

Dr Kevin Latham, Dr Esme Lillywhite



The Good Life?

The relationship between social mobility and happiness





About the Sutton Trust

The Sutton Trust is the UK's leading social mobility charity. Our programmes empower young people to access life-changing opportunities, and our research influences national change to deliver a fairer future.

As an independent charity, our work is entirely reliant on the generous support of our community of donors.

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Foreword – Claire Costello, The Co-op Group

Co-operatives, like ours, are unique – those they serve are those who own the business. We have members, not shareholders.

Because of this, the welfare of our Group and the welfare of those who make Co-op what it is are inherently connected. It's been this way since the Rochdale Pioneers laid the foundations of our movement in 1844.

We commit our focus to, and measure our success against, the value we create for our members. The more our 7.2m active member-owners trade with us, the more we can return to them and their communities.

On behalf of everyone here at Co-op I am so grateful to Kevin Latham, Esme Lillywhite and the wider Sutton Trust team for this report and the quality of their work.

The Good Life? sheds new light on the relationship between social mobility, wellbeing and access to opportunities in the UK, with a focus on young people and their prospects.

Sadly, the findings are particularly stark.

Correlations between work or education and personal health/wellbeing are already well documented, where UK Government recognises a 'crisis of opportunity' for those one million young people who are not currently in education, employment or training.

But this report has uncovered a further, irrefutable link between social mobility and happiness. Opportunities for young people to pursue and experience happiness, thanks to upward mobility and reaching their goals, are now undermined by the rising cost of living and the housing crisis.

Today, the outlook for the next generation of workers promises fewer opportunities and, in turn, a lower sense of wellbeing.

The reason we believe this research is so important is that it shows social mobility isn't simply about a stronger national economy or an equitable pipeline for future talent, it is fundamental to building a

“Social mobility isn't simply about a stronger national economy or an equitable pipeline for future talent, it is fundamental to building a healthy, happy society.”

healthy, happy society. Access to the education, training and employment opportunities are a route to fulfilling lives, and that pathway must be protected.

On behalf of our members and our communities, that is where we will continue to drive our energy and resource.

And, as you read this, I invite anyone with power and influence to give the findings the same careful consideration that we will be doing.

Together, we can ensure that greater opportunities - and the good life they make possible - are within the reach of every young person.

Claire Costello, Chief People and Inclusion Officer, The Co-op Group



Foreword – Nick Harrison, Sutton Trust

Since 1997, the Sutton Trust has made the case that where you start in life should not determine where you end up. Social mobility is a route to higher incomes and better jobs. But in today's Britain, where opportunity and outcomes remain uneven and unequal, it is also about something more fundamental: who gets to live a good life.

We see the transformative power of opportunity every day. Last year we supported over 14,500 young people from disadvantaged backgrounds as they navigated education and early careers. Their ambition and resilience are a powerful reminder of how much potential remains untapped across the UK.

Yet this research highlights a more complex reality. Social mobility does hugely improve lives, but it does not level them. Class, it turns out, casts a shadow which persists.

We find a clear “happiness gap” between those from different socio-economic backgrounds. Individuals raised in professional households, who remain there, are significantly more likely to report high levels of wellbeing than those who remain in routine occupations. Upward mobility narrows this divide, bringing greater financial security, better health, and improved prospects of home ownership. But it does not close it.

For many, the journey upwards comes with trade-offs. It can involve moving away from family, navigating unfamiliar professional cultures, and overcoming entrenched expectations. These pressures can carry real costs—for relationships, for work-life balance, and for overall wellbeing. As a result, those who climb the ladder do not always experience the same quality of life as those born at the top.

By contrast, those from more advantaged backgrounds appear better protected from downward moves. Family resources, networks and a sense of security act as a buffer, cushioning the impact on life satisfaction. The advantages of birth endure in ways that are not always visible, but are deeply felt over time.

“If we are serious about building a fairer society, we must also confront the enduring link between where you come from and how you experience life itself. Everyone deserves the chance to live a good life.”

The Sutton Trust will continue to work to break the link between background and opportunity. But this research shows that the challenge runs deeper. If we are serious about building a fairer society, we must also confront the enduring link between where you come from and how you experience life itself. Everyone deserves the chance to live a good life, wherever they start and whatever path they take.

Nick Harrison, CEO, Sutton Trust



Key findings

Is social mobility just about jobs and income? Does being upwardly mobile make you happy? Does socio-economic background determine who gets to live good, healthy and happy lives? This report examines the connection between happiness, wellbeing, life satisfaction, and social mobility, and how this relationship is affected by education, geographical mobility and age. It draws on analysis of the UK Household Longitudinal Survey, new nationally representative polling, as well as case study interviews.

Happiness is a broad and often loosely defined concept. In this report, we use several different indicators of happiness and wellbeing, including the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS), as well as life satisfaction and self-reported happiness.

- **People's social background significantly impacts their happiness and life satisfaction as an adult.** There is a 'happiness gap' between people born into different socio-economic circumstances. Those from professional households who maintain that status through their lives are a third (33%) more likely to experience high wellbeing than those who remain in routine occupations.
- **Social mobility closes most of this gap.** Those who are upwardly mobile are substantially more happy than those who remain in routine occupations. **This boost in happiness is explained by a combination of higher incomes and financial stability, better health, as well as higher chances of being in employment, accessing higher education and owning your home.** Remaining in a routine occupation is also associated with higher levels of emotional and mental distress.
- **However, the upwardly mobile are still not quite as happy as those born into a professional household who maintain this status as adults.** This remaining gap is explained by differences in income, employment and home ownership.
- **Downwardly mobile people from higher socio-economic backgrounds tend to be 'protected'** from some of the negative aspects of lower socio-economic status on wellbeing. In part this may be because they actively made choices to work in lower status occupations. They may also have benefited from previous financial security enabling such decisions.
- In general, **longer-range mobility** (moving from bottom to top or vice versa) **had a stronger influence on wellbeing** than shorter-range mobility (people who move to an adjacent occupational status e.g. routine to intermediate).

- **People with a university degree had higher wellbeing.** Degree holders consistently have higher wellbeing than non-degree holders even after accounting for patterns of wellbeing across social mobility trajectories.
- **Those who were upwardly mobile were more than twice as likely to have moved away from the region they grew up in** than those who remained in routine occupations. In general, **those who moved region had higher wellbeing** than those who didn't, although this was likely associated with the income boost from moving.
- **New survey data shows that self-perceptions of social mobility also matter to wellbeing.** Those who thought themselves upwardly mobile had the highest levels of wellbeing, and those who saw themselves as downwardly mobile had the lowest. However, almost half (49%) of the group reporting upward mobility grew up in professional homes. This shows the enduring power of social mobility narratives.
- **A sense of belonging to the local community is strongly linked to wellbeing. Those with a very strong sense of belonging were more than 13 times more likely to have high wellbeing than those with very weak belonging.** Those who moved region and those who were upwardly mobile were just as likely to have this sense of belonging than those who hadn't moved region and weren't socially mobile.
- **Social mobility is not a singular phenomenon and our case studies demonstrate that people experience it in very different ways.** While for many those experiences are positive, others may face challenges including needing to move away from home to be successful, overcoming class stereotypes and expectations, higher stress or strain on relationships and issues with work-life balance. Wellbeing is also informed by personal outlooks as well as health, family relationships, friendship and culture.
- **Different people have different ambitions in life**, many of which are not related to moving into high-paying and/or high-status professions. **What is important for happiness and wellbeing is people's agency to realise their ambitions**, however bold or modest, and whatever form they take. Upward social mobility is not the only route to a happier life.
- **The potential for young people to experience the benefits often associated with upward social mobility is being undermined by the current cost of living, as well as the housing crisis.** Even interviewees who felt they had higher social status or professions than their parents pointed to the fact that they could not afford to buy their own homes or enjoy the kind of economic freedom that their parents had had.

Policy implications

This research reveals how factors such as education, housing, employment, health and community intersect and interact to affect people's experiences of social mobility and wellbeing. These insights point to several key policy implications:

1. **Realise social mobility's potential:** upward social mobility is associated with higher wellbeing. Consequently, **greater social mobility should be seen a valuable pathway for improving people's happiness and wellbeing**, as well as purely economic impacts.
2. **Use broader measures of quality of life beyond GDP to measure progress and inform policymaking:** this could include material and economic indicators such as levels of transport connectivity, housing quality, availability and quality of healthcare or employment opportunities but also indicators of non-economic factors contributing to wellbeing such as access to green spaces, sense of community, connectedness and satisfaction with where we live. Data on these, and many other factors, are already collected by the Office for National Statistics (ONS).
3. **Improve access to educational, employment and training opportunities for young people from all backgrounds:** with widespread concern about the number of young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEETs), there is a danger of a vicious circle of poor opportunities and low wellbeing, with the two exacerbating one another. The government should build on its Youth Guarantee and other initiatives to **further access to educational, employment and training opportunities - empowering all young people with greater agency**.
4. **Enable people to thrive without having to leave their community:** social mobility is strongly linked to geographical mobility. Yet we know that geographical mobility is constrained for many people by, among other things, poor or expensive transport, financial resources and social networks. For many reasons, people also want to stay in the places where they have family, friends and community ties. None of these should be an obstacle to social mobility. Consequently, **policymakers should prioritise ways to make sure that opportunity structures are available to people where they are**. Here, the government can look to reap the rewards of greater devolution, invest in local infrastructure and strengthen local business environments through its Modern Industrial Strategy. This also includes ensuring good-quality and well-paid jobs in routine occupations.

5. **Broaden conceptualisations of the university premium:** it is widely recognised that the university premium – that is the higher salaries that graduates can on average expect compared to non-graduates – is reducing. However, **this research finds that graduates have greater happiness and wellbeing than non-graduates.** This suggests that the university premium should not only be measured in terms of financial returns and that this should inform debates about university attendance among young people. Young people should continue to be encouraged to go to university if appropriate for them. Reform of the student finance system is also required to make it more equitable for students from low-income backgrounds.
6. **Look beyond occupation and income:** alongside objective measures of upward mobility, we have found that people's subjective experiences and perceptions of their social mobility journeys are a crucial part of the picture. People's life circumstances, priorities and rationale for decisions vary greatly. For many people finding happiness involves crucial trade-offs involving, for example, careers, housing, moving region or family. Consequently, addressing **social mobility should be about empowering people to have more agency over their lives.**
7. **Address poverty and educational disadvantage and the impact this has on people's lives. You shouldn't need to be socially mobile to thrive.** The poorest and least socially or geographically mobile are on average the least happy and experience the lowest wellbeing. To address this, **every effort should be taken to address poverty and the significant impacts that economic deprivation can have on young people's schooling.** The Sutton Trust has recommended a suite of recommendations for how this should be done at all stages of education, including: equalising access to high quality early years education; extending incentives for teachers to work in deprived areas; targeting more funding at the most disadvantaged schools through the National Funding Formula and Pupil Premium.

Introduction

Social mobility generally refers to the relationship between someone's socio-economic background and their current socio-economic status. We often hear about individuals' social mobility stories, where they share experiences of their 'journey' from a more modest upbringing to jobs of greater pay or status. There has also been growing acknowledgement of the economic case for social mobility – making better use of the country's talents.¹

Much of the research on social mobility has focused on 'hard' outputs, like the income level or occupation reached by an individual. However, money and social status alone do not tell the whole story of being socially mobile – and these metrics can leave out key parts of individuals' experiences.

Becoming socially mobile may bring you more money or a professional occupation, but does it make you happy and fulfilled? Do those who are socially mobile have better life satisfaction? What are the community ties, family bonds, work-life considerations and wider social factors that affect people's decision-making, experiences of social mobility and future happiness? This report aims to widen the conversation on social mobility in the UK, moving beyond just income and social status by considering interrelated markers of happiness, wellbeing and life satisfaction.²

“Becoming socially mobile may bring you more money or a professional occupation, but does it make you happy and fulfilled?”

Social mobility and wellbeing in the policy landscape

Social mobility has been a mainstay of UK political debate for decades.³ It appeals to governments, as it speaks to an aspiration to spread opportunity across the country and to drive economic growth. There is

¹ Billy Huband-Thompson, *The Opportunity Effect: How Social Mobility Can Help Drive Business and the Economy Forward* (Demos, 2024), <https://demos.co.uk/research/the-opportunity-effect-how-social-mobility-can-help-drive-business-and-the-economy-forward/>.

² Wellbeing and happiness are broad and often vague concepts. Throughout this report we use different approaches to understanding wellbeing, including wellbeing scales, life satisfaction, and people's own understandings of wellbeing or happiness. The conceptualisation of wellbeing and happiness in this report is discussed in further detail below.

³ The Sutton Trust, *What Is Social Mobility* (Sutton Trust, 2025), <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/What-is-Social-Mobility.pdf>.

also strong public appetite for social mobility. Sutton Trust polling has found that 9 out of 10 members of the public say it is important to level the playing field in the UK.⁴ However, social mobility is a contested term and there is growing acknowledgement that people's professional decisions have wide-ranging motivations beyond simply getting a high-status promotion or earning more money.

Recent polling from the Social Mobility Commission has found people in the UK more likely to put other values above high income or professional status as a measure of success. Most people said that success is about physical and mental wellbeing and having good relationships with family and friends, while only two thirds said success is about earning a high income and less than half said having a job regarded as professional or managerial.⁵ Other factors such as the importance of family, community, work-life balance or cultural background may also come into play for many.⁶

It is important for contemporary social mobility discussions to better capture these factors and the local and often individual contexts that shape them. In 2025, The Sutton Trust published The Opportunity Index, highlighting the range and variation of social mobility opportunities for disadvantaged young people in all English parliamentary constituencies.⁷ The House of Lords also recently published a detailed analysis of social mobility in the UK, recommending a focus on local, place-based interventions.⁸ The Social Mobility Commission similarly pointed to the complexity of social mobility in regional context in its annual *State of the Nation* reports.⁹ Among other

⁴ Kevin Latham, *Social Mobility and Opportunity*, 29 May 2024, <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/social-mobility-and-opportunity/>.

⁵ Social Mobility Commission, *Perceptions of Social Mobility in the UK: Unpacking Public Attitudes and Evolving Aspirations* (Social Mobility Commission, 2025), <https://socialmobility.independent-commission.uk/reports/perceptions-of-social-mobility-in-the-uk-unpacking-public-attitudes-and-evolving-aspirations/>.

⁶ Huband-Thompson, *The Opportunity Effect*.

⁷ Erica Holt-White et al., *The Opportunity Index*, 15 May 2025, <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/the-opportunity-index/>.

⁸ Social Mobility Policy Committee, *Social Mobility: Local Roots, Lasting Change - Social Mobility Policy Committee*, HL 201 (House of Lords, n.d.), accessed 3 December 2025, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5901/ldselect/ldsocmob/201/20102.htm>.

⁹ The Social Mobility Commission, 'State of the Nation: Research on Social Mobility in the UK', GOV.UK, 18 December 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/state-of-the-nation>.

things, this report provides further insights into the relationships between social mobility and place as well as geographical mobility.

One key issue relating to opportunities for young people is the crisis of roughly one in eight young people aged 16-24 not in education, employment or training (NEET).¹⁰ With young people who are from a lower socio-economic background more than twice as likely to be NEET than those from higher socio-economic backgrounds,¹¹ the issue is one of social mobility. It is also intricately linked to wellbeing: analysis in 2025 showed a 76% increase in economically inactive 16-34-year-olds with mental health conditions since 2019.¹² Not only are higher rates of mental health identified as a key driver of the rising number of young people who are NEET, but employment precarity and affordability pressures are also identified as a key driver of poor mental health for young people.¹³ It is clear that both opportunity and wellbeing must go hand in hand when addressing these challenges for young people.

“Not only are higher rates of mental health identified as a key driver of the rising number of young people who are NEET, but employment precarity and affordability pressures are also identified as a key driver of poor mental health for young people.”

Wellbeing policy

In recent decades, there has been extensive research and debate about whether indicators or indices of happiness and wellbeing should feature in government policy making alongside economic indicators such as gross domestic product (GDP).¹⁴ In fact, a UN High-Level Expert Group was appointed in May 2025 on ‘Beyond GDP’, to advance work on measures of progress beyond GDP which ultimately feature subjective wellbeing, among other indicators.¹⁵ The work of economist Richard Layard, one of the leading figures of happiness studies, has made the case for prioritising wellbeing in government policy, arguing that the overarching goal of a society should be to maximise the wellbeing of its

¹⁰ Office for National Statistics (ONS), published 26 February 2026, ONS website, statistical bulletin, Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), UK: February 2026

¹¹ The Social Mobility Commission, ‘State of the Nation’.

¹² Charlie Mayfield, ‘Keep Britain Working: Final Report’, GOV.UK, 5 November 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/keep-britain-working-review-final-report/keep-britain-working-final-report>.

¹³ Understanding Drivers of Recent Trends in Young People’s Mental Health (Youth Futures Foundation, 2025), <https://youthfuturesfoundation.org/publication/briefing-understanding-drivers-of-recent-trends-in-young-peoples-mental-health/>.

¹⁴ R. Allan Freeze, *The Metrics of Happiness: The Art and Science of Measuring Personal Happiness and Societal Wellbeing* (Springer, 2022), <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-10913-3>.

¹⁵ High-Level Expert Group on Beyond GDP, ‘Interim Report’, 2025, [interim_report_high-level_expert_group_on_beyond_gdp_251105.pdf](https://www.beyondgdp.org/interim-report-high-level-expert-group-on-beyond-gdp-251105.pdf)

people.¹⁶ Consideration of wellbeing both at the individual and societal level is therefore one way of trying to understand the complexities and interactions between economic and more social, psychological or cultural policy outcomes.

In various ways, recent governments have also started incorporating wellbeing into policy.¹⁷ Wellbeing was one of twelve missions identified in the 2023 Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill.¹⁸ This set a target for wellbeing to have improved in every area of the UK, with the gap between top performing and other areas closing by 2030. The current Labour government has committed to repealing Part 1 of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill¹⁹ but until this happens is legally obliged to report on progress. Indeed, it has identified the actions it is taking towards the Wellbeing Mission, including prioritisation of and targeted funding through arm's-length bodies for wellbeing across culture, arts, heritage, sport, youth and civil society sectors.²⁰

Despite plans to repeal this bill, wellbeing is nonetheless a key feature of current government policy. There are examples of policies that explicitly target wellbeing particularly with regards to mental health, such as plans to expand mental health support teams in schools and colleges, providing additional support for children and young people's mental health through Young Futures Hubs and spending up to £120

¹⁶ Peter R. G. Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science ; [inside: The Seven Causes of Happiness]*, New ed.: fully rev. and updated, Penguin Psychology (Penguin Books, 2011).

¹⁷ Though this has also come with criticism of an overemphasis on economic and a lack of wellbeing indicators. The Health Foundation, 'The Government's Levelling up Agenda', July 2021, <https://www.health.org.uk/reports-and-analysis/briefings/the-government-s-levelling-up-agenda>; UK Health Alliance on Climate Change, 'Levelling Up Bill', UK Health Alliance on Climate Change, accessed 13 March 2026, <https://ukhealthalliance.org/resource/levelling-up-bill/>; Elaine Mulcahy, 'Targets for Measuring Health and Wellbeing Are Critical to Success of Levelling Up', UK Health Alliance on Climate Change, accessed 13 March 2026, <https://ukhealthalliance.org/news-item/targets-for-measuring-health-and-wellbeing-are-critical-to-success-of-levelling-up/>.

¹⁸ Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 'Levelling Up the United Kingdom', GOV.UK, accessed 1 December 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom>.

¹⁹ Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 'Levelling-Up Missions Annual Report 2024 to 2025 (Accessible Version)', GOV.UK, accessed 1 December 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-missions-annual-report/levelling-up-missions-annual-report-2024-to-2025-accessible-version>.

²⁰ Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 'Levelling-Up Missions Annual Report 2024 to 2025 (Accessible Version)'.

million developing more dedicated mental health emergency services.²¹ But improved wellbeing may also be a secondary effect of other policies, such as those aimed at tackling poverty, increasing home ownership and improving the supply of good jobs. Additionally, the ONS publishes annual measures of national wellbeing using a range of measures including life satisfaction as well as GDP.²²

This report brings together these two strands of policy interest by exploring the relationship between social mobility and wellbeing. Drawing on household survey data, polling and qualitative studies, it seeks to understand these complex dynamics and consider the implications for government policy.

What do we mean by happiness and wellbeing?

Although often used interchangeably,²³ *happiness* is seen as a more short-term feeling of contentment and *wellbeing* refers more to longer term or more general life satisfaction and state of mind. In this report, we are focusing on this broader concept of wellbeing. Wellbeing is often broken down into two types: hedonic and eudaemonic wellbeing.²⁴ Hedonic wellbeing is characterised by pleasure attainment and pain avoidance, while eudaemonic wellbeing is characterised by more long-term meaning, self-realisation and purpose in life.²⁵

The household survey studies analysed for this report ask about mental wellbeing using the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale

²¹ Department of Health and Social Care, 'Fit for the Future: 10 Year Health Plan for England - Executive Summary (Accessible Version)', GOV.UK, 30 July 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/10-year-health-plan-for-england-fit-for-the-future/fit-for-the-future-10-year-health-plan-for-england-executive-summary>.

²² 'UK Measures of National Well-Being Dashboard - Office for National Statistics', accessed 13 March 2026, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/ukmeasuresofnationalwellbeing/dashboard>.

²³ Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, 'On Happiness and Human Potentials: A Review of Research on Hedonic and Eudaimonic Well-Being', *Annual Review of Psychology* 52, no. 1 (2001): 141–66, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.52.1.141>; Freeze, *The Metrics of Happiness: The Art and Science of Measuring Personal Happiness and Societal Wellbeing*, 9.

