



Evidence on Economic Mobility

Prepared for Evidence Matters

February 2025



We are a research and policy lab based at Harvard University.

Our **mission** is to identify barriers to economic opportunity and inform scalable solutions that will empower people throughout the United States to rise out of poverty and achieve better life outcomes.



Outline – What the evidence on mobility tells us

■ Focus on Childhood Environment

What is **economic mobility**? What does **opportunity** look like across America, in King County? What are the **driving factors**?

■ Invest in Social Capital and Economic Connectedness

One of the strongest predictors of economic mobility: **Who you are friends with.**

■ Target Social Communities to Improve Outcomes

How is opportunity **changing nationally**, in **WA state**, and what factors are contributing most to these trends?



Focus on Childhood Environment

The Geography of Opportunity

Where and for whom does opportunity exist?

What is Economic Mobility?

Children's income in adulthood relative to their parent's



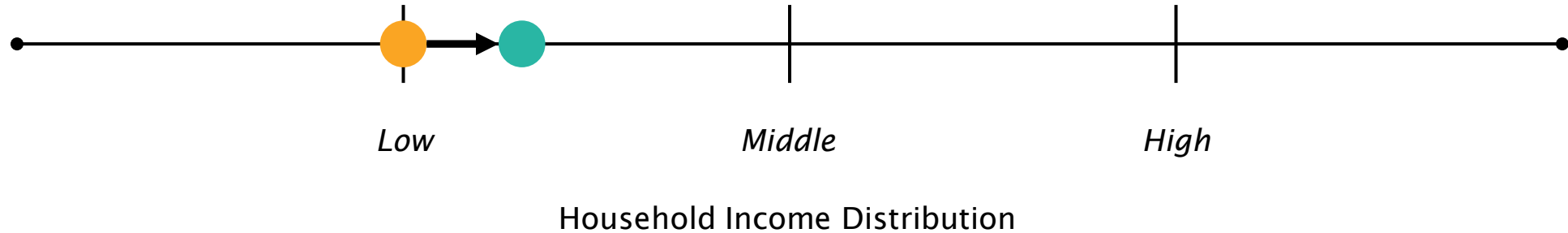
Parent's Household Income

The household income a child is exposed to while growing up



Child's Household Income in Adulthood

The household income a child achieves later in life



What is Economic Mobility?

Children's income in adulthood relative to their parent's



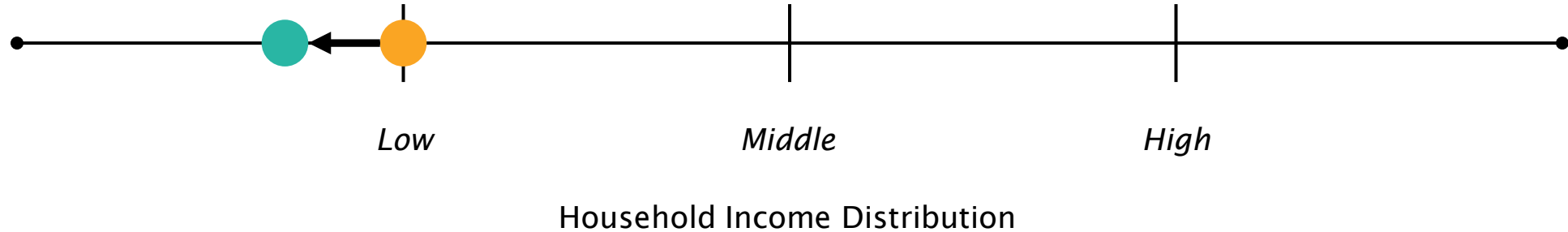
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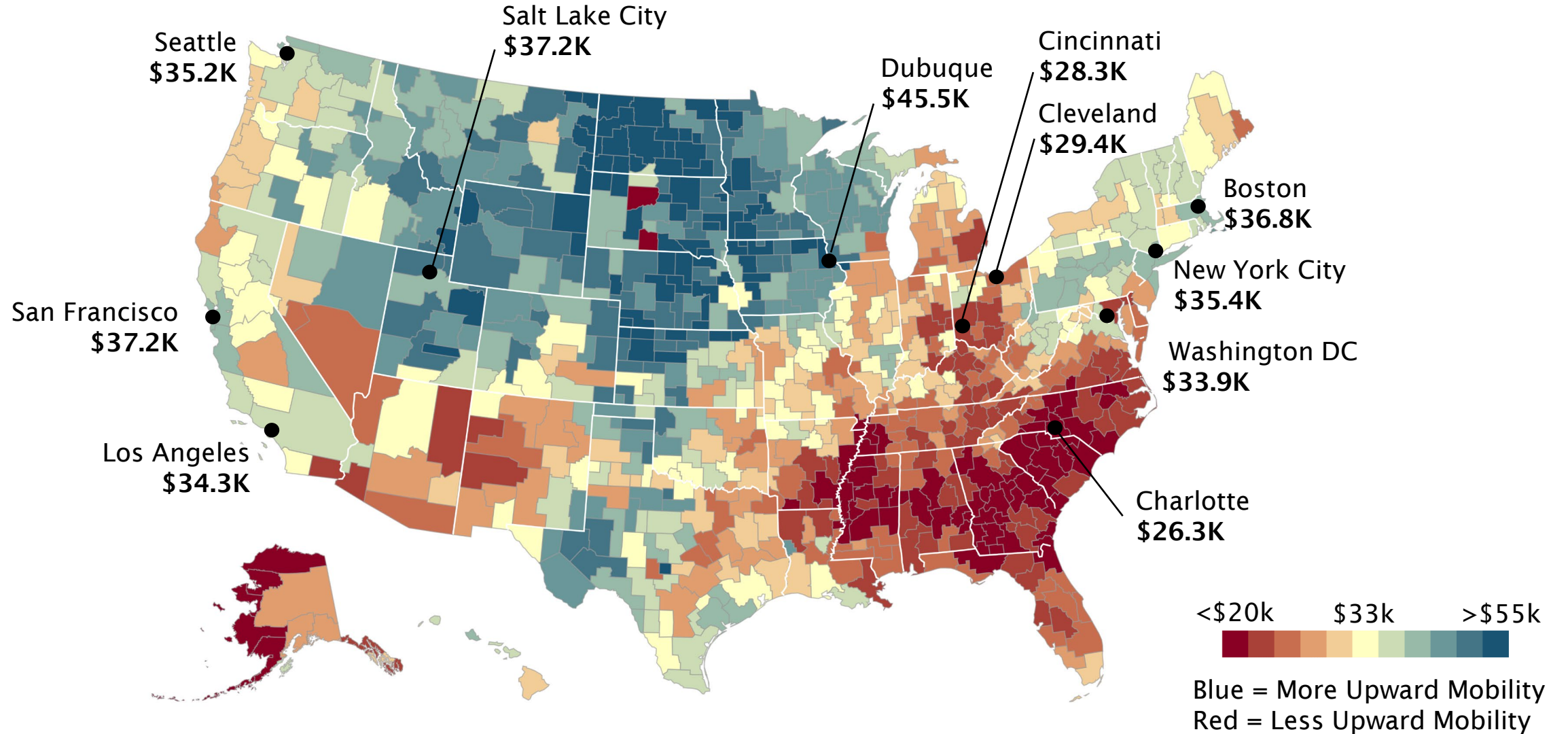
Using Big Data – The Geography of Opportunity

We repeat this same analysis for ~20 million Americans, mapping their income back to the neighborhoods in which they grew up, to see which places in America offer children the best chances of climbing the income ladder.



Opportunity Varies by Place

Average Household Income at Age 35 for Children whose Parents Earned \$27K (25th percentile)

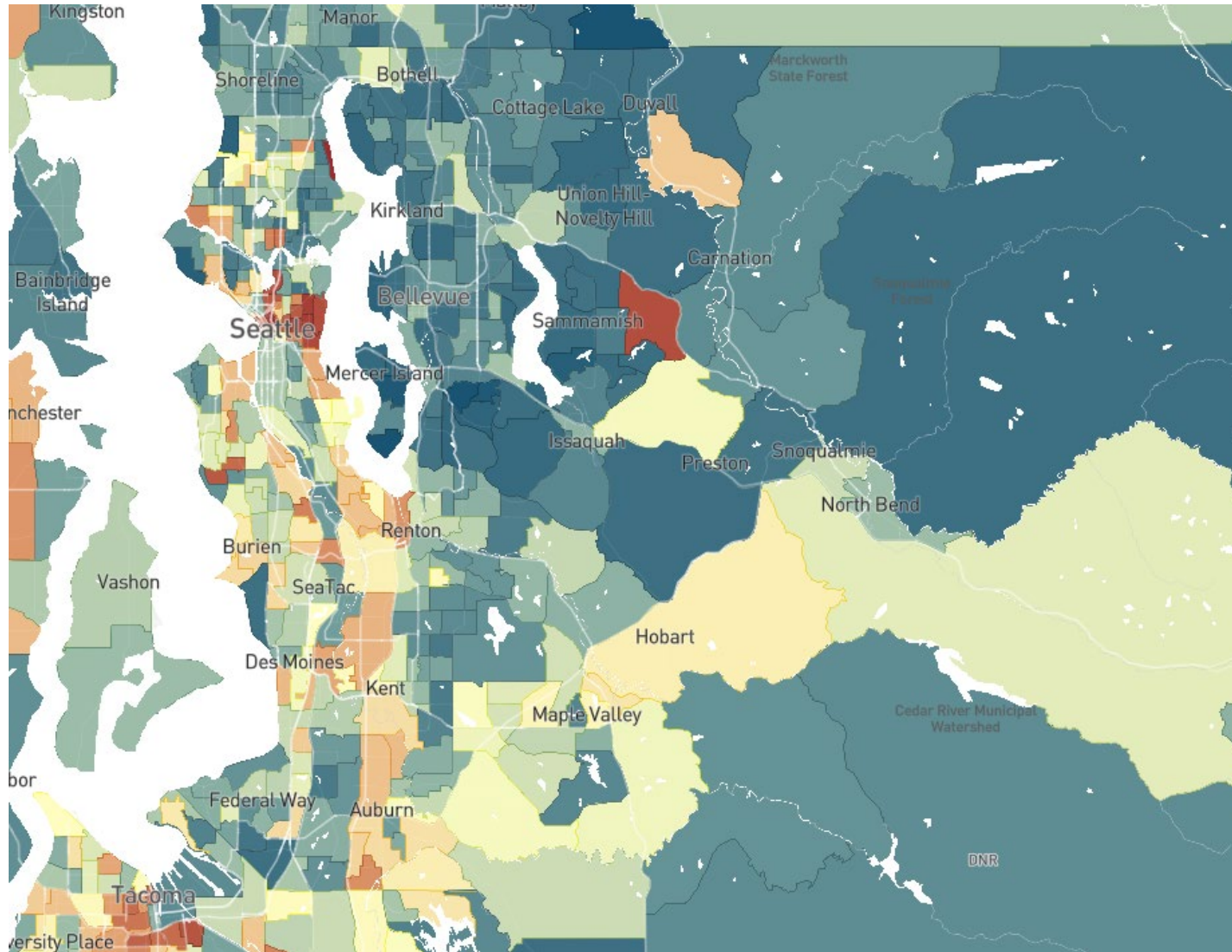


Source: Chetty, Hendren, Kline, Saez (QJE 2014)



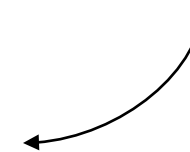
Opportunity Varies by Place + *is hyper local*

Average Household Income at Age 35 for Children whose Parents Earned \$27K (25th percentile)



Growing up in adjacent neighborhoods can be the same as living in completely different regions of the U.S.

King County, WA



<\$20k \$33k >\$55k



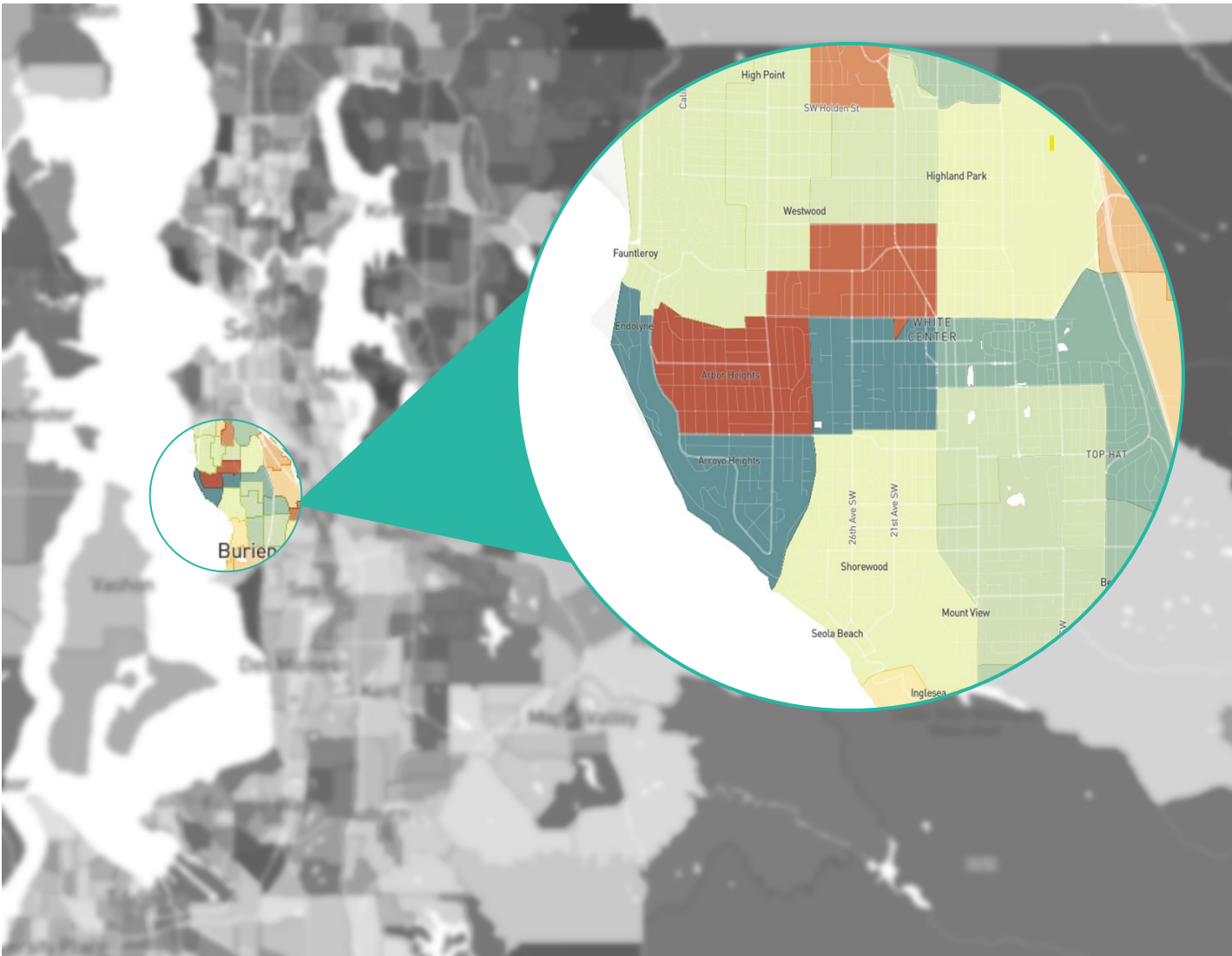
Blue = More Upward Mobility
Red = Less Upward Mobility

