

Perspective

# The Mental Health Costs and Benefits of Upward Intergenerational Mobility: A Lifespan Perspective

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**ABSTRACT:** Upward intergenerational mobility is often viewed as a sign of social progress and individual achievement because moving into a higher socioeconomic position can improve access to education, income, occupational opportunities, and other useful resources. These changes may reduce exposure to material hardship and, in some cases, support better psychological well-being. At the same time, upward mobility is not always psychologically beneficial. The effort to attain a higher socioeconomic position often involves prolonged stress, strong performance pressure, repeated social comparison, identity-related tension, and fear of falling behind. In addition, not everyone who strives for upward mobility succeeds. Even when objective gains are made, individuals may still experience psychological strain linked to relative deprivation, feelings of inadequacy, distance from their family or community of origin, and continuing insecurity about their social position. This narrative review examines both the possible benefits and the less visible mental health burdens of upward intergenerational mobility from a lifespan perspective. The current study proposes a developmental framework that distinguishes resource-related benefits from mobility-related psychological costs, with particular attention to aspirational strain, uncertainty, comparative stress, belonging conflict, and the emotional consequences of perceived failure or insufficient progress. A central argument of this review is that the mental health implications of upward mobility depend not only on objective socioeconomic gains but also on how individuals interpret their movement, compare themselves with others, and negotiate identity and belonging across the life course. The review concludes with implications for research, practice, and policy, emphasizing that upward mobility should not be treated as a uniformly protective process for mental health and that efforts to promote mobility should also take account of the emotional burdens attached to it.

**Keywords:** Upward intergenerational mobility; Relative deprivation; Social comparison; Lifespan development; Socioeconomic status; Psychological costs

## 1. Introduction

Upward intergenerational mobility is usually presented as one of the most desirable outcomes in unequal societies [1]. When people reach a higher level of education, occupational status, or income than their parents, this is often taken as evidence of both personal advancement and social opportunity. From



that perspective, upward mobility appears likely to improve mental health by reducing exposure to poverty, increasing access to resources, and providing a greater sense of security and control over everyday life [2]. The possibility of moving upward is therefore often embedded in broader cultural narratives of effort, hope, and achievement.

However, upward mobility is not only a story of gain. It is also a process shaped by pressure, uncertainty, sacrifice, and comparison. Many people endure years of stress in order to pursue educational and occupational advancement. They may come to believe that success depends entirely on personal effort, even when the opportunities available to them are shaped by structural inequality. Under these conditions, the pursuit of upward mobility can intensify anxiety, self-surveillance, fear of failure, and feelings of inadequacy [3]. Moreover, the promise of upward mobility does not guarantee its realization. Many individuals strive for a higher socioeconomic position without eventually reaching the level they had hoped for. Even among those who do move upward, comparison with more successful peers may continue, producing dissatisfaction and relative deprivation rather than emotional relief.

This tension matters for mental health. Socioeconomic improvement may reduce some risks associated with deprivation [1], but upward mobility can also produce distinct emotional costs [3]. These may include stress related to competition, isolation linked to movement across classed social environments, guilt or distance in relation to one's family of origin, and a fragile sense of self-worth that depends heavily on achievement. The meaning of upward mobility may also change over the lifespan. During adolescence, it may be tied to educational aspiration and sensitivity to peer comparison. During emerging adulthood, it may become bound up with access to higher education, employment, and status-based belonging. In midlife, it may be experienced through role strain, financial responsibility, and fear of downward movement. In later life, mobility may be judged more reflectively in light of its accumulated benefits and costs.

Despite these complexities, discussions of upward intergenerational mobility still tend to focus more heavily on economic gain than on the psychological burden associated with striving, transition, and comparison. Existing scholarship often addresses mobility as a structural outcome or as a social determinant of health, but less often as a developmental process that unfolds psychologically over time and may involve both relief and vulnerability. A clearer synthesis is therefore needed to explain why upward mobility may improve mental health in some respects while undermining it in others, and why those patterns may vary across stages of life.

