

The American Opportunity Study:
A Link to the Past and a Bridge to the Future

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“The combined trends of increased inequality and decreasing mobility pose a fundamental threat to the American Dream, our way of life, and what we stand for around the globe. And it is not simply a moral claim that I’m making here. There are practical consequences to rising inequality and reduced mobility. “

Barack H. Obama, December 4, 2013.

Introduction

In a speech that he gave at the Center for American Progress, President Barack Obama suggested repeatedly that social mobility had declined in the United States and imperiled what many regard as the fundamental social contract between the state and its citizens. That hard work and ingenuity will be justly rewarded with material success. This idea is central to what many, if not most Americans consider to be “The American Dream”. It is an idea deeply embedded within American culture, and it has been an idea that has attracted generations of immigrants seeking a better life in this nation. For the President of this nation to say that something is amiss with this belief, that this once powerful contract has been broken, is of course a profoundly important statement.

What was perhaps even more striking about this statement was that it was made largely without evidence. Has social mobility indeed declined in America? There are a handful of studies to suggest that this possibly has happened but other studies suggest otherwise (see Hout 2015, Chetty et al. 2014, Mitnik et al. 2013, Krueger 2012, Lee and Solon 2009). Furthermore, virtually all of this research is limited to one type of mobility: economic mobility. This is an exceptionally narrow view of social mobility insofar as it gauges the income of children against the income received by their parents. It does not speak directly to the nature of the underlying economic opportunities that gave rise to those incomes. Economic mobility is in fact endogenous to the underlying structure of opportunities from which income is derived; notably the work performed by individuals—investment bankers and janitors alike within this structure.

Historically, sociologists have focused on occupations as a way of capturing the labor performed by individual workers. The occupational structure thus represents the organization of opportunities in a society, and by the same token, how those opportunities are either facilitated by or limited by various mechanisms associated with social closure ranging from nebulous class boundaries to the rules established by labor unions.

Given the centrality of occupations, and occupational mobility for understanding the structure of opportunities in American society, assertions that Americans today have fewer opportunities than previous generations begs the question: is there less mobility today than in the past? It is impossible to overstate the importance of this question. At the same time, it is a question that is currently impossible to answer because there is no evidence whatsoever that can be used to address this matter.

The landmark study by Peter Blau and Otis Dudley Duncan that was described in their book *The American Occupational Structure* (1967) revolutionized the sociological study of inequality. It was followed by another major study completed by Robert Hauser and David Featherman and reported in their book, *Opportunity and Change* (1978). Each of these studies was done by adding supplemental questions to the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS). The former study added questions to the CPS in 1962 and the latter added questions to the CPS in 1973. Since then, more than forty years have passed and there has not been a single comprehensive assessment of social mobility completed to date. To return to the previous question, has social mobility declined in America? The best answer to this question is that we have no idea whatsoever.

This is a striking lapse considering the profound changes that have taken place in American society over the past four decades. To mention only a few relevant changes, we can list the massive increase in women's labor force participation, the decline in manufacturing jobs and the rise of service employment, immigration and the ethnic diversification of the labor force, the decline in White male labor force participation, changes in family and household structure, and the striking increase in economic inequality, to name but a few. What has been the impact of these changes on opportunities within American society? Again, we have no idea whatsoever.

Background: re-visiting social mobility in American society

Amid the growing public concerns about economic inequality and the state of the American Dream, and the utter dearth of data to speak to these issues, two of the authors of this paper (Grusky and Snipp) traveled to Washington, D.C. to meet with officials at the Census Bureau, the Office of Management and Budget, and the National Science Foundation. These meetings took place February 13-14, 2012. These conversations were productive and led to one inescapable conclusion: that mounting another study of social mobility comparable to previous studies was going to be a massive, complex and expensive undertaking. The 1973 study cost approximately \$2.0 million (personal communication, Robert M. Hauser). A new study would cost many times this amount and likely exceed the entire annual budget that NSF allocates for sociological research. Given the scope of this undertaking, Grusky and Snipp were encouraged to enlist the assistance of others.

