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Breaking the Mobility Barrier

By: **Sarah Trumble, Lanae Erickson**

Takeaways

New research in the education sector shows that characteristics like a growth mindset and grit can have a huge impact on whether a person succeeds. This report posits that government programs should:

- Aim to channel these characteristics, which we call the "mobility mentality;" and
- Encourage grown-ups to foster this mentality in children, in an effort to better ensure that our country is a place where a person's status at birth doesn't determine their lot in life.

Perhaps the only thing that President Obama, Senators Gillibrand and Rubio, and Congressman Ryan all agree upon is that America is facing a mobility crisis—but where they disagree is how to fix it. Many policymakers have offered crucial economic

solutions, but while changes like raising the minimum wage and extending unemployment insurance are necessary, they are not sufficient to combat our persistent mobility problem. In this paper, we focus in on the non-economic ways that government could support Americans of all ages in overcoming poverty's gravitational force. We provide a framework based on new academic research about brain plasticity and the characteristics that can help equip a person to more effectively fight their way out of poverty. First, a growth mindset: the belief that success is learned, not pre-ordained. And second, grit: the ability to see setbacks as hurdles, not walls. Together, growth and grit comprise what we call a "mobility mentality." Finally, to help foster it in children, we need a third element: grown-ups. This report describes how government can reinforce and channel this mentality to increase the likelihood that those born at the bottom have a chance of moving up.

The Mobility Barrier

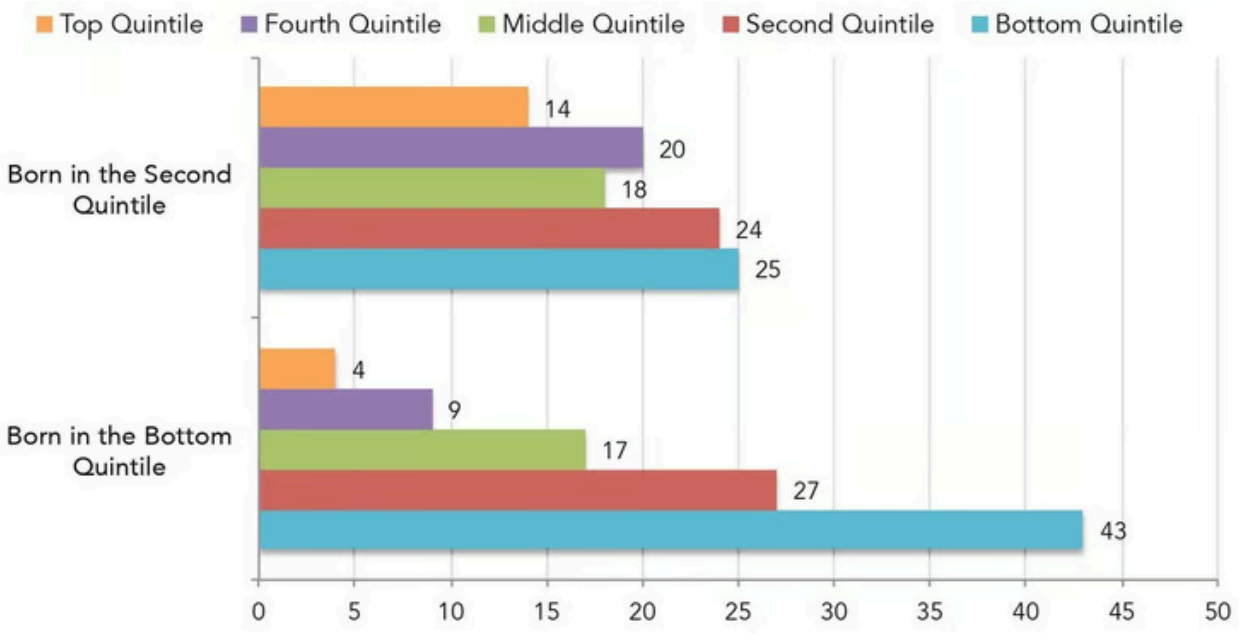
The living situation of the American poor is better today than it was half a century ago. Fifty years ago, President Lyndon Johnson declared a war on poverty and ushered in the most extensive support system for the poor in history, and in 2010 President Barack Obama stitched the final major thread into that safety net with the passage of the *Affordable Care Act (ACA)*. Medicaid has ensured that those in poverty could get some measure of health care. Public housing and vouchers have made it so most had a roof over their heads. We've raised the minimum wage 22 times since its inception and instituted at least 126 different anti-poverty programs.[1] Because of programs like SNAP, rent subsidies, and refundable credits like the EITC, overall purchasing power rose for those in the bottom quintile from 1973 to 2012, even while actual cash income fell.[2] If you include tax credits, cash, and in-kind benefits in the calculations, the poverty rate has actually fallen from 26% in 1967 to 15% in 2012, as Jason Furman, the President's Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors recently noted.[3] In all, we have spent nearly $15 trillion on anti-poverty programs since 1964; and in 2012 alone, the federal government spent more than $668 billion.[4]

Likewise, some of the grinding non-economic barriers to success have been worn down, though not erased. Discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, disability, and sexual orientation has begun to diminish over time. In 1980, not one *Fortune* 100 company had a woman in a top-tier executive position; today all but 17 do.[5] Then there

were only 22 African-American or Hispanic legislators in Congress; today there are 81—as well as the President of the United States.[6] The *Americans with Disabilities Act* opened public and private accommodations to the disabled. And we are making steady progress on equality for gay and transgender people in the home and in the workplace.