This study examines the mental health costs and benefits of upward intergenerational mobility from a lifespan perspective. Particular attention is given to the less visible emotional burdens of upward striving and uneven attainment, including performance pressure, uncertainty, relative deprivation, identity strain, and the psychological consequences of comparing oneself with others who appear to have moved further upward. The current study argues that upward mobility should be understood not simply as a socioeconomic outcome, but as a developmental process that can reshape self-concept, social belonging, stress exposure, and emotional well-being over time. This manuscript is a narrative review that brings together theory and empirical insights from developmental psychology, sociology, social stratification research, mental health, and lifespan development. The review is organized into definitional foundations, potential benefits, psychological cost pathways, developmental differences across the lifespan, and implications for practice and policy.

To improve transparency in the use of prior literature, relevant studies were identified through searches of PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Search terms included combinations of "upward intergenerational mobility", "social mobility", "mental health", "depression", "anxiety", "stress", "relative deprivation", "social comparison", "subjective social status", "identity strain", and "lifespan development". The literature search focused primarily on peer-reviewed theoretical and empirical studies that examined socioeconomic mobility, subjective social status, social comparison, relative deprivation, developmental transitions, or mental health outcomes. Studies were included when they were conceptually relevant to the

manuscript's central aim of explaining how upward intergenerational mobility may involve both resource-related benefits and mobility-related psychological costs. Studies were excluded when they focused only on intragenerational mobility, did not address psychological or mental health implications, or were not directly relevant to the conceptual framework of this paper. The literature was synthesized thematically to develop a lifespan-oriented conceptual framework.

## 2. Defining Upward Intergenerational Mobility and Mental Health

### 2.1. What Counts as Upward Intergenerational Mobility?

Upward intergenerational mobility generally refers to movement into a higher socioeconomic position than that of one's parents or family of origin. This movement may be captured through education, occupation, income, wealth, or broader indicators of social status [4]. Although mobility is often treated as an objective change in rank or status, its psychological meaning cannot be reduced to objective indicators alone. Two people may achieve similar educational or occupational advancement and still experience that mobility in very different ways depending on their expectations, peer environment, sense of legitimacy, and relationship to their family or community of origin.

For that reason, it is important to distinguish between objective upward mobility and subjective mobility experience. Objective upward mobility refers to a measurable change in socioeconomic position across generations. Subjective mobility experience refers to how people understand and evaluate that movement: whether they feel they have actually progressed, whether they feel secure in their new position, and whether they still experience themselves as lagging behind others. This distinction is central to the present review because mental health is often shaped not only by one's objective position but also by how that position is interpreted in relation to expectations, comparisons, and perceived social standing [5]. It is also useful to distinguish upward mobility as an outcome from upward mobility as a process. As an outcome, it refers to the eventual attainment of a higher social position. As a process, it involves years of striving, evaluation, uncertainty, and adjustment. The mental health implications of mobility may therefore emerge before upward movement occurs, during efforts to move upward, during transitions into new social settings, and after objective attainment.

The distinction between objective and subjective mobility has important implications for mental health research. Objective upward mobility may indicate measurable improvement in education, occupation, income, or social rank, but it does not necessarily capture whether individuals feel secure, successful, or socially accepted in their new position. Subjective mobility experience may diverge from objective mobility when individuals perceive their progress as insufficient, unstable, undeserved, or inferior to that of relevant peers. For example, a person may be objectively upwardly mobile compared with their parents but still feel psychologically disadvantaged when comparing themselves with peers who have greater inherited resources or smoother pathways into high-status environments. Conversely, some individuals may experience modest objective movement as meaningful and psychologically beneficial when it is interpreted as progress, dignity, or family advancement. This distinction suggests that mental health research should examine both measurable mobility trajectories and subjective appraisals of mobility, including perceived progress, status security, belonging, legitimacy, and relative deprivation. Without this distinction, studies may overestimate the protective effects of upward mobility or overlook psychological distress among individuals who appear objectively successful.