With support from the National Science Foundation and the National Research Council, work commenced on planning the American Opportunity Study the Fall of 2012. It began with a conference call November 8 that led to a meeting of a small group of social scientists at the National Academy of Science's Beckman Center in Irvine, CA December 10.¹ The purpose of this meeting was to develop a plan for launching a new study of social mobility; one comparable to previous

¹ A list of meeting participants appears in Appendix 1 of this paper.

studies but also one intended to advance current theory and methods. In particular, this group had to resolve two especially important issues. One was to identify a survey vehicle for the study; namely whether to use the Current Population Survey as the previous studies had done or to take advantage of the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) or the American Community Survey (ACS). The latter two surveys did not exist in 1973. The second task was to identify the most important content domains to be included in the new study.

To accomplish these tasks, this group identified a larger group of social scientists, mainly sociologists and economists who were experts in area such as the measurement of education, immigration research, and family and household composition. These individuals were invited to prepare papers in their subject matter areas for presentation at a workshop held in June 2013 at the National Academy of Science's Keck Center in Washington, D.C. These papers were subsequently published as a volume in *The Annals* (Grusky et al. 2015). This workshop was followed by a series of meetings of a smaller executive committee, with the final meeting being held in August 2014. In addition to the original group, representatives of the Census Bureau and others were invited guests

The issue of which survey vehicle should be used for a new mobility study became clouded by a number of external considerations. One of the workshop papers expertly reviewed the pros and cons of the surveys available and suggested that the ACS might be the best option (Warren 2015). The Survey of Income and Program Participation is rich in content but rejected for having too small a sample size to capture less common immigrant groups and certain types of family structures. The CPS is less rich in content, larger than the SIPP, but still too small for certain purposes. The ACS contains less content than the other two surveys but undoubtedly delivers the most statistical power by virtue of its sample size. Ultimately, other considerations led this group to decide that neither the CPS nor the ACS would be suitable.

The decision to reject these surveys rested on considerations connected with the Census Bureau. First, the idea of adding questions to the ACS was flatly rejected by Census Bureau management. The ACS was annually the target for Congressional objections. It is a large costly survey and many Americans object to disclosing the information it requests. Law mandates completing the survey and a sizable number of members in the House and Senate would gladly vote to terminate the ACS. In response, the Census Bureau was in the midst of a review aimed at eliminating questions from the survey. In this environment, the Bureau management was not inclined to entertain the possibility of adding yet more, potentially controversial questions.

Using the CPS remained an option and it was not mired in politics in the same way as the ACS. However, the CPS is the federal government's survey workhorse. Each month, a variety of federal agencies fund special supplements to collect information on topics ranging from Internet access to health insurance coverage. To

add questions to the CPS pertaining to social mobility meant developing a supplement and somehow getting it into the queue. Regrettably, it might have taken five years or more until it was possible to add these questions in a supplement. Furthermore, federal agencies have a priority in this queue. It was conceivable that a social mobility supplement might be delayed indefinitely as the needs of federal programs would take precedence.

Given these constraints, the committee learned about the Census Bureau's research program in the Center for Administrative Records Research and Analysis (CARRA). The staff in this center had been involved in an ambitious research program. Work had been done linking the recent 2010 census with other data sources such as the preceding 2000 census and data from the Social Security Administration and the Internal Revenue Service, and linking them all to the 2004 and 2008 SIPP (Johnson et al. 2015). As an alternative to the aforementioned surveys, the committee concluded that a much more robust project could be developed by linking post-war decennial census data and augmenting it with administrative data from sources such as the Social Security Administration. This plan was dubbed the *American Opportunity Study* (AOS).

The American Opportunity Study: the plan²

A little-known fact, unappreciated by social scientists and policymakers alike is that the U.S. has the basic elements of a large-scale panel, with a comprehensive array of intergenerational items. This panel has, however, gone unnoticed because it is in an unassembled form and has never been used in the extensive and ambitious way that we envision.

This panel, dubbed the *American Opportunity Study* (AOS) can be assembled by the following steps:

- Assigning identification keys to the individual records in the 1990 long form census.
- Using these identifiers to then track the same individuals into the 2000-2010 decennial censuses, the 2008-2012 American Community Surveys (ACS), and ultimately future decennial censuses and American Community Surveys.
- Extending the resulting panel by using the same identifiers to link to data from administrative sources.
- Effecting intergenerational links between parents and children within the AOS by drawing on existing databases that match the Social Security numbers (SSNs) of parents to those of their children.
- Once a tool has been developed for processing the 1990 census, repeating this operation until every decennial census from 1940 to the present are linked into a single panel.

