


Assessing Barriers to Upward Mobility in the Cape Fear Region


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Abstract

Researchers explore upward mobility to better understand how economic and employment factors drive or undermine social justice and equity in the United States. This scholarship can inform activists and researchers seeking to design solutions that help overcome systemic challenges to upward mobility. Therefore, as an interdisciplinary team of scholars in a public university, we collaborated with community partners to conduct a case study in which we assessed the barriers to—and the drivers of—upward mobility in a medium-sized city in Southeastern North Carolina. We conducted key informant interviews and focus groups with a cross-section of local residents to learn about their experiences securing employment, earning a living wage, and participating in professional development opportunities, as well as identifying promising employees. Our findings indicate that there are multiple barriers to upward mobility in this region. The most commonly cited barriers include affordable housing, the cost of childcare, a prior criminal record, transportation, and racism and discrimination.

Keywords: *upward mobility, economic freedom, affordable housing, living wage*

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Introduction

Intergenerational upward economic mobility—the opportunity for children from poorer households to pull themselves up the economic ladder in adulthood—is a hallmark of a just society. (Oishi et al., 2019, p.1)

Research on upward mobility generally seeks to define and measure how and to what extent different groups are able to attain wealth. These groups are often stratified by race, household income, and preexisting measures of wealth (e.g., the financial standing individuals are born into), and these divisions are found to be consequential (Oliver & Shapiro, 2001). Some studies defined upward mobility as the ability of an individual

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to rise from the bottom income quintile to the top quintile. Berger (2018) provided a rationale for measuring the most aggressive jump in economic and social standing as an attempt to gauge the reality of the American Dream, or a rags-to-riches story. However, defining upward mobility in these terms neglects the smaller, more common, and frequent transitions made by individuals. Best (2018) questioned the use of quintiles as the sole indicator of wealth or upward mobility. Additional literature on upward mobility focuses on more incremental steps—e.g., accessing living-wage jobs, identifying career development opportunities, and building networks. Oishi et al. (2019) identified other essential elements and reported a significant relationship between community inclusiveness and upward mobility, suggesting that belongingness may also play a key role.

Earlier research identified interconnected factors that can promote or inhibit upward mobility. Browman et al. (2017) reported, “Despite facing more daunting odds of academic success compared with more socioeconomically advantaged peers, many students from lower socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds maintain high levels of academic motivation and persist in the face of difficulty” (p. 45). This finding hinges on students’ perceptions of whether socioeconomic mobility can occur in their society, thereby highlighting a connection between SES, higher education, and upward mobility.

Studies have explored additional contributing factors influencing upward mobility, including geographic location and city walkability. Buttrick and Oishi (2019) investigated the relationship between upward mobility and the built environment, specifically the walkability of a city. The authors found that walkability impacted a sense of belonging and was thereby positively correlated with upward mobility.

Other factors, including systemic issues pertaining to sexism, inhibit upward mobility. Elias (2018) contended that government regulation and legislation fail to protect women in the workplace, thereby jeopardizing their pursuit of upward mobility. Elias also described as toothless the federal agencies responsible for monitoring their own metrics for including women in the workforce. For example, actions, including “title inflation,” were common, with managerial titles bestowed on women with little change in salary or responsibilities.

Chetty et al. (2014) reported that upward mobility is primarily linked to five factors: residential segregation, income inequality, school quality, social capital, and family structure—even after controlling for race, urbanicity, and other covariates. As have others, we concluded that one way to effectively address upward mobility is through place-based policies that target public investments and subsidies in historically disadvantaged neighborhoods, cities, and regions (Bartik, 2020; Parker et al., 2022; Kline & Moretti, 2014).

Chetty et al. (2014) explicitly build on the extensive literature on intergenerational mobility outlined by Solon (1999) and updated by Black and Devereux (2011) in subsequent volumes of the *Handbook of Labor Economics*. These authors review the core scholarship investigating the influences of parental education on child outcomes and explore how family characteristics (e.g., ages of parents and children, sibling and twin differences, and other variables) affect intergenerational mobility. Going beyond parental education and family characteristics, Black and Devereux also review the relatively nascent literature investigating the intergenerational transfer of IQ from parent to child, the influence of jobs or occupations on intergenerational mobility, and the intergenerational transmission of welfare receipt, health, social behavior, and consumption.

