

# **Beyond the Ranking: Deeper Lessons from Charlotte's New Economic Mobility Data**

Opinion BY EVAN BILLE MAGEN  
AUGUST 01, 2024 12:00 PM

[PHOTO] LaTonda Faggart feeds her two-year old son, Ezekiel Faggart during lunch at FeedNC in Mooresville, N.C. on Tuesday, October 24, 2023. The nonprofit provides breakfast, lunch and groceries to people in need and operates a Workforce Development Program that focuses on culinary and warehouse jobs.

Since 2014, Charlotte's economic mobility, or lack thereof, has had a hold on the soul of the city. The "Land of Opportunity" study by economist Raj Chetty started the conversation that I heard repeated across business, government, churches, nonprofits and even my seminary classes. I heard the same thing each time: 50 out of 50. Charlotte ranked last out of 50 American cities in opportunity for low-income children to rise out of poverty. Chetty recently released an updated study, "Changing Opportunity," in which Charlotte made significant progress, now ranking 38. It feels like the new rankings let our community exhale. Charlotte leaders worked to improve economic mobility, and this study confirms we are making progress. Media coverage of the new data emphasized two ideas: Charlotte's ranking improved, and economic mobility is improving. But neither of these claims are in the study. Evan Bille Magen Charlotte's new ranking is not mentioned in the study itself. The new rankings can be found on the Opportunity Atlas website from the raw data of county and city level trends. In our rush to see where we stand, we have overlooked the study's actual results. The original study tracked the outcomes for children born in the late 1970s and early '80s. In "Changing Opportunity," the authors expanded the data to include children born through 1992. The "new" data on economic mobility capture the effects of neighborhood and community change on children 20 years ago. Economic mobility in Charlotte increased at the third highest rate in the country during that time. But from this study, we cannot say economic mobility is currently improving for children in Charlotte. Charlotte will not see the fruit of current initiatives translate into higher rankings for at least two decades. That makes investments in children politically disadvantageous. It is more convenient to celebrate progress in the rankings now, even though its unrelated to current policy. It is harder, but necessary, to advocate for

policies that we will not benefit from until after our careers, campaigns and initiatives are over. We can start by putting less emphasis on rankings and more on the substance of the new research. The new study's actual results are really encouraging. Even after a century of enslavement and another century of segregation and redlining in Charlotte, economic opportunity can improve in a relatively short time, especially for Black children. We now know it only takes one generation to significantly impact a community and rapidly increase the opportunity and mobility for the next. The authors make three recommendations that can help Charlotte build on work it is already doing. First, adult unemployment in a neighborhood hurts the future opportunities of the neighborhood's children. So, workforce programs like job-training should not only target adults, but also youth and young adults. Second, economic mobility depends on children's "social communities" — where they live, who they interact with. Policies like Charlotte's UDO, which change zoning restrictions and increase availability of affordable housing in high-opportunity neighborhoods, can help promote greater connection across race and class divisions. Lastly, changes in policy alone are not enough to close the gap. Recent evidence finds that the most successful programs combine financial capital (i.e. housing vouchers) with social capital (neighbors willing to help). Faith-based organizations and other community groups can strengthen policy change and expand economic opportunity by fostering connections for children, their families. When we go beyond the rankings, there are deeper lessons within the new landscape of Charlotte's economic mobility. Progress is achievable in one generation. Policies that prioritize children in housing and employment expand opportunity. Every person in Charlotte can make an impact through connection. And if we commit to those lessons, we will see the impact in Charlotte before any rankings tell us.

*Evan Bille Magen is a recent graduate of Union Presbyterian Seminary in Charlotte who writes about the intersections of faith and economics.*