² Excerpted with minor edits from Grusky et al. (2015) pp. 63-82.

- Developing algorithms for the imputation of personal characteristics from administrative records and statistical methods.

This is an ambitious plan that can only be realized by overcoming many practical and administrative hurdles. Even if the hurdles prove surmountable, we also appreciate that we would likely have to create two versions of the AOS: one that omits a great deal of information to prevent deductive disclosure and a “secure version” that could only be analyzed in Federal Statistical System (formerly Census Bureau) Research Data Centers (RDCs). The latter would be a “highly-controlled” version that includes administrative data and accessible only under stringent restrictions and protocols. Data security issues are discussed below. However, it is important to clarify first the structure of the proposed AOS. (see also Grusky et al. 2015; Johnson et al. 2015; Warren 2015). A schematic diagram for the AOS appears in Figure 1.

Figure 1 about here

Assigning PIKs: The first step in assembling the AOS is to assign a protected identification key (PIK) to each individual in the 1990 long form census. This step is carried out by using a set of variables (e.g., first name, last name, year of birth, address, sex) that, when taken together, allow us to reliably find an individual’s SSN in the Social Security Administration (SSA) Numident file. Warren (2015) and Johnson et al. (2015) discuss in detail the technical challenges presented by this procedure.

Because the 2000 census, 2010 census, and 2008-12 American Community Surveys are already PIKed, this first step is costly mainly because the 1990 long form census is not yet PIKed. Once the 1990 PIKs are assigned and the post-1990 linkages completed, we will have a panel for all individuals appearing in the 1990 long form census, with post-1990 information (e.g., education, occupation, income) available for each year in which the 1990 census respondents show up in later censuses or American Community Surveys. The same design may of course be applied to earlier decennial censuses as well as to subsequent ones.

Administrative linkages: The AOS panel can be supplemented by acquiring administrative records for the individuals within it. If approval to link to IRS 1040 and SSA earnings records were secured, additional high-quality reports of income, earnings, and other variables would become available on an annual basis. These data are especially important for imputing personal characteristics for persons who appear only in the short form censuses. Although IRS 1040 and SSA earnings reports are perhaps the most valuable linkages for the purposes of mobility research, other administrative records could of course, be usefully incorporated (e.g., program participation records, incarceration records, veterans records). The practical and legal obstacles to linking to administrative data are discussed by Johnson et al. (2015).

Intergenerational matches: The AOS panel, as described so far, would provide repeated observations on individual income, education, occupation, and other demographic variables for individuals appearing in the 1990 long form census, any linked administrative data for persons in the short form census, and subsequent censuses or American Community Surveys. In the next step, links between parents and children are established, thereby converting this simple panel into an intergenerational one. Using the existing “Kidlink” files (these identify, for each parent’s SSN, the corresponding SSNs for his or her children) makes intergenerational matches possible. These files, which are currently used by the IRS to determine whether tax filers are making legitimate claims to dependent children, could in principle be used for our matching purposes as well (see Johnson et al. (2015) for details and limitations). Additionally, IRS 1040 forms can be directly used to improve the quality and scope of parent-child matches, given that parents claiming children as dependents have been required, since 1987, to list the SSNs of the claimed children. Finally, the ACS and decennial censuses also identify children of the household head, thus providing a further source of parent-child matches. Although more research on these and other approaches is required, the initial evidence on intergenerational matching rates is promising (see Johnson et al. 2015).

“Sliding in” surveys: The AOS, if assembled as laid out above, would provide a high-quality infrastructure for monitoring mobility without the cost of mounting a new mobility survey and without further burdening existing surveys with (possibly low-quality) intergenerational modules. This is not to suggest that mobility or other surveys would no longer be needed in a post-AOS world. To the contrary, the AOS would allow surveys to become more efficient vehicles, because they could be used exclusively for the purpose of ascertaining variables that were not already available in the AOS. Given the AOS’s architecture, any sufficiently large survey with individual identifiers could be linked to it, thus making it possible to supplement the AOS with any of the additional variables collected as part of that linked survey.³ Although an analysis based on the AOS alone would suffice for a wide range of descriptive analyses, a survey supplement to the AOS might be useful for studies of the causes, consequences, and social correlates of mobility.