Though there has been improvement for many groups who have historically faced hurdles in our country, one vexing problem remains the same: a child born at the bottom of the income ladder today is no more likely to move up than 50 years ago. This child is unlikely to ever make it to the top—or even to move up a few rungs. Our mobility problem is concentrated almost entirely among those in the lowest economic quintile and runs counter to our ideal of how American society should operate. According to basic mathematic principles, there will always be a bottom quintile—but what we as a society cannot tolerate is the existence of one that is impermeable.

Figure One: Mobility Outcomes of Americans Born in the Lowest Two Income Quintiles[7]



Source: "Pursuing the American Dream: Economic Mobility Across Generations," Report, The Pew Charitable Trusts, Economic Mobility Project, Available at: http://www.pewstates.org/research/reports/pursuing-the-american-dream-85899403228.

Figure One shows the stark difference in mobility outcomes of the bottom quintile and the second-to-the-bottom quintile. A child born in the bottom quintile has a 70% likelihood of being in one of the bottom two quintiles as an adult. By comparison, a

child born in the second-to-the-bottom quintile has a 49% chance of being in one of the bottom two quintiles as an adult and a 34% chance of getting to one of the top two quintiles.[8]

This lack of mobility at the bottom has remained stubbornly so in good times and bad, and under conservative, liberal, and moderate governance. By the end of the 1990s, poverty rates had fallen to 12.4% of the population, but even then those in the bottom quintile had no better chance of moving out and up.[9]

Moreover, both liberals and conservatives must face up to the realities ahead. It seems highly unlikely that there will be huge new dollar resources at the federal, state, or local levels for the programs liberals want. And wish as conservatives might that the elimination of anti-poverty programs and government incentives might change family structures and poverty outcomes, those laws seem unlikely to pass and even less likely to work.[10] Despite all our nation's efforts to expand opportunity for all Americans, the rate of mobility has stayed stable for the last 50 years.[11] And while this report does not offer a silver bullet to 'fix' our country's mobility problem, it provides a fresh perspective on one piece of how we may address the issue.

Who is in the Bottom Quintile?

Poverty is much more complicated than the federally-defined income cut-off implies. For some, it is just a detour on their economic journey: between 2009 and 2011, 31.6% of Americans had at least one period of poverty lasting a minimum of 2 months. But for others, it is the destination: during that same 3-year period, 3.5% of Americans lived in poverty every single month.[12] The bottom quintile of the income spectrum encompasses some of those in the first group, and all of those in the latter. Households in the bottom income quintile earned no more than $20,599 in 2012, compared to $39,764 in the second-lowest quintile, $64,582 in the middle quintile, $104,096 in the second-highest quintile, and a minimum of $104,097 in the highest quintile.[13] As of 2012, 15% of the country—46.5 million Americans—live below the federal poverty line, set at $11,720 for an individual.[14]

Sixty percent of Americans in the bottom quintile are white, compared to the 70% of the total population. African-Americans make up 21% of the quintile, while 13% of the total population identifies as African-American. Asian-Americans make up 4% of the general

population and 3% of the bottom quintile. Fourteen percent of those in the bottom quintile are Hispanic, compared to 12% of the general population.[15] Nearly half of all Americans live in a married-couple household (49%), and 17% of the bottom quintile is made up of these married-couple families. Out of the total U.S. population, 13% of Americans live in a single-mother household, and those households make up 19% of the bottom quintile. Single-father families make up 5% of the total population and 4% of that quintile.[16] The 34% of the population not living in a married-couple, single-mother, or single-father household are considered nonfamily households (meaning they are either individuals who live alone without children, or they share their home only with people to whom they are not related).[17] They make up the largest proportion of the bottom quintile, at 60%.[18]

The Mobility Mentality

How can we take a fresh look at the stark mobility problem facing those in the bottom quintile? How can we use government levers to give every child born into the bottom quintile a chance to break poverty's gravitational hold? Economic assistance is crucial, but it may not be sufficient to ensure permeability of the lowest quintile. Thus, we must also ask ourselves what kinds of non-economic characteristics can help someone succeed despite the long odds. New research in the education sector has pointed to a series of characteristics which if applied in this context could increase the likelihood of success for those fighting their way up the income ladder. It suggests that in addition to economic factors, Americans could increase their chance at mobility by nurturing a mentality which encompasses two key characteristics: a growth mindset and grit. A growth mindset allows someone to believe that they can better their position in life; grit is the tenacity and perseverance to overcome obstacles and do the work necessary to make it happen. The way to nurture these characteristics is through grown-ups, who can teach, instill, and reinforce them at an early age. Together, valuing a mobility mentality at every age and using grown-ups to foster it in the next generation may offer some promise in addressing our mobility problem when paired with economic solutions. While in previous generations we have focused on teaching our children the ABCs, now government should endeavor to also encourage these three Gs.