²⁴ Richard Kraut, 'Two Conceptions of Happiness', *The Philosophical Review* 88, no. 2 (1979): 167–97, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2184505>; Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, 'On Happiness and Human Potentials: A Review of Research on Hedonic and Eudaimonic Well-Being', *Annual Review of Psychology* (US) 52 (2001): 141–66, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.52.1.141>.

²⁵ Ryan and Deci, 'On Happiness and Human Potentials', 2001.

(WEMWBS)²⁶ which includes questions on levels of optimism, feeling useful, relaxed, confident, feeling good about oneself and so on, and a measure of life satisfaction. These questions were also used in our polling which also asked directly about life satisfaction and what makes people happy. The case study interviews included discussion of changing levels of happiness over time, life satisfaction and a range of factors affecting happiness in addition to financial ones. For the purposes of this report, we use the term happiness as an overarching term operationalised in these ways. When referring specifically to findings based on the WEMWBS we refer to wellbeing and when discussing questions directly asking people's views on what makes people happy we refer to happiness.

Considering the complex nature of these concepts, they are notoriously difficult to measure quantitatively. As one author puts it, projects like this one are trying to 'measure the unmeasurable'.²⁷ Nonetheless, doing so is crucial to understanding happiness and using several different measures of happiness helps clarify some of that complexity. Indeed, many of the case studies in this report reflect upon the balance between financial stability and security and other aspects of wellbeing and happiness such as relationships, community, time and environment.

Wellbeing in the UK

In terms of international rankings, the UK was ranked number 29 out of 147 countries in the latest edition of the World Happiness report, behind many English-speaking countries such as the US, Australia, Ireland, and Canada. The UK is ahead of France, Spain and Italy, but also behind many European countries including the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany.²⁸ The pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis have impacted people's wellbeing, particularly the more socio-economically

²⁶ Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) © University of Warwick 2006, all rights reserved.

²⁷ Freeze, *The Metrics of Happiness: The Art and Science of Measuring Personal Happiness and Societal Wellbeing*.

²⁸ John F. Helliwell et al., eds, *World Happiness Report 2025* (Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2024). (University of Oxford: Wellbeing Research Centre).

disadvantaged,²⁹ and there are increasing concerns about a growing mental health crisis for young people.³⁰

In the 2022 PISA survey of OECD countries, England reported significantly lower levels of life satisfaction than the average with the second lowest average life satisfaction of 15-year-olds across all OECD countries.³¹ With more than one in three young people reporting symptoms of a common mental health disorder, mental health services are also struggling under increased pressure.³² This trend of worsening mental health likely reflects many factors including financial pressures, the enduring impacts of the pandemic, work and living conditions, the influence of social media, technology and social attitudes, higher reporting and evolving definitions of psychological conditions.³³

“In the 2022 PISA survey of OECD countries, England reported significantly lower levels of life satisfaction than the average with the second lowest average life satisfaction of 15-year-olds across all OECD countries.”

This report

This report begins with a review of the existing evidence on social mobility and wellbeing in the UK, leading into an analysis of household survey data from the UK Household Longitudinal Survey and Next Steps. The analysis explores wellbeing and life satisfaction by mobility journey, and how this relationship varies by factors such as education, geography and age. We then delve into these broad patterns through original survey data. Working with Savanta, we surveyed nearly 2,500 people in a nationally representative poll in November 2025 on their experiences of social mobility and wellbeing, to better understand the factors involved in this relationship. Co-op members also participated in preliminary focus group discussions in October 2025.

²⁹ *Coronavirus: The Divergence of Mental Health Experiences during the Pandemic* (Mental Health Foundation, 2020), <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-01/MHF%20The%20COVID-19%20Pandemic%202.pdf>.

³⁰ Myriam Vriend et al., *Mental Health Trends among Working-Age People* (The Health Foundation, 2025), <https://www.health.org.uk/reports-and-analysis/analysis/mental-health-trends-among-working-age-people>.

³¹ OECD, *PISA 2022 Results (Volume I): The State of Learning and Equity in Education*, PISA (OECD Publishing, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1787/53f23881-en>; *EPI Comments on the Launch of the International PISA 2022 Results* (Education Policy Institute, 2023), <https://epi.org.uk/comments/15884/>.

³² Charlie McCurdy and Louise Murphy, *We've Only Just Begun: Action to Improve Young People's Mental Health, Education and Employment* (Resolution Foundation, 2024), <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/weve-only-just-begun/>.

³³ Vriend et al., *Mental Health Trends among Working-Age People*.

Throughout the report, thematic boxes draw upon case study examples to provide a deep dive into individual stories, and how, if at all, mobility has impacted their wellbeing. Longer summaries of the case studies can be found on the website accompanying this report. These were written up following interviews with 15 Co-op members selected for the variation of socio-economic, ethnic and regional backgrounds they represented as well as diversity of experiences of social mobility. We also held focus groups that worked as an initial sounding board for our case studies.

Review of the evidence

This section provides an evidence review of what we know about social mobility and wellbeing from previous research, starting with a look at socio-economic status and wellbeing. It then presents evidence on the link between upward mobility and wellbeing, downward mobility and wellbeing, and consideration of additional factors explaining these relationships.

Socio-economic status and wellbeing

Socio-economic status (which can include your income, occupation, education or social class) is consistently found to be associated with wellbeing and happiness. Socio-economic status can influence wellbeing through the realisation of needs and wants, the ability to achieve goals and access resources and reduction of stress associated with low income.³⁴

While greater income can go hand in hand with greater wellbeing and happiness, the relationship may only hold up to a certain threshold.³⁵ One global study, for instance, found that income was associated with emotional wellbeing up to a salary of \$50,000 in Western Europe and

³⁴ Andreas Hadjar et al., 'Social Mobility and Subjective Wellbeing', in *Encyclopaedia of Happiness, Quality of Life and Subjective Wellbeing*, ed. Hilke Brockmann and Roger Fernandez-Urbano (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800889675.00034>; Bruno S. Frey and Alois Stutzer, *Happiness and Economics: How the Economy and Institutions Affect Human Well-Being* (Princeton University Press, 2002), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt7rm1k>.

³⁵ Freeze, *The Metrics of Happiness: The Art and Science of Measuring Personal Happiness and Societal Wellbeing*, 45.

Scandinavia, after which the effects diminished.³⁶ These findings suggest that money impacts happiness largely through the fulfilment of needs and desires. This pattern also mirrors a nation-level pattern known as the Easterlin paradox.

The Easterlin paradox, refers to the contradiction that while greater income is linked with greater happiness within and across countries, a country's economic growth over time does not lead to an increase in happiness. In other words, income is an important driver of happiness on an individual level but may not drive average happiness nation-wide.

One explanation offered for this paradox is that *relative* income is a factor of people's happiness, rather than absolute income meaning that people may assess their financial situation and wellbeing by comparing themselves with others. Indeed, the seminal book *The Spirit Level* brought attention to how higher income inequality, including in wealthier countries, was linked with worse mental health, trust and community life and child wellbeing.³⁷ Others have argued that the positive association between national income and wellbeing may largely stem from the better health and stronger social networks that are associated with higher income.³⁸

Social mobility and happiness

Upward social mobility

While it is well established that socio-economic status affects wellbeing, less is known about how social mobility might impact happiness (see Box 1 for a glossary of key terms).

³⁶ Andrew T. Jebb et al., 'Happiness, Income Satiation and Turning Points around the World', *Nature Human Behaviour* 2, no. 1 (2018): 33–38, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-017-0277-0>.

³⁷ Richard G. Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better* (Allen Lane, 2009).

³⁸ Ekaterina Oparina et al., *The Easterlin Paradox at 50* (Centre for Economic Performance, LSE, 2024), <https://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp2048.pdf>; Layard, *Happiness*; Richard Easterlin, 'Explaining Happiness', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, no. 100 (2003): 11176–83; Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, *Economic Growth and Subjective Well-Being: Reassessing the Easterlin Paradox*, no. w14282 (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2008), w14282, <https://doi.org/10.3386/w14282>; Wilkinson and Pickett, *The Spirit Level*. However, some research has challenged these findings on methodological grounds, instead finding a robust relationship between income and subjective wellbeing across countries, within countries, and over time.

Box 1: Definitions

Socio-economic background refers to the socio-economic circumstances of the household someone grew up in. It can be measured in many different ways, but most commonly would be measured by parental household income, social class, occupational status, educational level or wealth.

Socio-economic status refers to someone's *current* socio-economic status. Again, this most commonly is measured through income, social class, occupational status, education or wealth.

Social mobility refers to the link between socio-economic background and socio-economic status. Upward mobility generally encompasses someone having higher socio-economic status than their parents did while downward mobility means lower socio-economic status than their parents.

There are contending theories as to the link between social mobility and happiness. Some argue that upward social mobility is linked with greater wellbeing. Others argue that upward social mobility can be a difficult journey, that brings challenges of its own.

The link between upward mobility and greater wellbeing is perhaps easier to understand. After all, higher social status, whether that be income, social class, wealth or education, is linked with greater wellbeing.³⁹ This may be driven by several things including greater security, greater access to resources to pursue needs and wants and achieve goals, reduced financial stress or improved health outcomes, all of which are associated with greater social status.⁴⁰ Other studies suggest that intergenerational social mobility can also bring more happiness to people when they compare their life to that of their parents.⁴¹

³⁹ Jacinth J. X. Tan et al., 'The Association between Objective and Subjective Socioeconomic Status and Subjective Well-Being: A Meta-Analytic Review', *Psychological Bulletin* 146, no. 11 (2020): 970–1020, <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000258>.

⁴⁰ Hadjar et al., 'Social Mobility and Subjective Wellbeing'.

⁴¹ Alexi Gugushvili et al., "'Falling from Grace" and "Rising from Rags": Intergenerational Educational Mobility and Depressive Symptoms', *Social Science & Medicine* 222 (February 2019): 294–304, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2018.12.027>.

The link to negative wellbeing is perhaps less intuitive. However, according to Sorokin's dissociative hypothesis, social mobility may impact someone's wellbeing through factors such as alienation, lack of belonging, and challenges to their identity.⁴² Other studies have also suggested that social mobility can lead to estrangement and alienation from family or home community and make someone feel out of place in their new workplace or community.⁴³ We also know that socio-economic background, such as growing up in poverty, can have lasting effects on wellbeing.⁴⁴ Another paper by Iveson and Dreary found that social mobility did not predict life satisfaction at age 78, although this may be due to the effects diminishing with age.⁴⁵

Sam Friedman has documented life course interviews in a paper that also points to trade-offs that are sometimes associated with upward social mobility.⁴⁶ In his 2016 study, interviewees finding themselves in a new social class faced a kind of double alienation. They battled feelings of insecurity and inferiority along with feelings of guilt, estrangement and abandonment with regards to their social class background. These experiences varied with the range, speed and direction of social mobility trajectory, in combination with factors such as gender, ethnicity and geographic mobility.

Different comparative perspectives among upwardly socially mobile individuals may also complicate the relationship with wellbeing. While upwardly mobile people may compare their new social status to that of their parents, leading to greater satisfaction or wellbeing, upwardly mobile people may also begin to compare themselves, less favourably, to people with their new status or even higher cancelling any positive effect on happiness associated with the upward mobility in the first place.⁴⁷

⁴² Pitirim A. Sorokin, 'Social and Cultural Mobility', *New York* 4 (1959): 99–145.

⁴³ Sam Friedman, 'Habitus Clivé and the Emotional Imprint of Social Mobility', *The Sociological Review* 64, no. 1 (2016): 129–47, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12280>.

⁴⁴ Eric Dearing, 'Psychological Costs of Growing Up Poor', *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1136, no. 1 (2008): 324–32, <https://doi.org/10.1196/annals.1425.006>.

⁴⁵ Matthew H. Iveson and Ian J. Deary, 'Intergenerational Social Mobility and Subjective Wellbeing in Later Life', *Social Science & Medicine* 188 (September 2017): 11–20, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2017.06.038>.

⁴⁶ Friedman, 'Habitus Clivé and the Emotional Imprint of Social Mobility'.

⁴⁷ Andrew E. Clark et al., 'Relative Income, Happiness, and Utility: An Explanation for the Easterlin Paradox and Other Puzzles', *Journal of Economic Literature* 46, no. 1 (2008): 95–144, <https://doi.org/10.1257/jel.46.1.95>.

International findings

Other scholars have suggested that the relationship between social mobility and happiness varies across countries. For example, while Vanhoutte and Nazroo found that upward social class mobility came with an increase in eudaemonic wellbeing in England, they found that upward mobility had a detrimental effect on satisfaction in the US.⁴⁸ The researchers attribute these results to several potential factors including the negative effects of status anxiety and imposter syndrome and different forms of upward social mobility in the US.

Meanwhile, research by Hadjar and Samuel found that while social class mobility had an effect on happiness in Switzerland, there did appear to be a negative impact of upward social class mobility on life satisfaction in the UK when controlling for current social class – a finding they attributed to dissociative theory.⁴⁹ Others have found educational mobility effects on wellbeing over and above socio-economic background and status in continental Europe, but not in the UK.⁵⁰

Accounting for socio-economic status

Although previous research on the relationship between social mobility and happiness in the UK has found a link between social mobility (measured in a variety of ways) and an increase in life satisfaction or wellbeing, some studies have also sought to understand how much this relationship may be driven by socio-economic status alone. That is, they try to separate the effect of socio-economic status (which may account for a certain amount of happiness or lack of it in and of itself) from the impact of movement between social classes on wellbeing by adjusting for current socio-economic status.

For example, Bridger and Daly investigated the link between social mobility – captured by educational level, social status, home size – and life satisfaction. Their findings showed that upward social mobility was

⁴⁸ Bram Vanhoutte and James Nazroo, 'Life Course Pathways to Later Life Wellbeing: A Comparative Study of the Role of Socio-Economic Position in England and the U.S.', *Journal of Population Ageing* 9, nos 1–2 (2016): 157–77, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12062-015-9127-x>. Age will be considered in more detail below.

⁴⁹ Andreas Hadjar and Robin Samuel, 'Does Upward Social Mobility Increase Life Satisfaction? A Longitudinal Analysis Using British and Swiss Panel Data', *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 39 (March 2015): 48–58, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rssm.2014.12.002>.

⁵⁰ Bettina Schuck and Nadia Steiber, 'Does Intergenerational Educational Mobility Shape the Well-Being of Young Europeans? Evidence from the European Social Survey', *Social Indicators Research* 139, no. 3 (2018): 1237–55, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-017-1753-7>.

associated with life satisfaction at age 42 even when accounting for multiple indicators of socio-economic status, although the effect size decreased by around one third.⁵¹ Another study by Chan found that upward social class mobility was linked with more positive life evaluation, life and job satisfaction as well as lower distress compared to those who remained working class⁵² where psychological distress refers to a state of emotional and mental suffering such as feelings of depression, anxiety, negative affect, hopelessness, or a loss of spiritual well-being.⁵³

Other studies have sought to disentangle the effects of social mobility from a range of factors that might simply reflect higher socio-economic status or background. With some exceptions,⁵⁴ most conclude in one way or another that these factors cannot account entirely for greater wellbeing associated with upward social mobility although they certainly account for some part of it.⁵⁵ Across this research, there is some consensus suggesting a link between upward mobility, higher socio-economic status and wellbeing. However, there is lack of agreement among researchers as to just how much and which of these factors most account for this relationship.

Downward social mobility

Some research has also investigated whether downward mobility is associated with lower levels of happiness and wellbeing. For example, researchers at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) found that downward income mobility was associated with lower

⁵¹ Emma Bridger and Michael Daly, 'Intergenerational Social Mobility Predicts Midlife Well-Being: Prospective Evidence from Two Large British Cohorts', *Social Science & Medicine* 261 (September 2020): 113217, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2020.113217>.

⁵² Tak Wing Chan, 'Social Mobility and the Well-being of Individuals', *The British Journal of Sociology* 69, no. 1 (2018): 183–206. 'Working class' is the term used by Chan.

⁵³ 'Psychological Distress - Knowledge and References', Taylor & Francis, accessed 18 February 2026, https://taylorandfrancis.com/knowledge/Medicine_and_healthcare/Psychiatry/Psychological_distress/.

⁵⁴ Boris Nikolaev and Ainslee Burns, 'Intergenerational Mobility and Subjective Well-Being—Evidence from the General Social Survey', *Journal of Behavioral and Experimental Economics* 53 (December 2014): 82–96, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socec.2014.08.005>.

⁵⁵ Vanhoutte and Nazroo, 'Life Course Pathways to Later Life Wellbeing'; Paul Dolan et al., 'Do We Really Know What Makes Us Happy? A Review of the Economic Literature on the Factors Associated with Subjective Well-Being', *Journal of Economic Psychology* 29, no. 1 (2008): 94–122, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joep.2007.09.001>; Gugushvili et al., "'Falling from Grace" and "Rising from Rags"; Nikolaev and Burns, 'Intergenerational Mobility and Subjective Well-Being—Evidence from the General Social Survey'.

wellbeing and higher distress. In fact, they found that the negative effect of downward mobility on wellbeing was stronger than the positive effect of upward mobility.⁵⁶ These authors suggested that this is consistent with loss aversion, a cognitive bias where losses may resonate more acutely and longer than gains.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, using a different measure of social mobility, Vanhoutte and Nazroo's study found that downward social class mobility was detrimental to life satisfaction in England and the US, even when controlling for wealth.⁵⁸

However, some studies suggest otherwise. Chan, for instance, did not find lower wellbeing outcomes for downwardly mobile individuals compared to the immobile working class when measuring social class mobility suggesting this may be explained by individuals adapting to their loss in the long-term.⁵⁹

All of the above research on both upward and downward mobility has pointed to the complexity of these relationships. Overall, there are likely a mix of both positive and negative effects of upward mobility on happiness which in different contexts and circumstances may result in different findings and neutralising effects. Social mobility and wellbeing are both socially and culturally situated concepts and differences in findings may also reflect differences in their operationalisation as well as methodological assumptions and a range of models used.⁶⁰

Other explanatory factors

Some previous studies have sought to understand how non-socio-economic factors may influence the relationships between social mobility and happiness and wellbeing. Below, we briefly consider some

⁵⁶ Paul Dolan and Grace Lordan, *Moving Up and Sliding Down: An Empirical Assessment of the Effect of Social Mobility on Subjective Wellbeing* (2013), <https://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp1190.pdf>.

⁵⁷ A. Tversky and D. Kahneman, 'Loss Aversion in Riskless Choice: A Reference-Dependent Model', *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 106, no. 4 (1991): 1039–61, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2937956>.

⁵⁸ Vanhoutte and Nazroo, 'Life Course Pathways to Later Life Wellbeing'.

⁵⁹ Chan, 'Social Mobility and the Well-being of Individuals'.

⁶⁰ Differences in findings may also reflect differences in operationalisations of happiness (e.g. hedonic to eudaemonic) and social mobility (e.g., absolute or relative, upward or downward, income or social class), and a range of models used (e.g., using immobile trajectories as a reference group or differentiating between higher status and lower status immobile trajectories as a reference group, or using different controls).

of the key factors that appear both in previous literature and in this report.

Health

Physical health is broadly associated with happiness.⁶¹ Socio-economic status⁶² and social mobility⁶³ have also been linked with greater physical health, meaning that it may be a key factor in explaining some of the relationships between social mobility and happiness. Physical health is also an important measure of the quality of life alongside happiness itself.

Bridger and Daly's research found that approximately 30% of the effect of social mobility on wellbeing was explained by improved general health.⁶⁴ Similarly, Hadjar and Samuel found that health had an effect on happiness above and beyond that of social mobility.⁶⁵ US research has also found that health and income fully explained the relationship between social class and education mobility and happiness.⁶⁶

Mental health is also recognised as a key component of overall health. While concepts of wellbeing can overlap with mental health (for example, the WEMWBS measure we use in this report for wellbeing can be used to flag likely depression), in this report we focus on wellbeing more than mental health.

Age

Other researchers have explored the effect of age on overall happiness. While many have suggested a U-shaped curve, meaning that we

⁶¹ Andrew Steptoe, 'Happiness and Health', *Annual Review of Public Health* 40, no. 1 (2019): 339–59, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-040218-044150>.

⁶² Alexander M. Clark et al., 'Socio-economic Status and Cardiovascular Disease: Risks and Implications for Care', *Nature Reviews Cardiology* 6, no. 11 (2009): 712–22, <https://doi.org/10.1038/nrcardio.2009.163>.

⁶³ Caroline Barakat and Theodore Konstantinidis, 'A Review of the Relationship between Socio-economic Status Change and Health', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 20, no. 13 (2023): 6249, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20136249>.

⁶⁴ Bridger and Daly, 'Intergenerational Social Mobility Predicts Midlife Well-Being'.

⁶⁵ Hadjar and Samuel, 'Does Upward Social Mobility Increase Life Satisfaction?'