Biases in underlying social and economic structures play a persistent role in upward mobility (Connor & Storper, 2020; Davis, 2020). Berger (2018) found that the historical presence of slavery is linked with mobility, even when controlling for competing factors, such as income. More specifically, according to Berger (2018), “More fragile family structures in areas where slavery was more prevalent, as reflected in lower marriage rates and a large share of children living in single-parent households, is seemingly the most relevant to understand why it still shapes the geography of opportunity in the United States” (p. 1). These findings introduce a more complex nuance to understanding upward mobility. Particularly, this scholarship brings into

question the ways that the history of slavery and oppression within a community can impact current, as well as future, attempts to succeed, excel, and thrive.

Existing research suggests there may be a mismatch between what individuals *know* empirically about the potential for upward mobility and what individuals *perceive* as possible. Research has noted that North Americans both underestimate and overestimate the rate of upward mobility in the United States (Swan et al., 2017; Davidai & Gilovich, 2018; Onyeador et al., 2021). Further, when Harris (2008) evaluated the relationship between beliefs regarding social mobility and academic outcomes, he found that Black participants who invested the most in academic pursuits were also more likely to view barriers to social mobility as significant. Yet, he also found that those who were less economically advantaged viewed education and hard work as viable means of upward mobility. Therefore, the focus of this case study is not on identifying the systemic problems we face but on understanding the perceived possibility of upward mobility from a range of individuals with varied backgrounds and lived experiences.

Methodology

This project was a collaborative effort between a midsized university in Southeastern North Carolina and community partners. The primary collaborator was a local nonprofit organization that works to catalyze systemic change through impact investing and other programming. The first author served in the role of Principal Investigator (PI) and worked with one undergraduate Public Health student, as well as one recent Master of Public Administration graduate to (1) create recruiting and data collection instruments; (2) recruit participants; (3) conduct key informant interviews and focus groups; (4) analyze the data; and (5) compile the findings. The key informant interview and focus group guides incorporated questions relevant to identifying the perceived facilitators of and barriers to upward mobility. All study instruments and processes were reviewed and approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Following IRB approval, the primary community partner introduced the PI to eight nonprofit leaders (representing six organizations) who were in senior roles in their respective organizations. The nonprofits and key informants predominantly serve clients who live in underserved areas or are members of historically disadvantaged groups. The PI then coordinated with the nonprofit leaders to schedule semi-structured interviews, which typically lasted 45–60 minutes. All interviews—except one facilitated in person for video recording purposes—were conducted via Zoom. Each was recorded and auto-transcribed. After the key informant interviews were complete, the members circulated the focus group flyer among their clients to help the PI with focus group recruitment. The nonprofit leaders received a modest donation to their organizations provided by the primary community partner as an incentive for their time and efforts. The PI and the remaining research team also posted the focus group flyer on social media, including LinkedIn and Facebook, to encourage a range of participants.

To keep track of potential focus group participants, the research team created an Excel tracking sheet to log the names and contact information of those who expressed interest in participating. If the interested party participated in a focus group, the dates of their participation and the type of gift card they requested were also logged. Each focus group participant received a \$25 gift card. The PI served as the primary point of contact, responsible for recruiting participants via social media, scheduling focus groups, sending reminder emails to participants, and distributing the gift cards. All focus groups were conducted via Zoom, recorded, and auto-transcribed.

All participants were emailed a copy of the consent form and required to give verbal consent before beginning the interviews and focus groups. The two student members of the research team were responsible for reviewing the interview and focus group recordings, identifying key themes, and entering these data into a

separate tracking spreadsheet. Finally, the research team was charged with keeping researcher journals to track overarching thoughts, reflections, and significant takeaways from the interviews and focus groups. The journal contents were discussed in follow-up data analysis meetings.

Results

Six (one from each organization) of the eight key informant interviewees completed the demographic survey. Those demographics are reported in Table 1.

Table 1. *Key Informant Interviewee Demographics*

Key Informant Responses		
Age range	26–35	1
	36–49	1
	50–64	3
	65+	1
Gender	Man	1
	Woman	5
Race	White	2
	Black or African American	4
Highest level of completed education	Trade/Technical/Vocational Training	1
	Bachelor's Degree	3
	Master's/Professional Degree	2

Key Informant Themes Discussed as Barriers to Upward Mobility

Key informant interviewees consistently noted numerous barriers to upward mobility. Following are the six most identified themes across all interviews.

