016. Published on THEBRITISHACADEMY.AC.UK; Erzsébet Bukodi and John Goldthorpe, ‘[Social mobility and education in Britain](#)’, 2019. Published on CAMBRIDGE.ORG.

Figure 2.8: Intergenerational class equality of opportunity has improved among early-career men and women but has not changed so much among those in mid-career.

Relative occupational mobility: professional class:working class log odds ratios among young men and women aged 28 to 37 and aged 38 to 47 years, outcomes observed at the 1991, 2001, 2011 and 2021 Censuses.³⁰



Source: ONS-LS.

Note: This chart tracks mobility trends over time by year of destination (the census year in which the mobility outcome was observed). Each destination year corresponds to specific birth cohorts as defined in figure 2.1. The error bars show 95% confidence intervals. A formal test of the changes in relative mobility, using the 'undiff' parameter estimate and distinguishing 5 social classes, confirmed the changes shown in figure 2.8. For early-career men the parameter estimates (and their standard errors) for the 3 later periods relative to the first period (set at 1.00) were 0.82 (0.03), 0.86 (0.03) and 0.74 (0.03). For early-career women the parameter estimates were 0.82 (0.03), 0.92 (0.04) and 0.80 (0.03). For mid-career men the parameter estimates (and their standard errors) relative to the first period (set at 1.00) were 0.94 (0.03) and 0.93 (0.03). For mid-career women they were 0.92 (0.04) and 0.90 (0.04).

How might we explain the difference in the trends for early and mid-career young people? If we were to focus solely on early-career young people, we might suggest that the expansion of HE after 1991, and the greater equality of opportunity that we observed in educational mobility, might explain the increase in occupational equality of opportunity too.

³⁰ 'Symmetrical' here means that we're considering professional and working-class origin, and also professional and working-class destination. So the origin and destination classes are symmetrical.

An alternative explanation could be that, after the expansion of HE during the 1990s, careers have on average been started at an older age than before (for example, at 21 instead of at 16). In effect, a large and increasing proportion of the age group have been starting their careers some 2 or 3 years later than they would have done in the previous cohorts. So, many members of the age group would have been at an earlier career stage than their predecessors before the great HE expansion in the 1990s. This could also explain why relative mobility appears to be greater among young people after the expansion: early-career earnings are still tightly clustered and the larger differences between groups only emerge later, after the high earners pull ahead.

Comparisons with previous research

Our results for absolute occupational mobility cannot be compared directly with those reported in *State of the Nation 2023*: the 2023 report looked at trends over time in the workforce as a whole, whereas this year's report focuses on specific age groups. Our 2023 report showed that the level of upward mobility had declined in recent years while rates of downward mobility had increased, contrary to what we report here. The 2023 analysis also emphasised that the findings might have been biased because the data used for the most recent period disproportionately included people at earlier career stages. Since social mobility is a process which evolves over people's careers, it is important to take account of people's career stages, which the current analysis is better able to do. On the other hand, with people increasingly staying in education for longer periods, it may be the case that chronological age does not correspond nowadays to the career stage in exactly the same way that it did 30 or more years ago.

The results for relative mobility are more closely in line with previous published research. Researchers Franz Buscha and Patrick Sturgis (2018) found an improvement in relative mobility among early-career people in the last decade of the 20th century, but this stalled in the first decade of the 21st century (a similar result to ours for the 1991 to 2011 period). They obtained similar results for those in mid-career, although the changes across birth cohorts were not quite as strong as those for the early-career stage.³¹

³¹ Franz Buscha and Patrick Sturgis, '[Declining social mobility? Evidence from five linked censuses in England and Wales 1971–2011](#)', 2018. Published on [ONLINELIBRARY.WILEY.COM](#).





Brian Bell and others (2023) used different methods: rank-rank regressions of scales of occupational attainment. These regressions rely on ranking occupations and then measuring how the ranks of parents' occupations link to the ranks of children's occupations. They also found an improvement in relative mobility across the 3 early-career cohorts that they studied up until 2011.³² They report that persistence was stronger among men than among women throughout, as we do for the same period and cohorts.

On trends for people in mid-career, Erzsébet Bukodi and John Goldthorpe (2019), using a series of birth cohort studies, found no significant change among men aged 38 years in relative class mobility, a result similar to ours.³³ However, they found a significant improvement in relative mobility among women (that is, a decline in the strength of the association between parents' and children's class positions), a result that comes closer to our findings for early-career than for mid-career women. Their observations of mobility outcomes cover the period from 1984 to 2008 and so are earlier than those that we cover in the ONS-LS for people in mid-career (namely 2001 to 2021).

None of the existing academic literature has covered the most recent decade as yet. Our State of the Nation reports have covered the period from 2014 to 2022 using the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and found a statistically significant improvement after 2019 in relative mobility for the population aged 25 to 64 years as a whole (State of the Nation report 2023, figure 2.10). However, the sample size was too small to separate those at early, mid- or late-career stages and the post-2019 period is one where the LFS response rates fell sharply.

³² Brian Bell and others, '[Where is the land of hope and glory? The geography of intergenerational mobility in England and Wales](#)', 2023. Published on RESEARCHONLINE.LSE.AC.UK.

³³ Erzsébet Bukodi and John Goldthorpe, '[Social mobility and education in Britain: research, politics and policy](#)', 2019. Published on CAMBRIDGE.ORG.

Income mobility

Summary

The calculations of income mobility from the ONS-LS are better called occupational-wage mobility. This is because we cannot measure income directly in the ONS-LS. Instead, we can analyse 'occupational wages', which are the average wage for each occupation and are estimated indirectly from other data sources. This measure does not include non-salary income.

Relative wage mobility among early-career men and women worsened up until 2001, but improved in the most recent decade. However, relative wage mobility for young women remains significantly worse than it was, as measured in 1991. In other words, wages of young women's parents are a significantly stronger predictor of young women's wages now than they were then. Intergenerational occupational-wage persistence among mid-career men and women increased across the 3 earliest cohorts. This means that wages became more closely linked to parents' occupation-based wages over that time.



Background

At the same time as the occupational transformation that Britain saw over the last 60 years, average real household income doubled between 1961 and 2015. There were increases both for the least affluent and most affluent households, but the absolute gaps between the most and least affluent widened greatly in the 1980s and continue to widen today, although more slowly. Over the period as a whole, the income of a household at the 90th percentile (the household that is 90% of the way up from the bottom or 10% from the top) trebled in real value (after adjusting for inflation and household size). In contrast, the increase for a family at the 10th percentile (only 10% of the way up from the bottom) was only 2.5 times. The gaps are even greater as we get to the very top of the income distribution. There are also some differences within the lowest 10%, although not as large.

This widening of income gaps over time raises the possibility that those at the top of the income distribution become better able to help their children's careers by financially supporting their access to HE or their move to expensive areas of the country such as London, where high-level job opportunities are more common. Increased intergenerational persistence of income might therefore be expected to follow from the widening income inequalities between families. Put simply, when the gap between rich and poor increases, children's incomes are more likely to end up similar to their parents'. And this makes it harder for people to move up or down the income ladder.

There are also grounds for thinking that income inequality within occupational classes, particularly within the professional classes, may have grown substantially over this period.³⁴ Occupational classes are not as uniform as they used to be. Conventional sociological approaches based on broad social classes may be missing some important developments in social stratification. Trends in income mobility could well be different from those for occupational mobility.

Unfortunately, there are currently no large-scale data sources for Britain that enable us to directly measure intergenerational income mobility for the most recent period. Researchers in other countries can draw on linked tax records for parents and their adult children (for example, Miles Corak for Canada and Raj Chetty for the USA).³⁵ These are not yet available in Britain, although the SMC has called upon the government to connect existing datasets between His Majesty's Revenue & Customs, the Department for Education and the Department for Work and Pensions. In Britain, researchers have instead used longitudinal panel studies, which measure family income when the children are growing up and obtain the adult children's income when they enter the labour market, years later. The Millennium Cohort Study (which is following up children born in 2000 to 2002 across the UK) will give an up-to-date measure of income mobility as soon as the members have fully moved into the labour market, but in the meantime we have to rely on other sources.

“The SMC has called upon the government to connect existing datasets between His Majesty's Revenue & Customs, the Department for Education and the Department for Work and Pensions.”

³⁴ Jo Blanden and others, '[Intergenerational persistence in income and social class: the effect of within class heterogeneity](#)', 2013. Published on ACADEMIC.OUP.COM.

³⁵ We use 'parents' as a shorthand for who you grew up with at home, whether parents or other caregivers.

The ONS-LS, which we have used to measure occupational, educational and housing mobility, does not contain information on the income or earnings of parents or adult children. However, the detailed information on occupations that the ONS-LS does include, when combined with external data on the average earnings of different occupations, enables researchers to estimate what can be termed occupational-wage mobility. Since the broad occupational classes used in the previous section each include a range of specific occupations with different average earnings, this method addresses issues arising from increasing income differences within social classes and also summarises how earnings vary across the labour force.³⁶ Further details of the method for estimating occupational-wage mobility are provided in the technical appendix.

As with the other analyses of mobility using the ONS-LS, researchers have to look at specific age groups of young people in the early stages of their careers (aged 28 to 37 years at the time of the relevant census) or mid-career (aged 38 to 47 years) in order to link them with their parents. We focus on relative rather than absolute mobility, in other words, on the strength of the association between the parents' estimated occupational earnings and those of their adult children. A stronger link can show greater intergenerational persistence (adult children's earnings similar to parents'), and a weaker link shows less persistence (adult children's earnings differ from parents') and increased relative mobility.³⁷

Relative occupational-wage mobility

To measure relative occupational-wage mobility, we rank people by the average earnings of their occupation, using separate averages for men and women. This provides us with a percentile rank similar to the rankings of household income described earlier and helps capture how specific occupations differ in their earnings. Using the technique of rank-rank regression (or rank-rank slopes), we can then estimate the strength of the association between the percentile position of the adult children's occupational earnings and that of their parents in the linked census 20 or 30 years earlier.³⁸ The rank-rank regression approach is preferred because it is robust to outliers and invariant to dispersion changes (not thrown off by unusual values and changes in how spread out earnings are).

Figure 2.9 shows the trends over time in the strength of intergenerational association (how strong parental income is as a predictor of children's income) among young people aged 28 to 37 years in the relevant census. We see this association strengthened across the first 3 waves of the ONS-LS but then weakened in the most recent wave covering the cohort born between approximately 1984 and 1993.³⁹ There was a broadly similar trajectory for young women and young men. The strength of association for young men in the most recent period was similar to the earliest period (0.215 and 0.220 respectively, as shown in figure 2.9), but this was significantly higher for young women in 2021 than it had been in the earliest.

³⁶ The research was carried out by Emma Gorman, Franz Buscha and Min Zhang from the University of Westminster under ESRC grant ES/X012190/1. We are very grateful to them for making their results available to the Social Mobility Commission and for their helpful advice.

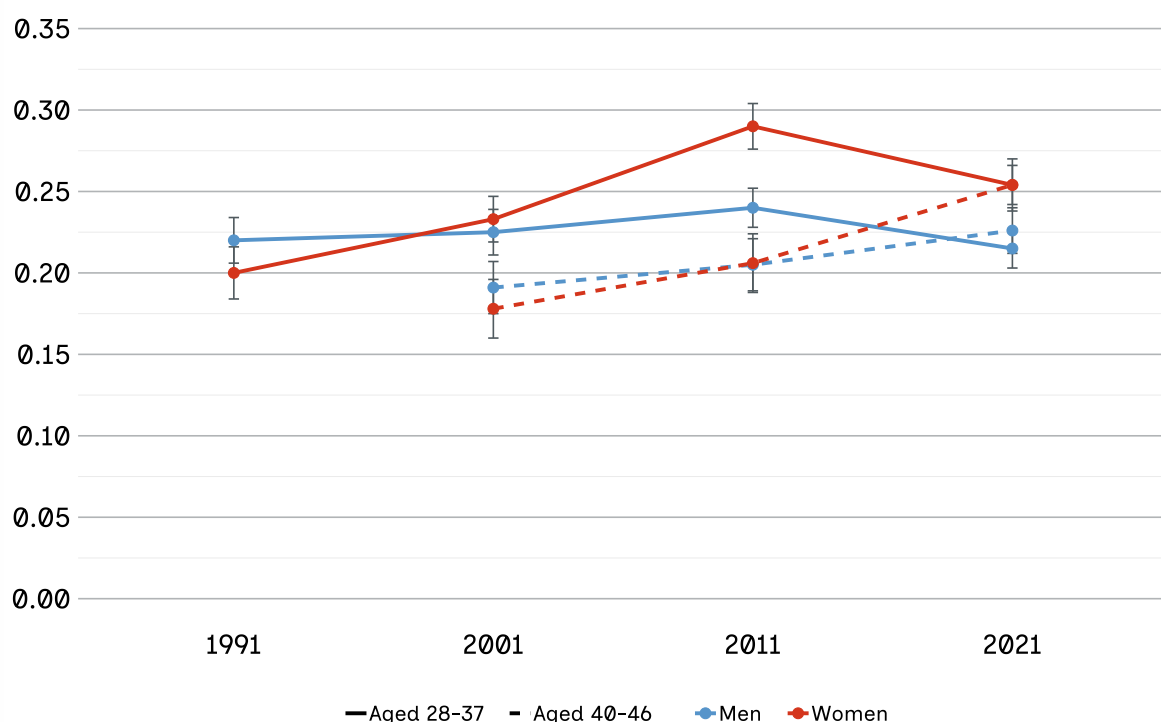
³⁷ In the study of income mobility, absolute mobility is usually interpreted as the proportion of adult children who have higher real incomes than their parents had at a similar stage of their career, but we cannot estimate this from the occupational earnings data.

³⁸ Checks were also carried out using alternative techniques such as log-log or standardised regressions. These yielded a very similar pattern of change over time for both young men and young women.

³⁹ Throughout the State of the Nation reports we have tended to describe results according to year or period of the survey/census rather than by birth cohort. The canonical economic theory of income mobility (Becker and Tomes 1979) focuses on parental investments in their children and on the credit constraints facing parents. Economists therefore tend to use a birth cohort approach to income mobility rather than a period approach. In contrast, sociological accounts of occupational mobility, especially those of absolute mobility, have focused on the differences in the labour market positions between parents and children (the differences in the marginals). This is why in the rest of this chapter we focus on the expanding or contracting opportunities for children compared with their parents.

Figure 2.9: Intergenerational occupational-wage persistence among early-career men and women increased up until 2001 but decreased thereafter. At the same time, persistence among mid-career men and women increased across the 3 cohorts.

Relative occupational-wage mobility: rank-rank slopes for young men and women aged 28 to 37 and 40 to 46 years at the 1991, 2001, 2011 and 2021 Censuses.



Source: ONS-LS.

Note: This chart tracks mobility trends over time by year of destination (the census year in which the mobility outcome was observed). Each destination year corresponds to specific birth cohorts as defined in figure 2.1. The regression model includes controls for parental age. The error bars show 95% confidence intervals.

We can also look at trends in intergenerational occupational-wage persistence for the 3 oldest cohorts in mid-career (aged 40 to 46 years).⁴⁰ Here we see a picture of strengthening intergenerational persistence similar to that found for the same birth cohorts observed at their early-career stage in the previous wave.

The increasing intergenerational persistence shown over the 3 earliest birth cohorts is consistent with previous findings on income mobility for this period and with the increase in earnings inequality among parents in the 1980s and 1990s. The decrease in intergenerational persistence seen for the most recent birth cohort is consistent with our findings for this cohort when looking at occupational mobility (see the results for early-career men and women in figure 2.8 above). As with occupational mobility, the explanation for this decrease in persistence may be connected with the increase in equality of opportunity for HE (shown in figure 2.4). Further research is needed to check this theory.

⁴⁰ For occupational-wage mobility, the mid-career age range is slightly narrower (aged 40 to 46 years) to match the specific data models used for this part of the analysis already conducted by the researchers Franz Buscha, Emma Gorman and Min Zhang.

Comparisons with previous research

The main previous analyses of intergenerational income mobility have used a series of birth cohort studies. In particular, the National Child Development Study (NCDS – 1958 birth cohort observed in 1991 when the adult children were aged 33 years) and the Birth Cohort Study (BCS – 1970 birth cohort observed in 2000 when the adult children were aged 30 years). The foundational article by Jo Blanden and others (2004) reported that intergenerational persistence increased between the 2 studies, consistent with the strengthening association found over the 1991 to 2001 period in the present study. In other words, the link between parents' wages and their adult children's occupational wage got stronger. However, the researchers used a different type of regression model (intergenerational elasticity of earnings, not a rank-rank regression).⁴¹

Researchers Paul Gregg and others (2017) have also examined the strength of intergenerational persistence between the same 2 birth cohorts, but were able to investigate how the association varies at different ages, including at mid- and later-career stages (the latter only in the NCDS).⁴² They show that the association strengthens markedly when people are in their 20s and 30s and reaches its maximum when the adult children are in their 40s. They also show that at mid-career, as well as the early-career stage, the association was stronger in the later birth cohort (observed at age 42 years in 2012) than in the earlier cohort (observed at age 42 years in 2000). In other words, children born later were more likely to end up in similar occupational-wage positions to their parents.

There is also a study, by Brian Bell and others (2023), that uses the same ONS-LS as the present study and a similar methodology, using an external source (NES/ASHE) to calculate occupational wages and examine intergenerational persistence across 3 cohorts. These cohorts were born approximately 1954–63, 1964–73 and 1974–83, and were observed in 1991, 2001 and 2011 at aged 28 to 37 years.⁴³ These researchers report occupational-wage elasticities, which means they use a model that estimates what percentage difference we would expect to see in children's income from a 1% difference in parental income. For example, they find an occupational-wage elasticity of approximately 0.35 for the earliest cohort (born approximately 1954–63 and observed in 1991). This means that if we compare 2 sets of parents, the parents with an income that is 1% higher will probably have children with an income that is 0.35% higher than the other parents' children. This rises to around 0.40 for the middle cohort (born approximately 1964–73), then declines to 0.33 for the most recent cohort (born approximately 1974–83 and observed in 2011). Their overall conclusion of 'little overall change' in occupational-wage mobility is perhaps least consistent with our new results for the corresponding waves of the ONS-LS, where we found some significant change.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Jo Blanden and others, '[Changes in intergenerational mobility in Britain](#)', in Miles Corak (editor) '[Generational income mobility in North America and Europe](#)', 2004. Published on CAMBRIDGE.ORG.

⁴² Paul Gregg and others, '[Moving towards estimating sons' lifetime intergenerational economic mobility in the UK](#)', 2017. Published on ONLINELIBRARY.WILEY.COM. They also compared results using rank-rank regression and the intergenerational elasticity (IGE), which Jo Blanden and others had used. They show that the rank-rank regression is more robust to life-cycle biases than the IGE. They also check and correct for other sources of measurement error such as spells of worklessness.

⁴³ Brian Bell and others, '[Where is the land of hope and glory? The geography of intergenerational mobility in England and Wales](#)', 2023. Published on RESEARCHONLINE.LSE.AC.UK.

⁴⁴ Two methodological differences may contribute to this gap: (a) the present study uses hourly wages rather than weekly wages and (b) in the present study we applied the dominance method (highest-class parent) rather than restricting to fathers.



Housing mobility

Summary

There were high rates of upward housing mobility (people who grew up in rented accommodation becoming homeowners) between 1991 and 2001, with rates decreasing between 2001 and 2021.⁴⁵ Correspondingly, there were low rates of downward housing mobility (people who grew up in accommodation their parents owned becoming renters) in the first half of the period, but rates of downward mobility increased in the second half of the period. In 2021, the probability of upward mobility for those who grew up in rented accommodation was still higher than the probability of downward mobility for those who grew up in accommodation their parents owned. However, the raw number of people who grew up in accommodation their parents owned was much larger. As a result, the number of young people experiencing downward housing mobility was twice as large as the number experiencing upward mobility. Men were more likely to be upwardly mobile than women, and less likely to be downwardly mobile throughout, with the gap, if anything, widening. There was also increased intergenerational persistence in housing status after 2001, increasing further after 2011.

Background

England and Wales saw some major transformation of housing in the period after World War 2. Great strides were made in tackling the postwar housing crisis: there were major building programmes both in the public and private sectors, reducing the level of overcrowding and improving amenities. One crucial element of this progress was the major slum clearance programme of postwar governments, the building of new towns like Milton Keynes and investments in social housing with large-scale state assistance.⁴⁶ Up until the 1970s, the housing stock grew steadily, with social housing and owner-occupied housing expanding, while privately rented accommodation declined. In the 1980s, however, there was a marked shift towards market forces (moving away from state supply and provision to letting private landlords and buyers shape the housing market). This led to a programme of selling off social housing at subsidised prices to tenants. The social housing stock started to decline, while owner-occupation greatly increased until the early 2000s before levelling out.⁴⁷

A further major change has been in the real cost of housing, both for renting and buying. Real house prices (adjusting for inflation) doubled between 1970 and 1991 and then increased sharply to 2007, when real house prices had quadrupled compared with 1970, and have since remained at around the same multiple.⁴⁸ Alongside these changes, inequality in access to housing space also increased greatly between 1981 and 2011 (meaning some people have more living space than others).⁴⁹

These changes in the supply of different types of housing are reflected in patterns of housing mobility between renters and homeowners. Following previous research, we distinguish between owner-occupation (covering both those with mortgages and those who own outright) and, on the other hand, renters (covering private renting as well as social housing). We define upward housing mobility as moving from renting to owner-occupation, and downward mobility as the reverse. Those resident in communal establishments (such as care homes) are excluded.

⁴⁵ We use 'homeowner' to mean someone who owns the accommodation that they live in (including those who have a mortgage or loan as well as those who own outright).

⁴⁶ Anthony Holmans, '[Historical statistics of housing in Britain](#)', 2005. Published on BLACKWELLS.CO.UK.

⁴⁷ Anthony Heath and others, '[Social progress in Britain](#)', figure 5.2, 2018. Published on GLOBAL.OUP.COM.

⁴⁸ Jo Blanden and others, '[Trends in intergenerational home ownership and wealth transmission](#)', figure 2, 2021. Published on CEP.LSE.AC.UK.

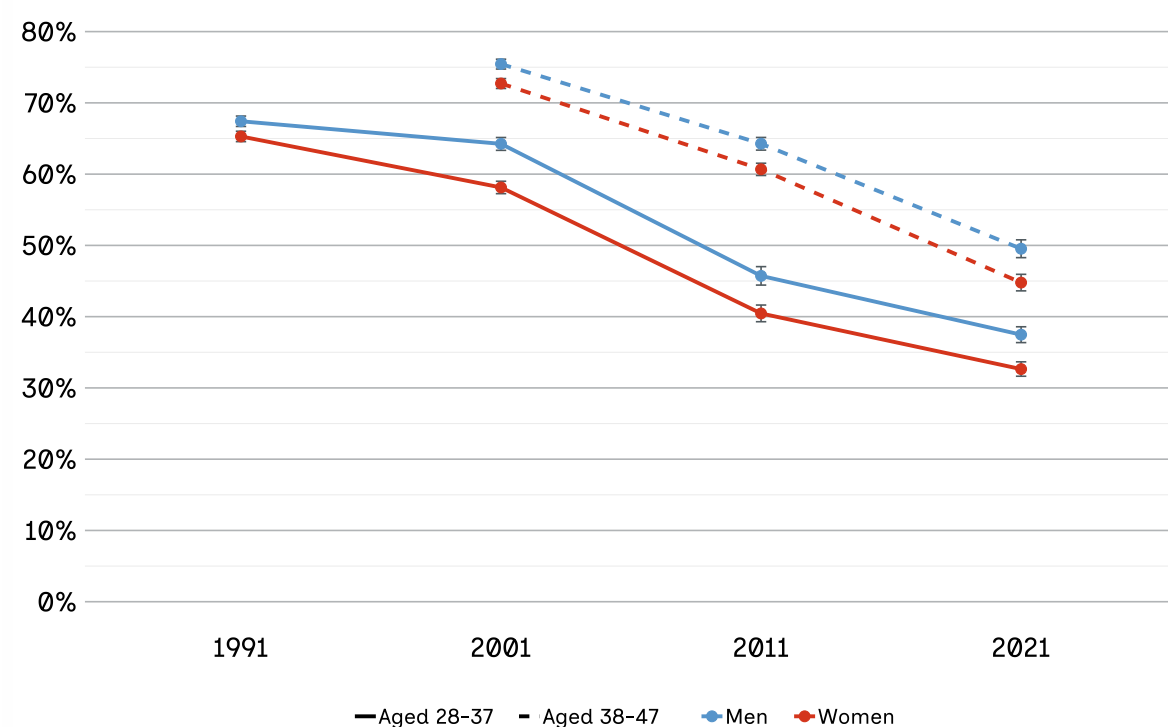
⁴⁹ Rebecca Tunstall, '[Relative housing space inequality in England and Wales and its recent rapid resurgence](#)', 2015. Published on TANDFONLINE.COM.

Absolute housing mobility

Figure 2.10 shows that there were high rates of upward mobility in the decade up to 2001, with nearly two-thirds of young people who had lived in rented accommodation when they were growing up becoming homeowners themselves. The rate of upward mobility then fell substantially in the first 2 decades of the 21st century.

Figure 2.10: There were high rates of upward housing mobility for the first 2 decades, with rates declining in the last 2 decades, both among early- and mid-career men and women.

Probability of becoming a homeowner among those who had been in rented accommodation as children (expressed as percentages), men and women aged 28 to 37 years and 38 to 47 years.



Source: ONS-LS.

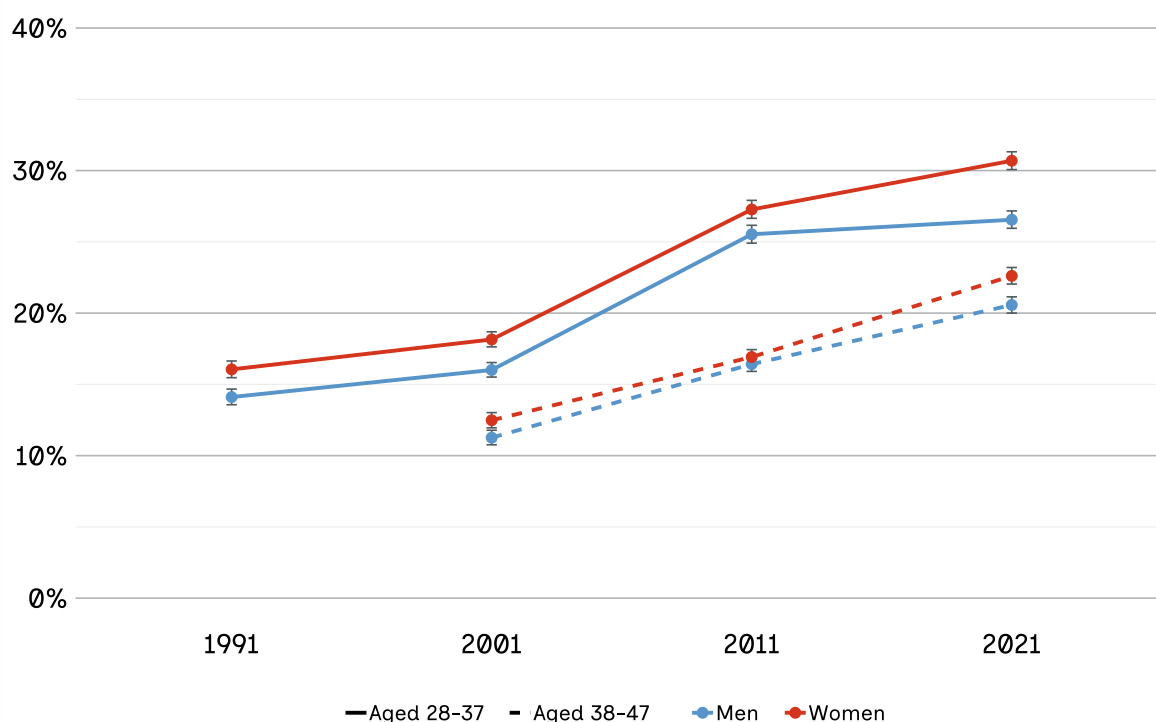
Note: This chart tracks mobility trends over time by year of destination (the census year in which the mobility outcome was observed). Each destination year corresponds to specific birth cohorts as defined in figure 2.1. The error bars show 95% confidence intervals.

Similarly to this, as figure 2.11 shows, there were low rates of downward housing mobility until 2001 and increasing rates thereafter.

There were, however, continuing inequalities between young men and young women in housing mobility chances. In every period, young women had on average a slightly higher chance than men of being downwardly mobile and a lower chance of being upwardly mobile. The gap in upward mobility chances widened from 2.1 percentage points at the time of the 1991 Census to 4.8 points at the 2021 Census and the gap in downward mobility chances widened from 1.9 points to 4.1 points.

Figure 2.11: There were low rates of downward housing mobility in 1991 and 2001, but rates of downward mobility increased after that.

Probability of becoming a renter among those who had been in owner-occupied accommodation as children (expressed as percentages), men and women aged 28 to 37 years and 38 to 47 years.



Source: ONS-LS.

Note: This chart tracks mobility trends over time by year of destination (the census year in which the mobility outcome was observed). Each destination year corresponds to specific birth cohorts as defined in figure 2.1. The error bars show 95% confidence intervals.

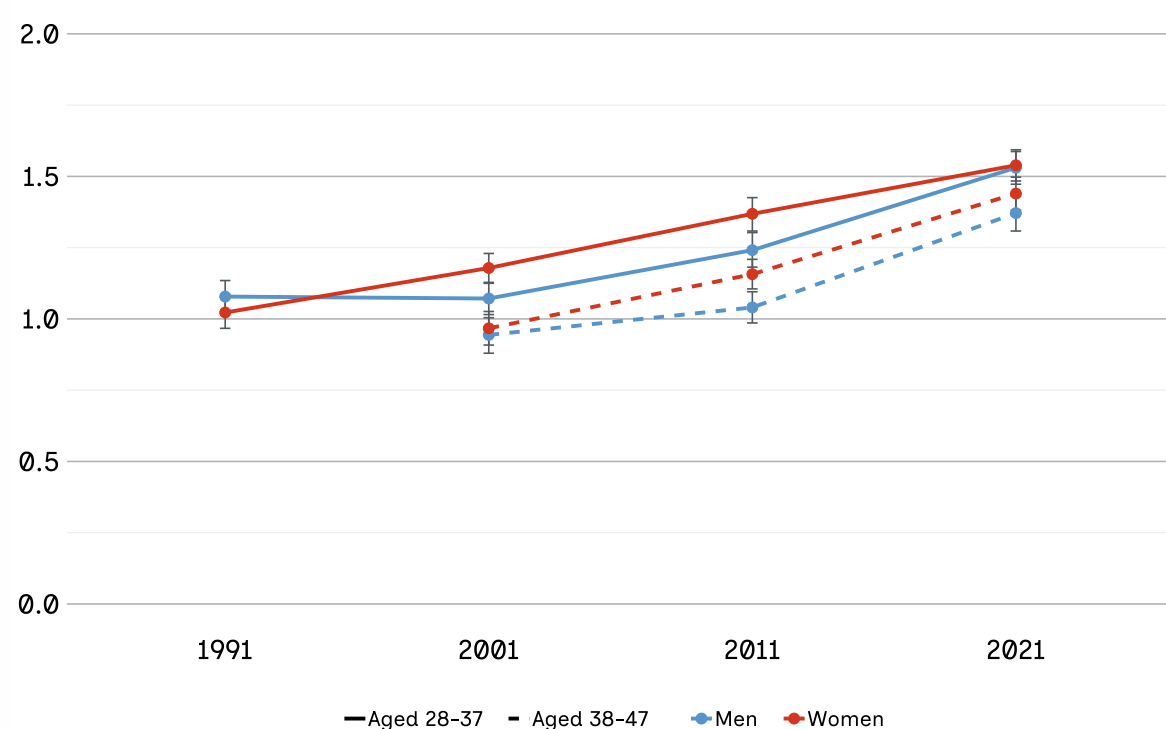
While the likelihood of upward mobility out of renting was still slightly higher than the probability of downward mobility out of owner-occupation in 2021, there were many more people who had grown up in owner-occupied accommodation than in rented accommodation. As a result, the overall number of young people experiencing downward housing mobility was twice as large as the number experiencing upward mobility. In other words, downward housing mobility was a more common occurrence among young people overall than upward housing mobility. In contrast, at the time of the 1991 Census when the proportions who had been living in owned and rented accommodation as children were evenly balanced, upward housing mobility had been 3 times as common an experience as downward mobility.

