



Why is Economic Mobility So (Surprisingly) Low in North Carolina?

CSEM Policy Brief: Volume 1, Issue 1

Spring 2019

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Executive Summary

The odds of climbing up the economic ladder, otherwise known as economic mobility, differ quite dramatically depending on where one lives. Compared to northern states, economic mobility is far lower in the South, and North Carolina suffers from some of the worst economic mobility in the nation. Cities like Charlotte, Winston-Salem, and Greensboro are leaving some of their poorest residents behind, despite overall strong economic growth. What can be done to improve upward mobility for the least advantaged? This paper details how a new research center at Winston-Salem State University is combining researchers from multiple fields to bring forward an alternative approach to poverty. This approach highlights the need for initiatives that create wins for business, residents and government in order to overcome stymied public policies that pit one group against another. With public transit, for example, the center's research yields surprising findings about the high opportunity costs of their long commutes. The enormous use of time spent commuting by public transportation acts like a tax on poor people's time. This approach may serve as a blueprint for other cities coping with low economic mobility.

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Note: This is largely based on the author's original article in the Spring 2019 *CSFE Issue Brief*, Volume 1, Issue 1, for the Center for the Study of Free Enterprise, housed at Western Carolina. The views are those of the author and do not represent those of Winston-Salem State University, Center for the Study of Economic Mobility, Western Carolina University or the University of North Carolina System. Some additions have been made since that publication.

Why Is Economic Mobility So (Surprisingly) Low in North Carolina?

By Craig J. Richardson

Why care about economic mobility?

For the past number of years, Stanford economist Raj Chetty and his research team have been exploring a fundamental question: Is the American Dream still possible in the United States? That is, if you are born poor, what are the odds of getting out of poverty? If we define the poor as the bottom 20 percent of household income, then Chetty investigated how difficult it would be for the next generation to move up the economic ladder to a higher income quintile, or level of income.¹

Chetty's perspective was to measure economic mobility in terms of relative gains, rather than absolute gains. Measuring economic mobility in absolute terms (whether or not you earn more dollars than your parents) versus relative terms (whether or not you are moving up in income faster than others are) provides different perspectives. For example, a study by the Pew Charitable Trusts compared family incomes of children to parents nationwide and adjusted for inflation. About 84% of Americans in the early 2000s surpassed their parents' income by at least a dollar, so this gives us some important information about absolute mobility.² However, the work of Chetty's research team gives a deeper look into how easily people can move up the economic ladder from different vantage points.

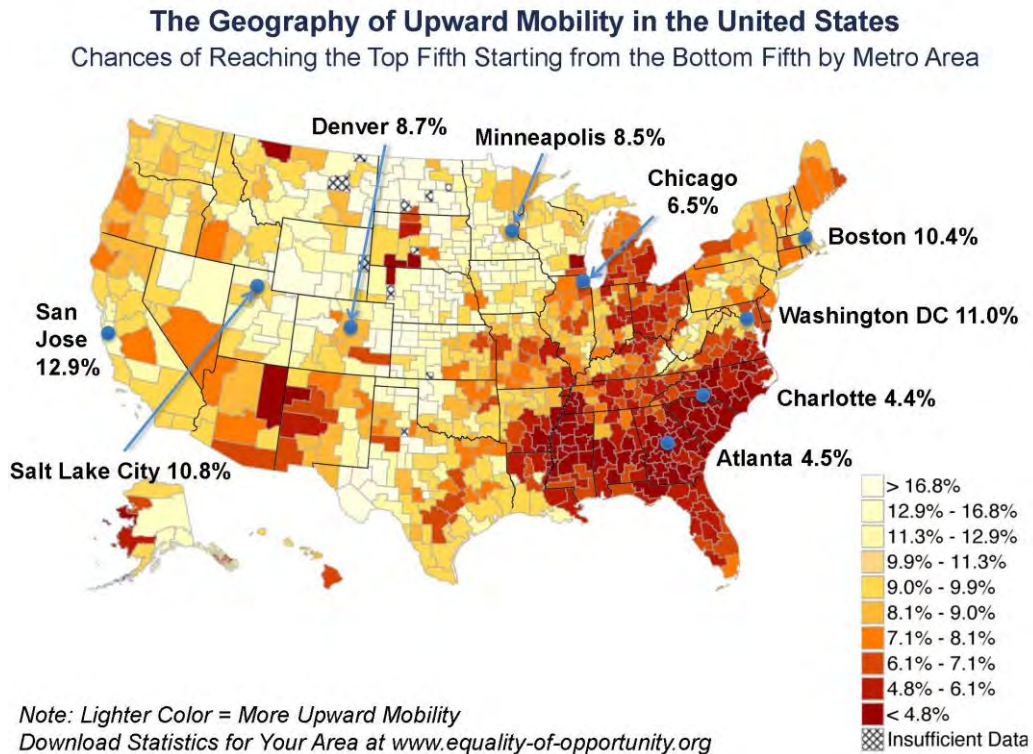
Looking at Figure 1, for example, we see that relative economic mobility differs quite dramatically depending from one U.S. county to the next. Figure 1 is a heat map that shows the financial penalty of

