

## **IS AMERICA THE LAND OF OPPORTUNITY?**

From “Where Is the Land of Opportunity? The Geography of Intergenerational Mobility in the U.S.”

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### Vocabulary Warm-Up

#### Section A

1. My family has moved around some, although most of the family has stayed in the Northeast. So we are relatively mobile geographically. It seems to be easier to move from one area of the country to another than to move from one social class to another, although my family has experienced a fair amount of economic and social mobility as well as geographic mobility.
2. The median income level is the average or middle income level. In New York City, the median income might be very high because many people in New York City earn very high salaries. The median income in a city like Paterson, NJ, would be much lower because many people in Paterson are poor.
3. Some research suggests that tall people earn more money. Is this because tall people are smarter or more successful? Probably not. But it is possible that being tall makes people more confident, which in turns leads to more success and eventually a higher salary. So there could be a causal effect. But it would be hard to nail down the actual cause of the higher salary and to eliminate all the other factors that might contribute to the outcome. It would be easy, in contrast, to simply show a correlation between height and salary.
4. Intergenerational housing would be housing that was intended or occupied by more than one generation. I would expect grandparents and grandchildren to live together, but I guess that one could argue that most families with children are living in a kind of intergenerational housing.
5. If you drive under the influence of alcohol, you might get into an accident. If you work hard at school, you might succeed and then you might be able to go to a college and study what you want to study. I think it can be hard to see ahead as a teenager, so long-term outcomes can be hard to see and even harder to believe.

#### Section B

1. d
2. a
3. b
4. a
5. b
6. d

#### Section C

1. Upward mobility in the world of economics refers to one’s ability to advance economically: for a child to earn more than his or her parents, for example. I’m not sure I think upward mobility is so easy to achieve in this country. I think it’s easier for middle class or lower-middle class people to advance, but I think the very poor in this country have a hard time breaking out because of the depth of economic segregation and structural inequality that exists in the United States.

2. We might compare a Chicagoan's chance of being upwardly mobile with a New Yorker's chance; that's a relative analysis. An analysis of absolute economic mobility would indicate an individual's chance of being upwardly mobile, regardless of where he comes from. Absolute mobility, then, focuses on overall chances for any individual; relative mobility looks at mobility in relation to one factor – such as city of origin.

3. A core sample might be all the important and relevant data to a particular research project. Researchers probably collect lots and lots of data, but they then have to decide what's relevant and useful. That particular set of information would be the core data.

#### Section D

1. In my school, there is not a lot of social mobility: people stick to their particular crowds based on their interests and activities. I think more social mobility would be a good thing; we probably have more in common than we think with people in other groups. Activities that forced students to interact with others outside their normal comfort zones would probably help, but I'm not sure anyone would support those. For example, if you were forced to eat lunch with different people once a week, you might make new friends and learn interesting things about different people. But I don't think that idea would go over well in my school.

2. All sorts of standardized tests use median scores as part of the norming process. If the goal of a test is to assess how an individual's score stacks up against others, then the median score is important. If the goal is to determine whether an individual learned a base-level of information, like on the driving test, then it doesn't matter so much how others do on the test. I guess the issue of fairness goes to the question of why we need to compare people with others altogether.

3. In my high school, there is a highest GPA award for one girl and one boy. That means if two girls have the two highest overall GPAs, they can't both win. This is a kind of separate treatment for boys and girls that I think is nonsensical and should be eliminated. But I think same-sex education is an interesting experiment; some girls and boys thrive when they don't have to worry about the distractions of the opposite sex. And perhaps teachers teach differently and better when they have only girls or only boys in their classrooms.

#### Section E

1. c
2. a
3. b
4. c

#### Check for Understanding

1. a
2. b
3. b
4. a
5. b

#### Writing and Discussion

A. Section A: Do you live in a land of opportunity?

1. Using New Jersey or the Northeast as an example, students should see that cities like New York, Newark, or Boston have greater relative mobility than many cities in the South and Midwest, like Atlanta or Milwaukee.

