

# Public attitudes towards social mobility and in-work poverty

**June 2013**



Social Mobility &  
Child Poverty  
Commission

## **Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission**

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# 1

## Introduction

# Introduction - background and methodology

The **Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission** is an advisory non-departmental public body (NDPB) of the Department for Education, the Department for Work & Pensions and the Cabinet Office.

The Commission was established with a remit to:

- publish an annual report setting out progress made in improving social mobility and reducing child poverty in Great Britain;
- provide published advice to ministers at their request on social mobility and child poverty; and
- act as an advocate for social mobility beyond government by challenging employers, the professions and universities amongst others to play their part in improving life chances.

This research was undertaken to explore current attitudes to factors related to social mobility and in-work poverty among the general public.

The research used a TNS/BMRB omnibus survey with a representative sample of 2,272 adults (aged 16+) across England, Scotland and Wales.

Respondents were interviewed face-to-face in their own homes using Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) devices between 15<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2013.

Respondents in Wales and Scotland were over sampled to allow for more detailed analysis of responses in these countries, however survey weights have been applied to ensure the overall results are representative of the adult population of Great Britain.

# 2

## Key findings

# Key findings

## Social mobility today

- 65 per cent of the public thought ‘who you know’ matters more than ‘what you know’.
- Three in four people said family background has significant influence on life chances in Britain today.
- However, when asked about the extent to which their own parents’ income or level of education had influenced where they had got to in life, people were less clear. Four in 10 thought that their parents’ income and education had influenced them and four in 10 thought it had not.
- 29 per cent of those who thought family background influences life chances thought it was more important now than in the past, 36 per cent thought it was less important and 37 per cent thought its influence had remained the same.
- Seven in 10 people thought a good education was the key to getting a good job. But nearly half thought it remained out of reach for most children from lower income families.
- Public opinion on the influence of education on future employment prospects varied by country; fewer people in Scotland (63 per cent) and Wales (59 per cent) thought a good education was the key to getting a good job than in England (72 per cent).
- When asked where government should be focusing its efforts to improve social mobility, the most commonly selected policies related to employment. Six in 10 said the most important way for government to improve social mobility was by either creating jobs or apprenticeships or helping unemployed young people to find work.

# Key findings

## **In-work poverty**

When given statistics on the percentage of children in poverty whose parents are in work:

- Two in three thought government had a role in tackling in-work poverty.
- Three in four thought that government should top-up incomes of those in in-work poverty.

Even more people thought employers had an important role to play:

- More than four in five (84 per cent) said that employers should be providing more opportunities for progression for their employees.
- More than four in five (84 per cent) said that employers should be paying wages that better reflect the cost of living.



# 3

Attitudes on factors that influence social mobility and trends over time

# Most people think that personal connections are an important influence on life chances in Britain today

Respondents were asked: *To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?*

*In Britain today... 'who you know' matters more than 'what you know'*



- Overall, 65 per cent agreed that 'who you know' matters more than 'what you know'. 17 per cent disagreed.
- There was little variation between different population groups. However, there was a very high level of agreement among people with apprenticeship level qualifications (83 per cent).

■ Agree strongly   ■ Agree slightly   ■ Neither   ■ Disagree slightly   ■ Disagree strongly

Base: All adults (2,272)

Numbers may not add up to 100 % due to rounding. Summarised responses may differ slightly from the sum of responses presented due to rounding. All differences noted are statistically significant (at 0.05).

# The majority of people think family background has a significant influence on life chances in Britain today

Respondents were asked: *To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?*

***In Britain today... family background significantly influences an individual's chances of doing well in life***



- Overall, 76 per cent agreed and 11 per cent disagreed family background significantly influences an individual's chances of doing well in life.
- Agreement that family background influences life chances increased with age and income. Graduates were most likely to agree (83 per cent).
- The most advantaged socio-economic group groups were more likely to agree (82 per cent of ABs and 68 per cent of DEs).\*
- Ethnic minority groups were less likely to agree (70 per cent).
- Disagreement was higher among students (15 per cent) and people not in work (15 per cent).

■ Agree strongly   ■ Agree slightly   ■ Neither   ■ Disagree slightly   ■ Disagree strongly

\* See Annex for definitions of social grade classification.

Base: All adults (2,272)

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# People were less likely to think that their own success (or otherwise) was a result of their family background

Respondents were asked: *To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?*



- Overall, 41 per cent agreed and 41 per cent disagreed their parents' income had influenced where they had got to in life.
- Agreement was higher among students (53 per cent), parents (46 per cent) and ethnic minority groups (58 per cent).
- Agreement was lower amongst older people. Just 35 per cent of the 55+ age group agreed.



