

Pew Study Finds Children of Divorced Parents More Likely to Remain at Bottom of Income Ladder as Adults

WASHINGTON—Family structure has an impact on a child’s economic mobility prospects, according to the Pew Economic Policy Group’s report *Family Structure and the Economic Mobility of Children*. The group’s Economic Mobility Project found that only 26 percent of children of divorced parents who start in the bottom third of the income ladder move to the middle or top third as adults. This compares to 42 percent of children who are born to unmarried mothers and 50 percent of children with continuously married parents in the same income category.

The impact of divorce also is seen when analyzing families by race. The vast majority (85 percent) of African-American children and nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of white children born into the bottom third of the income ladder remain in the bottom third as adults if their parents divorce. Fewer children (62 percent of African-Americans and 45 percent of whites) remain in the bottom if their parents are continuously married.

“By separating the effects of income and family structure, this report’s findings suggest that divorce is a meaningful barrier to a child’s economic mobility,” said John E. Morton, managing director of the Pew Economic Policy Group.

Parental marital status, however, explains only some of the previously identified racial gap in economic mobility. Fifty-six percent of African-American children born to middle-income parents fall to the bottom of the income ladder as adults compared to only 30 percent of white children. This reflects a racial gap of 26 percentage points. When analyzing just middle-income African-American and white children whose parents are continuously married, this gap shrinks but remains substantial at 12 percentage points.

“While these findings add to our understanding of the wide racial gap in economic mobility, our report confirms that family structure is only one of a number of factors that determine a child’s chances of moving up the ladder,” said Thomas DeLeire of the University of Wisconsin, a co-author of the report with Leonard M. Lopoo of Syracuse University.

For the complete report and more information, please visit www.economicmobility.org. The report’s data and analysis were reviewed by external, independent experts.

Comprised of a Principals’ Group of experts from the American Enterprise Institute, the Brookings Institution, the Heritage Foundation, the New America Foundation and the Urban Institute, with guidance from an Advisory Board of leading academics and economists, Pew’s Economic Mobility Project seeks to investigate the health and status of the American Dream.

The Pew Economic Policy Group is a division of The Pew Charitable Trusts and promotes policies and practices that strengthen the U.S. economy. Pew applies a rigorous, analytical approach to improve public policy, inform the public and stimulate civic life.
www.pewtrusts.org