



Missouri Economy Indicators

Social Mobility

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Social mobility refers to the movement of individuals between social classes, typically measured through changes in income, education or health. This mobility can be upward or downward and can happen over a person’s lifetime. Across generations, upward social mobility is often achieved through the gradual accumulation of wealth. A successful business owner who couldn’t afford college might later provide their children with the means to attend college, leading to higher future incomes. Increased upward social mobility benefits individuals, the economy and society by creating more economic opportunity.

The Role of Parents in Social Mobility

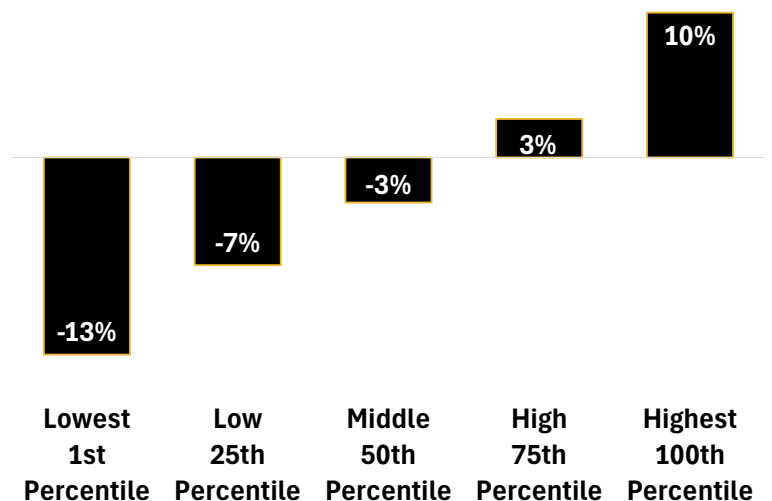
Social mobility differs across groups, influenced by factors like income, race and gender. Data from the [Opportunity Atlas](#) compares two birth cohorts—one from 1978 and one from 1992—to examine changes in social mobility over a 15-year period. Parents’ income and employment heavily influence their children’s future economic outcomes. Families in the 25th income percentile (low-income) and the 75th income percentile (high-income) have shown diverging trends. Employment rates for low-income families dropped from 75% for the 1978 cohort to 64% for the 1992 cohort. This decline in employment corresponds with a decrease in their children's income, who earned 7.2% less in adulthood than their 1978 counterparts, adjusted for inflation. In contrast, children from high-income families in 1992 earned 2.6% more than their 1978 counterparts, with children of the top 1% of earners seeing a nearly 10% increase. Children in 85% of Missouri’s counties earned lower incomes in 1992 than those born in 1978.

Social Mobility in Missouri

Children of the highest income earners (*top 1%*) experienced the largest average income gains (10%), approximately \$3,794. By contrast, children of the top 25% of earners experienced only modest gains of 3%.

Overall, three-quarters of all children experienced a decrease in social mobility over the 15-year period, with the greatest income losses falling on children from low-income families. Those born to the lowest 25% of earners in 1992 earned, on average, 7% less than counterparts born in 1978. Children born to the lowest 1% earned even less, with those born in 1992 earning 13% less than the 1978 group.

Change in Average Income for Children, by Parental Income
(Comparison of 1978 & 1992 Cohorts)



Source: MU Extension Graphic using Opportunity Atlas data
 Note: Income measured at age 27 for two cohorts of children born in 1978 and 1992. Figures are adjusted for inflation.

Birthplace and Social Mobility

Where a person is born plays a key role in determining their upward social mobility. Examining where social mobility is rising or falling can illuminate long-term economic trends and inform decision-makers on where to focus resources. Social mobility varies widely across the state, with some counties seeing average family income declines greater than 7%, while others report gains exceeding 15% (see map).

In both metro and nonmetro areas, income growth has been concentrated among the top income earners. The highest earners in metro counties saw a rise in income of about \$7,322, with nonmetro counties close behind at \$6,930. In contrast, the lowest earners faced significant declines, especially in nonmetro counties (-\$4,916) compared to metro counties (-\$1,885). This regional discrepancy highlights the challenges faced by rural areas in maintaining economic stability for lower-income families.

Economic structure and local opportunities also impact social mobility. The largest income growth occurred among the top 25% of earners, particularly in manufacturing-dependent (\$10,268) and mining-dependent (\$6,709) economies. Meanwhile, families in the lowest 25% experienced steep declines across most economic types, especially in manufacturing-dependent (-\$4,082) and farm-dependent (-\$8,714) economies. These findings suggest widening income disparities between top and bottom income earners in certain sectors, particularly in those linked to industrial and agricultural economies.

Overall, the findings from Opportunity Atlas reveal growing economic inequality, where the highest-income groups see the most benefit. This persistent inequality suggests limited economic mobility for lower-income groups, particularly in rural areas and specific economic sectors.

Additional Notes and Resources

- [Opportunity Insights](#) has several dashboards and articles that explore social and economic mobility.
- Brookings Institution summary of [key takeaways](#) from Opportunity Insights.
- The county economic structure, used in this analysis, is defined by U.S. Department of Agriculture [typology codes](#).

All Missouri Economy Indicators briefs in this series are available at <http://muext.us/MissouriEconomyIndicators>

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