⁶⁶ Nikolaev and Burns, 'Intergenerational Mobility and Subjective Well-Being—Evidence from the General Social Survey'.

experience the lowest happiness during midlife,⁶⁷ this pattern has also been challenged to suggest that happiness generally declines with age.⁶⁸

Similarly, the association between social mobility and wellbeing may also vary by age. Evidence from the US investigated this pattern, finding that the effect of income mobility on subjective wellbeing peaked between the ages of 35–45 and then slowly dissipated. The authors suggested this may be because income mobility matters more in your 30s and 40s once people have had a chance to establish themselves. They also suggest that the diminished effect at later ages may reflect greater reliance on state support rather than income. It could also suggest a weaker comparison effect – comparing your social status to that of your parents or that of your childhood and deriving satisfaction (or lack of it) from that – when parents have since passed away. It may also be the case that the hypothesised negative effects of social mobility such as alienation or disassociation may diminish over time.⁶⁹

Social connection

Social connection and community are also important drivers of happiness.⁷⁰ For example, investing in social infrastructure has been found to be beneficial for improving people's health and happiness.⁷¹ However, sometimes being socially mobile requires moving away from where someone grows up, especially if there is a lack of work or educational opportunities in the area. Moving away may weaken ties and social connections to family and friends. As Friedman argues, upward mobility can have 'adverse effects on kinship ties and intimate relationships'.⁷²

⁶⁷ David G. Blanchflower and Andrew J. Oswald, 'Is Well-Being U-Shaped over the Life Cycle?', *Social Science & Medicine* 66, no. 8 (2008): 1733–49, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2008.01.030>.

⁶⁸ Fabian Kratz and Josef Brüderl, 'Assessing Age Trajectories (of Subjective Well-Being): Clarifying Estimands, Identification Assumptions, and Estimation Strategies', *European Sociological Review*, 23 September 2025, jcaf038, <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcaf038>.

⁶⁹ Nikolaev and Burns, 'Intergenerational Mobility and Subjective Well-Being—Evidence from the General Social Survey'.

⁷⁰ Helliwell et al., *World Happiness Report 2025*.

⁷¹ *The Impacts of Scaling Social Infrastructure Investment* (Frontier Economics, 2025), <https://localtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/The-impacts-of-scaling-social-infrastructure-investment.pdf>.

⁷² Friedman, 'Habitue Clivé and the Emotional Imprint of Social Mobility'.

Chan investigated the link between social mobility and participation in civic associations, contact with parents, close personal relationships and social support, finding that upward social mobility was linked across the board with greater social connections.⁷³ The study also found differences by social class in routine social interactions, indicating that people who are currently working class, no matter their socio-economic background, were more likely to have more routine social interactions with their friends, relatives and neighbours.

Perceptions of financial security

While similar to objective measures of socio-economic status, some research has investigated the role of perception of financial security and its role in the link between social mobility and happiness. For example, research by Bridger and Daly found that almost half of the relationship between social mobility and happiness was explained by both health and perceived financial difficulties.⁷⁴ Likewise, research by Dolan and Lordan also found that self-rated financial difficulties partially explained the relationship.⁷⁵

Geography

Increasingly, geography is recognised as crucial to social mobility. The Sutton Trust's Opportunity Index demonstrated that your opportunity to succeed depends heavily on where you grow up. For example, disadvantaged students who went to school in Newcastle-upon-Tyne Central and West in the North East of England on average earned £7,000 less a year compared to those from East Ham in London.⁷⁶

However, the geography of happiness is a less developed field. A report by the World Wellbeing Movement mapped life satisfaction across the UK, finding significant differences in average happiness across regions and local authorities.⁷⁷ There are many regional level factors that are linked with happiness including economic, environmental and socio-demographic factors such as education or religion.⁷⁸ However, there is

⁷³ Chan, 'Social Mobility and the Well-being of Individuals'.

⁷⁴ Bridger and Daly, 'Intergenerational Social Mobility Predicts Midlife Well-Being'.

⁷⁵ Dolan and Lordan, *Moving Up and Sliding Down: An Empirical Assessment of the Effect of Social Mobility on Subjective Wellbeing*.

⁷⁶ Holt-White et al., *The Opportunity Index*.

⁷⁷ Maria Cotofan, *The UK Wellbeing Report* (World Wellbeing Movement, 2024), <https://worldwellbeingmovement.org/uk-wellbeing-report-2024/>.

⁷⁸ A. Aslam and L. Corrado, 'The Geography of Well-Being', *Journal of Economic Geography* 12, no. 3 (2012): 627–49, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jeg/lbr041>.

not clear evidence on the drivers of why happiness varies across different areas of the UK.

Aside from the work cited above, there is also a lack of research looking at how the link between mobility and happiness may vary regionally. While research has compared the relationship between the UK and the US, or the UK and Switzerland, and found telling differences, there is very limited research on this within the UK.

This report's contribution

In this section we have reviewed the evidence of a link between social mobility and wellbeing. Overall, there is general consensus around a positive link between social mobility and wellbeing, although questions remain as to the explanatory factors behind it.

In this report, we contribute to the evidence base by estimating the link between social mobility and wellbeing in the UK and exploring potential explanatory factors through the analysis of national household survey data. We investigate questions such as to what extent the link can be explained by wider socio-economic factors, how satisfaction in different areas of life contribute to this relationship, and how the relationship is influenced by factors such as higher education, health, age and housing tenure. More subjective experiences are explained through our national polling analysis and case study interviews.

Methods

Data

The UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS)⁷⁹ is a longitudinal household panel study ran by the Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Essex. Data collection for the study began in 2009 and includes around 40,000 households, who are interviewed each year. It covers England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and is designed to be representative of the general population in the UK.

⁷⁹ Institute for Social University of Essex, 'United Kingdom Household Longitudinal Study; UKHLS Understanding Society: Waves 1- , 2008- : Safeguarded Understanding Society: Waves 1-14, 2009-2023 and Harmonised BHPS: Waves 1-18, 1991-2009', version 19th Edition, UK Data Service, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-6614-20>.

Sample

We used the following inclusion criteria for our analysis sample:

- Aged 24-65 in Wave 13 (2021/2022)
- Has data on parental NS-SEC/working status aged 14
- Has data on their own NS-SEC/working status (in Wave 13 or latest wave available)
- Has data on wellbeing and life satisfaction in Wave 13

Our final sample size was 15,193 individuals. A common problem with longitudinal survey data is attrition, which can lead to selection bias. To test the sensitivity of our analysis to this issue, we used weighted analyses that adjusted for attrition, sampling design and non-response. Findings were largely consistent with that of the unweighted analyses, as such, unweighted results are reported in the following sections. For more information on how we dealt with missing data, see Supplementary Methods in the Appendix.

Variables

Detailed information about each variable used in the analysis can be found within the Supplementary Methods in the Appendix.

Mobility trajectories

We use a three-class schema of the national statistics socio-economic classification (NS-SEC) to measure social class in this analysis.⁸⁰ The NS-SEC consists of routine and manual; intermediate; and professional and managerial occupations.

For our main analysis, we split our sample into four mobility trajectories:

- **Upwardly mobile** refers to those who are from a routine background and are themselves in an intermediate or professional occupation. It also includes those who are from an intermediate background and are themselves in a professional occupation.
- **Downwardly mobile** includes people who are from a professional background and are themselves in an intermediate or routine occupation. It also includes those from an intermediate background who are in a routine occupation.

⁸⁰ We also carried out analysis with a five-category version of NS-SEC, finding similar results.

- **Stable professional** refers to those who are from a professional background and are themselves in a professional occupation. It also includes those from an intermediate background and are themselves in an intermediate occupation.
- **Stable routine** refers to those who are from a routine background and are themselves in a routine occupation.

Wellbeing

Our main measure of happiness is subjective wellbeing, measured by the Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS). The scale captures a comprehensive view of mental wellbeing, encompassing both eudaemonic and hedonic wellbeing. The scale ranges from 7-35, with high wellbeing considered a score of 27.5-35 and low wellbeing considered a score of 7-19.5, which is also indicative of possible depression. This puts 70% of the population in average wellbeing 21-27.

Supplementary analysis

We additionally carried out supplementary analysis using data from Next Steps, a national cohort study of roughly 16,000 people born in 1989-1990, to understand the role that moving region played in the relationship between social mobility and happiness. Efforts were made to make the analysis as comparable as possible to the main analysis. The analytical sample was made up of 5,855 individuals with overall life satisfaction and socio-economic status measured at age 32 in 2022. More information on the data and methods can be found in the Supplementary Methods in the Appendix.

Is there a link between social mobility and wellbeing?

Key characteristics

Within our sample, 35% came from a professional background, 26% from an intermediate background, and 40% from a routine and manual background.

As for current social class, the sample is made up of 45% professional, 22% intermediate and 33% routine and manual. For context, this is

roughly comparable to the proportions found in the general population according to census data.⁸¹

As for social mobility trajectories, 18% of the sample were stable routine, 27% were stable professional, 33% were upwardly mobile and 22% were downwardly mobile.

Key characteristics varied across social mobility groups. For example, the upwardly mobile were more likely to be white, degree-educated, healthier, live in London, married and own their own homes than stable routine individuals, but slightly less likely to have these characteristics than the stable professional group (see Table 1). For full descriptive statistics by social mobility trajectory, see Appendix Table A1.

“Wellbeing is linked with socio-economic background, with those from intermediate and professional backgrounds the most likely to have high wellbeing, and the least likely to have low wellbeing.”

Table 1: Key characteristics by social mobility trajectory

	Stable professional	Upward	Stable routine	Downward
White	81.6%	76.6%	75%	77.1%
Degree	60.4%	43.7%	8.8%	26.5%
Healthy	76.6%	74.9%	61.9%	69.6%
Own their house	87%	82.1%	57.3%	71.9%
Married	67.7%	64.7%	54.9%	59%

The happiness gap

Wellbeing is linked with socio-economic background, with those from intermediate and professional backgrounds the most likely to have high wellbeing, and the least likely to have low wellbeing. We find that the gap is biggest in terms of low wellbeing, with those from intermediate

⁸¹ Census data covers England and Wales. See Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2021) *NS-SEC by age*. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/datasets/RM090/editions/2021/versions/3>

and professional backgrounds four to five percentage points less likely to have low wellbeing compared to those from a routine background. The gap between those from intermediate and professional backgrounds is small while the largest gaps occur with those from routine backgrounds. However, there is only a small gap in mean wellbeing score overall between people from a routine background and those from a professional background at 0.5 (see Table 2 below).

Table 2: Socio-economic background and wellbeing

	Low	Average	High	Mean SWEMWBS score
Routine/ manual	17.4%	58.4%	24.2%	21.8
Intermediate	13.8%	59.4%	26.9%	22.2
Professional/ managerial	12.8%	60.5%	26.7%	22.3

We find a slightly stronger but similar link between wellbeing and current socio-economic status (see Table 3). There is a slightly larger mean wellbeing gap of 0.9 between routine and professional, though still a small difference overall.

Table 3: Socio-economic status and wellbeing

	Low	Average	High	Mean
Routine/ manual	19.7%	57.8%	22.5%	21.5
Intermediate	13.5%	60.7%	25.8%	22.2
Professional/ managerial	12%	59.9%	28.2%	22.4

A positive relationship between upward social mobility and happiness

27.3% of upwardly mobile individuals had high wellbeing, which was a similar level to that of stable professional individuals (28.1%). However, this was 6 percentage points higher than stable routine individuals (21.2%) (see Table 4).

On the other hand, 13.6% of upwardly mobile people had low wellbeing, 2.6 percentage points higher than stable professionals. This compared with 21% of stable routine, meaning that stable routine individuals were almost twice as likely as stable professional individuals to have low wellbeing.

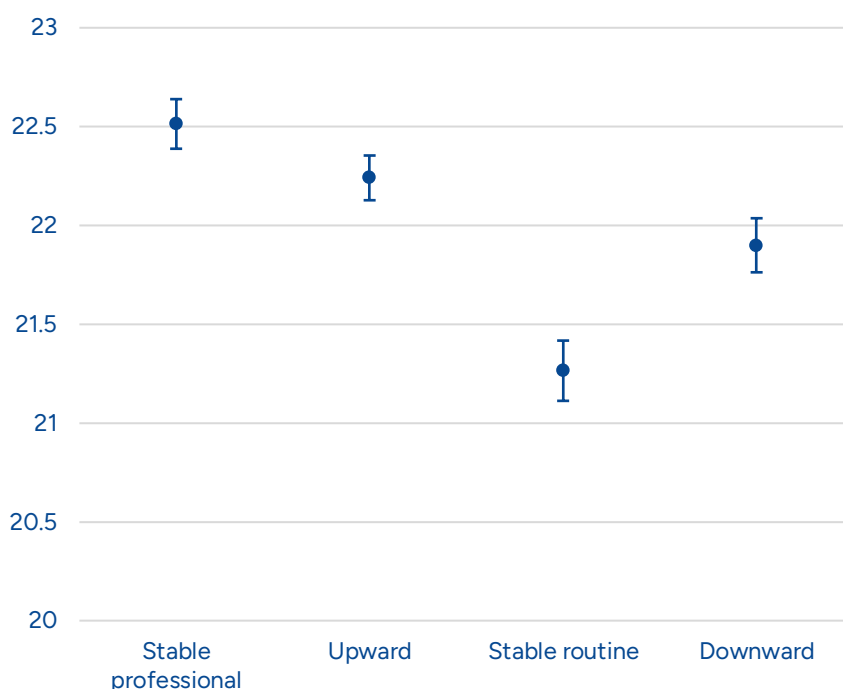
Table 4: Wellbeing by social mobility trajectory

	Low	Average	High	Mean
Stable professional	11%	61%	28.1%	22.5
Upwardly mobile	13.6%	59.1%	27.3%	22.3
Stable routine	21%	57.7%	21.2%	21.3
Downwardly mobile	16.3%	59.3%	24.5%	21.9

Notes: High wellbeing is considered a score of 27.5-35 and low wellbeing is considered a score of 7-19.5.

We then tested the statistical significance of this relationship by running a regression model using social class trajectories to predict wellbeing, whilst controlling for age, gender, ethnicity and retirement. Figure 1 depicts the predicted wellbeing scores for each social mobility trajectory.

Figure 1: Predicted wellbeing by social mobility trajectory



Notes: Model controls for age, gender, ethnicity and retirement. Each dot represents the predicted level of wellbeing by social mobility trajectory, with the whiskers showing the 95% confidence interval. Overlapping confidence intervals suggest no statistically significant difference between groups.

In line with our descriptive analysis, the results suggest that those who remain of a higher socio-economic status (stable professional) have the highest average wellbeing, while those who remain of a low socio-economic status (stable routine) have the lowest average wellbeing. Levels of wellbeing for the upwardly and downwardly mobile groups fall between the two, with the upwardly mobile experiencing slightly greater wellbeing on average than the downwardly mobile group. All differences are statistically significant at the 95% level. However, the magnitude of differences is relatively small at less than one standard deviation difference in group means.

“Overall, our analysis suggests that there is a positive link between social mobility and wellbeing. Upwardly mobile people tend to have higher wellbeing than those who remained of lower socio-economic status in adulthood.”

Overall, our analysis suggests that there is a positive link between social mobility and wellbeing. Upwardly mobile people tend to have higher wellbeing than those who remained lower socio-economic status in adulthood. However, they tend not to have as high wellbeing as those who are from a higher socio-economic background and are in a professional occupation themselves. In other words, while being upwardly mobile is linked with greater wellbeing, on average it is not linked with as high wellbeing as those who are from a higher socio-

economic background and have higher socio-economic status. This could indicate a lasting impact of coming from a lower (negative) or higher (positive) socio-economic background on happiness. It could also reflect there being negative aspects to upward mobility that partially counteract the positive effect of higher socio-economic status.

On the flip side, downwardly mobile people from higher socio-economic backgrounds tend to be 'protected' from some of the negative aspects of lower socio-economic status on wellbeing. Our results suggest that those who experience downward social mobility tend to be happier than those who are from a lower socio-economic background who remain in a routine occupation. These protective factors may include a safety net to fall back on or other types of support from family, their wider network or cultural capital. It could also reflect higher levels of agency, where some may have been in a position to actively choose to eschew high status career paths, rather than facing negative factors such as higher stress or worse work-life balance. Equally, it could suggest a lasting impact of growing up in a higher income household on happiness, for example through greater health, greater skills or lower stress levels in childhood which can have lasting impacts on wellbeing.

These tensions are illustrated in Box 2 below through quotes from our case study interviews. While some interviewees recognised the benefits that social mobility might bring to wellbeing, others suggested that there may be downsides to such mobility, also highlighting the subjective nature of the experience of social mobility. There was also widespread acknowledgement that there were many wider contributors to happiness.

Box 2: The complex relationship between social mobility and happiness

Lucy (*educationally upwardly mobile but financially worse off; female; 35-54*) came from a working-class background in the Midlands. With parents uninterested in education, her schooling suffered after their difficult divorce. Getting a degree and a job in law, for her upward social mobility brought satisfaction and inspiration: "Not only because of the experience itself, just almost an amazement for the years of being told by teachers you'll amount to nothing. Stuff like that. You know, having crap scores 'cause you weren't there, not doing homework. So it really was like I can do this. And if I can do this. What else can I do?"

Martin (*upwardly mobile; male; 55+*) came from a poor family in Yorkshire and worked his way up through the construction industry before retiring to Wales. Encountering people from all backgrounds he concluded social mobility is not for everybody. "I've worked with many people at the lower end of the social mobility scale who have been very happy because they've had the skills and the ability to provide a comfortable career for themselves."

Francesca (*upwardly mobile; female; 35-54*) came from a modest background but hard-working parents gave her good educational opportunities. For her, upward social mobility involved trade-offs: "I feel fulfilled and I think that comes partially from career. But I think it also comes from good relationships, like I've got a great family. I've got a daughter. I get a lot of fulfilment and happiness from that. If I had a successful career, but I was really lonely, I don't think I would say that. I had quite a high paying job and it did not fulfil me. It made me feel quite stressed. It is difficult to find a good job that is high-paying that doesn't suck the life out of you."

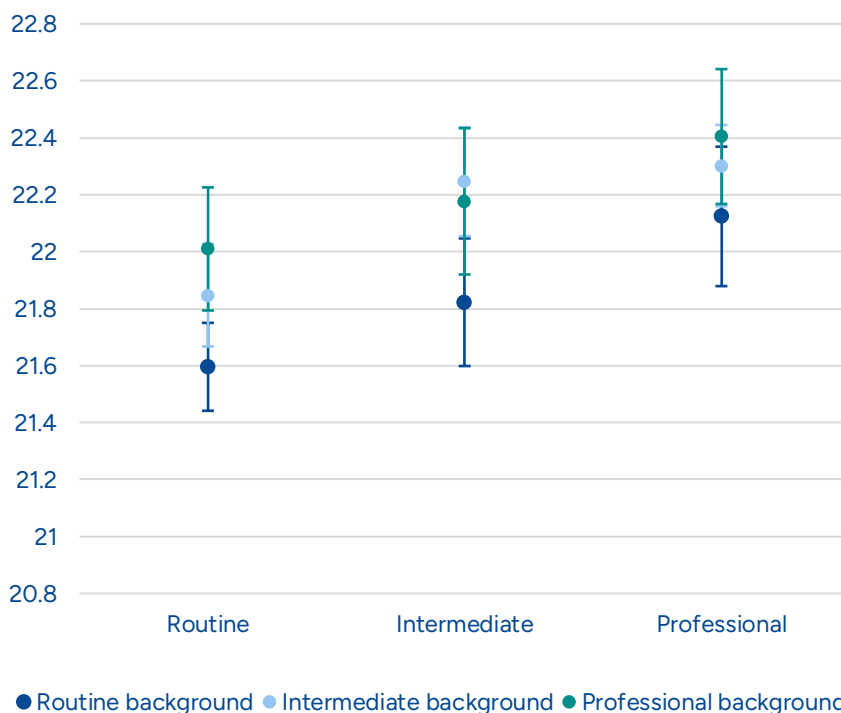
Keith (*downwardly mobile; male; 55+*) from a working-class background had a successful career but retired early for health reasons. For him downward social mobility leads to disappointment and feeling unfulfilled and unhappy. At the same time he said that "social mobility would definitely improve most people's lives or their happiness anyway."

Long-range mobility has a stronger impact on wellbeing

Within these social mobility trajectory groups, we have both short-range (people who move to an adjacent occupational status e.g. routine to intermediate) and long-range mobility (people who move from one end to the other e.g. routine to professional). For our next analysis, we wanted to understand the relationship between wellbeing and social mobility at a more granular level, to see whether the distance of mobility influenced the relationship.

To test this, we ran a regression model using the different socio-economic trajectories to predict wellbeing, controlling for age, gender, ethnicity and retirement. See Figure 2 below for a visualisation of predicted wellbeing by socio-economic background and socio-economic status.

Figure 2: Predicted wellbeing by long- to short-range social mobility trajectory



Notes: Model controls for age, gender, ethnicity and retirement. Each dot represents the predicted level of wellbeing by social mobility trajectory, with the whiskers showing the 95% confidence interval. Overlapping confidence intervals suggest no statistically significant difference.

The sizes of these groups are smaller, meaning larger overlapping confidence intervals. The dark blue represents those from a routine background; the light blue represents those from an intermediate background, and the teal represents those from a professional background. On the left are those who are currently routine and the right those who are currently professional.

In general, the results show a larger gap between those from a routine background and those from both intermediate and professional backgrounds. This also shows that the longer-range the mobility, the stronger the influence on wellbeing. For instance, short-range upward mobility has a weaker effect on wellbeing than long-range upward mobility. This suggests that the main findings outlined above slightly underplay the positive impact of long-range upward mobility on wellbeing.

It also gives insight to the underlying mechanisms belying this relationship. For instance, some of the hypothesised negative impacts of upward mobility centre around the concept of 'habitus clivé' – the experience of being split between your socio-economic background and your new socio-economic status – which can be expected to negatively impact those who have experienced long-range upward mobility more than those who move from an intermediate background to a professional occupational status themselves for instance. However, what we found was that professionals from an intermediate background are not significantly happier than professionals from a routine background, questioning how impactful these negative aspects of long-range mobility may be to overall wellbeing.