### 2.2. Mental Health Outcomes

This review focuses mainly on depression, anxiety, chronic stress, emotional instability, shame, and feelings of relative deprivation. Depression may emerge when prolonged striving gives way to exhaustion, hopelessness, or a sense of inadequacy. Anxiety may arise from uncertainty, fear of failure, status insecurity,

and concern about losing hard-won progress. Stress is especially relevant because upward mobility often depends on sustained performance under conditions where there is little room for error. The current study also considers relative deprivation, understood here as the painful sense that one has less success, status, or recognition than relevant others, even when one's objective situation has improved.

Although upward mobility may protect against some mental health risks associated with poverty and deprivation, it may also create a different kind of psychological vulnerability rooted in comparison, insecurity, and instability [1,3]. In this review, mental health is understood not merely as the absence of disorder, but as a broader pattern of emotional functioning, coping, self-evaluation, and psychological security.

### **3. A Lifespan Framework: Resource Gains Versus Mobility-Related Psychological Costs**

A lifespan perspective is especially useful here because the meaning and consequences of upward intergenerational mobility do not remain constant over time [6]. The motivations for mobility, the institutional routes through which it is pursued, the comparisons that shape self-evaluation, and the burdens that accompany advancement all shift across developmental stages. Childhood and adolescence involve early awareness of family disadvantage and the formation of aspiration. Emerging adulthood is closely tied to educational and occupational transitions. Midlife often brings long-term role demands and concerns about maintaining status. Older adulthood involves more retrospective judgment about what mobility has actually provided and what it has cost.

A life-course perspective also emphasizes that the psychological meaning of upward mobility is shaped by timing, developmental tasks, cumulative exposure, and linked lives. The same socioeconomic transition may have different mental health implications depending on when it occurs and which developmental responsibilities are most salient at that point in life. For example, mobility-related pressure in adolescence may be organized around educational aspiration and identity formation, whereas similar pressure in midlife may be tied to role strain, family responsibility, and status maintenance. In addition, mobility-related stress may accumulate over time rather than appearing only at a single point. Early experiences of family pressure, later experiences of institutional transition, and adult concerns about maintaining status may become connected across the life course. From this perspective, upward mobility should be understood not only as movement between socioeconomic positions but also as a sequence of psychological and relational adjustments that unfold through changing developmental contexts.

The current study proposes a framework that distinguishes two broad pathways through which upward mobility may affect mental health. The first pathway concerns resource-related benefits. Upward mobility may reduce exposure to chronic hardship, improve access to health care and education, strengthen perceived control, and expand opportunities for safety and stability. These changes may lower psychological distress associated with persistent deprivation and, in some cases, support hope, self-efficacy, and life satisfaction. The second pathway concerns mobility-related psychological costs. These costs are not simply the effects of poverty carried forward. Rather, they arise from the pressures, uncertainty, transitions, and comparisons that often accompany attempts to move upward or the experience of having moved upward. These costs may include aspirational strain, fear of underperformance, relative deprivation, belonging conflict, identity tension, guilt toward one's family of origin, and continuing vigilance about maintaining one's position. Importantly, such costs may appear both among those who successfully move upward and among those who try to do so but do not achieve the level of advancement they had hoped for.

The central assumption of this study is that upward mobility does not have a single mental health effect [7]. Its implications depend on the balance between material gain and psychological burden, and that balance may change across the lifespan. The same process that reduces hardship may simultaneously generate new forms of distress. Likewise, partial or blocked mobility may intensify feelings of failure even when limited progress is primarily due to structural barriers rather than to personal shortcomings.

## 4. Potential Benefits of Upward Intergenerational Mobility

### 4.1. Reduced Exposure to Material Hardship

One of the clearest benefits of upward mobility is reduced exposure to the chronic stressors that accompany low socioeconomic position [8]. Higher income, improved housing, safer neighborhood conditions, and better access to health care can lessen everyday burdens that often contribute to depression and anxiety. Individuals who move upward may experience fewer financial crises, greater routine stability, and less exposure to cumulative disadvantage. These changes can support mental health by reducing overall stress load and making it easier to sustain healthier patterns of daily life.