Relative housing mobility

Given the rising cost of homeownership and increased intergenerational wealth transmission (parents passing on assets to children), we would expect to see an increase in intergenerational persistence of homeownership (adult children's housing tenure being the same as their parents'). This is what we see in figure 2.12. Intergenerational persistence was low at the time of the 1991 Census. This was probably due to the 1980s Right to Buy scheme, allowing millions of council tenants to buy their homes at discounted prices.⁵⁰ There was little change in the decade to 2001, but then large increases in persistence in the following 2 decades.

Figure 2.12: Intergenerational persistence of housing status increased greatly after 2001, meaning people were more likely to be in the same housing status as their parents.

Relative housing mobility: owner:renter log odds ratios, men and women aged 28 to 37 years and aged 38 to 47 years.



Source: ONS-LS.

Note: This chart tracks mobility trends over time by year of destination (the census year in which the mobility outcome was observed). Each destination year corresponds to specific birth cohorts as defined in figure 2.1. The error bars show 95% confidence intervals.

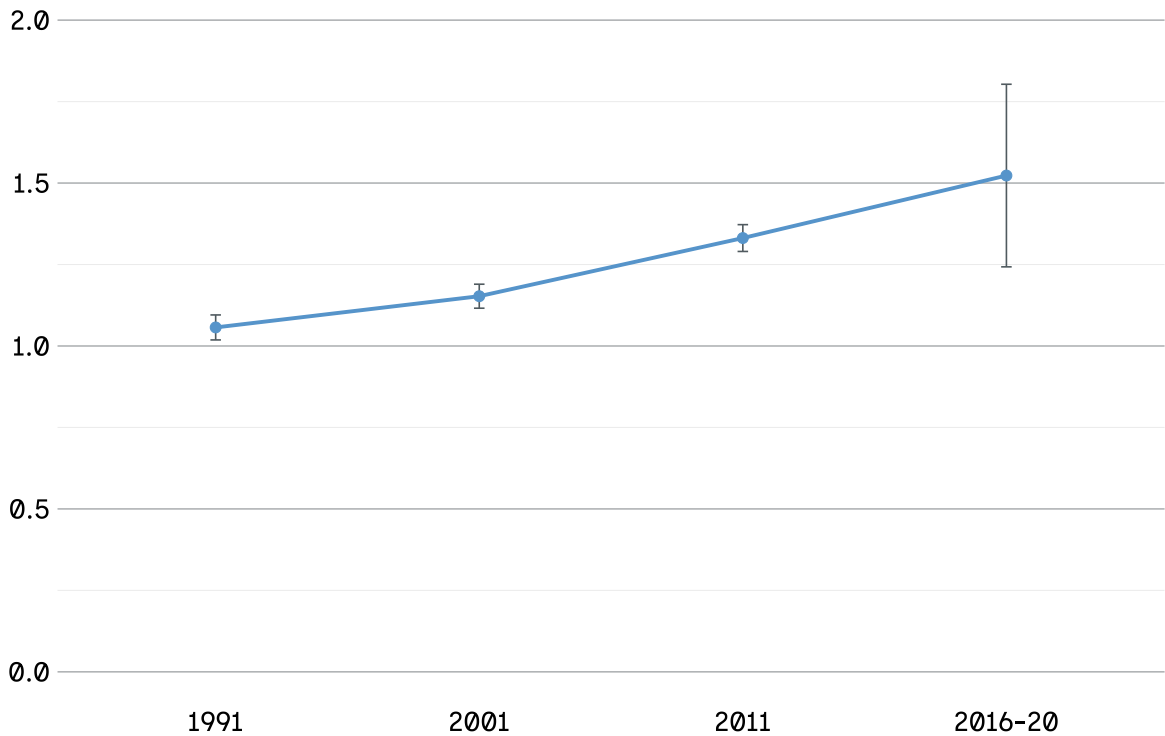
⁵⁰ The Right to Buy scheme was introduced by the Housing Act 1980, giving council tenants the opportunity to buy their home at a significant discount. In England, the scheme continues, although the generosity of the discount and the number of eligible houses have fluctuated and reduced over time. The scheme was ended in Wales in 2019 and in Scotland in 2016. UK Parliament, 'Comparing the Right to Buy in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland', 2017. Published on COMMONSLIBRARY.PARLIAMENT.UK.

Comparisons with previous research

These results are closely in line with those published by Bell and others (2023) using the ONS-LS up to 2011 and in State of the Nation 2023, which updated Bell and others' results using the Wealth and Assets Survey (WAS – figure 2.13).⁵¹ We also add to these earlier findings an analysis comparing women and men.

Figure 2.13: Previous research also shows that relative housing mobility has declined steadily since 1991.

Log odds ratios of the relationship in homeownership between people and their parents (UK, 1991, 2001, 2011 and 2016 to 2020 combined).



Source: SMC, [‘State of the Nation 2023’](#), page 94, figure 2.30.

Note: The error bars show the 95% confidence intervals for each estimate. The odds ratio is a measure of relative mobility. It is the ratio of the odds (of owning a house or not) among those whose parents owned a house to the odds among those whose parents had not. The data used is weighted using the individual weights. Odds ratios have been log transformed for consistency with this year’s analysis.

Jo Blanden and others (2021) have also looked at trends in intergenerational persistence of homeownership (relative mobility) using the BCS and the WAS. They conclude: “There is evidence of a strong upward trend in the intergenerational persistence of homeownership status which increased substantially between 2000 and 2015. At the same time there is evidence of strong empirical relationships between measures of wealth and homeownership of parents and children. Combining these in a model calibration to derive upper and lower bounds on the intergenerational transmission of wealth over time, the principal finding is that intergenerational wealth transmission strengthened over time in Britain at the start of the 21st century.”⁵²

⁵¹ Brian Bell and others, [‘Where is the land of hope and glory? The geography of intergenerational mobility in England and Wales’](#), 2023. Published on RESEARCHONLINE.LSE.AC.UK.

⁵² Jo Blanden and others, [‘Trends in intergenerational home ownership and wealth transmission’](#), 2021. Published on CEP.LSE.AC.UK.

Conclusion

Looking back to 1991 and earlier, we see that, although absolute and relative mobility are different concepts, in practice they move together over time. When absolute mobility (roughly, the overall amount of opportunity) has increased, relative mobility (equality in the uptake of that opportunity) has tended to increase as well.

The most striking example of this is in HE. With the expansion of places, opportunities for access to universities have greatly increased. This has coincided with an improvement in relative education mobility; in other words, parental education has become a much weaker driver of children's education. Of course, we should not ignore the growing differences within the HE sector. It may be that differences in prestige among universities, or perhaps the difference between an undergraduate degree and a higher degree (for example, a bachelor's versus a master's), have started to take the place of the difference between graduates and non-graduates.

Housing is an example of a one-off increase of opportunities through the Right to Buy programme, followed by a slowdown and increasing inequalities of opportunity, particularly as housing costs have risen in real terms far faster than wages. This slowdown is a serious concern because, for many people, the bulk of their wealth is tied up in their housing. Our results on relative housing mobility suggest that parental ownership of the family residence has become a more important influence on whether children will go on to own their own home. As a result, it is likely that intergenerational transmission of wealth (inheritance) is now becoming more important to people's life chances, a result that should be of some concern.

Occupational mobility lies somewhere in between education and housing: there has been a continuing but slow increase in opportunities for upward mobility, but little change in relative mobility over the decades.

For occupational-wage mobility, we cannot observe absolute mobility with this dataset, but we have seen that relative mobility has slightly decreased over time, despite the slight improvement over the last decade for those in early career.

Increasing educational equality of opportunity could partially explain the increasing equality of opportunity for early-career people between 2011 and 2021 with respect to occupational and wage mobility.



Tunde Okewale OBE

Age 42, London

I am the oldest of 4 children, born to parents who were first-generation migrants in the UK from Africa. My father worked on the London Underground and my mother was a machinist tailor. I grew up on a council estate in Hackney, before it became considered 'posh' and 'trendy'.

Growing up, the sorts of opportunities I'm often asked to speak about now simply didn't exist. There wasn't a strong push towards professional careers and many of the brightest students I went to school with didn't pursue them. This was sometimes a consequence of the soft bigotry of low expectations and sometimes because of a lack of family expectations.

Even while I was at university, there wasn't the emphasis on high aspirations that exists today. It felt like a conveyor belt. Students went through the system and were largely left to decide their own paths without much structured support or guidance.

I was fortunate to have parents with high expectations. They believed in me and pushed me. My parents were very keen for me to take advantage of the opportunities they didn't have. If there were any moments where it appeared I didn't have opportunities, I would be reminded in the strongest terms that I did!

While studying law at university, one of my lecturers played a pivotal role. In my penultimate year he told me, "I can see you being a barrister." Until then, I hadn't seriously considered that path. It took one person, someone who had been a barrister himself, to say, "I think you can do it, and I can help."

While a student, I was working at my local Sainsbury's. Like many working-class households, especially as the oldest child, I was expected to contribute financially to our household finances. While many of my better-off postgraduate peers could focus solely on their studies, I was working around 16 hours a week, often in the evenings and then attending lectures in the morning. Naturally, this affected my performance and I graduated with a 2:2.

While working at Sainsbury's I asked everyone I encountered, customers and colleagues alike, whether they knew anyone working in law. Eventually, someone in the meat and fish aisle mentioned a friend's dad was a barrister. That chance connection led to work experience with a barrister. That experience was transformative. He was also an example of social mobility. Coming from an Irish background, he had little formal education early on, worked on the roads and later returned to education as an adult, becoming a barrister in his 40s. He spoke openly about the barriers he had faced and helped prepare me for the challenges ahead. Through him, I was introduced to a wider network of barristers who had similar backgrounds. They reviewed my applications, helped me prepare for interviews and trained me up in the law profession etiquette.



When I applied for pupillage, the vocational training required to become a barrister, around 100 chambers rejected me, likely due to my undergraduate grades. However, one set of chambers gave me an opportunity, impressed by the on-the-job experience I had gained through my networking. After a few years of performing well, I was then headhunted by another chamber. Today, I am a barrister specialising in serious crime, including white-collar fraud, anti-bribery, corruption and misconduct. I also chair Sport England's Talent Inclusion Advisory Group and work with Urban Lawyers, a charity I founded to improve access to the legal profession. In 2023, I received an OBE for services to social mobility and the criminal justice system.

When it comes to social mobility, I think there's too much focus on lifting a small number of exceptional individuals up the ladder. That's why the democratisation of knowledge is so important. Many people assume they cannot pursue certain careers simply because they don't understand the process, not because they lack ability. Fortunately, this is improving, with more initiatives aimed at increasing social mobility and access to information.

3

Intermediate outcomes





Highlights

This year, the Social Mobility Commission (SMC) examines intermediate outcomes across 3 areas: sex, ethnicity and disability. For the first time, we track trends over time for both sex and disability to look at shifting barriers to social mobility.

Girls outperform boys from age 5 years through to university. However, women aged 25 to 29 years are still less likely than men to be in top professional jobs. For example, from 2020 to 2025, 34% of men from the most advantaged backgrounds were in higher professional roles compared to 25% of women from the same socio-economic background (SEB).

Since the pandemic, GCSE results for girls have fallen faster than for boys. Between 2020 and 2025, the share of non-disadvantaged girls achieving a grade-5 pass fell from 61% to 55% and disadvantaged girls saw a drop from 34% to 27%. For disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged boys, results were steadier, dropping by 1 or 2 percentage points.

The number of young men (aged 16 to 24 years) not in education, employment or training (NEET) rose faster than the number of young women across the 2 periods: 2014 to 2019 and 2020 to 2025. Both men and women from lower working-class backgrounds are the most likely to be NEET.

Men tend to occupy the 2 extremes of the job market. They are more likely to be in higher professional roles, but also more likely to be in lower working-class roles.

The pay gap between men and women remains a barrier because men's earnings increase into their 40s while women's pay flattens out much earlier. Accounting for social class, the pay gap nearly doubles between the late 20s and late 30s.

Disadvantaged pupils from Chinese, Indian and Bangladeshi backgrounds tend to get better grades than any other group. By age 16 years, nearly 73% of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) from the Chinese ethnic group meet the expected standard of a grade 5 or above in both GCSE English and maths, compared with just 4% of Gypsy or Roma pupils.

Young people from lower working-class homes who are Black Caribbean or White British face the highest risk of becoming NEET and degree attainment for both groups is just 19%.

People of Black African, Chinese, Indian, Other and White Other ethnic backgrounds are all significantly less likely to be NEET between age 16 and 24 years than White British people of the same SEB.

Academic success does not always lead to the same rewards at work. Young people from Bangladeshi and Pakistani backgrounds experience poorer outcomes in employment despite their classroom achievements.

Black Caribbean and Pakistani young people face a significantly higher risk of being unemployed than their White peers.

Disabled young people from disadvantaged backgrounds continue to be much more likely to be NEET and much less likely to be employed than their non-disabled peers.

The disability gap in economic activity for the lower working-class group remained large at 32 percentage points across the 2 periods (2014 to 2019 and 2020 to 2025). Non-disabled peers from lower working-class backgrounds are more than twice as likely to reach a higher professional job as their disabled peers, at 10% compared to just 4%.

Disabled people face persistent barriers to progression, with non-disabled peers more likely to reach higher-level jobs across all SEBs. Even when holding the same level of qualification such as a degree, disabled young people earn 8% less than their non-disabled peers.

Introduction

This chapter looks at intermediate outcomes to understand how different factors shape a person's life chances. Intermediate outcomes measure the development a person makes from their starting point to an earlier endpoint, such as employment in their 20s or educational attainment at age 16 years, broken down by SEB. This serves as an early indicator of how their later life will turn out. By looking at these steps, we can see exactly where young people encounter barriers before they establish their main careers. To provide a deeper analysis, we also break down these metrics by 3 protected characteristics: sex, ethnicity and disability. This focus helps uncover how specific characteristics interact with socio-economic backgrounds to influence early success.

For the first time, this year's report tracks trends over time for both sex and disability. This new approach allows us to see whether gaps are widening or narrowing across different groups. While the report also provides a detailed breakdown by ethnicity, tracking changes over time was not possible. Breaking down data into distinct ethnic groups creates a major statistical challenge: the resulting sample sizes become too small to produce reliable or meaningful estimates. Despite these data limitations, comparing the static findings across all 3 characteristics provides an essential baseline for social mobility policy.



Differences between men and women

Summary

School results do not always lead to later career success. Girls outperform boys from age 5 through to university. However, these results do not always lead to the best-paid jobs.

By their late 20s, women are more likely to hold degrees than men from the same backgrounds. Yet they often stay in lower professional roles, such as teacher or nurse. Men tend to occupy the 2 extremes of the job market. They are more likely to reach higher-professional roles, but they are also more likely to be in routine manual roles.

The pay gap between women and men also remains a documented challenge. Men's earnings continue to climb into their 40s, while women's pay tends to flatten out much earlier. Education seems to protect women from unemployment, but it has not yet opened the door to the very top professional roles.

Compulsory school age attainment

At age 5 years, 79% of girls not eligible for FSM reach a 'good level of development'. This is 7 points higher than the figure for boys in the same group. The lowest scores are for boys eligible for FSM: less than half (44%) reach the expected level.

By age 11 years, girls still lead by 6 or 7 points in reading, writing and maths. This gap has stayed roughly the same for 10 years. However, being disadvantaged has a much bigger impact than sex: there is a 20-point attainment gap between children eligible for FSM and those who are not.

By age 16 years, the gap between boys and girls is smaller. But since the pandemic, GCSE results for girls have generally fallen faster than for boys:

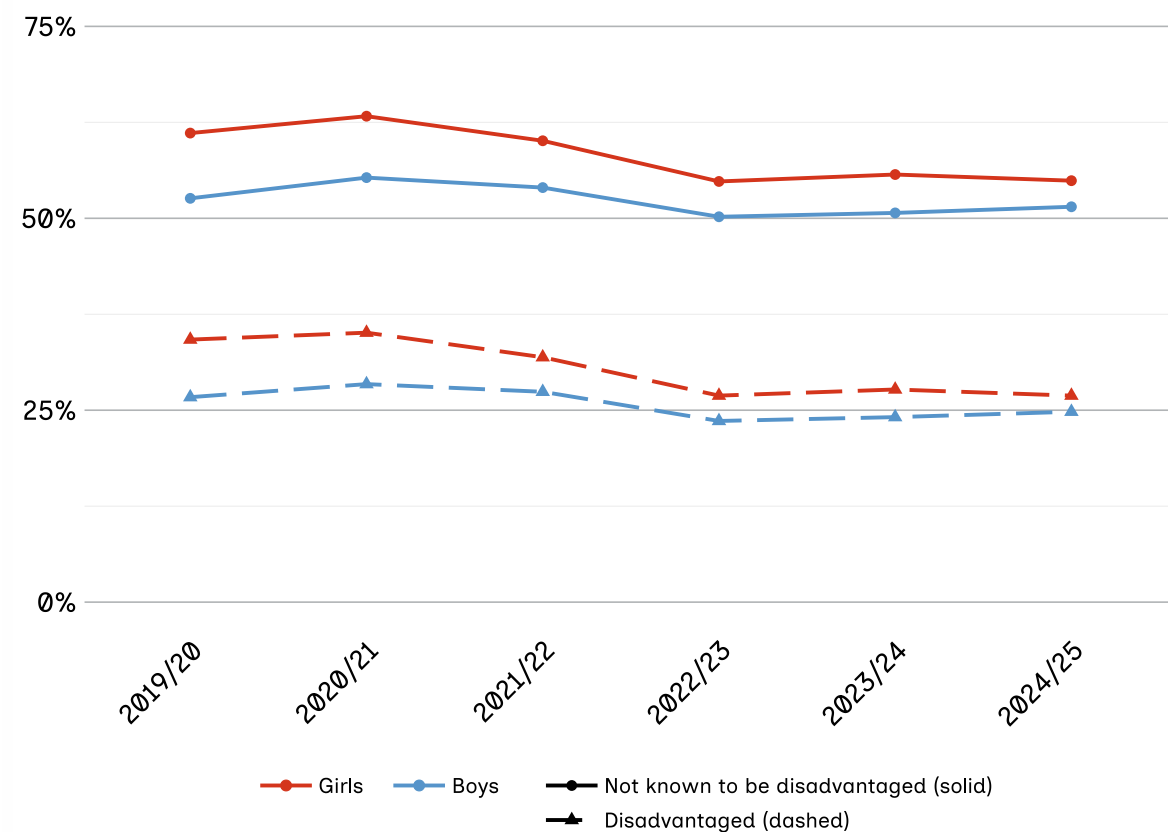
- for non-disadvantaged girls: results fell from 61% to 55% between 2020 and 2025
- for disadvantaged girls: results dropped from 34% to 27%
- for both disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged boys: results were steadier, only dropping by 1 or 2 percentage points

There is a 28-point attainment gap between disadvantaged girls and their non-disadvantaged peers. For boys, that gap is 27 points. As the gap between sexes closes, SEB remains an important factor associated with school success.

“Girls outperform boys from age 5 through to university.”

Figure 3.1: In the 2024 to 2025 school year, girls were more likely than boys to achieve a grade-5 pass in both GCSE English and maths regardless of their disadvantaged status.

Percentage of pupils achieving a pass (grade 5 or above) in both GCSE English and maths by disadvantage status and gender in England, between the 2019 to 2020 and 2024 to 2025 academic years.



Source: Department for Education (DfE). National curriculum assessments at key stage (KS) 4 in England, 2025.

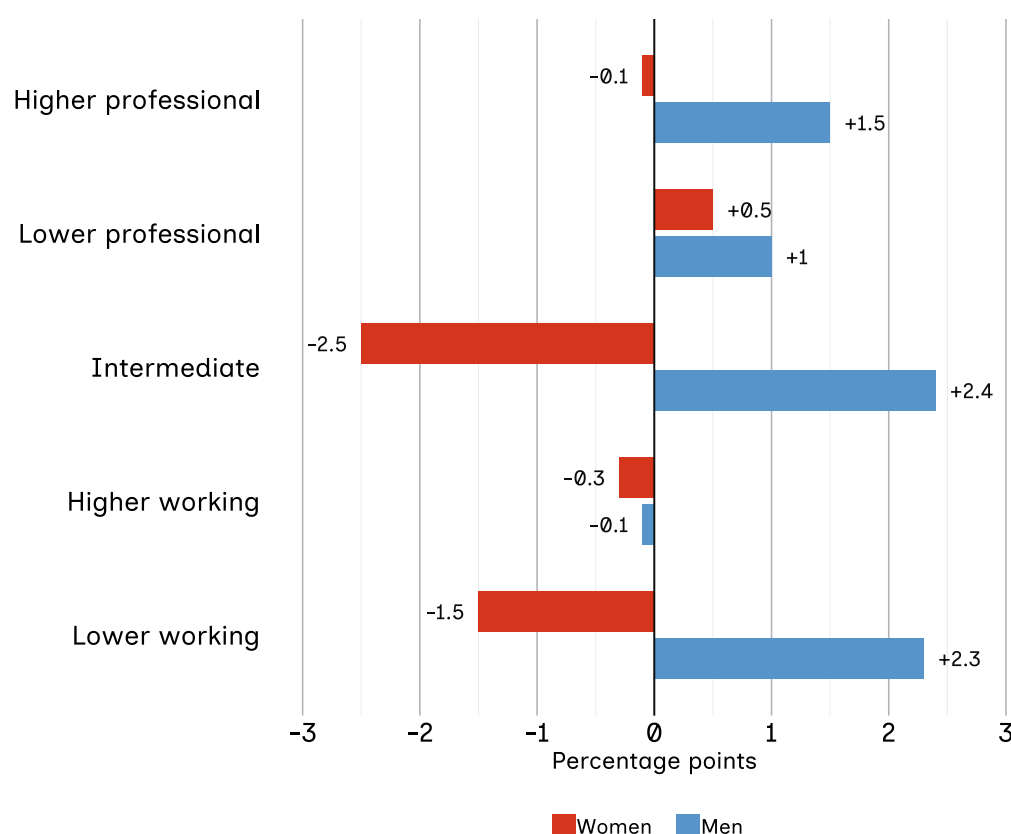
Note: Pupils are defined as disadvantaged if they are known to have been eligible for FSMs at any point in the past 6 years (from year 6 to year 11), if they are recorded as having been looked after (in care) for at least one day or if they are recorded as having been adopted from care.

Education, jobs and training

Moving from school to work reveals more differences between young men and women. Here, we group results from 6 academic years together to get a more reliable comparison over time. When comparing the time periods 2014 to 2019 with 2020 to 2025, the number of young men (aged 16 to 24 years) who were NEET rose faster than for young women. This suggests that some young men may find it harder to access or stay in education, jobs or training places.

Figure 3.2: The number of young men who are NEET rose faster than for young women.

Percentage points change of young people aged 16 to 24 years in the UK who were NEET, by socio-economic background (SEB) and sex, between the 2014 to 2019 and 2020 to 2025 time periods.



Source: Office for National Statistics (ONS), pooled Labour Force Survey (LFS) data from the 2014 to 2019 and 2020 to 2025 time periods, respondents aged 16 to 24 years in the UK.

Note: NEET is defined as not in employment, education or training in the week before the survey. SEB refers to the main wage earner's occupation when the respondent was aged 14 years. Where there was no earner in the family, SEB is treated as lower working class. The data used is weighted using the LFS person weights. Due to rounding errors, in some instances the totals may not add up to 100%.

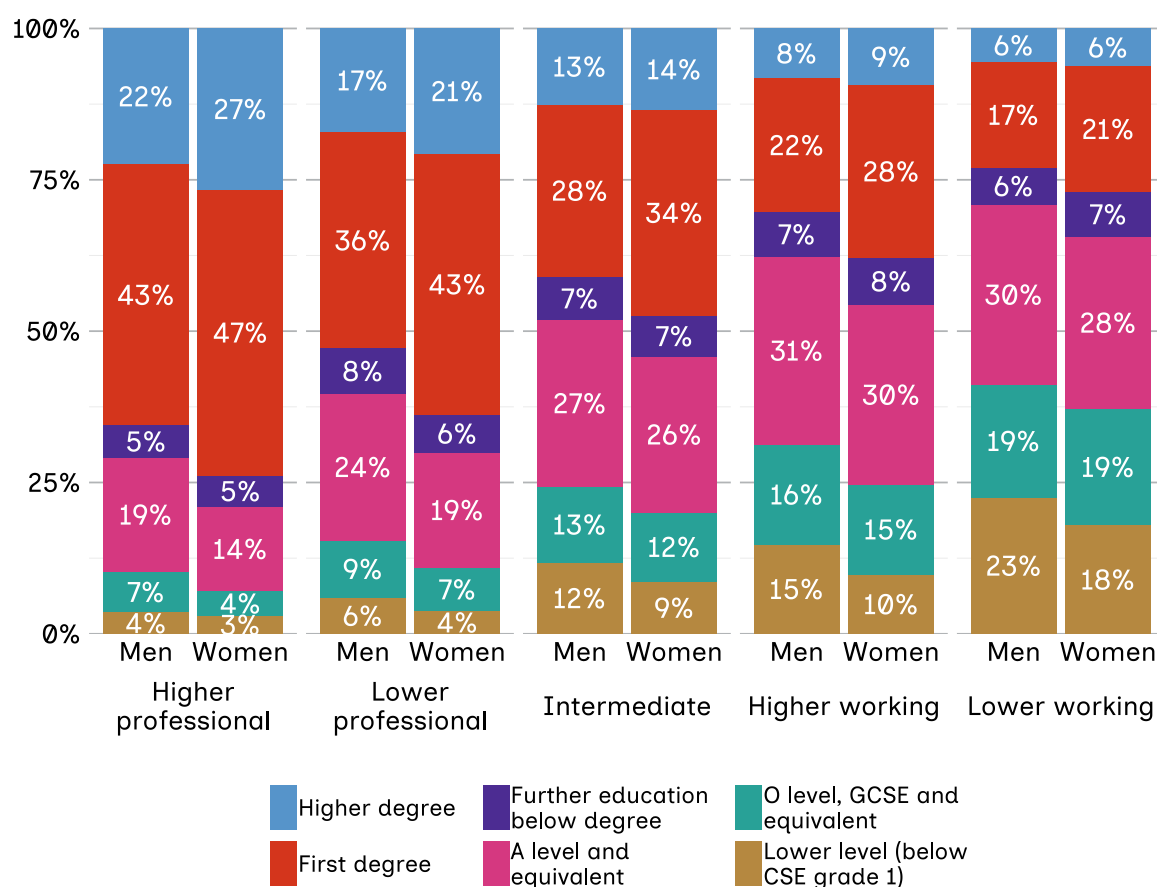
The growing gap between men and women in training and NEET rates may be feeding through to higher education (HE). Young women are more likely to have a degree than young men from the same SEB.

This gap is widest for the higher professional and lower working-class SEB groups. Women from higher professional backgrounds are the most qualified: 74% hold a degree. In contrast, men from lower working-class backgrounds have the lowest qualifications: only 23% of this group hold degrees.⁵³

⁵³ Formal statistical testing showed no significant differences between the 2014 to 2019 and 2020 to 2025 periods. Therefore, we have combined 2014 to 2025 data to provide more reliable estimates.

Figure 3.3: Within all SEBs, higher proportions of young women than young men have a first degree.

Highest level of qualification achieved by those aged 25 to 29 years in the UK, by SEB and sex, from 2014 to 2025 combined.



Source: ONS, pooled LFS data from 2014 to 2025 combined, respondents aged 25 to 29 years in the UK.

Note: Due to rounding errors, in some instances the totals may not add up to 100%. A formal test was conducted to test for differences in degree attainment by SEB and sex. The data used is weighted using the LFS person weights.

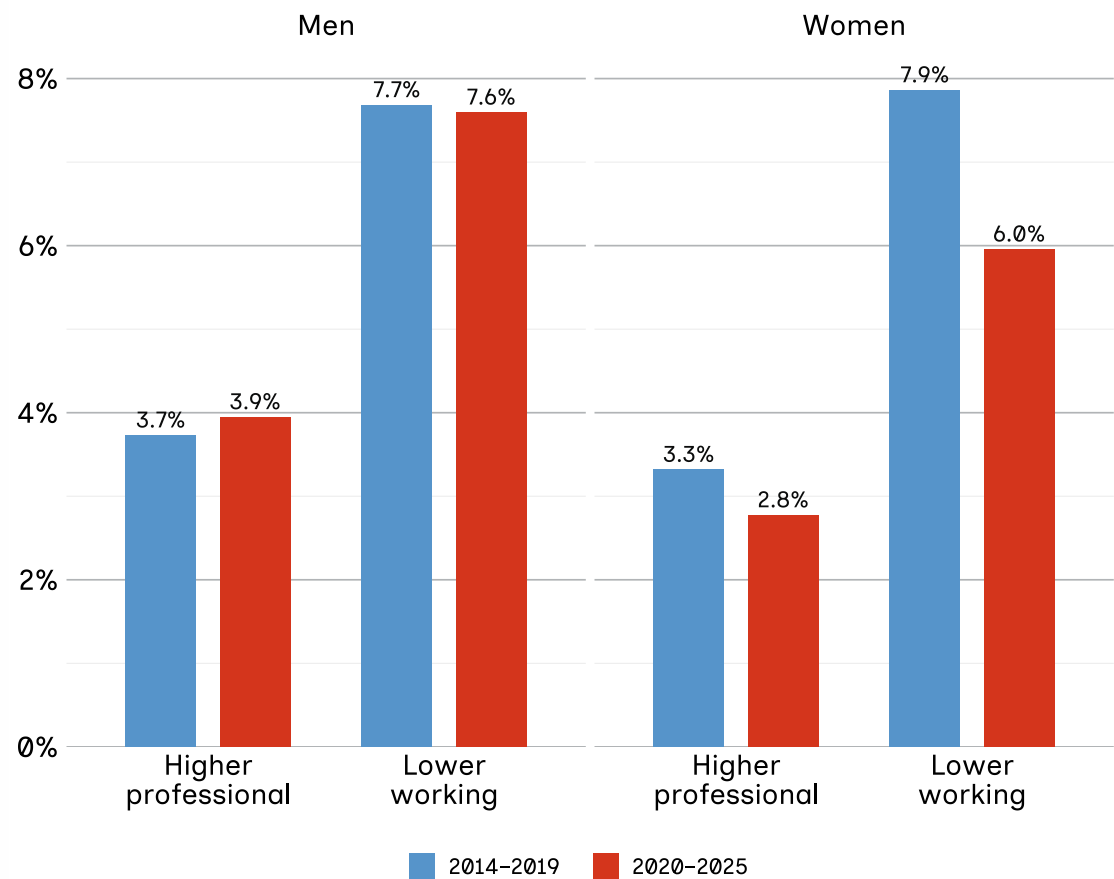
“When comparing the time periods 2014 to 2019 with 2020 to 2025, the number of young men (aged 16 to 24 years) who were NEET rose faster than for young women.”

Labour market and earnings

The training young people undertake early on affects the stability and type of jobs they get later. In figure 3.4 we can see a clear difference between men and women in unemployment rates. However, there is no strong statistical evidence of different trends over time for men and women. Overall, the unemployment level of people from lower working-class backgrounds is around double that of people from higher professional backgrounds.

Figure 3.4: For both men and women, unemployment has consistently been around twice as high for those of a lower working-class SEB than for those of a higher professional SEB.

Percentage of young people aged 25 to 29 years in the UK who were unemployed, by SEB and sex, from the 2014 to 2019 and 2020 to 2025 time periods.



Source: ONS, pooled LFS data from the 2014 to 2019 and 2020 to 2025 time periods, respondents aged 25 to 29 years in the UK.

Note: The unemployed are defined as those who are not in work but available and looking for work. This means that economically inactive people (people who are not working and not looking for work) are excluded from the calculation. A formal test was conducted of whether there are differences in unemployment by SEB and sex. The data used is weighted using the LFS person weights.