2. Eighty-seven people will not escape poverty. These numbers are depressing, but students may have other perspectives.

3. Table A-1: Factors that may contribute to intergenerational poverty

<b>Factors identified in the research</b>	<b>What this means to you</b>
Racial and income segregation	If poor people and/or people of color live separately and apart from others, it might be hard for them to see, learn about, and access opportunities and experiences that might contribute to economic success.
Inequality	If inequality is large, that means the wealthy are way ahead of the poor and have access to lots of resources to stay ahead. A poor kid might need to work 30 hours a week at a minimum-wage job, while a rich kid can work at an unpaid internship and gain valuable job experience. When both of those people apply for a job, the kid who had the internship probably has an advantage.
School quality	Some schools have more resources than others. Those resources may include nicer facilities, more extracurricular activities, more student support services, more advanced classes, and more experienced teachers. All of these can be important in helping students succeed and keeping students from reaching their potential.
Social networks and community involvement	In some communities, there are strong social networks, like religious groups and community organizations. These sorts of groups can be a safety net for families and help during hard times. Obviously, a safety net can be crucial in making it through the inevitable crisis that life throws in everyone's way.
Family structure	Strong families, in whatever shape and form, can be crucial in helping young people succeed. Whether it is a strong mother or a supportive grandfather, families are important. A child who grows up without a network of family support, whether in terms of a nuclear family or a strong extended family, is at a disadvantage.

Other ideas	Economic growth is probably important for economic opportunity. At some historical moments in time, our economy has grown rapidly, and this has meant for opportunities for everyone. At times of economic contraction, some people, including women and minorities, seem to suffer more, so economic mobility is probably also affected.
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4. Students can talk about the particulars of their region. Are they in an area of above average opportunity or below average opportunity? They can also analyze the additional factors, from the table above, in order to think about how supportive their community might be in helping a child succeed beyond the level of his or her family. Hopefully, students can begin to reflect on the many complications that factor into the equation when deciding whether they live in a land of opportunity or not.

B. Will Travis be whatever he wants to be?

1. Walter specifically resents the fact that he drives wealthy white men around. Perhaps he might be more sympathetic to the clientele of a bus, but clearly his ambitions for his son are vast. He wants Travis to surpass his father, and a bus driver is too close to a chauffeur to satisfy Walter.

2. It's interesting that Walter's dreams for himself are about material success and respect: a flashy car, a gardener. But when he thinks of what he wants for Travis, he speaks about education and options. He wants Travis to be whatever he wants to be. He doesn't talk about Travis being rich or famous. It's as if Walter wants to be rich just so that he can give his son the option to be happy doing whatever he wants.

3. Travis would be most likely to succeed in San Jose, CA, and least likely to succeed in Charlotte, NC, at least at the end of the twentieth century. I think those numbers probably would have been different in the 50s, when racial segregation was at its height. California is now a diverse state. Was it in the 50s? The article suggests that racial segregation is a factor in economic stagnation. Perhaps the places of greatest racial and economic integration in the 50s would have offered Travis the greatest success. Given what we read about Chicago in *Raisin*, it doesn't sound as if either the south side of Chicago or Clybourne Park offered much hope for Travis.

4. I think Walter's dreams for Travis are fascinating. Perhaps in this scene, we can best see how Walter is Beneatha's brother: full of hope and ambition. But unlike Beneatha who still hopes for big things for herself, Walter seems to have transferred his hopes to his son. Unfortunately, given what the research suggests about the important factors in economic mobility, it seems unlikely that Travis will succeed. He lives in a racially and economically segregated environment, with vast inequality. There is little in the play to suggest a strong community network – indeed, the fact that Walter is fleeced by a friend indicates just the opposite. Travis does have the benefit of his aunt and his grandmother looking out for him, in addition to his parents. Perhaps a strong school could help Travis. Whether he will find that in Chicago or in Clybourne Park isn't made clear in the play.