¹ An income quintile is a measure of socioeconomic status that divides the population into 5 income groups (from lowest income to highest income) so that approximately 20% of the population is in each group.

² Julia Issacs, "Economic Mobility of Families Across Generations," *Economic Mobility Project*, Pew Charitable Trusts, 2016, pp. 1-17. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/11_generations_isaacs.pdf. Parents' income is from 1967–1971. Children's income as adults is taken from 1995–2002. Issacs writes: "Family cash income is the focus of the analysis, including taxable income (such as earnings, interest and dividends) and cash transfers (such as Social Security and welfare) of the head, spouse and other family members... As discussed in Appendix B, family cash income does not include the value of non-cash compensation such as employer contributions to health insurance and retirement benefits, nor does it include the effect of taxes or non-cash benefits such as food stamps. All incomes are reported in 2006 dollars, using the CPI-U-RS to adjust for inflation."

growing up in certain counties across the country versus others. With lower economic mobility, people in these counties stand a far lower chance of climbing the economic ladder to higher income quintiles.

Figure 1:
Heat Map of Economic Mobility Across Metro Areas in the United States³



What is immediately evident from Figure 1 is that the low economic mobility is particularly evident as a sweeping dark swath that spans the deep South. Other troublesome areas include the so-called Rust Belt in Ohio and Michigan, and other small pockets such as Indian reservations in Arizona and South Dakota.

Areas with higher economic mobility have five characteristics in common: lower levels of residential segregation, a larger middle class, stronger families, greater social capital, and higher quality public

³ Raj Chetty, "The Impacts of Neighborhoods on Economic Opportunity: New Evidence and Policy Lessons," Presentation to Brookings Institution, June 1, 2015. <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Brookings-slides-for-web.pdf>

schools.⁴ What is surprising is how poorly North Carolina does in economic mobility. In Chetty’s dataset of 729 metro areas, Charlotte, NC is ranked 19th from the bottom, tied with Tupelo, MS and Dyersburg, TN. Winston Salem is tied at 20th from the bottom with eight other cities. The odds of getting out of the bottom 20th percentile in Winston-Salem is just 4.5%. Compare that to San Jose, CA at 12.9%, Salt Lake City at 10.8% and Washington, D.C. at 11.0%. Other cities in western North Carolina, such as Asheville and Sylva, fare only slightly better as seen in Table 1 below.

Table 1:
Chances of reaching the top income quintile, starting at the bottom quintile,
selected North Carolina cities

<u>City</u>	<u>Population of city (2017)</u>	<u>Odds of reaching the top income quintile</u>
Asheville	91,902	6.3%
Charlotte	859,035	4.4%
Fayetteville	209,889	3.8%
Greensboro/High Point	290,222	4.7%
Hickory	40,611	4.5%
Raleigh	464,758	5.0%
Roanoke Rapids	14,787	3.3%
Sylva	2,678	6.1%
Wilmington	119,045	4.2%
Winston-Salem	244,605	4.5%

For the United States overall, the average probability of climbing from the bottom to the top quintile is 10.0%. Notably, six of the top ten highest ranked cities are in North Dakota, with two located in South Dakota and two in Montana. The odds in that group range from Glendive, MT (26.7%) up to Bowman, ND at 47.0%.⁵

North Carolina’s low ranking is particularly surprising since the state exhibited the sixth fastest growth in the 1990s, according to a 2000 Brookings report. The report noted the high accolades in the

⁴ Raj Chetty, Nathaniel Hendren, Patrick Kline and Emmanuel, “Where is the Land of Opportunity?”, *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 129(4), pp. 1553-1623, 2014.