For children born in the bottom quintile, these characteristics are uniquely important. There are some children at every income level who already have grit and a growth

mindset, and in fact, children who face poverty may naturally acquire more grit than their peers given the hurdles they have to overcome every day. But middle-class kids who don't have these characteristics may still end up doing fine, given where they began. They may not excel, but for them, maintaining the status quo could be perfectly acceptable. By contrast, low-income kids need grit and growth exponentially more—because they have to fight to work their way up the income ladder and compete with those who have more resources at their disposal. So while some low-income children already have grit and a growth mindset, we need to support and encourage it in every single child in the bottom quintile in order to give them the best chance to break free of poverty's grasp.

Growth

> **What are the consequences of thinking your intelligence or personality is something you can develop, as opposed to something that is a fixed, deep-seated trait?**

–Dr. Carol Dweck, Mindset: The New Psychology of Success[19]

New psychological research has uncovered an important divide between different mindsets, or ways of seeing the world in which one lives and the challenges one faces. These mindsets are not static characteristics determined at birth—rather they are filters that can be taught and changed. Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck discovered that when tested, some people approached the world with a *growth mindset*, meaning they perceived intelligence and ability as qualities that could be developed and cultivated through effort and experience.[20] They saw the brain like a muscle that, if properly exercised, could become stronger and make a person smarter and more skilled by their own volition.[21] In contrast, others who were in a *fixed* mindset believed that intelligence and ability were inherent and finite—that a person is born with a certain amount and little can be done to change that.[22] When faced with a challenge, someone

who is viewing the world through a fixed mindset fears failure as an indication of their innate deficiencies, while someone who is seeing things through a growth mindset views failure as an opportunity to learn and develop, regardless of the outcome of that particular circumstance. Crucially, as recent studies have shown, these mindsets can be taught and learned—and they can make a big difference at any stage of life.

Yet many of our social institutions reinforce a fixed mindset. For example, in some elementary schools it is common practice to determine which students are placed in the gifted classes based on IQ scores—relying on a test for which a child supposedly cannot study to measure inherent "giftedness" and determine whether that child will ever have the capacity to excel in advanced classes.[23] Practices like this bolster a fixed mindset by telling low-scoring children that there is no point in trying at school since their score on an IQ test taken at the age of five has already determined the limits of their abilities. And this viewpoint of aptitude as a lottery ticket you're issued at birth is especially worrisome when it comes to educational opportunities for low-income students, because research shows that the stresses of poverty can decrease cognitive functioning on a daily basis. One recent study gave IQ tests to people with different income levels and then asked the subjects to think about how they would solve a hypothetical major financial problem in everyday life, like paying for an unexpected car repair. When given another IQ test after pondering this financial crisis, low-income people scored on average 13 points lower than they did before—a phenomenon not experienced by higher-income test-takers.[24] This drop in score among the low-income participants did not occur when they were given a less stressful scenario to complete, illustrating the cognitive limitations that can be caused by the anxiety of struggling to make ends meet on an everyday basis. A fixed mindset would tell these low-income people that they are simply not as able to achieve as their counterparts at other income levels—painting their lower scores as a static reflection of their innate abilities. A growth mindset would recognize the effect poverty may have on their performance as temporary and see their abilities as something that can be improved, rather than a sentence meted out to them.

Studies have shown that students with a growth mindset or those who are taught it academically outperform those with a fixed mindset and exhibit more effort and motivation to learn than the latter group as well. For example, middle school students who exhibit a growth mindset earn increasingly higher math grades, even when controlling for their prior achievement.[25] A study by Dr. Lisa S. Blackwell of Columbia University and Drs. Kali H. Trzesniewski and Dweck of Stanford looked at the effect of a

growth mindset on a group of New York public school middle schoolers from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds (for example, 53% were eligible for free lunch). They found that a growth mindset correlated to higher achievement in math by these middle schoolers, with that effect growing from a predictability of .12 in the fall of seventh grade to .20 in the spring of eighth grade.[26]

A second study by the same research team found that another group of seventh graders (79% eligible for free lunch) with declining math grades who were taught a growth mindset reversed that negative trend and improved their grades, while students taught only study skills continued to see their grades decline.[27] In fact, three times as many of the students who were taught a growth mindset increased their effort and engagement in math class compared to those taught study skills—27% vs. 9%.[28]

Teaching the Growth Mindset

In the Blackwell, Trzesniewski, and Dweck study, seventh grade students were taught the growth mindset through a series of lessons on the brain—both its science and the ways that learning can make it smarter. These concepts were taught via activities, readings, and discourse and applied in discussions on topics like why labels such as 'dumb' or 'stupid' should be avoided.