Source: Opportunity Atlas, Opportunity Insights and the US Census Bureau



Opportunity Varies by Place + *is hyper local*

Average Household Income at Age 35 for Children whose Parents Earned \$27K (25th percentile)



Growing up in adjacent neighborhoods can be the same as living in completely different regions of the U.S.

Neighborhood of White Center



<\$20k \$33k >\$55k

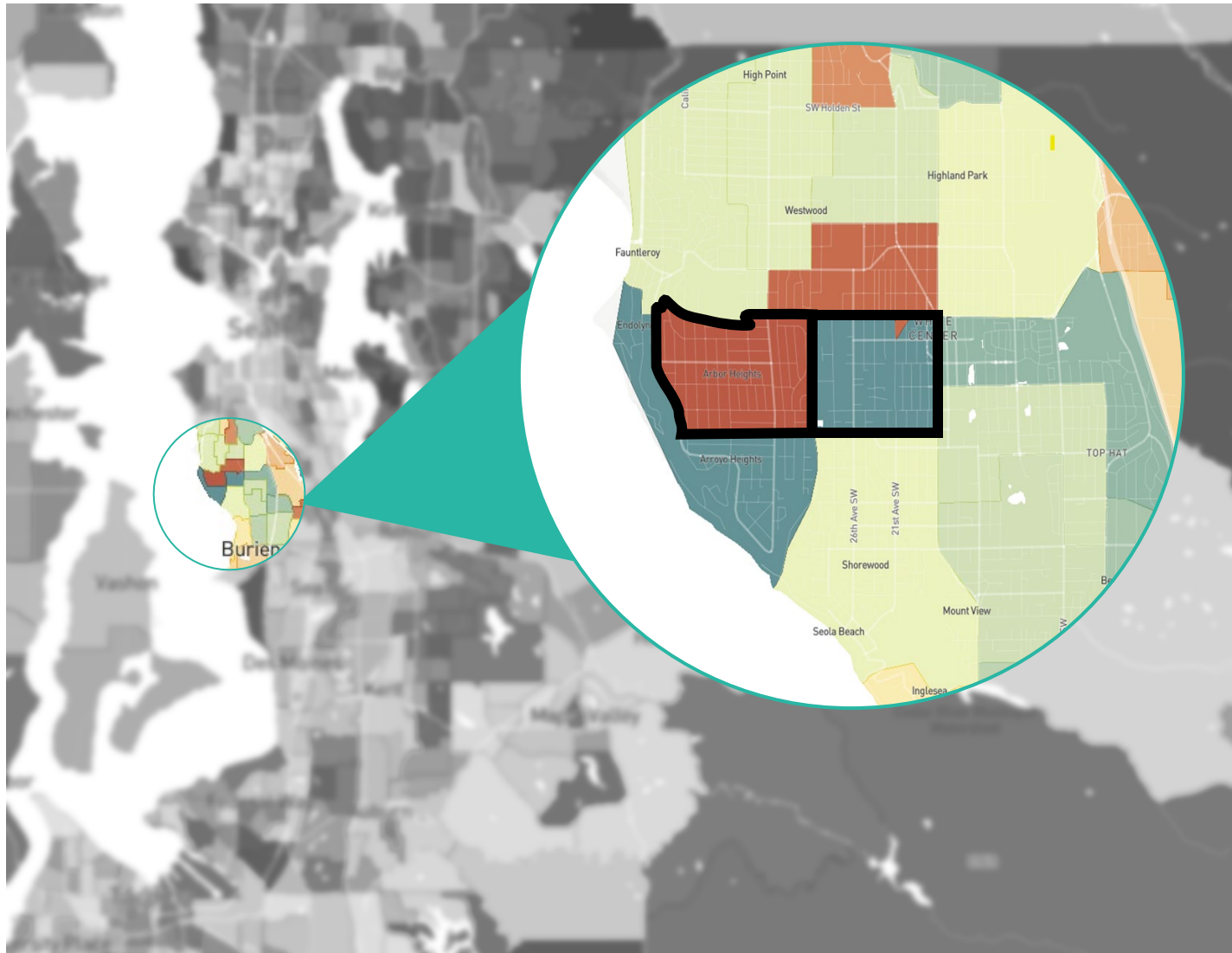


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Neighborhood of White Center



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Characteristics of High Mobility Neighborhoods



**Lower Poverty
Rates**



**More Stable
Family Structure**



**Better School
Quality**



**Greater Social
Capital**



Invest in Social Capital

How do social connections across class lines impact mobility?