⁵ The probability statistics and Table 1 were generated from Chetty, et. al., using information from Online Data, Table 6 in “Where is the Land of Opportunity? The Geography of Intergenerational Mobility in the United States”, Descriptive statistics. Available at: <http://www.equality-of-opportunity.org/data/>.

popular press. For example, *Forbes* magazine ranked 200 best metro areas by wage, salary, job growth, and increases in high tech clusters. Charlotte was 14th, Raleigh was 21st, and Wilmington was 35th in the country. *Money* magazine’s, “The Best Places to Live, 2000” ranked Raleigh-Durham 2nd, Greensboro/Winston-Salem 11th, and Charlotte 12th among large metropolitan areas in the South.⁶

Yet despite high growth across the state and popularity of its large metropolitan areas, less attention gets paid to many areas in North Carolina that might be better known as “the tale of two cities.” Out of sight of the construction cranes and booming downtowns in places like Winston-Salem, Charlotte, and Raleigh are poverty-stricken areas that are growing ever more concentrated with poor people.

Recall that Chetty and his colleagues concluded that one of the key barriers to economic mobility is residential segregation. A 2014 Brookings report studied the growth in concentrated poverty by measuring the number of Census tracts that had more than 20 percent of the families living below the poverty line. As seen in Table 2, in the year 2000, Winston-Salem, NC had only two Census tracts with more than 20 percent of families below poverty. In other words, most poor families in 2000 were likely to be in the same Census tract as lower middle class and middle-class families.

Table 2:
Cities with Biggest Increases in Concentrated Poverty⁷

LARGEST INCREASES	2000		2008-12		CHANGE	
	20%+ TRACTS	SHARE OF POOR	20%+ TRACTS	SHARE OF POOR	20%+ TRACTS	SHARE OF POOR
Colorado Springs, CO	0	0	7	35.2	7	35.2
Winston-Salem, NC	2	6.8	19	40.7	17	33.9
Augusta-Richmond County (balance), I	12	31.2	30	63.9	18	32.7
Boise City, ID	3	7.9	18	40.3	15	32.3
Greenville, SC	19	20.5	57	52.1	38	31.6
Atlanta, GA	32	14.7	197	44.1	165	29.4
Greensboro-High Point, NC	2	6.6	15	35.7	13	29
Grand Rapids, MI	0	0	20	28.1	20	28.1
Scranton, PA	11	14	33	41.7	22	27.7
Charlotte, NC	21	15.6	82	42.2	61	26.6

⁶ Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy and Bruce Katz, “Adding It Up: Growth Trends and Policies in North Carolina,” Brookings Institution: Washington, D.C. July 1, 2000. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/research/adding-it-up-growth-trends-and-policies-in-north-carolina/>

⁷ Elizabeth Kneebone, “The Growth and Spread of Concentrated Poverty, 2000 to 2008-2012.,” *Brookings Metropolitan Opportunity Series*, July 31, 2014. <https://www.brookings.edu/interactives/the-growth-and-spread-of-concentrated-poverty-2000-to-2008-2012/>.

There are benefits to this kind of economic diversity in incomes in a geographic location. When there are families of different income levels living in the same neighborhood, common in older cities like Boston and Washington, D.C., the way up the economic ladder for the poorest families is more tangible and easier to visualize. Moreover, their children will have access to higher quality school districts, grocery stores and medical care than those in poverty-stricken areas. In addition, network effects increase regarding employment opportunities through informal gatherings such as PTA meetings, local children's soccer games or neighborhood get-togethers.

That network of interaction is known as social capital, and it is one important key to upward economic mobility. Yet for many North Carolina cities, it is difficult to reverse the built-in planning bias that separates housing developments by income levels. A Winston-Salem city council member described to me how the majority of his constituents, who primarily live in single-family houses, forcefully oppose any proposed plans for low- to middle-income multi-family housing units in his ward. The result is the familiar NIMBY problem ("Not In My Back Yard"). When low-income people lack political representation, their housing typically ends up where there is the least resistance: in the areas of concentrated poverty. Over time, the NIMBY problem results in growing concentration of poverty, with no easy political solutions.