- Overall, 43 per cent agreed and 42 per cent disagreed their parents' level of education had influenced where they had got to in life.
- Agreement was higher among parents (49 per cent), ethnic minority groups (58 per cent) and graduates (51 per cent).
- Disagreement was higher amongst the older (55+) group (47 per cent).

■ Agree strongly  
 ■ Agree slightly  
 ■ Neither  
 ■ Disagree slightly  
 ■ Disagree strongly

Base: All adults (2,272)

Numbers may not add up to 100 % due to rounding. Summarised responses may differ slightly from the sum of responses presented due to rounding. All differences noted are statistically significant (at 0.05).

# There was disagreement about whether family background was becoming more or less important to life chances than in the past (or staying the same)

Respondents were asked:

*Is family background more or less important in influencing where people end up in life than it was in the past?*



- Overall, 35 per cent felt that family background was becoming less important than it was in the past; 29 per cent felt that it was becoming more important; and 35 per cent felt that it was the same as before.
- People who were unemployed and those from less advantaged social groups (DE) were more likely to think family background was becoming **more important** (37 per cent).
- People from ethnic minority groups were **less** likely to think the importance of family background was **declining** (27%).

■ Less important    ■ The same as it was before    ■ More important

# The majority of people think education is key to chances of getting a good job; but nearly half do not believe that a good education is accessible to all

Respondents were asked: *To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?*

*... a good education is the key to getting a good job*



- Overall, 72 per cent agreed that a good education is the key to getting a good job; 18 per cent disagreed.
- Agreement increased with salary (those earning over £26k) (83 per cent) and among graduates (78 per cent).
- Agreement was higher amongst the most advantaged groups (of the AB social group, 79 per cent agreed vs. 68 per cent of DEs).
- Agreement was lowest among under 35s (65 per cent) and in Scotland (63 per cent) and in Wales (59 per cent)

*... a good education remains out of reach for most children from lower income families*



- Overall, 49 per cent agreed that a good education is out of reach for most children from lower income families; 38 per cent disagreed.
- Agreement was highest among ethnic minority groups (65%). Agreement was also higher among people from lower socio-economic groups (57 per cent of DEs vs. 45 per cent of ABs), people not in work (56 per cent), with no qualifications (57 per cent), on lower incomes (51 per cent) and among men (51 per cent vs. 46 per cent of women).

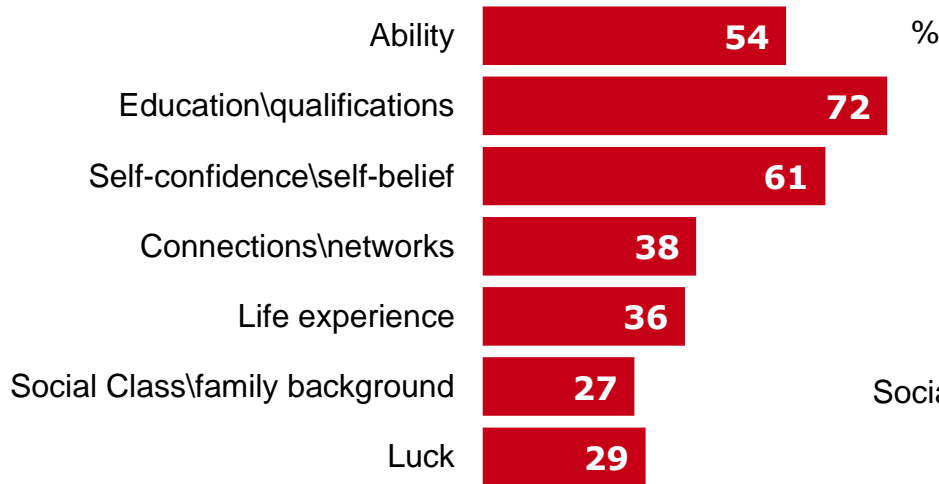
Base: All adults (2,272)

■ Agree strongly ■ Agree slightly ■ Neither ■ Disagree slightly ■ Disagree strongly

