

# My social mobility journey feels more like an exhausting, endless quest



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## **Transience, poverty and hard work: that's the lot of the working-class graduate in a Britain that reserves its best jobs for the wealthy**

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I am one of Britain's "socially mobile". I am one of the few pupils to go to university from a free school meals background, and one of the one in a thousand who make it into Oxbridge. And I'm part of a dwindling number. The annual report from the government's social mobility commission found that social mobility, already a deep  
5 problem, is getting worse "for an entire generation of young people".

Although I may appear to be a success story, my background still remains the biggest barrier to earning a decent living. I sit writing this in the dark early hours, because I have to leave for my waitressing shift in four hours' time. I write it from my boyfriend's kitchen because I am currently living with him and his mum, while I sub-  
10 let my own room to make up the money for rent this month. I have had to ask my friends to top up my Oyster card three times this month.

Before going to Cambridge, I was from the type of family that, the "State of Britain" report tells us, is 1.5 times less likely to get careers advice, whose parents' insider experience won't navigate them to higher pay cheques.

15 Being willing to work around that lack of knowledge wouldn't help me either. It didn't matter where I went to university. When I left, my lack of family wealth meant taking the first job I was offered, at just above the minimum wage, because I needed money, and fast. Withstanding months of rejection while waiting for a stable, well-paid career job to come along was not an option.

20 The effect on mobility was insidious: a slow starting salary means no prospect of saving for years to come. We line the pockets of private landlords instead of cementing our futures. And that is not because we are unwilling to work.

Today I will spend two extra hours travelling because I can't afford the train. I will nap between my shifts because of the sleep I lost writing this article. And I will return  
25 past midnight, because that is what it takes to do the career I love. I will do this instead of taking up the TV opportunity I was offered today, that will gain me the type of "exposure" I need for a career in the media.

Others will take up unpaid internships, if they can afford to. The report highlights the corrosive impact of these, and calls for them to be banned. Being expected to work  
30 for free is a scourge for all young people, but it feels insurmountable if you don't have money from your family.

As the report shows, most such unpaid internships are in London, the most expensive city in the country. That means that if you don't have relatives or friends there, or money to put you up while you work for free, you are locked out based on  
35 your background.

For people from working-class backgrounds, this inability to take up the opportunities required for the careers we want is often used against us. Why take a career in journalism, then? Why live in London, then? That is not the point. I thought the mantra was that if we worked hard, we would get ahead. I never thought that  
40 getting ahead would mean walking across London to work for free in restaurants and bars in my late twenties, to do the career that I love.

And it is not just about those starting off. Working-class people are locked out of all types of career opportunities based solely on background. We are denied jobs for not conforming to invisible middle-class dress codes, such as wearing the right shoes.  
45 Our career progression is slower because of our accents. The problem is insidious, institutional and unfair.

While the social mobility commission has pledged to rank firms on their performance on progressing mobility, it has also promised anonymity when doing so. These are the olive branches we are supposed to accept.

50 So, it is great to hear the acceptance that people from working-class backgrounds have an incredibly tough time making it in the world of work, but I am unsure what I am supposed to take from this. Until the barriers to working-class people in this country are truly recognised, I don't want to be socially mobile. I am fed up with living a life in transit. I want to be there. I want to be middle class.