The obstacles to assembling the AOS, particularly access to administrative data cannot be overstated. However large such obstacles may be, it is important to stress that the dividends to the AOS are also sizable. These dividends come in the form of:

- substantial cost savings and efficiencies that arise from exploiting information that has already been collected for other purposes (rather than mounting a new and replicative data collection effort);

³ For voluntary surveys, respondent consent is required before any links can be made to administrative records, to the ACS, or to decennial censuses.

- the capacity to characterize intergenerational parameters on the basis of contemporaneous reports (and hence obviate the need for retrospection);
- the capacity to exploit high-quality administrative data and high-quality Census products rather than field new and almost inevitably lower-quality surveys (given cost constraints);
- the spinoffs and cost savings to various Census products that accrue to advancing methods for PIKing and intergenerational matching (see Johnson, Massey, and O'Hara [2015]);
- the development of a monitoring infrastructure that, by virtue of being automatically “refreshing,” sidesteps the problems with unrepresentativeness that plague other long-running panels (e.g., the PSID);
- the opportunity to gradually grow the AOS and extend its research uses by adding new administrative records (e.g., health data, program use data);
- the opportunity for the evaluation community to ascertain the longer term effects of any past pre-school, schooling, health, training or any other treatment that can be linked to AOS; and
- the capacity to field leaner and more efficient surveys by relying on the AOS for core economic and demographic items.

This is obviously not to suggest that the AOS, even when supplemented with add-on surveys, satisfies all the requirements that our *Annals* contributors have laid out. While a great many problems remain, one of the more obvious ones is that intergenerational matches cannot be made for children with parents living abroad (at least insofar as such parents do not have Social Security numbers and are not co-residing with their children at the time of the ACS or decennial census). But still the AOS would lead to a revolution in the data we have on immigrant mobility, where the current knowledge is almost nil (see Duncan and Trejo 2015).

Next Steps

The backdrop to the AOS initiative is an ongoing effort at the Census Bureau to develop new capacities for strategically reusing administrative data from federal, state, and commercial providers. This initiative, dubbed CLIPP (Core Longitudinal Infrastructure Population Project), is founded on a commitment to reduce the country's reliance on high-cost surveys for economic research and program evaluation. The current focus of CLIPP is on PIKing the 1940 census records and then matching them to existing PIKed products in the present day (e.g., 2000-2010 censuses) or earlier in history (i.e., pre-1950 censuses).

Although this is an immensely useful effort for analyzing a host of substantive questions, it relies exclusively on *existing* PIKed products for linking with 1940 and possibly earlier censuses and thus omits the 1950-1990 censuses, which are critical for studies of contemporary social mobility and for developing a permanent infrastructure for monitoring trend in mobility. The 1950-1990 censuses are key for our purposes because they provide income, education, and

occupation information on parents (with whom contemporary workers will have been co-residing). The very youngest workers (e.g., 25 year-olds in 2015) would, of course, typically be living with their parents in 2000 and hence are available in the already-PIKed 2000 census or 2005 ACS if they fall into that sample. However, for the bulk of workers currently in the labor force, we need to reach back earlier to the 1950-1990 censuses, which are precisely those that CLIPP does not include. By PIKing those censuses, we can (a) secure parental information on contemporary workers and thus examine contemporary patterns of mobility, and (b) construct high-quality trend data that speak to ongoing concerns that rates of social mobility may be declining.

The AOS initiative is therefore an important complement to CLIPP that allows us to address issues of contemporary and recent mobility. It bears noting in this regard that the AOS project team is in close contact with the CLIPP team in the Census Bureau (e.g., Amy O'Hara, Trent Alexander, Catherine Massey, Todd Gardner), as well as their external collaborators (i.e., Steven Ruggles, Seth Sanders, Joseph Ferrie). This is important because CLIPP is carrying out very relevant research on PIKing technology with the 1940 census. For example, early evidence from CLIPP suggests that state birth certificates can assist in locating parents, a result that may hold when we PIK the later censuses as well. We will of course collaborate closely with the CLIPP team throughout this initiative.