It's not just academic—it's intuitive. If your parent or parents raised you to believe you have the capacity to improve your abilities, your circumstances, your scores, or your intellect, you do better. But if you grew up believing that you are simply stuck with the hand you were dealt at birth, and challenges or tests only reveal whether or not you are innately good enough, what would possibly motivate you to try and improve?The demonstrated increases in academic achievement and motivation that come from adopting a growth mindset can help open the door to mobility for low-income children. Students in the lowest economic quintile—those with the least opportunity for mobility—are unsurprisingly the least likely to graduate from high school or college.[29] But consider this: a growth mindset can help improve students' grades; better grades can help them finish high school and college; and college provides a ticket out of poverty—those born in the lowest quintile who graduate from college have a *90% chance* of moving up and out of that category.[30]

Grit

> **It wasn't the academic piece that was holding our kids back. What we found hands down was it was the noncognitive piece—that tenacity, that grit—that allowed kids to harness those skills and persist when they faced difficulty.**

—Donald Kamentz, senior director of college initiatives at YES Prep[31]

A growth mindset is crucial, but merely believing that it is possible to improve your circumstances is not enough—you also have to have the grit to do the work necessary to make it happen. As author Paul Tough describes it in his book, *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character*, grit is "conscientiousness, resilience or the ability to delay gratification—all for a distant prize that…[is] almost entirely theoretical."[32] It's the tenacity and perseverance to strive for long-term goals, over several years, overcoming hurdles and set-backs. And studies have shown that grit plays a significant role in success, even when controlling for things like previous test scores or age.

An experiment that has been repeated often with groups of four-year-old children demonstrates this effect by examining one important part of grit (a shorter-term correlate)—the ability to delay gratification. Researchers put a preschooler in a room and present them with both a small treat (like a single marshmallow) and a larger, more desirable one (like two marhsmallows). They then leave the room, but not before telling the child that if they wait until the researcher comes back, they can have the bigger snack. If instead they ring a bell on the table before the researcher returns, they can eat the smaller snack immediately, but they will not get a second marshmallow. Children who demonstrate ability to delay gratification in this experiment and earn the second

snack do better later in life on a variety of measures. According to one summary of the multiple similar studies:

4-year-old children who are more successful at waiting in the delay of gratification situation have been found to be more attentive, to be better able to concentrate, and to exhibit greater self-control and frustration tolerance than their peers when they are adolescents. They also score higher on the SAT and are perceived as more interpersonally competent by parents and peers.[33]

Other studies have illustrated the importance of grit at a variety of ages. Using a scale that measured consistency of interest and perseverance of effort, Drs. Angela Duckworth of the University of Pennsylvania, Christopher Peterson of the University of Michigan, and Michael D. Matthews and Dennis R. Kelly of West Point United States Military Academy found that among undergraduates at an elite university, those who scored higher on the grit scale had higher GPAs—even though they had *lower* SAT scores, on average. When researchers controlled for those SAT scores, the gap widened, with "gritty" students outperforming their similarly-SAT-scoring peers by an even greater margin.[34] Among cadets at the United States Military Academy at West Point, the same research team found that a cadet's score on the grit scale was a better predictor of whether he or she would complete the difficult first summer training program than that person's SAT score, high school class rank, leadership potential score, or even their physical aptitude exam. In fact, cadets who scored a standard deviation above the average grit score were 60% more likely to complete summer training—and were also more likely to do so than cadets who scored a standard deviation above average in self-control.[35] A third study, this time of participants in the Scripps National Spelling Bee, found that students who scored a standard deviation above the average grit score among all competitors were 41% more likely to advance to later rounds in the competition. And when controlling for age, grit score could be used to successfully predict the final round. This is likely because grittier students dealt better with setbacks and responded with more practice hours—and performed better because of it.[36] Taken together, these studies suggest that grit plays a bigger role in—and can be more predictive of—success than test scores, grades, leadership ability, self-control, or age (which corresponds to years of school and substance knowledge).