While these differences are statistically significant, it is important to note that these differences are less than one standard deviation, meaning that there is not a large inequality in the general level of wellbeing across trajectories.

What explains gaps in wellbeing between mobility trajectories?

In our next analysis, we sought to understand what explains the gaps in wellbeing between the groups of different social mobility trajectories. Differences in socio-economic status are likely a key factor, and we also look at employment status and health.

To do this, we ran four sequentially adjusted regression models. Model 1 is our baseline model, which controls for basic demographic characteristics including age, gender, ethnicity and retirement status. This is the same model as shown in Figure 1. Model 2 additionally controls for employment status, a key explanatory factor in people's sense of happiness and fulfilment. Model 3 additionally includes socio-economic controls for household income quintile, housing tenure and whether they have a degree or not. Finally, Model 4 additionally includes long-term illness or disability. These are all key hypothesised predictors of happiness and in turn likely partially explain differences in wellbeing between different social mobility groups. Table 5 below shows the estimated gaps in wellbeing between the upwardly mobile and other groups, also visualised in Figure 3.

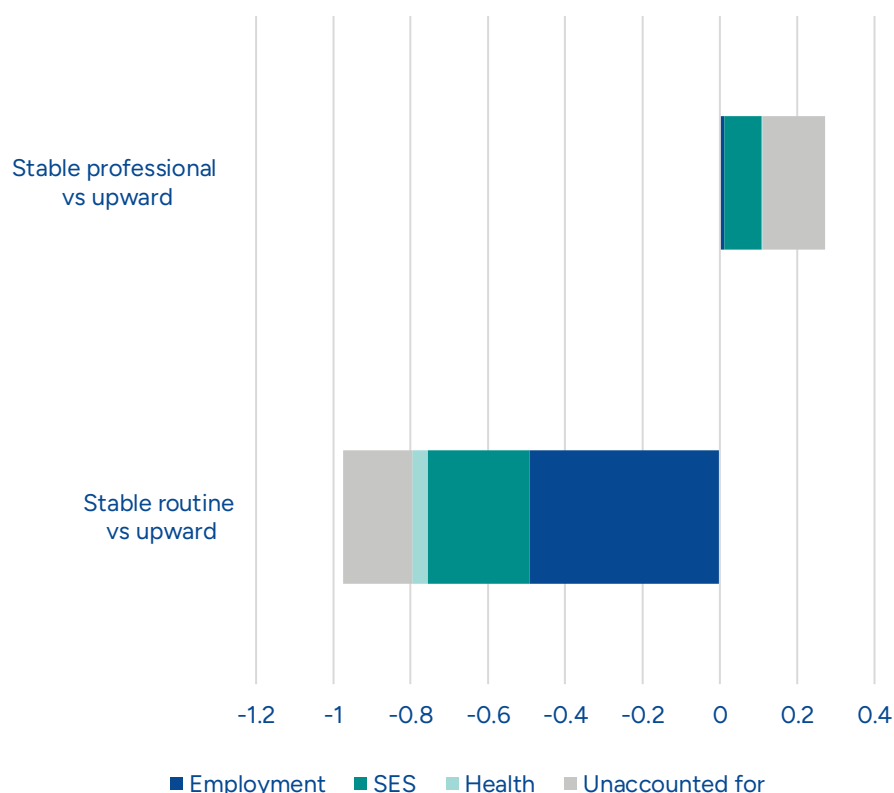
“This boost in happiness is explained by a combination of higher incomes and financial stability, better health, as well as higher chances of being in employment, accessing higher education and owning your home.”

Table 5: Accounting for wellbeing gaps

Social mobility trajectory	Model 1 (baseline)	Model 2 (baseline + employment)	Model 3 (baseline + employment + SES)	Model 4 (baseline + employment + SES + health)
Upward vs. stable professional	0.27**	0.26** (4.4%)	0.16 (39.9%)	0.16 (40.7%)
Upward vs. stable routine	-0.98***	-0.48*** (50.6%)	-0.22* (77.3%)	-0.18 (81.6%)

Note: * p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Figure 3: Explanatory factors in wellbeing gaps



Notes: Each bar represents the estimated difference in wellbeing between the indicated social mobility trajectory and the upwardly mobile.

Firstly, we look at the difference in wellbeing between the upwardly mobile and the stable professional. According to our baseline model, the upwardly mobile have a predicted average wellbeing of 22.24 and the stable professional have a predicted average wellbeing of 22.51, meaning a difference of 0.27 (row 1, column 2 in Table 5). While a small gap in the grand scheme of things (on a scale that runs from 7 to 35), it's a statistically significant gap, and our analysis sought to understand what factors could account for it. Employment status included in Model 2 (whether employed or unemployed) accounts for less than 5% (row 1, column 3) of this wellbeing gap. This is expected, as both the upwardly mobile and the stable professional are the least likely to be unemployed.

Model 3 additionally adjusts for socio-economic status, meaning that together employment status and socio-economic status account for around 39.9% of the baseline wellbeing gap. This means that the differences in income, home ownership and higher education account for a substantial share of the observed wellbeing gap. Once these

socio-economic controls are included, the wellbeing gap reduces to 0.16 and is no longer statistically significant.

In Model 4, differences in health additionally account for less than 1% of the gap. While some of the gap remains unaccounted for in our model, the wellbeing gap that remains is small (0.16) and statistically insignificant. Our polling and case study analysis look into possible reasons behind this gap beyond these factors too.

In contrast, there is a greater wellbeing gap between the upwardly mobile and the stable routine of 0.98 (row 2, column 2). Adjusting for unemployment in Model 2 reduces this to a difference of 0.48, meaning that differences in employment account for roughly 50% of the wellbeing gap. Numerous studies have shown how central employment is to people's sense of happiness and satisfaction, and as the stable routine were much more likely to be unemployed than any other group (29% versus 5.1% of upwardly mobile), it is reasonable that this difference accounts for much of the wellbeing gap.

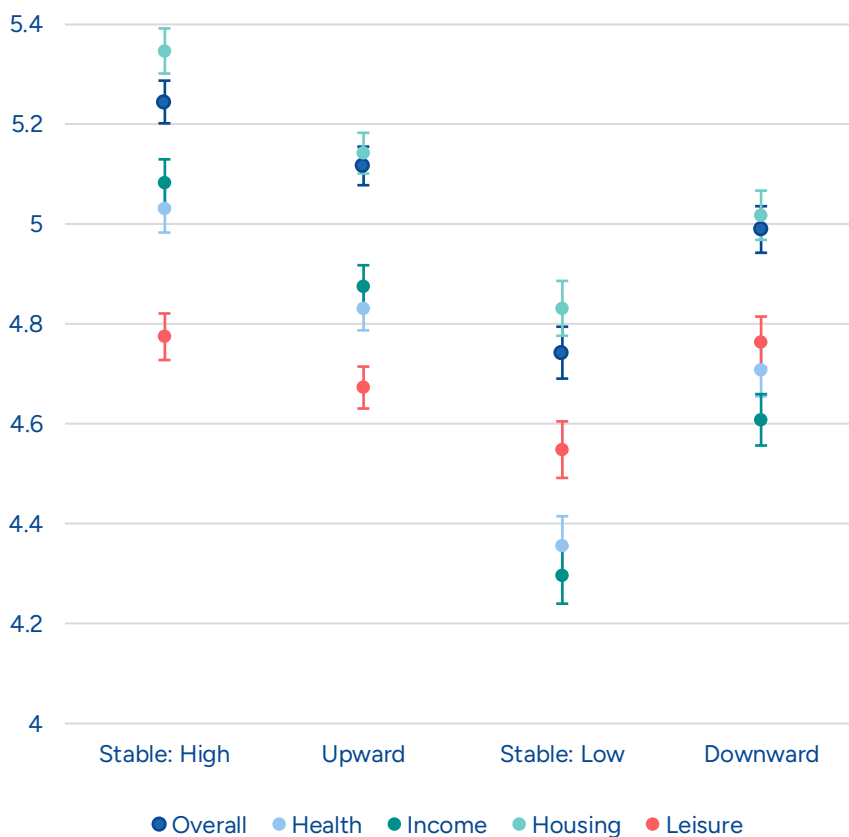
Additionally accounting for socio-economic status accounts for a further 26.7%, bringing the wellbeing gap down to 0.22. Finally, including health together with employment and SES accounts for up to 81.6% of the wellbeing gap. This reduces the estimated wellbeing gap to -0.180, which is statistically insignificant. Overall, while differences in unemployment largely explain the wellbeing gap, it is also explained by differences in SES and to a lesser extent, health. Albeit the relatively small additional reduction when health is included may reflect overlap between health and employment, for health issues that are debilitating enough to stop someone from being able to work.

One interpretation of these results may be that as unemployment explains up to 50% of the wellbeing gap between the upwardly mobile and the stable routine, getting people into employment is an important step to increasing wellbeing and happiness. However, it is important to caveat this analysis to say that while unemployment is associated with lower wellbeing, we cannot say that unemployment *causes* low wellbeing, and in fact in many cases, unemployment may be a symptom of low wellbeing, rather than a cause. However, undoubtedly, fixing unemployment and raising wellbeing should go hand in hand.

Satisfaction with different areas of life contribute to this relationship

We also analysed the relationship between social mobility trajectories and satisfaction with different areas of life. We looked at overall life satisfaction, satisfaction with health, satisfaction with income, satisfaction with housing and satisfaction with leisure time (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Predicted satisfaction in different areas of life by social mobility trajectory



Notes: Model controls for age, gender, ethnicity and retirement. Each dot represents the predicted level of satisfaction by social mobility trajectory, with the whiskers showing the 95% confidence interval. Overlapping confidence intervals suggest no statistically significant difference.

The results show that the upwardly mobile have higher satisfaction in all areas of life than stable routine, with the largest gap occurring for satisfaction with income. Stable routine individuals have the lowest satisfaction in all areas of life. Upwardly mobile individuals also have lower satisfaction in all areas of life compared to stable professionals.

However, upwardly mobile individuals' satisfaction shows some alignment with that of downwardly mobile individuals, with similar levels of satisfaction with leisure time and health. This could suggest a lasting effect of socio-economic background on health, and the trade-off with work-life balance. This was something mentioned by several of our case study interviewees, especially considering how draining and time-consuming some higher-status occupations can be. Similarly, while the stable professional group have the highest level of satisfaction across all areas of life, satisfaction with leisure time is not statistically significantly higher than for the downwardly mobile. This may suggest that some of the downward mobility seen here is driven by deliberate decisions to prioritise areas of life beyond career.

Overall, the results suggest that satisfaction across these different areas of life all contribute to the pattern we see between wellbeing and mobility, though to varying degrees. In Box 3, our case study interviews give depth and insight into the range of more specific factors that bring people happiness and wellbeing.

Box 3: Satisfaction in different aspects of life

Charlotte (*Upwardly mobile, female, 35-54*) once moved to a nearby town for work but soon returned home. Among other things, for Charlotte the natural and social environment of home was important for happiness: "The fact that I live somewhere like not in a big city. I love the mountains. The sea, that gives me a lot of happiness, like especially when COVID hit, we were able to go out for walks, which obviously helps with mental health."

Simon (*Downwardly mobile, male, 35-54*) left home for university but also to explore his sexuality more openly. For him relationships were fundamental for happiness: "I would pull out health and social connection and that sense of community... I've got a fantastic network of friends that I've built for 25 years and we founded a community sports club... Doing all these amazing things, because my health allowed it and I had the benefit of those people and those social connections, that to a great degree has been the source of my happiness over the years."

Alice (*Upwardly mobile, female, 35-54*) explained the complexities of satisfaction juggling work and home demands: "Organised life, like organisation... makes me happy. Like if I know what I'm eating for dinner every night, I've got enough food in the cupboards, you know, and that's something I struggle with when I'm working a lot because I'm like finding the balance. That's when my happiness does deteriorate, because I can't do everything... but I could not not work full time because I enjoy it too much."

Interestingly, for levels of distress measured by the General Health Questionnaire which is a screening tool designed to detect minor psychiatric disorders such as anxiety and depression (not visualised here), only those in the stable routine group have significantly higher amounts of distress compared to other mobility trajectories. There are no statistically significant differences in levels of distress between upward mobility, downward mobility and stable professional. This suggests that levels of distress, while uniquely high for stable routine, do not strongly influence other differences in wellbeing that we see here. This finding aligns with wider evidence on the stresses related to experiences of persistent poverty, and the knock-on effects that has on health.

Higher education is linked with greater wellbeing across social mobility trajectories

The benefits, or not, of higher education have been widely debated in recent years, particularly with the cost of attending university increasing.⁸² Consequently, we sought to understand whether the link between social mobility trajectory and wellbeing varied by education. In other words, do people with or without a degree still experience the same patterns of social mobility and happiness?

Existing evidence suggests that those with a degree in general are happier than those without a degree.⁸³ We also found this pattern in our data, with 27.5% of degree-educated individuals having high wellbeing compared to 24.7% of those without a degree. Additionally, those without a degree were 3.7 percentage points more likely to have low wellbeing than degree-holders (16.1% vs 12.8%). However, education is also intrinsically linked to socio-economic background and status, with those in higher status jobs more likely to have been degree-educated.

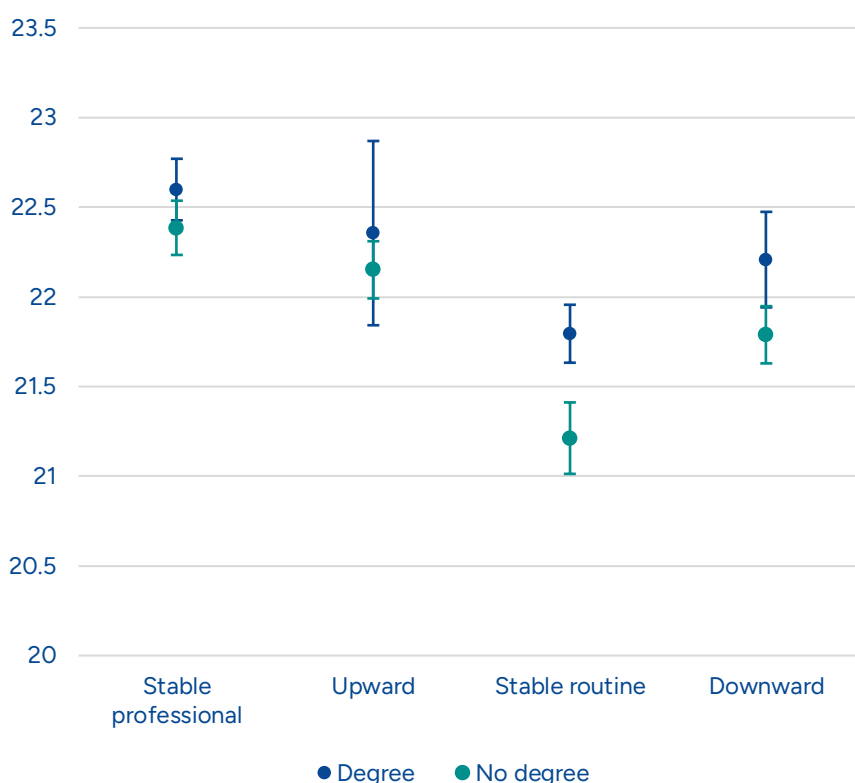
Our data found that 60% of those in the stable professional category were degree-educated, compared to 44% of the upwardly mobile, 26% of the downwardly mobile and only 9% of the stable routine. Consequently, some groups had relatively small sample sizes, limiting the statistical power of the analysis.

We already know that differences in higher education contribute to the differences in wellbeing between social mobility trajectories, along with other socio-economic factors. Our next analysis takes a closer look at how these wellbeing gaps between social mobility trajectories are impacted by higher education, by looking at the link between social mobility and wellbeing for those with and without a degree. See Figure 5 for a visualisation of this interaction.

⁸² David Willetts, *Are Universities Worth It?*, 2025.

⁸³ Janine Jongbloed, 'Higher Education for Happiness? Investigating the Impact of Education on the Hedonic and Eudaimonic Well-Being of Europeans', *European Educational Research Journal* 17, no. 5 (2018): 733–54, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474904118770818>.

Figure 5: Predicted wellbeing by social mobility trajectory, by degree



Notes: Model controls for age, gender, ethnicity and retirement. Each dot represents the predicted level of wellbeing by social mobility trajectory, with the whiskers showing the 95% confidence interval.

The results show generally similar patterns of wellbeing across social mobility trajectories for both degree holders and non-degree holders, albeit degree holders consistently had higher wellbeing. Among both those who had a degree and those without a degree, upwardly mobile people had greater wellbeing than the stable routine group and lower wellbeing than the stable professional group.

Likewise, the wellbeing boost associated with degree attainment does not vary significantly across different mobility paths, although we cannot rule out small differences that our model may be underpowered to detect.

Some theories have suggested that the route of social mobility may impact on wellbeing, for example abrupt mobility through entry to an elite university may be more jarring or more of a culture shock than

working one's way up through successive promotions.⁸⁴ In contrast, we find that both routes to upward mobility translate into boosts in wellbeing. With regard to the value or otherwise of higher education, our results show a clear association between higher wellbeing and having a degree, regardless of the socio-economic returns. Even for those graduates who may not have got a professional job (such as the stable routine and downwardly mobile groups mentioned here), a degree still translates to a boost in wellbeing. It is important to note that we cannot interpret these findings to mean that higher education directly causes higher wellbeing. The findings may instead reflect differences in the type of people who are able to complete a degree – they may be those who face fewer barriers or challenges such as being from a low-income background or having caring responsibilities.

In Box 4 (below), case study interviewees gave examples of how they felt that their degrees had been important for both social mobility and happiness. However, some interviewees also felt clearly that education was not important for either in their lives.

⁸⁴ Friedman, 'Habitus Clivé and the Emotional Imprint of Social Mobility'.

Box 4: Diverse experiences of education

Toluwanimi (*upwardly mobile; male; 18-34*) is a pharmacist who graduated in the UK. For him education was a route to status and recognition in his community as well as bringing happiness, personal development and social mobility opportunities in itself. "When you go through education, you're constantly meeting milestones. These milestones are character building and build your sense of worth and that can be a sense of happiness... pride. Particularly when you see how it impacts those around you, those who have raised you." He also said having a certain level of education "puts you in new circles", opening up networking opportunities "more easily accessed by those of higher social class."

Lucy (*downwardly mobile; female; 35-54*) compared her situation with that of her parents and how even though her father was on a low salary in a low status job with limited education, no degree and working up from being an apprenticeship he was still "able to buy houses, raise four children and keep a wife who wasn't working" and get a great pension. For her, even with a degree and a master's, this was not conceivable with the current cost of living.

Charlotte (*upwardly mobile; female; 35-54*) found her education had little impact on her later life. It was enjoyable and she made friends, but otherwise was 'irrelevant'. "I went to the Community College, did a national diploma. It's not really contributed to anything in my life because it was in performing arts, which is irrelevant, but I made friends and I enjoyed it for the two years I was there. And then I started working at 18."

Julia (*downwardly mobile; female; 35-54*) faced many challenges after running away from home at a young age. Over time her pursuit of education was a route to social mobility compared to where she was when she left home. However, she viewed it as a necessary means to an end: "I played the game because I had to get where I wanted to." However, that route was particularly challenging due to her then undiagnosed neurodiversity. For Julia, education systems are ill-equipped to deal with such needs: "They're not built to support them. In fact, they literally go against many of our baseline needs."

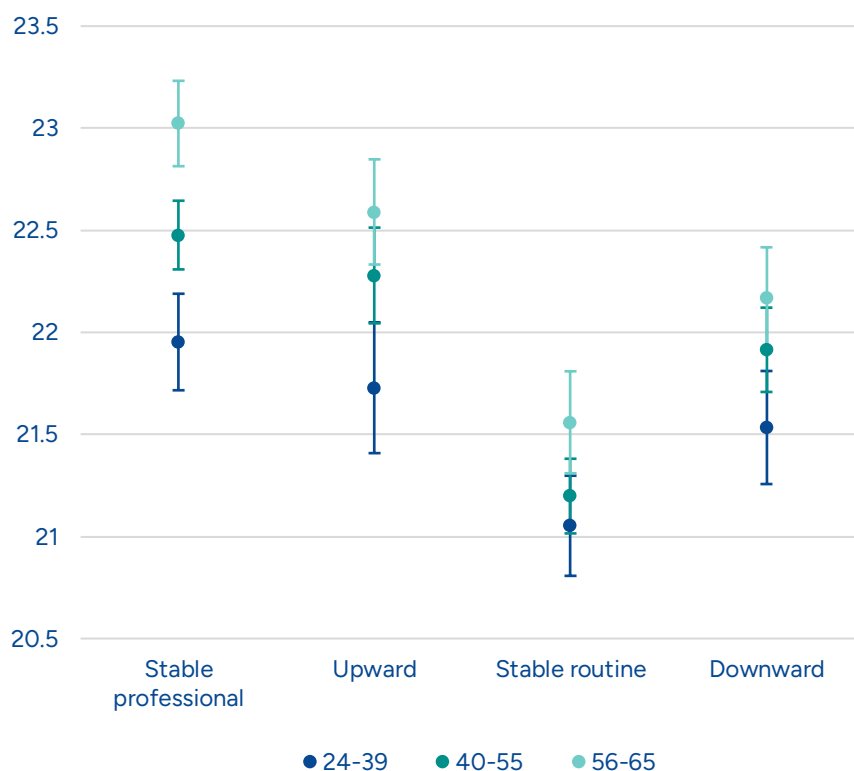
Jo (*upwardly mobile; female; 35-54*) left school with A levels and has a successful career in a professional job. For her not having a degree had "100% *not*" affected her happiness although she did think it could be nice to do a vocational degree at some time: "I think it would give me a certain amount of satisfaction to do it because I think I was a little bit cheated in a way because I didn't have the right network, I didn't have the family support."

