

Is Britain unfair and unequal?

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Social changes such as a minimum wage, equal-pay legislation and the expansion of higher education were introduced to raise levels of social mobility. **Joan Garrod** asks whether this actually happened

In November 2016 the Social Mobility Commission presented its annual report to Parliament. It made for depressing reading. The opening words were: 'Britain has a deep social-mobility problem.'

The report pointed out that, despite successive governments putting social mobility ever higher on the social-policy agenda, the expectation that each generation would be better off than the one before is no longer being met. Those born in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s have lower incomes than their parents did

at the same age. Those born in the 1980s are the first post-war cohort to start their working lives with lower incomes than their predecessors. In Britain today, only one in eight children from low-income families is likely to become a high earner as an adult.

What are the barriers to social mobility?

The report identifies four factors keeping social mobility low. These are:

- an unfair education system
- a two-tier labour market
- an imbalanced economy
- an unaffordable housing market

Education

Despite some narrowing of the gap between the achievements of those from poorer and better-off backgrounds, the report points out that 'from the early