

MOBILITY AND THE LIFE COURSE

LESSON ONE



CASCADING LIVES
DIGITAL TOOLKIT





Lesson 1: Mobility

This lesson is the first in a series that examines mobility and cascading. Students explore these concepts in the context of biographical stories of real people that involve significant ups and downs in economic status, social position, and health. Then, using an interactive infographic that shows income mobility, students consider unequal patterns in mobility. The lesson aims to show students that social position is more than a snapshot in time. Instead, we can think about strings of events and how policies can play a role in the ups and downs of a life.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Understand the concepts of mobility and cascading and be able to apply them to specific life stories
- Analyze patterns in mobility using an infographic and come to understand some consistent patterns across race and gender
- Collect and compare the stories we tell about mobility beyond the American Dream bootstrap story: tales of anxiety, hope, resignation, cascading, stagnation, transformation, and more.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What is mobility? Why does it happen?
- Who tends to move up? Down? Stay the same?
- Why does cascading happen? What could prevent it?
- Why might we want a society in which people can move social position?

MATERIALS

- Biographical stories for Jai and Francesca
- *New York Times* infographic: www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/03/27/upshot/make-your-own-mobility-animation.html
- Life map worksheet

CONCEPTS

- **Social position:** While each person is a distinct individual, we also each occupy a place in society based on how much money, status and resources we have. While where people begin does not determine what happens to them, it has a big impact on the kinds of obstacles they face.
- **Mobility:** Movement between social positions, particularly economic positions, such as from working class to middle class.
- **Cascading:** When one event triggers several that follow it, leading to a change in social position. For example, a lost job that leads to lost health insurance and the inability to pay for necessary medical care.



ACTIVITY 1: READING BIOGRAPHICAL STORIES

For most people, social position changes throughout their life. There will be times when it seems like "the sky is the limit" and moments when they lose ground. Reading the real-life stories of people can show us how people move between social positions, and how, sometimes, life can "cascade" as one crisis tumbles onto another.

In this first activity, students are going to read two life histories. As they read them, be sure to have them make note of any questions that come up.

In groups, have students map the life described in one of the biographical stories by drawing a line on the worksheet. Label the person's starting point, and any key moments. Once the groups have drawn the map, talk as a class about why each group drew it the way they did.

As a class, discuss these questions: What are the challenges the people in these stories faced? What triggered a downward cascade? What might have stopped or altered the course of cascading events? How many times does the economic position of the person change? How does the person work to recover from a cascade? What are the resources that are available to help? When did the person make choices? What choices were made for them?

ACTIVITY 2: LOOKING AT PATTERNS OF MOBILITY

The myth of the American Dream tells us that if someone works hard, they can climb up the economic ladder. But hard work is not enough to explain patterns of mobility. While people work hard everywhere, few people move up and most stay the same or move down. Using the article "Income Mobility Charts for Girls, Asian-Americans and Other Groups. Or Make Your Own" from *The New York Times*, have students look for patterns in who is economically mobile and in which direction. Students should use the infographic from the article, found here: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/03/27/upshot/make-your-own-mobility-animation.html>

The *New York Times* infographic shows patterns in changes to income between childhood (based on what parents made) and adulthood. What patterns do students notice in where people start? In where they finish? In the relationship between the two? Where do the people in those stories that students have just read fit into this picture?

Discussion question: The American Dream promises mobility: people who start at the bottom can pull themselves up through hard work and careful saving. But there are other stories too. What stories have students heard - from family, friends, or in books or other media - about the way that people's economic position changes? Can they think of anyone who has lost ground? Gotten stuck? Had a major change?



SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES

- Household finances: <https://www.usfinancialdiaries.org/>
- Homelessness: [https://www.usich.gov/tools-for-action/map/#fn\[\]=1300&fn\[\]=2900&fn\[\]=6400&fn\[\]=10200&fn\[\]=13400](https://www.usich.gov/tools-for-action/map/#fn[]=1300&fn[]=2900&fn[]=6400&fn[]=10200&fn[]=13400)
- Black and White Home Ownership: <https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/21/why-the-homeownership-gap-between-white-and-black-americans-is-larger-today-than-it-was-over-50-years-ago.html>
- Veterans: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/04/05/the-changing-face-of-americas-veteran-population/>
- Mental Illness: <https://www.nami.org/Home/>

SUGGESTED ANCHOR TEXTS

- *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee
- *Slaughterhouse Five*, Kurt Vonnegut

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We invite you to visit our website, www.brandeis.edu/cascading-lives, to access the full Cascading Lives Digital Toolkit. There, you can also find additional resources produced by the Cascading Lives Project.

The correct citation for the Cascading Lives Digital Toolkit is:

Cascading Lives Project 2021. "Cascading Lives Digital Toolkit." Brandeis University. www.brandeis.edu/cascading-lives.

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Lesson 1: Mobility Stories

JAI: A HARD ROAD BACK

Jai is an African American man in his fifties. Born and raised in Alabama, Jai joined the military at the age of eighteen. Since then he has worked at a sports venue as a bartender and most recently, at an Amazon warehouse.