The recent emergence of tax-return analyses of economic mobility is also complementary to the proposed AOS (see Chetty et al. 2014; Mitnik et al. 2015). Although tax-return analyses have proven immensely important, they unfortunately do not provide the full and complete monitoring framework that the United States needs. It is not merely that there are stringent limits on the types of uses to which tax-return data may legitimately be put. The tax-return framework is additionally limited because tax returns (a) provide no information about race, ethnicity, or generational status; (b) fail to cover non-filers (and supplementing with earnings reports and other administrative sources does not fully solve the missing data problem); (c) can only be used to measure recent trends (because identifiers for children were first secured in 1987); (d) provide only low-quality occupation reports (which are only available in machine-readable form since 1996); and (e) provide educational reports, via the 1098-T form, that only pertain to college attendance.

Although tax-return analyses will hopefully continue to be a key national resource for monitoring mobility (and indeed some members of the AOS project team are fully involved in them), the AOS initiative will build a more comprehensive infrastructure by allowing for simultaneous monitoring of different types of mobility (e.g., economic, education, occupation), incorporating key demographic variables (e.g., race-ethnicity), reducing missing data problems, and constructing long trend series of trends in mobility. Even if the AOS is not linked to the Form 1040, it will allow for comprehensive analyses of this sort. It goes without saying that, insofar as permission to link to the Form 1040 is also secured, the AOS will

combine all the advantages of conventional tax-return analysis with the comprehensiveness of an AOS approach.

Development of the AOS, including the necessary linkage technology and the infrastructure for authorizing and delivering data for research, needs to be carried out in phases. The phased implementation will ensure that each part of the developmental effort is soundly carried out before proceeding to the next part. This proposal seeks partial funding for the first phase of the project, which addresses the full complement of technical, statistical, and software needs that will ultimately allow the AOS to go into production. The first phase thus includes the following:

Step A: Testing and selecting digitizing software and hardware to accurately capture names and addresses from a “truth deck” of 1990 census microfilm long-form records—this information, along with birth date (age and year of birth are already contained in the 1990 census electronic records), is required for Steps B and C. In the 1990 census, names and addresses were not electronically captured for tabulation purposes; they are currently available only in handwritten form on 62,000 reels of microfilm. Before any digitizing software products can be tested and a vendor selected, a necessary step is to develop a “truth deck,” a small sample of images of page 2 of the 1990 questionnaire, which lists all household members and provides the household address, scanned from the microfilm. This truth deck will be used to evaluate optical character software systems in terms of accuracy of reading the scanned handwritten responses and converting them to electronic form. The chosen system will be used to digitize a larger sample of scanned images and link them to the full (electronic) census records for the sample to feed into Step B.

Step B: Developing the statistical methodology to assign identifiers (PIKs) to the augmented 1990 census electronic records and to link individual records across the 1990-2010 decennial censuses and the 2008-2013 American Community Surveys (ACS), building on and refining existing Census Bureau PIKing and matching software (see Wagner and Layne, 2014; Johnson et al. 2015)⁴. The output from Step A will be used to refine the Census Bureau’s PIKing methodology for assigning identifiers to the census records. The PIKing process entails assigning protected identification keys to person records using the Numident database (which contains all Social Security Numbers (SSNs) ever assigned). The Numident contains the full name, full birth date, sex, race, state or country of birth, and parent’s first and last names (with name changes trackable because each name associated with an SSN is recorded). Under current Census Bureau protocols, a probabilistic matching

⁴These papers describe the probabilistic procedure to match identifying information (principally name and exact date of birth) from the file of interest (census, survey, administrative records dataset) to restricted Social Security Administration data to assign unique protected identification keys (PIKs). The PIKs then make possible matches among any two or more files that have gone through the process to assign PIKs.

algorithm named PVS is deployed (Wagner and Layne 2014), an algorithm that takes into account the address, full name, sex, and full date of birth. To compare names, PVS measures Jaro-Winkler distances between names in the input and reference files, thus allowing it to accommodate variability in spelling. Once PIKed, records can be linked with other sets of PIKed records.

