ROOTED OR STUCK? THE CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF AMERICAN MOBILITY DECLINE


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Annual mobility rates in the US have declined by half since 1950, but it is not clear why. The emerging literature suggests that as-yet inexplicable immobility is indicative of an increasing cultural attachment to place – known as “rootedness” – that is both universal and voluntary. I assess this claim using data from the Current Population Survey and the Panel Study of Income Dynamics and address three central questions. First, to what extent do shifts in the composition of the U.S. population account for observed declines in mobility? Second, have expectations of mobility declined alongside actual mobility? Third, has the link between mobility expectations and actual mobility outcomes weakened over time? Results suggest that Americans are “stuck” – increasingly unlikely to move when they expect to do so – rather than “rooted” in place. This pattern is consistent with the conclusion that social and economic shifts in the latter half of the 20th Century left Americans with fewer options for, and a marginalized ability to take advantage of, opportunity elsewhere. Moreover, because the weakening expectation-mobility link is particularly pronounced among African-Americans, mobility decline may exacerbate inequalities in residential mobility processes that are already deeply stratified by race.

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