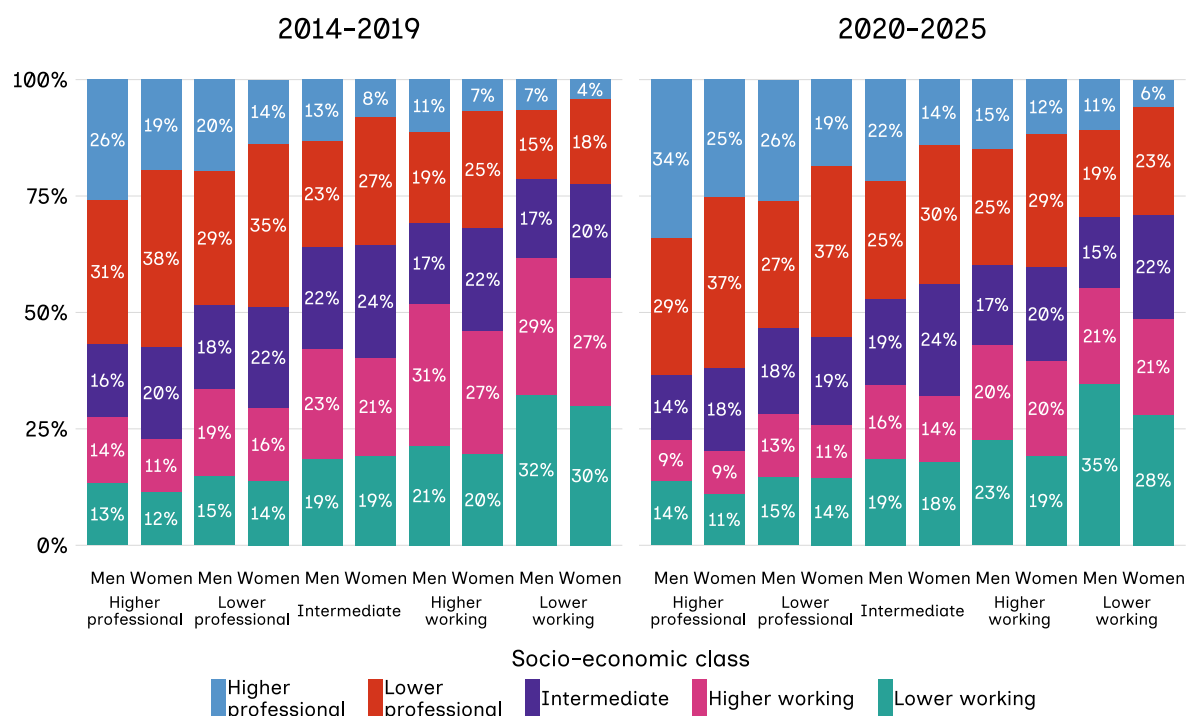
Women consistently do better than men in school and at university. However, women aged 25 to 29 years are still less likely than men to be in top professional jobs.

There is a distinct sex split in the workforce. Both young men and women have seen some improvements in their career levels, but young men are now more concentrated at the 2 extremes. They are more likely to be in the very highest-paid or lowest-paid roles. Women tend to be in middle-tier professional roles.

For those from the most advantaged backgrounds, the gap at the top may be growing. The proportion of men from higher professional backgrounds attaining top roles increased from 26% to 34%. For women of similar socio-economic backgrounds, the proportion rose from 19% to 25%.

Figure 3.5: Men are increasingly concentrated at both the highest and lowest levels of the occupation ladder.

Percentage of young people aged 25 to 29 years in the UK in different occupational levels, by SEB and sex, from the 2014 to 2019 and 2020 to 2025 time periods.



Source: ONS, pooled LFS data from the 2014 to 2019 and 2020 to 2025 time periods, respondents aged 25 to 29 years in the UK.

Note: Due to rounding errors, in some instances the totals may not add up to 100%. A formal test was conducted of whether there are differences in occupational class by SEB and sex, and over time. The data used is weighted using the LFS person weights.

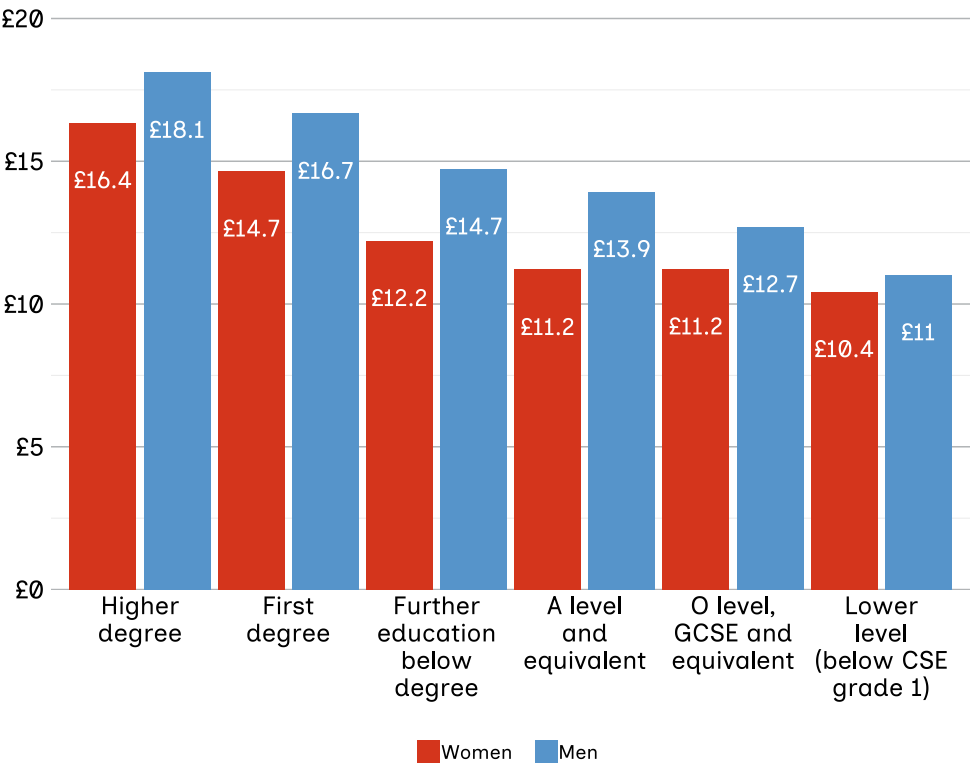
“Women consistently do better than men in school and at university. However, women aged 25 to 29 years are still less likely than men to be in top professional jobs.”

The pay gap

These job trends lead to differences in pay. Young women earn less than young men across all backgrounds. Even when women have the same qualifications and backgrounds as men, they earn significantly less. This gap is widest for people whose highest qualifications are A levels. In this group, women earn an average of £11.20 per hour, while men earn £13.90 per hour.

Figure 3.6: Young women earn significantly less than young men with the same qualifications and SEB.

Mean hourly earnings of young people aged 25 to 29 years in the UK by educational level and sex, controlling for SEB and age, from 2014 to 2025.



Source: ONS, pooled LFS data from 2014 to 2025 combined, respondents aged 25 to 29 years in the UK.
Note: Earnings have been adjusted for inflation with a base year of 2025. Data is weighted using LFS income weights. For data by sex, the estimates shown are the hourly earnings of 27-year-old men and women from a lower working-class background. Data from 2014 to 2025 is combined.

Even when young people have the same qualifications and come from the same SEB, the gap between men and women remains significant. This probably reflects the different types of jobs taken up by men and women at this level. It shows that for those without high-level degrees, sex remains a major factor related to pay.

Occupation and income progression over time

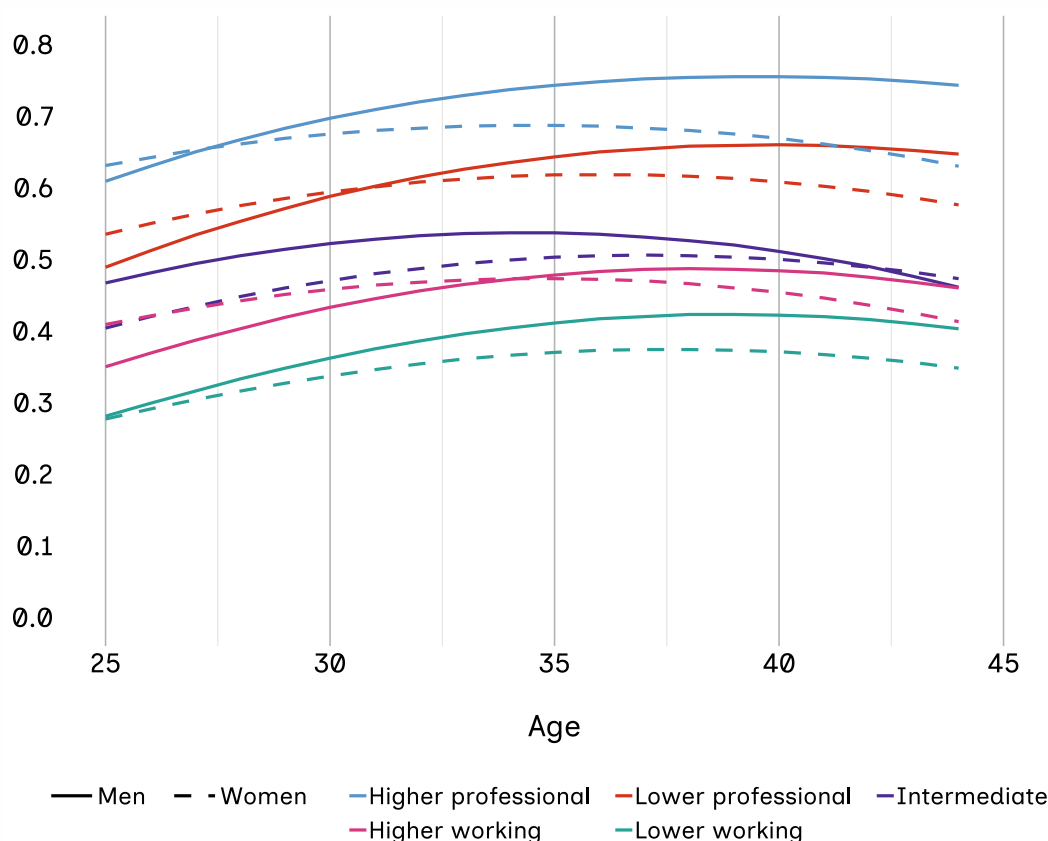
Men and women start their careers at a similar level. However, as people move from age 25 toward 44, the story changes. Men's careers tend to grow steadily, with wage growth accelerating into their late 30s.

For women, the trend is the opposite. Between their late 30s and early 40s, the proportion of women holding professional roles is flat or may even decline. This may be due to the impact of starting a family, childcare costs and changing working patterns. While women start strong, they face much higher barriers to staying in top roles or moving up as they reach the middle of their careers.

People from lower working-class backgrounds have the lowest chance of reaching professional roles. While their opportunities might improve slightly in their 20s, as they move into their late 30s and early 40s they see a sharper decline in their progression compared to people from professional backgrounds.

Figure 3.7: Young men from higher SEBs are more likely to progress into professional occupations.

The likelihood of men and women entering the professional classes in the UK, by SEB, sex and age, from the 2023 to 2025 time period.



Source: ONS, pooled LFS data from 2023 to 2025, respondents aged 25 to 44 years in the UK in paid employment.

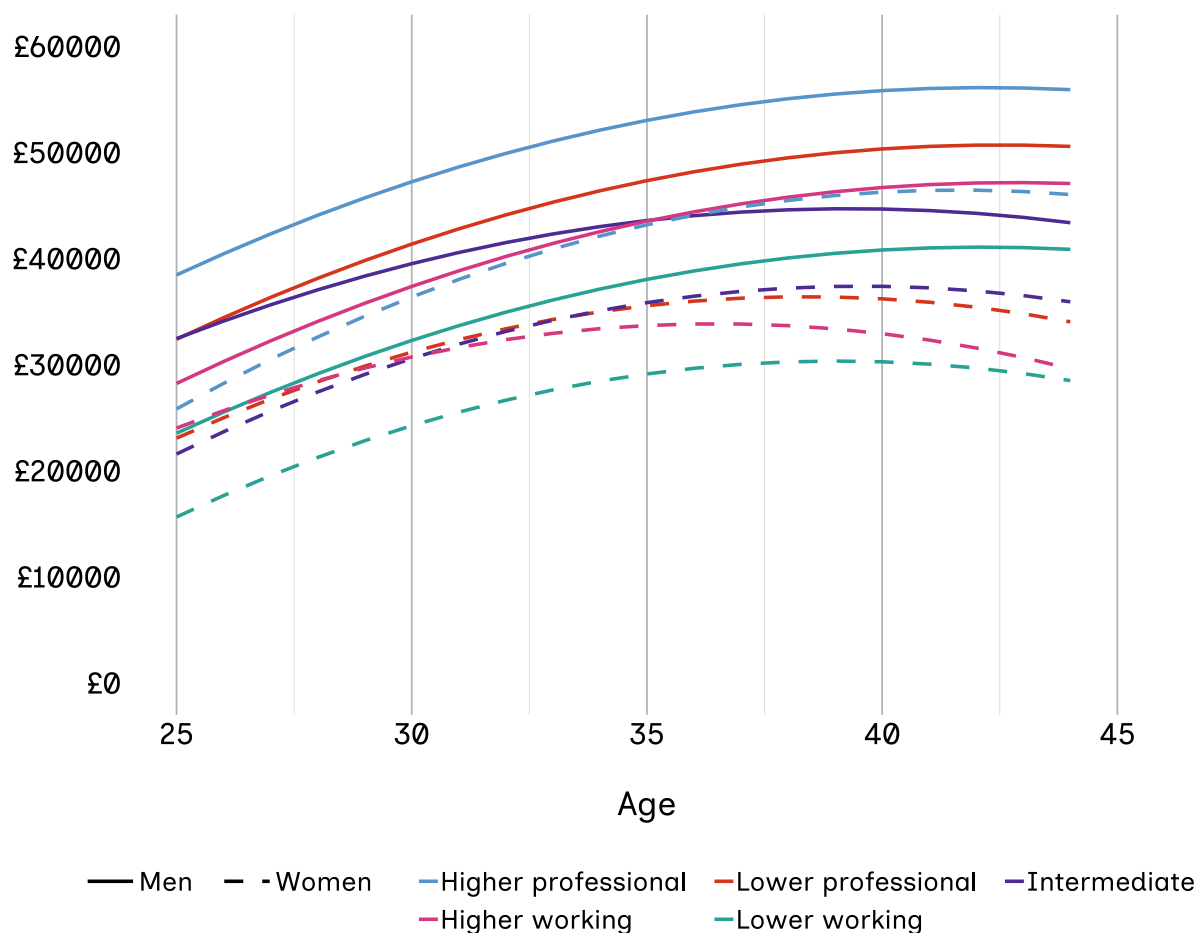
Note: Estimates are derived from a logistic regression of professional employment by SEB and age controlling for survey year for individuals aged 25 to 44. Due to model revisions that now fully account for both the main effects and interaction effects between SEB and age, the results for this indicator are not directly comparable to previous years. The data is weighted using the LFS response weights.

These differences in career trajectories are reflected in earnings. While men's pay continues to rise into their 40s, women's pay hits a ceiling much sooner. Even after accounting for social class, the pay gap nearly doubles between the late 20s and late 30s.



Figure 3.8: On average, the annual incomes of young men from higher SEBs increase more over their working lives than those of young men from lower SEBs.

Income progression of men and women in the UK, by SEB, sex and age, from the 2023 to 2025 time period.



Source: ONS, pooled LFS data from 2023 to 2025 time period, respondents aged 25 to 44 years in the UK in paid employment.

Note: Estimates are derived from the a linear regression of annual income by SEB and age, controlling for survey year and number of dependent children. Due to slight revisions to the model to account for the interaction between SEB and age, the results for this indicator are not directly comparable to last year's. The data used is weighted using the LFS person weights.

Differences across ethnic groups

For this 2026 report, we looked at data across ethnic groups from 2014 to 2025. We could not compare shorter time periods (as we do for sex and disability) for different ethnic groups because the sample sizes were too small. Instead, we analysed the entire period to give the most accurate picture possible. In the future, we hope to use administrative data, such as the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Longitudinal Study (LS), to look at changes over time in intermediate outcomes for different ethnic groups.

Summary

Disadvantaged pupils from Chinese, Indian and Bangladeshi backgrounds are more likely to get degrees than their White British peers, while pupils from other ethnic backgrounds achieve similarly. Pupils from almost every minority ethnic group have higher achievement than the White British majority when we look at GCSE grades for those eligible for FSM. However, this academic success for minority ethnic groups does not always lead to the same rewards at work. There is a disconnect between what young people from some ethnic groups achieve in the classroom and their outcomes in the workplace.

Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Other ethnic groups are significantly less likely to get professional jobs, and Black Caribbean and Pakistani young people face a significantly higher risk of being unemployed. These findings suggest that some of our most educationally mobile communities are still struggling to find stable, high-level work. However, young people from Indian backgrounds are the most likely to get professional jobs. This may also be true of young people from Chinese backgrounds, but the sample was too small for us to be sure.

People of Black African, Chinese, Indian, Other and White Other ethnic backgrounds are all significantly less likely to be NEET between age 16 and 24 years than White British people of the same SEB. Young people from lower working-class homes who are Black Caribbean or White British face the highest risk of becoming NEET and degree attainment for both groups is just 19%.

Disparities also show up in how much young people earn. Young people from Bangladeshi and Black Caribbean backgrounds earn significantly less than their peers from the same SEB. Young people from Chinese backgrounds generally earn more than their White British peers.

“There is a disconnect between what young people from some ethnic groups achieve in the classroom and their outcomes in the workplace.”

Compulsory school age

This section looks at how children from different backgrounds perform in school. Across the UK, many students from ethnic minority backgrounds now do better in school than their White British peers. The gap between the highest- and lowest-achieving groups is still very large.

The differences are clear from as early as primary school. By age 11 years, 80% of FSM-eligible children in the Chinese ethnic group meet the expected standards for their age. In contrast, only 18% of Gypsy or Roma children reach that same level.

As students move through secondary school, this divide often grows even wider. By the time they sit their exams at age 16 years, nearly 73% of FSM-eligible pupils from the Chinese ethnic group achieve the benchmark level of a grade 5 or above in both GCSE English and maths. Meanwhile, for Gypsy or Roma pupils, that figure drops to just 4%.

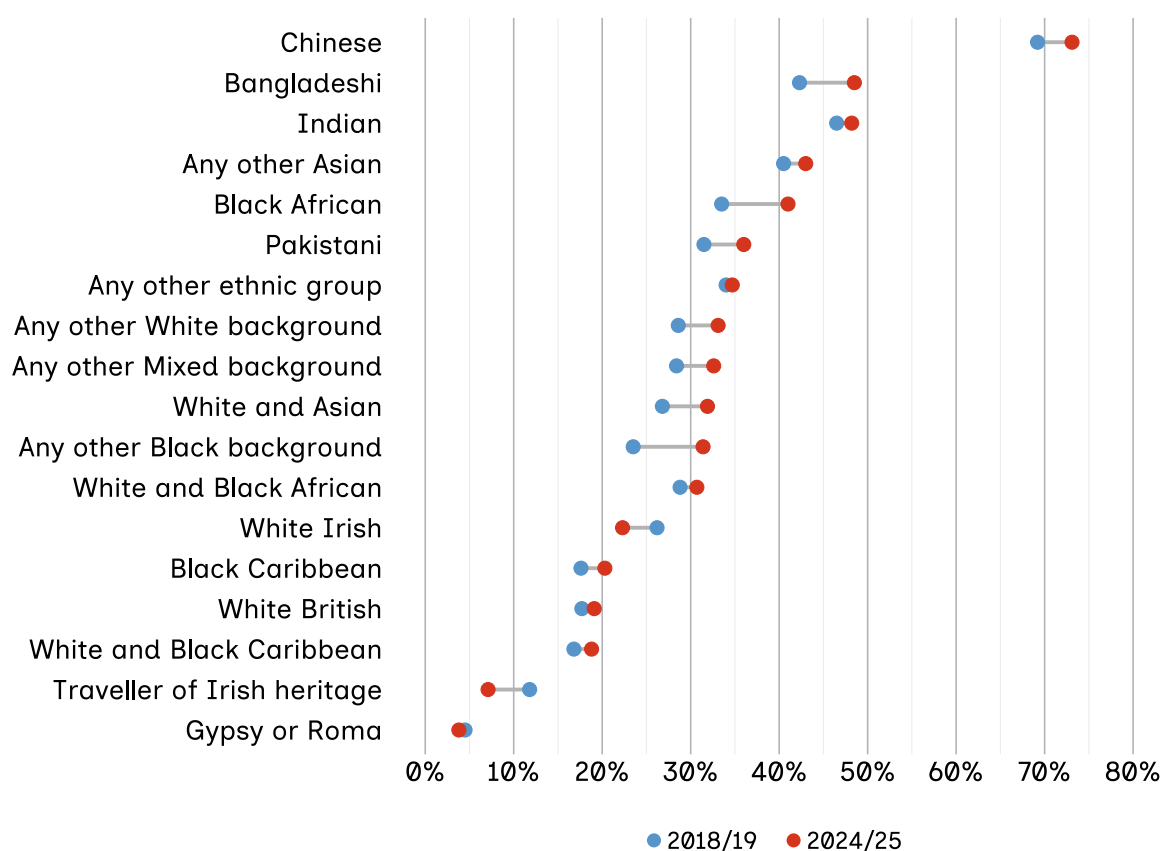
When looking at attainment of different ethnic groups over time, we observe that while most ethnic groups have seen their results bounce back since the pandemic, some have continued to fall behind. The biggest decline at age 11 years was seen among White Irish children, whose results dropped by 9 percentage points over the last 7 years.

Figure 3.9 shows that this downward trend is also visible at age 16 years. Between 2019 and 2025, the proportion of Traveller of Irish heritage pupils meeting expected standards nearly halved, falling from 12% to just 7%. White Irish and Gypsy or Roma pupils also saw their results dip during this time. The data suggests that while many groups are excelling, those who were already struggling may be finding it even harder to catch up.



Figure 3.9: There is great variation across ethnicities in the attainment of FSM-eligible pupils.

Percentage of FSM-eligible pupils achieving a strong pass (grade 5 or above) in both GCSE English and maths by ethnicity in England, from the 2018 to 2019 academic year to the 2024 to 2025 academic year.



Source: DfE. National curriculum assessments at KS4 in England, 2024 to 2025.

Note: Figures for 2024 are based on revised data. FSM eligibility is based on data collected in the school census, which records whether a child's family has claimed eligibility. Parents are able to claim FSM if they receive certain benefits.⁵⁴

Education and training

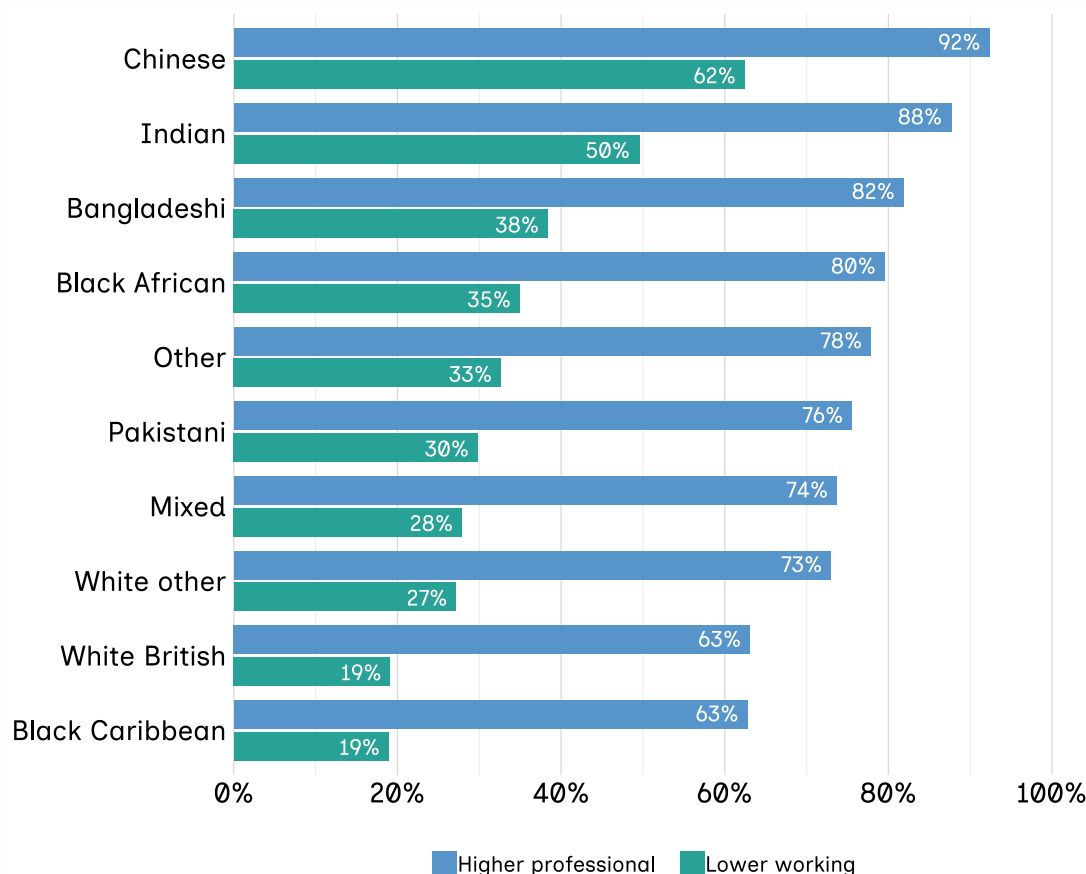
As young people move into adulthood, the education gap between ethnic groups remains wide. We look at degree attainment because higher education (HE) is a sign of upward mobility: degrees often help young people move into professional jobs.

White British individuals are less likely to hold degrees than young people from Indian, Chinese and Bangladeshi backgrounds from the same SEB. White British and Black Caribbean young people from lower working-class backgrounds have the lowest levels of degree attainment of all groups, at 19%.

⁵⁴ See DfE guidance for more information on FSM eligibility, '[Early years foundation stage profile results](#)', 2023. Published on GOV.UK.

Figure 3.10: Students from Chinese, Indian and Bangladeshi backgrounds are significantly more likely to obtain degrees than their White British peers of the same SEB.

Percentage of young people aged 25 to 29 years in the UK from lower working-class and higher professional backgrounds who achieved a university degree, by ethnicity, 2014 to 2025 combined.



Source: ONS, pooled LFS data from 2014 to 2025 combined, respondents aged 25 to 29 years in the UK.

Note: Because of small sample sizes, the outcome measure is simplified to whether the respondent has a university degree. The estimated percentages are derived from a logistic regression model on the likelihood of attaining a degree by ethnic group and SEB, controlling for sex.⁵⁵ The model assumes that class effects are the same within each ethnic group. The percentages shown are those for men. Percentages are shown only for those with lower working-class and higher professional backgrounds for illustrative purposes. The data used is weighted using the LFS person weights.

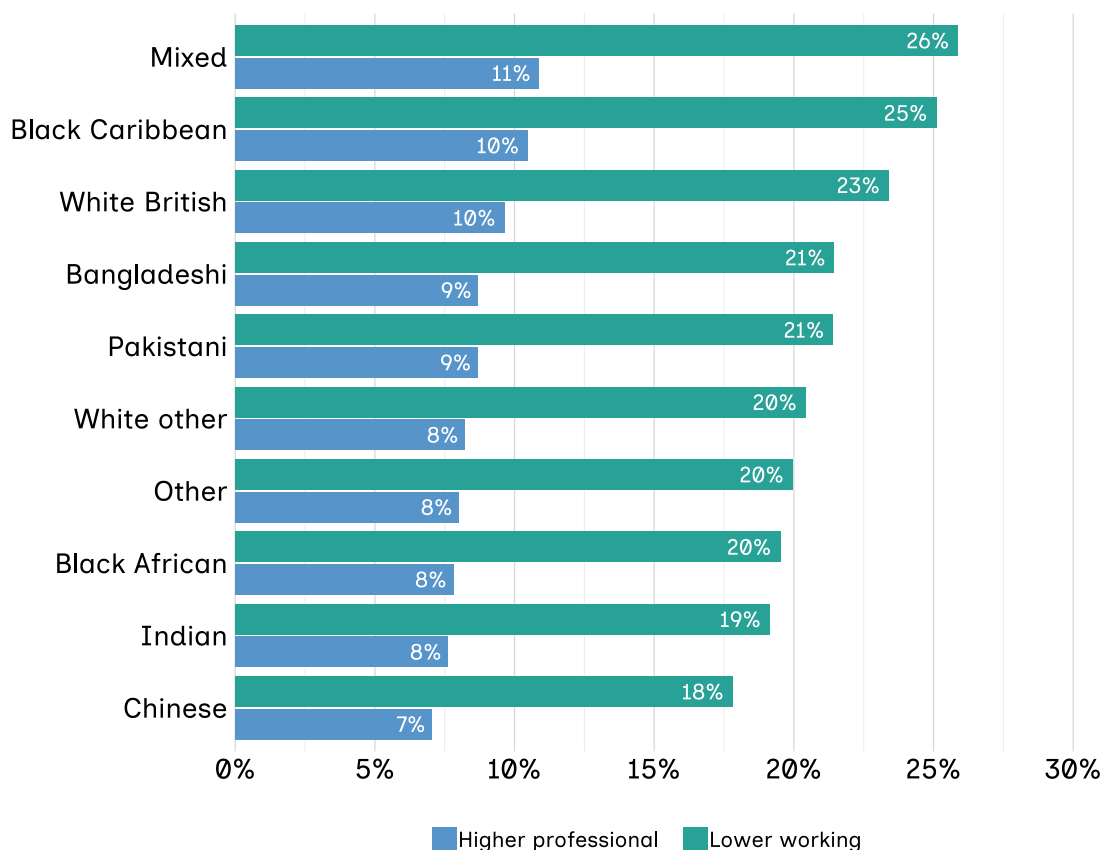
We also monitor young people who are NEET. As we noted in chapter 4, this number has risen in recent years and being NEET can lead to scarring effects on future pay and productivity.⁵⁶ When looking at this across socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds we observe that the risk of being NEET is not the same for everyone.

⁵⁵ The model shows that young people from most ethnic backgrounds are significantly more likely to have a degree than young people from a White British background.

⁵⁶ ONS, 'Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), UK: May 2026'. Published on ONS.GOV.UK.

Figure 3.11: People of Black African, Chinese, Indian, Other and White
Other ethnic backgrounds are all significantly less likely to be NEET between the ages of 16 and 24 years than White British people of the same SEB.

Percentage of young people aged 16 to 24 years in the UK who were NEET, by SEB and ethnicity, 2014 to 2025 combined.



Source: ONS, pooled LFS data from 2014 to 2025, respondents aged 16 to 24 years in the UK, data collected from July to September each year.

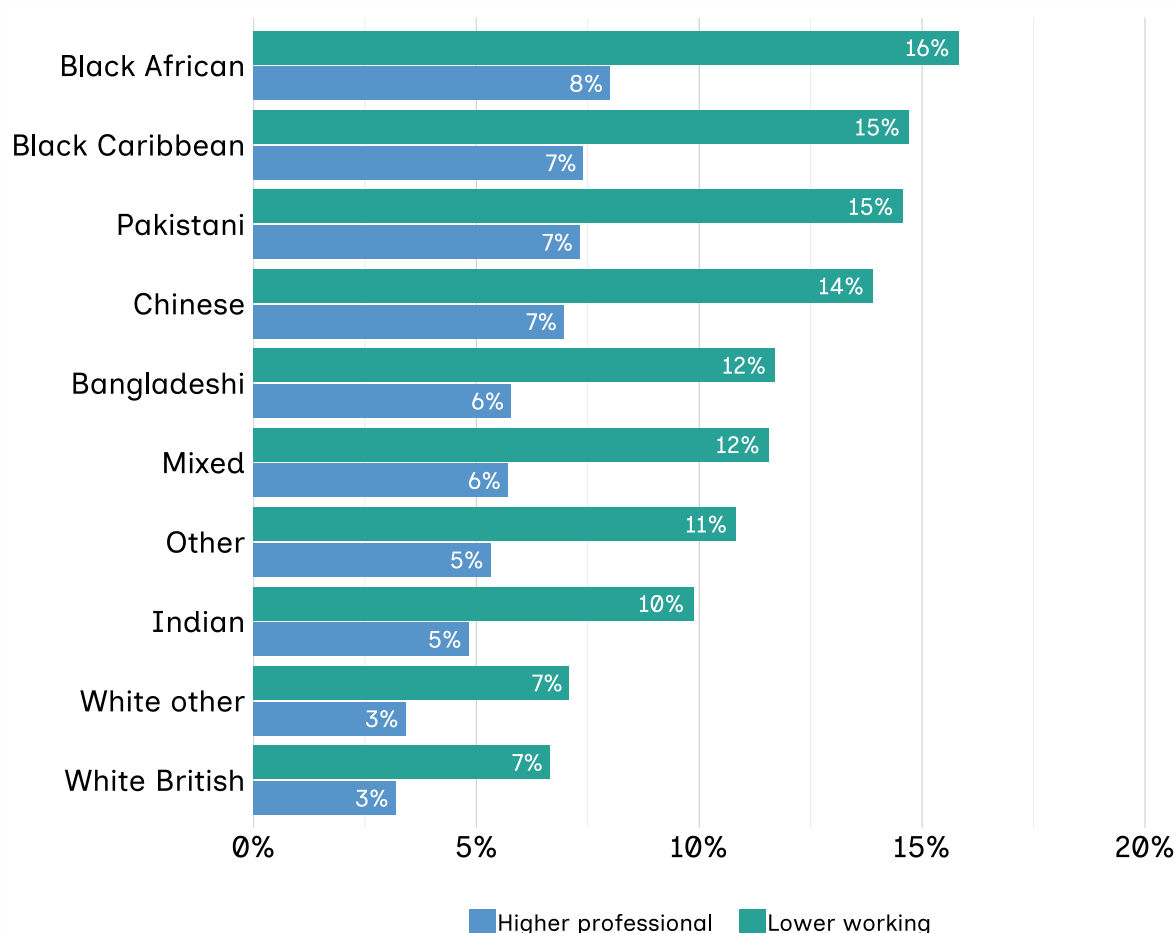
Note: NEET is defined as not in employment, education or training in the week before the survey. The estimated percentages result from a logistic regression model on the likelihood of being NEET by ethnic group and SEB, controlling for sex. The model assumes that class effects are the same within each ethnic group. The estimated percentages are those for men. Percentages are shown only for those with lower working-class and higher professional backgrounds for illustrative purposes. The data used is weighted using the LFS person weights.

