

Grit and Dreams: Character Strengths, Social Mobility and the American Dream

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What is the American Dream?

- Shared prosperity?
- Rising living standards?
- A strong middle class?
- No poverty?
- Fair treatment?
- Meritocracy?
- High rates of relative mobility?

Horatio Alger's Dream

“In this free country poverty in early life is no bar to a man's advancement. ... Save your money, my lad, buy books, and determine to be somebody,” Mr Whitney to ‘Ragged Dick’, 1868

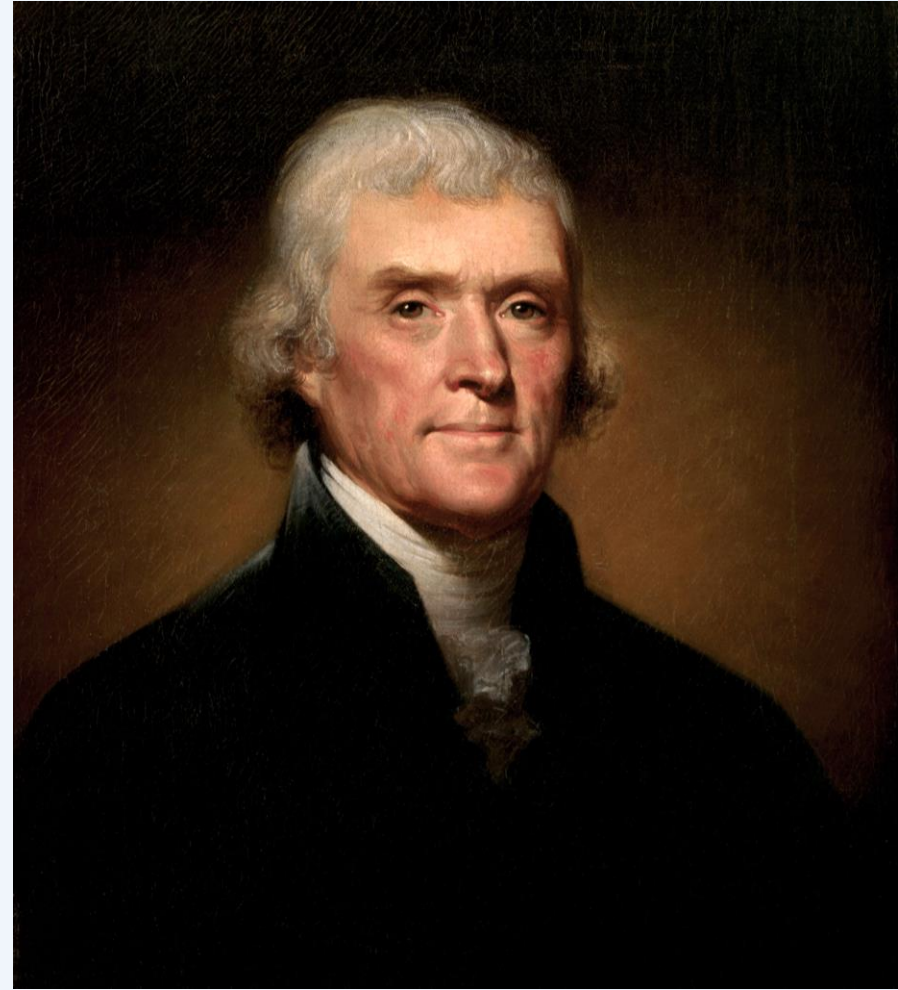


Pres. Obama (and of course every President before him)...

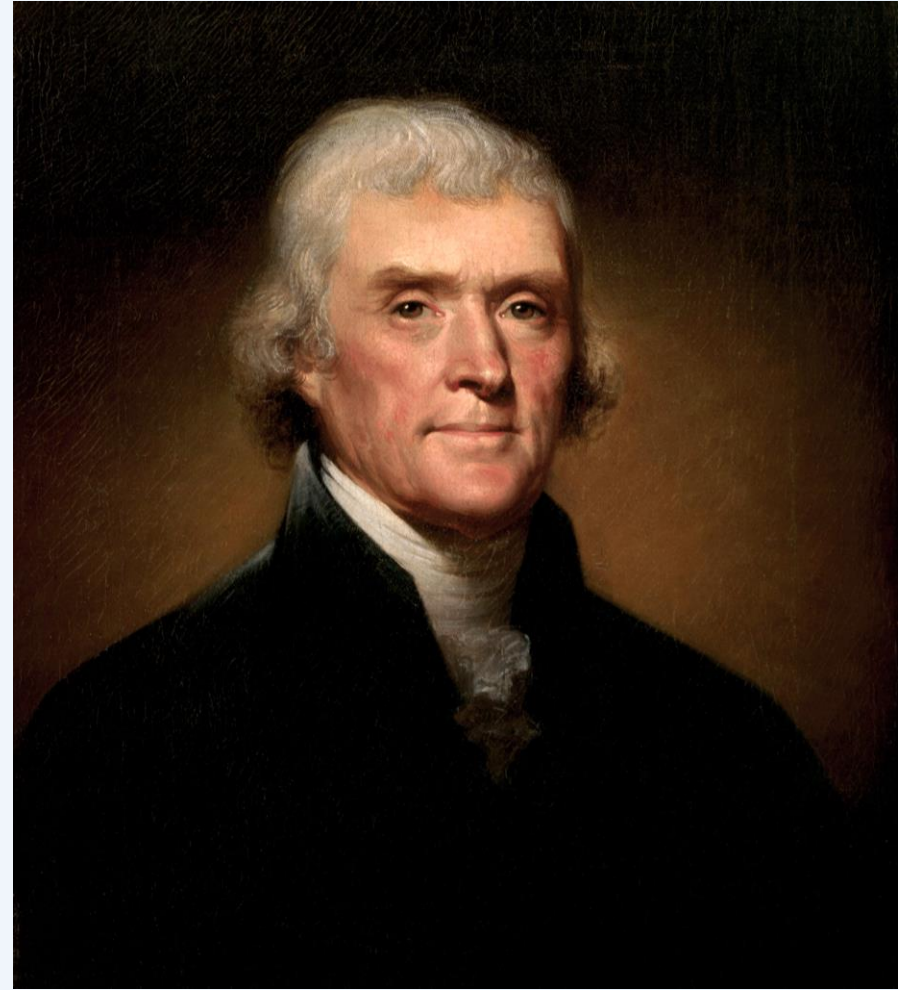
“I renew my commitment to the basic bargain that built this country – the idea that if you work hard and meet your responsibilities, you can get ahead, no matter where you come from...”



“That all men
are created
equal



“That all men
are created
equal *and*
independent”



The State of the American Dream, Using Lego...