Access to Affordable Housing

The high cost of renting and owning a house in the Cape Fear Region was recognized as a significant barrier by multiple key informants as a barrier to upward mobility. Some of the interviewees lead nonprofits that seek to address barriers to affordable housing. Nonetheless, even respondents who have different service foci acknowledged the challenges of affordable housing for themselves and their clients.

The cost of housing is related to—and exacerbated by—the lack of access to transportation. Moving to communities outside of the city limits in search of more affordable housing presents the challenge of residents getting to and from their place of employment. Although public assistance exists to support area residents, key informants noted that the threshold to qualify for public housing assistance does not keep pace with the rising cost of living within the region.

In addition to the high cost and low supply of affordable housing units in the region, some citizens face additional hurdles presented by having a criminal record. Participants suggested that private landlords can—and do—discriminate based on the criminal record of a prospective tenant. Individuals in such circumstances have little recourse to appeal these practices.

Soft Skills/Professionalism

Key informants used different terms to describe the notion of professionalism, including soft skills and power skills. They discussed the attributes necessary for nearly every job, particularly for any formal, professional, or office position. One interviewee noted, “I’ve had people apply for jobs with me who didn’t even complete sentences in their e-mail or their cover letter, and [their application] go[es] in the trash.” Key informants mentioned punctuality, social skills, networking skills, grammar, proofreading, editing, and technological skills, such as typing or using a computer, as essential. As stated by one interviewee, “I don’t call them soft skills, I call them power skills; I think they’re the most critical skills that talent needs.”

Some informants stressed the need for *applicants* to focus on these skills; others shifted the responsibility for cultivating these skills *to schools and other institutions* responsible for preparing applicants with the assets they need to enter and navigate the workforce. Identifying mentors and professional development opportunities for entry-level workers were suggested as potential solutions for developing these skills. Additionally, in a follow-up meeting, a key informant interviewee emphasized the need for professional development opportunities for leaders. According to respondents, these trainings should emphasize cultural competency and awareness, as well as ways to productively engage with and work alongside communities of interest.

Cost of Childcare

Key informants discussed the cost of childcare as a significant barrier to upward mobility, citing that some individuals are unable to afford childcare despite having a full-time job. In such circumstances, informants noted that seeking employment outside the home could be counterproductive. According to one interviewee, “The cost of childcare is outrageous. If you look at childcare, what a parent or parents pay for childcare just for one child, you can go to community college and get a 2-year degree off of 1 year [of] childcare expenses.”

Criminal Record or Criminal History

Key informants shared that they have experienced issues gaining access to affordable housing, which is another significant barrier to upward mobility. Also, informants who worked with individuals with prior incarcerations or arrest records observed additional significant barriers. Although some informants spoke to direct connections between employment struggles and prior criminal citations, such as denial of employment, others shared stories of more indirect connections, such as struggles to find affordable housing. One informant noted that facing discrimination or challenges due to criminal history, along with other factors, can contribute to feeling jaded or untrusting towards management. He stated, “When you have a criminal history ... you are relegated to a permanent second-class citizenship role. Over time, you start to internalize that as being an inferior person and inferior employee.”

Transportation

Transportation was also identified as a significant barrier to upward mobility, with the intertwining capacities of cost and availability. Participants spoke of the high cost of owning and maintaining a car, while a few observed that some individuals are ineligible to drive for legal reasons, as well as physical or mental impairments. Those without their own vehicle are at the mercy of available public transportation, which the participants considered limited and/or inefficient. Further, public transportation options can be time consuming, which compounds the issue for those working multiple jobs and contemplating childcare arrangements.

Minimum Wage or Livable Wages

Participants largely agreed on the challenges that low wages presented to employees—that they provided a very small margin of error and made long-term goals, such as homeownership, asset investment, and entrepreneurship, seem out of reach. One participant added that this lack of adequate funds can contribute to feelings of hopelessness, “How do you have hope when you work all week and you come home and all you have to live on is this?” However, respondents offered differing perspectives and potential solutions for this

barrier. Some participants discussed the concept of providing livable wages by actively considering the cost of living in the region and trying to provide wages, as well as benefits that allow employees to afford their basic needs. Others stressed the importance of an individual's mindset and development of marketable skills to pursue higher-paying jobs and potentially avoid the challenges presented by minimum or low wages. According to one participant, "If the talent is developed well, they will find jobs that pay more than \$15 an hour, so where I believe we need to be investing is [on] the talent end so that they can get those jobs."

Focus Group Demographics

Next, we report the results of our focus group interviews. Of the 24 prospective participants who completed the demographic survey, 21 participated in a focus group. The remaining either cancelled and did not reschedule or did not show up for their rescheduled interview.

Table 2. Focus Group Demographics

Focus Group Demographic Survey Responses (Total = 24)		
Age Range	21–25	5
	26–35	7
	36–49	10
	50–64	2
Gender	Man	10
	Woman	14
Race	White	6
	Black or African American	16
	American Indian or Alaska Native	1
	Two or more races	1
Highest level of completed education	Did not finish high school or complete GED	3
	High school/GED	10
	Associate degree	2
	Bachelor's degree	4
	Master's/professional degree	5
	Doctoral degree	0
Employment status	Full-time permanent	9
	Part-time permanent	1
	Full-time temporary	2
	Part-time temporary	3
	Self-employed	3
	Unemployed	8
Salary range	Less than \$30,000	14
	\$30,001–\$45,000	5
	\$45,001–\$60,000	4
	\$60,000+	0

Key Focus Group Themes Discussed as Barriers to Upward Mobility

Focus group participants discussed a range of barriers to upward mobility. The following five themes, however, were the most prevalent across all groups.

It Takes More Than a Degree

A bachelor's degree does not always equate to a job in the designated or desired field. The focus groups included three participants who earned a bachelor's degree and were working in a field unrelated to their highest degree. However, there were also three participants who earned a bachelor's degree and were working in a field outside of their highest degree. Participants expressed sentiments ranging from frustration and exhaustion to impatience and confusion when discussing this dynamic. One participant discussed this phenomenon at length by sharing the balance between seeking a return on her educational investment and wanting to pay the bills. Another participant stated, "You want to use your degree, but it almost feels so useless because you need income."

Participants also discussed feeling societal or familial pressure to only pursue professional jobs once they graduated with a bachelor's degree. They expressed frustration over being stuck between taking jobs that they were overqualified for and being unemployed and financially dependent. Another focus group participant shared, "It was really disheartening to know that I did all this work, did all these things, had all these accolades; I was student of the year ... all these great things they told me were gonna be a golden ticket, and it wasn't—it wasn't at all."

Racism and Discrimination

Race-related barriers were frequently discussed as a reflection of participants' lived experiences. Participants expressed explicit and implied ways racism impacts their interactions and day-to-day livelihoods, particularly participants of color, who more commonly cited race as a barrier than did White individuals. As shared by one focus group participant:

When [I'm] dressed in regular street clothes, I'm perceived one way, but when I'm [in] khakis and a polo [shirt] I'm perceived differently, but nonetheless I'm still Black. There [have] been situations ... where I have been let know that 'no matter, even if I have khakis on and a polo, you're still Black.

Blatant forms of racism were discussed, such as discrimination based on an individual's name. According to one participant, "I changed my name several times, because ... people will automatically know that I'm Black when they see my name." Other more subtle acts of racism, such as lack of access to housing, were also discussed. For example, one participant was told that real estate agents in a particular housing community negotiated higher prices with people of color.

Several participants discussed navigating employment and promotion with the understanding or expectation that they would face discrimination. Many of these conversations regarding race-related barriers led to a similar consensus: Some people of color felt uncomfortable and unwelcome in the local community. Participants discussed that even if they didn't personally feel uncomfortable or unwelcome, they could see how people of color—particularly those seeking professional advancement and safe spaces for their families—regularly leave the region altogether.

When asked about the most significant barrier to upward mobility, a statement shared by a key informant was echoed by a focus group participant: "[I] would say that mindset, the mindset [of] trying to get to reality or for it to actually hit home that [you] can actually have all of this ... their past experiences will tell them that that's not possible." These reflections highlight the effects of internalized racism and oppression.

According to another focus group participant:

I feel like when you have a criminal history [and] as Michelle Alexander uses these words, you are relegated to a permanent, second-class citizenship role. So what[ever] happens over time, you start to internalize that as being an inferior person and an inferior employee. ... It might not be that your supervisor is not embracing you but because of internalized oppression [you] feel inferior. You've already convinced yourself that they got a problem, and you typically respond like, "Yeah, he's hating on me" ... and it might not even be that so that's actually probably one of the hidden issues that very seldom comes to the surface.