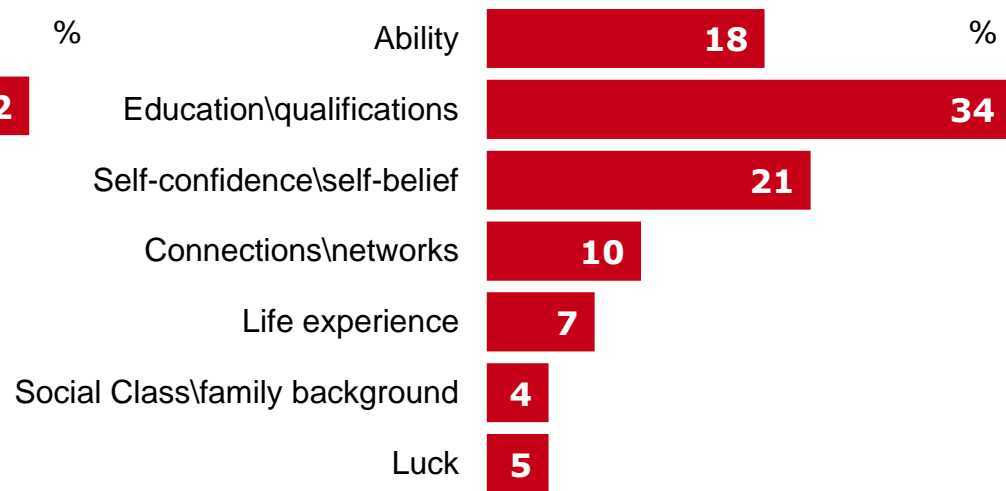
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# Education was seen as the most important factor influencing chances of getting a top job

*Which of the following factors do you think influence an individual's chances of getting a top job? (select as many as apply)*



*Which of these factors is most important for an individual's chance of getting a top job?*



- *Education/qualifications were the most commonly cited factor seen to be important to chances of getting a top job; (72 per cent) followed by self confidence/self-belief (61 per cent).*
- *When respondents were asked to state which was the single most important factor, more people cited education/qualifications than any other response (34 per cent).*

# 3

## Views on policies to improve social mobility

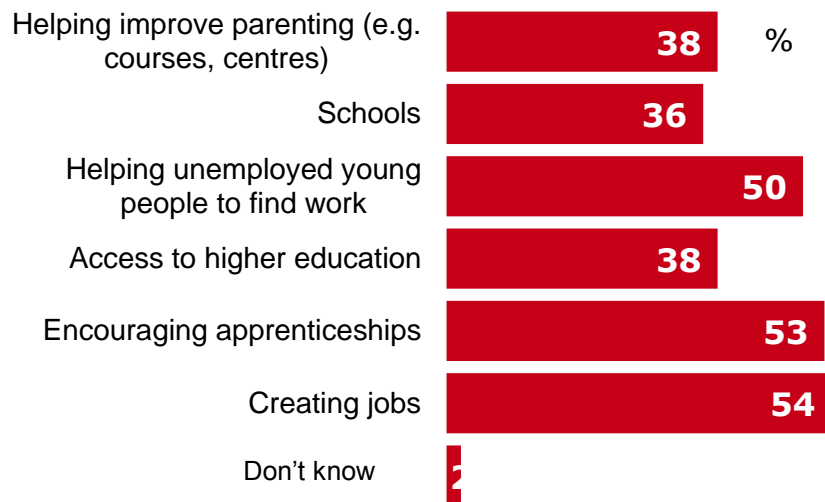
**Definition of social mobility provided to respondents:**

*Social mobility is breaking the link between your family's level of disadvantage and where you end up, so every individual, regardless of their background, has an equal chance of doing well in life.*

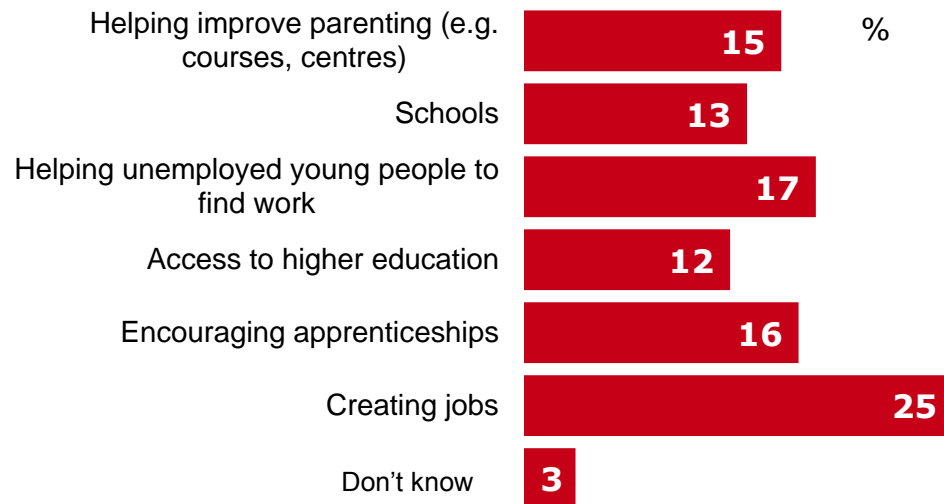


# Enabling employment was seen as the most important way for the government to improve social mobility

*If you were in government and looking to improve social mobility, on which of the following would you focus your efforts and money? (select as many as apply)*



*Which of these factors would it be most important to focus efforts and money on in order to improve social mobility?*



- More than half of respondents said that if they were in government they would prioritise policy responses which enable employment. 54 per cent said that they would prioritise job creation; 53 per cent said encouraging apprenticeships; and 50 per cent said helping unemployed people to find work.
- Over a third of people said that they would focus on schools, parenting and access to higher education.
- When asked to select the single most important factor for government to focus efforts on, nearly 6 in 10 people said employment responses (25 per cent said creating jobs, 17 per cent said helping unemployed young people and 16 per cent said apprenticeships).