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t2XFh_tD2RA

TABLE III
Intergenerational Mobility in the 50 Largest Commuting Zones

Upward Mob. Rank	CZ Name	Population	Absolute Upward Mobility	P(Child in Q5 Parent in Q1)	Pct. Above Poverty Line	Relative Mobility Rank-Rank Slope
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
1	Salt Lake City, Utah	1,426,729	46.2	10.8	77.3	0.264
2	Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania	2,561,364	45.2	9.5	74.9	0.359
3	San Jose, California	2,393,183	44.7	12.9	73.5	0.235
4	Boston, Massachusetts	4,974,945	44.6	10.5	73.7	0.322
5	San Francisco, California	4,642,561	44.4	12.2	72.5	0.250
6	San Diego, California	2,813,833	44.3	10.4	74.3	0.237
7	Manchester, New Hampshire	1,193,391	44.2	10.0	75.0	0.296
8	Minneapolis, Minnesota	2,904,389	44.2	8.5	75.2	0.338
9	Newark, New Jersey	5,822,286	44.1	10.2	73.7	0.350
10	New York, New York	11,781,395	43.8	10.5	72.2	0.330
11	Los Angeles, California	16,393,360	43.4	9.6	73.8	0.231
12	Providence, Rhode Island	1,582,997	43.4	8.2	73.6	0.333
13	Washington DC	4,632,415	43.2	11.0	72.2	0.330
14	Seattle, Washington	3,775,744	43.2	10.9	72.0	0.273
15	Houston, Texas	4,504,013	42.8	9.3	74.7	0.325
16	Sacramento, California	2,570,609	42.7	9.7	71.3	0.257
17	Bridgeport, Connecticut	3,405,565	42.4	7.9	72.4	0.359
18	Fort Worth, Texas	1,804,370	42.3	9.1	73.6	0.320
19	Denver, Colorado	2,449,044	42.2	8.7	73.3	0.294
20	Buffalo, New York	2,369,699	42.0	6.7	73.1	0.368
21	Miami, Florida	3,955,969	41.5	7.3	76.3	0.267
22	Fresno, California	1,419,998	41.3	7.5	71.3	0.295
23	Portland, Oregon	1,842,889	41.3	9.3	70.5	0.277
24	San Antonio, Texas	1,724,863	41.1	6.4	74.3	0.320
25	Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	5,602,247	40.8	7.4	69.6	0.393
26	Austin, Texas	1,298,076	40.4	6.9	71.9	0.323
27	Dallas, Texas	3,405,666	40.4	7.1	72.6	0.347
28	Phoenix, Arizona	3,303,211	40.3	7.5	70.6	0.294
29	Grand Rapids, Michigan	1,286,045	40.1	6.4	71.3	0.378
30	Kansas City, Missouri	1,762,873	40.1	7.0	70.4	0.365
31	Las Vegas, Nevada	1,568,418	40.0	8.0	71.1	0.259
32	Chicago, Illinois	8,183,799	39.4	6.5	70.8	0.393
33	Milwaukee, Wisconsin	1,660,659	39.3	4.5	70.3	0.424
34	Tampa, Florida	2,395,997	39.1	6.0	71.3	0.335

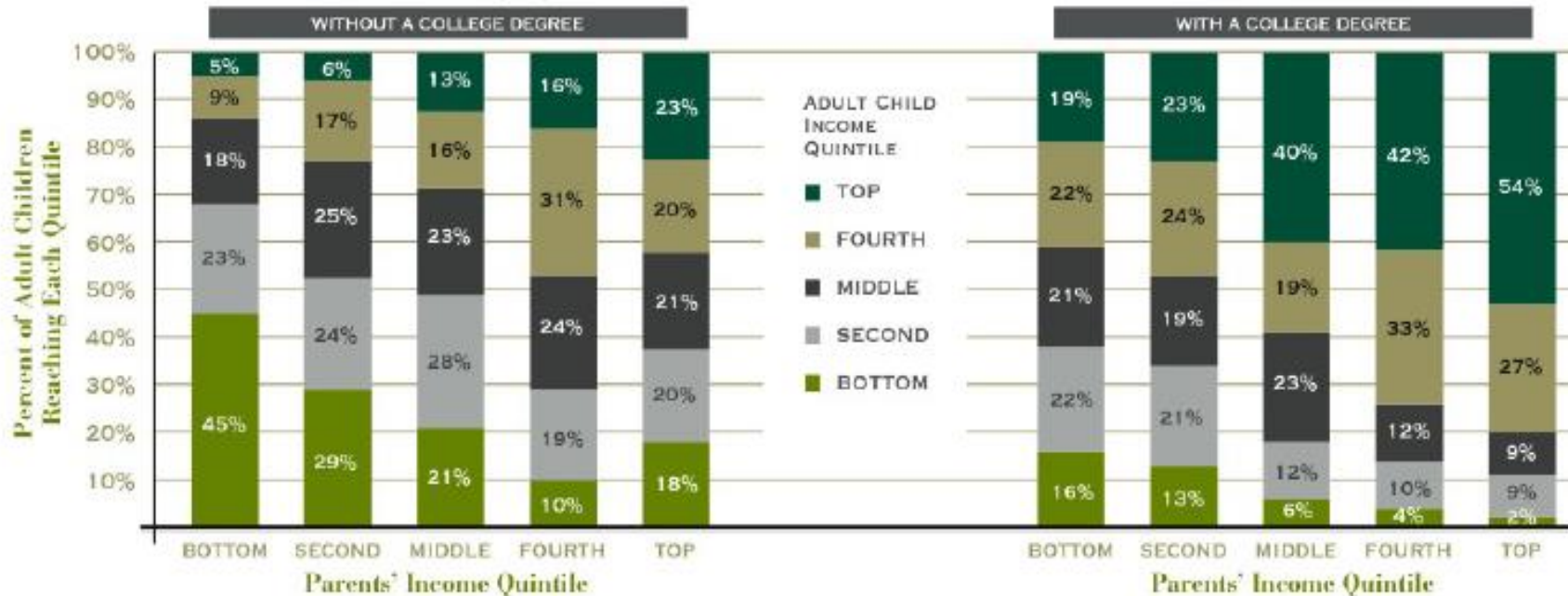
The (Mobility) Power of a BA

EDUCATION AND *Economic Mobility*

By Ron Haskins, The Brookings Institution

FIGURE 6

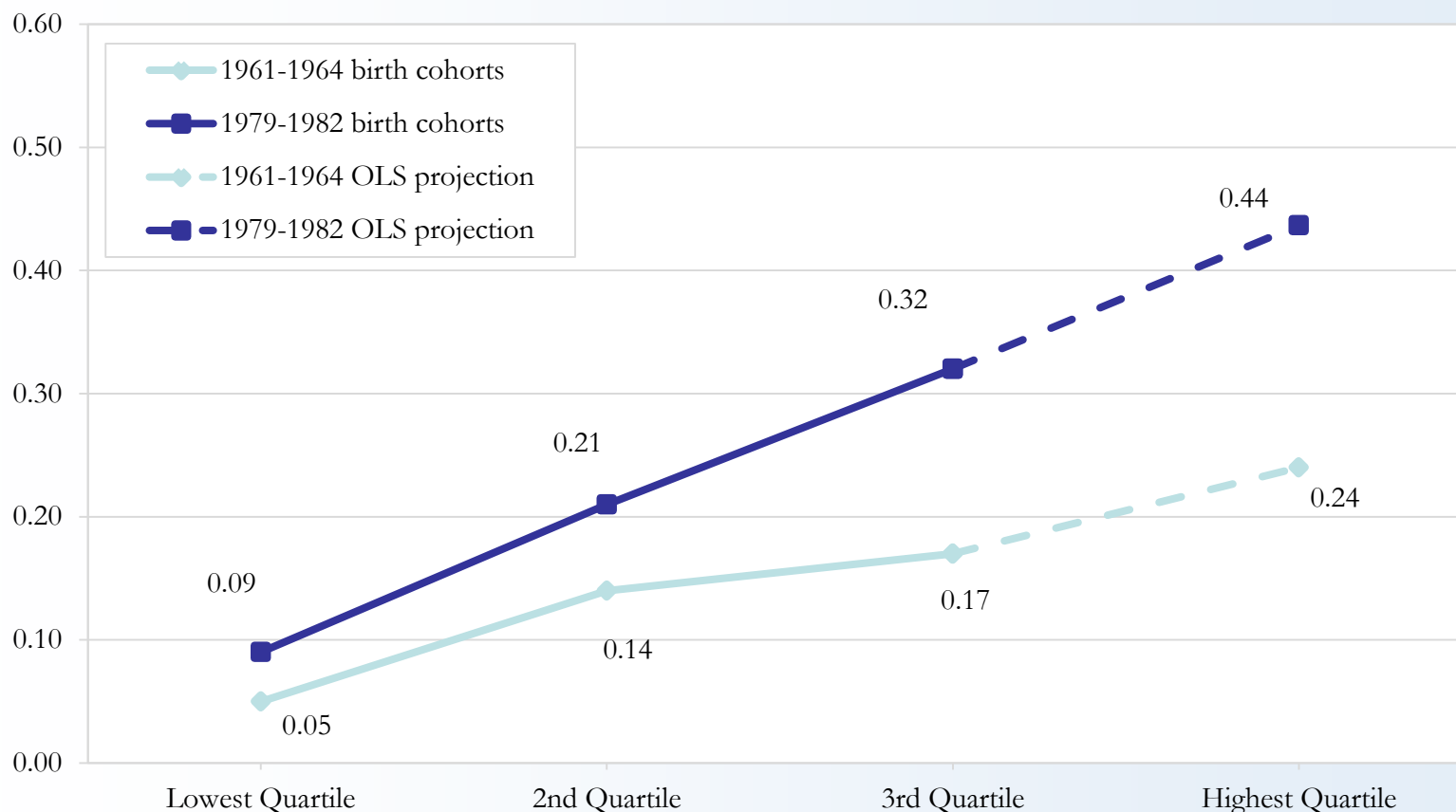
Chances of Getting Ahead for Children with and without a College Degree, from Families of Varying Income