After the 2008 Great Recession, poverty became far more concentrated in some of the larger cities in North Carolina. In Winston-Salem, the number of Census tracts with greater than 20% of families in poverty increased from two in the year 2000 to nineteen in 2008-12, as seen in Table 2 on the previous page. This means that low-income residents are grouped in these poverty pockets, rather than sprinkled across the city in multi-income areas, as was the previous case. No other city in America except Colorado Springs saw a larger share of accelerating concentration of poverty than Winston-Salem. Two

other North Carolina cities also make the list of the nation's greatest changes in concentrated poverty: Greensboro-High Point and Charlotte, NC. No other state has three cities on the list.

Tackling low economic mobility in North Carolina: A new research center's approach

The troublesome statistics illustrated in this paper led to the launch of a new academic center in the fall of 2017 at Winston-Salem State University, located in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Launched in 2017 with funding from the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Advancing Opportunity, the Center for the Study of Economic Mobility (CSEM) seeks to explore any issues relating to economic mobility in its resident Forsyth County, North Carolina.⁸ The hope is that by finding answers about the area's lack of economic mobility, this will serve as a blueprint for other cities in North Carolina and beyond.

CSEM takes a unique multidisciplinary approach by reframing scientific inquiry to align the incentives of business, individuals, and government, otherwise known as its B.I.G. idea. What are those incentives that improve the likelihood of idea adoption? Businesses want more profits, individuals want more income, and government wants higher net tax revenue or accolades from the public. By aligning incentives of all stakeholders, with "win-win-win" as a potential outcome, the odds increase substantially of framing government policies that drive upward economic mobility. This perspective helps research programs anticipate pushback from any of the three sets of stakeholders.

CSEM has funded seven different research tracks, including faculty from the fields of economics, transportation, geography, psychology and education. A separate advisory board, composed of representatives from local non-profit foundations as well as campus representatives, makes

⁸ Headquartered in Washington, D.C., the Center for Advancing Opportunity (CAO) is a research and education initiative created by a partnership with the Thurgood Marshall College Fund, the Charles Koch Foundation, and Koch Industries. CAO supports faculty and students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and other postsecondary institutions to develop research-based solutions to the most challenging issues in education, criminal justice, and entrepreneurship/economic mobility. CSEM is guaranteed academic independence and freedom by its donors and Winston-Salem State University. As noted on the CAO website, "Our constituency is people living in fragile communities and they are members of all races, ethnicities, and religions. See: <https://www.advancingopportunity.org/our-story/>

recommendations for faculty funding each year. Each research question is framed holistically with all three stakeholders in mind. The result is localized empirical research that is aimed at improving both short-term and long-term economic mobility for the poorest citizens in Forsyth County, North Carolina, and beyond.

Transportation and economic mobility- one path to investigate

CSEM research has identified transportation as one important key to upward economic mobility in Forsyth County. Unfortunately, it is difficult in North Carolina to access jobs, medical care and shopping without a vehicle. WalkScore.com rates 147 cities between 200,000 to 1 million people by ease of walking to work, recreational areas, and shopping. Six of the 15 lowest-ranked cities are in North Carolina. Worst in the entire U.S. is Fayetteville, followed by Winston-Salem in third place, Charlotte in 4th, Greensboro in 9th, Durham in 10th, and Raleigh at 14th worst. That means those without cars must often settle for “bus stop jobs,” spending time on long commutes rather than advancing themselves through education or high-skilled work.

For this reason, in late 2018, CSEM surveyed 215 employed bus riders using the Winston–Salem Transit Authority (WSTA) bus system to learn more about their lives and missed opportunities. The survey was a random, stratified and weighted sample in order to get a representative picture of employed bus riders across most of the routes. Driving the survey were many questions about wages, missed job opportunities, changes in behavior in relation to food choices, medical care and alternative employment opportunities. CSEM researchers asked respondents for actual numbers rather than ranges in order to calculate riders’ time costs with more precision.

Notably, the WSTA bus fare has been unchanged since 1998, at \$1 per trip- which has survived various calls for price increases. However, the time costs of bus riders have never been measured, which can give a better glimpse into the hurdles for rising up the economic ladder.