Base: All adults (2,272)

Numbers may not add up to 100 % due to rounding.

# 4

## Attitudes to in-work poverty

# Two in three said government should be tackling in-work poverty; and three quarters agreed government should be topping up the income of people the lowest paid workers

*“60% of children in poverty live in families where someone is working”. With this in mind, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?*

***It is not the government’s role to tackle in-work poverty***



- Overall, 66 per cent disagreed with the statement that it is not the government’s role to tackle in-work poverty. 19 per cent agreed.
- Older respondents were less likely to think that it was government’s role to tackle in-work poverty; 25 per cent of the 55+ group agreed with the statement.
- Students and those on higher incomes were most likely to think that it was government’s role to tackle in-work poverty; 74 per cent of students and 74 per cent of people on higher incomes disagreed with the statement.

***The government should top-up the income of those who are in work and living in poverty***



- Overall, 75 per cent agreed that the government should top up the income of those who are in work and living in poverty.
- Most likely to agree were parents (80 per cent), lower socio-economic groups (80 per cent of DEs) and those who are unemployed (84 per cent)
- Agreement was lower amongst respondents who were retired (69 per cent), students (68 per cent) and those on higher incomes (68 per cent).

Base: All adults (2,272) ■ Agree strongly ■ Agree slightly ■ Neither ■ Disagree slightly ■ Disagree strongly

Numbers may not add up to 100 % due to rounding. Summarised responses may differ slightly from the sum of responses presented due to rounding. All differences noted are statistically significant (at 0.05).

# The majority thought that employers also have a role to play in tackling in-work poverty

*“60% of children in poverty live in families where someone is working”. With this in mind, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?*

**Employers should provide more opportunities for people to progress in work so they can earn more**



- Overall, 84 per cent agreed employers should provide more opportunities for people to progress in work so they can earn more. Only four per cent disagreed.
- Agreement was higher among people from ethnic minority groups (91 per cent) and people from lower socio-economic groups (87 per cent of DEs).
- There was also less disagreement among younger people (aged 16-34) (2 per cent).

**Employers should pay wages that better reflect the cost of living**



- Overall, 84 per cent agreed employers should pay wages that better reflect the cost of living. Five per cent disagreed.
- Agreement was higher among parents (87 per cent).
- There was less agreement among older people (aged 55+) (80 per cent), retired people (78 per cent) and people from higher socio-economic groups (78 per cent of ABs).

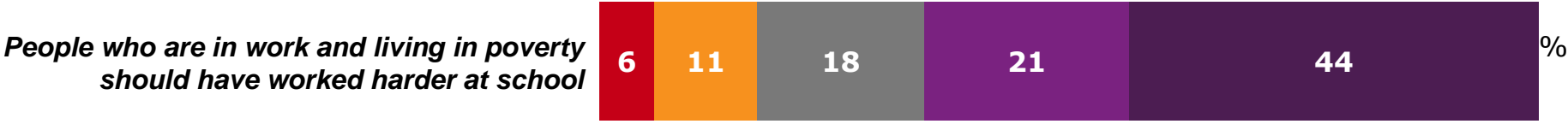
■ Agree strongly  
 ■ Agree slightly  
 ■ Neither  
 ■ Disagree slightly  
 ■ Disagree strongly

Base: All adults (2,272)

Numbers may not add up to 100 % due to rounding. Summarised responses may differ slightly from the sum of responses presented due to rounding. All differences noted are statistically significant (at 0.05).

# And were reluctant to lay the blame on people’s lack of efforts in education

“60% of children in poverty live in families where someone is working”. With this in mind, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?



- Overall, 65 per cent disagreed those who are in work and living in poverty should have worked harder at school. 17 per cent agreed and 18 per cent neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement.
- People on higher incomes (£26,501+) were more likely to disagree (73 per cent).
- Agreement was higher among ethnic minority groups (33 per cent), people from lower socio-economic groups (23 per cent of DEs), retired people (22 per cent) and people with no qualifications (30 per cent).
- There was less agreement among women (16 per cent) and among people aged 35-54 (14 per cent).

■ Agree strongly  
 ■ Agree slightly  
 ■ Neither  
 ■ Disagree slightly  
 ■ Disagree strongly

Base: All adults (2,272)

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