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The myth of upward mobility

Pat Perriello | Feb. 27, 2014 NCR Today

It is often difficult to accept the reality that certain long held beliefs may no longer be true. An important article in *The New Yorker* *[1]* challenges some traditional beliefs about social mobility in the United States.

In the piece, finance reporter James Surowiecki examines a study from Harvard and Berkeley economists that suggests the notion of upward mobility in our country is more myth than reality. As much as we would like to believe that anyone who works hard can get ahead in this country, it just does not appear to be true.

Surprisingly, the researchers discovered that there is little change in upward mobility from the present going back even to the 1970s. While this sounds encouraging, it turns out that there wasn?t much mobility in previous decades either. Among the poor, 70 percent never make it to the middle class, and only 20 percent of the middle class ever make it to the top. Even more discouraging to those who want to hold on to the notion of the availability of the American Dream, it turns out that mobility is actually greater in most European countries than it is here

While there was greater mobility in the early part of the 20th century, Surowiecki refers back to the 1962 classic of Michael Harrington, *The Other America*, as capturing the reality of the poor: People are poor because they ?made the mistake of being born to the wrong parents.?

The data suggests that it is simply not that easy to rise above your current economic status no matter where you are. Even in Sweden, one of the countries where mobility is greatest, the top group is primarily made up of people who were born into rich families.

Surowiecki suggests that the focus should be on raising the standard of living for the poor and the middle class rather than trying to move them into a higher economic category. From the late 1940s through the 70s, median income in the U.S. doubled. Wages, on the other hand, have essentially remained stagnant.

The bottom line seems to be that if we want to help the poor or those in need we will have to take steps that those in power simply refuse to take. Raising taxes or redistributing wealth are anathema to many, yet current policies condemn the poor to remain right where they are.

On the margins there is at least a minimum need to enact the plans floating around Washington that have so much difficulty gaining traction. Things like extending unemployment benefits and increasing the minimum wage would at least put additional dollars into the pockets of the poor. A jobs bill focused on needed infrastructure projects could put many of the long-term unemployed back to work. A comprehensive immigration bill would have a net positive impact on the labor force.

These are things we could do to help improve the lot of the poor and improve the overall economy at the same time. Yet each of these proposals is met with stiff resistance at every turn.

Those who refuse to take any step whatsoever to help improve the lot of the poor need to do some selfexamination. Pope Francis has reminded us of our obligation to assist the poor.

Government has a responsibility to implement policies that do not make life more difficult for those in need. A few modest pieces of legislation could provide the poor with at least the possibility of achieving more than what they now have. Instead, when government creates structures designed to help only the wealthiest among us there is a disturbing disordering of priorities.

We can do better.

Links:
[1] http://www.newyorker.com/talk/financial/2014/03/03/140303ta_talk_surowiecki