Social mobility has a stronger association with happiness at later ages

Our analysis confirms wider evidence (see the 'Other explanatory factors' section above), that on average wellbeing increases steadily with age.

We divided our sample into three age groups, 24-39-year-olds, 40-55-year-olds and 56-65-year-olds. Then, we ran the regression analysis with an interaction between social mobility trajectory and age groups. This analysis aimed to examine whether the relationship between social mobility and wellbeing varied by age and to better understand how age contributes to the relationship. The results are visualised in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Predicted wellbeing by social mobility trajectory, by age



Notes: Model controls for gender, ethnicity and retirement. Each dot represents the predicted level of wellbeing by social mobility trajectory, with the whiskers showing the 95% confidence interval.

The results suggest that social mobility trajectory had a stronger effect on wellbeing in later adulthood. This may be through the realisation of

gains in social mobility at a later age such as being able to look back on socio-economic accomplishments. It may also reflect how people with children may then compare the material conditions they are raising their children in to how they grew up. In fact, this feeling of intergenerational comparison was a common theme in our case study interviews and often a source of pride and happiness (see Mark's case study for example). Additionally, as health tends to be so intrinsically linked to socio-economic status, aging and wellbeing, it may also reflect greater health issues among those of lower occupational status arising at these later years.

Equally, the hypothesised negative effects of upward social mobility such as imposter syndrome, alienation and disassociation may reduce over time, as people adjust. However, these results do not lend support to these negative effects, as the younger upwardly mobile are as happy as their counterparts from a higher socio-economic background.

It's also important to caveat the interpretation here. Firstly, socio-economic status is a more unstable measure at younger ages. This is because many young people are in transition in their careers, and measuring at a younger age may not necessarily capture those that may later rise to managerial or executive positions or have career changes in later life. Accordingly, the stronger relationship at a later age may partially reflect a 'settling down' of socio-economic status as a measure for mobility.

Additionally, these results could also reflect cohort or period effects rather than an age effect. For instance, the youngest group included here were born between 1981 and 1998 while the oldest group were born between 1955 and 1966. Another theme that came up in our case study interviews referred to generational effects, a general feeling that older generations had it easier than younger generations. For instance, the ability to own a house and raise children on a single income in a routine or manual occupation, compared to now where for many owning a house and raising children even sometimes in higher income jobs feels less affordable (see Lucy's case study).

The link between social mobility and wellbeing is stronger for people with a long-term illness or disability

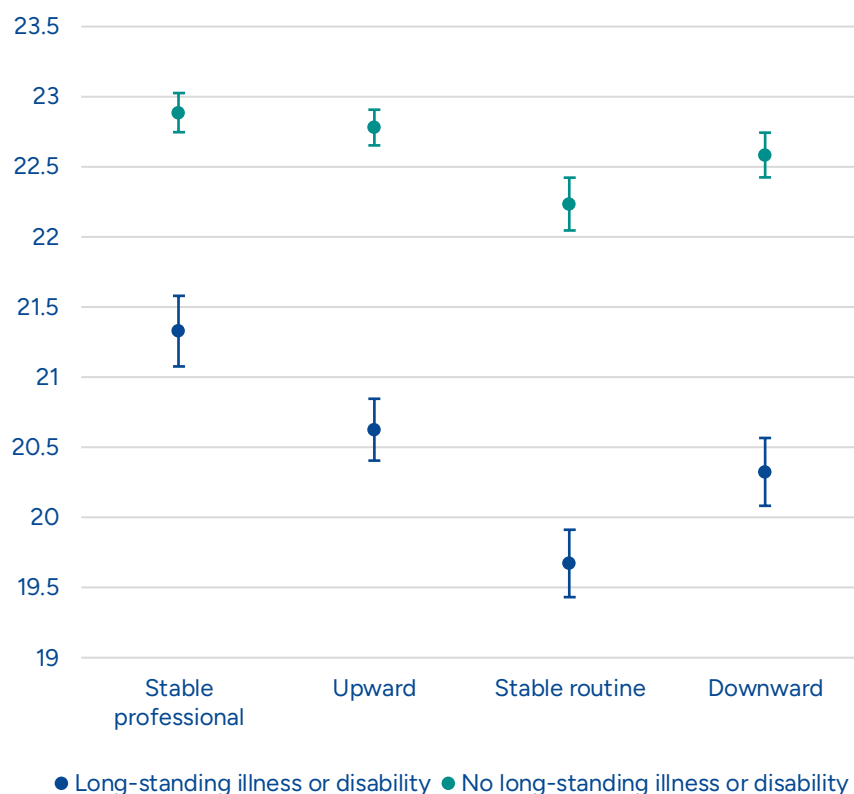
Research suggests that health is one of the key explanatory factors in the relationship between socio-economic status and wellbeing, with greater socio-economic status linked with greater health outcomes (see above). Bad health can also be linked to downward mobility, something exemplified in our case study interviews as well (for example, see Keith's case study).

We found that health was strongly linked to wellbeing, with people with a long-term illness or disability almost three times more likely to experience low wellbeing compared to those without. Similarly, people without a long-term illness or disability were almost twice as likely to report high wellbeing. However, health was also linked with social mobility trajectory, with those with a long-standing illness or disability nine percentage points more likely to be stable routine and two percentage points more likely to be downwardly mobile than those without an illness or disability.

Our next analysis sought to answer whether the relationship between social mobility and wellbeing varied by health, to understand how much differences in health contribute to wellbeing gaps (see Figure 7).

“People with a long-term illness or disability were almost three times more likely to experience low wellbeing compared to those without.”

Figure 7: Predicted wellbeing by social mobility, by long-term illness or disability



Notes: Model controls for age, gender, ethnicity and retirement. Each dot represents the predicted level of wellbeing by social mobility trajectory, with the whiskers showing the 95% confidence interval.

The results confirm that in general, there are larger wellbeing gaps by social mobility trajectory for people with a long-term illness or disability. Among those without a long-term illness or disability, the upwardly mobile had greater wellbeing in general than the stable routine, and similar to the stable professional group. This suggests that differences in wellbeing between the upwardly mobile and the stable professional may be driven to some extent by differences in health between the two groups.

These findings may reflect the importance of how having greater socio-economic status can 'protect' people from some of the detrimental impacts of illness and disability on their wellbeing. However, they could also reflect differences in illness and disability. For example, the illness or disability of those working in higher socio-economic occupations may be less serious or less disruptive to their careers (although the analysis attempts to adjust for unemployment to partially deal with this issue).

The link between social mobility and wellbeing is stronger for those who do not own their own home

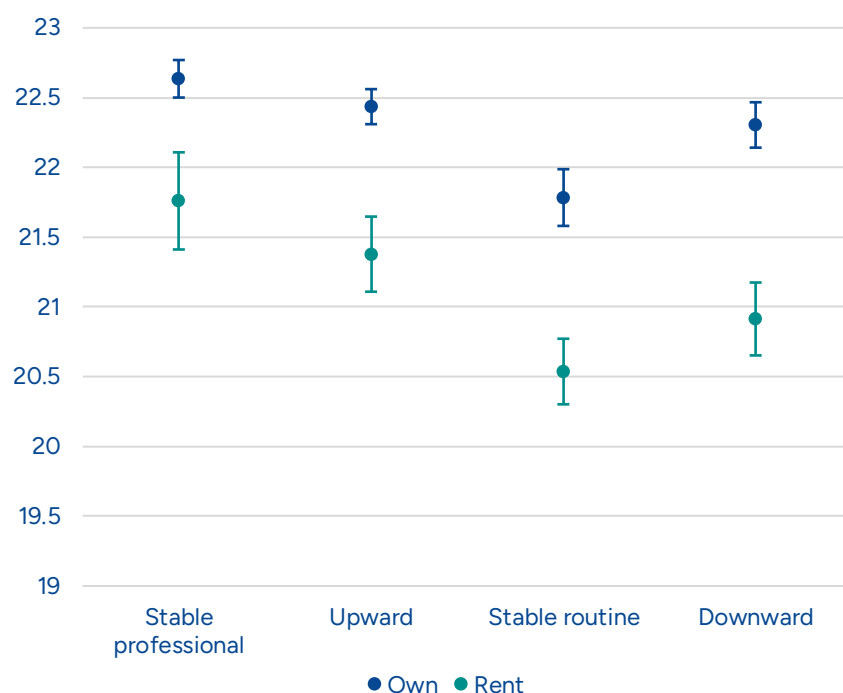
Housing tenure is also intrinsically linked to both social mobility and happiness. For today's 'generation rent', owning a house is becoming a significant social cleavage as it becomes less feasible to buy a house without the 'bank of mum and dad'.⁸⁵ Owning your own home can therefore be an indicator of wealth and, increasingly, intergenerational wealth, both related to the experience of social mobility. In this context, the UK is also forecast to experience a 'great wealth transfer' over the next twenty years when the baby boomer generation pass on their assets to their children, with knock-on impacts on inequality.

Unsurprisingly, home ownership is linked with wellbeing, with those who rent their home more than twice as likely to experience low wellbeing than those who own and roughly 40% less likely to experience high wellbeing. Housing tenure is also intrinsically linked with social mobility, with those who own their own home 10 percentage points more likely to be upwardly mobile, and 16 percentage points more likely to be stable professional and a huge 20 percentage points less likely to be stable routine, less than half as likely as those who rent (see Appendix Table A1).

We know from our earlier analysis that differences in housing tenure contribute to wellbeing gaps between social mobility trajectories. Our next analysis sought to understand whether the relationship between wellbeing and social mobility varied by homeownership, with the results shown below in Figure 8.

⁸⁵ Kevin Peachey, 'Bank of Mum and Dad "Helps Half of First-Time Buyers"', *BBC News*, 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cly1jzl9eedo>.

Figure 8: Predicted wellbeing by social mobility, by housing tenure



Notes: Model controls for age, gender, ethnicity and retirement. Each dot represents the predicted level of wellbeing by social mobility trajectory, with the whiskers showing the 95% confidence interval.

The results show a similar relationship between social mobility and wellbeing for those who own their home and those who rent, although homeowners have higher wellbeing in general. For both homeowners and those who rent, the upwardly mobile are more likely to have high wellbeing than those who didn't experience upward mobility from a lower socio-economic background, and slightly lower wellbeing than those who are stable professional, although this wellbeing gap was somewhat reduced among renters.

Overall, these results suggest that home ownership is associated with greater wellbeing in general, but that the relationship between social mobility and wellbeing does not necessarily vary by home ownership. It's also important to note that housing tenure likely also captures differences in age, region and other factors.

Interviewees for our case studies brought out some of the personal significance of housing issues ranging from the challenges of buying your own home today to the cultural significance in working-class cultures of owning your own home (see Box 5).

Box 5: Significance of house ownership to experiences of wellbeing and social mobility

Francesca (*upwardly mobile; female; 35-54*) has had a higher paid professional career than her parents but for her social mobility is complicated due to the cost of living. She gave the particular example of housing: "I don't feel that I have the same access to housing now that my parents had: money wasn't like easy when we were growing up, but we still had quite a big house in like a nice part of North London. Now that's not possible.... basic housing is much more inaccessible."

Charlotte (*upwardly mobile; female; 35-54*) saw housing as a source of stability and security: "Even though my mum never bought a house, it was a council house. So we were secure." This was something she appreciated with owning her own home later in life: "I do feel a sense of, like security, knowing that I have a roof over my head and because it's not a rental, I can't be kicked out, you know? So I'm like permanently secure."

Jonathan (*downwardly mobile; male; 35-54*) was very conscious of the environment and the consequences of decisions. When he bought his home he chose an area that cost less and where other people in his situation "would have made different choices." He chose "not to mortgage myself to the hilt." But he also saw this less assuming and modest approach "crystallising" into his overall worldview.

Isabel (*upwardly mobile; female; 55+*) felt that home ownership is often taken for granted: "We are only the second generation to have bought our own home and the first generation was our parents... I think a lot of people forget that, but it's important." For her this pointed to quite different class experiences: "You'll have middle or upper class people who have always had their own property and then you'll get normal working class people like us, only the second generation."

Jo (*upwardly mobile; female; 35-54*) moved away from where she grew up in the South of England because of the unaffordability of housing. She grew up in social housing and all her siblings still live in social housing. Jo, however, was proud of having "broken a cycle" by buying her home, something her son has subsequently emulated.

The link between social mobility and wellbeing varies by region

We also looked at the link between social mobility and wellbeing and how it varies by region. There are significant socio-economic inequalities between regions, and inequalities in opportunities and social mobility. Some research also suggests that there are regional differences in wellbeing, which comes down to cross-cutting factors, but the research into regional differences in wellbeing is limited.⁸⁶

Our descriptive statistics corroborate previous findings of small differences in wellbeing across regions, with the largest differences between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, with regional differences within England smaller, and mostly not statistically significant. For example, Northern Ireland consistently has higher levels of wellbeing and happiness than the rest of the UK according to statistics from the ONS.⁸⁷ Our findings showed that the English region with the highest wellbeing was the South East and the lowest wellbeing was the North East although again, there was only a small difference.

We then tested whether the relationship between social mobility trajectory and wellbeing varied across regions, to find out whether the link between social mobility and wellbeing was broken or amplified by place.

In general, our results show a pattern of the upwardly mobile having greater wellbeing than the stable routine, and lower wellbeing than the stable professional, with downwardly mobile falling in between the two echoing our main results across regions. However, there are some anomalies in this pattern. For example, there is a relatively flat relationship between social mobility and wellbeing in the West Midlands, East of England and London to a certain extent, meaning that everyone had a similar level of wellbeing. These differences are not clearly explained by socio-economic regional differences, likely coming down to a variety of factors. Further research is needed to better understand the reasons behind why socio-economic inequalities in wellbeing might vary across regions.

⁸⁶ Cotofan, *The UK Wellbeing Report*.

⁸⁷ Office for National Statistics (ONS), released 7 November 2023, ONS website, statistical bulletin, [Personal well-being in the UK: April 2022 to March 2023](#)

Moving region is linked with greater wellbeing

Research by the Social Mobility Commission has found that moving is associated with greater employment outcomes in the UK.⁸⁸ However, moving can also affect sense of community and belonging (for example, see Box 6 below for experiences from our case study interviews). Having to move away from the area you grew up in to get better opportunities is a barrier to many and can result in trade-offs between opportunity and wellbeing. In this way, moving may amplify (or detract from) wellbeing gaps across social mobility experiences. Using data from Next Steps, in this next analysis we look at the link between social mobility, life satisfaction and living in a different region aged 32 to the one lived in aged 16 with the aim of understanding whether the wellbeing gap varies by whether they've moved afar or not (see Figure 9).⁸⁹

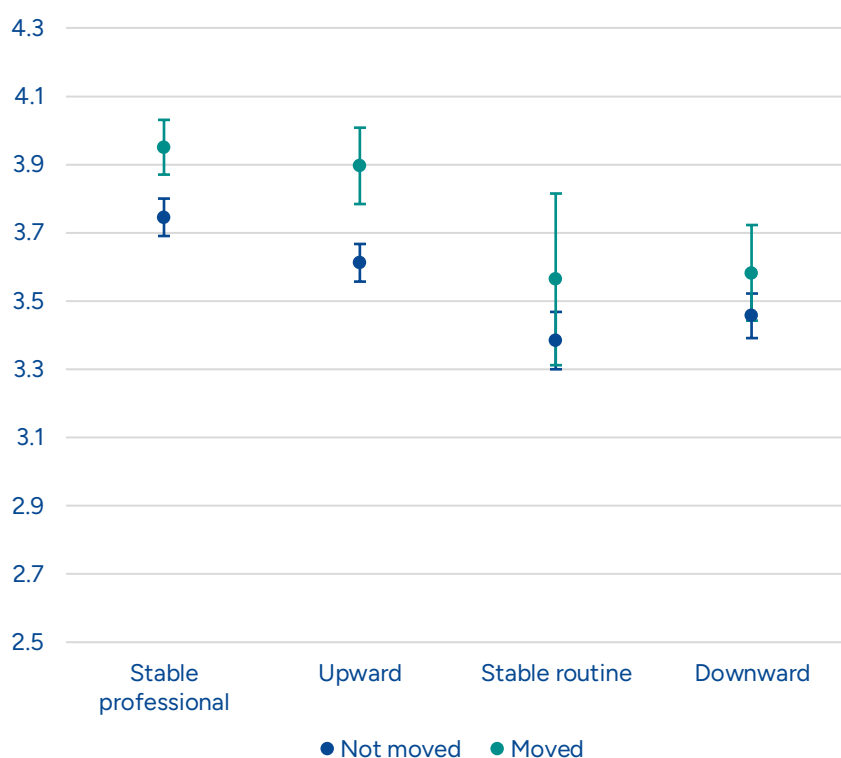
“Those who moved were more likely to say they were fairly to very satisfied with life overall compared to those who didn't move (75% vs 62%).”

Overall, we found a similar relationship between social mobility trajectory and life satisfaction using Next Steps data as we did with the dataset in our main analysis. 22% of the sample lived in a different region compared to the one they lived in aged 16. 19% of upwardly mobile people had moved, compared to 9% of the stable routine group and 32% of the stable professional group. Of those who moved region, 45% had moved down an IMD quintile between age 16 and age 32 and 32% had moved up an IMD quintile. Those who moved were more likely to say they were fairly to very satisfied with life overall compared to those who didn't move (75% vs 62%).

⁸⁸ Dafni Papoutsaki et al., *Moving out to Move on: Understanding the Link between Migration, Disadvantage and Social Mobility* (Social Mobility Commission, 2020), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/internal-migration-and-social-mobility-moving-out-to-move-on/moving-out-to-move-on-understanding-the-link-between-migration-disadvantage-and-social-mobility>.

⁸⁹ See Supplementary appendix for more details on the methodology.

Figure 9: Predicted life satisfaction by social mobility, by geographic mobility



Notes: Model controls for age, gender, ethnicity and retirement. Each dot represents the predicted level of wellbeing by social mobility trajectory, with the whiskers showing the 95% confidence interval.

The results suggest that those who moved generally have higher life satisfaction than those who didn't. However, the relationship between social mobility and life satisfaction did not vary between those who moved and those who didn't. For both, the upwardly mobile had greater life satisfaction than the stable routine, and lower life satisfaction than the stable professional group. This suggests that whether social mobility is experienced through moving or staying in the region you grew up in, it is equally associated with a wellbeing boost. This is likely at least partially explained by the higher income associated with people who moved.

It is important to note that these results could also reflect differences in the type of people who are able to move region, such as those with the resources to up and move region. Additionally, this analysis may reflect differences in age and cohort compared to our main analysis.

Our case study interviews in Box 6 revealed diverse experiences of moving from one part of the country to another. Several referred to being cut off from previous social relations and networks although they had varying ways of dealing with it.

Box 6: The difficulties and opportunities of moving

Julia (*downwardly mobile; female; 35-54*) moved North for education and to escape an abusive relationship. Although it had its advantages, she felt she left everything behind and went through “an identity crisis” leaving behind everyone she knew and “completely reconfiguring” her social life. She “stopped talking to anybody.”

Jo (*upwardly mobile; female; 35-54*) also experienced isolation moving away from everyone she knew in the South. However, although not always easy, she did value having been “forced” to find new connections in her new area.

Jonathan (*downwardly mobile; male; 35-54*) saw geographical mobility as often important for social mobility and happiness but felt that it shouldn't always be necessary. Being gay, when he moved to a large Northern city for university it was also “a vehicle to explore” his sexuality in a way he could never have done where he grew up. For him, geographical mobility was therefore also about “social connection” and “community”.

Martin (*upwardly mobile; male; 55+*) still keeps in touch with friends from where he grew up but many of them, like him, also moved away later in life: “I do miss where I grew up to a degree. It was a good place to bring up children and when our children grew up we moved. And I think it seemed to be a trend actually. So people scattered.”

Overall, this section has shown that in general, the upwardly mobile have greater wellbeing than those from a similar socio-economic background who did not experience upward mobility. This is explained to some extent by differences in income, education and housing tenure though not entirely. Other factors that also contribute to this wellbeing gap include satisfaction with health and leisure time. We also looked at whether the strength of the relationship between social mobility and wellbeing varied by a range of factors. In particular, we wanted to find out if different routes to upward mobility may have differing impact on wellbeing. The findings showed that in general the relationship was stronger for older people, in different regions, and for those

experiencing long-term illness or disability. While those with higher education, those who owned their own home and those who moved region generally experienced greater wellbeing than those without, these factors did not generally change the relationship between social mobility and wellbeing.

In the next section, we explore more subjective experiences of social mobility and wellbeing.

What people think: additional perspectives

This section explores nationally representative polling conducted by the Sutton Trust via Savanta. This polling offers a contemporary snapshot of public opinion on the issues covered by the household survey studies.⁹⁰ In some areas, the polling results corroborate the household survey data analysis. In other cases, they provide challenge and additional perspectives on the issues raised.

In particular, the polling reveals people's subjective understanding of wellbeing related to social mobility trajectories. Where the household survey analysis relies on an agreed measure of social mobility based on narrow criteria, the polling also draws on people's personal views on and experiences of social mobility and happiness.

From 'objective' to 'subjective' measures of social mobility

In our polling, we took two measures of social mobility. One 'objective' measure used standardised questions on occupation and parental occupation, whereas another more 'subjective' measure asked about respondents' perceptions of their social mobility journey.