Labour market and earnings

Young people from lower working-class backgrounds, and those from Black Caribbean and Pakistani backgrounds, have the highest rates of unemployment.⁵⁷ White British young people from higher professional backgrounds have among the lowest unemployment rates (3%).

Figure 3.12: Almost every ethnic minority group faces a higher risk of unemployment than White British people when controlling for SEB.

Percentage of young people aged 25 to 29 years in the UK who were unemployed, by SEB and ethnic group, from 2014 to 2025 combined.



Source: ONS, pooled LFS data from 2014 to 2025 combined, respondents aged 25 to 29 years in the UK.

Note: The estimated percentages result from a logistic regression model on the likelihood of being unemployed by ethnic group and SEB, controlling for sex. The model assumes that class effects are the same within each ethnic group. The estimated percentages are those for men. Percentages are shown only for those with lower working-class and higher professional backgrounds for illustrative purposes. The data used is weighted using the LFS person weights.

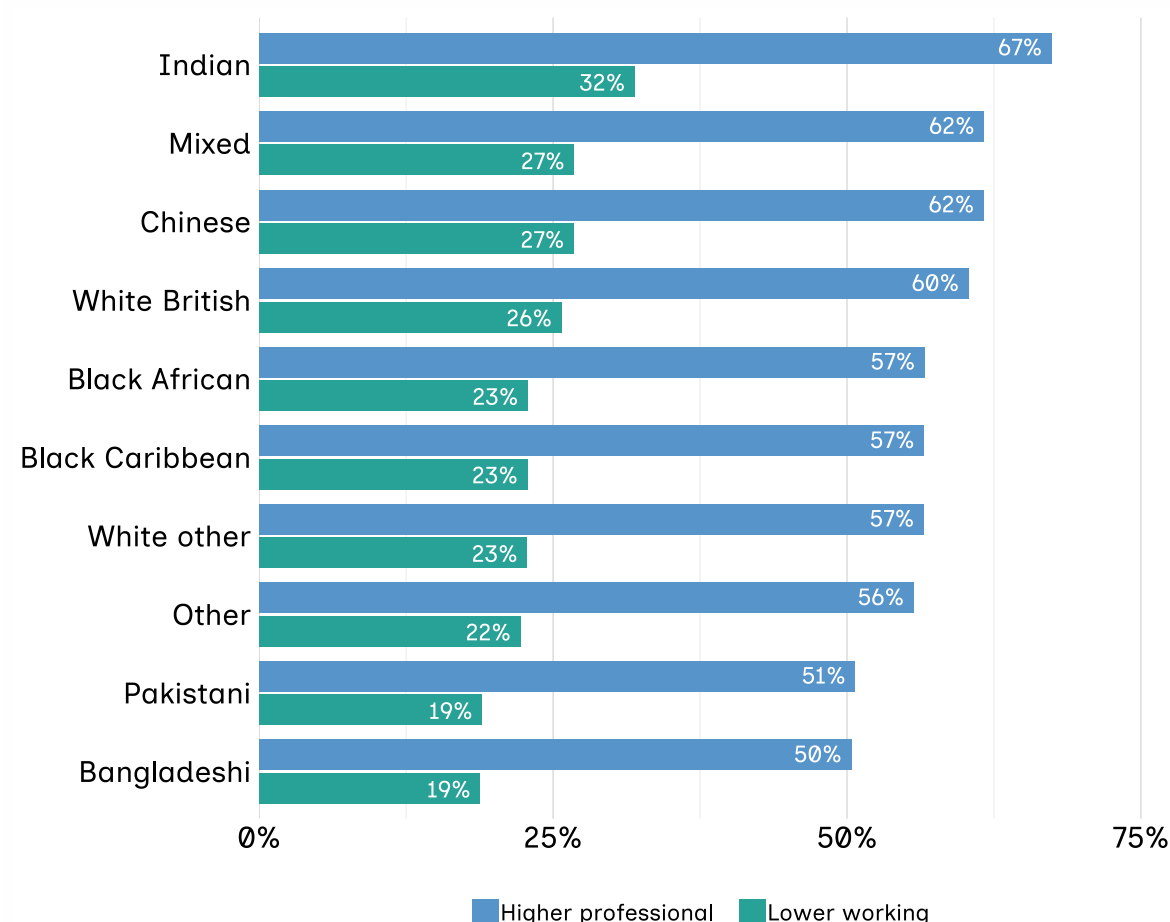
⁵⁷ Although the chart shows a 16% unemployment rate for young people from Black African backgrounds, this is based on a small sample size and is not statistically significant. It is therefore omitted from the main text findings.

Occupational level

Indian young people aged 25 to 29 years are the only group that is statistically more likely to secure professional roles than their White British peers.⁵⁸ Young people from Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Other backgrounds find it much harder to break into professional roles.

Figure 3.13: Compared with their White British peers, people of Indian background aged 25 to 29 years are more likely to get professional jobs.

Percentage of young people aged 25 to 29 years in the UK in a professional occupation, by ethnicity and SEB, 2014 to 2025 combined.



Source: ONS, pooled LFS data from 2014 to 2025, respondents aged 25 to 29 years in the UK.

Note: Because of small sample sizes, the outcome measure in the formal test is whether the respondent has a professional occupation (either higher or lower professional class). The estimated percentages are derived from a logistic regression model on the likelihood of being in a professional occupation by SEB and ethnic group, controlling for sex. The model assumes that class effects are the same within each ethnic group. The estimated percentages are those for men. Percentages are shown only for those with lower working-class and higher professional backgrounds for illustrative purposes. The data used is weighted using the LFS person weights.

⁵⁸ Although the chart shows that 62% of young people of Chinese and Mixed background from professional backgrounds are in higher professional roles, this is based on a small sample size and is not statistically significantly higher than the White British group. It is therefore omitted from the main text findings.

Earnings and income

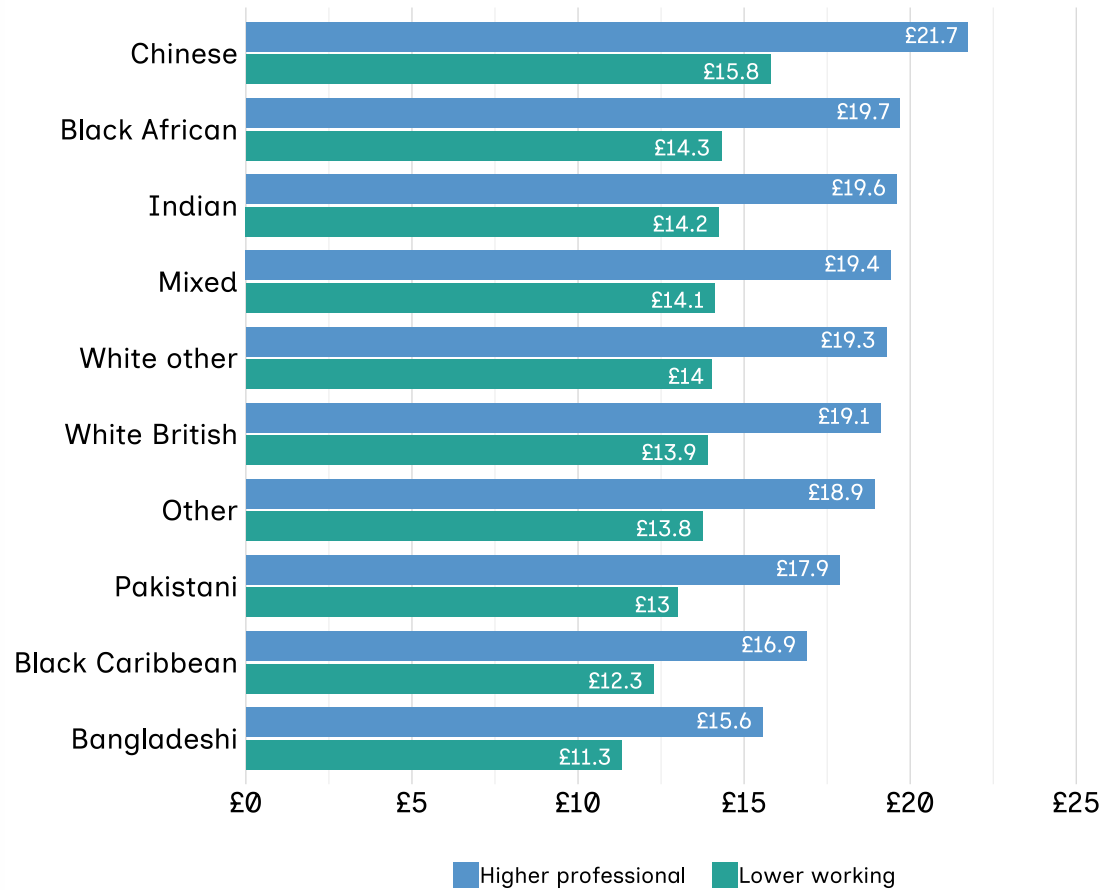
This final section looks at the ethnicity pay gap. We measure income because it is a key part of our social mobility framework. In our 2022 report, we explained that financial stability allows people to invest in their own future and in their children’s futures.

While small sample sizes prevent us from making claims about all ethnic groups, we see that young people from Bangladeshi and Black Caribbean backgrounds earn significantly less than their White British counterparts from the same SEB; those from Chinese backgrounds, however, earn significantly more.⁵⁹

We also find, consistently with previous years, that young people from higher professional homes earn more than those from lower working-class homes. This remains true regardless of the qualifications the individual has achieved.

Figure 3.14: Young people from Bangladeshi and Black Caribbean backgrounds earn significantly less than their peers from the same SEB. Young people from Chinese backgrounds earn significantly more.

Average (mean) hourly earnings of people aged 25 to 29 years in the UK, by SEB and ethnicity, 2014 to 2025 combined.



Source: ONS, pooled LFS data from 2014 to 2025, respondents aged 25 to 29 years in the UK.

Note: Self-employed respondents and those without earnings are excluded. Earnings have been adjusted for inflation with a base year of 2025. For data by ethnicity, the percentages shown are those for men. Percentages are shown only for those with lower working-class and higher professional backgrounds for comparison, but all SEBs were included in the analysis.

⁵⁹ Although the chart shows that earnings for young people of different ethnic backgrounds are slightly higher (Indian) or lower (Pakistani) than earnings for White British young people, this is based on a small sample size and is not statistically significant. It is therefore omitted from the main text findings.



Differences by disability status

Our 2026 analysis shows that disabled young people continue to face significant barriers across education and work. These challenges often start early and continue throughout their careers. To understand this, we compared 2 periods: 2014 to 2019 and 2020 to 2025. This comparison helps us see where the disability gap is narrowing and where it is widening.⁶⁰

The Labour Force Survey uses 2 standard harmonised questions from the Government Statistical Service to determine whether a respondent is disabled:

1. “Do you have any physical or mental health conditions or illnesses lasting or expected to last 12 months or more?”
2. “Does your condition or illness/do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities?”

If an individual answers “yes” to both questions, they are classified as disabled.

Summary

The findings show a complex story of progress and persistent gaps. More disabled young people are now gaining university degrees. For those from the lower working SEB, the proportion in education or training rose from 28% to 36% between 2014 to 2019 and 2020 to 2025. However, disabled young people from disadvantaged backgrounds continue to be much more likely to be NEET and much less likely to be employed than their non-disabled peers. In the workplace, the gap in economic activity remains at 32 percentage points for those from the lowest SEBs. Even with the same degrees, disabled young people earn 8% less than their non-disabled peers. These results show that disability and background may limit a person’s chances of moving up in their career.

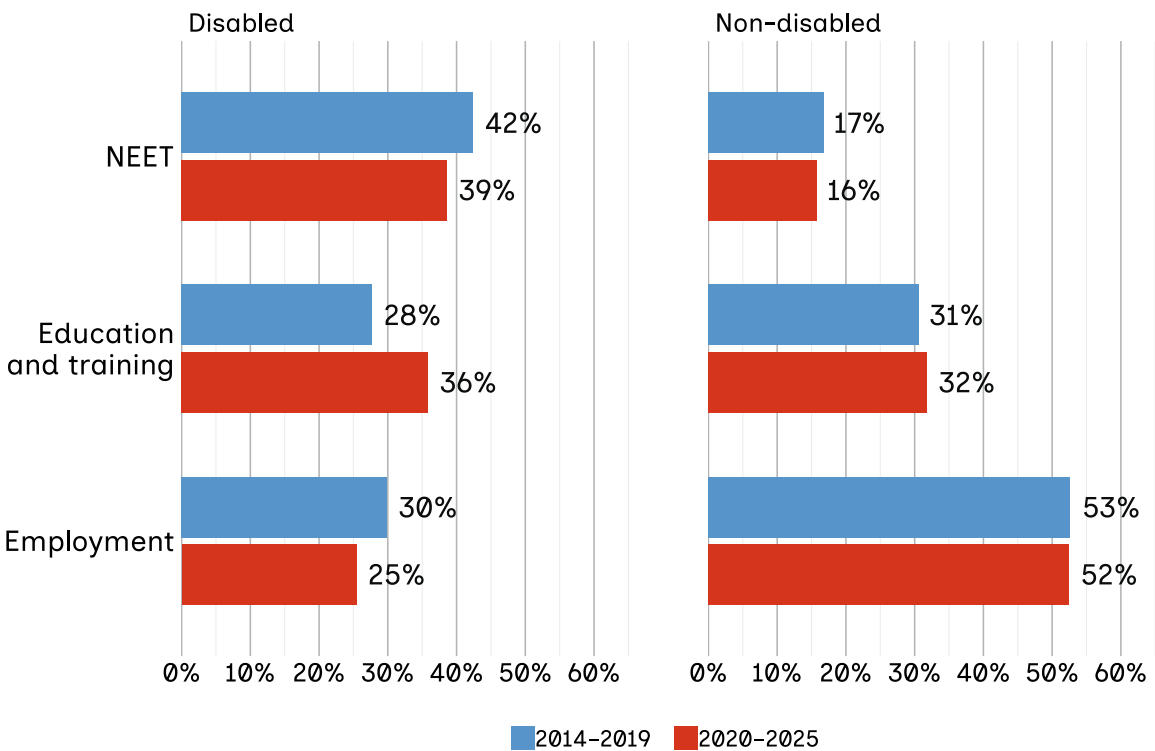
⁶⁰ In this chapter we refer to the disability gap as the percentage points (or pounds when talking about earnings) difference between the non-disabled and disabled groups.

Education and training

There is some positive news in education. Disabled young people are now staying in school or training for longer. Figure 3.15 shows that between 2014 to 2019 and 2020 to 2025, more disabled people from lower working backgrounds entered education and training. This group saw a large 8-percentage-point increase, from 28% to 36%. By contrast, non-disabled people from the same background only saw a 1-percentage-point increase. This suggests that more disabled young people are using education to improve their options. However, disabled young people from disadvantaged backgrounds continue to be much more likely to be NEET and much less likely to be employed than their non-disabled peers.

Figure 3.15: Disabled young people from disadvantaged backgrounds continue to be much more likely to be NEET and much less likely to be employed than their non-disabled peers.

Percentage of young people aged 16 to 24 years in the UK from lower working-class backgrounds who were in education, employment or training and those who were NEET, by SEB and disability status, from 2014 to 2019 and from 2020 to 2025 time periods.



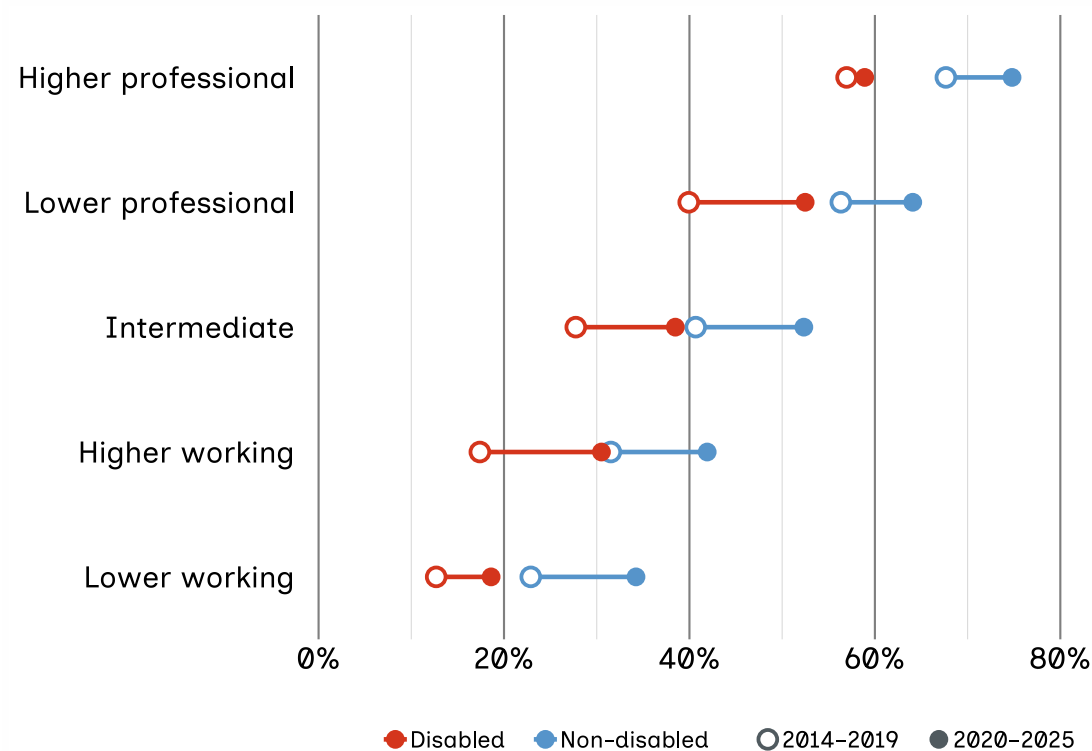
Source: ONS, pooled LFS data from the 2014 to 2019 and 2020 to 2025 time periods, respondents aged 16 to 24 years in the UK.

Note: We use the LFS variable DISEA (disability status). This provides a measure of disability consistent with the Equality Act. The survey asks whether the respondent has a health condition or illness lasting 12 months or more (or both), and whether that condition reduces their ability to carry out day-to-day activities (for details see the LFS user guide volumes 3 and 4). The data used is weighted using the LFS probability weights.

University degree attainment has also risen for disabled individuals across every SEB. However, a gap remains. We observe in figure 3.16 that non-disabled peers are often advancing even faster, which means the overall gap in qualifications is not always closing.

Figure 3.16: While there has been educational progress for both groups, disabled young people remain less likely than their non-disabled peers to gain higher levels of qualification.

Percentage of people aged 25 to 29 years in the UK achieving degree qualifications, by SEB and disability status, 2014 to 2019 and 2020 to 2025 combined.



Source: ONS, pooled LFS data from the 2014 to 2019 and 2020 to 2025 time periods, respondents aged 25 to 29 years in the UK.

Note: A formal test was conducted to test for differences in degree attainment by SEB and disability. The data used is weighted using the LFS person weights.

The transition to work

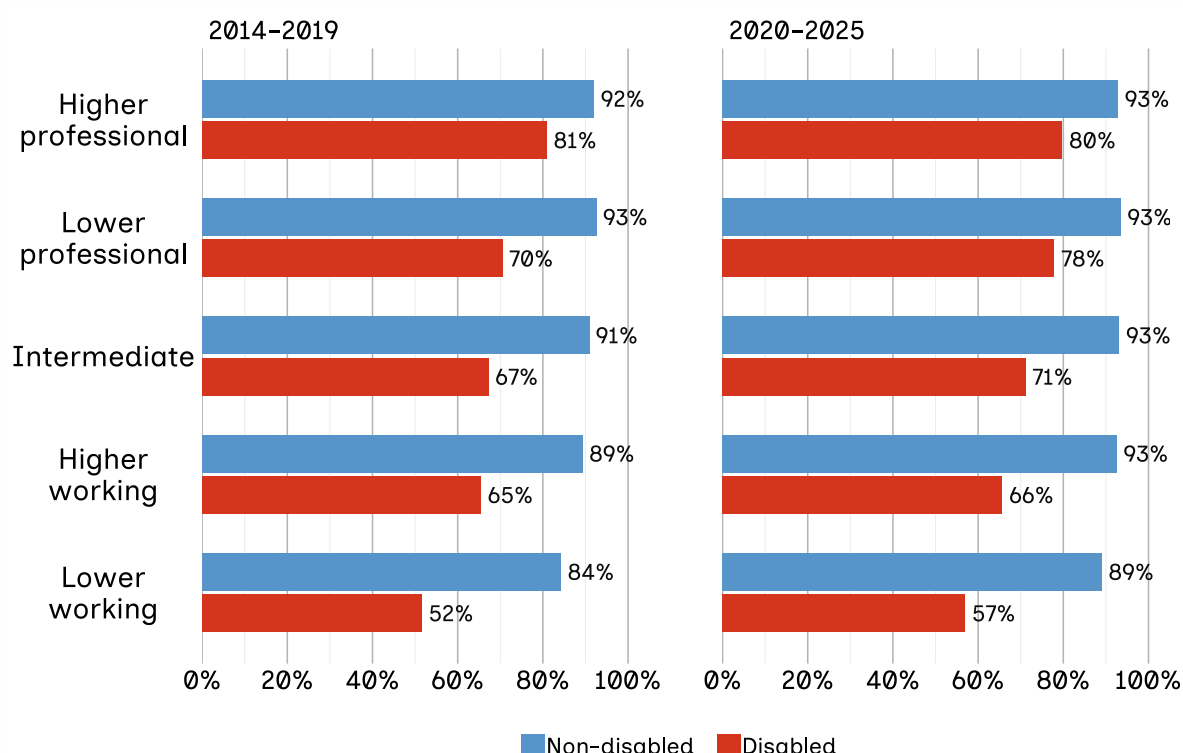
While education trends are improving, the move into the workplace is more difficult. Disabled young people are less likely to be economically active and in employment than those without a disability.

Economic activity rates have shown some growth. Disabled people from lower professional backgrounds saw their activity rates rise from 70% to 78% (see figure 3.17). This helped narrow the disability gap for that group from 23 to 15 percentage points.

But for those from lower working-class backgrounds, the picture is different. The disability gap in economic activity for this group stayed at 32 percentage points across both periods. This suggests that young people who are both disabled and from a lower working SEB may face the most persistent barriers to entering the workforce.

Figure 3.17: The disability gap in economic activity not only remains but is widening significantly over time.

Percentage of young people in the UK aged 25 to 29 years who were economically active, by SEB and disability, for the 2014 to 2019 and 2020 to 2025 time periods.



Source: ONS, pooled LFS data from the 2014 to 2019 and 2020 to 2025 time periods, respondents aged 25 to 29 years in the UK.

Note: The economically active are those who are either in work or who are available for and actively looking for work. We use the LFS variable DISEA. This provides a measure of disability consistent with the Equality Act. It also takes account of whether the respondent has a health condition or illness lasting 12 months or more (or both) and whether that condition reduces ability to carry out day-to-day activities (for details see LFS user guide volumes 3 and 4). A formal test was conducted of whether there are differences in economic activity by SEB and disability status. The data used is weighted using the LFS person weights.

Barriers in the workplace

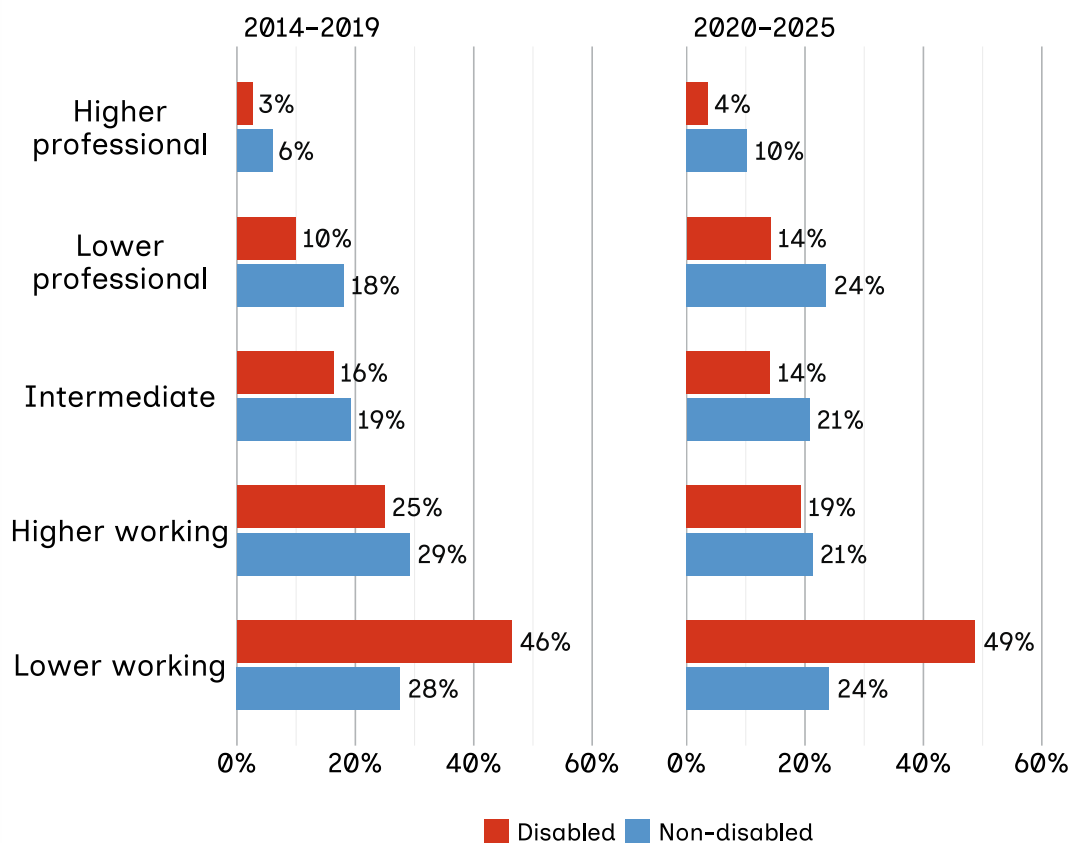
Once in work, disabled people are less likely to reach the highest-level jobs and are paid less. In 2020 to 2025, non-disabled people from lower working-class SEBs were more than twice as likely to reach a higher professional job as their disabled peers (around 10% versus 4%).

Figure 3.18 shows that, in 2020 to 2025, 68% of disabled people from a lower working-class background remained in working-class jobs, whereas only 45% of their non-disabled peers stayed in those same roles. This 23 percentage point disability gap in 2020 to 2025 has increased from a 14 percentage point gap in 2014 to 2019, although the increase is not statistically significant.

In terms of pay, disabled people aged 25 to 29 years earn significantly less than those without a disability. Even with the same undergraduate qualifications, disabled young people earn 8% less than their non-disabled peers.

Figure 3.18: Non-disabled people from lower working-class backgrounds are now more than twice as likely to be in higher professional roles than disabled peers.

Percentage of young people aged 25 to 29 years in the UK from lower working-class backgrounds, by occupation level and disability status, from the 2014 to 2019 and 2020 to 2025 time periods.

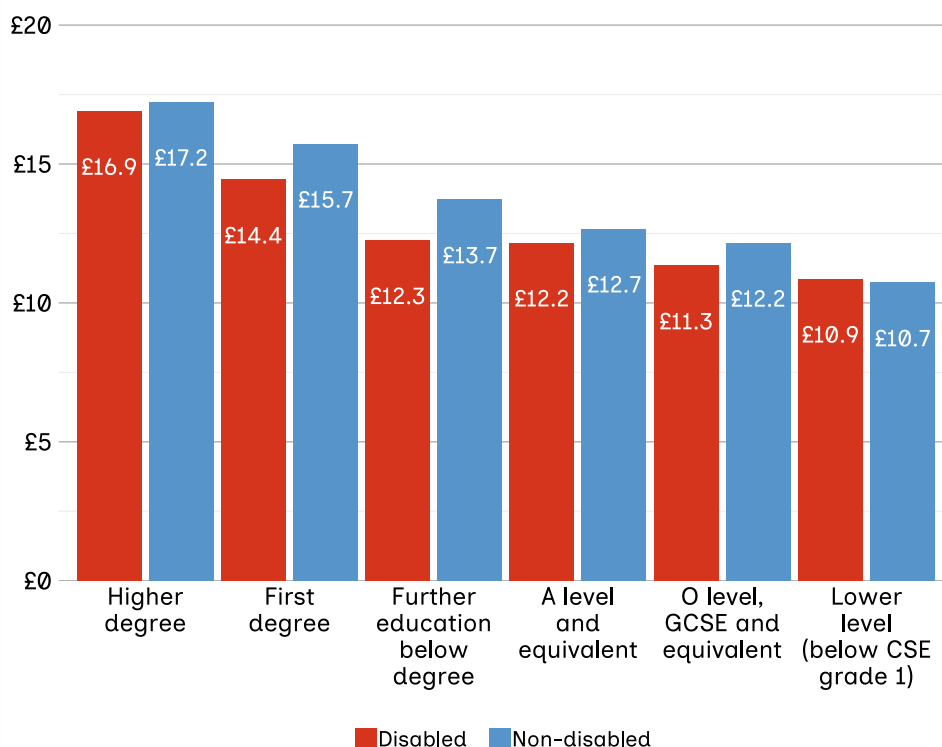


Source: ONS, pooled LFS data from the 2014 to 2019 and 2020 to 2025 time periods, respondents aged 25 to 29 years in the UK.

Note: Due to rounding errors, in some instances the totals may not add up to 100%. We use the LFS variable DISEA. This provides a measure of disability consistent with the Equality Act. It considers whether the respondent has a health condition or illness lasting 12 months or more (or both) and whether that condition reduces the ability to carry out day-to-day activities. A formal test was conducted of whether there are differences in occupational class by SEB and disability. The data used is weighted using the LFS person weights.

Figure 3.19: Disabled young people earn less than their non-disabled peers with the same qualifications.

Average (mean) hourly earnings of young people aged 25 to 29 years in the UK, by educational level and disability status, controlling for SEB and age, 2014 to 2025 combined.



Source: ONS, pooled LFS data from 2014 to 2025, respondents aged 25 to 29 years in the UK.

Note: Earnings have been adjusted for inflation with a base year of 2025. Data is weighted using LFS income weights. For data by year and disability, the estimates shown are the hourly earnings of 27-year-old men from a lower working-class background. Data by disability is combined from 2014 to 2025. Among people with a disability, those in work are a more selective group because their inactivity rate is higher. Controls for education level, age and SEB were included to test whether the pay gap between disabled and non-disabled young people is statistically meaningful. The difference was highly significant, indicating that a disability pay gap exists even among peers with the same qualifications and backgrounds.