Calculating Grit Score

As developed for the Duckworth, et. al study, a grit score is based on participants' self-rankings of 12 measures divided into two categories:

Consistency of interest measures:

- *often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one.*
- *New ideas and new products sometimes distract me from previous ones.*
- *I become interested in new pursuits every few months.*
- *My interests change from year to year.*
- *I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest.*
- *I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete.*

Perseverance of effort measures:

- *I have achieved a goal that took years of work.*
- *I have overcome setbacks to conquer an important challenge.*
- *I finish whatever I begin.*
- *Setbacks don't discourage me.*
- *I am a hard worker.*
- *I am diligent.*

If a person is equipped with a growth mindset and grit, a combination we are calling the "mobility mentality," they will be less likely to see their place at the bottom of the income ladder as determinative, and they will be equipped with the perseverance to overcome the significant hardships they will inevitably face in their effort to work their way up the economic ladder. The great news is that these characteristics can be taught. And the fact of the matter is, since low-income kids already face on average far more hurdles in life than many of their peers, they have been cultivating grit all their lives. Those abilities which have allowed them to overcome the many obstacles they've already faced can be channeled to help them get ahead in life. Children from every walk

of life can benefit from grit, and many already exhibit it—but it is the children born into the lowest quintile and facing the highest mobility barriers who will need it the most. Unwittingly or not, children often hear that their opportunities are limited because of the circumstances in which they've been raised. If they believe their ability to persevere will help them succeed, they'll be more likely to do so.

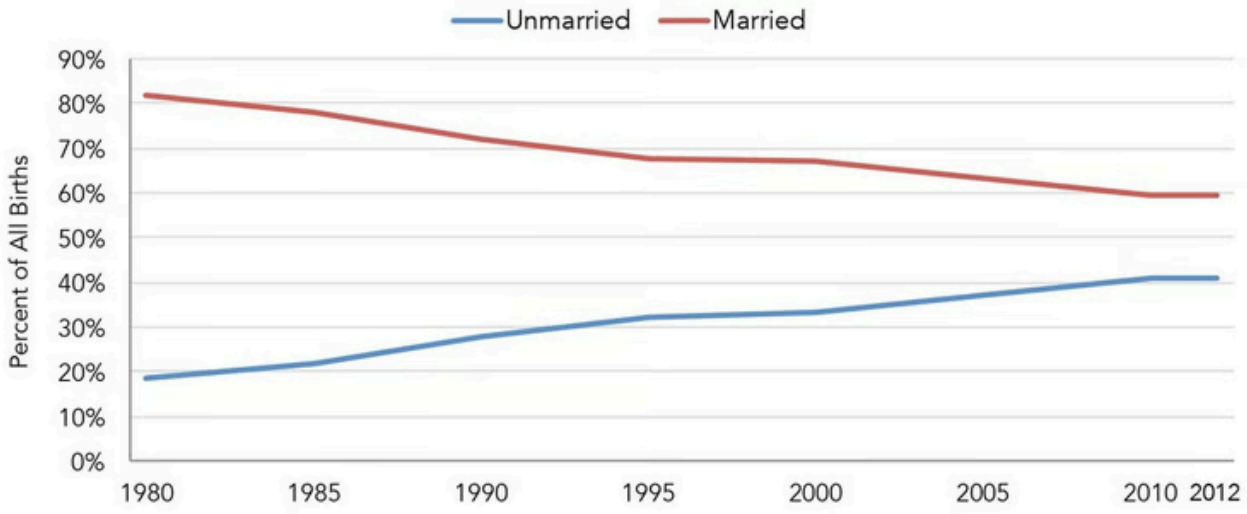
Grown-ups

> **Parents and other caregivers who are able to form close, nurturing relationships with their children can foster resilience in them that protects them from many of the worst effects of a harsh early environment.**

–Paul Tough, *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character*[37]

Married couple households make up only 17% of the bottom quintile, compared to 78.4% of the top quintile.[38] Regardless of race, married couples are less likely to live in or raise children in poverty.[39] Yet births of children to married couples have been falling for decades, and according to the most recent numbers they now constitute only 59.3% of all births.[40] While data suggests that on average children do better if they have stable, two-parent families, the government has proven itself ineffective at altering the trajectory of trends in family structure.

Figure Two: Percent of Births to Married and Unmarried Women Since 1980[41]



Source: United States, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Vital Statistics Report, "Births: Final Data for 2012," Available at: http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/nvsr.htm.

Many of the recent policies proposed to reverse that trend could have negative consequences for women by financially incentivizing them to stay in abusive relationships or by encouraging marriages that will lead to eventual divorce (after which women and their children are worse off than those who have never married in the first place).[42] However, even if government policy were successful at reducing the rate of single-parent births by 20%, one out of three babies would still be born to single moms—roughly 1.3 million children per year.[43] Policies focused principally on marriage promotion essentially write off all the children who are now or in the future growing up in single-parent homes, telling them they are simply out of luck, and imply that single mothers can't be good parents. That's not only blatantly incorrect but also in direct conflict with the views of the majority of the country—64% of Americans believe that the government should be trying to help society adapt to the reality of single-parent families and using its resources to help children and mothers succeed, regardless of family status.[44]

Given that single parents share the same dreams of success for their children as married parents, but must often work twice as hard to give their children the chance to succeed, what can government do to help? Can public policy help all parents raise kids to exhibit growth and grit? Instead of only asking how we can use government to get more people to marry, why can't we ask how we can use government to help make sure the children from every family structure have the same opportunities for success?