Participants were asked about their occupation as an indicator of their current socio-economic status and also that of their parents at the age

⁹⁰ The two sets of results are not directly comparable due to differences in time, scale and methods. However, they do cover many of the same issues and lend themselves to parallel analyses.

of 14 based on the occupation of the main earner. Social mobility was calculated based on changes in occupational status from age 14, using the same mobility trajectories as the analysis above (see Table 5).⁹¹

In addition, participants were asked whether, thinking of their current job, they considered their current earnings and status to be higher, lower or similar⁹² to that of the main earner in their household when aged 14. This more subjective measure produced quite different results (see Table 6). A notably higher proportion of respondents considered themselves either upwardly or downwardly mobile compared to their trajectories based on identification of socio-economic status.⁹³ Whereas the latter suggested a largely socially stable population, the former suggested much higher levels of social mobility.

Table 6: Self-declared social mobility is higher than ‘objective’ measures

Social mobility trajectory	Comparison of current SES and household at 14	Self-declared social mobility status compared to age 14
Stable professional	43.0%	15.2%
Upwardly mobile	11.1%	37.7%
Stable routine	32.4%	12.8%
Downwardly mobile	13.5%	20.1%

⁹¹ Occupation was categorised using the NRS codes A, B, C1, C2, D and E corresponding to high and intermediate managerial, administrative or professional roles (A and B respectively), supervisor, administrative or professional (C1), skilled manual worker (C2), semi-skilled or unskilled manual worker (D) and retired, unemployed and casual workers. Trajectories from either A or B to either A or B were counted as stable professional along with those from C1 to C1. Trajectories from D or E to D or E and those from C2 to C2 were categorised as stable routine.

⁹² The ‘similar’ responses were disaggregated into stable routine and stable professional categories using current socioeconomic status.

⁹³ This could be at least in part as it would include some shorter social mobility journeys, that would not get picked up in the objective measures. This is supported by the high proportion of self-declared upwardly mobile respondents coming from higher socio-economic backgrounds (see below).

Other questions in this survey asked participants their opinions on issues related to social mobility and happiness closely related to their own experiences and perceptions of social mobility. As work by Sam Friedman and others has shown, subjective accounts of social mobility journeys are complex and can incorporate the mobility trajectories of previous generations into an 'intergenerational self'.⁹⁴ However, as our case study interviews demonstrate, this complexity may also include respondents feeling downwardly mobile due to factors such as the cost of living or housing compared to their parents, even if they may 'objectively' be considered upwardly mobile.

Consequently, our polling analysis will mainly use people's self-declared social mobility status as its basis. This allows us to better account for this subjectivity and complexity, and provides an interesting perspective in comparison to the household survey analysis.

Those who considered themselves upwardly socially mobile were more likely to come from higher professional backgrounds. Almost half (49%) of those who saw themselves as upwardly socially mobile grew up in families from the highest socio-economic groups (AB) compared to just 29% from the lowest (DE).⁹⁵

Perceptions of social mobility also varied by region respondents were living in (see Table 7). Those in London (48.6%) and Northern Ireland (47.8%) were twice as likely to see themselves as upwardly socially mobile as those in the East Midlands (24%). The Eastern region had the highest proportion of downward social mobility (23.5%). There was less regional variability with stable professional and stable routine respondents.

⁹⁴ Sam Friedman et al., 'Deflecting Privilege: Class Identity and the Intergenerational Self', *Sociology* 55, no. 4 (2021): 716–33.

⁹⁵ This could partially account for the contrasting mobility profiles between the 'objective' and 'subjective' measures of social mobility in Table 6.

Table 7: Self-perceived social mobility by region

	Stable professional	Upwardly mobile	Stable routine	Downwardly mobile
Northern Ireland	11.9%	47.8%	17.9%	13.4%
Scotland	14.6%	42.0%	9.3%	23.4%
North West	16.3%	42.4%	12.3%	20.7%
North East	16.0%	27.0%	13.0%	18.0%
Yorkshire & Humberside	16.3%	43.6%	12.9%	18.3%
Wales	21.6%	26.7%	12.1%	16.4%
West Midlands	14.7%	31.7%	15.6%	21.1%
East Midlands	17.5%	24.0%	15.8%	23.0%
South West	13.4%	35.6%	17.1%	18.5%
South East	14.2%	37.5%	15.4%	20.1%
Eastern	15.4%	34.2%	11.1%	23.5%
London	12.9%	48.6%	5.8%	18.8%

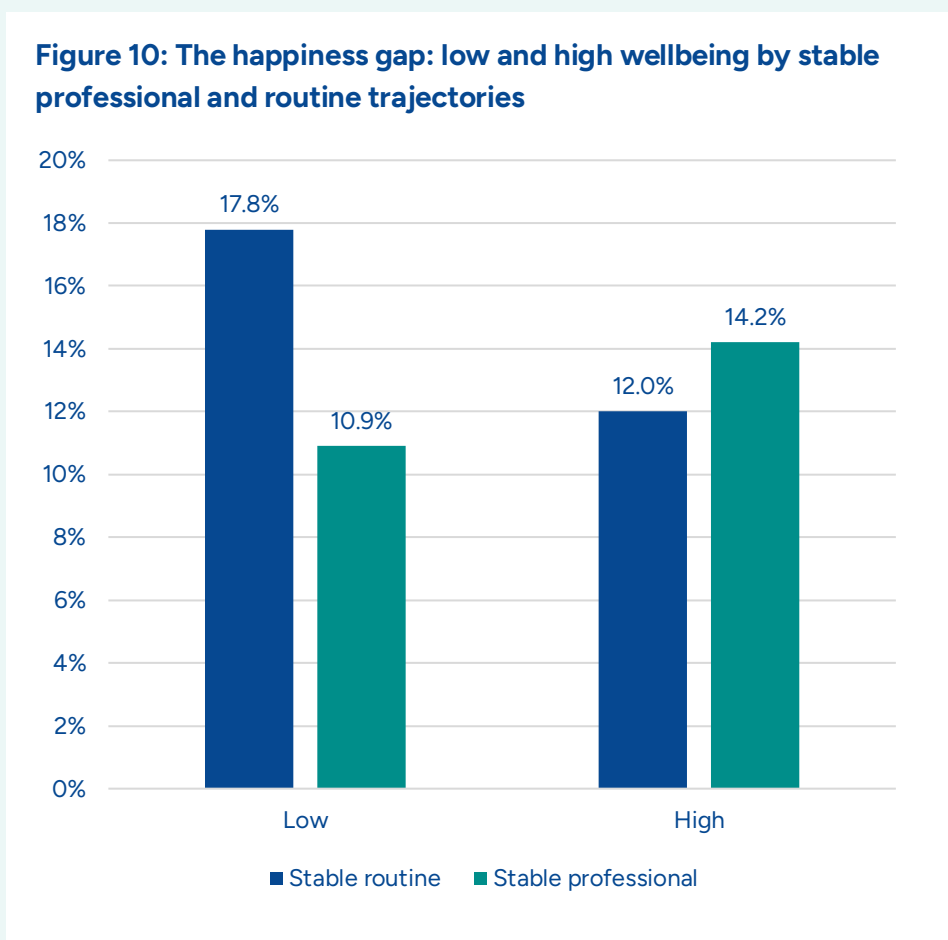
This reminds us of the importance of place when discussing social mobility. The contrast between London and other regions points to quite different perceptions of the social mobility possibilities in different parts of the country.

Wellbeing by social mobility

Participants in the survey were asked questions on their mental health and wellbeing using the Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing

Scale (SWEMWBS).⁹⁶ Responses to the questions were scored and aggregated to give an overall mental wellbeing score. These were then categorised into low, average and high scores.⁹⁷

Using the 'objective' measure of social mobility trajectories outlined above, there is a clear happiness gap (see Figure 10). Stable professionals are more likely to have high wellbeing and less likely to have low wellbeing than those remaining in stable routine occupations.



Using self-declared social mobility trajectories, the picture is a little more complex. On this analysis, those seeing themselves as stable professionals were a third less likely to experience low wellbeing than

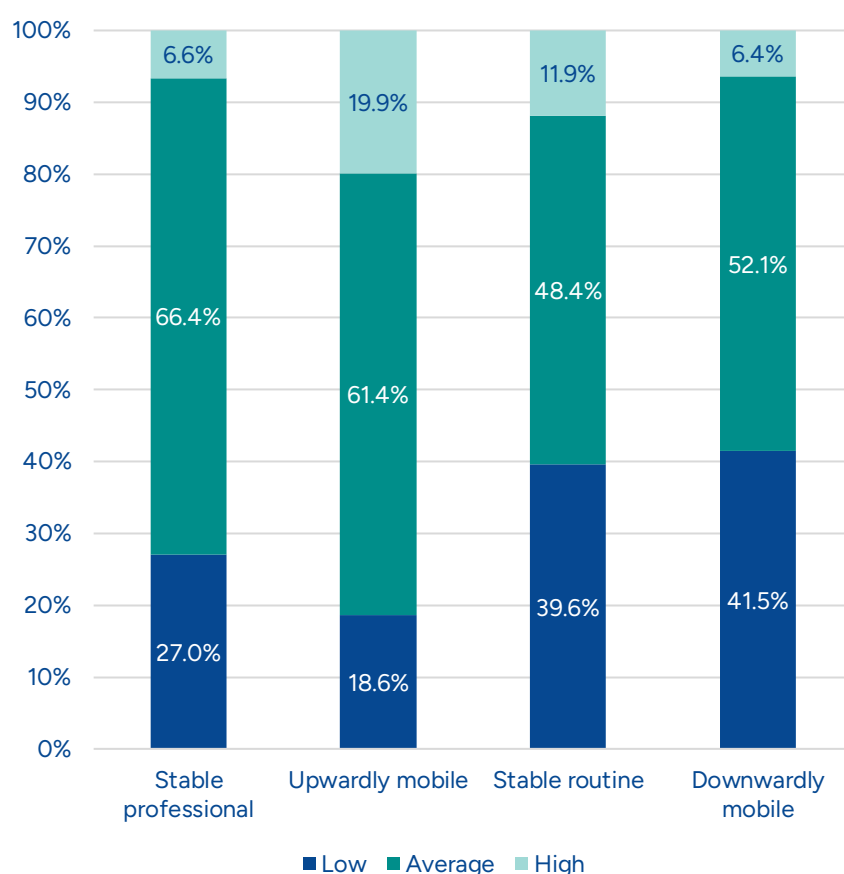
⁹⁶ See <https://warwick.ac.uk/services/innovations/wemwbs/how/> for an explanation of how the scale works. This survey used the reduced seven-question version of the scale with transformed raw data scores.

⁹⁷ Following WEMWBS guidance the thresholds for high and low were applied using plus or minus 15% difference to the mean. High wellbeing is considered a score of 27.5-35 and low wellbeing is considered a score of 7-19.5.

those in the stable routine category but were also less likely to experience high wellbeing.

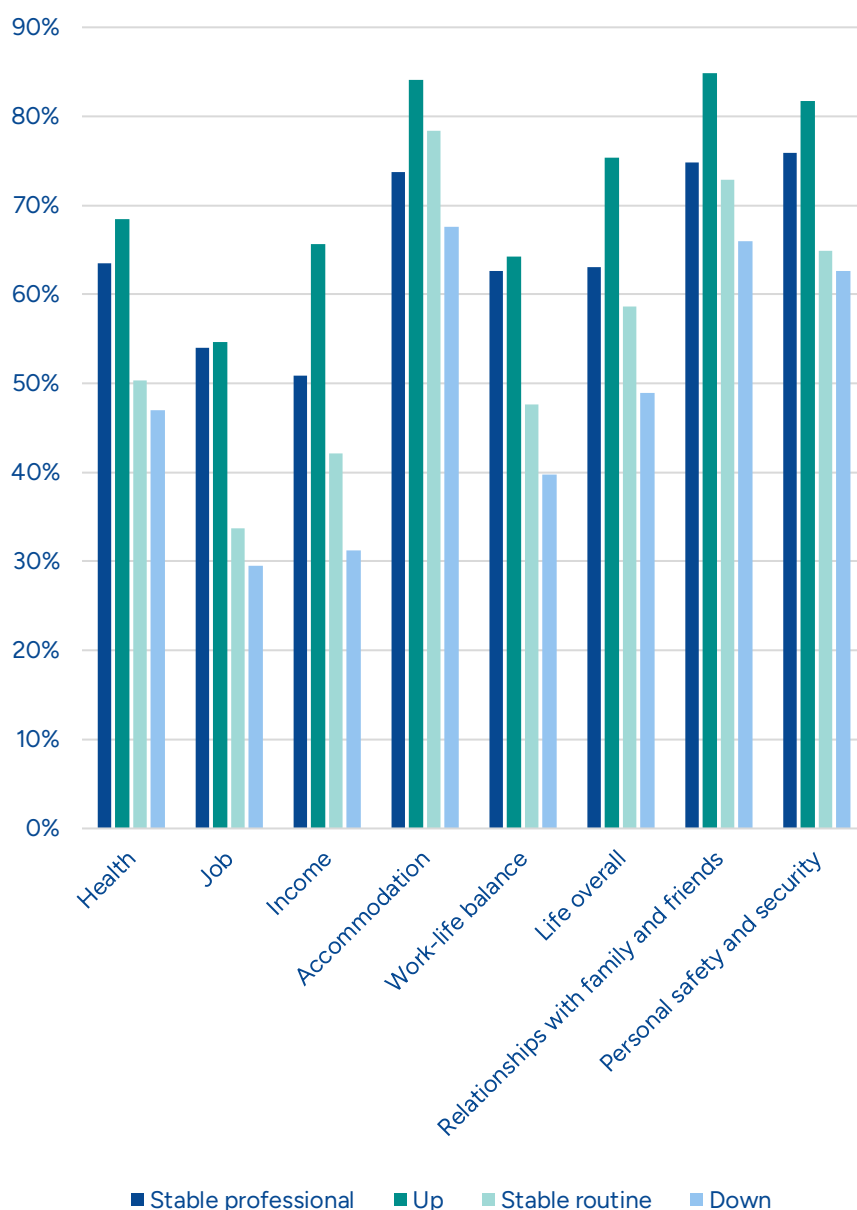
At the same time, those who think of themselves as upwardly mobile are considerably more likely to experience high levels of wellbeing; more than three times more likely than those who say they have been downwardly mobile (see Figure 11). Downwardly mobile participants were more than twice as likely than upwardly mobile participants to experience low wellbeing. This suggests a clear link between perceived upward mobility and heightened wellbeing.

Figure 11: Wellbeing level by social mobility trajectory



Upwardly mobile participants were also notably more likely to express satisfaction with life overall (see Figure 12). Three quarters said they were either satisfied (53%) or very satisfied (22.4%) with life overall compared to an average of 63.2% among all respondents. They were also more likely than any other group to express satisfaction with all the individual aspects of their lives polled: health, accommodation, jobs, income, work-life balance, relationships with family and friends and personal safety and security.

Figure 12: Levels of satisfaction by social mobility trajectory



People across social mobility trajectories identified their jobs as the area of their lives with which they were least satisfied. Case study interviews revealed a range of perspectives on occupation, including satisfaction with completing a good job through to the tension between financial rewards and work-life balance (see Box 7 below). These examples give a clear indication of how happiness and job satisfaction are not just about income but are deeply ingrained in people's individual lives and perspectives. Happiness often comes through important individual trade-offs that people make in their everyday decisions.

Box 7. Work and job satisfaction

Martin (*upwardly mobile; male; 55+*) grew up in a difficult household with alcoholic parents. For him, several factors associated with work were important for bringing happiness: "What I was looking for was stability and particularly financial stability, which I didn't have from my parents. Financial stability and the ability to achieve objectives on behalf of other people, and to do that effectively, satisfactorily, so that it provides what they want. And the pleasure of seeing a nice a job done well. It's great."

Francesca (*upwardly mobile; female; 35-54*) had a professional job but took time off for maternity leave and struggled to find a job afterwards in a competitive market which impacted her mental wellbeing. This made her realise "whatever it is that you are doing in the world of work has such a big effect on how happy you are." However, she also stressed the need for financial resources to be able to enjoy leisure time, as well as energy and "mental space to plan." If you are completely overworked, she said, "you don't want to do anything at the weekends."

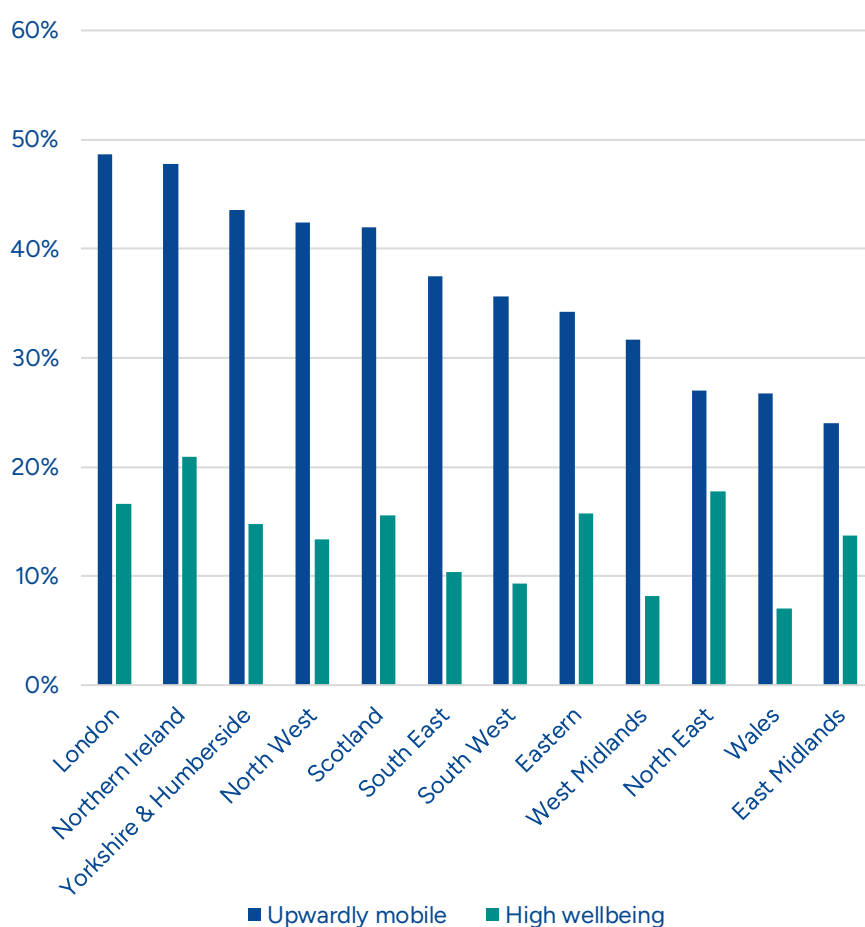
Isabel (*upwardly mobile; female; 55+*) currently works at a non-profit organisation which, she said, brings her happiness and a "sense of satisfaction that you're doing something for the community."

Julia (*downwardly mobile; female; 35-54*) had a job in civil engineering which she said many people would see as a great professional role earning "decent money". However, for her, after difficult times in the workplace due to discrimination surrounding her neurodiversity, it was, in the end, not worth it: "I would rather do something that I feel passionate about and if I get paid less than I get paid less and I'll make my life suit that because it's not good for my emotional and mental wellbeing."

Dean (*upwardly mobile; male; 55+*), an academic putting on theatre for disadvantaged communities, found happiness through the sense of satisfaction that work gave him: "What makes me happy is 300 young people and their parents in a room creating an awful lot of noise in one of the poorest parts of the country." For him, an important way to make yourself happy is by "making other people happy."

In terms of region, London (48.6%) and Northern Ireland (47.8%) were not only the most upwardly socially mobile but were also the regions with highest wellbeing levels (20.9% and 16.6% high wellbeing respectively – see Figure 13). Other regions with high upward social mobility such as Yorkshire and Humberside, the North West and Scotland also had relatively high wellbeing and with the exception of the North East, generally the highest levels of wellbeing were found in regions with the highest upward social mobility. There were also higher levels of wellbeing in the North than in either the Midlands or the South.