Conclusions

The findings in this chapter reveal a striking pattern across multiple protected characteristics: strong performance in school and higher education does not necessarily lead to high professional or well-paid jobs. Young women, some ethnic minority groups and disabled young people have strong educational outcomes that are not reflected in their later occupational or earnings outcomes. This pattern is consistent with barriers beyond educational attainment, although the analysis does not identify the reasons for this.

For instance, young women consistently outperform young men in education from early childhood through to university. By their late 20s, they are far more likely to hold degrees than men from the same backgrounds. Despite this classroom success, young women remain disproportionately concentrated in lower professional roles, while men are far more likely to reach higher professional occupations.

Despite achieving strong results at school and university, young people from Bangladeshi and Pakistani backgrounds face significantly poorer employment and pay outcomes than their White British peers.

Finally, once in the workplace, disabled graduates earn 8% less than non-disabled peers with the same qualifications.



Aaron Winfield

Age 22, Chesterfield, Derbyshire

I had a very broken childhood. I grew up with my mum, her partner, my little brother and sister. Nobody worked. What money we had as a family was spent down the pub. I didn't have many good role models around me and felt I had to grow up before I should have.

I didn't know where I wanted to go in life and I took a lot of my frustration out at school. I only had 43% attendance one year due to exclusions. I didn't want to be in lessons and wasn't interested. I just didn't care.

At age 13 years, I was sent to Engineered Learning for one day a week, an organisation that delivers welding and construction programmes to young people. It was a bit like the system was saying, 'this is your last chance'. It soon turned into 3 days a week, because I actually turned up. It was the one thing I didn't mind getting up in the morning for. The more time I spent there, the better I got at school.

I finally had good role models. I was learning a trade, getting drive and being good at something. As well as learning practical skills with my hands, I was learning skills for life. How to conduct myself and treat others in the workplace, how to be a responsible citizen, how to be a good working person. We worked in small groups and it was very catered to the help you needed. A lot of the time, I needed somebody there, not looking over my shoulder, but being supportive. Someone who could sit there and listen, who had been through similar stuff.

Dan was our instructor, but he was also like a counsellor to us. The guy you spoke to, whether opening up about personal issues or about your troubles in school. He very quickly knew pretty much everything about me. Although he had an authority role, which was what I needed, there was also a shared respect. He was more invested than any teacher I'd met.

Dan helped me line my first job up and got me my first interview which led to a welding job. At the start, he would come to my work once a week and make sure I wasn't mucking about. I then progressed into structural welding which involved working on bridges and gas tanks. My work became my passion and I was taking home good money.

With welding there's a lot to learn and when I do something, I want to do it to the very best of my ability. I worked hard at being the best I could at welding and I've now launched my own business. Dan inspired me and showed me if I have a passion for something, I can make it work.

I now have a family of my own which has given me a new security in life having lived independently since I was aged 17 years. My son wants for nothing, he doesn't go to nursery hungry, he has a full packed lunch every day. I don't have to walk around the shop saying, "we can't afford that, mate". A lot of how I father my children derives from Dan, he was my mentor for some of the most crucial years of my life at age 13 years.

I have people walk through my door now that struggle to find work. Some people don't have the drive and some struggle in dead-end jobs, which I'd struggle to have the drive in. But discovering a passion and having a mentor like Dan, who can teach you the skills and attitude needed for a job, will mean you'll never be unemployed.



Sabrina Cohen-Hatton

Age 43, London



My upbringing was tricky. We grew up in poverty after my dad died and my mum found it really hard to cope and struggled with her mental health. My parents had run a pizzeria, but after my dad died and the recession hit, my mum lost the business, so we grew up on benefits. We were on the at-risk register for years and had social workers back and forth.⁶¹

When I was 15 years old, home became too volatile and I ended up sleeping rough on the streets of Newport. I still went to school, partly because I wanted to hide the fact that I was homeless. Academically I was good, which at least helped me feel like I could achieve something. But behaviour-wise I was a nightmare, which isn't a surprise given what I was dealing with. When you're raised by a caregiver who loves you but doesn't have the means to look after you, you're trained to see every kind of authority figure through a lens of mistrust.

When not at school, I was sleeping in the doorways of shops, a derelict church and empty buildings wherever I could. Financially it was really tough for me because there was limited help available due to my age. I was entitled to £15 a fortnight as a bridging allowance. I couldn't access any council housing as they deemed me voluntarily homeless regardless of why I'd left, so I started selling the *Big Issue*.

⁶¹ In social care settings, local authorities may keep an at-risk register for: children on child protection plans, adults with care and support needs, people at risk of domestic abuse, people at risk of homelessness, and individuals vulnerable due to disability, mental illness or exploitation.

I found a small village, Monmouth, about an hour away where no one else was selling and I would sit there with a stack of magazines from 7 in the morning until 7 at night until I'd sold them all. Eventually, after a very difficult period on and off the streets, not having a stable place to sleep and even experiencing violence, I saved up enough to put a small deposit on a cheap rented flat in the South Wales Valleys. That's when I started to think about the fire service, I think I wanted to help people in the way no one helped me.

When I started, I was the seventh woman in a workforce of 1,700. Nationally, less than 1% of operational firefighters were women. I started as a part-time firefighter and since then I've worked across a range of roles and climbed the ladder – working as a watch manager, community safety official, station commander, government adviser, deputy assistant commissioner.

My first chief fire officer appointment was in West Sussex. I took over the service following a difficult inspection and led [it] through significant improvements over 6 years.

Moving on from my past wasn't easy, poverty is not something you can wash off your skin. Believing you have worth after feeling deeply dehumanised on a daily basis is incredibly hard – I'd been abused more times than I care to remember. While chief fire officer I would look at other leaders, who didn't seem to have the same vulnerabilities and would feel I was different.

The game changer for me has been finding the courage to talk about my experiences openly. Since opening up, so many people have got in touch with me to say they've been through something similar and it's made a real difference. It's important that people who've achieved upward social mobility speak about it openly because it helps others see what's possible. I'm a big believer that if you can see it, you can be it. It's also important to think about how you target your opportunities. For example, unpaid internships are not going to be accessible to someone who doesn't have a financial safety net and needs to earn to stay afloat. Employers' encouraging staff networking groups that consider things like social mobility are so helpful for people to come together and speak about their experiences.

The amazing thing about the fire service is that it offers incredible career paths where you can join on the first rung of the ladder and work your way to the very top. I didn't think, "I want to be a chief one day," but each time I took a step and succeeded, I felt ready to take the next one.

4

Tracking drivers: important national trends





Highlights

- Parental education and professional employment continue their long-term rise. Of adults living in a household with children, 45% had a degree or higher qualification and 48% were in professional roles in 2025. However, the momentum of these gains has slowed since the pandemic.
- Average parental hourly income rose sharply to £23.89 in 2025, up from £22.29 in 2024, marking the largest year-on-year increase recorded since the 2019 to 2020 period.
- The immediate outlook for young people remains challenging, with rates of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) reaching a high of 9% in 2024 (the highest since 2012), and youth unemployment for those aged 16 to 24 years returning to 2014 levels at around 16% in 2025.
- The wider labour market is tightening, with the vacancy-to-jobseeker ratio continuing its downward path from the historic peak in 2021, dropping from 0.7 in 2023 to 0.4 in 2025.
- Business investment in research and development (R&D) has nearly returned to its highest point of £55.8 billion, following a 2-year decline. This suggests an improving foundation for future high-skilled job opportunities.
- These national figures hide major differences, as opportunity is not shared equally across the UK.

Introduction

This chapter explores the drivers, which are the social and economic factors that help or hinder mobility. For example, a strong public education system will help those who might not otherwise have a chance to succeed.

Our Social Mobility Index concentrates on 4 types of drivers: conditions of childhood, educational opportunities and quality of schooling, young people's opportunities in the labour market, and the role of social capital (the value of networks) and connections. There is a large body of theory and empirical research showing that these 4 groupings of drivers are likely to have causal impacts on rates of absolute and relative mobility.⁶² This means that drivers tell us whether rates of social mobility in the future are likely to improve.

The full suite of indicators that cover all drivers of mobility is available on our online Data Explorer Tool.⁶³ All the figures in this report and the interactive tool use the latest data available.

⁶² Empirical research is based on direct observation or measurement in real-world scenarios, rather than theory or opinion. It involves gathering evidence and analysing it.

⁶³ Social Mobility Commission, '[State of the Nation: data about social mobility in the UK](https://www.social-mobility.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/State-of-the-Nation-2019.pdf)', Published on SOCIAL-MOBILITY.DATA.GOV.UK.



National trends in drivers

Summary

The latest data shows a mixed picture across the drivers. Beginning with parental outcomes, which serve as the baseline for the future prospects of their children, parental education and professional employment continue to rise, but the momentum of these gains is slowing. Meanwhile, average parental hourly income has recently increased markedly, after years of very slow growth.

However, NEET rates have reached their highest point since 2012 and youth unemployment has returned to levels last seen in 2014. These shifts have occurred alongside a tightening labour market, reflected in a fall in the number of vacancies per jobseeker. So the immediate outlook for young people remains challenging.

The third area centres on high-skilled job creation and offers a more positive direction. Business investment in R&D has nearly returned to its historical peak following a 2-year decline. This recovery suggests an improving foundation for future opportunities, even though the current outlook for those entering the labour market is tough.

The following sections provide a detailed analysis of these trends, identifying potential opportunities and challenges.

“Parental education and professional employment continue to rise, but the momentum of these gains is slowing.”

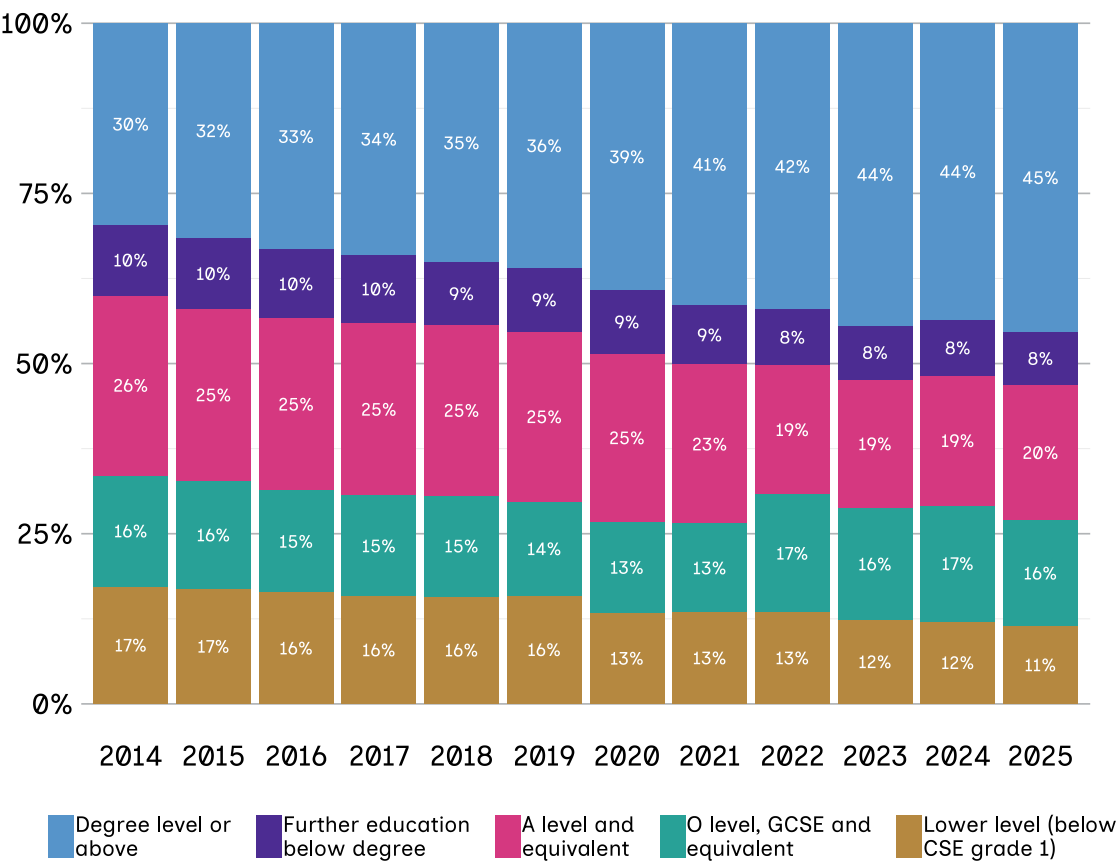
Parental education, occupation and income

A person's future chances are closely linked to their parents' resources. These resources are not just economic; a parent's education and occupational level are also important in helping children to succeed academically and secure good jobs. For example, parents who attended university are often better equipped to help their children reach higher education (HE). Our analysis shows clear improvements in parental education, professional employment and earnings over the past 12 years. However, this has slowed notably since the pandemic.

These trends are first apparent in the shifting educational levels of parents. Figure 4.1 shows that the qualifications of young people's parents have improved over time. Since 2014, the education profile of UK parents has shifted towards higher qualifications: 45% of adults in families with children held a first degree or above in 2025, a significant increase from 30% in 2014. However, this is only an increase of 1 percentage point from the previous year, suggesting a slowing rate of increase. While the percentage of families whose highest qualification is a GCSE or below is declining, it is still 27% in 2025.

Figure 4.1: There has been a continuing increase in the proportion of households where the adults have higher-level qualifications.

Percentage of adults with different levels of education in households with dependent children in the UK, from 2014 to 2025.



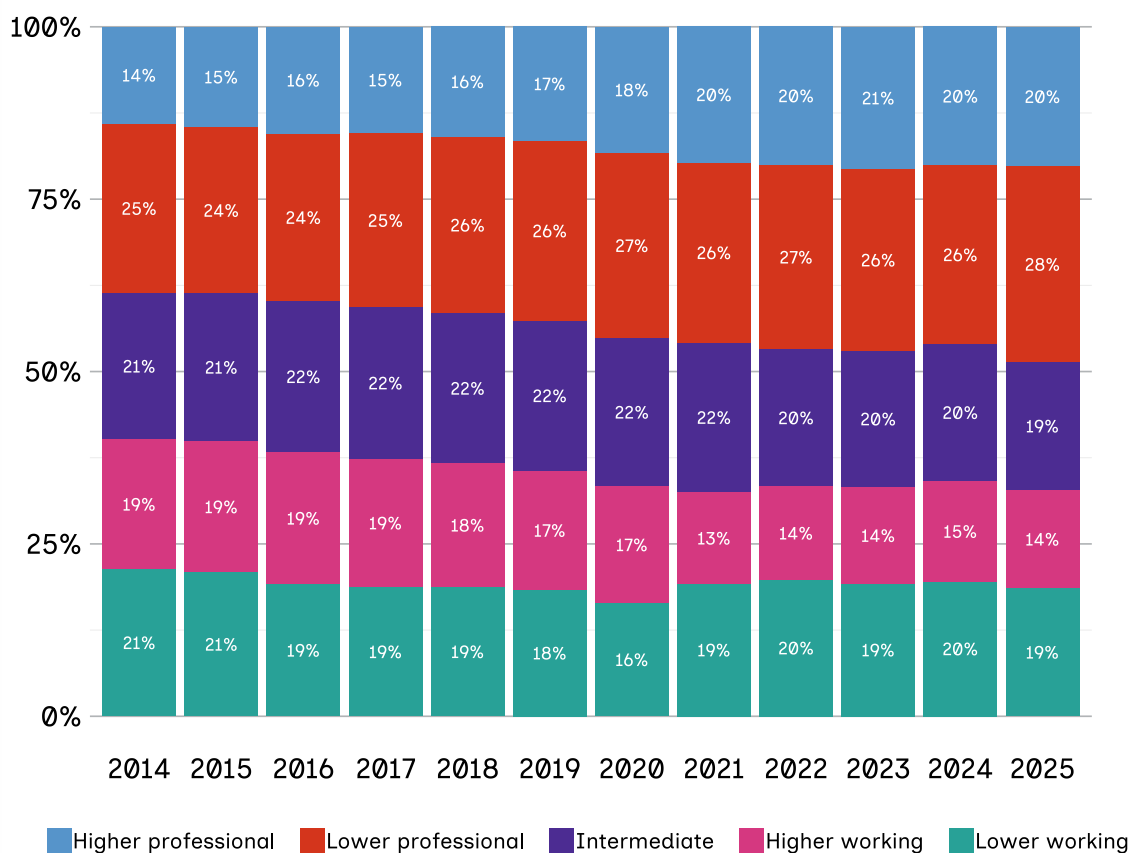
Source: Office for National Statistics (ONS), Labour Force Survey (LFS) from 2014 to 2025.

Note: Due to rounding errors, in some instances the totals may not add up to 100%. The sample consists of respondents with dependent children in their household (defined as those aged 0 to 15 years and 16 to 18 years who are in full-time education). Respondents aged under 21 years are excluded. The median age of respondents is 40 years. Most respondents are likely to be the parents or carers of the dependent children. However, the dataset could include some adults who are living at home with parents who have dependent children. A formal trend analysis was conducted to verify changes in parental educational attainment over time. The data used is weighted using the LFS person weights.

Alongside this shift in education profiles, the labour market has seen a gradual increase in parents holding professional roles. Figure 4.2 shows the distribution of parental occupation from 2014 to 2025. The percentage of adults in families with dependent children in both higher and lower professional occupations has increased from 39% in 2014 to 48% in 2025, although this trend has slowed over the last 5 years.

Figure 4.2: There has been a continuing increase in the proportion of families in which the adults have professional and managerial occupations.

Percentages of adults with different levels of occupation in families with dependent children in the UK, from 2014 to 2025.



Source: ONS, LFS from 2014 to 2025.

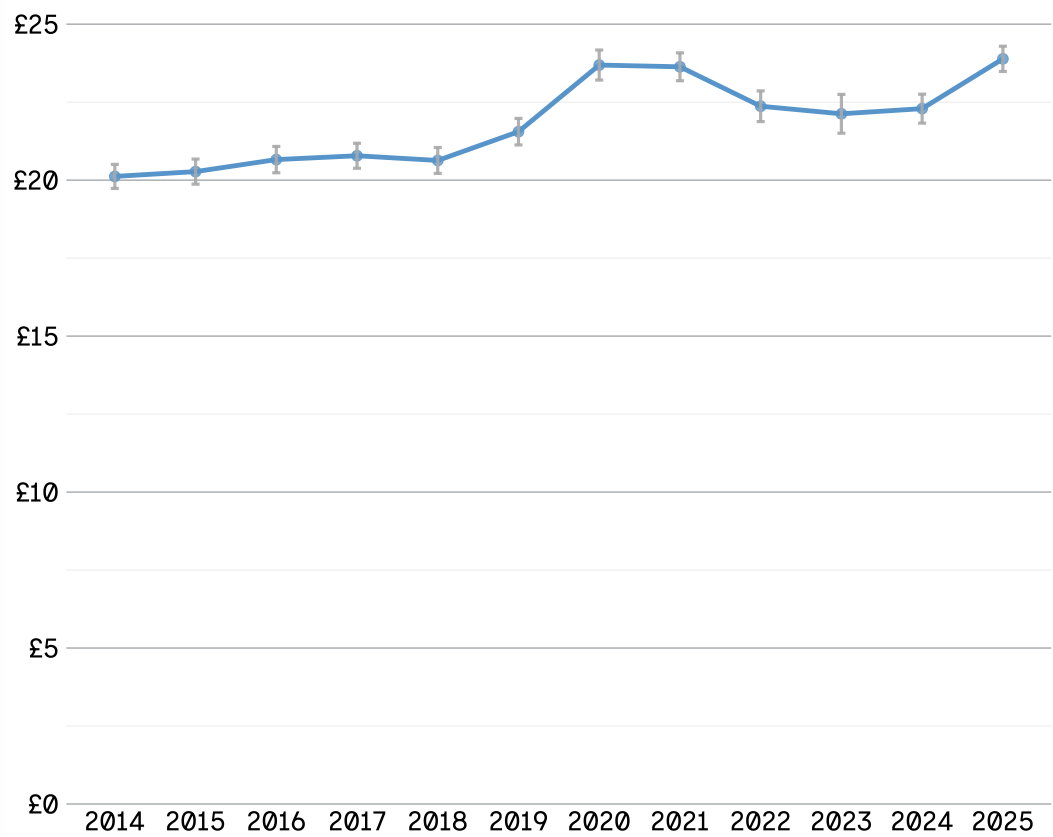
Note: Due to rounding errors, in some instances the totals may not add up to 100%. The sample consists of respondents with dependent children in their household (defined as those aged 0 to 15 years and 16 to 18 years who are in full-time education). Respondents aged under 21 years are excluded. The median age of respondents is 40 years. Most respondents are likely to be the parents or carers of the dependent children. However, the dataset could include some adults who are living at home with parents who have dependent children. A formal trend analysis was conducted to verify changes in parental occupation over time. The data used is weighted using the LFS person weights.

Data on the average (mean) income of people with dependent children was part of our Conditions of Childhood composite index in our 2025 report, but has not been discussed as a standalone driver previously.⁶⁴ Figure 4.3 shows that the average hourly income for individuals with dependent children rose to £23.89 in 2025, up from £22.29 in 2024, around the highest level recorded since tracking began. The observed year-on-year increase of £1.60 in 2025 is the largest recorded in the series since the 2019 to 2020 period.

⁶⁴ The Conditions of Childhood index aims to measure the socio-economic situation of parents with dependent children.

Figure 4.3: Average hourly income for parents rose to £23.89 in 2025, around its highest level since 2014.

Average hourly earnings, adjusted for inflation, of people with dependent children (UK, 2014 to 2025).



Source: ONS, LFS from 2014 to 2025.

Note: Average hourly earnings is strictly a measure of employment earnings (pay) and excludes non-wage benefits or other sources of income. For this measure, we report the average parental income to maintain methodological consistency with the other indicators used to calculate the composite indices. Please note that earnings data is typically ‘right-skewed’, so the average may be pulled upward by a small number of very high earners and may sit higher than the income of the ‘typical’ household (the median). The sample consists of respondents with dependent children in their household (defined as those aged 0 to 15 years and 16 to 18 years in full-time education). Respondents who are aged less than 21 years are excluded. The median age of respondents is 40 years. Most respondents are likely to be the parents or carers of the dependent children. However, the dataset could include some adults who are living at home with parents who have dependent children. The data is weighted using the LFS person weights. Earnings have been adjusted for inflation using 2025 as the base year. A formal trend analysis assessed changes in parental income over time.

“The proportion of young people who are NEET climbed to 9% in 2024.”



Further education and training opportunities of young people

What happens after compulsory education is critical for a person's long-term development. Success during these formative years shapes mobility prospects, yet current data suggests that this transition is becoming increasingly difficult for the next generation. A rise in NEET rates and limited work opportunities now present a clear barrier to progress across the country.

The scale of this challenge is reflected in the shifting participation and employment data for those aged 16 to 18 years, whose participation in education has stayed relatively stable since 2011. However, the proportion of young people who are NEET climbed to 9% in 2024. This is the highest level recorded since 2012. Also, Office for National Statistics (ONS) estimates from 2025 show that 13.5% of all young people aged 16 to 24 years in the UK were NEET, with the employment rate falling to a 10-year low.^{65 66}

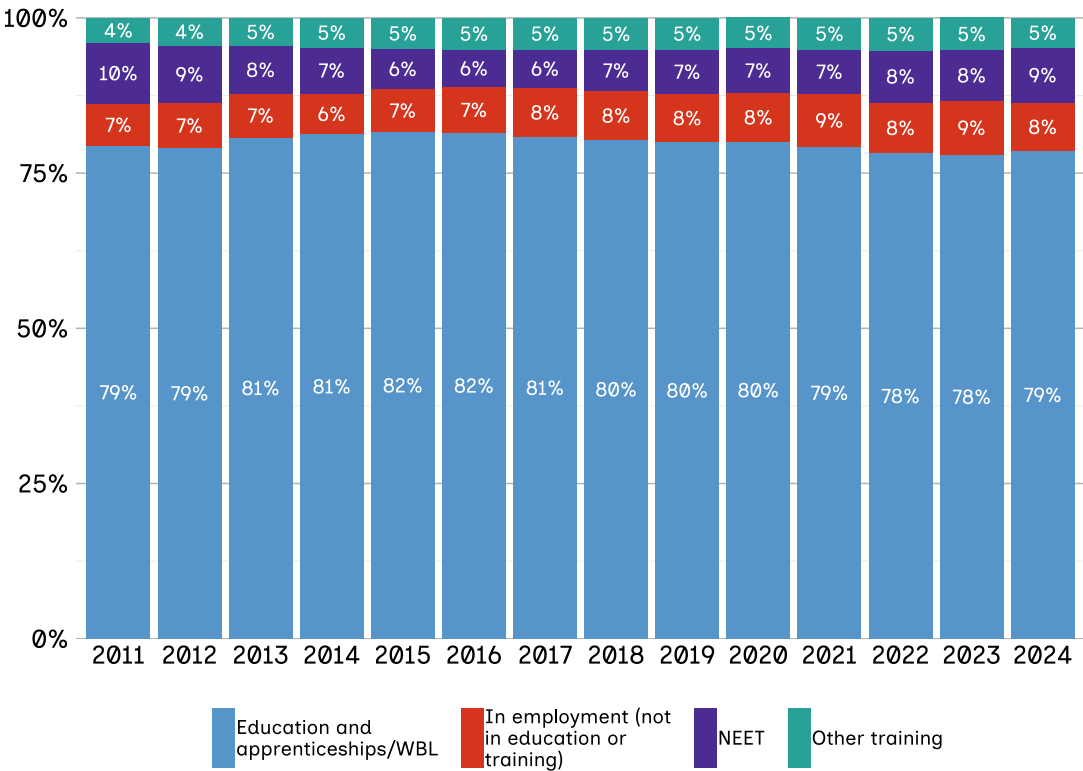
Looking at figure 4.4, there was a time of steady improvement between 2011 and 2015, when the percentage of those aged 16 to 18 years who were NEET dropped from 10% to 6%. However, these rates have been rising since the pandemic. Likewise, ONS estimates have seen a steady increase since 2021. Meanwhile, the proportion of young people aged 16 to 18 years in employment has remained relatively stable, at 8 to 9% since 2020. Figure 4.4 also shows a slight increase in participation in education and apprenticeships or work-based learning (WBL), from 78% in 2023 to 79% in 2024, and these rates have stayed relatively stable since 2011.

⁶⁵ ONS, '[Young people not in education, employment or training \(NEET\), UK: May 2026](#)'. Published on ONS.GOV.UK.

⁶⁶ Institute of Employment Studies, '[Labour market statistics, February](#)', 2026. Published on EMPLOYMENT-STUDIES.CO.UK.

Figure 4.4: NEET rates in 2024 were at the highest levels since 2012.

Percentage of young people aged 16 to 18 years participating in education, employment and training in England, from 2011 to 2024.



Source: Department for Education (DfE), participation in education, training and employment, 2011 to 2024.

Note: Due to rounding errors, in some instances the totals may not add up to 100%. Revisions to the ONS’s population estimates have had an effect on previously published rates of young people in education, employment and training for the period 2021 to 2023. This means that increases in the population estimates have led to slight falls in participation rates and slight increases in NEET estimates for that period.⁶⁷ NEETs include anybody who is not in any form of education, training or employment. This means that a person identified as NEET is either unemployed or economically inactive.⁶⁸ Historically, there have been very small overlaps of students studying in further education, higher education (HE) and WBL at the same time. The total number of young people in training is calculated by excluding these overlaps. Since 2013, young people aged 16 to 17 years have been legally required to remain in education and training in England (at least part-time), but not in Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland.

To gain a deeper insight into these trends, the Commission has conducted qualitative research (aiming to understand behaviours and experiences) into why young people become NEET. This work concentrates on identifying the unique challenges they face to provide a clear basis for policy recommendations that support youth transitions (moving from childhood to adulthood) and improve social mobility.

⁶⁷ Department for Education, ‘Participation in education, training and employment age 16 to 18’, Published on EXPLORE-EDUCATION-STATISTICS.SERVICE.GOV.UK.

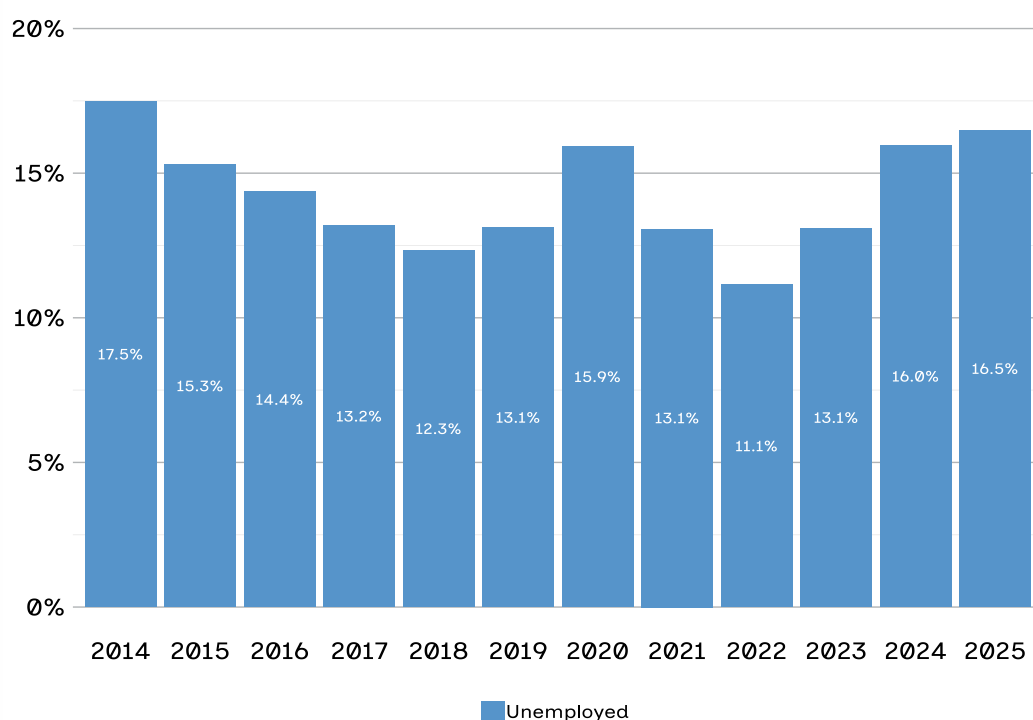
⁶⁸ “Unemployed” means out of work but actively looking, and “economically inactive” means not working and not looking for work.

Youth unemployment

Alongside these increasing rates of young people who are NEET, youth unemployment has also been increasing since 2022. Figure 4.5 shows that around 16% of economically active 16 to 24 year olds were unemployed in 2025, up from 11% in 2022. This marks a return to levels not seen since the 2014 peak of around 17%. ONS data also shows something similar; that between November 2025 and January 2026, 732,000 young people aged 16 to 24 years were unemployed, an increase of 99,000 from the previous year. The unemployment rate for young people was.^{69, 70} The Institute of Employment Studies' analysis found that the youth unemployment rate is the highest in more than 10 years.⁷¹

Figure 4.5: Youth unemployment reached the highest rate since 2014.

Percentage of young people aged 16 to 24 years in the UK, from 2014 to 2025, who were unemployed.



Source: ONS, LFS, from 2014 to 2025, weighted data, economically active respondents aged 16 to 24 years.

Note: The LFS follows the internationally agreed definition for unemployment recommended by the International Labour Organisation – a UN agency. Unemployed people are those without a job, who have actively sought work in the last 4 weeks and are available to start work in the next 2 weeks; or are out of work, have found a job and are waiting to start it in the next 2 weeks. Those who are economically inactive are excluded from the calculations (for example in full-time education, looking after the home or permanently sick or disabled). A formal test was conducted of whether there are differences in youth unemployment over time. The data is weighted using the LFS person weights.

⁶⁹ House of Commons Library, '[Youth unemployment statistics](#)', 2026. Published on COMMONSLIBRARY.PARLIAMENT.UK.

⁷⁰ ONS, '[LFS: unemployment rate: UK: all: aged 16-24: %: SA](#)', 2026. Published on ONS.GOV.UK.

⁷¹ Institute of Employment Studies, '[Labour market statistics, February](#)', 2026. Published on EMPLOYMENT-STUDIES.CO.UK.

