

# Having more education than your parents makes it less likely that you will commit a crime as an adult.

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2016/09/16/having-more-education-than-your-parents-makes-it-less-likely-that-you-will-commit-a-crime-](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2016/09/16/having-more-education-than-your-parents-makes-it-less-likely-that-you-will-commit-a-crime-/)

9/16/2016

*Though the relationship between socioeconomic status and crime has long been of interest to criminologists, few studies have examined the importance of social mobility. **Raymond Swisher** and **Christopher Dennison** used data from a national longitudinal study to analyze the association between intergenerational educational mobility and crime. They find upward educational mobility is associated with a lower likelihood of committing a crime, and downward mobility is linked to a greater likelihood. They argue that these findings are important given increasing concerns about inequality, the growing importance of a college degree, and its consequences for family life, well-being, and criminal behavior.*

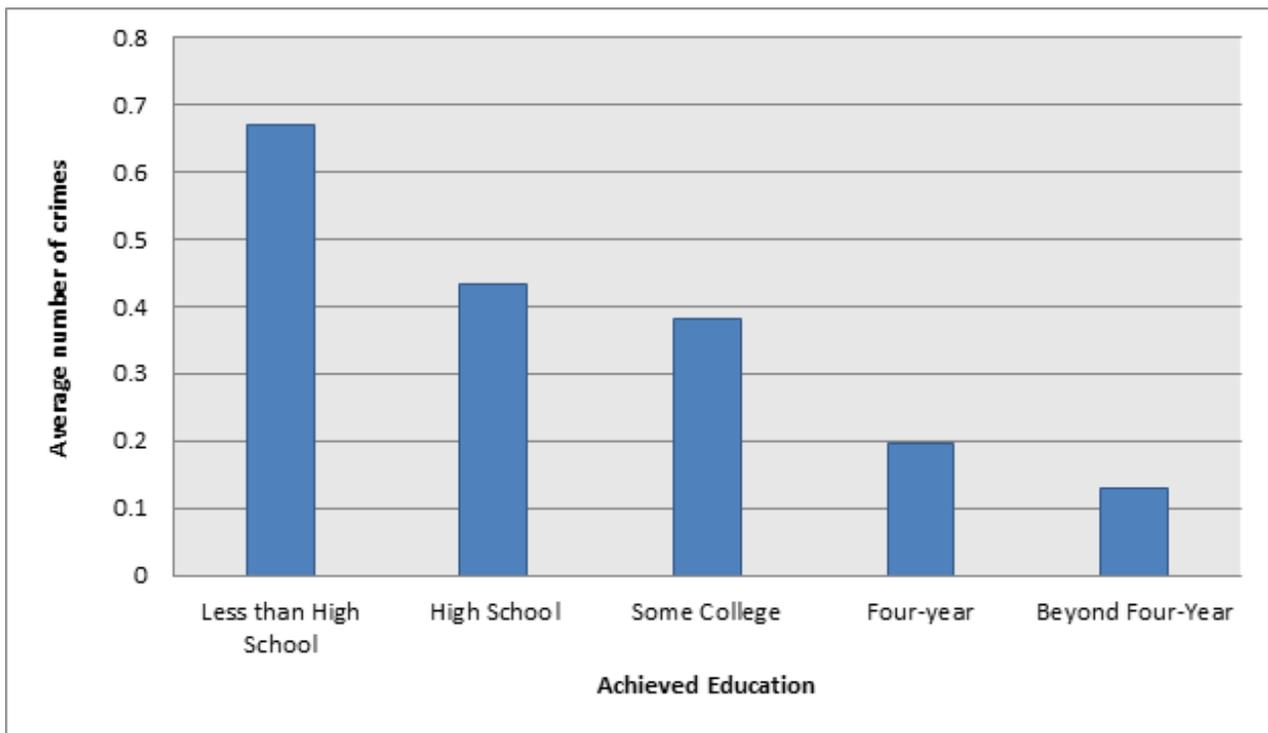


A global recession, rapidly increasing economic inequality, and perceptions of a disappearing middle-class make the prospects of declining socioeconomic fortunes a growing concern within the US. At the same time, the increasing rewards of a college degree and expanding enrollments of women and first generation college students suggest the potential for upward mobility in educational attainment. Though the study of the relationship between socioeconomic status and crime has a long history within sociology and criminology, contemporary studies of the role of social mobility and crime are surprisingly few in number.



Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, we applied a life course perspective to analyze the relationship between intergenerational educational pathways (i.e., own educational attainment compared to one's parents') and change in crime between adolescence and early adulthood. Our results showed intergenerational educational pathways were significantly associated with changes in crime. Having less education than one's parents was predictive of a greater likelihood of criminal behavior, whereas upward educational mobility was associated with a decreased likelihood. These associations were partly explained by differences in more favorable adult transitions (e.g., marriage vs single parenthood, or employment vs unemployment), as well as differences in economic stressors.

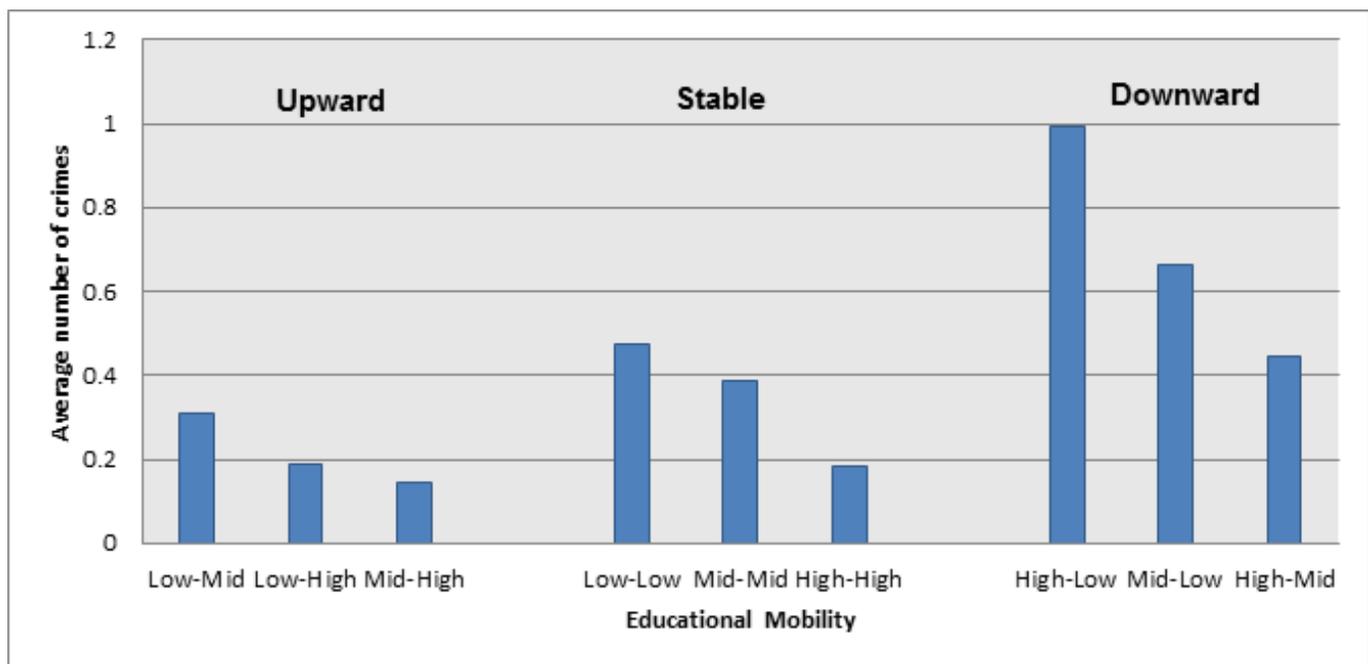
## Figure 1 – Average Crime in Adulthood (Ages 25-32) by Education