How the Government Can Recognize AND Reward the Mobility Mentality

Does the government currently recognize, reward, and channel the growth mindset and grit, and encourage grown-ups to help foster them in our kids? And if not, can it?

In this section, we argue that in order to begin to combat America's mobility problem even while we debate the larger economic issues facing our country, local, state, and federal governments should encourage a mobility mentality. Agencies should be challenged to analyze their programs to see where participants can learn ways in which they can improve outcomes, overcome obstacles, and channel their children's natural grit. Below, we outline a handful of policy suggestions based on examples of what has worked in individual programs or certain states, but this list is by no means exhaustive. The mobility mentality is an overarching concept which can be applied in innumerable ways—not only children born into poverty, but also those who have paid their debt to society through prison, and anyone who works to earn a second chance at success. The potential extends far beyond merely fostering the mobility mentality in the next generation—we should also put our money where our mouth is to make good on the promise that it is possible to change your circumstances, rather than sentencing someone to permanent underclass status based on birth or for a single mistake.

1. Teaching parents about the mobility mentality in home visitation programs

Government-funded parenting programs often focus on facts and skills like the importance of breastfeeding or the best way to swaddle an infant. And while that knowledge is important, what many parents also need—and what would benefit their children most in the long run—is to learn strategies for successfully parenting given modest resources and ample stress. There is a belief among some that young, single moms are going to be failing parents. That reflects both a stereotype and a fixed mindset. In truth, good parenting in the best of circumstances is not easy, and without excellent role models, it is even harder—but good parenting can be taught and supported. That is the growth mindset.

Studies find that strong parent-child relationships are built on an attachment parenting model, which encourages parents to develop secure, dependable parental bonds—a foundation from which children feel confident expanding their horizons and challenging themselves because they know they have a safe place to land.[45] Attachment parenting stresses loving parental interaction, positive discipline, and sensitive and understanding responses to children's emotions.[46] These bonds and the character traits they inculcate are crucial to the child's later success and mobility—and studies show that creating them is a skill that can be taught.[47] Therefore, current and future parenting programs—particularly home visitation programs, on which we already spend more than a billion dollars each year— should teach parents about the mobility mentality so they can model it for their children and pass it on through the nurturing attachment relationships they'll learn how to establish.[48]

Other government programs (like Head Start and WIC) can also guide new parents to create these positive "attachment relationships" with their children that will help give them the best chance of upward mobility.

2. Instilling grit in wrap-around pre-K programs

The research is clear that the kids who really need pre-kindergarten are low-income.[49] And just any pre-K isn't sufficient. As we expand pre-kindergarten programs, they should be focused *and* targeted—focused on teaching not only words and numbers but also the executive functions inherent in grit, and targeted at the needs of low-income students.

Executive functions are a set of cognitive skills rooted in the brain's prefrontal cortex that help people deal with confusing and unpredictable circumstances—such as handling stress, delaying gratification, and controlling impulses.[50] These skills are crucial throughout one's life, but are particularly beneficial to develop at a young age, since children face contradictory information every day in school just trying to learn to read and write (like a single letter that can make different sounds or words that are pronounced the same but have different meanings.)[51] Rather than implementing some version of universal pre-K for every child, those precious resources would be better spent on "wrap-around" pre-K for the low-income children who need it most. Wrap-around pre-K addresses a full range of needs in low-income communities by providing

some combination of before- and after-childcare so parents can work full time, medical and dental care for children and families, developmental testing (e.g., hearing, eyesight, developmental delays), referrals to support services, parental education, and parental involvement planning. And it works.

By offering that full range of services and focusing the curriculum on encouraging grit and executive functions, we can ensure that low-income children are better equipped to succeed long-term, since on average these children will face significantly more hurdles and stress than their higher-income peers.[52] Take, for example, the results of a study by Cornell researchers Dr. Gary Evans and Michelle Schamberg: teenagers who spent more time in poverty while growing up had higher allostatic load scores—a measurement of the physiological manifestations of stress in the body such as blood pressure, hormone levels, and body mass index—and they performed less well on tests of working memory, which is an important type of executive function. But even more interestingly, when Evans and Schamberg controlled for the effects of allostatic load, the poverty effect also disappeared—meaning it was not actually growing up in poverty that had negative consequences—it was the stress of growing up in poverty that did.[53] Teaching executive functions in pre-K can give low-income children the tools and techniques they'll need to deal with that stress and overcome it. A complete pre-K experience focusing on grit and executive functions and providing wrap-around services can set low-income children up for success—but data show that it doesn't produce the same dividends for most middle class or wealthy children, who face vastly fewer hurdles and less stress.[54]