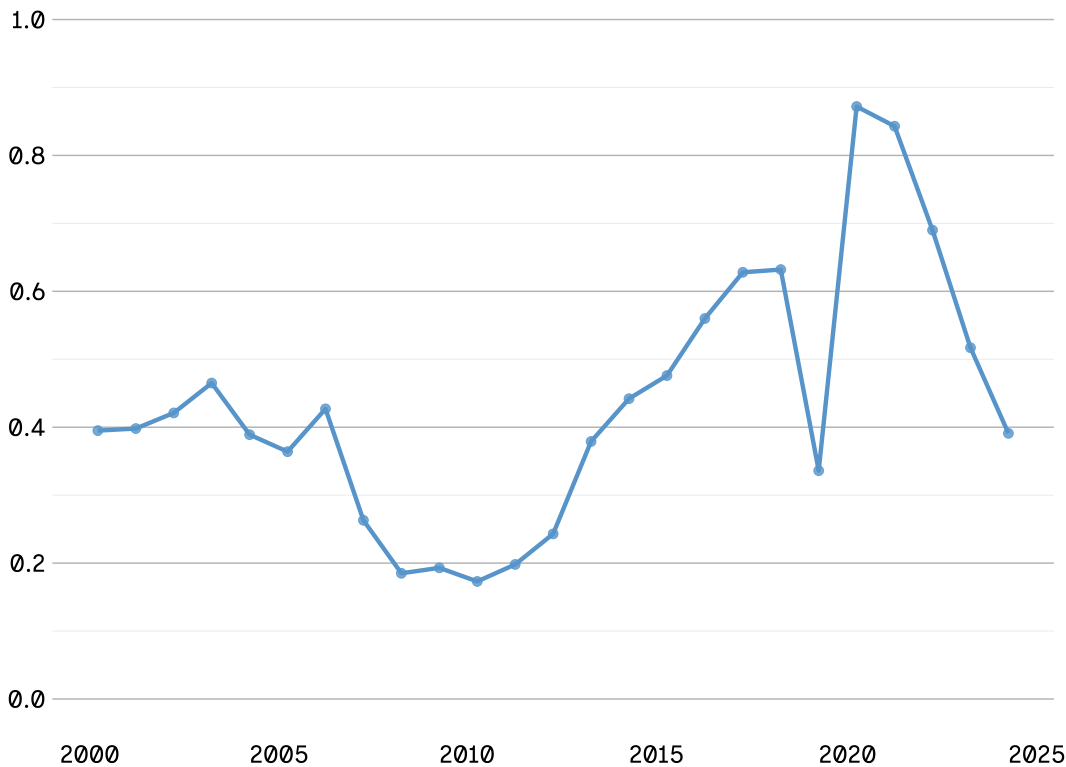
Job vacancy rate

The wider job market may be contributing to these unemployment and NEET rates. Figure 4.6 shows the number of vacancies per jobseeker over time. This ratio serves as an indicator of job opportunities. A higher ratio means that there are more vacancies per jobseeker and therefore greater job opportunities. This ratio provides estimates of the overall state of the labour market, but not of the opportunities specifically for young people entering the market.

Figure 4.6 shows that the estimated number of vacancies for every jobseeker went down from 0.7 in 2023 to 0.4 in 2025, extending the downward trend from its 2021 historic peak (nearly 0.9 vacancies for every unemployed person). The job vacancy rate was at its lowest between 2009 and 2012, at around 0.2 vacancies for every unemployed person. The Institute of Employment Studies highlights that young people are particularly affected by this reduction in hiring. Nearly 40% of unemployed young people aged 18 to 24 years have been unemployed for more than 6 months.⁷²

Figure 4.6: Vacancy-to-jobseeker ratio continues its downward trend from the 2021 historic peak.

Number of vacancies per unemployed person in the UK (seasonally adjusted), quarter 4 from 2001 to 2025.



Source: ONS, Vacancy Survey and LFS (respondents aged 16 to 64 years), 2000 to 2025.

Note: A proxy for job opportunities is calculated by ONS as the ratio of the number of unemployed (as estimated from the LFS) relative to the number of vacancies (as estimated in the Vacancy Survey) and published here as the reciprocal. Ratios were calculated using quarter 4 (October to December) from 2001 to 2025. A higher value indicates greater opportunities for jobseekers.

⁷² Institute of Employment Studies, 'Labour market statistics, February', 2026. Published on EMPLOYMENT-STUDIES.CO.UK.

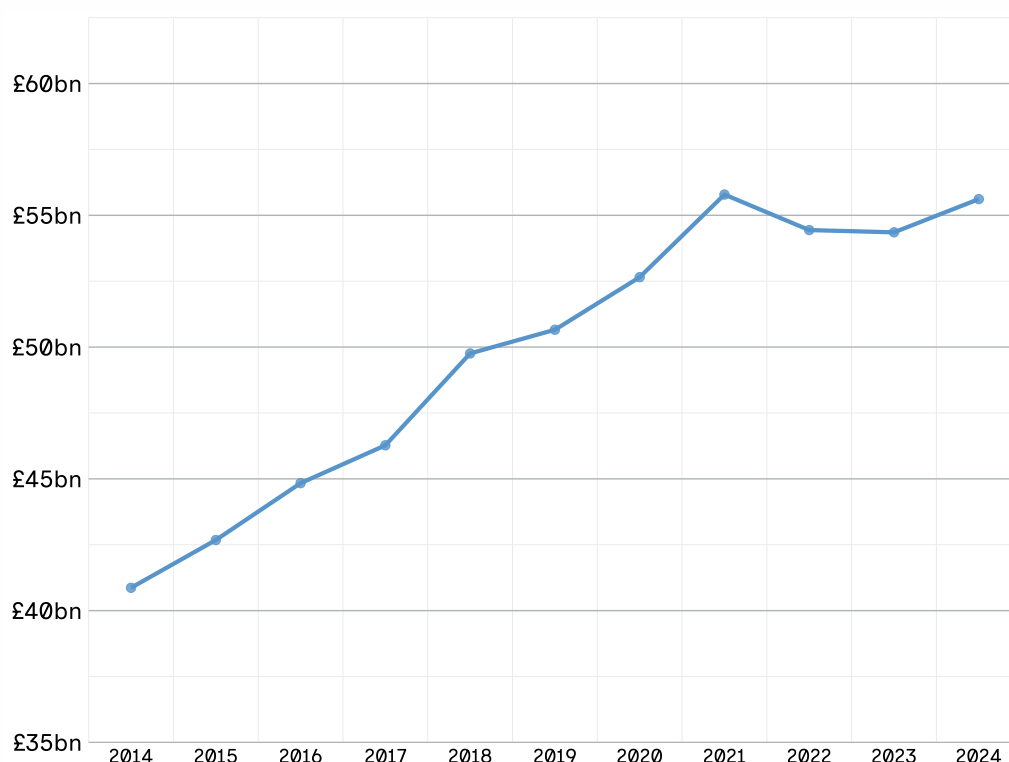
Business spending on research and development

The difficult outlook for young people reflects a labour market that faces huge challenges, particularly the stability of entry-level roles. One way to increase these opportunities is through the availability of high-skilled jobs that offer a clear path for improvement. The growth of such roles is often linked to wider economic innovation. For that reason, the Index tracks business spending on R&D because it signals where high-value, future-proof jobs are likely to be created.

From 2014 to 2024, spending on R&D by UK businesses rose from £41 billion to £55.6 billion. Investment was highest in 2021 at £55.8 billion. The recent £1.3 billion increase between 2023 and 2024 returned the UK to near-peak levels of spending. However, this was a modest increase in the context of the general trend from 2014 to 2021. This upward trend aligns with a growing proportion of professional roles in the UK. However, the limited growth in investment over the past 3 years could start to constrain this progress.

Figure 4.7: Business spending on research and development (R&D) has sharply increased since 2015.

Business spending on R&D, adjusted for inflation, UK, 2014 to 2024.



Source: Business expenditure on R&D, ONS. Nomis population estimates, ONS. 2014 to 2024.

Note: Figures are presented in constant 2024 prices to account for inflation (when prices go up and money devalues). Following ONS methodology introduced in November 2025, this series now uses the specific R&D deflator rather than the general gross domestic product deflator.⁷³ To maintain a consistent trend, data from 2014 to 2017 has been re-indexed to the 2024 baseline using a link-year method (anchored in 2018). This preserves historical growth rates while ensuring alignment with the latest ONS R&D price indices and sampling improvements.

⁷³ A deflator is an economic tool used to remove the effects of inflation when numbers are compared over time.

Investment is an important priority for the Commission. Our publication, ‘Innovation, investment and inclusion: a framework for regional renewal’, highlighted that innovative growth is a vital component of social mobility.⁷⁴ It set out a plan for inclusive growth through a series of recommendations designed to attract private capital into ‘left-behind’ regions, support entrepreneurship and adult skills, and increase opportunities in regions outside London and the South East.

“Our publication, ‘Innovation, investment and inclusion: a framework for regional renewal’, highlighted that innovative growth is a vital component of social mobility.”

⁷⁴ Social Mobility Commission, ‘[Innovation, investment and inclusion: a framework for regional renewal](https://socialmobility.independent-commission.uk)’, 2025. Published on [SOCIALMOBILITY.INDEPENDENT-COMMISSION.UK](https://socialmobility.independent-commission.uk).



Conclusions

Monitoring drivers such as parental education, occupation and income, youth employment and wider labour market conditions offers a long-term view of the country's opportunities for social mobility. By tracking a person's starting point, we can anticipate future problems and offer early solutions that improve options for the next generation.

In assessing these patterns, we see an upward trend in parental education and occupational level. This continues the long-term, slow shift we have been tracking for several years. Parental income also saw a sharp rise. Yet, alongside these shifts, there are higher rates of youth unemployment and those who are NEET. Tracking change on innovation and growth remains important to find solutions.

However, these national figures hide major differences. Opportunity is not shared equally across the UK. Our previous reports have consistently shown that where a person grows up strongly affects their life chances. Chapters 5 and 6 will explore these variations in detail. This geographical breakdown will show exactly where the barriers and opportunities are most concentrated.



Martin Levermore

Age 64, Walsall, West Midlands

I was born in Birmingham but my parents came from Jamaica. My mother was a nurse and my father was a trained mechanic. I'm one of 5. I have an older brother and 3 younger sisters.

Growing up in the UK in the 70s, I never really saw people of my own background excelling. My parents felt the educational system for people of an ethnic background wasn't as well-formed in the UK as in the West Indies, so we returned to Jamaica for our formative education. In the West Indies it was inspiring seeing people from different backgrounds and colours moving up the social ladder.

But with the political disturbances in Jamaica during the late 70s, we returned to the UK for safety. I took my O and A levels, and went on to study a degree in political economics in London. Many migrant parents of that generation wanted their children to go off to university and I was the first in my family to do that.

Degree in hand, I felt the world was my oyster. I decided to join the armed forces as a bomb disposal officer. After 4 and a half years I was bought out by an international bank and decided to return to civilian life and apply myself in another direction.

By luck rather than design, I found good mentors in the bank, from the board of directors to senior managers. I worked in the international trade finance department and was able to travel the world. But then in the mid-90s we had the secondary banking crisis, which meant I lost my job. Even with all my experience I couldn't find another job. I had to find a way to stabilise, survive and keep my family together – this pushed me to create my own company.

I set up a Black internship programme, which is one of the leading success programmes for minority individuals to access careers in science.

I now have one daughter, aged 32 years, and a stepdaughter aged 19 years. I've always tried to encourage them to look beyond narrow boundaries and not feel limited in what they can aspire to do. I don't want them to be confined within their own community, but to go out, learn about others and form diverse friendships that encourage creative thinking. I've seen this has helped build their confidence. My daughter went on to study a degree in Manchester and has pursued a variety of different careers – not just staying in one area but utilising her transferable skills – and my stepdaughter is currently planning to pursue a degree in forensic medicine.

My view is, if your parents were no longer here, would you be able to survive and thrive? It's about giving them the tools to see the world as something they can actively participate in, not just observe.

We always encouraged our children, nieces and friends to engage, not just academically, but also in extra-curricular activities outside the classroom, like Duke of Edinburgh and sports, because that builds discipline and focus, which then supports academic work.

I believe the most important thing in being successful is value-based. Whether working in academia, healthcare or any industry, it's about understanding why you're doing something. It can't just be about financial return, it's about impact and creating lasting change.

I would say the most important thing my parents instilled in me is that regardless of the problems you face, your family is crucial in always being there to support you, dust you off, and push you forward. Never stop trying, that's the key.



5

Geography that matters: travel-to-work area analysis



Highlights

- In this new analysis, we examine how patterns of labour market conditions vary across travel-to-work areas (TTWAs) instead of across local authorities (LAs). Administrative boundaries like LAs often hide the real geography of opportunity, because people often travel to a neighbouring LA for work, especially in big cities. TTWAs vary in size because they depend on local commuting patterns.
- As with LAs, the TTWAs with the most favourable opportunities are mainly located in the south of England. Likewise, both LAs and TTWAs with the least favourable opportunities tend to be in former industrial areas, rural areas, and old coastal ports and seaside towns.
- But there are important differences between the findings for LAs and TTWAs. The TTWA analysis identifies areas with favourable opportunities further from London, including Derby, Preston and York and, most significantly given its size, Leeds.
- The influence of major cities with favourable opportunities can spread across several adjoining LAs. For example, the Belfast TTWA takes in much of the Lisburn & Castlereagh district. The Cardiff TTWA takes in parts of Vale of Glamorgan, Newport, Neath Port Talbot, among other areas. We can think of such areas as ‘city regions’.
- City regions with the most favourable labour market opportunities for young people include Bristol, Edinburgh, Oxford and Reading, as well as London. City regions with the least favourable labour market opportunities include Doncaster, Middlesbrough & Stockton and Sunderland, alongside more rural or isolated areas such as Berwick, Dumfries, Llanelli, Margate & Ramsgate and Skegness & Louth.
- Some small TTWAs, like Cromer & Sheringham, Skegness & Louth and Margate & Ramsgate, are local labour markets within geographically large LAs, so their disadvantaged position was invisible in our research on LAs. Some TTWAs with less favourable opportunities, such as Berwick and Hexham, even cross borders; again, this makes them invisible when using LA boundaries.⁷⁵
- TTWAs spanning multiple local authorities may have implications for the organisation of local government. For example, if neighbouring LAs take different and incompatible approaches to transport policy when they both belong to the same commuting zone, this is clearly inefficient.

⁷⁵ TTWAs are different from parliamentary constituencies, and often do not align closely with administrative boundaries.

Introduction

In our State of the Nation 2024 report, we presented the results from our composite index of Labour Market Opportunities for young people (aged 16 to 29 years).^{76 77} We showed a strong north-south divide: most of the LAs with favourable labour-market opportunities were located in the south, especially in London. In contrast, many of the LAs with unfavourable opportunities were located in the north east of England, especially in former industrial and port areas, as well as in more rural areas, such as Northumberland and the Shetland Islands. This north-south divide reflected the patterns of economic growth across the UK, with London and the South East showing the highest levels of economic growth in recent decades.

This chapter introduces an innovative analysis that measures labour-market opportunities for young people, as well as innovation and growth, using a more relevant geographical unit: the TTWA. TTWAs can be thought of as commuting zones or geographical labour markets.⁷⁸ For example, there is a TTWA surrounding and including London, which is the area whose residents typically work in the capital. TTWAs are constructed so that relatively few people commute across their boundaries. This avoids the arbitrariness of traditional administrative boundaries.

TTWAs are self-contained areas where most residents (75%) also work, and most workers in the area also live. They are a better choice for analysis than LAs because, in big cities like London or Manchester, people often live in one LA but travel to an adjacent one. Therefore using the LA where they live might not show their true job opportunities. TTWAs reduce this problem. For example, geographically large LAs, like Cornwall, can contain several smaller TTWAs with very different job markets. Looking at the whole LA could hide these local differences in opportunity.

⁷⁶ Social Mobility Commission, '[Chapter 3: mobility across the UK](#)', 2024. Published on GOV.UK.

⁷⁷ The term 'labour market conditions' refers to the job opportunities in an area — how easily people can find work and how easily employers can find the skilled staff they need.

⁷⁸ Office for National Statistics, '[Travel to work area analysis in Great Britain: 2016](#)', Published on ONS.OV.UK.



Methodology

Construction of the indices

We follow the same methodology as for the LA-level composite indices. In order to improve the reliability of the estimates, we use multiple indicators (in this case the percentages of young people aged 16 to 34 years employed in professional and working-class jobs). We use principal component analysis, a technique that analyses multiple indicators, to produce a single score for each area.⁷⁹ We then work out the position of each TTWA according to this single score. Due to the small sample sizes for some rural TTWAs, we use a statistical method (multi-level modelling) to make the results more reliable. This method treats both extreme results and those results based on small sample sizes with more caution.⁸⁰ Details of the coding of TTWAs are shown in the technical annex.

To measure job opportunities for young people aged 16 to 34 years, we combine 3 indicators:

1. Percentage of young people in employment
2. Percentage of young people in professional jobs
3. Percentage of young people in working-class jobs⁸¹

In the State of the Nation 2025 report, the index of Innovation and Growth was based on 3 indicators:

1. Percentage of economically active individuals in the LA (aged 25 to 64 years) who had higher degrees
2. Percentage of people working in new economy occupations – those at the leading edge of research, innovation and development, such as carbon capture engineers or bioinformatics scientists
3. Gross value added (GVA) per head⁸²

In this year's report, we use the same 3 indicators but calculate GVA per employed person in the TTWA (rather than per head of population) as the number of employed people is a more appropriate denominator than the total population in the case of labour markets.⁸³ This new version has satisfactory technical properties when applied to TTWAs (see the technical annex for details).

Construction of the travel-to-work areas

TTWAs are self-contained areas where most residents (75%) also work, and most workers in the area also live. In some cases like medium-sized cities (for example, Bradford), LAs and TTWAs will more or less coincide. However, in large conurbations with good transport infrastructure (for example, London or the Greater Manchester area) many people will live in one LA but work in a neighbouring one, as figure 5.1 shows. In contrast to large conurbations where a single TTWA encompasses multiple LAs, there are also some geographically large LAs, such as the Highlands, Norfolk and Cornwall, that also encompass multiple small TTWAs. A focus on LAs could therefore also be misleading in these cases, since there may be unequal labour-market environments within the same LA.

⁷⁹ The principal component analysis (PCA) technique distils several correlated variables into a single measurement. Details of the PCA are shown in the technical annex.

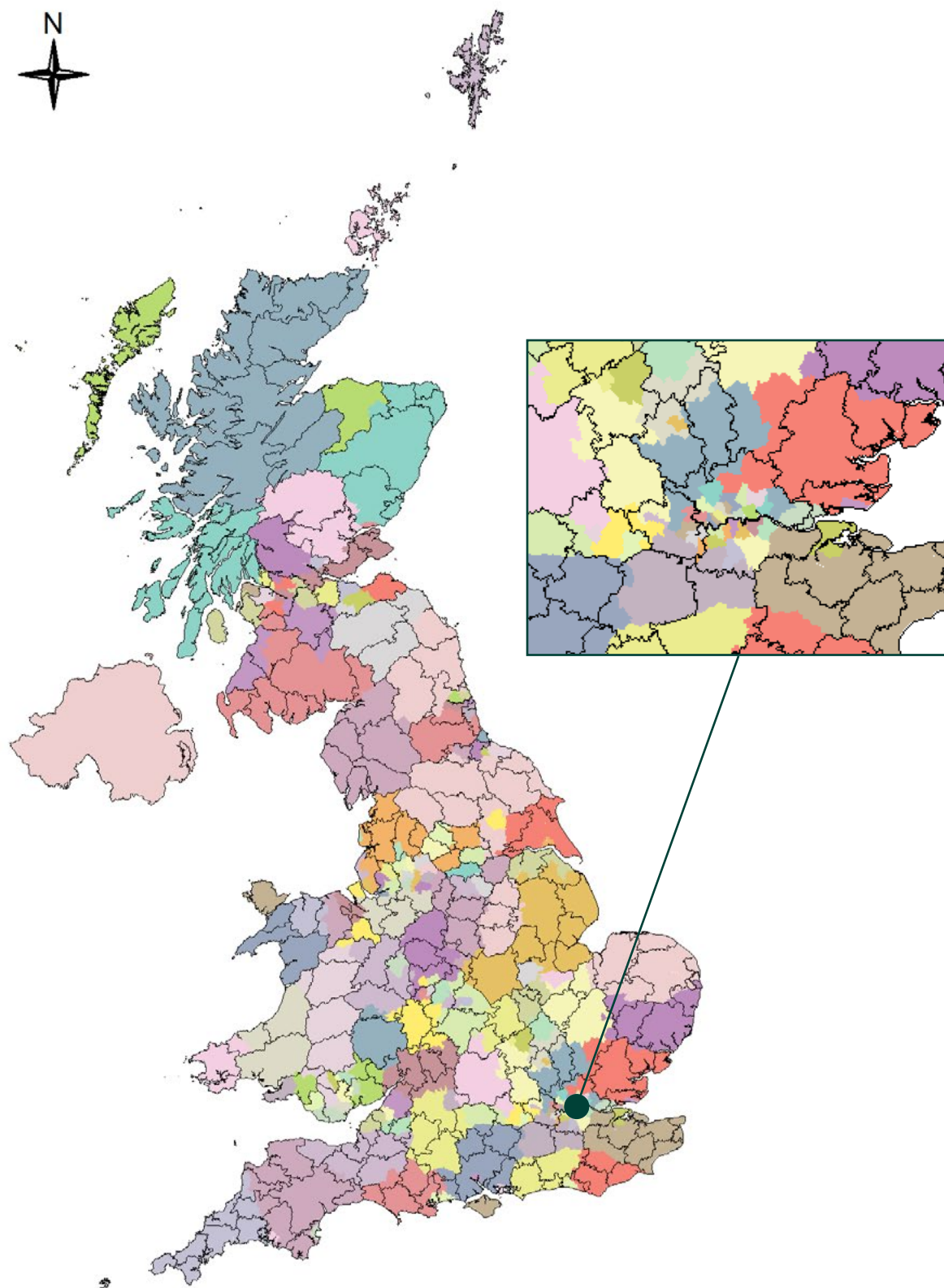
⁸⁰ A multi-level model takes account of the results for all LAs when looking at the result for an individual LA. So, if an LA ends up with an extreme value, and especially if the sample size for that LA is small, the model adjusts the estimated value to be closer to the average for all LAs.

⁸¹ See Chapter 1 for definitions of job types.

⁸² Social Mobility Commission, '[Chapter 3: how have social mobility conditions changed across the UK?](#)', 2025. Published on GOV.UK.

⁸³ This includes all who are employed, both full time and part time.

Figure 5.1: Map of overlap between travel-to-work areas (TTWAs) and local authorities (LAs).



Source: Social Mobility Commission's elaboration based on Office for National Statistics (ONS), Open Geography Portal data on TTWAs (2011) to Local Authority (LA) districts (2022).

Note: The zoomed-in key shows the overlap of LAs and the TTWAs in the Greater London area, where the coloured sections represent unitary and upper-tier LAs and the black line outlines the TTWA boundary. In the case of Northern Ireland, our data source – the LFS – does not enable us to distinguish different TTWAs.

Limitations

The TTWA boundaries we used are based on data from the 2011 Census, which may now be out of date. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) will update these in due course. There is also a possibility that young people with lower salaries might not travel as far for work as older, higher-paid people. Finally, the data tells us where people live now, not where they grew up. If people move for better jobs or education, this will affect what the data shows about opportunities.

Since the scores are estimates based on survey samples, they are not exact measurements. They should be used as a guide and more attention should be paid to the largest and most significant scores.



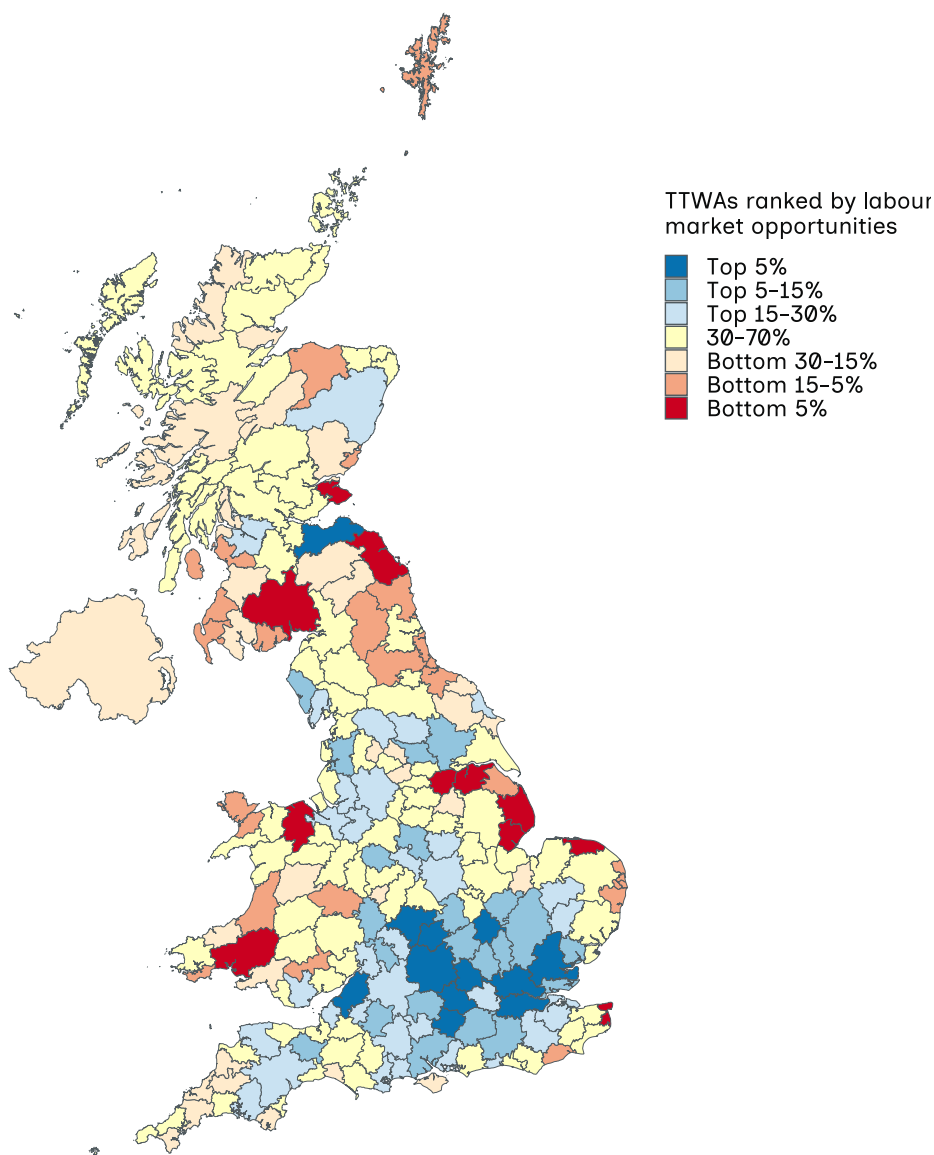
Labour market opportunities for young people

As we explain in the methodology section, this composite index takes into account the percentage of young people in employment, the percentage of young people in professional jobs and the percentage of young people in working-class jobs. The TTWAs with the most favourable job opportunities (deep blue on the map in figure 5.2) are mainly in the south of England. These favourable areas spread out from London to include places like Chelmsford to the east, Basingstoke to the south, Bedford to the north (up the M1), High Wycombe & Aylesbury, Reading and Oxford in the Thames Valley to the west, plus Banbury and Leamington Spa, which sit to the north-west of the M40 corridor. It is important to note that the London TTWA covers more than just the Greater London Authority (GLA), including significant parts of Essex, Surrey, Kent and Hertfordshire that border the GLA.



Figure 5.2: TTWAs with the most favourable labour market opportunities for young people include the Edinburgh city region and areas across south-central England. TTWAs with the least favourable opportunities are found around the coast.

TTWAs ranked according to their labour-market opportunities for young people: the percentages of young people in employment, in professional jobs and in working-class jobs.



Source: ONS, Labour Force Survey (LFS) from 2014 to 2025 combined.

Note: Areas are based on TTWAs where people currently live. For more information on how each area was scored, please see the technical annex.

Outside London, Bristol and Edinburgh stand out, with Bristol's job opportunities matching or even surpassing those in London, according to the composite index score. In our 2025 annual report, we noted that Bristol and Edinburgh score particularly highly on the 'Innovation and Growth' composite index.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Social Mobility Commission, '[Chapter 3: how have social mobility conditions changed across the UK?](#)', 2025. Published on GOV.UK.

Areas with favourable opportunities (blue on the map) are also widespread in the south around London, stretching out further to include Cambridge, Southend and Colchester to the east, Southampton, Guildford & Aldershot and Crawley to the south, Newbury and Trowbridge to the west (along the M4), and Luton, Stevenage & Welwyn Garden City, Milton Keynes and Northampton up the M1 corridor.

There are also important areas with favourable opportunities further away from London, in the Midlands and north of England: Derby, Preston, York and, perhaps most significantly given its size, Leeds. Unexpectedly, Manchester falls only within the light-blue category (top 15%). In Wales, the highest scoring TTWA is unsurprisingly Cardiff (the only light blue area in Wales). And in Scotland, apart from Edinburgh, we have Glasgow and Aberdeen in the upper-middling category. This gives a more encouraging picture of a range of labour market opportunities outside London, although the economic dominance of southern England is hard to ignore.

Most areas of unfavourable opportunity are around the coast. They can be found from St Andrews & Cupar in Scotland and Berwick (a cross-border TTWA straddling the Scottish Lowlands and English Northumberland), to Scunthorpe (and nearby Doncaster), Skegness & Louth, Boston in Lincolnshire, Cromer & Sheringham in north Norfolk and Margate & Ramsgate in Kent, then continuing to Llanelli in south Wales and Rhyl in north Wales, and back up to Dumfries in Scotland. Many places, such as Berwick, Dumfries, Boston and Cromer, have a largely rural character, while others, such as Rhyl, are focused on former seaside resort towns that have struggled in recent years as more people choose to holiday abroad.

Several other areas with unfavourable opportunities (orange) are also coastal and frequently rural. These include, for example, Elgin, Arbroath & Montrose and Stranraer in Scotland, Aberystwyth and Bangor & Holyhead in Wales, and Blyth & Ashington, Sunderland, Hartlepool, Middlesbrough & Stockton, Grimsby and Great Yarmouth down the east coast of England.

There are relatively few inland areas with unfavourable opportunities, but Hexham (straddling the Scottish border) and Ludlow (straddling the Welsh border) are both highly rural. Meanwhile, Durham & Bishop Auckland in the North East and Merthyr Tydfil in south Wales were formerly major mining areas (and also fairly rural). Several of these TTWAs with less favourable opportunities are small in population terms, sparsely populated and do not have easy access to major employment centres. These small TTWAs (in terms of population) tend to be local job markets within much larger LA areas.⁸⁵ Their disadvantage was, therefore, not obvious in earlier research based on LAs. There is also some evidence suggesting that young people are likely to move out of these small and remote TTWAs with unfavourable opportunities. Graduates in particular have been shown to be likely to leave poorer areas with lower average earnings and to move to areas with higher average earnings, especially London as well as to major cities such as Brighton, Bristol and Leeds.⁸⁶

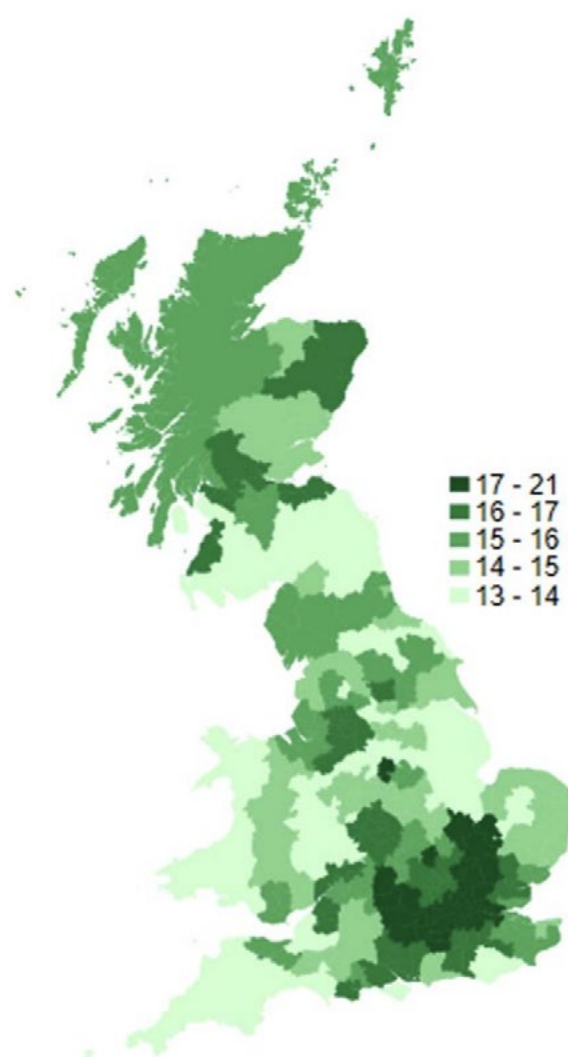
Previous academic research

We now compare our results with those from the limited number of published articles on TTWAs. In figure 5.3, data collated by renowned research economists Henry Overman and Xiaowei Xu (2024) shows earnings per hour across TTWAs in 2019. Their picture largely mirrors ours, with London and the areas radiating out from London, Bristol and Edinburgh standing out. We should note that their map is based on the LAs that approximate best to TTWAs, so there are some geographical discrepancies. They are also unable to distinguish the smallest TTWAs such as Boston, Cromer & Sheringham or Margate & Ramsgate.