Transportation

Although key informants identified transportation as a significant barrier, focus group participants were able to provide specific examples of the challenges they faced. They described public transportation as extremely time consuming and often counterproductive for individuals who do not have much time to commute to and from work. One focus group participant shared that commuting by public transportation can take four times as long as commuting by car. Another participant expressed concern over public transportation safety. By using public transportation, individuals noted that they had less control over their time commitments and schedules, which caused frustration and further complicated their pursuit of upward mobility, especially as it pertains to obtaining and sustaining employment.

Even those focus group participants with their own transportation faced barriers. One focus group participant shared:

It's this vicious, difficult cycle ... you need to already be able to provide for yourself in certain ways before you can even sustain a job. I never had reliable transportation, and the car I have now is holding on for dear life ... just worrying about making sure that I'm able to get there and be reliable, because sometimes those things don't have anything to do with your character.

Criminal Record or Criminal History

Several participants noted direct, as well as indirect, challenges related to employment and housing discrimination based on their criminal records. In general, these participants felt at peace with their incarceration—or at least did not explicitly state otherwise—but were frustrated with having served their time (or a sentence) and still feeling punished for prior convictions. Regarding finding housing with a criminal record, one participant stated, "After incarceration ... people are still discriminating against us, and they're calling us criminal, and what they're doing is criminal."

Childcare

The cost of childcare was noted as a significant barrier by a number of focus group participants, highlighting that families were often negotiating the cost of going to work compared to staying home and bypassing excessive childcare expenses—particularly in households with two or more adults. As with other themes noted by focus group participants, this finding aligns closely with the barriers to upward mobility identified in the key informant interviews.

Community Assets

While the focus of this study was on identifying the perceived barriers to upward mobility, key informant interviewees and focus group participants also noted several assets in the region that might facilitate upward mobility. These assets include but are not limited to investment in the community by native residents; mentorship by supervisors; and an ability to launch thriving start-up companies.

Participants discussed how they invested in their local community by starting nonprofit organizations, leading community initiatives, and mentoring community residents. One participant shared her perspective on the need to invest in her home community first before relocating to other cities and contributing to their economy.

Several focus group participants discussed receiving transparent and impactful mentorship from their supervisors and cited this mentorship as a means of helping them explore leadership opportunities, attain professional advancement, and learn to navigate the work environment. Many participants understood the value of mentoring youth and showing them alternative options to “street capitalism,” as coined by one of the key informant interviewees.

Discussion

In this study, key informants and focus group participants identified the high cost of childcare, the high cost of private transportation, the inefficiency of public transportation, and a prior criminal record as significant barriers to upward mobility. These findings are consistent with existing literature, as was the commonly identified theme of the lack of affordable housing (Buttrick & Oishi, 2019; Chetty et al., 2014; Payton, 2023). On the surface, these realities may not appear as obvious challenges to upward mobility; however, housing costs have continued to rise (Payton, 2023); childcare costs have risen as options have declined (Grundy, 2024); and although 37 states across the United States have passed legislation to “ban the box,” thereby prohibiting housing discrimination on the basis of a having a conviction (Avery & Lu, 2021), participants in our study noted challenges securing a job and housing with their criminal records. This finding aligns with Kukucka et al. (2021) who found that even those who were exonerated or wrongly convicted faced similar housing discrimination to those who were ex-offenders.

In many cities where public transportation is not readily available or accessible, having a consistent mode of transport from one place to another—including onsite work—is a significant factor in gaining, as well as sustaining, employment (Bastiaanssen et al., 2020). As diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives quickly diminish (Daniels, 2023), one must question what checks and balances remain to ensure equitable hiring and employee retention practices.

Although race is central to the Chetty et al. research (2014)—and weighs substantially in the effects income inequality and residential segregation have on opportunity—race is even more prevalent in our findings. Focus group participants repeatedly and emphatically acknowledged the pervasive racial discrimination they have faced accessing housing, professional employment, and professional development opportunities. The city that serves as the geographic area of analysis for this research has a long and well-documented history that contributes to the participants’ lived experiences (McLaurin, 2000). This experience of racism also likely undermines belongingness and social capital in the region, factors seen as drivers of upward mobility in prior scholarship (Buttrick & Oishi, 2019; Chetty et al., 2014; Oishi et al., 2019). Even for those with a college degree, these barriers are not eliminated.