### 4.2. Increased Sense of Control and Future Orientation

Upward mobility may also strengthen a sense of agency. Individuals who attain a higher social position than their parents may feel that effort can meaningfully shape life outcomes, and this may support hope and motivation [9]. Higher educational attainment and occupational standing may also strengthen confidence in one's ability to solve problems and manage future challenges. For some, upward mobility represents a real break from earlier insecurity and may therefore contribute to pride, efficacy, and psychological resilience.

### 4.3. Expanded Access to Social and Institutional Resources

Movement into a higher socioeconomic position may increase access to institutions and networks that support mental health, including better schools, healthier workplaces, safer communities, and broader opportunities for information and support [10]. These environments may reduce barriers to help-seeking, increase access to preventive care, and create more space for personal and professional development. In this sense, upward mobility may improve mental health indirectly by changing the settings in which individuals live and pass through major developmental transitions.

### 4.4. Meaning, Achievement, and Family Advancement

For some individuals, upward mobility carries a strong sense of meaning because it is understood not only as personal achievement but also as a movement that benefits the family across generations [1]. Being able to support parents, provide greater stability, or open opportunities for children may strengthen purpose and self-worth. These benefits are real and should not be minimized. At the same time, even these positive meanings may coexist with psychological costs, especially when individuals feel responsible for proving that their advancement was worthwhile or for carrying the hopes of the family alone.

## 5. Psychological Cost Pathways of Upward Mobility

### 5.1. Aspirational Strain and the Burden of Constant Striving

A major psychological cost of upward mobility lies in the effort required to pursue it. In unequal and highly competitive settings, upward movement often depends on years of academic pressure, disciplined self-regulation, delayed gratification, and repeated evaluation. Individuals may feel that even a small mistake could undermine their chances of advancement, particularly when they come from disadvantaged backgrounds with fewer social or financial buffers [11]. This can produce a form of aspirational strain in which hope is sustained, but only through relentless effort under uncertainty.

Such strain may contribute to anxiety, sleep problems, emotional exhaustion, and the persistent feeling that stopping is dangerous. Under these conditions, aspiration may stop feeling empowering and instead begin to feel compulsory. When societies frame upward mobility as proof of merit, the burden may become even heavier because unsuccessful outcomes are easily interpreted as evidence of personal inadequacy rather than as the result of structural inequality.

## 5.2. Uncertainty, Fragility, and Fear of Falling Short

Even when people are moving upward, they may not feel secure. Educational progress, occupational advancement, and income growth often unfold under unstable conditions. Upward mobility may therefore create a sense of status fragility: the fear that one's gains are incomplete, fragile, or easily reversible. Individuals may worry that they do not truly belong in their new environment, that they have not advanced far enough, or that others are moving ahead more quickly. This kind of uncertainty can sustain chronic vigilance. Instead of easing anxiety, objective progress may actually intensify concern about falling short or losing position. The emotional meaning of mobility may therefore be shaped less by relief than by insecurity. Mental well-being is likely to be more fragile when self-worth becomes tied to continued advancement, leaving little room for setbacks, plateaus, or alternative measures of a meaningful life.

## 5.3. Relative Deprivation and Social Comparison

One of the most important pathways emphasized in this study is relative deprivation. Upward mobility does not eliminate comparison. In many cases, it simply changes the comparison group and makes the comparison more painful. As people enter new educational or occupational environments, the reference group against which they judge themselves often shifts. A person who has objectively moved upward in relation to their parents may still feel inferior when compared with peers in elite institutions or high-status occupations. This helps explain why objective advancement does not always translate into better mental health. Individuals may compare themselves less to where they began and more to those who advanced further, more smoothly, or with greater inherited advantage. These comparisons may produce shame, dissatisfaction, resentment, and a sense of failure. This burden may be especially strong when individuals believe they ought to feel successful but instead continue to feel behind. In that sense, upward mobility may relocate deprivation rather than erase it.