Characteristics of High Mobility Neighborhoods



Lower Poverty Rates



More Stable Family Structure



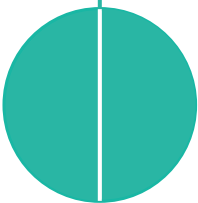
Better School Quality



Greater Social Capital

Economic Connectedness

50% Exposure
Segregation by Income

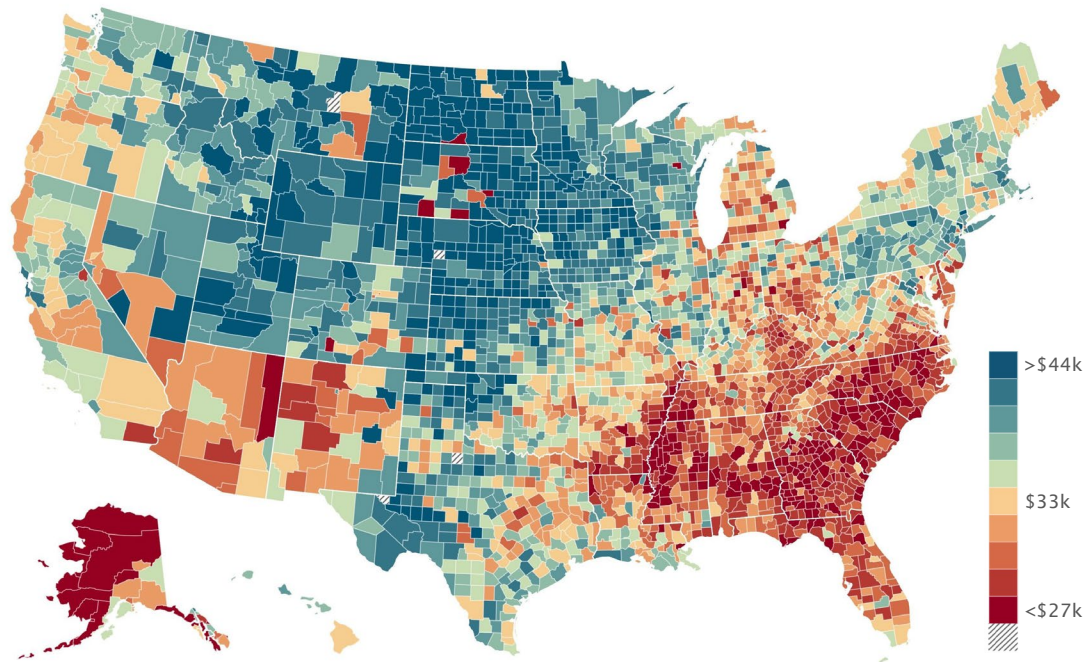


50% Friending Bias
Interaction conditional on exposure



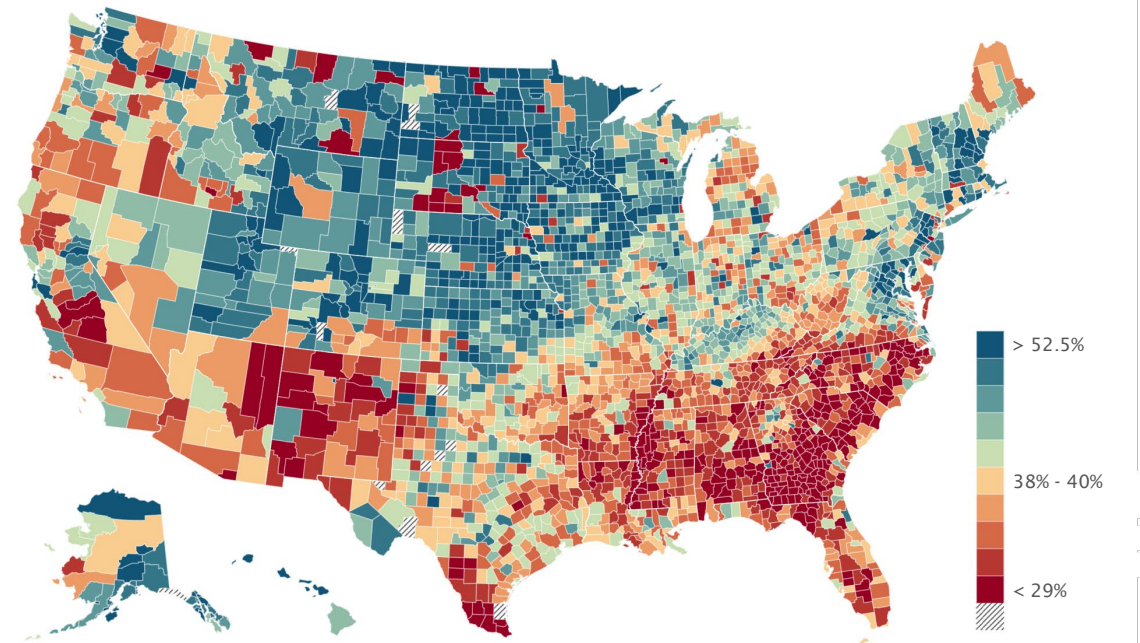
Economic Opportunity and Social Capital

Upward Mobility
Based on Tax Records



Average Household Income at Age 35
for Children whose Parents Earned \$27k

Economic Connectedness
Based on Facebook Data

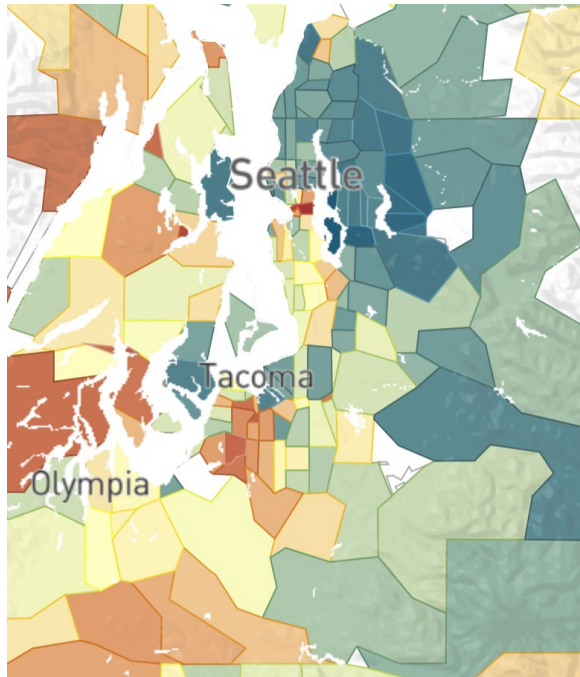


Share of Above-Median-Income Friends
among Below-Median-Income People



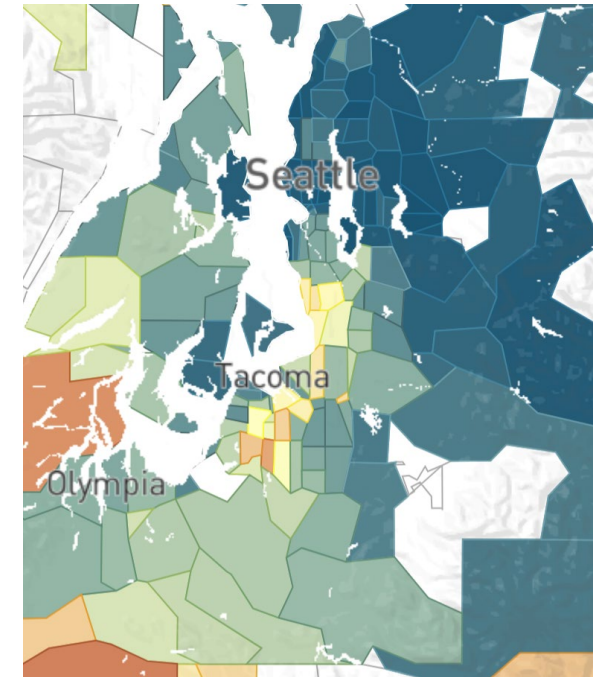
Economic Opportunity and Social Capital in Greater Seattle

