For too many, the ladder of mobility is missing the bottom step up.

Relative Mobility Plays a Role

People or households often shift between income groups with individual and global economic changes, life cycle progress, good and bad luck, family resources, illness, marriage or divorce, retirement, and hard work. Over time there can be different people in the income “quintiles”; this is called relative mobility, that people can move relative to those in their income group at any time. Because they are in a relative mobility position, it is not fair or accurate to talk about inequality or income or wealth gains or losses at the top or the bottom since the population of different groups is different at different times.

They would add that increased U.S. inequality is often by that relative mobility—the change of position relative to others, no matter what happens in the larger economy. In other words, I can “pull myself up by my bootstraps” and get to any higher income level, and so inequality is not really a problem. Inequality can even be an incentive to work harder and do better. In a recent op-ed, Andrew Kohut of the Pew Research Center wrote, “Americans are still confident that their society provides opportunities for economic mobility. In one recent Pew poll, 58 percent of respondents said they believed that people who wanted to get ahead could make it if they were willing to work hard.”

How Much Relative Mobility Is There?

Conservatives often cite a 2009 study from Treasury Department,4 based solely on income tax returns, which affirmed “considerable income mobility of individuals” during the 1996 to 2005 period and earlier. However, the same study disclosed that only “about half of those in the bottom quintile move to a higher quintile.” Also, in comparing changes over two time periods (1987 – 96 and 1996 – 2005), the study indicated that, while 62 percent of those in the top quintile remained there at the end of the first ten-year period, 69 percent remained in the top quintile over the next 10-year period, which would seem to indicate growing consolidation of those at the top. Some studies maintain that relative mobility has remained fairly constant since about 1970, although they concede that there are some indicators that it has declined in recent years.5

In terms of what is called intergenerational relative mobility (whether children track their parents’ income levels), there is greater relative mobility for those born into middle income families, moving up or down the income groups. However, roughly 40 percent of those in rich or poor families will remain in the same quintiles when they become adults. This reflects a growing awareness that the most important factors for a child’s future seem to be their parents’ income, education, and marital status. This powerful family environment predictor also is reflected in the growing correlation over time between the adult earnings of brothers.

Yes, there is some relative mobility in U.S. society, but in the face of the well-documented and rapidly escalating inequality of income and wealth discussed in our last issue, relative mobility would have to increase to offset the long-term effects of rising single year or “snapshot” inequality. Instead, “no study has found an increase in mobility that might have compensated for the increase in inequality.”

The United States Lags Behind in Relative Mobility

Another way to assess U.S. relative mobility is to compare ourselves with other developed nations. There actually are studies that indicate that, despite the popular faith in the “American dream” of mobility, the United States has less intergenerational relative mobility, measuring the relationship between parents’ and children’s income, than a number of countries, including Denmark, Norway, Finland, Canada, Sweden, Germany, and France. Only the United Kingdom seems on a lower mobility par with the U.S.6 Put another way by Council of Economic Advisors Chairman Alan B. Krueger, “Countries that have a high degree of inequality also tend to have less economic mobility across generations.”7 He went on to comment, “It is hard to look at these figures and not be concerned that rising inequality is jeopardizing our tradition of equality of opportunity.”8 The risk then is that we “enter a vicious cycle in which inequality breeds less mobility, and less mobility produces greater stratification—less mobility, less hardening of the class lines.”9

Another way of looking at these figures is that there is “economic freedom” for some, generally those “blessed” or “privileged” with greater gifts in terms of income, education, and family structure and the benefits they bring. For those born into families without these gifts, the economic freedom which they have is more or less constrained for most, except the exceptional person.

What can we do about this? Americans probably will be more persuaded by a focus on mobility and opportunity than poverty and inequality.

This means greater public investments in “home visiting, education, health, and other opportunity-enhancing programs,” which is a tough sell in a political climate primed to slash public spending on human investments rather than reduce bloated defense spending or increase revenues needed to improve opportunity.

For too many, the ladder of mobility is missing the bottom step up.

---See footnotes on page 7
Does Relative Mobility “Cure” Inequality?

In our Summer 2012 JustSouth Quarterly, Part One of this article, “Growing Economic Inequality Matters!”—discussed the fact that economic inequality (both in income and wealth) is real and worsening in the United States, that it has multiple causes, and that it matters, especially to people of faith, concerned about distributive justice. At the conclusion, the article raised the question whether “relative income mobility” cures inequality. In other words, does the fact that some people do move between income levels mean that inequality does not matter, that economic freedom trumps economic justice?

Relative Mobility Plays a Role

People or households often shift between income groups with individual and global economic changes, life cycle progress, good and bad luck, family resources, illness, marriage or divorce, retirement, and hard work. Over time there can be different people in the income “quintiles”; this is called relative mobility, that people can move relative to those in their income group at any one time. Some studies call relative mobility “success” or “good luck,” while others use “mobility” to refer to those who were in the same income quintile at the beginning of the time period and at the end of the time period. These are the people who did not move into a different income quintile than others; and the factors associated with increased downward mobility are being non-white and having a disability.4 In a comprehensive overview, the Pew Economic Mobility Project named what it called “pathways” to economic mobility that are strong determinants of mobility.5 They are divided into: social capital indicators such as family structure, parenting skills and education, parental similar-level occupations; education; community influences, and work-related networks; human capital indicators such as a child’s educational attainment, parents’ educational level, health status, health insurance, obesity, and low birth-weight; and financial capital indicators including wealth transfers, homeownership, retirement savings, and entrepreneurship.