## 5.4. The Mental Health Burden of Unmet Mobility Efforts

Not everyone who strives for upward mobility reaches the socioeconomic position they hoped to attain [12]. This point is crucial because many societies encourage people to aspire upward without offering equal access to the conditions needed to get there. When individuals invest heavily in educational or occupational advancement but confront blocked opportunities, the result may be disappointment, helplessness, or depressive symptoms. This should not be understood as a simple personal failure. Structural barriers, unequal capital, discrimination, labor market instability, and institutional gatekeeping all shape who is able to move upward.

Even so, individuals may still interpret unsuccessful mobility efforts in deeply personal ways. The emotional result is often self-blame: the sense that one worked hard and still failed to arrive. This interpretation can damage self-esteem and mental health. In addition, those who do not attain the desired upward movement may carry a double burden. They bear the stress of striving but do not receive the material improvements that might have offset some of that stress. When they then compare themselves to others who did move upward, feelings of relative deprivation may become even more intense.

## 5.5. Identity Strain and Belonging Conflict

Upward mobility may also be psychologically costly because it places individuals between social worlds. Movement into a higher socioeconomic position may create distance from one's family or community of origin, yet not guarantee full acceptance in a new, higher-status environment [13]. This can generate belonging conflict: a persistent sense of not fully fitting in either place. Individuals may feel that they have become too different from where they came from, yet still not enough like those in the new world they have entered. This tension may produce loneliness, guilt, emotional ambivalence, and fragmentation of identity.

Some individuals may feel pressure to mute aspects of their background in order to fit into new spaces. Others may feel guilty for having left family members behind or for benefiting from opportunities unavailable to others in their community. The burden here is not only social awkwardness. Over time, it may become a chronic form of psychological strain that weakens coherence of self and security in relationships.

### *5.6. Achievement-Based Self-Worth and Emotional Instability*

Another important cost pathway involves the development of a fragile self-concept built around achievement. In the context of upward mobility, individuals may come to judge themselves primarily through markers of performance, prestige, and status attainment [11,14]. Although achievement can be motivating, a self-concept organized too heavily around continued advancement is emotionally unstable. Setbacks, slow progress, criticism, or periods of plateau may trigger distress out of proportion to the event itself because they are experienced as threats to identity rather than as ordinary parts of development. This pattern is closely related to anxiety and depression. Anxiety may increase because individuals remain preoccupied with proving themselves and maintaining their position. Depression may emerge when the gap between aspiration and reality becomes too difficult to tolerate or when repeated striving fails to produce the emotional reward that was expected. Even those who are objectively successful may discover that attainment does not resolve deeper insecurity, which can then lead to renewed striving and continuing dissatisfaction.

## **6. Developmental Differences Across the Lifespan**

### *6.1. Childhood: Early Awareness of Inequality and Emotional Climate*

In childhood, upward mobility is rarely pursued directly by the child, but the psychological conditions that later shape mobility are already beginning to form. Children become aware of family disadvantage, parental strain, and unequal access to opportunity. Parents who are striving for socioeconomic advancement may provide structure and hope, but they may also transmit pressure, anxiety, and emotional tension [2,15]. Children raised in families strongly oriented toward mobility may internalize the message that success is necessary for safety, respect, or worth. This early emotional climate matters because it shapes self-esteem, expectations for achievement, and coping style. When family life is organized around the hope of future advancement, children may learn not only aspiration but also fear: aspiration that life can improve, and fear that failure carries serious consequences. In this way, the mental health implications of upward mobility may begin long before the individual actively starts pursuing it.

### *6.2. Adolescence: Social Comparison, Aspiration, and Emerging Status Consciousness*

Adolescence is a particularly important stage for mobility-related mental health processes because identity, peer comparison, and educational pathways become much more salient. Adolescents begin to compare family background, school performance, and future prospects more intensely [16]. Upward mobility may operate as a powerful source of motivation, but it may also generate anxiety about academic achievement, social standing, and future success. Adolescents from lower-status backgrounds may feel that they must outperform others in order to escape disadvantage, while also recognizing that they began from a very unequal starting point. Relative deprivation may be especially painful during adolescence because comparison processes are emotionally heightened and identity is still developing. If adolescents feel they are falling behind peers who seem more likely to achieve upward mobility, shame, hopelessness, and inadequacy may become more likely. At the same time, adolescents who begin moving into more advantaged educational spaces may already experience belonging conflict and status incongruity, both of which may carry mental health consequences.