**Upward Mobility
Based on Tax Records**



Average Household Income at Age 35
for Children whose Parents Earned \$27k

**Economic Connectedness
Based on Facebook Data**



Share of Above-Median-Income Friends
among Below-Median-Income People



Social Communities as Unit of Change

Changing Opportunity

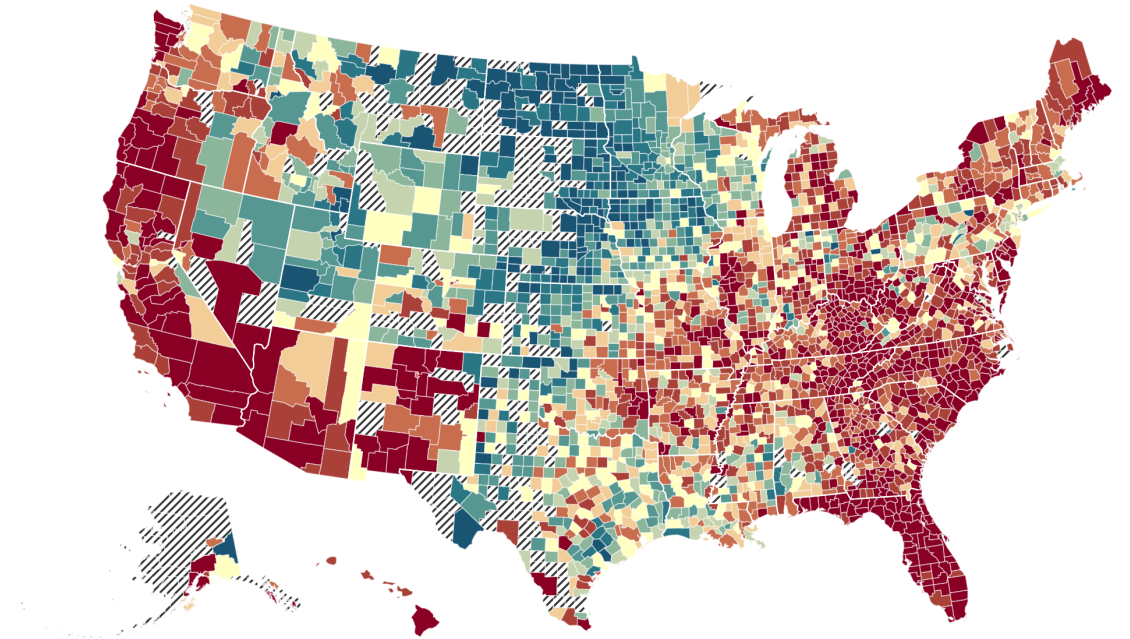
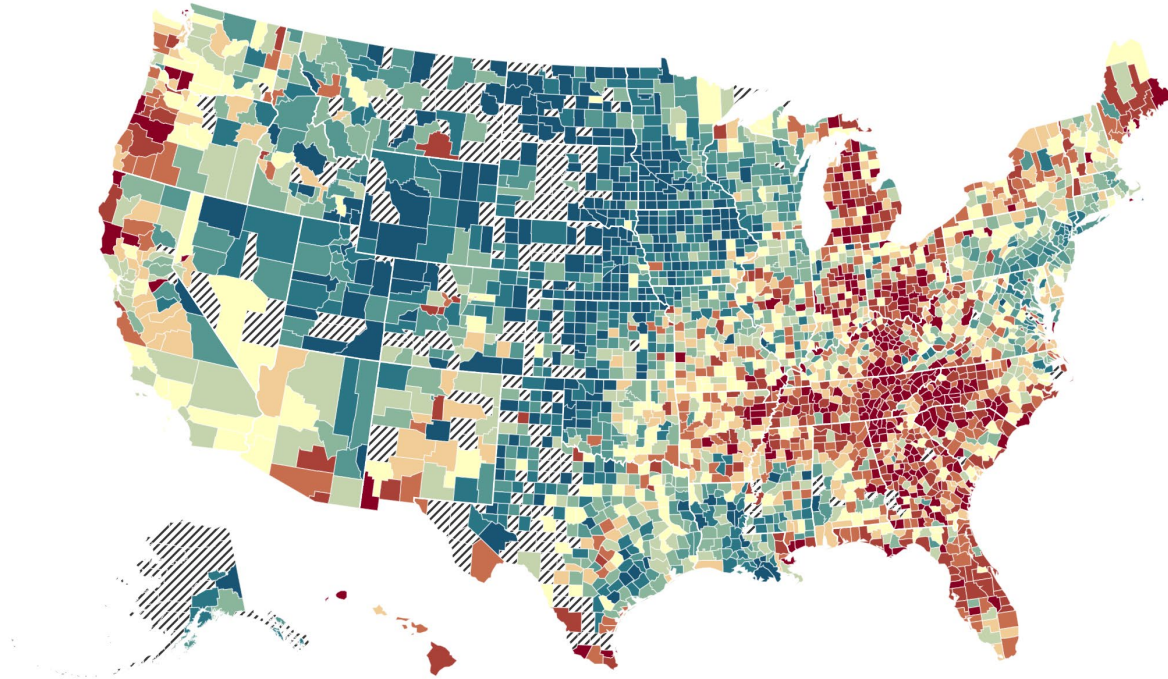
How is opportunity changing within places in recent years?

Changes in Opportunity for White Americans

White Children with Low-Income Parents

Born in 1978

Born in 1992



Household Income Percentile at Age 27 for
Children with Parents at 25th Percentile