As Table 3 shows, there are tremendous differences in commute times for taking the bus compared to traveling by car, as reported by bus riders. Overall, bus riders spend 8.6 extra hours per week riding the bus, compared to how much time they report it would take to get directly to work by car. This is essentially akin to a sixth day of work that goes unpaid. The monetary value of this hidden “time tax” can be measured using the average wage rate as a good approximation for potential lost wages.

Table 3:
Time Tax of Public Transportation: Commuting to and from Work in Winston-Salem, NC⁹

<u>Time</u>	<u>by Bus</u>	<u>(if by vehicle)</u>	<u>Difference</u>
Daily (minutes)	135.4	32.1	103.3
Weekly (minutes)	677.0	160.4	516.6
Weekly (hours)	11.3	2.7	8.6

Source: Fall 2018 CSEM survey of 215 Winston-Salem employed bus riders

Table 4 shows that the potential lost wages are substantial for an individual working full-time, typical for most employed bus riders. With a surveyed average wage of \$10.14, individuals are missing out on \$87 per week, \$348 per month or \$4,360 per year. This does not take into account the operating costs of a vehicle or taxi fares.

By framing the analysis in this way, we open discussion for multiple ways to lower commute times, which is by far the largest impediment to upward economic mobility. Rather than designing “one size fits all” policies, multiple alternatives can allow individuals to tailor a transportation experience that frees up time and resources. This could range from improving the bus system, subsidized ride-sharing such as Uber/Lyft, company provided work shuttles, or even electric bikes and scooters.¹⁰ The best

⁹ Source: Fall 2018 CSEM survey of 215 Winston-Salem employed bus riders.

¹⁰ Zachary D Blizard, “Economic Mobility in Winston-Salem/Forsyth County, NC: A Closer Look into Employed Bus Riders’ Lives, Ambitions and Missed Opportunities to Climb the Economic Ladder.” *CSEM Working Papers in Transportation Series, no. 1*: November. Published at Center for the Study of Economic Mobility, Winston-Salem State University, 2018.

approach will allow these different alternatives to create a dense capillary transportation network better suiting a city with low population density.

Table 4:
Dollar Value of the Public Transportation Time Tax in Winston-Salem¹¹

Net additional hours commuting by bus, weekly	Estimated hourly wage (average of bus riders)	Opportunity cost of extra time commuting by bus	
		Weekly	Yearly (50 weeks)
8.6	\$10.14	\$87.20	\$4,360.20

There are other ripple effects to long commutes besides lower wages. In the engaging book *Scarcity* (2013), we learn when time becomes scarcer, it reduces a person’s ability to retain information, engage in logical reasoning, plan ahead, and control impulses. This operates like a tax on one’s bandwidth, or ability to process a broad range of decisions. Studies indicate that this “bandwidth tax” does not reduce a person’s inherent mental capacity, but rather the capacity available for use, much like an over-taxed computer-processing chip with too many apps running.¹² This makes it more difficult to think about strategies for moving up the economic ladder. Combined with living in areas of concentrated poverty, the behavior can become self-reinforcing.

What is clear is that both the time tax and the bandwidth tax faced by public bus riders in Winston-Salem are rarely, if ever, directly measured by government officials when deciding on the best approaches to lift people out of poverty. That leads to public policy solutions that sharply discount the value of time for those at the bottom of the economic ladder.

¹¹ Source: Fall 2018 CSEM survey of 215 Winston-Salem employed bus riders.

¹² Sendhil Mullainathan, S. and Elr Sharfir (2013). *Scarcity: The New Science of Having Less and How It Defines Our Lives*. Picador: New York.

Moving people out of poverty must be more than a “triage” approach

Economic mobility in North Carolina remains a central challenge, all the more so because those on the lowest rungs of the economic ladder remain increasingly hidden from view as the concentration of poverty increases in major cities. Work at the Center for the Study of Economic Mobility (CSEM) at Winston-Salem State University is focusing on innovative ways to move people up the economic ladder, by moving from a triage model of “poverty alleviation” to a model of individual empowerment. By studying the visible and invisible costs of poverty, CSEM is working to create solutions that align the incentives of business, individuals and government. Future pilot studies will investigate and offer potential “win-win-win” solutions that potentially leverage private/public partnerships in order to ensure the greatest chance of success for those at the bottom of the economic ladder.

Further Readings

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