### 6.3. *Emerging Adulthood: The Peak Period of Mobility Striving*

Emerging adulthood may be the life stage in which the psychological costs of upward mobility are most concentrated. This period often includes university attendance, labor market entry, occupational sorting, and the formation of adult identity. It is also the phase in which individuals are expected to view ambition, effort, and strategic choice as important for shaping their future status [17]. As a result, striving for upward mobility often becomes especially intense during this period. The mental health burden can be substantial. Anxiety may arise from unstable transitions, debt, performance pressure, and uncertainty about whether upward movement will actually occur. Depression may appear when anticipated progress does not materialize or when peers seem to be advancing more quickly. Belonging conflict may become especially acute when individuals from lower-origin backgrounds enter elite institutions but feel culturally out of place or socially excluded. Even successful movement may come with significant emotional cost if it is accompanied by impostor feelings, isolation, or guilt about surpassing one's family background.

### 6.4. *Midlife: Maintenance Pressure, Role Strain, and Fear of Reversal*

In midlife, the key psychological issue may shift from achieving mobility to maintaining it. Individuals may be managing mortgages, caregiving roles, work responsibilities, and expectations to support both children and aging parents [18]. Those who have achieved upward mobility may feel strong pressure not to lose what they have gained. Midlife may therefore be especially vulnerable to chronic stress, burnout, and anxiety tied to status maintenance. Comparison often continues in this period as well. Individuals may ask whether they have advanced enough relative to their peers, whether their children are progressing in ways that will sustain family mobility, and whether the sacrifices made earlier in life were justified. Those whose mobility has plateaued or proved less transformative than expected may experience disappointment or persistent low mood. Those who never achieved the upward movement they had sought may continue to experience relative deprivation when they compare themselves with peers who now appear more economically secure.

### 6.5. *Older Adulthood: Retrospective Appraisal and Intergenerational Meaning*

In older adulthood, upward mobility may be judged in broader life-course terms. Individuals may ask not only whether they moved upward, but also what that movement actually delivered. Did it provide security, dignity, and better chances for children and grandchildren? Or did it also involve chronic stress, relational distance, and a life organized around pressure rather than peace [19]? This kind of retrospective appraisal may shape well-being in later life. Upward mobility may bring pride and relief, particularly when it led to improved living conditions for later generations while later life may reveal the less visible costs of decades of striving, including burnout, emotional estrangement, or the sense that success never produced the peace of mind that had once been imagined. Older adults may also continue to experience intergenerational concern through attention to their children's trajectories. If upward movement is not sustained into the next generation, worry and disappointment may once again affect mental health.

### 6.6. *A Cross-Cutting Lifespan Claim*

Across the lifespan, the central issue is not only whether individuals move upward, but how the mobility process interacts with developmental tasks, social roles, institutional transitions, comparison processes, and psychological security. The life-course perspective strengthens this argument by showing that mobility-related strain is shaped by timing and accumulation. In early life, the burden may be tied to aspiration, family emotional climate, and the early internalization of achievement expectations. In adolescence and emerging adulthood, these pressures may intensify through educational selection, peer comparison, identity formation, and the transition into higher-status institutions. In midlife, the same mobility process may be reorganized

around role strain, caregiving, financial responsibility, and fear of downward movement. In later life, mobility may be reinterpreted through retrospective appraisal and intergenerational meaning. Thus, the psychological costs and benefits of upward mobility do not simply appear separately at different ages; rather, they may accumulate, shift in form, and become reactivated as individuals move through changing developmental and social contexts. A lifespan perspective, therefore, suggests that the mental health significance of upward mobility is cumulative, dynamic, and deeply relational.