\$30.8k

\$33.7k

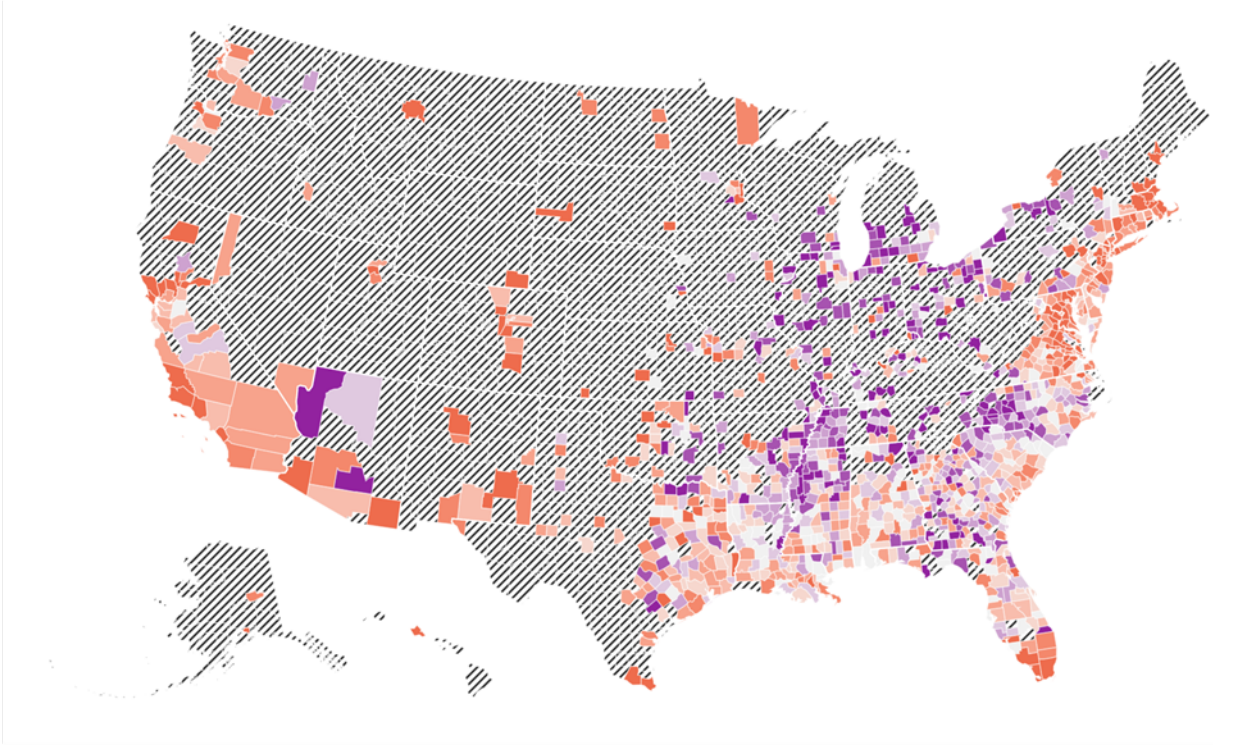
\$40.9k



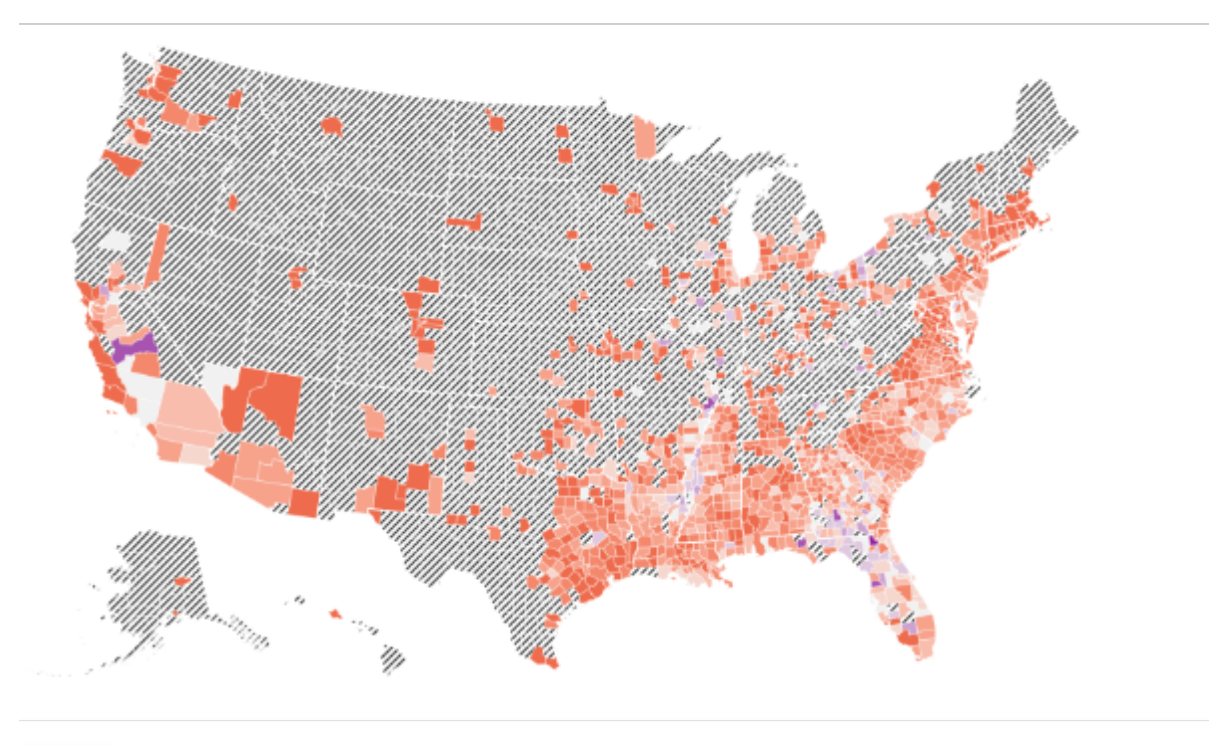
Changes in Opportunity for Black Americans

Black Children with Low-Income Parents

Born in 1978



Born in 1992



Household Income Percentile at Age 27 for
Children with Parents at 25th Percentile