Source: Brookings tabulations of PSID data.

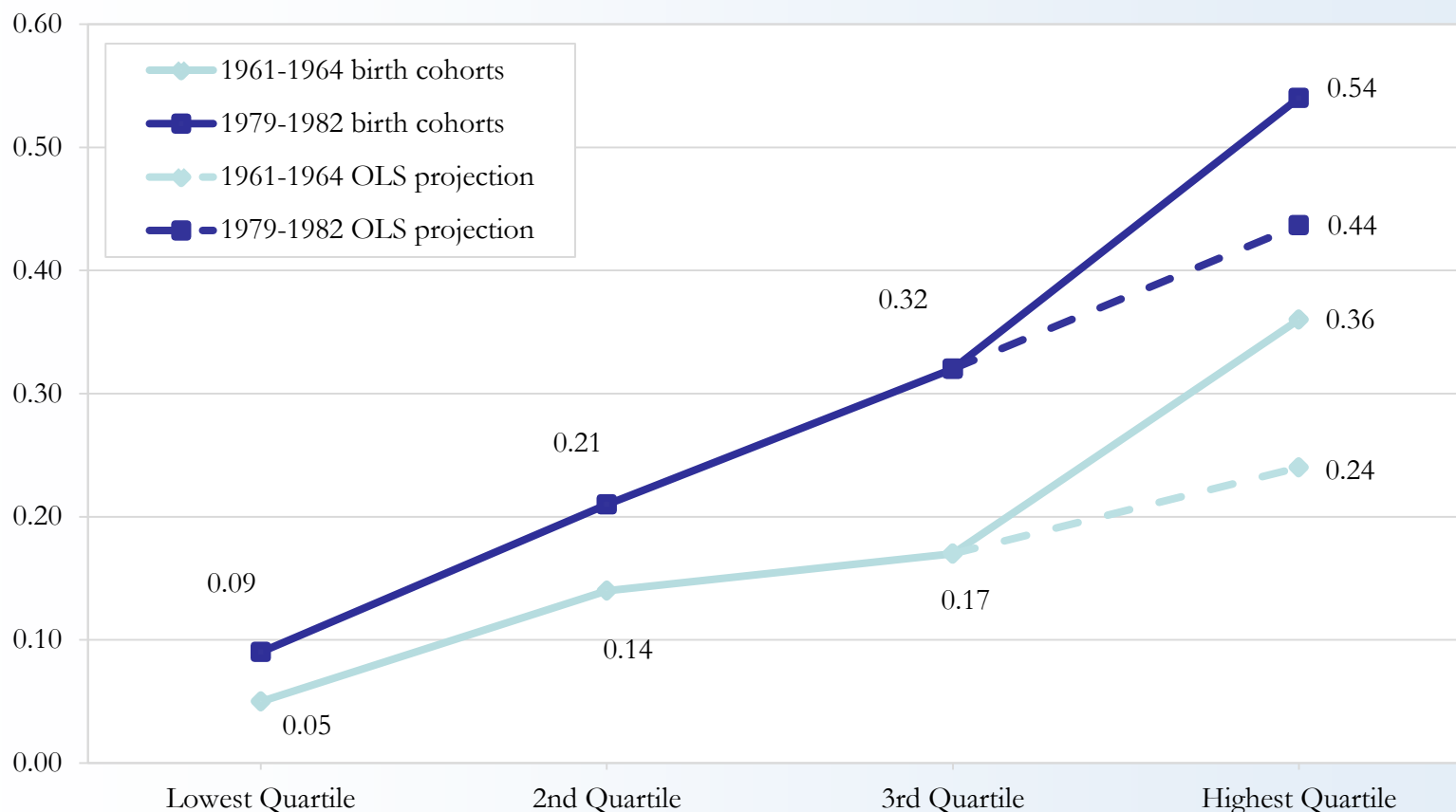
One Factor: Higher Education

Fraction of students completing college, projected



One Factor: Higher Education

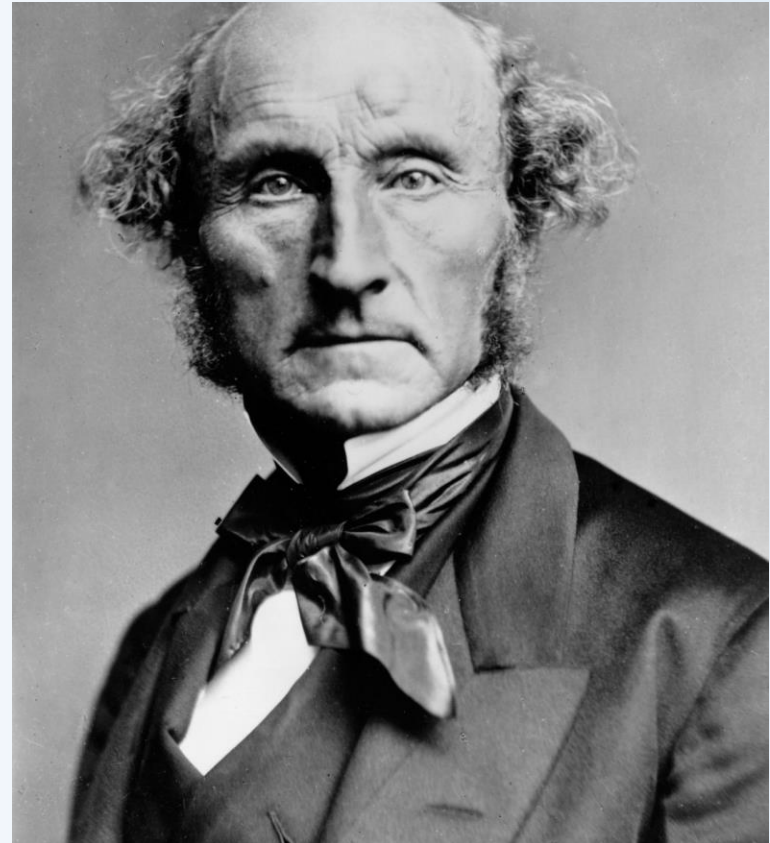
Fraction of students completing college, actual



Prudence

“Men often reach for the nearer good, even though they know it be the less valuable.”

John Stuart Mill,
Utilitarianism,
1861



Want this? Now, or More Later?



Want this now?



Or these in 15 minutes?

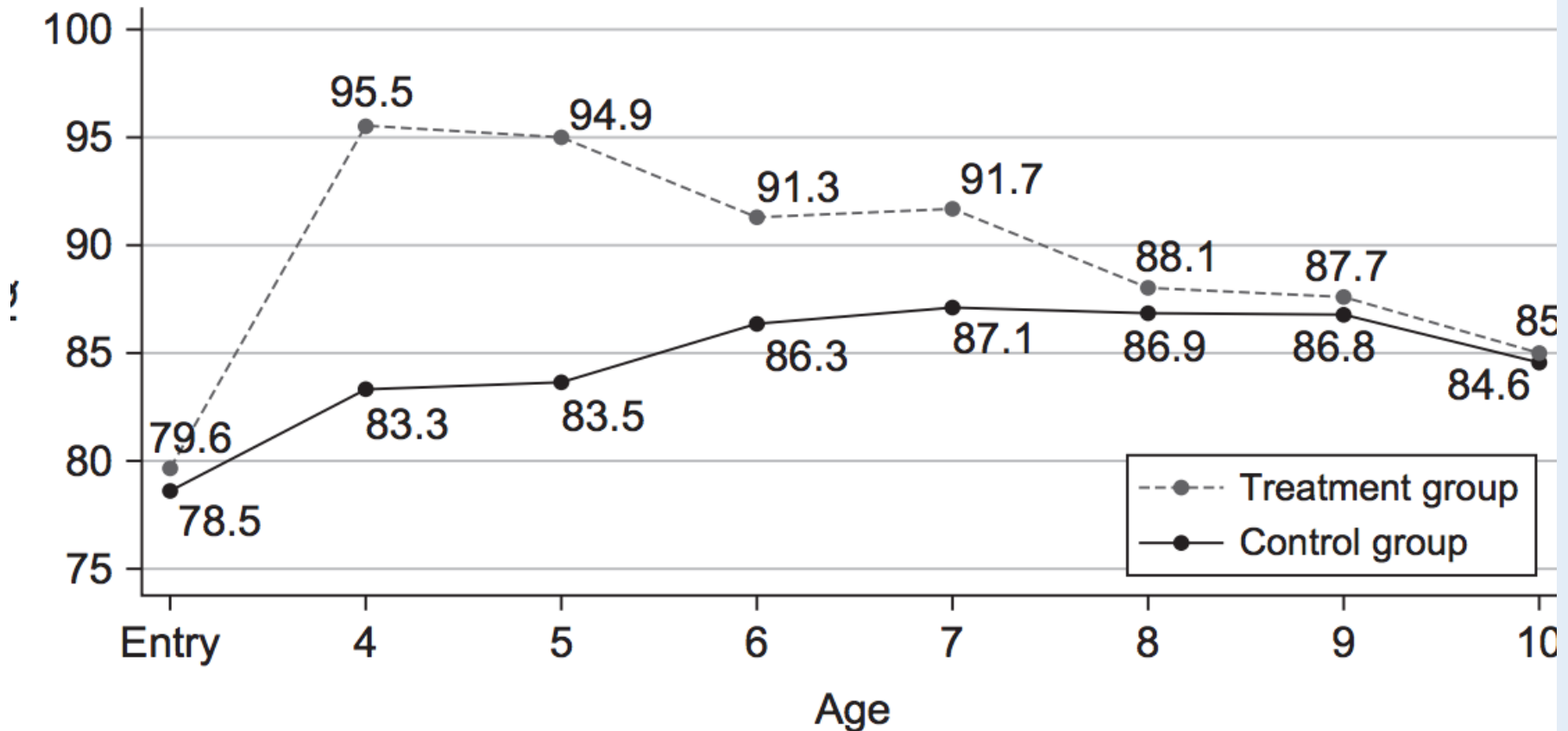


But then, add crayons...

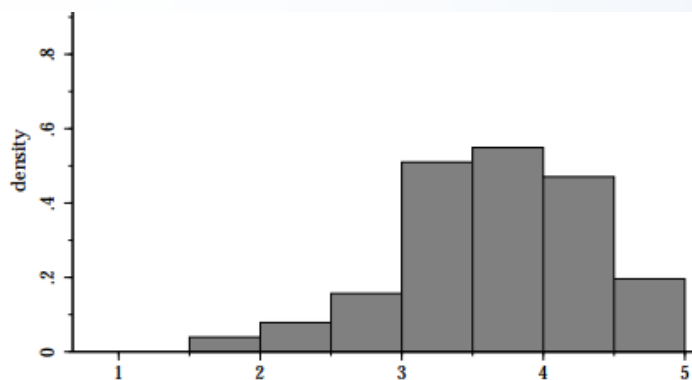


‘Grit’

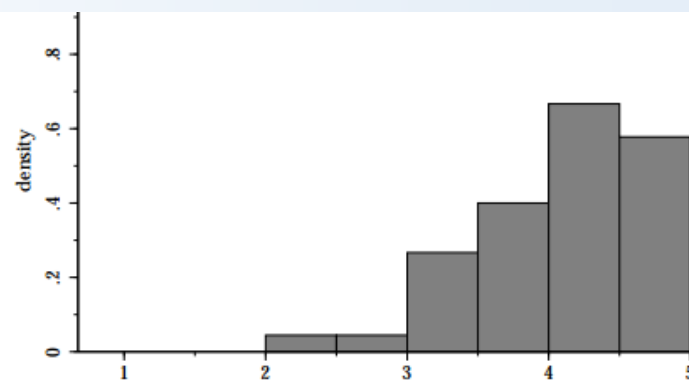
Perry Pre-K No Lasting Impact on IQ Scores



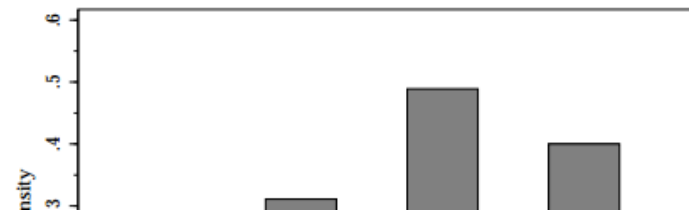
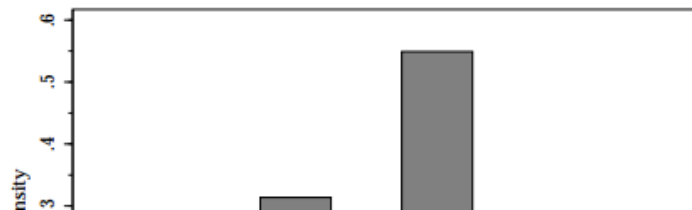
But Still Improved Outcomes...



(c) Academic Motivation
Control Group



(d) Academic Motivation
Treatment Group



‘Grit’: The Coding Speed Test

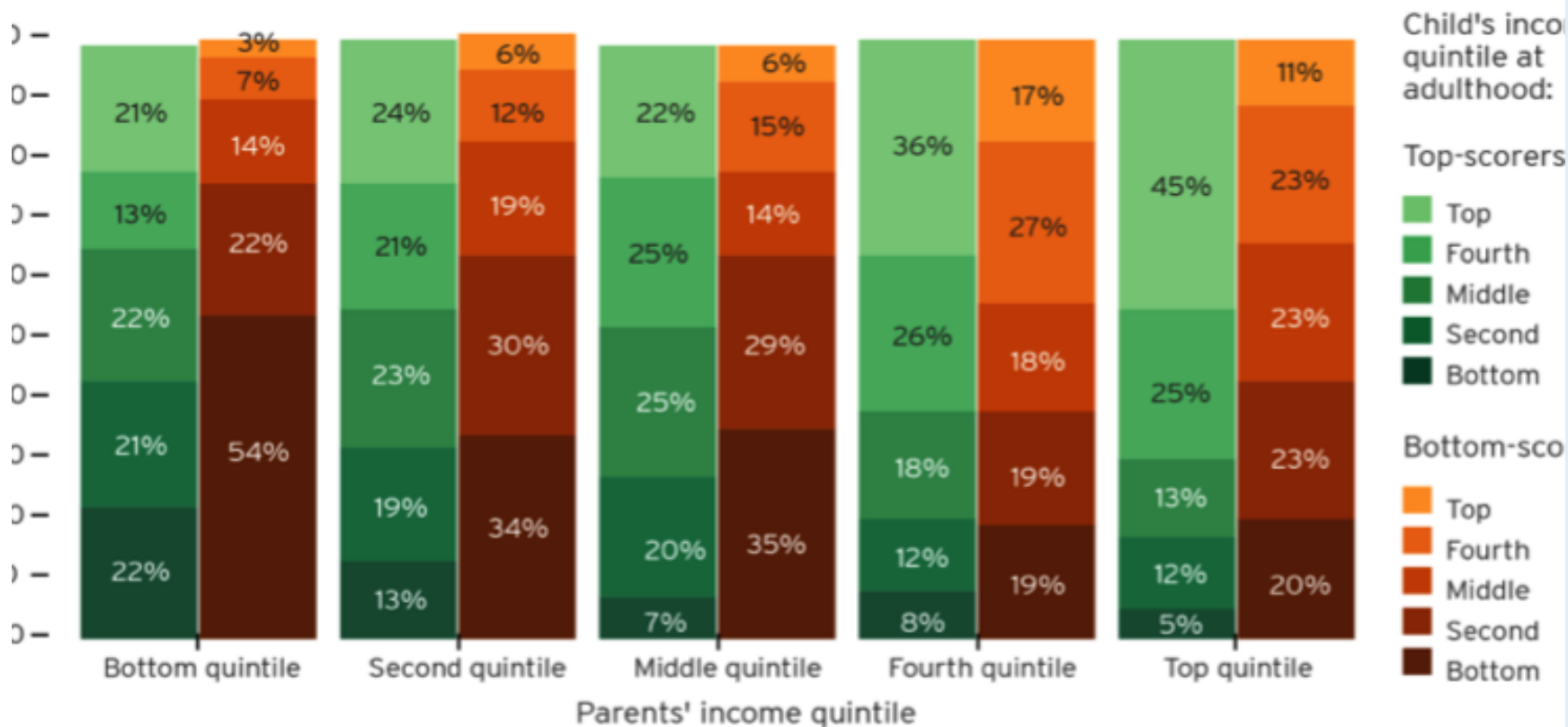
1. If Game = 2715 Chin = 3231 House =
4232

2. House = a) 4232 b) 2715 c) 3231 d) 4563
e) 2864?

Absurdly easy (for vast majority), but *spine-crackingly dull*.

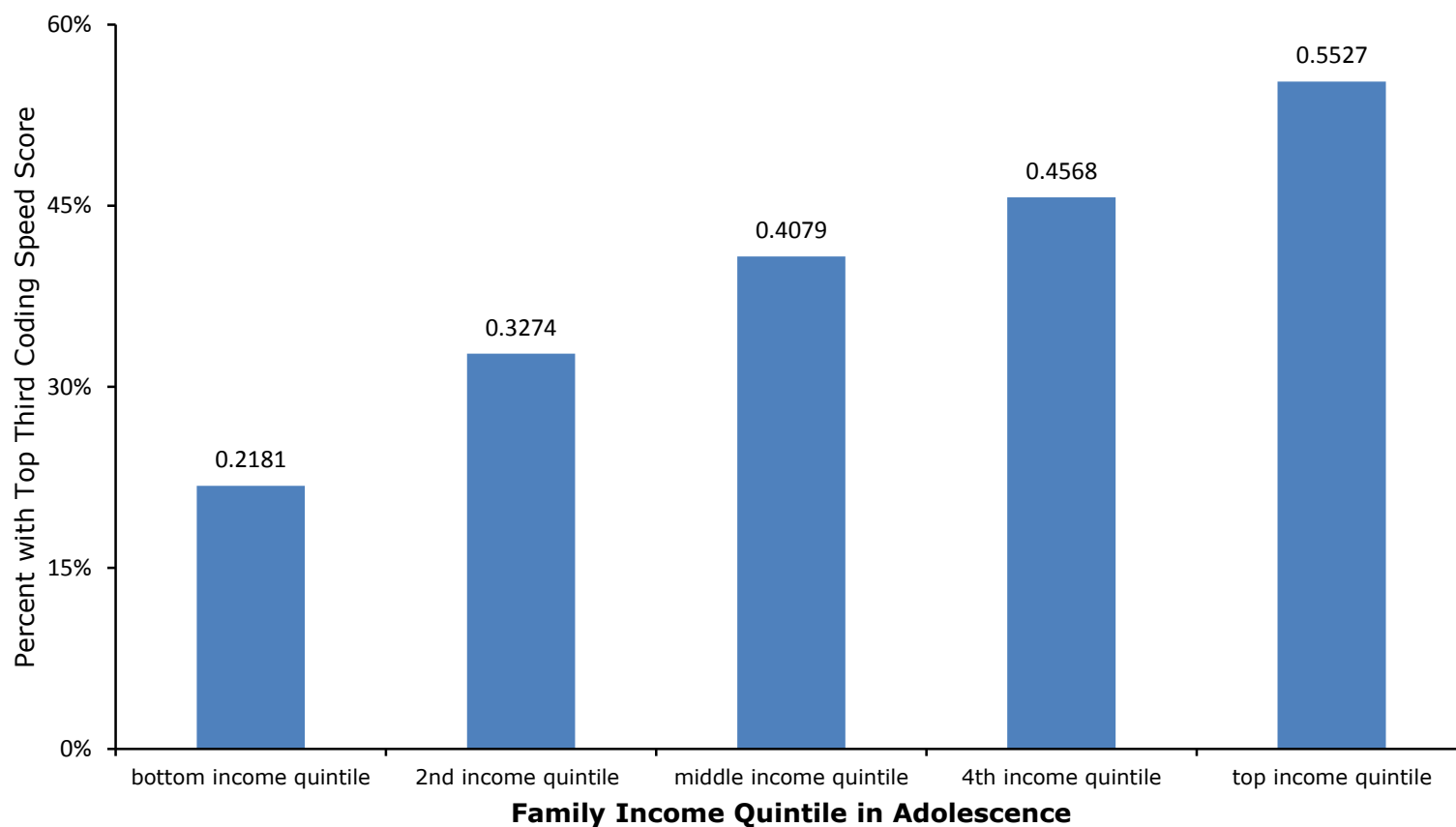
‘Stick-with-it-ness’ & Mobility

Percent chance of moving up or down the family income ladder, by parents' income quintile and non-cognitive skills