One complication in the PIKing work for this project is that the 1990 census contains only the birth year for household members and not the full birth date. The potential problems from PIKing with less than optimal information may, however, be less than might be anticipated. The Census Bureau has already PIKed all records in the 1990 Content Reinterview Survey (CRS), which includes 20,832 adults and 7,146 children. Using a modified version of the PVS on the CRS, a match was found for 87.3 percent of the adult records and 72.8 percent of the children records, results that are roughly comparable to those secured for the 2010 census (Johnson et al., 2015; Rastogi and O'Hara 2012). These results are very encouraging, and they can very likely be improved on by developing better algorithms (e.g., fuzzy matching) and by deploying additional data for the purposes of effecting the match. Input to improvements to the PVS will come from: (a) applying the CLIPP program's ongoing research on PIKing to the case of the 1990 census; and (b) drawing on the statistical recommendations of the commissioned papers on improving PIKing technology

Step C: Effecting intergenerational matches between parents and children within the resulting AOS by exploiting relationship pointers in the 1990 census and by drawing on databases that link the Social Security numbers (SSNs) of parents to those of their children. There is a wide range of sources that may be used to match parents to children within the AOS infrastructure. The census or ACS may be used, for example, to identify the adults with whom a child is living, with such co-resident adults presumably indicating a child's "social parents." It is also possible to use the SS-5 Form for the period prior to Enumeration at Birth, which serves as the application for an SSN, to identify the likely biological or adoptive parents. The SS-5 Form not only includes the mother's and father's SSN, but also indicates whether the mother and father are legal guardians or the natural or adoptive parents. Finally, the Form 1040 indicates which adults have claimed the child as a dependent, thus indicating "financial parenthood." It follows that the AOS may in principle be used to distinguish between social, biological, and financial parenthood. Moreover, the AOS can (imperfectly) detect changes in family situations during both childhood and adulthood, thus making it possible to capture some of the complex family histories and arrangements that may affect mobility. If new types of family complexity (e.g., single parenthood, blended families) are indeed working to reduce mobility, the AOS may give us the capacity to detect just that. The purpose of Step C, then, is to explore these types of relationship pointers and determine which should be included in the production version of the AOS.

Step D: Developing and testing a tool that enables on-demand links and extracts of 1990 census data with more recent censuses and other administrative

and survey data. The Census Bureau has a data governance structure extending from project proposal and review to data provisioning and monitoring. A data management system automates data requests and microdata access. This system would be fortified and expanded for the AOS including extranet access to the standing committee for proposal submission and comment, inclusion of metadata and information on analytic universes available through linking the decennial census files. Data stewardship is provided through the data management tool during research on the AOS, including required reporting for administrative data providers and disclosure avoidance review to remain compliant with contractual and statutory obligations.

The first step of Phase 1 entails testing and adapting existing scanning and handwriting-recognition technology to digitize a subset of 1990 census long-form records. This step is a prerequisite for the next two and hence will be undertaken and completed first. The key problem: The household member names were never captured electronically from the 1990 census, and the census forms in that year were not designed to facilitate optical character recognition. It follows that scanning and “reading” this information will be a critical first step before any linkage is possible. The second and third steps, which can commence once the 1990 data are successfully read in, entail developing algorithms for assigning PIKs and for linking parents to children. The remaining three steps can be carried out concurrently with the first three.

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Although the first phase addresses the software, technical, and statistical issues associated with developing the AOS, it does not entail actual production of the AOS. This will be undertaken in a separate production operation that will entail: (1) digitizing the full 1990 census; (2) PIKing the full 1990 census; (3) testing links of large samples of the 1990 census with other data sets; (4) developing methodology to fill in gaps for nonresponse (e.g., using administrative data to fill in missing earnings reports in census or ACS records) and for differences in questionnaires (e.g., the 2010 census has short-form information only); and (5) establishing protocols for permitting research access to extracts of linked data. It is envisioned that an NRC standing committee, working with the Census Bureau, will guide the effort throughout. To accord with laws and regulations protecting the confidentiality of federal census, survey, and administrative records data, the AOS will be housed within the Census Bureau's Research Data Center network, and access by researchers would be through the Census sworn status procedures. As an added protection and to forestall the appearance of an all-encompassing database, linkages will be performed on demand for subsets of variables needed for specific research projects.

Conclusion

Once it is assembled, the AOS will provide social science researchers a sweeping and unparalleled view of changes over time in American society. An even grander ambition might extend the current scope of this project to even earlier

censuses and administrative data. It remains to be seen whether youths coming of age in the 1950s and 1960s enjoyed a vastly larger range of opportunities than those who entered the workforce 20 years later when economic inequality increased substantially. However, this issue is at the heart of the so-called “American Dream” that stipulates that hard work and ingenuity will be rewarded with material success. Are the rewards offered today smaller and more limited than those offered to previous generations of Americans?

Although the data made available through the American Opportunity Study will speak directly to the study of social mobility, it also will be available to be deployed for practical applications such as policy analysis. For example, it might be possible to examine the long-term influence of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) on the behavior of low-income families. Similarly, if records from the Federal Emergency Management Agency could be linked to the AOS, it would be possible to study the long-term impact of Hurricane Katrina and the role of federal assistance in mitigating the disruption the storm caused to those who were exposed to it. Linking Bureau of Justice data on incarceration would allow us to assess the longer-term effects of prison on family life and subsequent economic and social well being. Linking Veterans Administration data on military service involvement would allow us to assess the net effects of service attachment to longer-term economic, health and social well-being

In closing, if the AOS can be successfully developed, it might prove to be a transformative tool for the social sciences. It would be a tool of unparalleled statistical power; an opportunity for causal research on an exceptional scale; and a source of data for a wide variety of problems unprecedented in the social sciences. There is much work left to be done to make the AOS a reality but the promise of this project makes the effort well worth it.

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Appendix 1. Invited participants for the first planning meeting of the American Opportunity Study.

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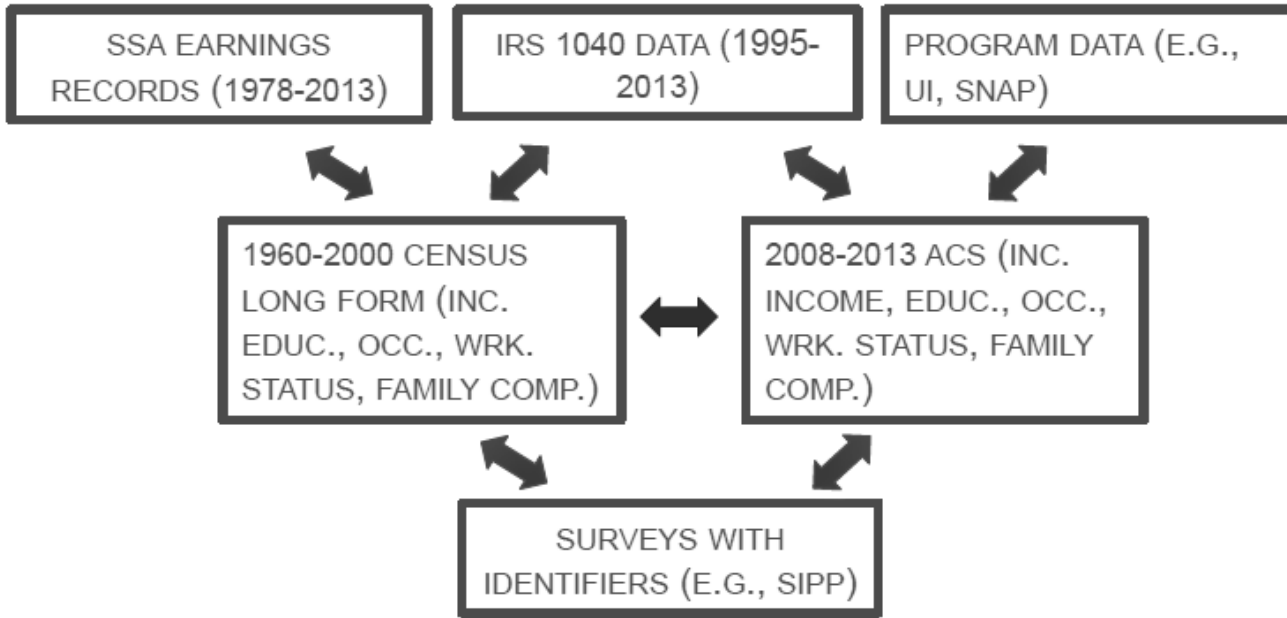
Sean Reardon

Timothy Smeeding

C. Matthew Snipp

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Figure 1. Schematic design of the American Opportunity Study



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