

Migration and social mobility: the life chances of Britain's minority ethnic communities

A study examining the class position in 2001 of those growing up in the 1960s-80s in England and Wales shows that family background remains important in achieving occupational success and avoiding unemployment, but that there are differences across ethnic groups. The study, by Lucinda Platt of the University of Essex, was based on the ONS Longitudinal Study. It found:

- Background remains important. The children of parents in higher social classes are more likely to end up in higher social classes themselves. This is the case even when taking account of individual educational achievement.
- Most minority ethnic groups show high levels of children moving into a higher class than their parents. This is consistent with the idea that their parents suffered downward mobility on arrival in Britain.
- For some minority groups (Caribbeans, Black Africans, Indians, Chinese and other) children with working-class parents are more likely to end up in professional/managerial class families than white British people from similar origins. This can be explained by educational achievement.
- Pakistanis in the sample were the exception to this pattern. Despite their parents being very heavily concentrated in the working-class, they show *lower* levels of upward mobility than their white British counterparts, even when taking account of their educational levels.
- Bangladeshis also show some of this disproportionate disadvantage. But, for them, more is explained through their backgrounds and educational achievements.
- Having parents from a higher social class tends to protect children against ending up in an unemployed household in adulthood.
- However, even when taking account of parents' social class, those from minority ethnic groups are at greater risk of unemployment than their white British counterparts from similar backgrounds. This is particularly true of Caribbeans.
- Exploring differences between religious groups reveals that, controlling for their backgrounds and other characteristics, Jews and Hindus are more likely to end up in a higher social class than their Christian counterparts; Muslims and Sikhs have lower chances.
- This is not just an effect of ethnicity (i.e. the fact that most Muslims are from the already disadvantaged Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities). Differences *within* the Indian ethnic group show that Hindus (and, to a lesser extent, Christians) are much more 'successful' than Sikhs and Muslims.



Background

This study used the ONS Longitudinal Study (LS) to explore patterns of intergenerational social mobility and how these differ by ethnic group. It asks:

- How do class, migration effects and ethnicity explain such differences?
- What is the impact of education for the second generation?
- Do patterns of mobility vary by religious affiliation?
- What can religion add to our understanding of differences between ethnic groups?

The study tracked three broadly defined class categories across the three decades: 'working' (for example, those in manual jobs and routine non-manual occupations), 'intermediate' (for example, those in administrative jobs) and 'higher' (for example, those in professional or managerial jobs).

The effect of changes in the labour market

Overall, the expansion of professional and managerial occupations in the period studied relative to routine and manual ones means that – with 'more room at the top' – there was a large amount of upward mobility for all groups.

In 1971 and 1981, parents from minority ethnic groups were very heavily concentrated in the working-class. This meant that the levels of upward mobility for their children appeared particularly marked. However, of four minority groups examined in detail, it was only those from the Indian ethnic group whose proportion in professional/managerial occupations in 2001 exceeded that of the white non-migrants.