⁸⁵ These small TTWAs have populations between 60,000 and 130,000 people.

⁸⁶ Jack Britton and others, '[London calling? Higher education, geographical mobility and early-career earnings](#)'. figures 13 and 14, 2021. Published on IFS.ORG.UK.

Figure 5.3: Earnings per hour across TTWAs in 2019 in the UK.



Source: Data from researchers Henry Overman and Xiaowei Xu (2024).⁸⁷

Note: This chart shows data on average wage (£) per hour in 2019. Maps constructed using local authority approximations of 2011. Working-age (16–64) population. Wage data excludes self-employed people.

Henry Overman and Xiaowei Xu summarise their results as follows: “The north-south divide is visible, as is the relatively poor performance of many coastal and some rural areas. Differences in wages are more pronounced than differences in employment ... but some areas such as the south of Scotland, north of England, Lincolnshire and Wales – fare poorly on both measures” (2024, pages 590 to 591). This is also a fair summary of our results.

⁸⁷ Henry Overman and Xiaowei Xu, ‘[Spatial disparities across labour markets](#)’, 2024. Published on ACADEMIC.OUP.COM.

Differences between travel-to-work areas and local authority findings

In many respects, the geographical patterns of LAs and TTWAs with favourable opportunities are similar (see figure 5.4). Just as with LAs, TTWAs with the most favourable opportunities are primarily located in the south of England, spreading out from London in all directions. Just as with LAs, TTWAs with the least favourable opportunities tend to be former industrial areas, sparsely populated rural areas and former coastal ports and seaside resort towns.

However, the map of TTWAs provides some new insights which were not apparent from the LA map. First, many of the TTWAs with unfavourable opportunities are small in population terms and sparsely populated, with no easy access to major centres of employment. These small TTWAs tend to be local labour markets within geographically large LAs. Their disadvantaged position was therefore invisible in our research on LAs.

Second, there are a number of cross-border TTWAs such as Berwick and Hexham (both of which are largely rural areas which straddle the border between Scotland and England). These cross-border TTWAs are also invisible when using administrative boundaries and again happen to provide less favourable opportunities for young people.

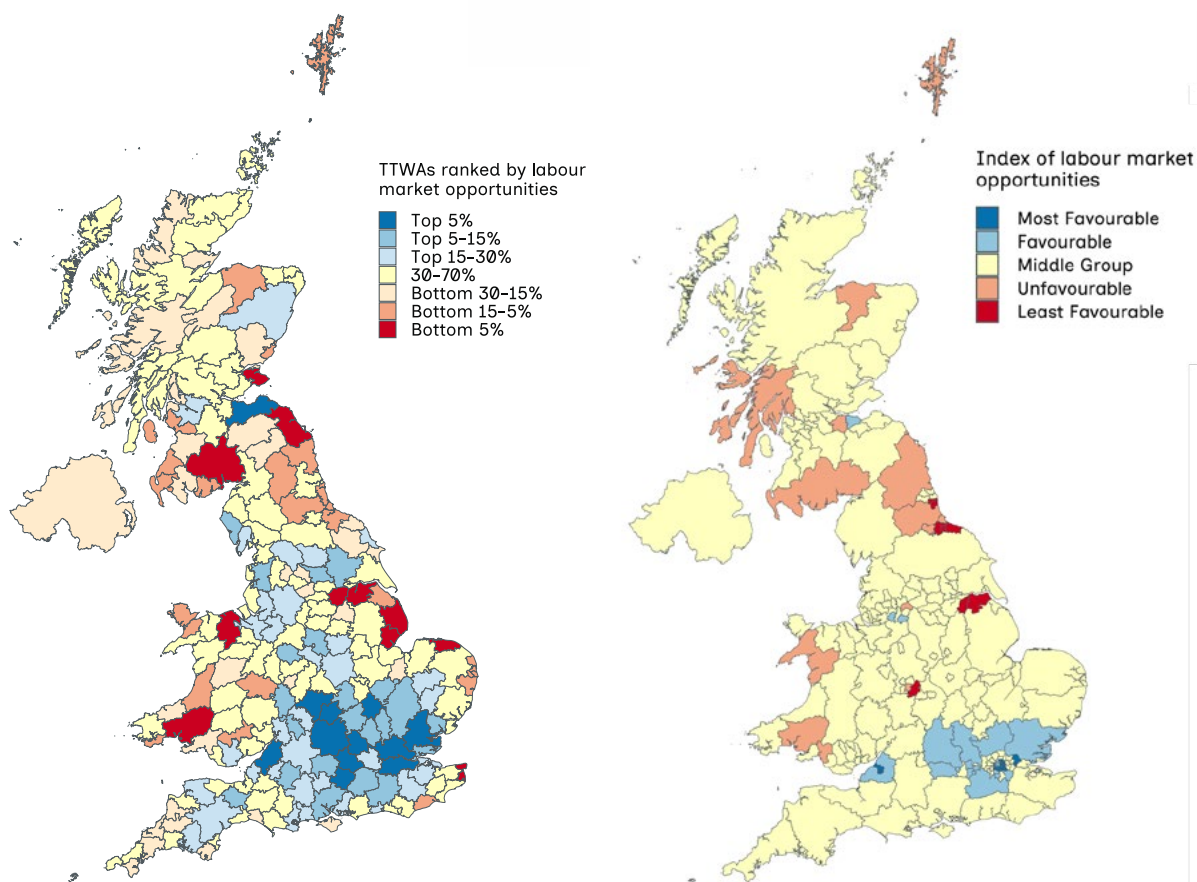
Third, the map of TTWAs brings out how the influence of major cities with favourable opportunities can spread and/or cut across several nearby LAs. For example, the London TTWA takes in parts of the surrounding Home Counties, the Bristol TTWA takes in parts of north-east Somerset and South Gloucestershire LAs, the Belfast TTWA takes in much of Lisburn & Castlereagh district, the Cardiff TTWA takes in parts of the Vale of Glamorgan, Newport, Neath Port Talbot (among others), and the Edinburgh TTWA takes in parts of West Lothian, Midlothian and East Lothian districts (among others). We can think of these areas as forming 'city regions'. In several cases these city regions more or less correspond to the new combined authorities that the government is introducing.



Figure 5.4: Comparison of the index of Labour Market Opportunities for young people at TTWA and LA level.

Index of Labour Market Opportunities for young people at TTWA level (2014 to 2025).

Index of Labour Market Opportunities for young people at LA level (State of the Nation 2024, 2014 to 2022 combined).



Source: ONS, LFS, 2014 to 2025.

“The map of TTWAs provides some new insights which were not apparent from the LA map.”

Innovation and growth

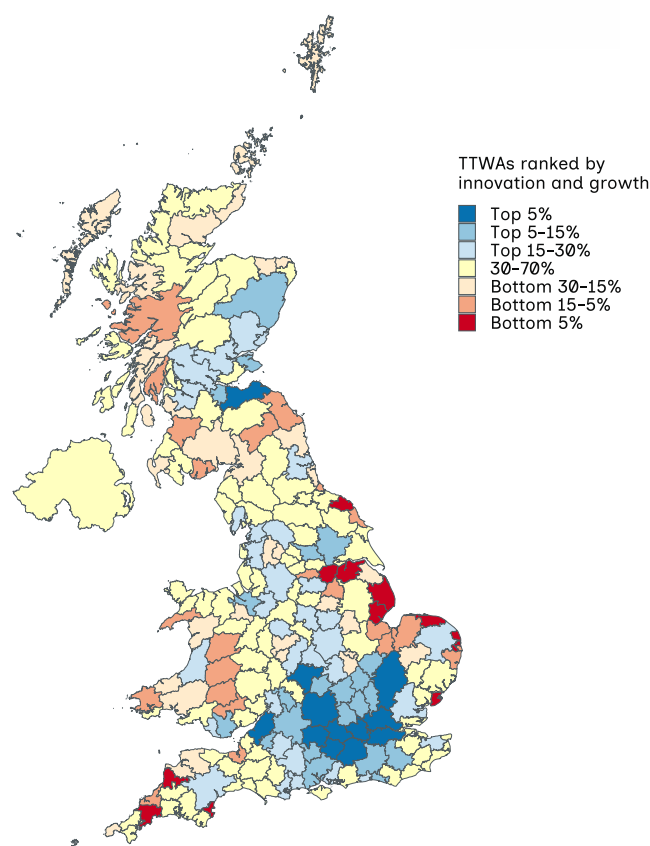
In our State of the Nation reports 2024 and 2025, we developed a new composite index of Innovation and Growth across LAs in the UK. The index was designed to measure the environments that were potentially favourable to innovation and growth, and which may promote social mobility. The results in the 2025 report showed that, in addition to many London boroughs, centres with favourable environments included Aberdeen, Brighton & Hove, Bristol, Edinburgh, Oxfordshire and Reading.

Figure 5.5 shows a map of TTWAs coded according to how favourable their environments are for innovation and growth (dark green indicating the 5% with the most favourable environments and dark red the 5% with the least favourable).

The TTWAs with the most favourable environments are largely city regions in the south-east of England and include Oxford, London, Slough & Heathrow, Reading, Cambridge, Basingstoke, Guildford and Aldershot and Newbury. Outside the south-east, other city regions such as Bristol, Edinburgh and Leamington Spa, score highly, while Aberdeen, Brighton, Leeds, Milton Keynes, Southampton and York also have rather favourable scores.

Figure 5.5: TTWAs with the least favourable environments for innovation and growth tend to be small in population terms and relatively remote.

TTWAs ranked according to their innovation and growth scores, constructed by combining measures of economically active postgraduates, people in new economy jobs, and productivity.



Source: ONS, LFS from 2014 to 2025 combined.

Note: Areas are based on current TTWAs. For more information on how each area was scored, please see the technical annex.

The least favourable areas include several geographically remote coastal areas, often with small populations, such as Boston, Bridgwater, Bude, Clacton, Great Yarmouth, Lowestoft, Scunthorpe, Skegness, St Austell & Newquay and Whitby. Among major cities, only Doncaster has a particularly unfavourable score. The largest cities, such as Derby, Glasgow, Birmingham, Leicester, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham and Sheffield, all lie in the top 30% of the distribution.

Differences between TTWA and LA findings

When it comes to innovation and growth, analysing the data by TTWA rather than LA confirms the same broad geographic patterns: the most favourable environments are overwhelmingly concentrated in the south of England, while the least favourable are typically remote coastal areas, sparsely populated rural locations and former industrial zones.

However, just as we saw with the youth job opportunities data, the TTWA map reveals specific localised areas of disadvantage that LA boundaries tend to hide. Because LAs can be geographically huge (for example, Scottish Borders or Northumberland), they often mask smaller, struggling local economies within them. For innovation and growth, this lack of opportunity becomes highly visible in small, remote coastal areas like Boston, Bude, Great Yarmouth, Skegness & Louth, St Austell & Newquay and Whitby.

This “hiding” effect also applies to administrative borders. For example, largely rural areas that straddle the border between England and Wales, such as Llandrindodd Wells & Builth Wells and Newtown & Welshpool, show less favourable environments for innovation, a detail easily lost when analysis is based on strict local government boundaries.

Finally, the TTWA map clearly illustrates how the economic pull of major, innovative cities spreads outward, ignoring LA lines to create wider ‘city regions’. We see this not just with London pulling in the Home Counties, but with Bristol spreading into north-east Somerset and south Gloucestershire, Cardiff taking in parts of Newport and the Vale of Glamorgan, and Edinburgh extending into the Lothians.



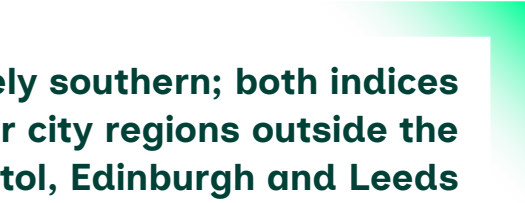
Conclusions

The UK's economic geography tells a consistent story, regardless of whether we are measuring labour market opportunities for young people or the overall environment for innovation and growth.

Both the LA and TTWA analyses confirm a persistent north-south divide. The areas with the most favourable scores for both labour market opportunities and innovation are overwhelmingly concentrated in the south of England. However, prosperity is not exclusively southern; both indices highlight the strength of major city regions outside the South East, with places like Bristol, Edinburgh and Leeds consistently standing out as top performers.

In contrast, the overlap in disadvantaged areas is striking. Across both labour market opportunities and innovation, the least favourable environments are routinely found in geographically remote coastal areas, such as Skegness, Great Yarmouth and Boston. These struggles are also heavily concentrated in sparsely populated rural locations, former industrial or mining towns and former seaside resort towns.

The TTWA approach exposes pockets of deep disadvantage that previous research based on LAs has hidden. LAs often mask the struggles of the small remote coastal communities and rural economies locked inside them. Similarly, disadvantaged rural areas that straddle national borders – whether between England and Scotland, as at Berwick, or England and Wales, as at Llandrindod Wells – are made invisible when relying on strict administrative boundaries.



“Prosperity is not exclusively southern; both indices highlight the strength of major city regions outside the South East, with places like Bristol, Edinburgh and Leeds consistently standing out as top performers.”



Matthew Cordwent

Age 28, London

I come from a farming background, growing up in Devon in a lovely area between Dartmoor and Exmoor. However, this came with some challenges, like my closest bus stop was about a 40-minute walk and buses would only come every 2 hours, except for Sundays, when there would be none at all.

Dairy farming was my childhood. It was enjoyable, but very hard work. As a child I would herd, milk and feed the cows, as well as cleaning out their sleeping place over the winter. My summers were often spent making hay and silage, fencing fields and looking after the livestock. The work never stops on a farm and even on Christmas Day we could be spending the morning herding sheep.

My first experience of law came about largely by chance. When I was 7 years old, I was helping my neighbour move house with my brother and my dad. We had a conversation about what I wanted to do when I was older and she offered me some work experience. Years later, while she was working as legal director at Southampton University, she got in contact again and remade the invitation. I took up the offer and thoroughly enjoyed it, I found the work played to my strengths and decided to study law at A level.

While studying, I was also working part-time and one of my colleagues mentioned a charity-funded law programme. I found out that there was one day left to apply and, thankfully, I was successful. The programme gave me fantastic opportunities to experience things I otherwise wouldn't have, like networking with legal professionals, visits to the Inns of Court and even assistance with my UCAS [Universities and Colleges Admissions Service] personal statement. As a first-generation university student, this last opportunity was key to my legal journey as I couldn't speak to my family for tips on how to approach my university application.

Through the pathway, I met a member of Causeway Education, a charity which promotes social mobility and supports young people with their applications to university. I am very proud to say that I have worked with Causeway ever since, for nearly 7 years, to help give others the same opportunities that I had.

I studied law at the University of Exeter and then completed the Legal Practice Course while working part time as a paralegal to cover the costs and gain experience, and I qualified in 2024.

I'm now an associate in the real estate disputes team. I particularly enjoy the variety of my work, dealing with a broad range of clients including large corporations, high-net-worth individuals and charities. My work involves dealing with disputes and providing advice on residential or commercial property issues, anything from boundary and rent disputes to professional negligence claims.

From my experience, I think that social mobility is rooted in the opportunities which are available to us. My first experience of law came about largely by chance and had it not been for that, my work and life would likely look rather different to what they are now.

My advice to anyone is to take every opportunity that you can. If nothing else it will give you the chance to try something new and find out what you like (and what you don't!). I also encourage everyone to create every opportunity possible – for yourself but others too. Diversity is vital to all professions, not just law, and creating opportunities to support social mobility is needed to achieve this.



Sophie Timbrell

Age 31, Bristol

I'm one of 4 children. My dad worked quite far away so I didn't see him very often and my mum worked in various jobs in cafes and shops. We lived in a council house, didn't have holidays and new school shoes weren't a regular thing. My parents worked long hours to make sure all 4 kids didn't feel we went without.

My parents were very intent on making sure we all stayed in education to get some security because they struggled with paying bills on a regular basis. We had bailiffs coming up to our house as money was tight.

School was difficult because I had undiagnosed dyslexia so I didn't have any of the learning support. I ended up having to learn in lower-level English and maths meaning the highest I could get was a pass. I felt like if anyone had noticed I might have been able to achieve higher than a pass, but I was good at hiding it. I would never volunteer to read anything out loud or share any of my work with anyone so nobody would see how bad my spelling and grammar were.

I also personally struggled not having everything that a lot of other students had. It was noticeable to my peers that I didn't have the right type of clothes, the right type of shoes, the right type of anything. I was singled out slightly but I managed to find a close group of friends that made me comfortable and I've kept them through my entire life.

I passed all my subjects at school and at 16. I went to Bath College to do media which was more practical than theoretical learning. I earned a merit pass which was better than anything I had achieved at that point.

After college, my parents were very strict that I couldn't live at home without a job, so I worked at a pound shop on the local high street for 5 years. I was doing 12-hour shifts 6 days a week. I was physically and emotionally drained. I ended up developing carpal tunnel syndrome in both my hands as a result of lifting heavy boxes.

I decided to apply for an admin level 3 apprenticeship. I applied through the government website to at least 5 employers every single day. With an apprenticeship, I knew I could learn while still earning as I had my own life and bills to pay. The apprenticeship opportunities were scarce and I had to cast a wide net. I kept applying and finally found an apprenticeship helping house over-16s who had left care and had nowhere to go. While my apprenticeship was underway, the company downsized and could not keep anyone but one administrator. I was half-way through my apprenticeship with nowhere to finish it. The City of Bristol College had heard from my trainer that I was switched-on and eager to work. I had an interview with the manager of the apprenticeship department and they took me on immediately.

I am now a curriculum administrator at City of Bristol College. I work in a small team helping write letters, take minutes, organise events, diary management, produce meaningful documents and am the first point of contact for many departments as well as coordinating across the college. I genuinely enjoy my job. I get a lot of personal gratification from it and I have so much more flexibility with my work pattern which has drastically improved my quality of life.



6

A changing job mix over time: census insights





Highlights

- The results of the 2022 Census have allowed us to track shifts in occupation types across the UK with better accuracy, using data from the 2001, 2011 and 2021 to 2022 Censuses.⁸⁸ This improves on our previous approach of using data from the Labour Force Survey (LFS), because the census provides a longer time series, larger sample size and better comparability across nations, including Northern Ireland.
- Over the last 20 years, the UK has seen a big rise in higher professional jobs and a drop in higher working-class jobs. However, these new professional opportunities are very unevenly spread across the country.
- While the list of places with the most and least professional jobs has not changed much since 2001, the gap between them is stark. For instance, Leeds has roughly one professional job for every working-class resident. In Hull, there is only half a professional job for every working-class resident.
- There have been some changes over time within England. For example, Leeds and Bristol enjoyed notable increases in their professional classes, whereas cities like Birmingham, Middlesbrough and Kingston upon Hull saw minimal growth.

⁸⁸ We collated UK-level figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) (England and Wales), Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency and National Records of Scotland for the 2001, 2011 and 2021 Censuses (2022 for Scotland). Variations in question wording across census years affected specific sub-categories, particularly 'never worked' and long-term unemployment figures between 2011 and 2021. The long-term unemployed and those who have never worked are intentionally excluded from our analysis due to such inconsistencies.

The Greater London Authority stood out, as the growth of its higher professional class was fully matched by a decline in its lower professional class.

These shifts in occupational class size will probably impact local social mobility and a region's ability to attract migrants. So upward mobility chances are expected to be better than average in cities like Leeds and Bristol, making them attractive destinations for people relocating from other parts of the country. But moving for work may be less of a choice and more of a necessity for those born in certain areas who wish to be upwardly mobile.

In Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, local authority (LA) trends were largely stable. For example, Cardiff and Blaenau Gwent kept their positions as areas with the largest professional and working classes in Wales.

Finally, between the 2001 and 2021 to 2022 Censuses, England, Scotland and Wales shared common occupational shifts: the higher professional class grew substantially, while the higher working class saw an even larger decline.⁸⁹ Meanwhile, the lower professional class shrank slightly, alongside small increases in the intermediate and lower working classes. Northern Ireland was the exception, experiencing the largest increase in its higher professional class and a unique decline in its lower working class. By 2021, Northern Ireland had largely caught up with the class profile for Wales.

⁸⁹ Higher working-class occupations include: lower supervisory, technical and semi-routine roles, such as foremen, mechanics, electricians and train drivers, as well as printers, shop assistants, traffic wardens, housekeepers and farmworkers.



Introduction

In last year's State of the Nation report, we used the LFS data to show how labour market opportunities vary between LAs in Great Britain (while Northern Ireland had to be treated as a single unit).^{90 91} Because of the small sample sizes for some LAs, we constructed composite indices using multiple indicators. These composite indices were relative measures because they showed how favourable or unfavourable each LA's position was compared with the others.

However, with the release of the 2021 to 2022 Census results, we have much more precise data. It is now possible to measure occupational structures directly across the entire UK, including Northern Ireland, without relying on composite indices. This allows for a detailed analysis of changes over time by comparing the 2001 and 2011 Censuses with the 2021 to 2022 Census data.

The national data from the LFS in previous State of the Nation reports showed that there have been long-term changes in the mix of job types, with the professional and managerial classes expanding and the working classes declining in size. In figure 6.1, we repeat this analysis, showing the trends separately for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Using the census instead of survey data

Until this year, our annual reports have relied mainly on the Labour Force Survey (LFS), which is the UK's official survey of its labour market, and on other surveys. The LFS allowed us to look at changes in the drivers, or enablers, of mobility over a long period, going back to the year 2000.

The LFS gives us very good estimates of things like occupational class for the UK as a whole, because it has a large sample size and is designed to be comparable over time. However, if we divide the UK up into small geographical areas, the sample size for each area is too small to generate reliable estimates. This creates a risk that differences between areas for a specific measure are a result of random sampling errors (differences that happen by chance as part of the sampling process).

To reduce this risk, we summarised findings across multiple indicators that seem to be related, creating composite indices (see chapter 1). When they all give a similar picture, we can confidently say that there are real differences between the areas. But this is a composite picture, not a comparison of areas on one specific indicator of interest.

Now that the 2021 to 2022 Census results are available, we have much larger numbers in each area, so there is no need to look at a composite picture. We can look at individual indicators, like youth employment, and compare them across areas of the UK with much more confidence.

Throughout, we assign people to areas based on their place of residence, not their place of work. However, this can give rise to misleading results when a large number of people travel across LA boundaries to work.

One important thing to note is that the Office for National Statistics (ONS) revises its occupational categories at each census to reflect emerging occupations, such as those in the tech sector. As a result, some overall changes may stem from these structural revisions rather than real shifts in the economy. However, this should not affect comparisons between LAs, because the classifications apply equally across all parts of the country.

⁹⁰ The Labour Force Survey (LFS) did not enable us to distinguish local authorities (LAs) in Northern Ireland.

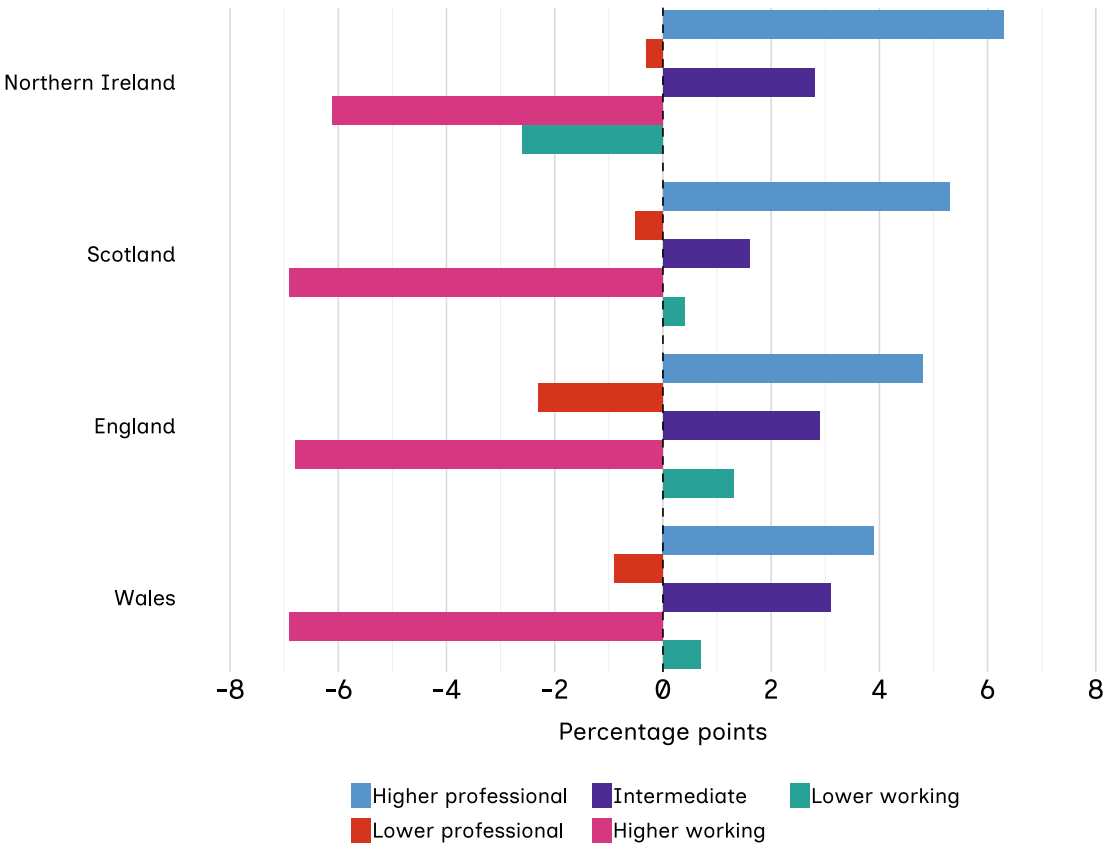
⁹¹ Social Mobility Commission, '[State of the Nation 2025: the evolving story of social mobility in the UK](#)', 2025. Published on GOV.UK.

UK-wide results

For this analysis, we use our standard 5-class grouping of occupational classes based on the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC): higher professional class, lower professional class, intermediate classes, higher working class and lower working class. The long-term unemployed and those who have never worked are intentionally excluded from the lower working class due to inconsistencies in publicly available data over time.⁹² The way we group occupations into classes is explained in chapter 1. Occupational class is based on employment relations and conditions of occupations, not on salary. Sometimes, people in lower occupational classes earn more than those in higher occupational classes. For example, a plumber may earn more than a speech therapist.

Figure 6.1: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have all seen the higher professional class grow and the higher working class shrink.

Change in size of the occupational classes (in percentage points) between 2001 and the 2021 to 2022 Census years across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland (population aged 25 to 64 years).



Source: Office for National Statistics (ONS), National Records of Scotland (NRS), and Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), Census 2001, 2011, and 2021 to 2022.

Note: Data covers the population aged 25 to 64 years. The most recent census wave was conducted in 2022 in Scotland and in 2021 in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Figures reflect a harmonised 5-group NS-SEC classification; the long-term unemployed and those who have never worked are intentionally excluded to ensure consistency over time.

⁹² In this analysis ‘long-term unemployment’ is defined as being unemployed for 12 months or more. ‘Never worked’ means people who say in the census that they have never done any paid work.

Over the 2 decades, England, Scotland, and Wales exhibited common evolutionary patterns: the higher professional class grew substantially, while the higher working class experienced an even larger percentage-point decline. In these 3 nations, there was also a small decline in the size of the lower professional class, a slight increase in the lower working class, and a somewhat larger increase in the intermediate class. These shifts represent a continuation of the long-term decline of manufacturing in the UK, mirroring many western European nations, and the corresponding rise of a post-industrial, knowledge-intensive economy.

Northern Ireland was exceptional in that it showed the largest percentage-point increase in the size of the higher professional class, and the smallest decline in the higher working class. As a result, Northern Ireland had largely caught up with Wales by 2021 in its class profile.⁹³ The explanation for the exceptional progress since 2001 in Northern Ireland might well be related to the end of the troubles and the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement.⁹⁴

Across the 2001, 2011, and 2021 to 2022 Censuses, England consistently had the largest higher professional and lower professional classes, alongside the smallest higher and lower working classes. By contrast, Northern Ireland historically had the smallest professional classes and the largest lower working class.⁹⁵

Local patterns of employment across the UK

We can think about patterns of employment opportunity across UK LAs in 2 ways. Firstly, where is there the greatest number of higher professional jobs? And secondly, how has this changed over time and are there any LAs that have outperformed expectations?

The first map, figure 6.2, answers the first question. Here, we see that higher professional jobs tend to gather around large cities and urban areas across the country such as London, Edinburgh, Oxford, Cambridge and Bristol. In contrast, many rural areas and coastal towns such as Blackpool, Stoke-on-Trent, Kingston upon Hull and Blaenau Gwent appear to have lower numbers of these roles. This pattern suggests that the local economic structure shapes opportunities, rather than a simple north-south divide.

⁹³ The index of dissimilarity between Wales and Northern Ireland fell from 4.9 in 2001 to 1.8 in 2021. This index measures the percentage of people who would need to change their class in order to make the 2 distributions the same.

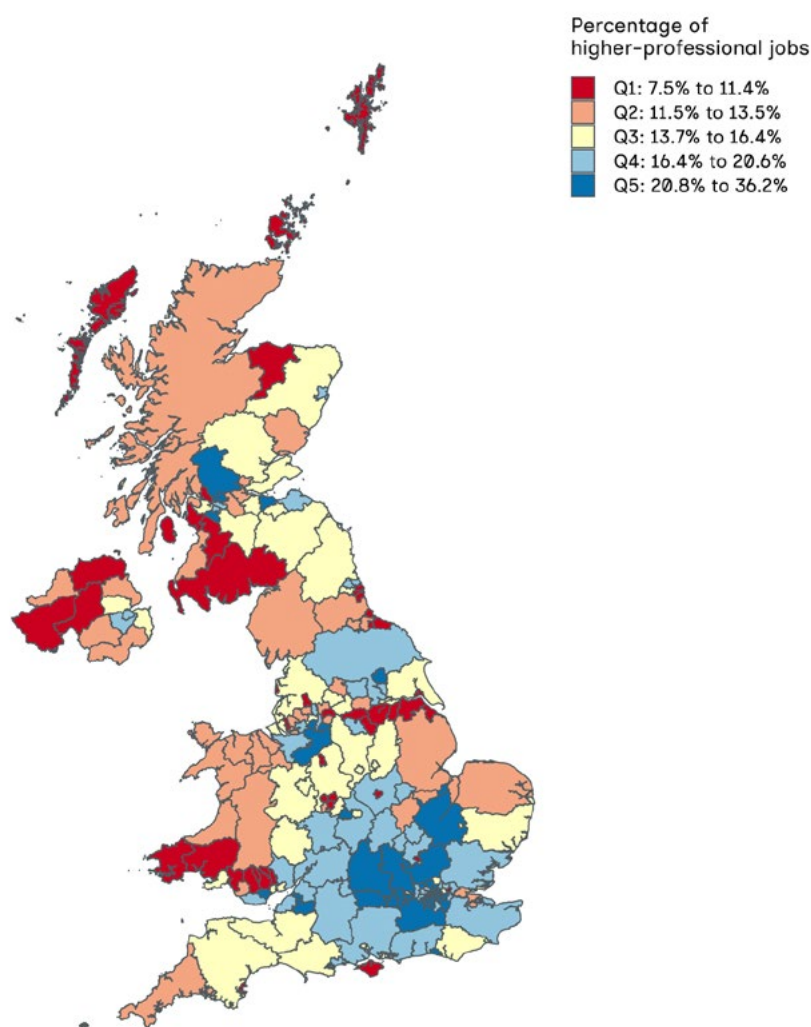
⁹⁴ The Good Friday Agreement is a peace deal that helped end decades of conflict in Northern Ireland in 1998.