While participants in our study did not explicitly discuss health-related consequences, Hudson et al. (2020) noted that the price of upward mobility specifically for African Americans—a significant demographic in our study sample—is not only financial. The authors describe the journey for many African Americans as arduous and exhausting, with many long-term health consequences being related to feelings of isolation, stress, and workplace discrimination. This body of work adds another layer to considerations of upward mobility, particularly for historically marginalized communities.

Finally, and in addition to the identified barriers, our study highlights the need to focus on the assets available within a community. Needs assessments often identify gaps and limitations or omissions, but every community has resources to contribute. As assessments are being conducted and funding streams are aligned, researchers, city planners, development officers, and foundation members should consider ways to support existing initiatives planned by and for community members (Suarez-Balcazar, 2020).

As stated in the opening quote of this article, upward mobility is a hallmark of a just society whereby equitable opportunities for advancement, success, and an enhanced quality of life are available to all. However, as our research shows, the attainment of this goal is not as easy—or accessible—as obtaining a college degree, serving a sentence in full, or securing a job. The obstacles to upward mobility may be endless and related to life decisions for many, including where to live and whether or when to start a family.

Opportunities for future research may include (but are not limited to) larger sample sizes with a mixed-method study focusing on historically marginalized populations; comparisons across multiple cities with deep-seated histories of slavery and oppression; and an assessment of policies and programs, such as ban the box and student loan forgiveness, which seek to increase equitable access to opportunities and thereby, upward mobility.

Limitations

The research team went to extensive lengths to minimize limitations within this study; however, there are a few that need to be noted. All focus groups and key informant interviews were conducted via Zoom given the timing of our study during the COVID-19 pandemic, when much engagement was transitioned online. Therefore, interested community members who did not have access to a cell phone or reliable internet were limited in their ability to participate.

The PI conducted all interviews and focus groups. This was a limitation because some participants knew the PI. Some respondents may have been hesitant to share personal details related to upward mobility. All data analysis meetings were also conducted via Zoom, limiting the ability of the research team to meet face-to-face and explore other analysis options or limitations.

Despite these limitations, we contend that the results presented in this article offer valuable insights into how historically marginalized groups—or those who serve them—perceive the persistent barriers to upward mobility reflective of our region. Findings from this case study may be mirrored in other similar medium-sized cities in the southern United States.

Conclusion

In this study, we sought to assess the barriers to—and the drivers of—upward mobility in a medium-sized city in Southeastern North Carolina. The motivation for undertaking this qualitative analysis and conducting this case study started with our primary community partner, an organization determined to design solutions to the systemic issues our region faces. Through key informant interviews and focus groups with residents, we were able to learn about their experiences securing employment; earning a living wage; participating in professional development opportunities; and identifying who they deemed as viable or promising employees.

Our findings contribute to the rich streams of literature on the barriers to upward social and economic mobility and indicate that there are multiple barriers to upward mobility in this region. Commonly cited barriers include affordable housing, the cost of childcare, prior criminal records, transportation, and racism and discrimination. Our findings also highlight the importance of capturing the lived experiences and individual perceptions of employers and clients involved in community-based nonprofits seeking to address underlying systemic and economic barriers to upward mobility.

Before we can collaboratively design a solution, we must understand the specific barriers to upward mobility faced by this community—beyond those we know to empirically exist in most regions of the United States. It is also critical to know how the leaders and interested community citizens who may contribute to the solution (our key informants) and the individuals they serve who might benefit from the solutions (our focus group

participants) think about the issue at hand. Producing social change is a people endeavor, and this study helped the research team and broader community understand the various and interconnected perceived barriers to upward mobility—not only in this region but perhaps in other similar communities.

Lasting social change to upward social and economic mobility will require multifaceted solutions that are co-produced by government, nonprofits, businesses, and individual community members. An essential step to setting the stage for engaging in thoughtful and productive dialogue also requires understanding how disparate parties define the problem. Opportunities for future research include creating a mixed-method study using a larger sample of participants from historically marginalized populations; making comparisons of specific barriers to upward mobility across multiple cities with deep-seated histories of slavery and oppression; and an assessment of policies—as well as programs—that seek to increase equitable access to opportunities and thereby, upward mobility.

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