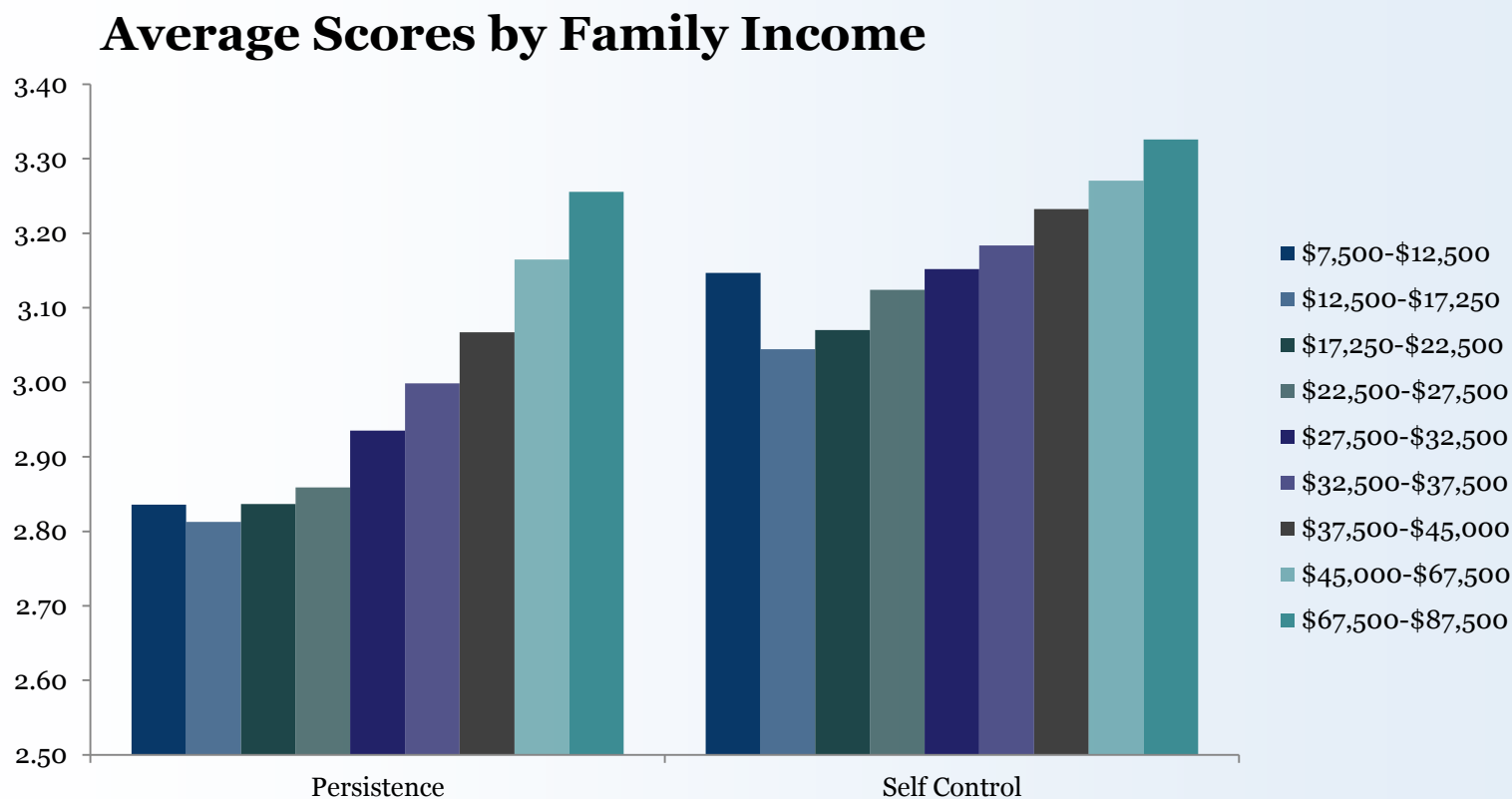
‘Stick-with-it-ness’, by income

Top Third Coding Speed Scorers by Income Quintile



Are there class divides in character strengths?

3. 5th Grade Non-Cog. Scores by Family Income



Source: ECLS-K, data supplied by Jason Fletcher

Character Strengths: Our Measure

‘Hyperactivity’ subscale of the Behavioral Problems Index in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) 1979: Children and Young Adults

Mother rates statements about her child as “not true,” “sometimes true,” or “often true”:

- Has difficulty concentrating/paying attention
- Is easily confused, seems in a fog
- Is impulsive or acts without thinking
- Has trouble getting mind off certain thoughts
- Is restless, overly active, cannot sit still

We have measures for the early years (5/6) and middle childhood (10/11)

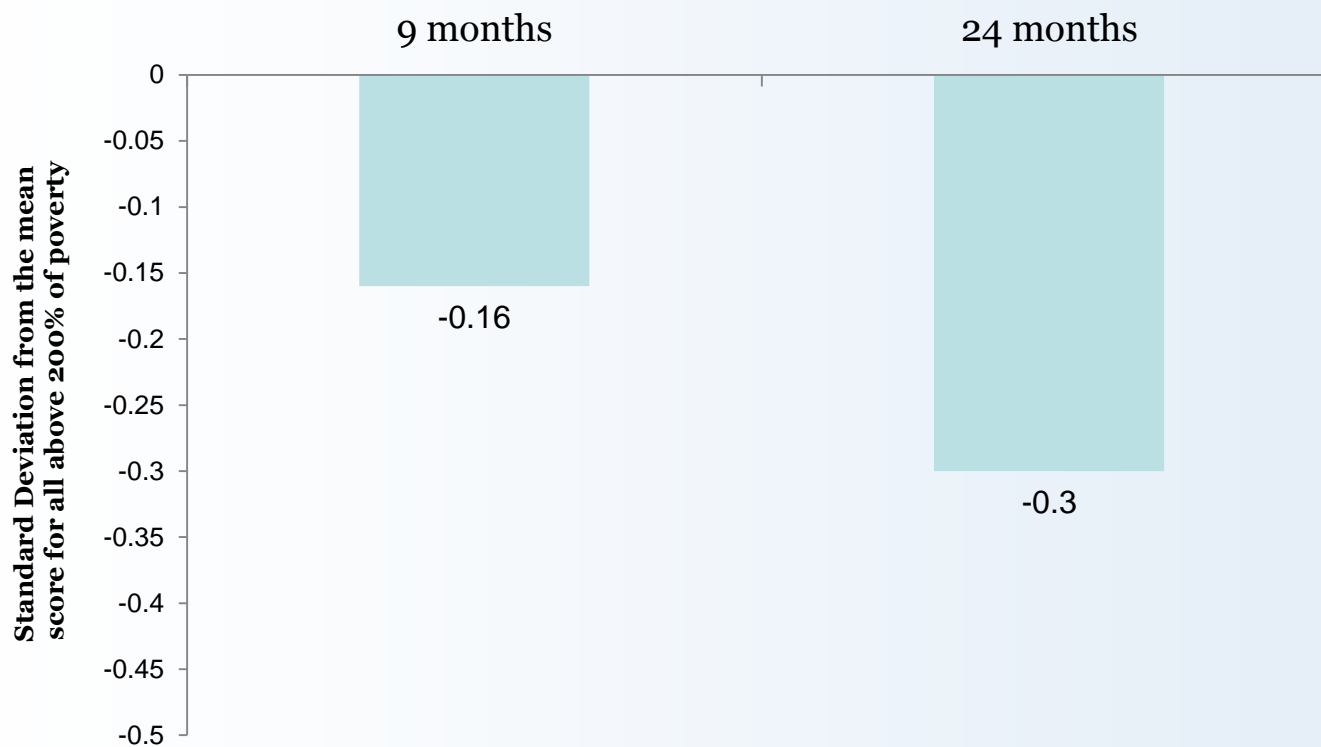
Character Strengths (BPI): Breakdown

		Low Skills (<1 SD below mean)	Medium Skills (1SD below – 1SD above mean)	High Skills (<1 SD above mean)	
Early Childhood		15.61%	59.29%	25.09%	
Middle Childhood		16.84%	55.06%	28.10%	
Composite Measure					
Always Low	Sometimes Low	Always Middle	Sometimes High	Always High	Low/High
6.73%	17.05%	36.88%	23.53%	13.85%	1.95%

Are there class divides in character strengths?

