

Mobility Is Prevented by a Class and Skill Divide



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As high-paying manufacturing work has declined over the past couple of decades, America’s economy has literally split in two. The large and rapidly growing mass of low-wage, low-skill service jobs in fields like food preparation, retail sales and personal care are much the same across the country and these workers have become largely stuck in place.

At the same time, there is much greater geographic specialization and considerably greater mobility among the upper ranks of the knowledge economy. America’s geography of work and the mobility of its people reflect its growing class divide.

There is a deep and widening fissure between the large and growing ranks of the stuck and the smaller and richer ranks of the mobile.

The period after World War II was a relatively unusual one in American history, giving rise to a large working middle class and relatively low inequality, cemented by high wage manufacturing jobs and a new social compact between capital, labor and government. This in turn helped to spur an era of record high geographic mobility. The 1950s, 60s, 70s, and 80s saw three mass migrations: of African-Americans from the rural south to the urban north, of the working and middle class from cities to suburbs, and then later from the Frostbelt to the Sunbelt.

But as manufacturing work was gradually automated and shifted offshore, places that had specialized in different kinds of manufacturing - Pittsburgh in steel, Detroit in autos, Buffalo and Cleveland in auto parts, Akron in rubber and tires - became more alike; their large wage differentials disappeared. Mobility among the ranks of the once great working class shriveled.

But high-skill, high-pay jobs are as specialized, and these workers as mobile, as ever. The share of adults with a college degree has [diverged](#) across metro areas. Jobs that require high levels of cognitive and social intelligence skills have clustered in a relatively small number of major cities and college towns. I called it a [“means migration.”](#)

Of course, some of the biggest professional fields, like education, health care and law, have also tended to converge geographically. But, the most highly paid jobs and the ones that tend to drive regional wealth and economic development — those in fields like finance, high-tech, media, and

entertainment to name a few — are increasingly clustered and concentrated in large metro areas. To succeed in these fields, which make up roughly 10-15 percent of all jobs, mobility is increasingly required.

But at the lower rungs of our economic ladder, for as many as two-thirds of working Americans, there is little difference in wages or opportunity regardless of where they might move. And while their paltry wages tend to be a bit higher in larger metro areas, they are insufficient to make up for higher housing costs. Many are trapped in underwater homes that make it [impossible for them to move](#).

In the Deep South and smaller metros across the country, these less fortunate Americans are literally locked in place.

To say Americans are less mobile, or that the country has become less specialized overall misses the bigger point, the stark reality of the deep and widening fissure between the large and growing ranks of the stuck and the smaller and richer ranks of the mobile.

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