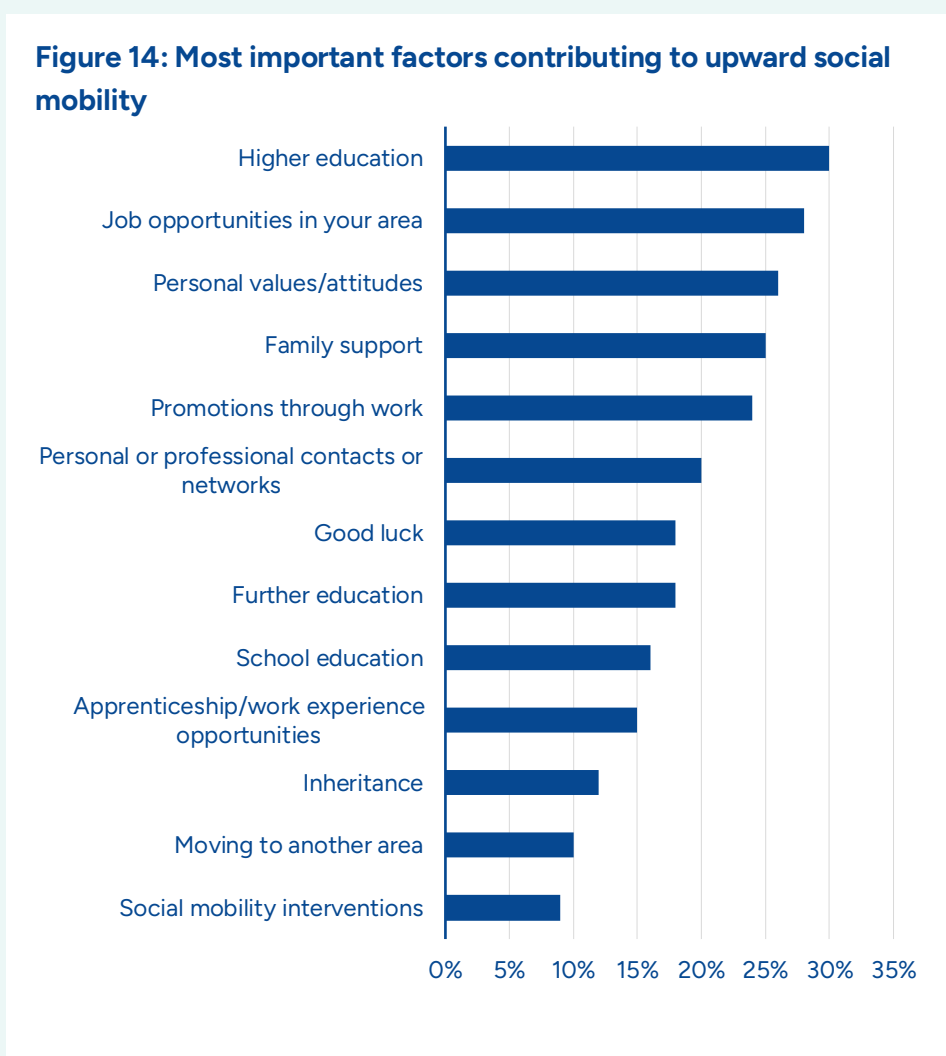
Figure 13: Proportions of high wellbeing and upward social mobility by region



Higher education and jobs contribute most to upward social mobility

We asked participants what they consider the most important factors contributing to both upward and downward social mobility.

Higher education was the most commonly cited factor in respondents 'top three' (30%), followed by job opportunities in your area (28%), personal values and attitudes (26%) and family support (25%) (see Figure 14). One in five respondents also ranked contacts and networks among the top three.



There were some variations related to region and ethnicity, with higher education considered particularly important in Scotland (41%) and London (38%) compared to just 18% in the South West and 23% in both Wales and the East Midlands. Respondents from certain ethnic minority groups were also more likely than average to value higher education with Black (40%), Asian (40%) and Mixed ethnicity (35%) all above average and considerably higher than White respondents at 28%.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ The survey suggested Chinese may also be among these ethnic groups (41%) but due to small numbers are not included here.

Only 16% of respondents ranked school education among the top three factors contributing to upward social mobility, though this again varied by region rising to 27% in Northern Ireland and just 12% in London and the North West. School education was considered relatively more important by those from routine and manual occupations (C2DEs 20% vs. ABC1s 13%). See Box 8 for an exploration of factors contributing to upward and downward mobility from our case study interviews.

Box 8. Factors contributing to upward and downward mobility

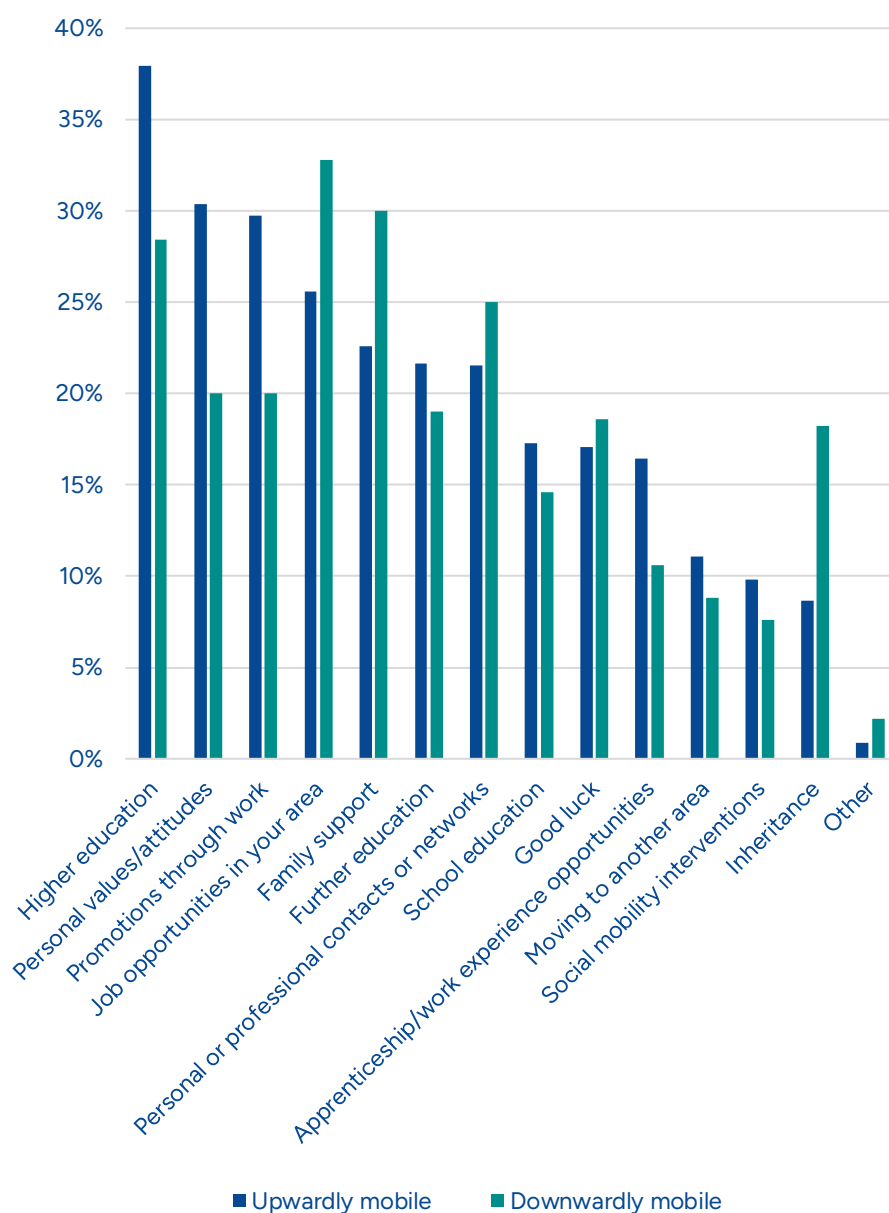
Julia (*downwardly mobile; female; 35-54*) had a problematic childhood and needed to escape an abusive relationship with her two children. Education was a route to social mobility compared to where she was when she ran away. It wasn't easy because of her undiagnosed neurodiversity but she knew she had to do it. "I played the game because I had to get where I wanted to." For Julia, it was a stepping stone to financial stability.

Mark (*upwardly mobile; male; 55+*) left school at 15 to join the Royal Navy, returning to his hometown years later to run a successful business franchise. "If I hadn't moved away, I don't think I would have had the social mobility that I've experienced." Mark felt that without his moving away, and crucial early phase in the Royal Navy, he wouldn't have had the same joys and experiences. "Getting out and then realising that I had much more to offer and I'd learned so much [...] and I wanted to do something with it, so came back to my own area again and decided that I wanted to really try to do something."

Keith (*downwardly mobile; male; 55+*) retired on health grounds due to chronic fatigue, of which he experienced issues with for around 20 years and led to his downward mobility. His success and sense of progression came to a "grinding halt" with his health problems, which was very painful. He feels his health robbed him of his opportunity to be more socially mobile.

It is useful to look at the key factors identified by upwardly mobile respondents given that their answers likely relate to their own experiences. Figure 15 shows the key factors identified by respondents on different social mobility trajectories ranked left to right according to responses of the upwardly mobile.

Figure 15: Most important factors contributing to upward social mobility by social mobility trajectory



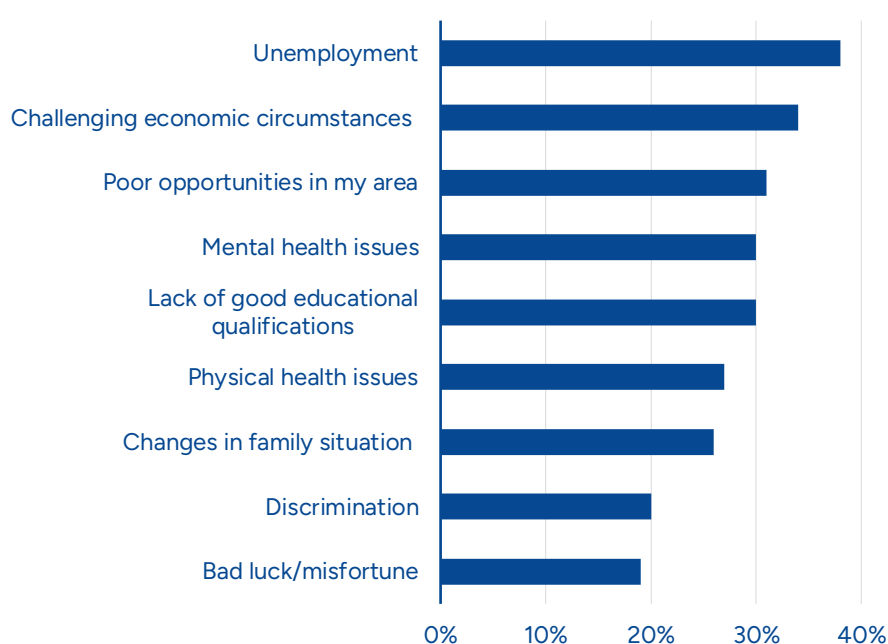
Interestingly, job opportunities, family support and inheritance were all considered more important by those who were not upwardly mobile and downplayed by those who were. This may in part at least reflect Friedman's claim that in cases where people from privileged class backgrounds misidentify their origins as working class there can be a tendency to erase the structural privileges that have shaped their social mobility trajectories.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Friedman et al., 'Deflecting Privilege: Class Identity and the Intergenerational Self'.

We also asked which factors are most important in affecting downward social mobility. The most likely to be ranked among the top three factors were unemployment (38%), challenging economic circumstances such as the cost of living and inflation (34%), poor opportunities in their area (31%), the lack of good educational qualifications (30%) and mental health (30%) (see Figure 16).

“The factors most associated with greater happiness were improved standard of living (57.7%) and improved financial situation (56.6%).”

Figure 16: Most important factors contributing to downward social mobility



Unemployment was ranked as the singular most important factor by 17% of all respondents but this rose slightly among 18-24-year-olds (21%).

Social mobility and happiness

To better understand how and why people value upward social mobility, we asked which factors associated with upward social mobility most affected happiness both positively and negatively.

The factors most associated with greater happiness were improved standard of living (57.7%) and improved financial situation (56.6%), suggesting a clear financial element to happiness (see Figure 17). These factors were cited particularly among older respondents (60.2% and 60.3% respectively among 55-64s and 62.4% and 60.5% respectively

among over 65s) as well as the upwardly mobile (65.7% and 63.6% respectively).

Figure 17: Factors associated with upward social mobility most affecting happiness positively



The least important factor contributing to greater happiness with social mobility was by some distance higher social status at just 19.7%. This was followed by higher work quality (32.4%) and a greater sense of achievement (37.4%).

Our case study interviews shed further light on this issue. As we found in the polling, none of our case study interviewees gave social status as a primary motivation for, or benefit of, upward social mobility. However, while none considered social status in the sense of social standing as important, many did comment on the pressure or expectations to conform or keep up with others, particularly in the age of social media (see Box 9).

Box 9: Social status and expectations

Peter (*downwardly mobile; male; 55+*) had been a successful businessman until health issues changed his perspective on life. He reflected on how much he used to be swayed by other people's expectations. Many people, including himself in the past, sought "social acceptability in various ways and at various levels" through meeting these expectations. However, he thought the link between social mobility and happiness varies from person to person. "If that's their genuine goal within themselves, rather than the expectation that's put on them, then I think absolutely that that can make people happy."

Francesca (*upwardly mobile; female; 35-54*) thought that a lot of people found self-value through their work but for her, meeting others expectations was not important: "It depends, I guess, on how important that is to an individual. And for someone to be able to feel like they've made it or they've done that, they're successful. And I personally don't find that very motivating... I think a lot of people might stay in a job they don't like because it gives them other things vis a vis status"

Charlotte (*upwardly mobile; female; 35-54*) explained how today social media feeds into social expectations: "The issue between now and back then is social media and had we had social media back then I probably would have been more unhappy because I would have seen what other people had. I would have seen what I was missing out on. People on holiday with their photos and that. But because I was oblivious to the wealthy population, I suppose it didn't affect my life. Whereas in this day and age it's pretty much in your face, isn't it?"

Isabel (*upwardly mobile; female; 35-54*) also identified social media as a vehicle for what she called "masking" in contemporary society. "So they've got to have a car each in a couple even if they can't afford it... but it isn't about them having a car so they can get from A to B, it's about 'I've got to have my car', it's about social status."

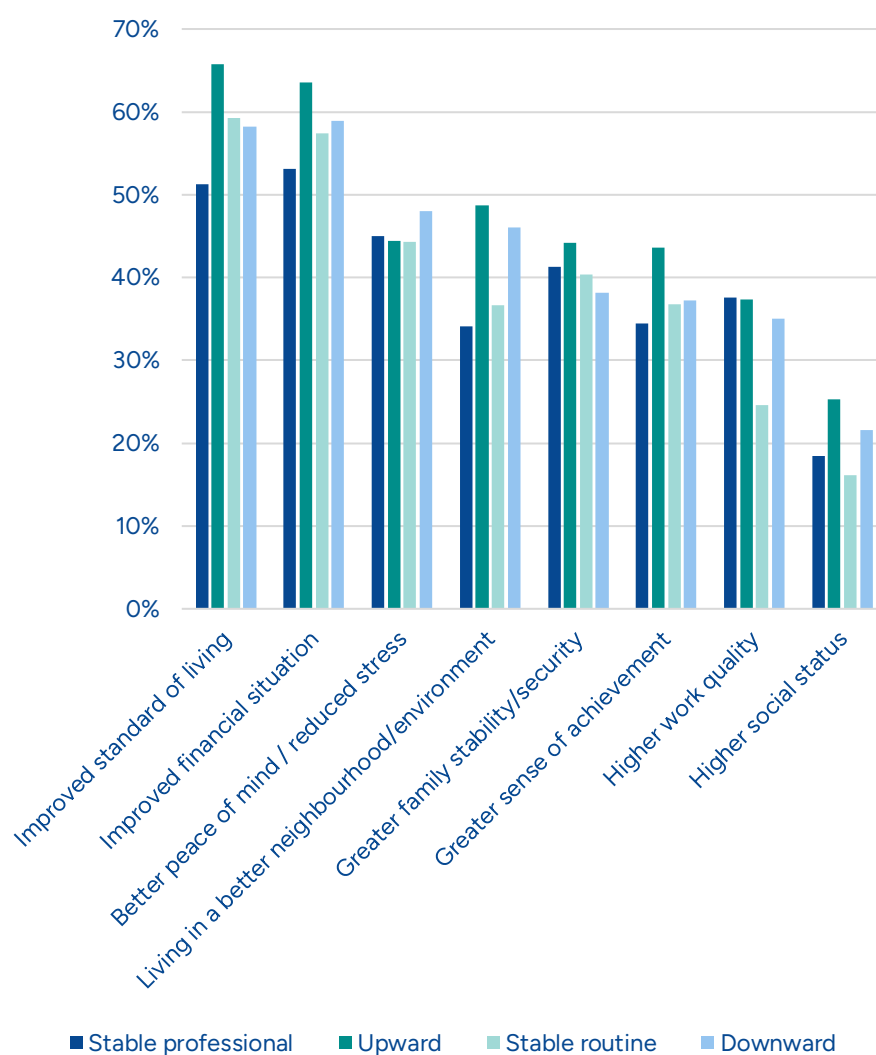
Keith (*downwardly mobile; male; 55+*) felt similarly and avoids social media as much as possible: "It's a toxic place that led me to question what I was doing with my life. Even though I knew it was a false narrative, it's all the glossy bits of people's lives... a constant bombardment... I took myself away from that and I feel happier now."

Adesewa (*upwardly mobile; female; 35-54*) by contrast found that people's expectations could be uplifting: "You know, there's this respect, you know? Oh, you're solicitor. That's interesting. You must be very intelligent. You know, you must be very hardworking... You know, I'm always proud to say, oh, I'm a trained lawyer."

Men were more likely than women to say that improved financial situation and higher social status were important factors while women were more likely to point to work quality, peace of mind and sense of achievement.

Some groups of respondents were more likely to identify positive factors associated with upward social mobility and happiness. For instance, those who moved away from where they grew up were more likely than average to identify positive factors. This was also true of those who saw themselves as either upwardly mobile or in professional occupations (see Figure 18).

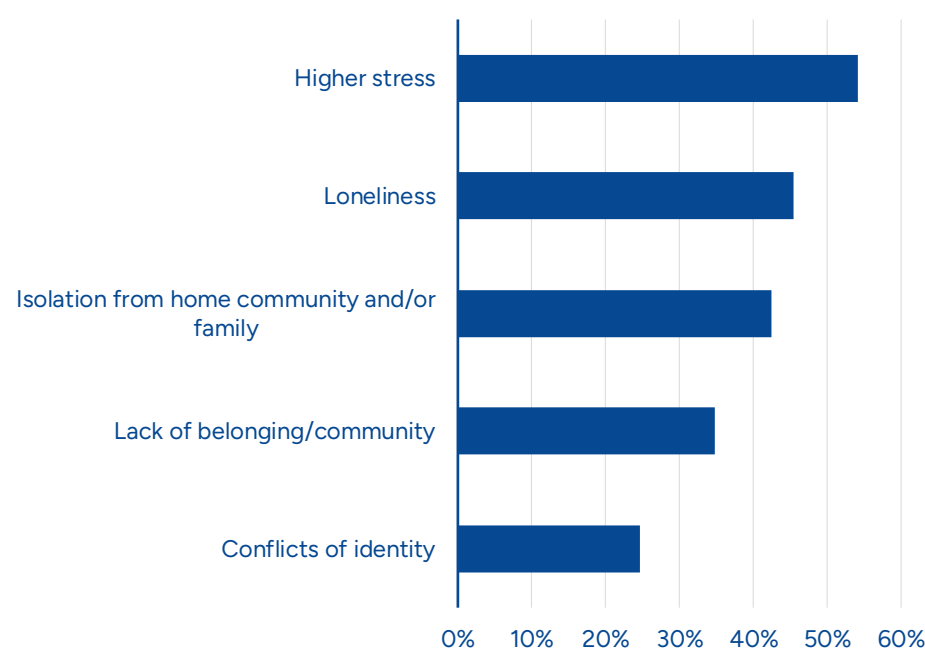
Figure 18: Factors associated with upward social mobility most affecting happiness positively by social mobility trajectories



Another way of trying to understand which aspects of social mobility people see as affecting their happiness is to ask what may undermine it rather than just contribute to it. In contrast to the importance of material factors associated positively with happiness and social mobility, we found more psychological and social factors came to the fore when asking about social mobility factors negatively affecting happiness.

Over half of respondents cited higher levels of stress (54.2%). This rose to 60.4% of downwardly mobile participants and 57.8% of upwardly mobile participants. Those in the 25-44 age group were also more likely to raise this concern. Higher levels of stress was followed by loneliness (45.4% rising to 53.8% among stable routine respondents) and isolation from one's home community or family (42.4%) (see Figure 19).

Figure 19: Factors associated with upward social mobility most affecting happiness negatively



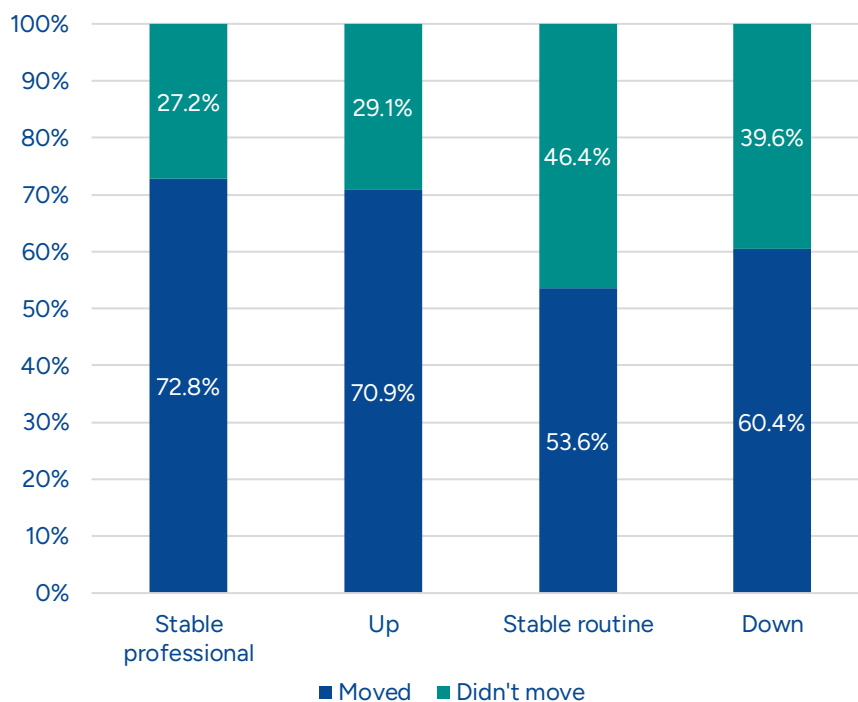
Again, as with positive factors, some groups of respondents were more likely to identify negative factors affecting happiness. For instance, those who moved away from where they grew up were not only more likely than average to identify positive factors (see above), but they were also more likely to identify negative factors.