⁹⁵ Full data of the occupational classes over time can be found on the Social Mobility Commission's [Data Explorer Tool](#). Published on SOCIAL-MOBILITY.DATA.GOV.UK.



Figure 6.2: Professional jobs tend to gather in cities and large urban areas.

Percentage of higher professional jobs in each local authority (LA) in the UK, measured as the percentage of its population in higher professional employment as of the 2021 to 2022 Census (population aged 25 to 64 years).



Source: ONS, Census 2021.

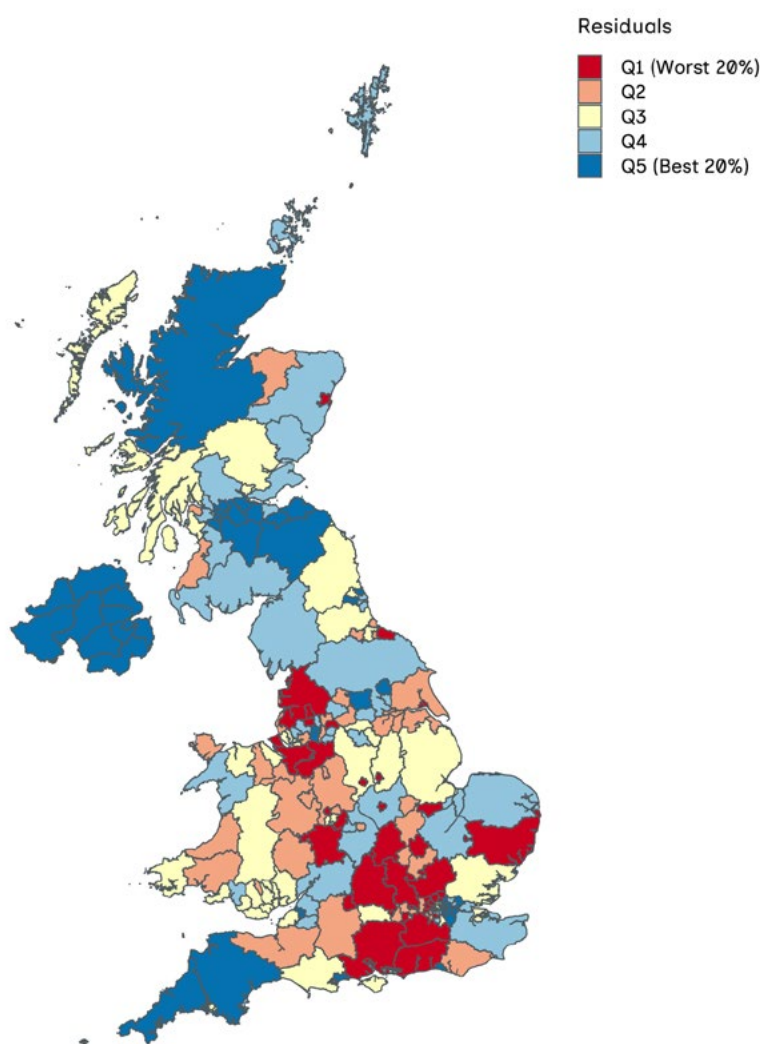
Note: Data covers the population aged 25 to 64 years. The most recent census wave was conducted in 2022 in Scotland and in 2021 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The map shows a snapshot of which LAs have the greatest amount of higher professional employment. But we would also like to know where opportunity has been improving the most. Figure 6.1 shows the national trend of increasing higher professional employment over the last 20 years, but are there any LAs that have increased more than expected, given their starting point? Figure 6.3 answers this. It shows each LA's starting point in the 2001 Census and highlights those that have increased their share of higher professional employment more – or less – than average.⁹⁶ We refer to this difference from the national trend as a 'residual'.

⁹⁶ We show the residuals from a loglinear model that fits all the two-way interactions between time period, LA size, and LA occupational-class composition. These residuals show how much the current occupational-class composition of the LA differs from what we would have expected based on the LA's starting composition, the change over time in its population size, and the change over time in national class composition. The size of the residual shows how strongly that LA moves away from the national trend in its class composition. For example, if the size of the higher professional class has increased by 10% nationally, we might expect a similar increase in every LA, but of course some LAs will have seen higher (or lower) increases. Further details can be seen in the technical annex.

Figure 6.3: Higher professional jobs have grown faster than expected in the west and north but slowed in traditional southern hubs.

The difference from the national trend, or 'residual', in higher professional employment for each LA in the 2021 to 2022 census, given its starting point in 2001.



Source: ONS, NRS, and NISRA, Census 2001 and 2021 to 2022.

Note: Data covers the population aged 25 to 64 years. The most recent census wave was conducted in 2022 in Scotland and in 2021 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The map shows a clear geographic split, different from that in figure 6.2. Many rural and coastal regions in the west and north of the UK grew faster than anticipated, while several major cities and traditionally affluent areas in the south and east fell behind. This higher-than-expected growth is particularly widespread in Northern Ireland, where every local district ranks in the top 20% of performers. Other outlying areas also beat expectations, including Cornwall, Cumbria, the Scottish Highlands and the Western Isles. In contrast, growth fell short in major urban hubs like Birmingham and the surrounding West Midlands, as well as Aberdeen City, which underperformed compared to its neighbouring areas. Large parts of the South East and the Home Counties, such as Hampshire and West Sussex, also saw slower growth than predicted. Finally, a sharp contrast is visible within the capital, where east and south-east London significantly beat growth expectations, while west and north-west London fell behind them.

In figures 6.4 to 6.7, we look in more detail at changes within the 4 nations, comparing a range of LAs. As well as changes in the sizes of the occupational classes over time, we also show how far each LA change differs from the national trend.

Northern Ireland

We start with Northern Ireland. Here, local government consists of 11 single-tier districts known as local government districts.⁹⁷ Councils do not have the same range of functions as those in the rest of the UK. For example, they do not have direct responsibility for education or housing. Their main functions are planning, waste and recycling services, leisure and community services, building control and local economic and cultural development.

Across these districts, there was a shared pattern of greater-than-expected increases in the higher professional class. For example, in Lisburn & Castlereagh, the share of residents in the higher professional class grew by 9.1 percentage points, while in Belfast, the capital, it increased by 7.4 points. At the same time, the lower working class declined across the board, including an 8.3-point fall in Derry City and Strabane.

Figure 6.4: Districts in Northern Ireland share a pattern of larger increases in the size of the higher professional class than in the UK as a whole.

Percentage point change from 2001 to 2021 in the size of the 5 social classes, selected districts in Northern Ireland, census data.



Source: NISRA, Census 2001, 2011, and 2021.

Note: Data covers the population aged 25 to 64 years. Figures reflect a harmonised 5-group NS-SEC classification; the long-term unemployed and those who have never worked are intentionally excluded to ensure consistency over time.

⁹⁷ In some areas of the England, local government is divided between a county council (upper-tier LA) and a district council (lower-tier LA), which are responsible for different services. In other areas of England, and in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland there is a single-tier (or 'unitary') LA instead.

The pattern of large positive residuals for the higher professional class and large negative residuals for the lower working classes was very similar for the other district councils, suggesting that these changes were broadly shared. If this interpretation is correct, we should find that the Northern Irish districts have improved their percentile – their relative positions – within the UK too.

Scotland

In Scotland, the capital city of Edinburgh had a substantially larger proportion of professional jobs and a smaller proportion of working-class jobs than Glasgow in 2001. By 2022, Edinburgh saw its higher professional-class residents grow by an impressive 7.8 percentage points, while its higher working class declined by 4.4 points. Glasgow's occupational structure closely tracked overall Scottish trends, reflecting its relatively large size, with its higher professional class growing by 5.8 points and its higher working class declining by 6.9 points.

There was a general tendency across Scottish council areas for the higher professional class to grow slightly more than expected based on UK-wide trends. However, Aberdeen City was a notable exception to this growth pattern. Despite starting with a relatively large higher professional class in 2001, likely due to its status as the UK base for the North Sea oil industry, its growth of 3.7 percentage points was smaller than anticipated. This slower pace of growth may reflect the declining economic importance of the North Sea oil sector over this period.

Interestingly, rural and formerly industrial districts like East Ayrshire, the Orkney Islands and Dumfries & Galloway go against the national trend by experiencing growth in both their higher and lower professional classes. This suggests that their occupational structures might be converging with the broader average rather than falling further behind.



Figure 6.5: Trends have been similar across Scottish council areas but the overall increase in the size of the professional classes (higher and lower) was smallest in Aberdeen City and largest in the Orkney Islands.

Percentage point change from 2001 to 2022 in the size of the occupational classes, selected council areas in Scotland, census data.



Source: NRS, Census 2001, 2011 and 2022.

Note: Data covers the population aged 25 to 64 years. The most recent census wave was conducted in 2022 in Scotland. Figures reflect a harmonised 5-group NS-SEC classification; the long-term unemployed and those who have never worked are intentionally excluded to ensure consistency over time.

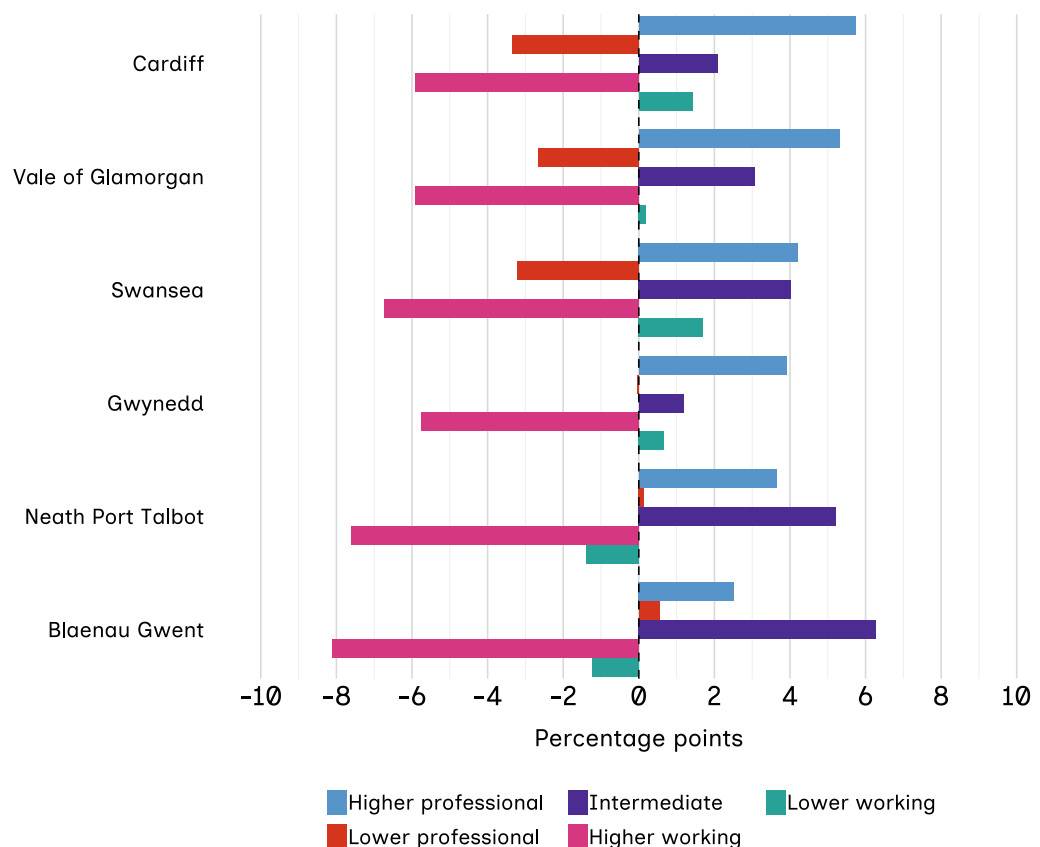
Wales

Changes in Welsh councils broadly aligned with the national trends: expanding higher professional and intermediate classes paired with a substantial decline in the higher working class. The regional rankings remained largely unchanged from 2001 to 2021. Cardiff retained the largest proportion of higher professional class residents (growing by 5.7 percentage points), while the former industrial area of Blaenau Gwent consistently had the smallest professional class and the largest lower working class in the entire UK.

While the percentage-point changes in former industrial areas like Blaenau Gwent and Neath Port Talbot were quite small, these were largely expected based on national trends. Because of ‘floor’ and ‘ceiling’ effects – starting from such low baselines – massive absolute changes are statistically unlikely over a 20-year period.⁹⁸ The data suggests these slow shifts should not be viewed negatively; as in Scotland, there may have been a slight convergence towards the national average.

Figure 6.6: Changes over time in Welsh councils have been broadly in line with national trends. Cardiff remained the council with the largest professional class and Blaenau Gwent the one with the largest working class.

Percentage point change 2001 to 2021 in the size of the 5 social classes, selected LAs in Wales, census data.



Source: ONS, Census 2001, 2011 and 2021.

Note: Data covers the population aged 25 to 64 years. Figures reflect a harmonised 5-group NS-SEC classification; the long-term unemployed and those who have never worked are intentionally excluded to ensure consistency over time.

⁹⁸ A floor effect happens when data clusters at the bottom of a scale – people are at the lowest possible level, so they cannot go any lower. Similarly, a ceiling effect happens when data clusters at the top of a scale.

England

Unlike the relative consistency seen in Scotland and Wales, English LAs showed starkly different patterns of change over the 2 decades, even among areas with the same starting points in 2001. Cities such as Leeds and Bristol saw significant increases in their professional residents, with the higher professional class growing by 6.8 and 7.7 percentage points. In contrast, disadvantaged areas like Birmingham, Sandwell, Middlesbrough, Stoke-on-Trent and Kingston upon Hull experienced some of the smallest increases in professional classes. Birmingham's struggles align with findings from a Resolution Foundation report, which noted that despite being better off than the North in the mid-1990s, the West Midlands has experienced 3 decades of relative economic decline and now lags far behind the South.⁹⁹ In places like Sandwell, Birmingham, Leeds, Bristol, Stoke-on-Trent and Kingston upon Hull, the decline of the higher working class was particularly severe – dropping by 8 to 10 percentage points. This reflects the long-lasting aftershocks of the sweeping deindustrialisation of the 70s and 80s.¹⁰⁰

The Greater London Authority (GLA) also presented a highly exceptional case. In 2001, London and Edinburgh each had professional classes making up 50.3% of their populations. By 2021 to 2022, Edinburgh had moved clearly ahead, as London's 5.9-point rise in its higher professional class was offset by a matching 5.9-point fall in its lower professional class. This pattern might be caused by high housing costs pushing lower-income residents out into the surrounding Home Counties (Essex, Hertfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Kent and Surrey). Within London itself, highly varied patterns emerged, often driven by gentrification and localised housing affordability.¹⁰¹ Boroughs like Hackney, Greenwich and Newham saw greater-than-expected professional growth, while others like Brent, Barnet and Ealing did not.

⁹⁹ Resolution Foundation, '[Unsung Britain: a portrait of the country's poorer half](#)', 2026. Published on RESOLUTIONFOUNDATION.ORG.

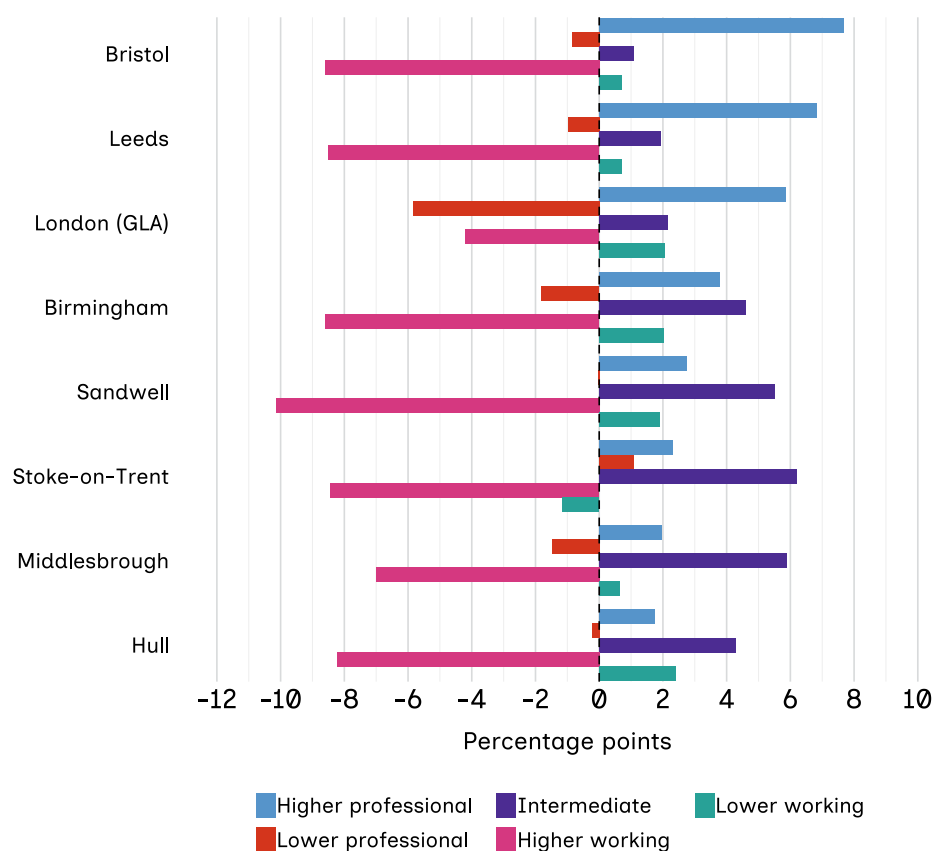
¹⁰⁰ Patricia Rice and Anthony Venables, '[The persistent consequences of adverse shocks](#)', 2021. Published on ORA.OX.AC.UK.

¹⁰¹ Often within capital cities and larger towns, gentrification is the process by which historically poor areas become wealthier as middle-class people with higher incomes move in. Trust for London reports that around 53 neighbourhoods in London have been gentrified since 2001 alone.



Figure 6.7: The percentage point increase in the size of the professional classes was smallest in disadvantaged areas such as Kingston upon Hull and Stoke-on-Trent, and largest in Leeds and Bristol.

Percentage point change from 2001 to 2021 in the size of the occupational classes, selected LAs in England, census data.



Source: ONS, Census 2001, 2011, and 2021.

Note: Data covers the population aged 25 to 64 years. Figures reflect a harmonised 5-group NS-SEC classification; the long-term unemployed and those who have never worked are intentionally excluded to ensure consistency over time.

“Unlike the relative consistency seen in Scotland and Wales, English LAs showed starkly different patterns of change over the 2 decades.”

Relative changes among local authorities

As well as looking at how selected LAs have changed and how they differ from the national trend, we can also see how their rankings have changed over time. We do this by ordering LAs by the share of residents working in higher or lower professional jobs.

For example, Wokingham LA had 57% of its residents working in professional jobs in 2001 and around 59% in 2021 to 2022. In both cases, this was the highest percentage in the UK. Trafford LA had around 47% of its residents working in professional jobs in 2001 and 54% in 2021. This moved Trafford up from 15th to 6th position.

There was considerable stability over time in the relative sizes of professional classes across LAs. In table 6.1, LAs such as Wokingham, Windsor and Maidenhead and Surrey stayed at the top of the rankings over the 2 decades. At the other end, areas like Blaenau Gwent, Stoke-on-Trent and Kingston upon Hull remained near the bottom. Major transformations in occupational structures are rare over a 20-year span, so the overarching hierarchy of regional occupational opportunity remains deeply entrenched.

Table 6.1: There was considerable stability over time in the relative sizes of the professional classes in different LAs.

	% in the prof classes 2001	Rank in 2001	% in the prof classes 2021/22	Rank in 2021/22	Percentage point change in the size of the prof classes 2001–2021/22
Wokingham	57.0	1	59.2	1	+2.2
Windsor and Maidenhead	55.2	2	56.8	3	+1.7
Surrey	52.5	3	54.0	6=	+1.5
East Renfrewshire	51.9	4	57.5	2	+5.6
Buckinghamshire	50.7	5	51.6	9	+0.9
GLA	50.3	6	50.3	11	0
City of Edinburgh	50.3	7	54.9	4	+4.6
East Dunbartonshire	50.2	8	54.8	5	+4.6
Bracknell Forest	49.7	9	49.6	15=	-0.1
Hertfordshire	48.2	10	50.0	13	+1.8
Brighton and Hove City	48.2	11	52.8	8	+4.6
Oxfordshire	47.9	12	50.2	12	+2.3
Trafford	46.7	15	54.0	6=	+7.3
Orkney Islands	28.3	172	35.0	168	+6.7
Derry City and Strabane	28.2	173	34.7	169	+6.5
Causeway Coast and Glens	28.1	174	32.9	173	+4.8
Fermanagh and Omagh	28.0	175	33.1	171	+5.1
Barnsley	27.9	176	32.0	177	+4.1
Blackpool City	27.5	177	29.4	178	+1.9

	% in the prof classes 2001	Rank in 2001	% in the prof classes 2021/22	Rank in 2021/22	Percentage point change in the size of the prof classes 2001–2021/22
North East Lincolnshire	27.0	178	28.9	179	+1.9
Dumfries and Galloway	26.9	179	32.3	176	+5.4
Mid Ulster	26.0	180	32.6	174	+6.6
Sandwell	25.9	181	28.6	181	+2.7
Kingston upon Hull City	25.1	182	26.7	184	+1.6
Stoke-on-Trent City	24.2	183	27.6	182	+3.4
Blaenau Gwent	24.0	184	27.1	183	+3.1

Source: ONS, NRS, and NISRA, Census 2001, 2011, and 2021 to 2022.

Note: Data covers the population aged 25 to 64 years to represent working age. The most recent census wave was conducted in 2022 in Scotland and in 2021 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Figures reflect a harmonised 5-group NS-SEC classification; the long-term unemployed and those who have never worked are intentionally excluded to ensure consistency over time.

In-depth analysis is needed to understand why these unusually large and small changes have occurred. In the case of Northern Ireland, it seems likely that the Good Friday Agreement and the measures introduced as part of it have played a role. On the other hand, the experience of Birmingham, Middlesbrough and Kingston upon Hull may be due to the continuing shadow of deindustrialisation of the 70s and 80s – although there is still the question about why other deindustrialised cities have managed differently.¹⁰² The case of London is particularly intriguing. One possibility is that high house prices have encouraged some people with lower incomes to move out to surrounding areas of the Home Counties (Essex, Hertfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Kent and Surrey) that lie within the Greater London travel-to-work area. This means people can still benefit from the higher wages and greater job opportunities that the capital offers.

¹⁰² Patricia Rice and Anthony Venables, '[The persistent consequences of adverse shocks](#)', 2021. Published on ORA.OX.AC.UK.



The implications for social mobility

Local changes in the sizes of professional classes have important implications for social mobility and internal migration. In areas where the percentage of working-class jobs has been persistently high and the percentage of professional jobs persistently low, there are simply not enough professional opportunities available for those from working-class origins.

Social mobility and geography

In Kingston upon Hull in 2001, 57.5% of residents were in working-class jobs. By 2021, 26.7% were in the professional class. In a hypothetical world where no one moved area between 2001 and 2021, we might estimate that 57.5% of today's residents have working-class origins, because their parents had working-class jobs in 2001. Yet today, only 26.7% of residents are in professional jobs. The ratio 26.7 to 57.5 is equal to 0.49, meaning there has been only half a professional opportunity for every person of working-class origin.

In stark contrast, Leeds had 38.7% of residents in working-class jobs in 2001 and 44.6% in the professional class by 2021, yielding a much more favourable ratio of 1.15. Therefore, there is at least one professional opportunity for every working-class resident in Leeds, making upward mobility chances much better there than in Kingston upon Hull.

In reality, people can and do move to different parts of the UK to find work. But this hypothetical example shows that people moving for work may be less of a choice and more of a necessity for those born in certain areas who wish to increase their opportunities (be upwardly mobile).

If professional job opportunities do not increase in some areas of the UK, then young people growing up there may increasingly face a choice between geographical mobility and occupational mobility. Unfortunately, the evidence suggests that many former industrial areas have not yet generated professional labour markets at sufficient scale.

Also, housing affordability may increasingly shape access to opportunity-rich labour markets. If moving up the ladder requires moving to a prosperous city, but housing in that city is out of reach for the majority of young people, the implications for social mobility could be severe.

“People moving for work may be less of a choice and more of a necessity for those born in certain areas who wish to increase their opportunities.”



Andrew Graham

Age 60, Hull, Yorkshire



I grew up on an estate and it could be rough at times. When I left school, I was put on a government Youth Opportunity Scheme, earning £25 a week. The scheme involved gaining work experience in different placements for 6 months. I ended up working with electricians and really enjoyed it. At the end of the 6 months they wanted to keep me on, but there wasn't an apprenticeship available, so I was placed on a different scheme at the same factory, but this time in the laboratory. I hated it. It was boring and tedious, and I missed working with the electricians.

One day, I saw a man in a suit walking across the yard. I thought he was a sales rep, but he seemed a bit lost, so I had a quick chat with him and showed him to the offices. He asked what I worked on and I told him I had just been moved to working in the lab but honestly that I preferred my previous role with the electricians.

Later, he walked into the lab surrounded by managers. It turned out he was the owner of the factories. He came up to me, greeted me by name and said I'd been polite and helpful. That act of politeness, my honesty and some luck got me an apprenticeship. I was about 17 years old at the time and I stayed there for the next 43 years.

It was a flour mill originally dating back to the 1800s. In the 1970s it was converted into a snack food mill, producing ingredients for the food industry. When I started there were about 72 employees, but by the time I left, there were only 26. The reduction in head count was mainly due to cost-cutting and automation. We brought in high-speed packing lines and jobs that used to be done manually disappeared.

I took pride in my work. Over the years I saved spare parts and kept things running when they could have broken down. I always felt like I was helping keep the factory going and people in jobs.

Things changed when new managers came in. They didn't understand the old machinery or how the place worked. Within a few years, the place shut down. Most of the mills that are still going are part of a bigger group. They're easier to clean because they're modern and open. I think we were the very last mill in Hull – and now we're gone.

Around the same time, things were difficult in my personal life. My partner had passed away. My dog passed away. After all of this, I then started looking for work. I had got some redundancy money but I realised it wasn't going to last very long due to the cost of living. I found the benefits system unhelpful. They couldn't find me work and I didn't like the way they spoke to me.

I became depressed and went to the doctor. I was referred to Talking Therapies and they were the ones who pointed me towards Giroscope.^{103, 104} They helped me rebuild my working life, including helping me write a proper CV and guiding me through applications.

My fingers are engineer's fingers. I didn't have a laptop, only a phone and I'm not good at typing. When I was invited to an online Teams interview, I didn't know what that was and almost attended the interview in person. Giroscope helped me throughout the process. I didn't want engineering work anymore, so they helped tailor my CV to reflect my caring experience, like looking after my parents.

I had a taste of being at home and it felt lonely and boring without my partner and my dog. I'm about to start my new chapter as a support worker, helping people with disabilities and mental health needs in a residential home. When I went to the interview, one of the residents took my hand and gave me a guided tour of the place. It was a lovely moment and I thought – this is what I want.

¹⁰³ Talking Therapies is the NHS national programme for treating common mental health difficulties, such as anxiety, depression, panic, trauma-related symptoms and long-term condition-related distress.

¹⁰⁴ **Giroscope** (Hull) helps unemployed individuals transition into work through tailored goal planning, short courses and voluntary work experience in construction, recycling and cooking.

Frances Fulton

Age 58, Dungannon, Northern Ireland

My dad was a labourer and my mum stayed at home. I hated school with a passion. I came from a working-class home and the teachers clearly didn't like it, I wasn't fancy enough.

But I'm the type of person who always knew I wanted to get a degree so I could get a half-decent job. It's something my mother always instilled in me: be independent, because she regretted not being. I was always good at maths but English was a struggle. When I was doing my A levels, I was still trying to pass my English O level at the same time because I needed a pass to get into university. It took me 8 attempts.

I succeeded in getting to university and halfway through studying computer science I discovered I was dyslexic. It was sort of an 'Oh, that explains a lot' moment. In the first year, everything was practical and I was top of the class, but in the second year, when it changed to more written work, I failed.

After university, I got a temporary job working on the millennium bug. Then I did a series of jobs in computer science. I ended up working at Belfast Metropolitan College for around 17 years, but then they made the entire in-house programming team redundant. I was 55 years old when I was made redundant. I started getting a payout from my pension, but it wasn't enough to cover my bills.

I was applying for jobs left, right and centre, but this got even harder when my father ended up in hospital and I took on a caring role for him. It became clear that I wasn't going to get a job within the IT sector that was rapidly changing because of AI, something I did not have experience in. I found the endless job applications extremely time-consuming with my dyslexia and I was also struggling with health issues, having been diagnosed with type 2 diabetes. When job applications asked about any illnesses, I felt they might not want me because of the time off I would need to attend clinics.

I decided to go to a job fair, where an employment support programme connected me with a pet food business. I wanted a night-shift job so that I could continue to care for my dad during the day. Alongside support from the employment support programme, I did 2 interviews and secured the job!

I'm now doing night shifts as a machine operator. The job has allowed me to grow my skillset as I have to train in various roles, so if something happens, I can take over and do the job for someone else. I've just mastered the conveyor belts. Everyone says night shifts are really difficult, but actually I don't mind it as it allows me to work and still care for my father.



Conclusions



This report shows a mixed picture of social mobility in the UK. There are improvements in many measures. For example, educational mobility has improved over the long term, with many more people from non-graduate families gaining degrees than in previous generations. Occupational mobility has also benefited from the growth of professional employment and the latest census data shows a long-term shift towards higher professional jobs across the UK. Some places, including several major city regions, now offer strong labour-market opportunities for young people and favourable conditions for innovation and growth.

There are also some measures that have deteriorated. If we consider housing mobility, young adults are now much less likely than previous generations to move from rented accommodation in childhood to homeownership in adulthood. The transition from education into work is also becoming more difficult for some young people. As the wider labour market has become less favourable for jobseekers, youth unemployment and rates of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) have risen, with those from lower working-class backgrounds the most likely to be affected. These trends matter because early experiences of work, training and unemployment can affect later earnings, career stability and confidence.

The report also shows that opportunity is still unevenly distributed. There is a complex interaction between socio-economic background (SEB) and sex, ethnicity and disability in influencing outcomes. For example, girls and young women often outperform boys and young men in education, but this advantage does not translate into occupational level or pay. Some ethnic minority groups achieve strong educational outcomes, but do not always see similar rewards in employment and earnings. Disabled young people, especially those from lower SEBs, continue to face persistent barriers in education, employment, occupation and pay.

Geography remains central to the story. Looking at travel-to-work areas (TTWAs) as well as local authorities gives a clearer view of the real geography of opportunity. Some large city regions appear to support strong labour-market outcomes across wider commuting zones. At the same time, some smaller, coastal, rural and formerly industrial labour markets face much weaker conditions, which can be hidden when analysis relies only on administrative boundaries. The census analysis reinforces this point: the national shift towards professional employment has not been evenly shared across places.

Future work could build on this year's improvements in several ways. There would be value in continuing to develop linked data sources that connect parents' circumstances with children's later outcomes, especially for income, education and occupation. Moreover, it isn't currently possible to get reliable estimates of wealth mobility: this is a critical gap, given that intergenerational wealth transmission now seems more important than ever.

Further analysis could also examine how housing, local labour markets and migration interact, since people may need to move to access better opportunities. The TTWA analysis could be extended as new boundary data becomes available, and further work could explore whether the same local patterns hold for different age groups or protected characteristics, as well as considering the role of transport links. Finally, there would be value in deepening the evidence on the transition from education to work, particularly for young people who become NEET, disabled young people and groups whose educational achievements are not fully reflected in labour-market outcomes.

Overall, the findings show that social mobility cannot be understood through a single measure. It depends on education, work, housing, geography, family background, health, discrimination and wider economic change. The UK has made real gains in some areas, but these gains are fragile and uneven. The central challenge is to ensure that opportunity does not depend so heavily on where a person starts, where they live or the barriers they face as they move from childhood into adult life.