Very Early BPI Gaps

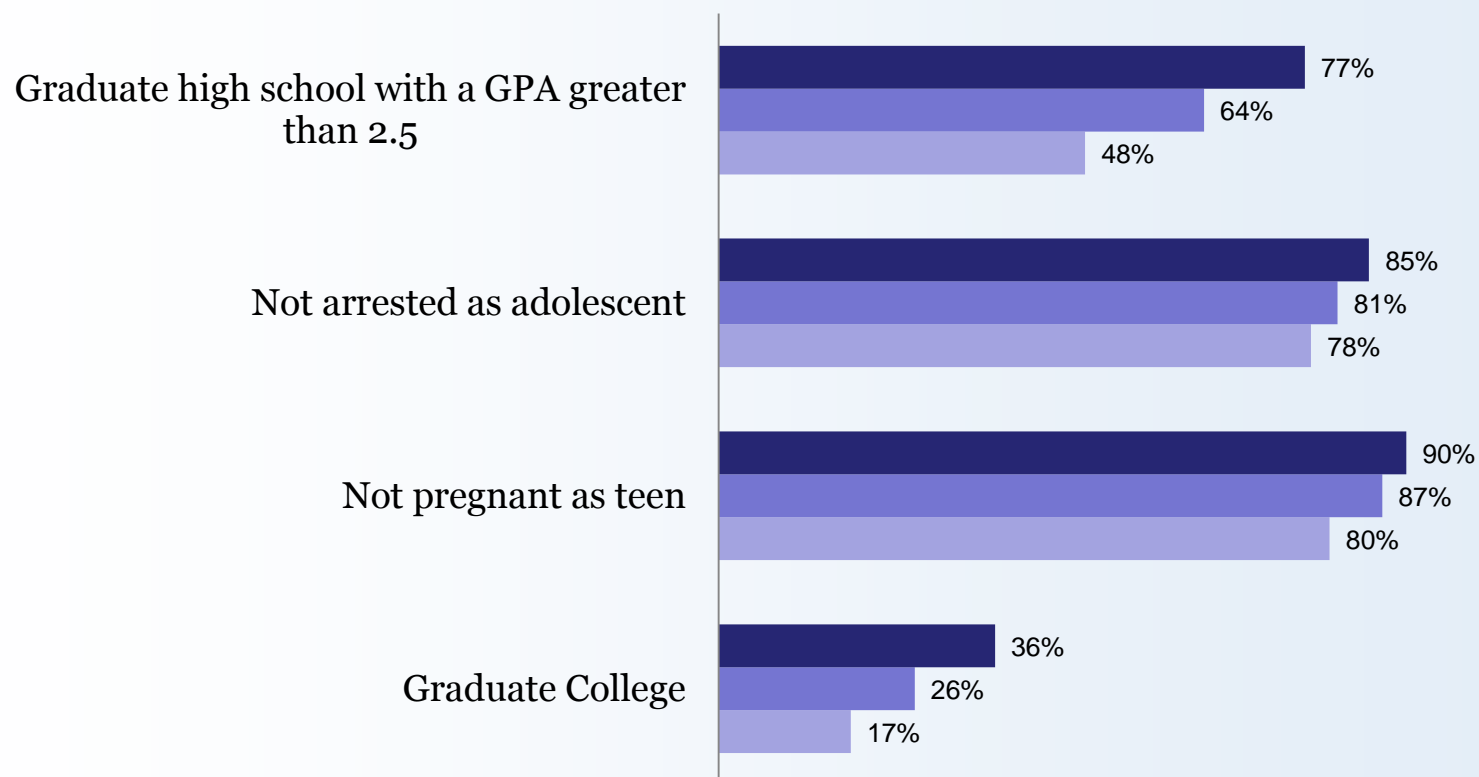
Disparities on the Positive Behavior Index Scores between Higher- and Lower-Income Infants at 9 and 24 Months



Source: Halle, Forry, Hari, Perper, Wandner, Wessel, and Vick, 2009

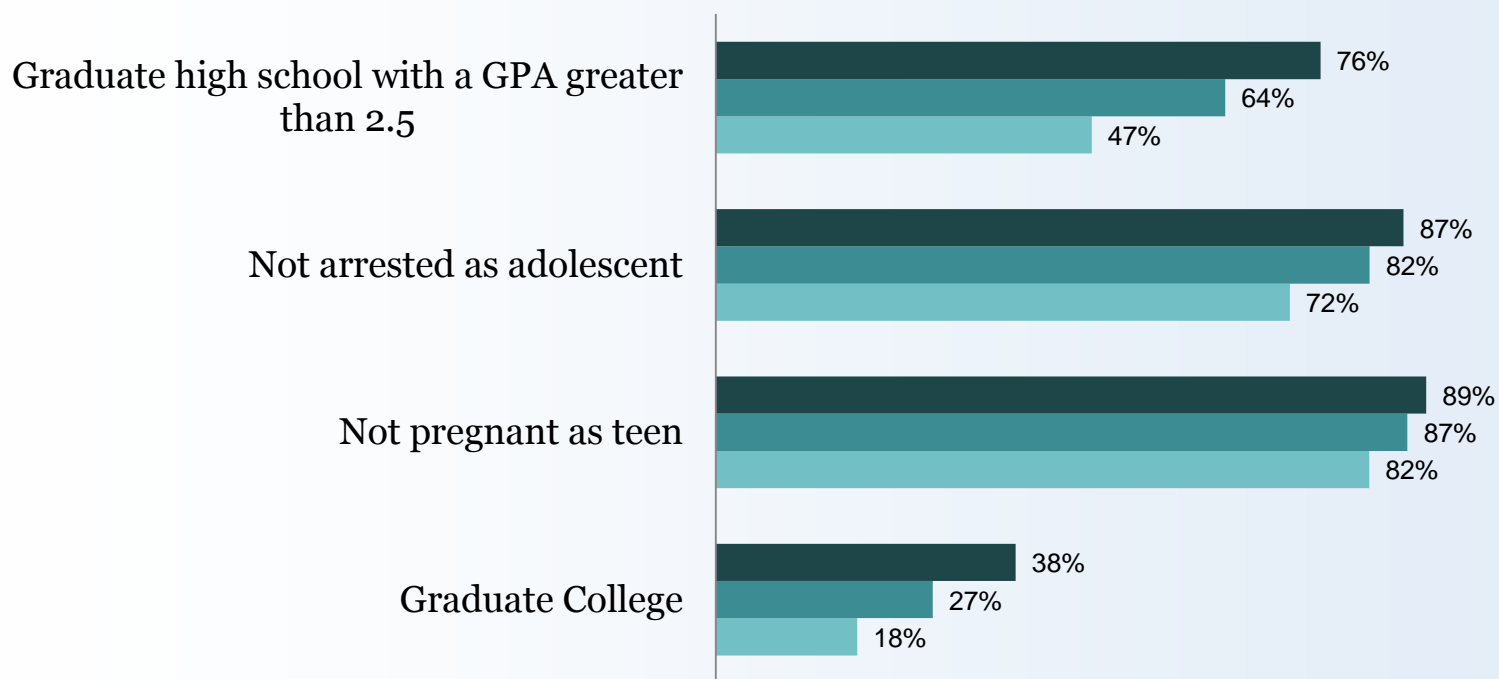
Early Years Character Strengths: Key Outcomes

■ Low levels of hyperactivity ■ Medium levels of hyperactivity ■ Children with high levels of hyperactivity