\$18.8k

\$21.2k

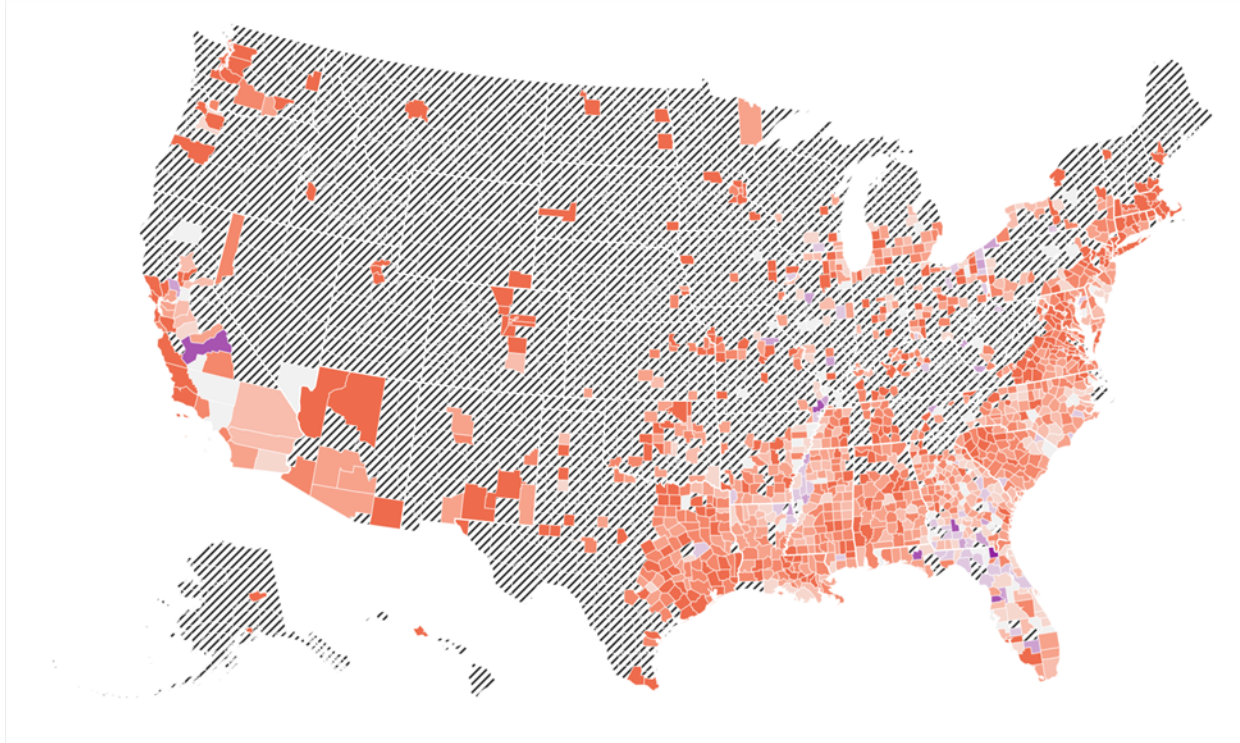
\$25.6k



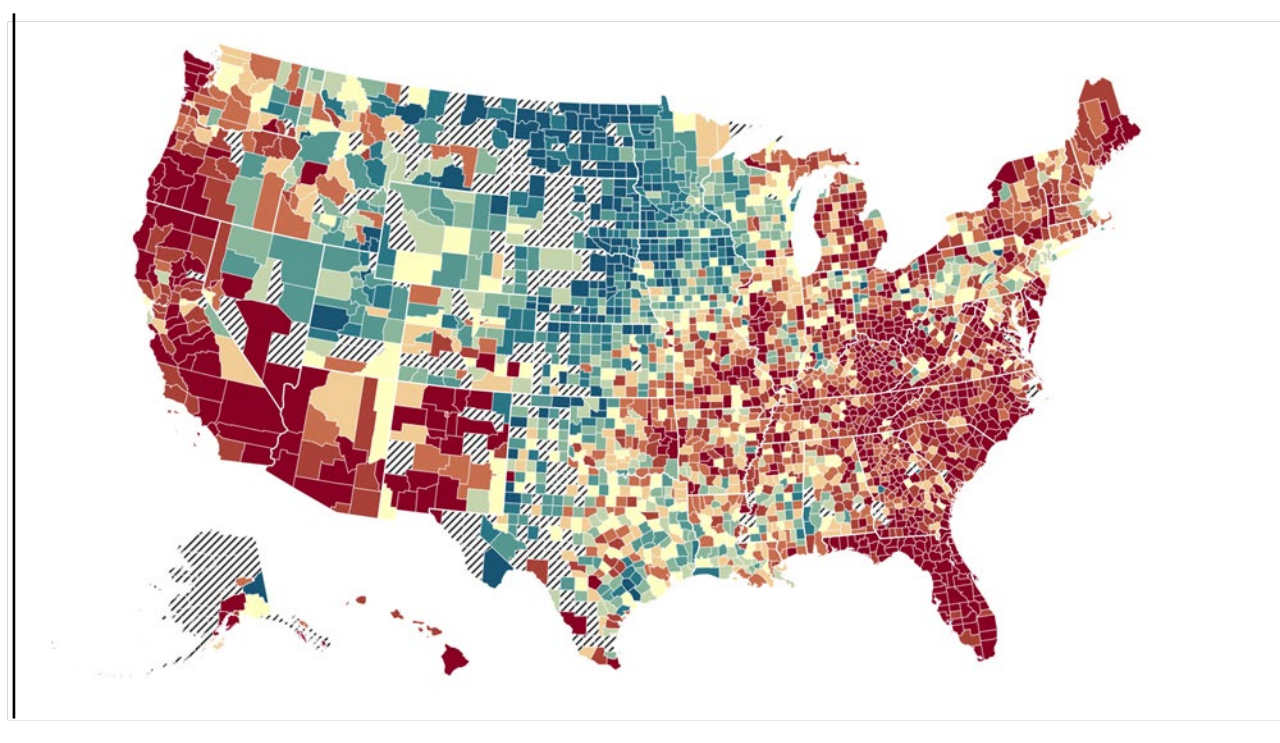
The Geography of Upward Mobility in the United States

Average Household Income at Age 27 for Children born in 1992 whose Parents Earned \$27K

Black Children Born in 1992



White Children Born in 1992



Household Income Percentile at Age 27 for
Children with Parents at 25th Percentile

\$18.8k

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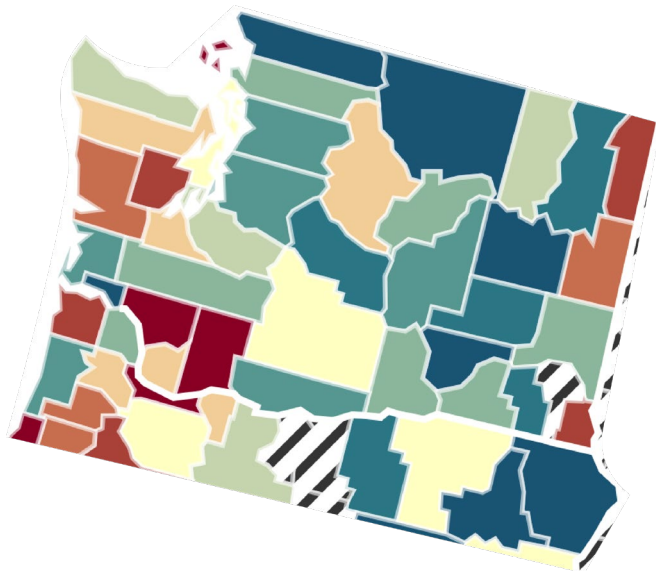
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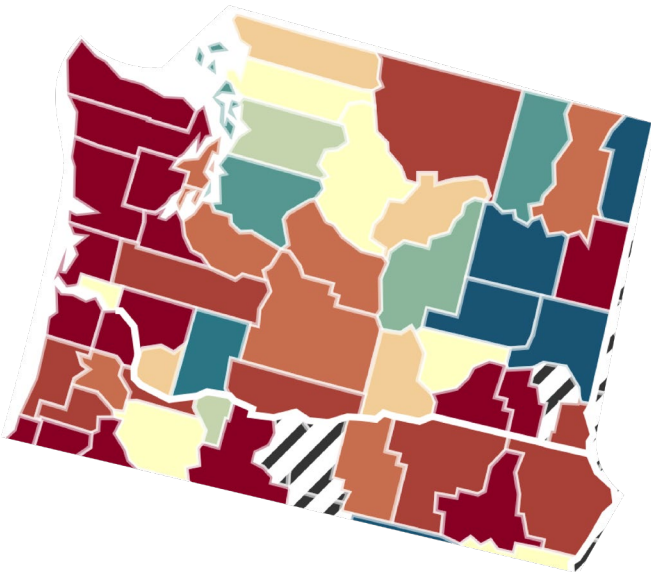
Changes in Opportunity for White Americans in WA State

White Children with Low-Income Parents

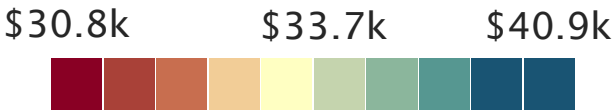
Born in 1978



Born in 1992



Household Income Percentile at Age 27 for
Children with Parents at 25th Percentile



