

LOCAL NEWS

Does class still matter in America?

As Americans, we'd like to think that where or to whom you're born is only a temporary status. With a little hard work, some gumption and a bootstrap, we can be anyone we want to be. That certainly seems to be the case with a group of 20-somethings who grew up in St. Paul, whom our research group is interviewing in an effort to better understand how the transitions from adolescence to adulthood are unfolding today.

These young adults believed for the most part that they were the authors of their lives and, if they were unhappy with the way things were going, that they could plan for and act to change things.

But is that really the case? Or does class matter in America? Consider this: Our findings show that in their early 20s, nearly two-thirds of young adults receive financial support from their parents, and 40 percent of those in their late 20s still receive assistance from parents in some form. However, and here is where class rears its head, young adults in the top one-fourth of family income categories receive three times more in material assistance than those in the bottom one-fourth. This occurs even though higher-income youth are only 10 percent to 15 percent more likely to attend college than low-income youth.

The importance of class was probably no more evident than in our interviews in St. Paul. While most, although not all, of the young Minnesotans we spoke with could count on their families for continued support as they established themselves, it was clear that those from more-affluent families received significantly more financial help — for their education, rent, health and car insurance, and even down payments on homes — while their less-well-off peers spoke of struggling to pay for these or forgoing them altogether.

Consider Jake and Bo, two white 29-year-olds who both attended St. Paul public schools. Following high school, Jake's parents paid for his bachelor's degree at the College of William and Mary. After graduating, he



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attended a prestigious private law school on the East Coast, also financed by his parents.

Bo, meanwhile, attended a local public university, which he felt was his only option because his mother could not afford to foot his education bills. Despite working substantial hours while attending college, he dropped out when he found himself having to go without food. Jake is now an attorney, while Bo has worked a series of manual and service jobs. Recently laid off, Bo has returned to community college, still hoping to someday earn his degree and land a well-paying job.

Yet despite these distinct trajectories, Bo remains optimistic that he can make a turnaround. Bo is not alone in this. Predictably, we found optimism over work and financial futures more prevalent for white, middle-class and highly educated youth. But even those facing more challenges believed that hard work and determination would eventually pay off.

As Bo said, "If I have to do something completely different tomorrow, as

long as I'm willing and able to work at it, I think I'll be fine."

The one concession for poor and working-class kids, it seemed, was to have reined in their aspirations; for example, hoping for a "clean" office job if they currently did manual labor or for increasing their commission from phone solicitations or bill collections.

On the whole, young people did not see their background and past experiences as determining their futures, and

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they viewed the world as offering them the chance to continually reshape their life through reflection, planning, goal setting and hard work — in short, the American Dream.

Indeed, the advantages of the private scaffolding that families provide their young adult children remain hidden, despite the very real inequities in material support that young adults from different classes receive from their parents. Relying on families to deal with the many larger structural changes (such as declining wages for men, higher housing and college costs, more jobs that demand higher education) means that those with more resources will be better able to afford more — and the class divide will widen.

Without stronger safety nets, such as affordable health care, subsidized education (think GI Bill), school-to-work supports and others, the optimism and can-do spirit of Bo and his peers may quickly disappear.

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