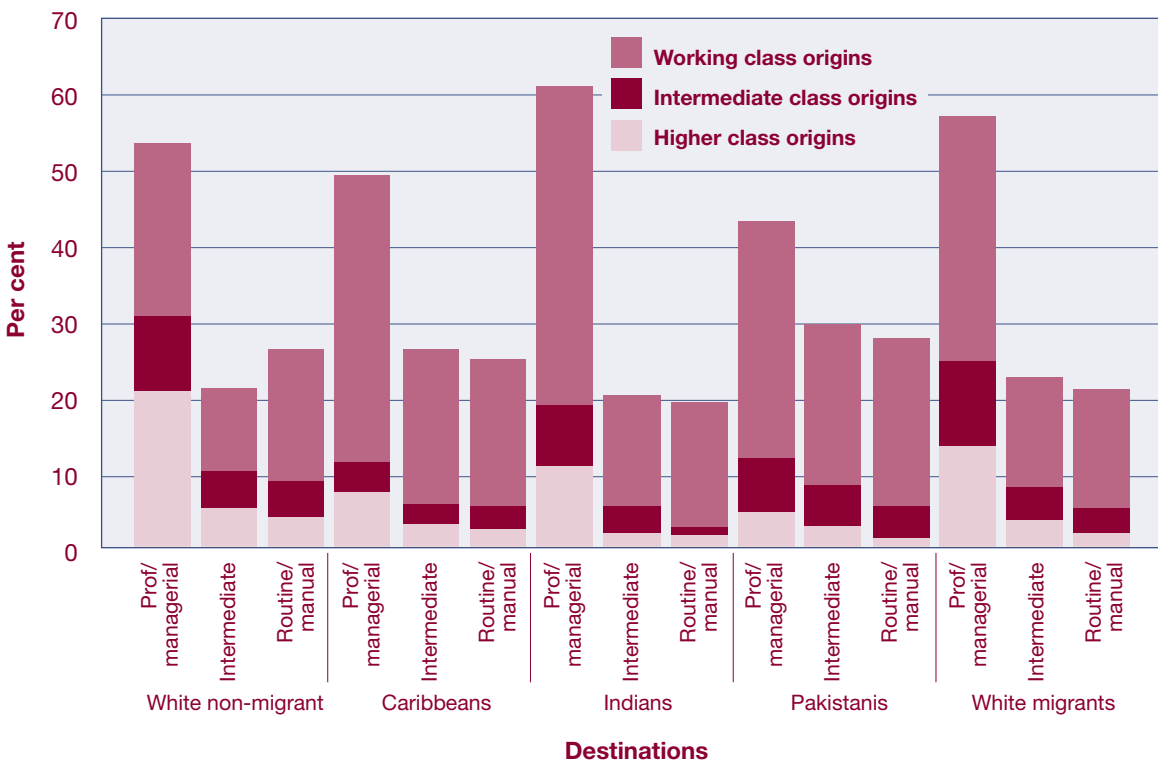
The impact of family background

For all the children in the study, the research examined whether relative chances of occupational success depended on class origins. It found that the children of parents from higher social classes were themselves more likely to end up in the professional or managerial classes, even when the children's own educational achievement was taken into account.

Two factors also independently increase the chances of ending up in a professional or managerial class family: economic assets in the household in which the child was growing up, and having a highly qualified mother. Thus, while education is clearly very important in determining occupational outcomes, class background continues to play a role. This is in addition to the role class background may play in helping towards educational success in the first place.

A more advantaged background also tends to protect against ending up in an unemployed family.

Figure 1: Percentages from different ethnic groups ending up in particular class destinations at 2001, by their class origins



Source: ONS Longitudinal Study, author's analysis

Note: The three columns across each ethnic group sum to 100%, and each section of the column represents the share of each group that ends up in a particular destination from a particular origin.

Differences between ethnic groups

Due to difficulties in measuring the intergenerational mobility of minority ethnic groups, in the past we knew very little about whether children from minority ethnic groups move into a different social class from their parents. This study fills that gap. Exploring only those minority groups where parents were born outside the UK but their class was measured following migration to England or Wales, and comparing them with a white group where the co-resident parent(s) was born in the UK, it traced the movement between classes for a limited age range with comparable school experience and compared their outcomes at a single point in time.

The research showed that the parents from the minority groups were very heavily concentrated in the working-class. This suggested that their children would have higher chances of upward mobility due to the overall expansion of higher class jobs. And that is indeed what we see. Figure 1 shows both the size of the different classes at 2001 by ethnic group and the composition of each class according to the parents' social class.

For the minority groups shown, those in the professional and managerial classes predominantly come from working-class backgrounds. By contrast, in the white non-migrant group, fewer than half of those in the professional/managerial classes have higher class backgrounds.

Figure 1 also illustrates the differences between minority groups. Far smaller proportions of Pakistanis and far higher proportions of Indians ended up in the professional/managerial classes.