3. Developing a BoomerCorps

Every day, roughly 10,000 of the 79 million members of the Baby Boomer generation turn 65.[55] Approximately 30% of those folks have a college degree, and another 30% have some college education.[56] And according to Pew, the typical Baby Boomer feels nine years younger than his or her chronological age—that is time that could be well-spent helping kids in need of support.[57] We should develop a BoomerCorps—based off of the AmeriCorps model—through which retirees can be recruited to serve their communities by helping low-income parents and their children move up the ladder of success. This BoomerCorps could teach young moms and dads about the mobility mentality, work with children on academic skills and executive functions, reinforce to

kids that their brain is like a muscle that can grow with exercise, and help support them overcoming daily obstacles. BoomerCorps could function similarly to the Big Brothers Big Sisters program, with Corps members serving their communities in afterschool programs, community centers, libraries, and other convenient neighborhood locales. In Denver, an organization called Boomers Leading Change in Health runs a similarly-modeled program at the local level that recruits Baby Boomers to be half-time AmeriCorps members serving at a variety of non-profit organizations as health workers. In exchange, participants receive a small living allowance and a National Service Education Award, which can be transferred to a child, grandchild, or foster child if the participant is 55 years of age or older.[58] By implementing this kind of program on a national scale, we can ensure that we are helping to provide parents with the support they need and expanding the number of grown-ups in children's lives from whom they can learn growth and grit.

4. Rewarding grit through socioeconomic affirmative action

Which student has the most potential: one with average standardized test scores who has grown up with many resources at her disposal and attended an expensive private school, or a low-income student with the same scores from a high-poverty school district?

In the eyes of many college admissions officers, every applicant is judged as if they are on a level playing field. Yet along with students of color, low-income students are vastly underrepresented on college campuses and less likely to graduate on-time than their peers.[59] At the most selective colleges only three percent of students come from the lowest socio-economic quartile (compared with 74% from the highest) and high-income students are 21 percentage points more likely to graduate within five years.[60] This fact is especially problematic because a college degree is so crucial for mobility (as noted above, nine in ten college graduates from the lowest economic quintile move up). Currently, students of color may be able to benefit from race-based affirmative action policies, although many of those policies are on their last legs: race-based affirmative action has already been outlawed in a quarter of the country, it's regularly threatened with being more severely curtailed by the Supreme Court, and public support for it is falling, even among demographic groups like Millennials.[61] By expanding affirmative action policies to take into account socioeconomic status in addition to race, we can

acknowledge the challenges that both people of color and low-income students face, and ensure students are rewarded for the growth and grit they have already displayed in order to succeed so far. To ensure that such a policy truly works to advantage those it should and doesn't displace others who need the help, we must learn from experiences at the state level and craft the policy in a way that defines socioeconomic status broadly —based not just on annual parental income, but on a broader picture of wealth that encompasses things like assets, neighborhood wealth, and parents' level of education. After all, a low-income student from a failing school in a poverty-stricken neighborhood who has earned an average score on her SATs has had to work harder and show more promise than a similarly-scoring higher-income student from a wealthy suburban school—and our admissions processes should reflect that fact.

5. Making it easier for foster parents to adopt

Kids need stable, loving, supportive grown-ups in their lives, but for many foster children, that seems like a pipe dream. Out of the almost 400,000 children in foster care, more than 100,000 are eligible for adoption, and nearly 30,000 age out of the system each year without finding a permanent family.[62] Studies have found that adults who were in foster care as children have better outcomes in terms of healthcare, housing, and personal and community engagement when they have a permanent family relationship—such as an adoptive parent.[63] But instead of making it easier for a family to adopt an eligible child they are fostering, many states have complicated processes rife with roadblocks. Some states require similar but separate licensing for foster care and adoption, some require the foster child to have already been in the home for a certain length of time, and some require an additional round of applications and home studies.[64] Due at least in part to this bureaucratic nightmare, only 1 out of every 28 people who contact a child welfare agency interested in adopting a child from foster care eventually does so.[65] Instead, every state should do what it can to streamline this process, encouraging adoption from foster care for those kids who are eligible and awaiting a forever home, reducing the number of moves those children have to make, and promoting the crucial development of long-term stable relationships with their new families.[66] Texas, for example, has implemented dual licensing—a single process through which someone can become simultaneously licensed to be both a foster parent and an adoptive parent—and today nearly half of the adoptions out of foster care in that state are by a child's foster family.[67] And since every $1 spent on adoption for a child in

foster care yields $3 in benefits, making the process easier and smoother is not only good for the child, but also for the pocketbook.[68]

6. Reforming the adoption system

Many would-be parents interested in adopting a child in need are discouraged by the complicated and expensive adoption process that, even domestically, relies on middleman agencies, can take several years, and can cost anywhere from $5,000 to more than $40,000.[69] Every state (and in some places even the county) has its own rules and requirements, and they may not accept the licensing or screening practices of others.[70] To make it easier for willing and able parents to adopt children in need of a home, we should standardize the licensing, screening, and approval process for prospective parents across the country and centralize the adoption system at the state level to ensure that children are connected with grown-ups who want to adopt them as quickly and efficiently as safely possible.