Jai grew up in a small town in Alabama near a farm owned by his grandparents. He lived with his mother, four sisters and his stepfather, a steelworker, who moved in with them when Jai was a teenager. Throughout Jai's childhood, his mother worked several jobs, in housekeeping and food services, to meet their expenses. When they weren't at school and work, the family spent much of its time in the local Black church and its community activities.

Jai enlisted in the military at the age of eighteen, seeing it as a good way to earn a steady income and to develop work experience. Eleven years later, feeling a need for a change, he received an honorable discharge and began to work for an electronics data company in Miami, using the skills he had acquired while in the military. He married and had a son. But he and his wife clashed constantly and the marriage fell apart after a short time. His wife moved with their son to Atlanta to be with her family there and filed for divorce.

Because of the divorce and his wife's relocation, Jai was unable to see his son very often. Finally, tired of the separation, Jai moved to Atlanta to be closer to his son, even though the move meant leaving his steady job in Miami. In Atlanta, Jai began bartending at a sports venue as a temporary way to support himself while he looked for a job in information management. But as time went on without a job offer, Jai threw himself into bartending. He worked eight to twelve hours a day, six to seven days a week. The long hours and tips from customers gave him a steady income stream.

For a while after his move to Atlanta Jai felt that his life had improved. He was making decent money and had moved in with his ex-wife and son, working on rebuilding his relationship with them. Then the family faced a housing crisis. The basement apartment which they were renting was sold by the owner. In the course of the sales inspection, the unit was found to have high levels of radon - a gas that increases risks of lung cancer with prolonged exposure. The family was given an eviction notice. They had thirty days to leave the apartment and find a new place to live.

Jai spent day after day combing the city for an apartment that was affordable and immediately available. As a husband and father, he felt a deep sense of responsibility to find a safe place for his family to live. He was desperate to save his son from the experience of being homeless.

Just a week before the eviction deadline, Jai finally stumbled on a suitable place. It was vacant and available to move into the very next day. The realtor told Jai that he did in fact have another potential tenant coming in that day. But if Jai could bring him a deposit of two months' rent within the next four hours, he would rent it to Jai and not anyone else.

Jai rushed to his bank which was just five minutes away. He had enough money saved and was confident that he could come back with the deposit within an hour. To his astonishment, when he got there the bank refused to disburse the funds to him, saying that his identification card (ID) didn't match what they had on file for the account: "The teller was this white lady and I'm African-American, so she had to give me a hard time. She was asking why my driver's license is from Miami, where I used to live. I explained it to her. I told her that if she checked my file, the license would match." As the conversation heated up, the bank manager came out. Jai pleaded with her to let him withdraw his money, explaining why he was under time pressure. The manager just laughed at him and



and said that he couldn't expect to withdraw money without a valid ID. Jai was overwhelmed with humiliation, helplessness and anger. "I was trying to meet my deadline. I just wanted to get my money so that I could go and rent a house, and provide for my family. That was the whole point, the purpose of the money I saved. I just couldn't believe it because I've been going to that bank for 5 years. Then they tell me that they didn't remember who I was and the valid ID that I gave them was invalid. And it was solely, truly based on the fact of my color. That's the only reason I got treated that way. I was upset because I knew that I was right and I couldn't understand why they were saying that I was wrong."

Later on, the bank manager would realize she had made a mistake and call Jai to tell him that. But for Jai, the damage was done. He had lost the apartment. He could feel himself spiraling down into a serious mental health crisis. He went back to the bank, resolving to withdraw all his money and close the account there. In the course of trying to accomplish these tasks, bank employees mocked him. Jai felt disrespected and angrily asked to file a complaint. After a heated exchange in which Jai refused to leave the bank when asked to do so, the manager called the police. Jai resisted their efforts to lead him out of the bank and was subsequently handcuffed, arrested and thrown into jail. After several blackouts and hallucinatory episodes, Jai was transferred to a psychiatric facility. He was soon discharged from there, although the episodes continued.

Following his release, Jai was disoriented and unsure where to go. His ex-wife and son had moved in with her sister, but Jai was not welcome there. He didn't get along with his sister-in-law, and his ex-wife was angry with him because he had not listened to her advice to avoid interacting with the bank employees after the initial negative encounter.

Jai spent six months on the streets of Atlanta. He eventually found his way to the Atlanta Veterans Administration (VA), which has been a source of

support for him, providing health care, employment resources, education and vocational training. Jai is now off the streets and living in a Transition House in a suburban area of Atlanta with ten other men. It is a difficult living situation as the house has no common area and the small kitchen only has one refrigerator, which is used by all the residents. The major problem for Jai though is the lack of public transportation. In order to get to jobs in the city he has to take two buses and two trains - a one-way trip takes him two hours.

Jai feels grateful though for the opportunity to put his life back together. He participates in the Veterans' Rapid Employment Program (VREP) which provides funding to qualified veterans to attend a one-year program at an accredited college. Jai is using this opportunity to pursue a certification in logistics management, which will qualify him for jobs that specialize in managing the movement of goods, information and services across multiple destinations. On the advice of the VREP staff, he is also working at an Amazon distribution warehouse, a job that he finds frustrating: "You work a 40-hour week in a four-day period. You're supposed to always get faster or stay constant in your numbers, or how fast you work. If there's any drop in your production, they let you know and you get mandatory overtime. The wages are also low."