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To better understand how Mississippi arrived at this potentially historic juncture in stopping the spread of state-level anti-immigrant legislation, I interviewed individuals who helped to shape the coalition of new voices, as well as faith and civil rights leaders working for immigration justice in Mississippi.

A HOPELESS FEELING

At the beginning of the 2012 Mississippi legislative session, the passage of a strict immigration enforcement bill was considered by many as inevitable. The new governor, Republican Phil Bryant, ran on an anti-immigrant platform, and for the first time since Reconstruction, chambers of the legislature were majority Republican.

Long-time immigrant advocate Mary Townsend with El Pueblo/Seashore Mission in Biloxi told me, “I had no doubt [HB 488] was going to pass. I felt we didn’t have a chance.” Michael Ann O’Rezpa, Director of Parish Based Ministries at the Diocese of Jackson, admits she sometimes suffered a “hopeless feeling, a feeling of defeat.” For Warren Yoder, the Executive Director of the Public Policy Center of Mississippi, the future for immigrant justice in Mississippi looked bleak: “We could really see ourselves going back to the 1930’s and 40’s in terms of the new Jim Crow… to have a three-race system with Hapalics at the bottom and using deputy sheriffs to harass people and prevent organizing. It was just scary.”

LAW ENFORCEMENT PRIME MOTIVATORS

Surprisingly, it was Mississippi law enforcement leaders that jump-started the coalition of new voices to defeat HB 488. Late Wednesday evening, March 14, an amendment giving law officers discretion over whether to investigate the immigration status of any person they arrested was removed from HB 488. Donna Echols, lobbyist for the Mississippi Association of Chiefs of Police said, “When that amendment took away our discretion, we had to come out full-force against it.” A leader in the agricultural sector, who asked not to be named, believes “law enforcement was one of the prime motivators of getting this going. Up to that point it looked like it was going to pass…The agricultural community worked really hard to build the coalition, but had the law enforcement people not been there first I don’t think we could have built the coalition.” He also noted that agricultural and business leaders were greatly influenced by the negative impact of HB 56 on Alabama’s economy and reputation.

I asked Robert Bruce Russell, Chief of Police for the city of Ellisville and a vocal leader of the law enforcement coalition, his reasons for opposing the bill. He explained, “The city of Ellisville cannot afford to fix a problem the federal government created… I am going to be honest with you. After 20 years of law enforcement people get two things when they go to jail—they get religion and they get sick. We are going to have to pay the bills on that… We start housing this many people we have to pay for it.”

Chief Russell made a compelling moral argument against HB 488 as well. At a press conference inside the capitol on March 28, he told reporters, “It’s going to get to the point to where either you detain a man who’s working and trying to provide a better life for his family. Or you detain a dope dealer or somebody with a suspended license or something like that.” In my interview, Chief Russell worried about the impact HB 488 would have on immigrant families: “The ones that are here now are family-oriented. What do you do about the children that are born here? Do you throw them in a detention center and let them sit there until something is figured out with the parent?”

DID MISSISSIPPIANS’ FAITH PLAY A ROLE?

As HB 488 was winding its way through the legislature, the annual Gallup Poll on religion in American life again found Mississippi the “most religious state” in the country, with 85 percent of Mississippi respondents agreeing that religion is an important part of their daily life. I asked what Mississippi leaders thought the role of faith played in the outcome of HB 488. Chief Russell told me, “It wasn’t about religion, it’s about the all-mighty dollar,” yet in opposition to the bill he provided important moral reasons to oppose HB 488. The leader of the agriculture group told me, “I’ll be honest with you, [religious leaders] did help… to shore up groups or legislators who would already be opposed. I don’t think they had much effect on persuading anybody who was either wavering or supporting it.” Warren Yoder felt that the reinforcement provided by faith leaders was “extremely important. We all went into this thinking we were going to lose, so having encouragement to stand up and stick it out was essential.”

Mary Townsend offered this perspective: “The more faith leaders speak up compellingly and present the teachings from Scripture we all hold in common, the more people’s eyes will be opened and they will remember that they are called by God to love their neighbor whoever he is…”

CONCLUSION

Without moral arguments provided by faith leaders, including Rep. Jim Evans, D-Jackson, who led the Mississippi Black Caucus in opposing the bill, the debate over HB 488 could have easily devolved into a solely economic argument that ignored the humanity and dignity of immigrants. Views are mixed regarding whether Mississippi will face immigration bills in the next legislature. How the Supreme Court rules on Arizona’s SB 1070 will certainly be a factor. Warren Yoder is hopeful. “The 21st Century is evolving in Mississippi quickly,” he said. “This is a place to keep an eye on and participate in. Because things are possible that nobody thought possible even four months ago. There are relationships that have been developed. There are possibilities that are being discussed. I frankly have no clue how this is going to work out… But there are heartening potentials.”