We began by investigating the relationship between an individual’s achieved education and criminal involvement (based on self-reports of nine criminal behaviors). As expected (see Figure 1), the more education completed the lower the predicted crime in adulthood. Given the minimal differences between the high school degree and some college groups, and between the four-year degree and higher attainment groups, we collapsed respondents into three levels: less than a high school degree (*low*); high school degree or some college (*mid*); and completion of a four-year degree or more (*high*). We then created similar categories for parents. To measure educational mobility we simply cross-classified the resulting respondent and parent groups to generate nine mobility pathways. For instance, respondents with less than a high school degree whose parents also did not complete high school fall into the “low-low” educational pathway. An advantage of these pathways is that they capture all possible patterns of intergenerational stability and mobility.

As Figure 2 illustrates, examining intergenerational educational mobility adds considerably to our understanding of crime, compared to the more linear pattern suggested by Figure 1. Highest crime is observed among those “falling from grace” (to borrow the title of Katherine Newman’s [classic study of downward mobility](#)), whose parents completed college but did not finish high school themselves. Conversely, the lowest crime is among first-generation four-year college graduates. Other upward mobility groups report relatively low levels of crime as well.

**Figure 2 – Average Crime by Educational Pathways**



At the same time, the social reproduction of educational advantage across generations (i.e., the “high-high” group) remains an important phenomenon, and one we find to be associated with lower levels of crime. Similarly, intergenerational continuity in failure to complete high school (the “low-low” group) predicted relatively high rates of crime in adulthood – though not the highest, again illustrating the importance of social mobility.

We also sought to explain why educational pathways were associated with crime, by examining differences across groups in rates of family formation (e.g., married with children vs single parents), employment, experiences of economic stressors, and social psychological well-being (e.g., depression, self-efficacy). Though both family and employment statuses played a role, measures of welfare receipt and economic problems were stronger in explaining the associations between downward educational pathways and crime, particularly for those whose parents were college educated (i.e., the “high-low” group). Fewer economic troubles also partly explained reductions in crime exhibited by first-generation college completers. Lastly, while measures of self-efficacy and depression were associated with changes in crime, they did little to explain the differences across educational pathway groups.

In our work, we show that educational intergenerational pathways are associated with changes in crime between adolescence and early adulthood, within a large, contemporary, and nationally-representative US sample. In future work, we plan to examine the role of rising student debt, particularly among those who are unable to complete college. These issues are critical due to the increasing importance of education, both for socioeconomic outcomes, as well as family life, physical and psychological well-being, and criminal behavior. It is also important given concerns regarding rising educational stratification and inequality in US society.

*This article is based on the paper, ‘Educational Pathways and Change in Crime between Adolescence and Early Adulthood’ in the Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency.*

*Featured image credit: Brett Levin (Flickr, CC-BY-2.0)*

*Please read our comments policy before commenting.*

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

*Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/2cutlxq>*

---

## About the authors

### **Raymond R. Swisher** – *Bowling Green State University*

Raymond R. Swisher is Professor of Sociology at Bowling Green State University. Most broadly his research examines risks in the lives of low-income and minority youth. Recent research has examined the consequences of post-secondary education for neighborhood attainments and crime, the effects of parental incarceration on crime and delinquency, and the effects of neighborhood poverty and exposure to violence on adolescent survival expectations.



### **Christopher R. Dennison** – *Bowling Green State University*

Christopher R. Dennison is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology at Bowling Green State University. His research interests include life course criminology, social mobility, and the association between socioeconomic status and crime. Recent research examines the effects of economic problems on crime, and the consequences of criminal justice involvement on intergenerational mobility.



- CC BY-NC 3.0 2015 LSE USAPP