Source: Chetty, Dobbie, Goldman, Porter, Yang (2024)



Changes in Opportunity for Black Americans in WA State

Black Children with Low-Income Parents

Born in 1978



Born in 1992



Household Income Percentile at Age 27 for
Children with Parents at 25th Percentile

\$18.8k

\$21.2k

\$25.6k



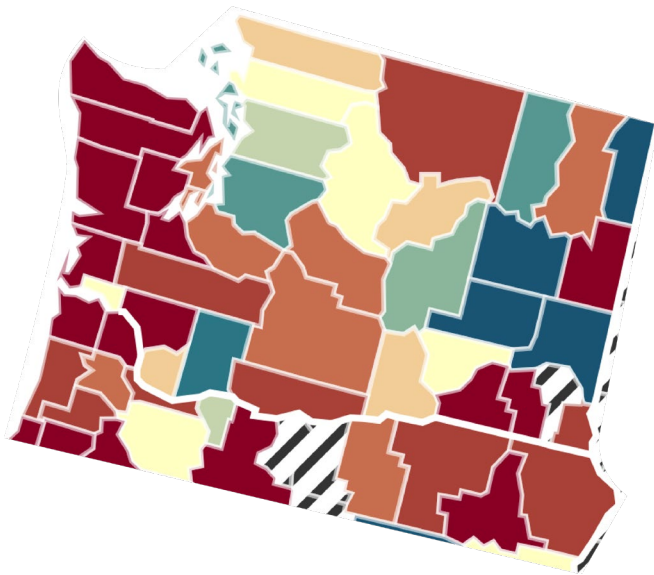
The Geography of Upward Mobility in WA State

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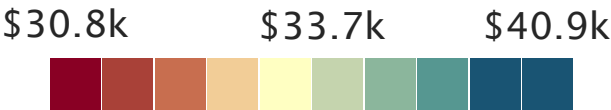
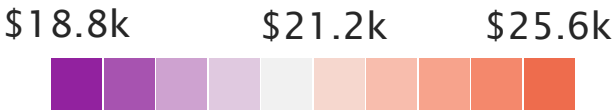
Black Children Born in 1992



White Children Born in 1992



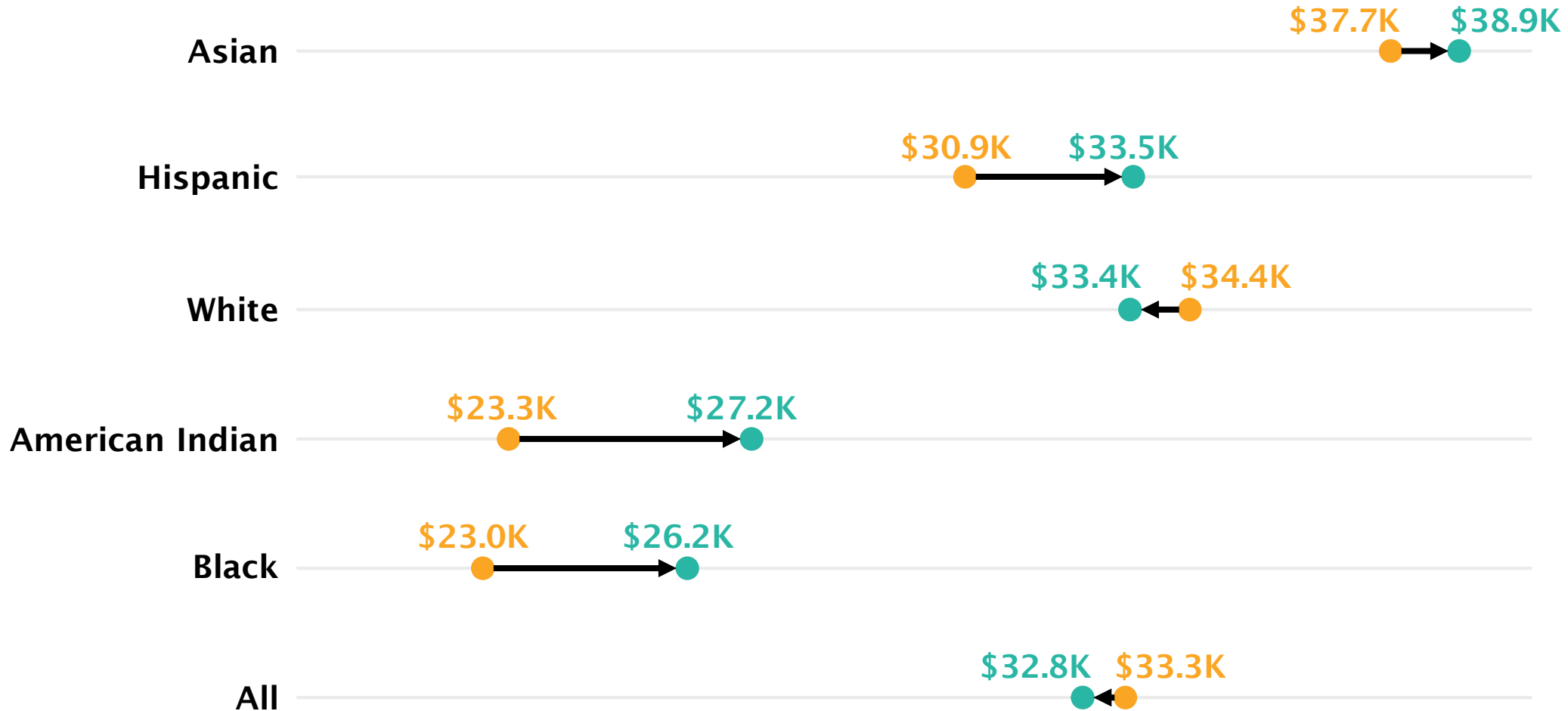
Household Income Percentile at Age 27 for
Children with Parents at 25th Percentile



Trends in Economic Mobility by Group in Greater Seattle

Average Change in Household Income at Age 27 for Children born in 1978 vs. 1992 to Low-Income Parents

● Born in 1978 ● Born in 1992



Source: Opportunity Atlas, Opportunity Insights and the US Census Bureau



Drivers of Changes in Opportunity

Improved Community Conditions

Growing up in a thriving community — where the adults are employed, in good health, etc. — dramatically improves children's outcomes, even holding fixed their own family's situation.



Parental Employment Rates

*A proxy for broader
community conditions*



Social Interactions

*The community children
interact with*



Ways to Increase Opportunity Going Forward

Focus on Childhood Environment



Provide opportunity-rich environments from birth to adulthood

Invest in Social Capital



Connect those who don't have opportunity to those who do

Social Communities as Unit of Change



Target communities that have historically lacked opportunity



Three Ways To Use The Opportunity Atlas



Explore the Data

Discover what economic mobility looks like in your community. **Where** does it exist, **for whom**, and **how is it changing?**



Catalyze Support

Leverage the data to **build awareness and momentum** for economic mobility in your community.



Target Strategies

Use the data to target economic mobility initiatives to **where they are needed most** - by place and sub population.

Visit the Opportunity Atlas