7. Establishing a commendable release program for felons

More than 10 million American children have a parent who has been incarcerated at some point.[71] But even after serving their time and repaying their debts to society, these parents face serious challenges to providing for their families: earnings fall an average of 40% after a stint in prison, drug felons are permanently ineligible for welfare benefits, Pell Grants, or SNAP food stamps, a felony conviction can be used to deny someone public housing or evict them from it, many job applications require anyone with a criminal record to check a box informing (and often scaring off) prospective employers, and in some states licensing boards can deny felons' applications for professional certifications or licenses required for jobs like architect, cosmetologist, or electrician.[72] Our country currently has a fixed mindset regarding felons. Our policies assume they will always be lawbreakers, always be dangerous, and no matter how rehabilitated they become, they will always deserve to be separated in some way by government and society.

Growth and grit should be valued at every age, and we shouldn't unilaterally discard people because they have made one mistake. So if a felon has served his or her sentence with good behavior and made a demonstrable effort to better himself—such as by

taking parenting classes, earning a GED or a degree, learning a trade, or seeking drug or mental health counseling while behind bars—he or she should be rewarded with "commendable release" when released from prison. A commendable release could restore eligibility for certain federal benefits, protect a felon and his or her family from being evicted or denied public housing, excuse a felon from checking the box on most job applications, restore licensing eligibility where those limits aren't required by public safety, or provide immunity from liability for negligent hiring for employers who hire commendably-released felons. We can still maintain some limitations on felons taking certain jobs in the interest of public safety, but many of the existing limits could be narrowed significantly without major risk, and doing so would reward a growth mindset and grit in those who show it, at any age.

8. Restructuring child support guidelines for felons

More than 2.7 million children currently have an incarcerated parent.[73] It's hard to pay child support in jail, but 12 states consider incarceration to be "voluntary unemployment" and thus prohibit modification of an incarcerated person's child support order.[74] Two additional states strongly disfavor modifications for inmates.[75] That means when a felon is released from jail, he or she often faces massive debt from years of missed payments. If he or she is able to get a job, the state will often garnish as much as 65% of those wages immediately for back payment. Worse, if the custodial parent is on welfare, the state simply keeps most of that money to cover its own costs.[76] When a felon becomes delinquent in child support payments, the state can also suspend his or her driver's and professional licenses and seize bank accounts—the very things a person would need in order to pay the backlogged child support.[77] And since paying child support debt is often a condition of probation, many feel they are left with two choices: go back to jail because they cannot afford their backlogged child support, or return to a life of crime in order to pay back the money they owe.[78] Instead, we should allow those who are serving time with good behavior to modify their child support orders to better recognize their limitations and the needs of their families, even forgiving the chunk of their debt that would go to the state to ensure their children have the best chance at receiving the support they need. For example, in Massachusetts, the Department of Revenue Child Support Division can reduce or forgive ex-offenders' debts to the state (though it is not obligated to do so), and while now-inactive, Indiana previously had a program through which participating ex-offenders could have their

debts to the state reduced if they met required conditions.[79] By making changes like this across the country, we would maximize opportunities for mobility for parents who are reentering society after incarceration. And for their children, we will improve the chances that their parent can stay out of prison and keep a job that allows them to maintain child support payments over the long term, while ensuring that money is primarily flowing to that child and the custodial parent, rather than paying off debts to the state.

These policy snapshots are just a sneak peek of some ideas for how we believe the government can recognize, reward, and channel a mobility mentality. In the coming months, we will release more detailed proposals around these policies, as well as others.

Conclusion

Despite the obvious mobility barriers faced by people in the lowest income quintile, some do manage to make it up the ladder. Thinking about the non-economic characteristics that when combined with economic support can help someone succeed, we were driven to the mobility mentality. If the government can help to channel growth and grit, and encourage grown-ups to foster this mobility mentality in children, these three Gs may help to equip people with additional tools to climb the income ladder and escape the gravitational pull of poverty. The mobility mentality is by no means the end of the story on poverty, but it is a small piece that could potentially make a big difference when combined with economic solutions. Because the promise of our country is that anyone willing to put in the effort can succeed, our public policies should do everything they can to make that promise a reality, by recognizing, rewarding, and channeling the mobility mentality in every government program or policy—especially those affecting people in the lowest economic quintile.

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Sarah Trumble
Former Deputy Director, Social Policy & Politics



Lanae Erickson
Senior Vice President for Social Policy, Education & Politics
LanaeErickson