Moving away helps both social mobility and wellbeing

This polling suggests that geographical mobility – that is moving away from the area where you grew up – is closely linked to both upward social mobility and greater happiness and life satisfaction. However, among stable routine respondents, who were also the least likely to move away from where they grew up, those who did *not* move away were *more* likely to experience high wellbeing than those who did move away.

In terms of geographical mobility, stable routine respondents were the least likely to move away from where they grew up, stable professional respondents were the most likely to move away, closely followed by the upwardly mobile. This suggests a strong link between geographic and social mobility. While 72.8% of those seeing themselves as stable professional and 70.9% of upwardly mobile moved away from where they grew up only 53.6% of stable routine respondents did so (see Figure 20).

Figure 20: Moved away from where they grew up by social mobility trajectory



This polling also suggested a small but statistically significant correlation between moving away for work purposes and positive wellbeing.¹⁰⁰

Among those who said they were upwardly mobile and had moved away, 21.1% experienced high wellbeing compared to 16.8% of those who did not move away (see Table 8). Among downwardly mobile and stable professionals, only around 7% experienced high wellbeing regardless of whether they moved.

However, almost half (49.7%) of downwardly mobile who did not move experienced low wellbeing, more than a third more than among those who did move. Among stable professional respondents, wellbeing levels varied much less between those who moved away and those who had not.

By contrast, among the stable routine respondents, 17.7% of those who did not move experienced high wellbeing compared to just 7% of those who did. At the same time, those who did not move were less likely to experience low wellbeing compared to those who did move.

This would seem to suggest for those who are not socially mobile there may be class differences in wellbeing related to moving. A similarly low proportion of stable professionals, whether they had moved or not, and stable routine respondents who *had* moved experienced high wellbeing, while those in stable routine occupations who had *not* moved were nearly three times more likely to experience high wellbeing.

¹⁰⁰ Pearsons correlation = 0.149 with significant to <0.001.

Table 8: Social mobility trajectory and wellbeing by moving away from where you grew up.

Social mobility trajectory	Moved?	Low	Average	High
Stable professional	Yes	26.2%	67.3%	6.5%
	No	30.1%	63.1%	6.8%
Upwardly mobile	Yes	17.6%	61.4%	21.1%
	No	21.2%	61.9%	16.8%
Stable routine	Yes	42.1%	50.9%	7.0%
	No	36.7%	45.6%	17.7%
Downwardly mobile	Yes	36.1%	58.3%	5.6%
	No	49.7%	42.7%	7.5%

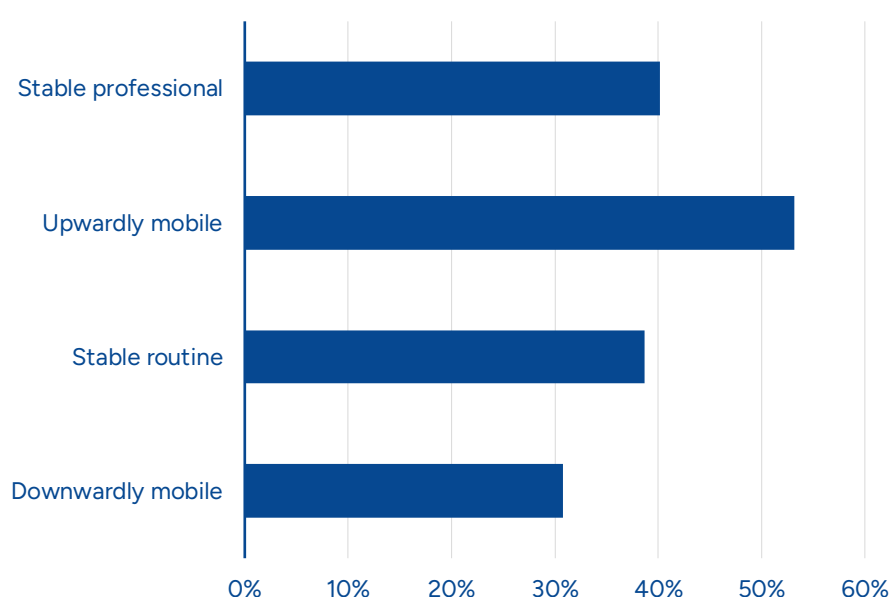
Some previous research on social mobility and happiness has suggested that one of the downsides of social mobility is that it often involves moving away from one's home community which could give rise to feelings of loneliness, isolation or alienation.¹⁰¹ To test this within our survey we asked respondents to what extent they felt a sense of belonging in the local community where they currently lived.

On the one hand, we found that there was only a small difference between those who felt a strong sense of community and had moved away from where they grew up (40.8%) and those who had not moved (42.3%).

¹⁰¹ Friedman, 'Habitus Clivé and the Emotional Imprint of Social Mobility'; Sorokin, 'Social and Cultural Mobility'; Gugushvili et al., "'Falling from Grace" and "Rising from Rags"'.

On the other hand, we found that on average those who said they were upwardly mobile, who were more likely to have moved (see Figure 20), were also the most likely to feel a strong or very strong sense of community (see Figure 21). There was only a small difference between stable routine and stable professional groups. Our case study interviews explored the interrelation between moving, social mobility and happiness, see Box 6.

Figure 21: Strong or very strong sense of belonging to local community by social mobility trajectory

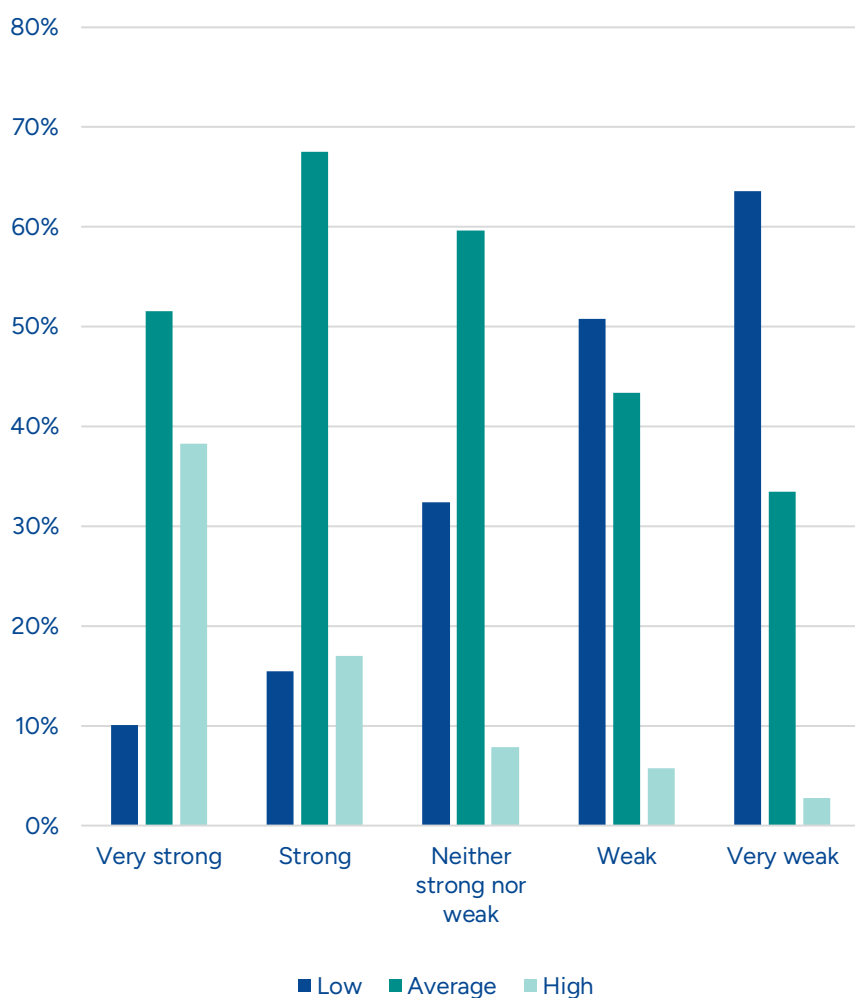


“Those who had a very strong sense of belonging to their community were more than three times more likely to have high wellbeing than low wellbeing.”

We did, however, find that those with a stronger sense of belonging to their community had higher wellbeing (see Figure 22). Those who had a very strong sense of belonging to their community were more than three times more likely to have high wellbeing than low wellbeing.¹⁰² At the same time the proportions of high wellbeing decline and the proportions with low wellbeing grow as the sense of community becomes weaker.

¹⁰² Research from the BeeWell project in Manchester also found that young people feeling that there was support for wellbeing among local people was one of the strongest predictors of wellbeing. See Neil Humphrey, ‘A Place to #BeeWell: Neighbourhood Effects on Young People’s Wellbeing’, Power in Place, University of Manchester, 2026, <https://policyatmanchester.shorthandstories.com/power-in-place/>.

Figure 22: Wellbeing levels by strength of belonging to local community



These findings together suggest that those who are upwardly mobile and those who moved away from where they grew up, who are more likely to have a strong sense of belonging to their local community are also more likely to experience high wellbeing. A sense of belonging to one's community does appear to be linked to higher wellbeing but these results suggest that such a sense of community does not necessarily need to be rooted in where you grow up.

Discussion

The merits of upward social mobility have been widely debated in recent years. Should young people aspire to work in 'professional' occupations? Do higher paying jobs necessarily lead to greater happiness? What about stress levels and work-life balance? If a higher paying job means leaving one's family or community and moving to another part of the country, could that lead to loneliness and isolation? How do we square the potential upsides of social mobility with the sacrifices and trade-offs it might entail? This report attends to these questions and adds depth to these debates.

We have seen that in general upward social mobility, while associated with some negative effects for some people, is more likely to be a positive experience across the population. What is more, it can give individuals a sense of achievement, perspective, freedom, and choice, and also enable them to support those around them.

Those who move into more professional and managerial jobs are more likely to have higher educational qualifications, higher incomes, better housing and more choice about where they live. They also tend to enjoy better health and a higher standard of living. In this report, we have found that, in general, all these factors positively affect people's happiness. In our household survey analysis, we showed that a large proportion of the happiness boost associated with upward social mobility can be accounted for by differences in housing, income and having a degree as well as employment and health. This was also reflected in our polling where improved standard of living and financial situation were most likely to be seen as aspects of social mobility positively affecting happiness. Respondents also pointed to reduced stress and greater family stability, making it clear that there are potentially non-economic contributors to social mobility's influence on happiness.

We have also seen that geographical mobility is positively correlated with higher wellbeing. People may move away from where they grew up for occupational, financial, educational or other reasons and many of our case study interviewees discussed the need to 'move out to move up'. At the same time, our household survey analysis reveals that people from routine occupational backgrounds, who are less likely to experience high wellbeing, are also less likely to move away from where they grew up. This lack of geographical mobility in many cases is likely

“There is an imperative to improve opportunities and local infrastructure across the country - meeting people where they are.”

linked to structural and economic factors like poor transport and connectivity, financial barriers or poorer educational outcomes. However, you shouldn't have to be socially or geographically mobile to live a happy life. Moreover, we must also consider how these social mobility patterns might affect communities being left behind.

Consequently, there is an imperative to improve opportunities and local infrastructure across the country – meeting people where they are. This requires place-based understandings and community-driven solutions that focus on improving access to opportunity where people live. In this regard, recent research from the BeeWell project in Manchester has shown that neighbourhood characteristics are significantly associated with different domains of wellbeing.¹⁰³ Adolescent participation in arts, culture and entertainment activities, for instance, can be seen to predict later wellbeing,¹⁰⁴ emphasising the need to improve local opportunities for all young people. This must be accompanied by redoubled efforts to create good local job opportunities. The Government's Pride in Place Strategy,¹⁰⁵ particularly its focus on building stronger communities, as well as the UK's Modern Industrial Strategy with its focus on strengthening local and regional business environments¹⁰⁶ offer good opportunities to meet these ambitions. Indeed, our polling showed that the stronger people's sense of belonging to their community the higher their wellbeing.

Our polling suggests people see local job opportunities as among the most important factors contributing to upward social mobility which in turn is linked to greater happiness. This raises questions about the assumed causal relation between opportunities and wellbeing. While the framing of the Milburn review suggests poor wellbeing affects participation in work or education, it may also be true that poor opportunities contribute to low wellbeing. Consequently, there is a

¹⁰³ Carl Emery and Louisa Dawes, 'Making the Local Matter: How the Forces of Power, Poverty and Place Shape Schools and Schooling', *Power in Place*, University of Manchester, 2026, <https://policyatmanchester.shorthandstories.com/power-in-place/>.

¹⁰⁴ Emma Thornton et al., 'Do Patterns of Adolescent Participation in Arts, Culture and Entertainment Activities Predict Later Wellbeing? A Latent Class Analysis', *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 53, no. 6 (2024): 1396–414, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-024-01950-7>.

¹⁰⁵ Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 'Pride in Place Strategy', GOV.UK, accessed 12 February 2026, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pride-in-place-strategy/pride-in-place-strategy>.

¹⁰⁶ HM Government, *UK's Modern Industrial Strategy. Updated, November 2025* (HM Government, 2025), 13, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/69256e16367485ea116a56de/industrial_strategy_policy_paper.pdf.

danger of a vicious circle of poor opportunities and low wellbeing exacerbating one another. The Government should therefore build on its Youth Guarantee and other initiatives to improve and enhance access to educational, employment and training opportunities to empower all young people wherever they live with greater agency. In addition, as noted by the recent report into workforce practices by Charlie Mayfield, it is important that employers take seriously the mental health of their employees in order to deliver healthier, more inclusive workplaces that drive greater economic participation and productivity.¹⁰⁷

This research has shown that graduates tended to be happier, no matter the social mobility trajectory, than non-graduates. Consequently, we must rethink the way we talk about the value of higher education. The so-called university premium should not only be about higher future earnings. However, university is not right for everyone and broader options need to become equally valued in public and policy discourse. Given widespread concern about the number of young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEET) it is imperative that opportunities for young people are made as widely accessible as possible. The Government launched the Milburn review into increasing numbers of young people who are NEET at the end of 2025 expected to report in 2026 and focusing heavily on mental health as a key driver of young people falling out of work or education. This review and the Government's response will be crucial to ensure a full range of training and job opportunities are made available to all young people.

In this research, we have had the benefit of comparing 'objective' measures of social mobility in the household survey analysis and more 'subjective' self-perceptions and experiences explored through our polling and case study interviews. This combination has shown that in addition to the more material factors identified above, there are also important psychological and emotional factors that shape individuals' experiences. In our case study interviews, we saw how experiences of social mobility are mediated by individual decisions and choices. Wellbeing might also result, for instance, from choosing *not* to seek a promotion, from a personal sense of achievement, from staying in one's home community, building a sense of belonging in a new community or engaging with the local natural environment.

“Social mobility and happiness are not about everyone needing to take a certain route through life but enabling people to make choices on their own terms.”

¹⁰⁷ Mayfield, 'Keep Britain Working'.

Social mobility is not a panacea. In the context of cost of living and other challenges, young people that are socially mobile may still be no better-off than their parents. In recent Sutton Trust polling, 57% of 18-24 year olds said it is harder for young people to succeed today than it was for older generations.¹⁰⁸ Concerns about energy bills, food costs, housing and poor real-terms wage growth can all have clear implications for happiness and wellbeing, regardless of whether people have moved into professional occupations or not. Renters are generally less happy than homeowners, for instance, which is significant given home ownership currently feels like a pipe dream for many young people.

Social mobility and happiness are not about everyone needing to take a certain route through life but enabling people to make choices on their own terms. People should have the opportunities to realise their ambitions, whether those involve moving into a high-paying profession, continuing the family business, starting a family, supporting a community initiative or spending time with their children.

However, what is clear is that not everyone has the same opportunity to pursue and realise those ambitions. Findings from the Sutton Trust's Opportunity Index reflect large disparities in education and employment opportunities across the country that need urgent address. This is made more significant in the context of our finding that the poorest and least socially or geographically mobile are, on average, the least happy and experience the lowest wellbeing.

To ensure all children and young people can succeed on their own terms, every effort should be taken to tackle poverty and its impact on education and employment outcomes. In *Fair opportunity for all*, the Sutton Trust has proposed a suite of recommendations for improving outcomes at all stages, from early years to the workplace, including: equalising entitlement to funded early years education; extending incentives for teachers to work in deprived areas; restoring pupil premium funding to 2014 levels in real terms; and increasing maintenance support levels for university students including unfreezing eligibility thresholds. Research from the Local Matters project in

¹⁰⁸ Latham, *Social Mobility and Opportunity*.

Manchester has also emphasised the need for place-based approaches to child poverty in order to improve educational outcomes.¹¹⁰

Social mobility can be a valuable pathway for improving people's wellbeing and happiness; it can bring a range of benefits that go beyond occupation or income. At the same time, we must ensure that we do not view social mobility as the only path to the 'good life'. This means attending to other non-economic contributors to wellbeing. The ONS produces a dashboard of wellbeing indicators at individual, community and national levels.¹¹¹ Our research suggests that such data could be more widely used to inform government planning and policymaking beyond conventional economic indicators.

Social mobility and happiness mean different things to different people. This report demonstrates how the former can often contribute to the latter. However, it also reveals how complex and highly personal considerations and circumstances mediate this relationship. For a government committed to spreading opportunity across the country and improving the welfare of its citizens, pursuing social mobility with appropriate attention to the diversity of experiences that entails is not just desirable but necessary.

“Every effort should be taken to tackle poverty and its impact on education and employment outcomes.”

¹¹⁰ Emery and Dawes, 'Making the Local Matter: How the Forces of Power, Poverty and Place Shape Schools and Schooling'.

¹¹¹ 'UK Measures of National Well-Being Dashboard - Office for National Statistics'. Alternatively measures such as the WELLBY could be adopted. Paul Frijters et al., 'The WELLBY: A New Measure of Social Value and Progress', *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 11, no. 1 (2024): 736, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-03229-5>.

Appendix

Supplementary methods

Missing data strategy

Some variables had low levels of missingness, including race, retirement, education, household income quintile and region. As these all fell below 5% missingness, simple imputation was used for missing values. All missing values used modal imputation except income which was using modal imputation by current NS-SEC and education which was imputed as no degree.

Variables

Socio-economic background

The highest recorded NS-SEC of parents aged 14. Unemployed coded as routine.

Socio-economic status

Last known NS-SEC. Unemployed coded as routine.

Wellbeing

The SWEMWBS comprises of 7 self-completed questions that are then summed into one score ranging from 7-35. The UK general population has a mean WEMWBS of 23.5, and using standard deviation cut points suggested by the creators, high wellbeing is considered a score of 27.5-35 and low wellbeing is considered a score of 7-19.5. One standard deviation in the general population is 3.9. This puts 70% of the population in average wellbeing 21-27.

Age

Age in Wave 13 when wellbeing measured.

Gender

Coded as 'male' or 'female'.

Race

Coded as 'White' or 'Ethnic minority'.

Retired

Coded as 'retired' or 'not retired' in Wave 13.

Education

Coded as 'degree' or 'no degree'.

Household income

Net household income, divided into quintiles.

Health

Respondents asked whether they had a long-standing illness or disability, coded as 'yes' or 'no'.

Housing tenure

Coded as 'homeowner' or 'renter'.

Supplementary Analysis with Next Steps

Data

Next Steps is a national cohort study following the lives of around 16,000 people in England, born in 1989-90 since they were 13-14.

Sample

The following inclusion criteria for our analysis were used:

- Has data on parental NS-SEC aged 14
- Has data on their own NS-SEC aged 32
- Has data on their life satisfaction age 32

Our final sample size was 5,855 individuals.

Variables

Socio-economic background

The highest recorded NS-SEC of parents aged 14. Never worked and long-term unemployed coded as routine.

Within our sample, 47.3% came from a professional background, 21.4% came from an intermediate background and 31.3% came from a routine and manual background. Differences between this and the UKHLS sample likely come down to differences in coverage (England only) and age.

Socio-economic status

NS-SEC aged 32. Never worked and long-term unemployed and currently unemployed coded as routine.

Within our sample, 56.5% were professional, 16.9% were intermediate and 26.6% were routine. Differences between this and the UKHLS sample likely come down to differences in coverage (England only) and age.

Wellbeing

Our main variable of interest. As the SWEMWBS was not available in this data, we use overall life satisfaction as our measure of wellbeing, measured on a 5-point Likert scale from very dissatisfied to very satisfied.

Moved

Whether living in the same region aged 32 as when they were aged 16.

Control variables

We control for gender, race and employment status in the analysis, coded the same way as in the main analysis.

Appendix Table 1. Key characteristics by social mobility trajectory

Table A1. Key characteristics by social mobility trajectory

	Stable professional	Upward	Stable routine	Downward
White	81.6%	76.6%	75%	77.1%
Long-term illness or disability	25.8%	28.7%	40.7%	32.7%
Unemployed	4.3%	5.1%	29%	17.4%
Married	67.7%	64.7%	54.9%	59%
Current region: London	13.3%	11.7%	8.2%	10.6%
Moved region*	31.5%	18.7%	8.8%	17.4%
Higher IMD quintile at 32	26.8%	34.8%	28.5%	24.7%
Lower IMD quintile at 32	39.1%	27.1%	24.9%	40.5%
Socio-economic factors:				
Median monthly household income	£4,347	£3,926	£2,843	£3,234
Own their house	87%	82.07%	57.26%	71.9%
Degree	60.4%	43.7%	8.8%	26.5%

Wellbeing:

Mean wellbeing (WEMWBS)	22.5	22.3	21.3	21.9
Mean overall life satisfaction	5.3	5.1	4.7	5

Notes: *From Next Steps sample



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