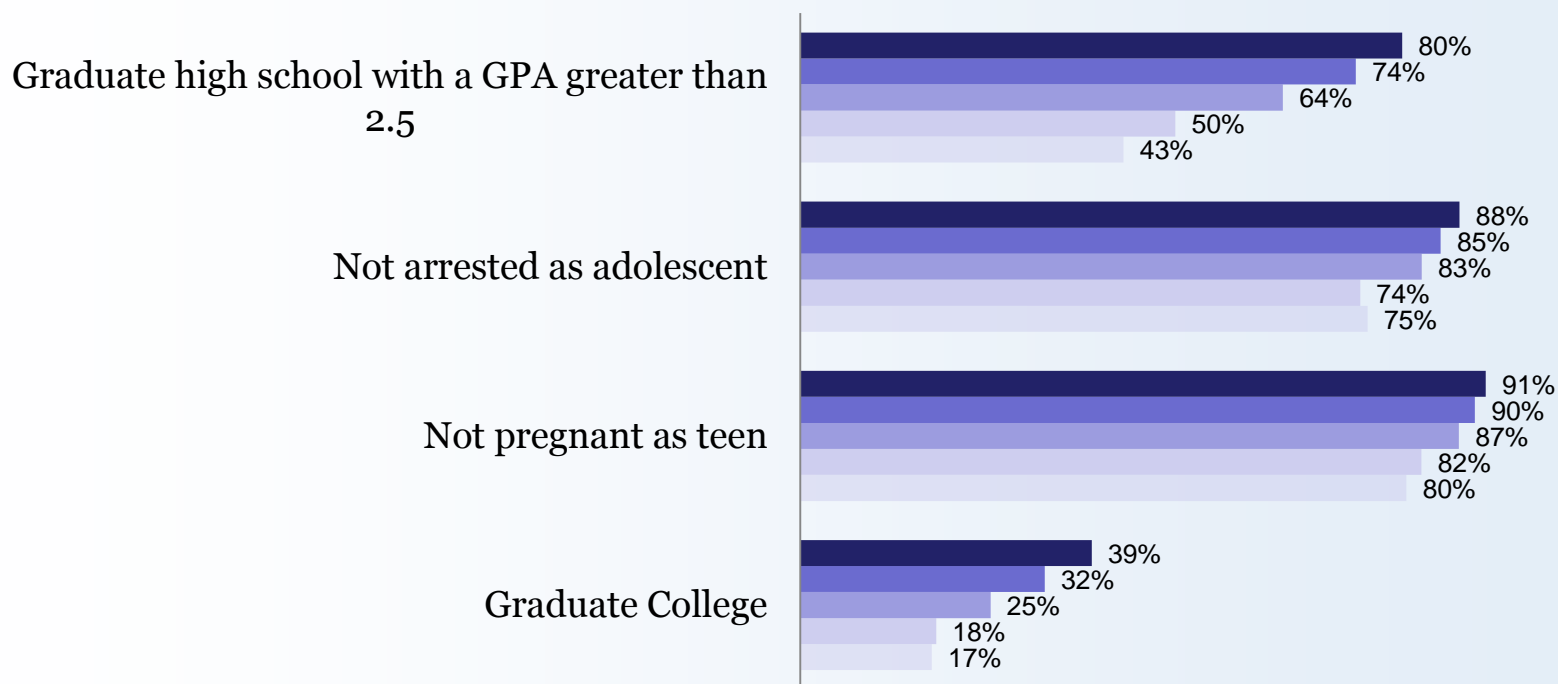
Middle Childhood Character Strengths: Key Outcomes

■ Low levels of hyperactivity ■ Medium levels of hyperactivity ■ Children with high levels of hyperactivity



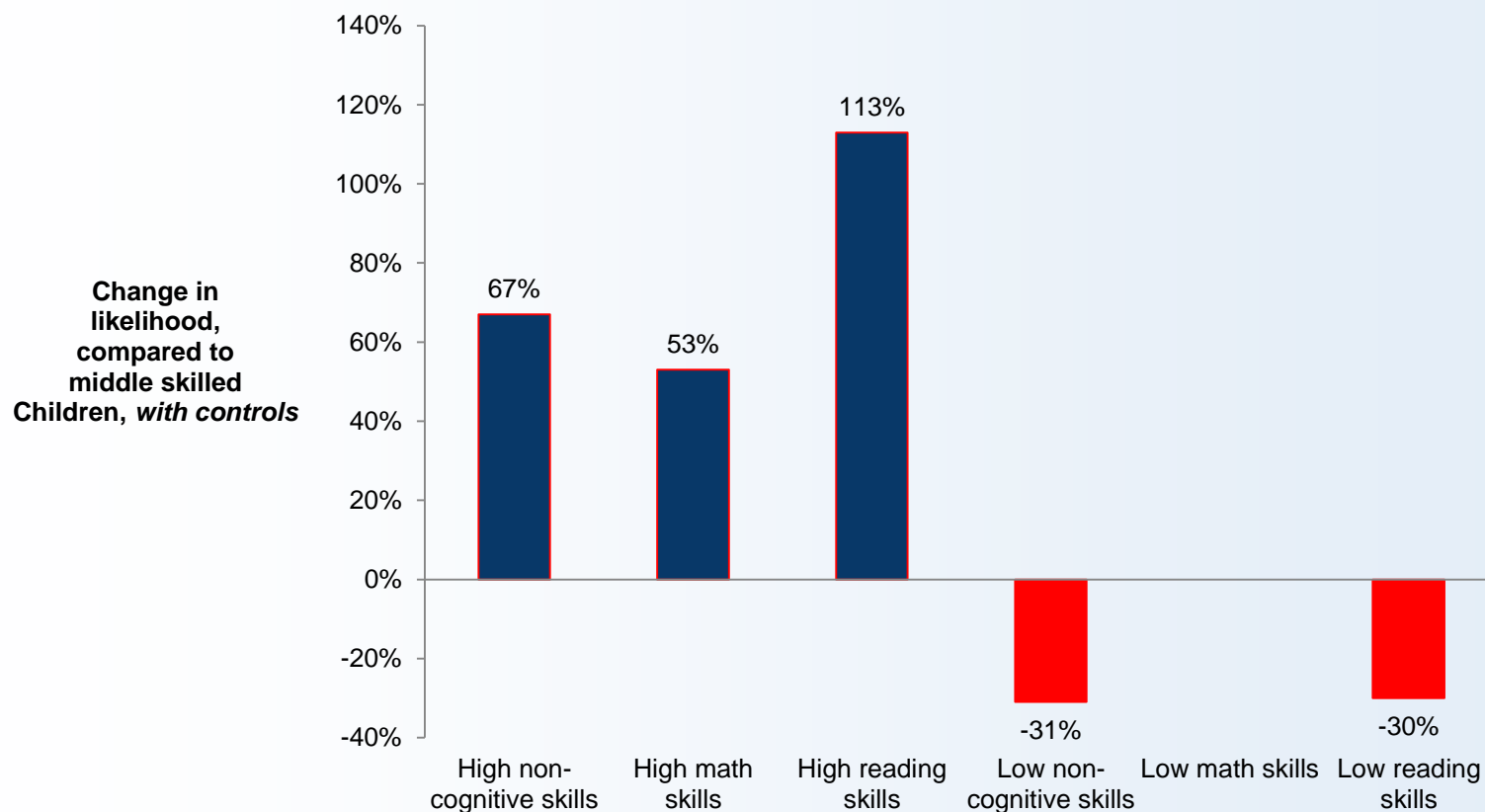
Composite Measure Character Strengths: Key Outcomes

- Always Low Levels of Hyperactivity
- Sometimes Low
- Always Medium
- Sometimes High
- Always High Levels of Hyperactivity



Character Strengths v. Smarts:

What matters most for HS Graduation?



Final Thoughts

- American Dream based on meritocratic movement, circulation of elites
- Individualist egalitarianism: born equal, but responsible for own destiny
- US is falling short of its own Dream
- Among the vital *skills* for mobility are character strengths as well as smarts
- So, equal opportunity policy needs to incorporate these skills into analysis and policy, too

Really, Honestly Final Thought

Does the individualist egalitarianism underpinning the American ideal of equal opportunity rely not only upon ‘book smarts’, but also on character strengths such as prudence and grit?

OR

Does the American Dream require a certain dose of the Frontier Spirit?