Despite the difficulties, Jai sticks with the Amazon job, especially because of the health care benefits. While he gets medical care through the VA, he has found the system to be slow and uneven in quality. The Amazon job also has the possibility of transferring to a different part of the country. Jai has been thinking of moving back to Florida where he enjoys spending time at the beaches.

In reflecting on his life, Jai speaks of a path filled with heartbreak and sorrow. But it is also a road that he is building anew with determination and hope for the future. "It's been a hard road back to where I was and I'm not even halfway there."



FRANCESCA: COMING BACK TO MY FAMILY ROOTS

Francesca is a 41-year-old Italian American woman. Married to a construction worker and the mother of two young children, she has worked as a restaurant server for much of her life.

Boston's North End is an iconic neighborhood also known as "Little Italy." Its historic buildings, narrow cobblestone streets and bustling Italian restaurants, coffeehouses and pastry shops give it a truly Italian flavor.

For Francesca, the North End is more than a place to soak up the history of Boston and enjoy authentic Italian food. She grew up there speaking Italian and surrounded by relatives. Her father and grandparents were immigrants from Italy who established businesses, including a tailoring shop and restaurant, in the neighborhood. Even now, married and with two young children, the North End remains central to her life. She has worked as a server and occasional bartender in a small Italian restaurant there for almost 20 years.

When Francesca was 14, her family's restaurant business collapsed. Her father's expansion of the business overextended its capacity and he had to liquidate his businesses and property to cover their debts. Her little brother was born at this time. She and her sister were no longer able to attend their private girls' school because they couldn't afford the high tuition costs. Francesca recalls, "It was heartbreaking for my parents that they couldn't afford private school. Giving us a good education was so important for them. They decided to move to the suburbs and they chose a pretty expensive area that has good public schools."

The move from the North End to the suburbs was a big change for the family. Her mother, who had not worked since getting married, found a job at a shoe store in a mall. Her father, unable to find work as a tailor, was unemployed until he found a job in an auto body shop owned by a friend. The financial stress created discord

between her parents and they decided to first separate and then divorce. During this time, her grandparents moved to be closer to them and became an even more important part of Francesca's life. While her mother was at work, her grandparents took care of Francesca and her siblings. That is a continuing pattern in Francesca's life. Her father, who lives in the town next to them, is the go-to babysitter whenever she and her husband cannot be at home for the kids.

At her public school, Francesca felt the collision of her family's economic cascade with the wealthy community in which she had landed. She felt alienated from the wealthy lifestyle of her peers, who had grown up in a world of country clubs, yacht clubs and exotic vacations. Her family had owned property and a business, but they had also lived and worked in an ethnic enclave teeming with her relatives who primarily spoke a foreign language. She was embarrassed when other kids asked her what her parents did for a living. "I'd be thinking in my head, 'My parents just lost everything they had. My mother works in a Payless shoe store. And my dad is kind of unemployed.' But I didn't want to tell them that. I didn't know what to say."

Francesca and her siblings graduated from high school and attended public universities in Massachusetts. After college, Francesca found a managerial job at the corporate headquarters of a liquor company. She kept up her connection to the restaurant business and the North End by working one or two nights a week as a server there. She soon married a man who worked in construction, in a unionized job for a government transportation agency.

In her late thirties Francesca began to rethink her life priorities. Unexpectedly pregnant, she worried about how to raise children and keep her corporate job with its long hours. Her husband's income alone was not enough for the family. Francesca dreamed of moving to another part of town and opening her own business.



After some thought she decided to give up her corporate job and expand her restaurant hours.

For Francesca, the late afternoon and evening hours required of a restaurant server were a big advantage. She would be at home for the children during the day, while her husband worked from 7 am to 2 pm. After he got home to take care of the children, she could go to work on the 4 pm to 11 pm shift. She values family care of her children, and sees this schedule as a way to make sure that one parent is always at home with the children, even if both are working.

The devastation wrought by COVID-19 on the restaurant industry in 2020 has had big repercussions for Francesca and her family. Thankfully, her husband's job was not affected by the pandemic closures. Still, the loss of Francesca's income has meant that they have had to delay their plans to buy a house in a more prosperous neighborhood. "We bought our current house as an investment. We weren't planning to raise our kids here in this neighborhood. We want them in a better school district. And we were almost to that point before COVID, but now I don't know."

In the future, Francesca hopes to open her own Italian café. She reasons that she first has to get her children into a better school district, before plunging into a risky business venture. But it is an important goal for her, one that will bring her full circle back to her family roots in Italian food, culture and the restaurant business.



Lesson 1: Life Map Worksheet

LIFE QUALITY : BETTER

AGE:

Birth 0 5 10 15 20 25 30 35 40 45 50 55 60 65 70+

LIFE QUALITY : WORSE