## 7. Implications and Recommendations

### 7.1. A Core Principle: Support Mobility Without Romanticizing It

A major implication of this study is that upward intergenerational mobility should not be treated as automatically protective or universally beneficial for mental health. It may indeed reduce hardship, but the process of attaining and maintaining a higher status may also involve substantial emotional cost. Public discourse, institutions, and support systems should therefore be careful not to romanticize mobility as a straightforward success story. A more realistic approach would recognize that upward movement may coexist with anxiety, exhaustion, identity strain, and relative deprivation.

### 7.2. Implications for Mental Health Practice

Clinicians, counselors, and other support professionals may benefit from assessing not only socioeconomic background and current status, but also the person's mobility narrative. Important questions include whether the individual feels pressure to justify upward movement, compares themselves intensely with more successful peers, feels they belong in their current environment, or interprets blocked advancement as a personal failure. Such questions may help identify forms of distress that are easily overlooked in people who appear objectively successful. Mental health support should also address the emotional consequences of partial or unsuccessful mobility efforts. Individuals who have strived without attaining the level of advancement they hoped for may need help understanding their experience in structural as well as personal terms. For those who have moved upward, support may be especially important around status insecurity, perfectionism, identity conflict, and the challenge of maintaining relationships across classed social worlds.

### 7.3. Implications for Education and Work Settings

Schools, universities, and workplaces are major institutions through which upward mobility is pursued, judged, and rewarded. These settings may either intensify or reduce the psychological burden attached to mobility. Environments that frame success as entirely individual may heighten shame and self-blame among those who struggle. By contrast, institutions that recognize unequal starting points and actively support belonging may reduce some forms of mobility-related distress. This suggests the importance of mentoring, inclusive culture, financial support, and explicit attention to class-based transition experiences. It is not enough simply to open pathways to upward movement. Institutions must also support the mental health of people who are trying to navigate those pathways.

### 7.4. Implications for Policy

Policies designed to promote upward mobility often focus on education, labor markets, and income support. These are essential. However, a lifespan perspective suggests that mental health should be integrated into mobility policy more directly. Promoting mobility without attending to psychological burden risks shifting the responsibility for structural inequality onto individuals while leaving them to carry the emotional cost by themselves. Policies that reduce economic insecurity, debt burden, unstable

employment, and unequal access to opportunity may improve mental health not only by increasing status but also by making the mobility process itself less punishing.

## 8. Conclusions

Upward intergenerational mobility is often celebrated because it promises escape from disadvantage and access to better opportunities. In many cases, this promise is partly justified. Upward movement may improve material conditions and reduce some of the mental health risks associated with poverty and chronic hardship. However, that is only one part of the picture. Upward mobility may also carry substantial psychological costs, including prolonged stress, uncertainty, relative deprivation, identity strain, status insecurity, and emotional distress linked to blocked or incomplete advancement. A lifespan perspective makes these tensions easier to see. The psychological meaning of upward mobility changes from childhood to older adulthood, but across stages the central challenge remains similar: mobility may improve objective conditions while at the same time unsettling emotional well-being through pressure, comparison, and fragile status-based self-evaluation. Not everyone who strives for upward movement succeeds, and even success does not necessarily bring relief from anxiety or dissatisfaction. Individuals may continue to compare themselves with those who seem to have moved even further upward, which can create feelings of deprivation despite real progress. For these reasons, upward intergenerational mobility should not be understood as a uniformly beneficial determinant of mental health. It is more accurately viewed as a developmental process that contains both protective and risk-producing pathways. Recognizing this complexity is important for building better scholarship, more humane institutions, and more realistic policy approaches that support advancement without overlooking the emotional burden that often accompanies it.

### Statement of the Use of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

An Artificial intelligence (AI) tool was used solely for language editing, grammar correction, and proofreading. The AI tool was not used to generate the research idea, develop the conceptual framework, or produce the substantive academic content of the manuscript. All intellectual contributions, arguments, and final decisions regarding the manuscript remain the sole responsibility of the author.

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