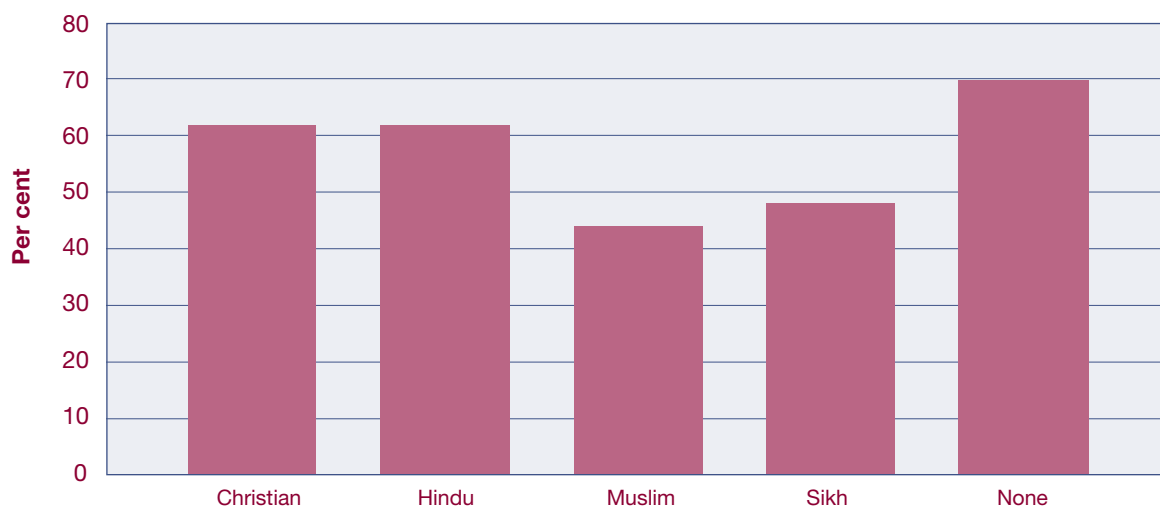
These different patterns have been put down to differences in background across the groups, including not only parents' class position but also their economic assets and educational qualifications. However, the analysis showed that these do not account for differences between groups.

When controlling for background, most of the minority groups (Caribbeans, Black Africans, Indians, Chinese and other, and white migrants) were more likely to end up in the professional/managerial class than their white non-migrant counterparts. This is consistent with the arguments that migrants experience downward mobility on entering Britain and that they have particular aspirations for their children, which can be part of their rationale for migrating.

Factoring in the children's own educational achievement at 2001, shows that children's upward mobility is due to education. This suggests that migrant parents may have motivated their children to achieve through supporting them in gaining qualifications.

This picture was not entirely true, however, for the Bangladeshis in the sample and was completely different for the Pakistanis. The Pakistanis were less likely to end up in professional/managerial families even when taking their backgrounds and their own educational level into account. Thus both their class disadvantage and their disadvantage relative to other minority groups cannot be put down either to differences in background or to differences in educational achievement. Indeed, this group could expect to have better outcomes than the white non-migrants on the strength of their characteristics and backgrounds.

Figure 2: **Predicted percentages with professional/managerial class outcomes among Indians according to their religion**



Source: ONS Longitudinal Study, Author's analysis

This was not true of the Bangladeshis, whose characteristics partly explain their class disadvantage. (The full report highlights important differences between these two groups as well as revealing some of the better known comparability between them in their generally disadvantaged position.)

The impact of religion

The study also examined how religious affiliation could enhance our understanding of intergenerational mobility instead of or in addition to ethnicity.

Exploring differences between religious groups reveals that those in the study of Jewish or Hindu affiliation have greater chances of upward mobility than their Christian counterparts, controlling for other characteristics; Muslims and Sikhs have lower chances.

However, this is not just an effect of ethnicity (i.e. the fact that most Muslims are from the already disadvantaged Pakistani and Bangladeshi groups). Examining differences within the Indian ethnic group showed that Indian Hindus (and, to a lesser extent, Indian Christians) did very well, Indian Sikhs and Indian Muslims did relatively less well (see Figure 2).

Conclusion

While other research has indicated that class background continues to be important, much of that privilege has been shown to operate through educational opportunities and through parents supporting the next generation in achieving educational qualifications. This research shows that a privileged background continues to operate alongside education in increasing chances of more favourable outcomes.

This study also shows how religion can provide valuable additional information on diversity within groups.

On this evidence, the researcher concludes that the policy ideal of a 'meritocracy' in which class and ethnic background no longer play a role is not being fulfilled for the up-and-coming generations.

About the project

The study is unique in tracing the transitions between parents and children directly over time for a particular cohort of children. The study observed the parental class, parental qualifications and household characteristics of a set of 140,000 children born between 1956 and 1977 and living in England or Wales. It observed these children's 'origins' at one of two time points – 1971 (for those aged 4-15 years old at that time) or 1981 (for those aged 4-15 years old at that time), when they were school age and living with a parent. It then traced the children's own occupational and educational achievement at 2001.

For further information

The full report, **Migration and social mobility: The life chances of Britain's minority ethnic communities** by Lucinda Platt, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press (ISBN 1 86134 800 2, price £9.95).

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