Immigrant Mobility Over Time

Colonial Era (1630 – 1783)

- European social system of feudalism (no social mobility) is absent in the colonies
- Immigrants migrate to flee from persecution and feudalism [1]
- Predominantly English, Irish and Scottish immigrants [1]
- The average colonist lives and eats better than a peasant in Europe [1]
- Many former peasants make their fortunes in America [1]
- Lowest Gini index (measure of inequality) in the world [7]

Famine Migration (1846 – 1851)

- Mass starvation in Ireland and revolutionary violence in Europe cause mass upheaval [1]
- 1.1 million Irish emigrate, 915,000 arrive in New York [1]
- Most are poor and destitute, with no education or skills [1]
- Many are forced into crowded, deadly tenement slums [1,5]
- Many survive off unskilled labor, but some Irish learn a trade from coworkers [1]
- By learning a trade, Irish manual laborers can join the middle class as skilled workers [1]

New Immigrants (1880 – 1905)

- Primarily Eastern European Jews and Southern Italians [3]
- Both groups are destitute, often forced to live in deadly, overcrowded tenement slums [3, 5]
- Southern Italians emigrate with no skills; children are pulled from schools to work as laborers. Low social mobility for Italians as a result [3]
- Jewish immigrants find success as peddlers. Jewish children are well-educated, become part of a burgeoning white-collar professional class. High Social Mobility for Jews as a result [3]

Income Inequality in America 1725-2000 [7]

- The Gini index is a measure of the distribution of income across a population. A higher Gini index indicates greater inequality, with high-income individuals receiving much larger percentages of the total income of the population.

Modern Immigration (1920 – Present)

- New legal restrictions and quotas make it more difficult to emigrate [2]
- Gentrification causing immigrant tenants to be evicted is a new threat facing immigrant communities [6]
- Stagnation of wages has made it more difficult to out-earn parents [4]
- Redlining in the 1930s (redlined neighborhoods are denied mortgages or insurance for housing) especially targeted ethnic enclaves. Most immigrants could only afford to settle in slums, and redlining by banks exacerbates poverty, making community members unable to leave [8]
- Comparable Gini index value to colonial empires [7]

Hypothesis:
As time has passed, immigrants to America have become less socially mobile due to urbanization.

Methods:
Narrative evidence, primary sources, statistical evidence, scholarly journals.

Sources: