

# SOCIOCULTURAL FACTORS AND THE CAREER ASPIRATIONS AND PLANS OF RURAL KENTUCKY HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS

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SOCIOCULTURAL FACTORS AND THE CAREER  
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KENTUCKY HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS

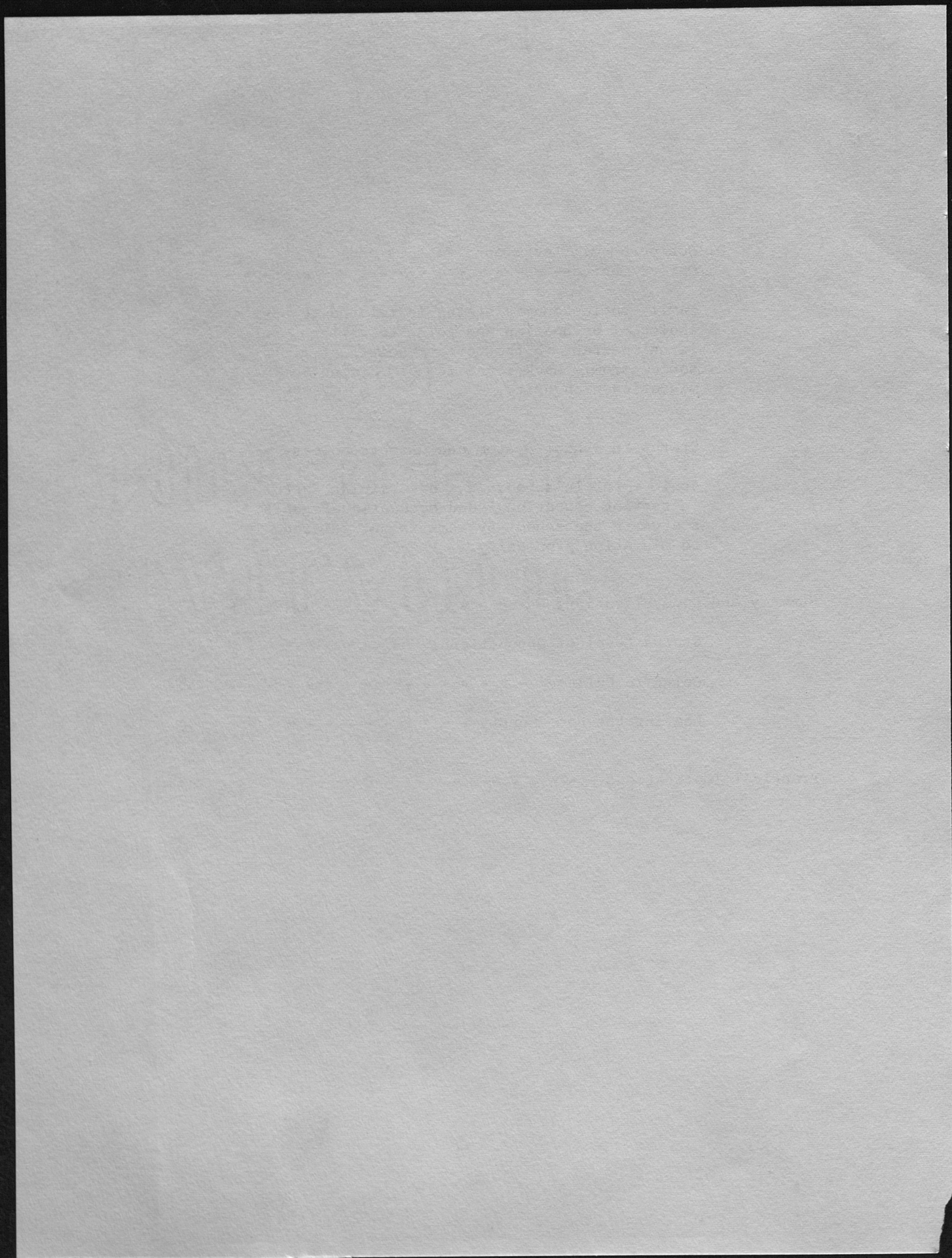
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SOCIOCULTURAL FACTORS AND THE CAREER ASPIRATIONS AND  
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Harry K. Schwarzweller\*

Young people on the threshold of graduation from high school face some very important career decisions. Confronted with a great many alternatives, they must make choices which will influence the future course of their lives. These career decisions are, for all practical purposes, irreversible.

A high school senior must decide what to do after graduation. What kinds of jobs would be interesting? What kinds of jobs are available? What kinds of jobs are reasonable career possibilities, considering personal circumstances and capabilities? Would more education be desirable to enhance the career position? Is it possible to go on to college? Would traveling the road that leads away from home and family increase the chance of career success? What is the best way to implement personal hopes, dreams, and ambitions?

Society has a large stake in the future plans of its young people. Every society must somehow arrange for the distribution of its human resources to fill the necessary jobs within that society. In a complex, highly industrialized society like the United States, the social mechanisms which regulate the labor market are extremely complicated and often not at all

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evident to the casual observer. A young person in America has a great deal of freedom in choosing a career and planning a future in the work world. The American creed affirms this fundamental principle of freedom to choose as well as the fundamental right to equality of opportunity. the

Most Americans accept and support the traditional notion that anyone who wants to get ahead, can get ahead. Nevertheless, it is well known that social circumstances and factors influence individual career choices. Greater knowledge about these factors can be useful to teenagers in anticipating the changing structure of the labor market and to counselors in guiding young people toward needed careers in modern society, without destroying the framework of individual freedom to pursue available opportunities.

#### THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND DESIGN

Previous studies have demonstrated that choosing a career is a process of eliminating alternatives rather than a single event. A lifetime occupation may be viewed as the end of a chain of decisions. For example, a youth must decide how to allocate his time and energy, what school courses to take, how much schooling to complete, when to look for a job, where to look for a job, when to marry, and countless other important things. From early childhood the young person builds a career, and the consequences of each action or inaction, of each choice from available alternatives, will affect future career alternatives and situations.

The present study is concerned with three major problems in the career-choosing process: (1) selecting an occupation, (2) going to college, and (3) leaving the home community. These problems intermesh in the overall career scheme. A young person's decision regarding the alternatives involved in any

one of these problem areas will affect the alternatives available to him in the other problem areas. It is important, therefore to ask why a particular alternative is chosen.

Of course, a single, almost accidental incident may spark a career decision. For example, a young man from a very poor family may win a university scholarship and go on to a successful professional career - simply because a high school science teacher "forced" him to fill out a scholarship application. Without a scholarship perhaps he never would have gone to college and never fully realized his abilities. In a sense, the teacher's influence was like a "causal trigger" which kindled the chain-reaction.

Yet conditions must have been favorable for the spark to catch; no doubt the young man possessed ability, preliminary training, high aspirations, strong motivation, awareness of alternatives, self-confidence, willingness to sacrifice time and energy in pursuing distant goals, etc. These personality traits do not burst forth spontaneously; the basic human material is nurtured in a socio-cultural environment. In short, a precipitating cause, often very conspicuous and therefore seemingly akin to luck, is effective only if the situation or context is "ripe." It is important, then, to know what factors affect the career-choosing decision and how these factors set the stage for a particular course of action.

Numerous studies have been published in recent years which focus on the career aspirations and plans of youth.<sup>1</sup> Gradually, a set of interrelated

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<sup>1</sup>For more general and comprehensive discussion of the career-choosing process, see especially Eli Ginzberg, et al., Occupational Choice, Columbia University Press, New York, 1951; D.E. Super, The Psychology of Careers, Harper, New York, 1957; and Robert Hoppock, Occupational Information, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1957.



principles and generalizations is being drawn together which permit better understanding of the career-choosing process. The project reported here aims to throw more light on this problem. The general objectives are: (1) to contribute to this growing body of knowledge about the phenomena of career choosing, and (2) to provide practical information about the career-choosing process of Kentucky youth for use by school administrators and youth guidance counselors. Specifically, research is aimed at answering the following questions:

- (a) What are the important differences in career patterns between boys and girls?
- (b) What are the important differences in career patterns between seniors in the Bluegrass region and seniors in the Mountain region.
- (c) What are the important differences in career patterns between farm and nonfarm youth?
- (d) What effect do socioeconomic background factors have upon career choices?
- (e) What is the relationship between social status in school and career choices?

The research problem, therefore, centered on analyzing differences in career patterns between various categories of individuals.

An attempt was made to identify two dimensions of career choice. First, there is that choice an individual would make if he were completely free to choose. This, labeled "aspiration," is the individual's perception of his ideal career goal with presumably little regard for the realities of his situation. Second, there is that choice an individual actually expects

to follow. This, labeled "plan," is the individual's perception of his future course of action presumably in view of the realities of his situation as he sees them. It is not possible to ascertain the career an individual will ultimately pursue, but previous research suggests a high correlation between the stated "plan" and the actual, later behavior.

#### THE RESEARCH PROCEDURE AND SAMPLE

Information for this study was obtained by questionnaire in the spring of 1959 from 248 girls and 203 boys in the senior classes of eight rural Kentucky county high schools. Four schools are in the Central Bluegrass (Jessamine, Anderson, Scott, and Clark counties), and four in the Eastern Mountain region (Powell, Menifee, Wolfe, and Elliott counties). In cultural and topographical respects these counties are fairly representative of their respective regions. Eastern Kentucky is often described as a familistic type of society. It is a low-income, marginal-farming area with relatively few job opportunities for young people and, consequently, a high net out-migration rate. Central Kentucky is more prosperous, more urbanized, and exhibits many of the characteristics associated with a rapidly increasing cultural complexity.

The questionnaire was administered to all seniors in the particular school on the day contact was made. It is very important to note that the sampling procedure automatically excluded all those youth who dropped out of school before completing their senior year.<sup>2</sup> In no way should the generalizations from this study be extended to all youth at this age both in and out of school.

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<sup>2</sup> One can get an idea of the number of drop-outs in these sample counties from, The Changing Kentucky Population by James S. Brown and Ralph J. Ramsey, Kentucky Agricultural Experiment Station PR 67, September 1958, Table 23, p. 36.

Composition of the total sample is as follows:

	<u>Number of Cases</u>
Bluegrass Boys	129
Mountain Boys	74
Bluegrass Girls	131
Mountain Girls	<u>117</u>
Total	451

The findings may be interpreted as a reasonably accurate assessment of the relationships between the factors studied and the career aspirations and plans of rural high school seniors in these two areas. Statistical treatment of the data establishes confidence that the relationships presented are not simply due to chance and will probably hold true among similar students in similar situations.

#### THE FINDINGS

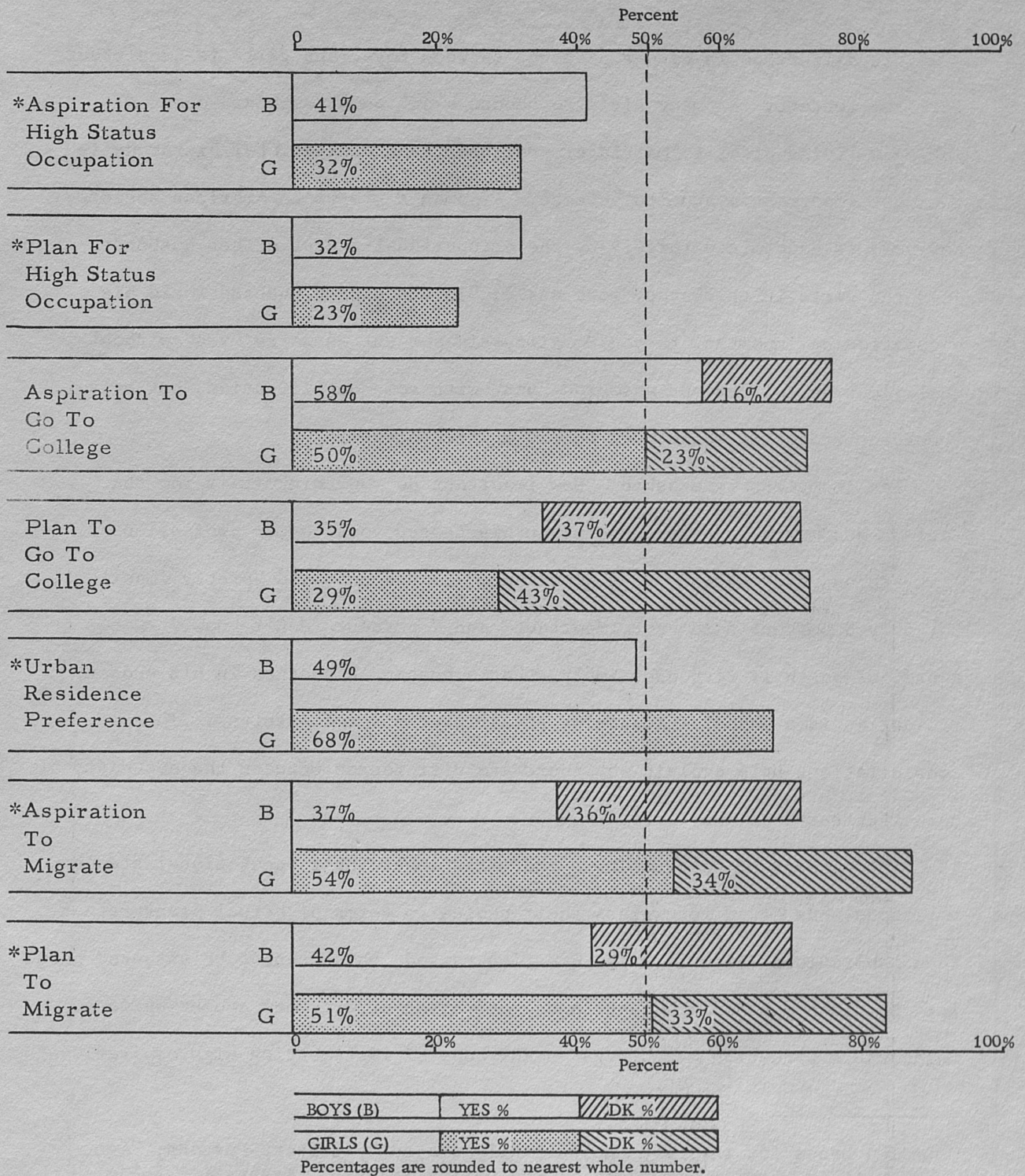
##### A. Career Patterns According to Sex

In a sense, boys and girls are reared in separate cultural environments. From the day they are born, the sexes are treated differently in terms of what they are taught, what is expected of them, and what opportunities are prescribed to them by the society. These socialization influences and role specifications are reflected in their different patterns of career aspirations and plans.

Compared with girls, a significantly greater proportion of boys choose high-status occupations (Figure 1). High-status occupation was defined as professional, semi-professional, and managerial type jobs; all other jobs, including farm operator, were classified as low-status occupations.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Classification was according to the criteria employed by the U.S. Census (commonly known as the Edward's Scale).



\* = Difference is significant at or above the 0.05 level of probability.

Fig. 1 - Career Aspirations and Plans of Senior Boys and Girls in Eight Rural Kentucky High Schools

This difference in career patterns between boys and girls is consistent with the tendency for many girls to choose a job as a temporary means of making a living prior to marriage. For boys, the occupational hierarchy is the most important avenue to success. A woman's status in American society, however, is determined largely by the occupational status of her husband.<sup>4</sup> When the girls in this study were asked, "In choosing a husband would his occupation be important to you?" Fifty-six percent answered "yes" without qualification, 41 percent answered "yes" with some qualification, but only 3 percent stated it would make no difference to them.

When the girls were asked, "How important do you think it is for the person you marry to be successful in his chosen vocation or profession?" Sixty-three percent said "very important," 25 percent said "pretty important," but only 5 percent said "not important" and 7 percent "don't know." Girls are aware, or so their responses imply, that a husband's success in his chosen occupation is a means of acquiring social status for themselves. These considerations help explain why there are differences between the occupational career patterns of the sexes.

Nine percent of both the boys and girls lower their occupational status ambitions when asked to express their choice in terms of actual plans rather than aspirations (Fig. 1). The question raised, which cannot be answered here, is: Do these youths lack functional motivation or are they caught up in an unfavorable situation which negates any hope of implementing high aspirations?

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<sup>4</sup>The bases for this are theoretically stated by Talcott Parsons, "Age and Sex in the Social Structure of the United States," Essays in Sociological Theory, The Free Press, Glencoe, Ill., 1949.

Boys and girls both aspire to go to college in nearly equal proportions (Fig. 1). They are also alike in the relative numbers planning to go to college. This does not necessarily mean, of course, that boys and girls choose to go to college for the same reasons; but whatever the reasons for going to college they apply with equal force to both sexes.

The differences between youths' aspirations and plans to go to college should be noted, particularly by school administrators and guidance counselors. When asked to state whether they actually plan to go to college, a sizable proportion of those youths who say that they would like to, have to say "don't know." Getting a college education is a generally accepted goal among these young people, but only about one-third of them feel they are in a position which would permit them to make definite plans.

There is a significant difference in the pattern of migration choices between boys and girls (Fig. 1). Leaving the home county must be a serious career-planning consideration for any young person in rural Kentucky. However, the propensity to migrate is much greater for girls than boys. Compared with boys, a larger proportion of girls wants to move away from the home county, and a larger proportion of girls is very definite about this decision. The fact that over two-thirds of these rural girls prefer to live in urban areas, compared with only about one-half of the boys, is a partial explanation of the difference. This does not, however, fully explain why more girls than boys prefer to move and are drawn to cities.

The large proportion of both boys and girls who say they plan to migrate and want to make their home in or near a city is a startling challenge to proponents of "the good rural life." Perhaps the attitude of these youth is a consequence of high materialistic and achievement aspirations in a

situation of low economic opportunity. It is interesting that only 37 percent of the boys would like to migrate compared with 42 percent who actually plan to migrate. Apparently many of the boys who "don't know" if they desire moving, feel they must when they consider the reality of their situation.

It is also interesting to note that the proportion of youths who prefer urban residence is much higher than the proportion who would like to migrate. Preference for city life is one thing, moving away from family, friends, and home is another. The findings from this study point to the conclusion that the propensity to migrate is correlated with the quest for better opportunities.

#### B. Career Patterns According to Region

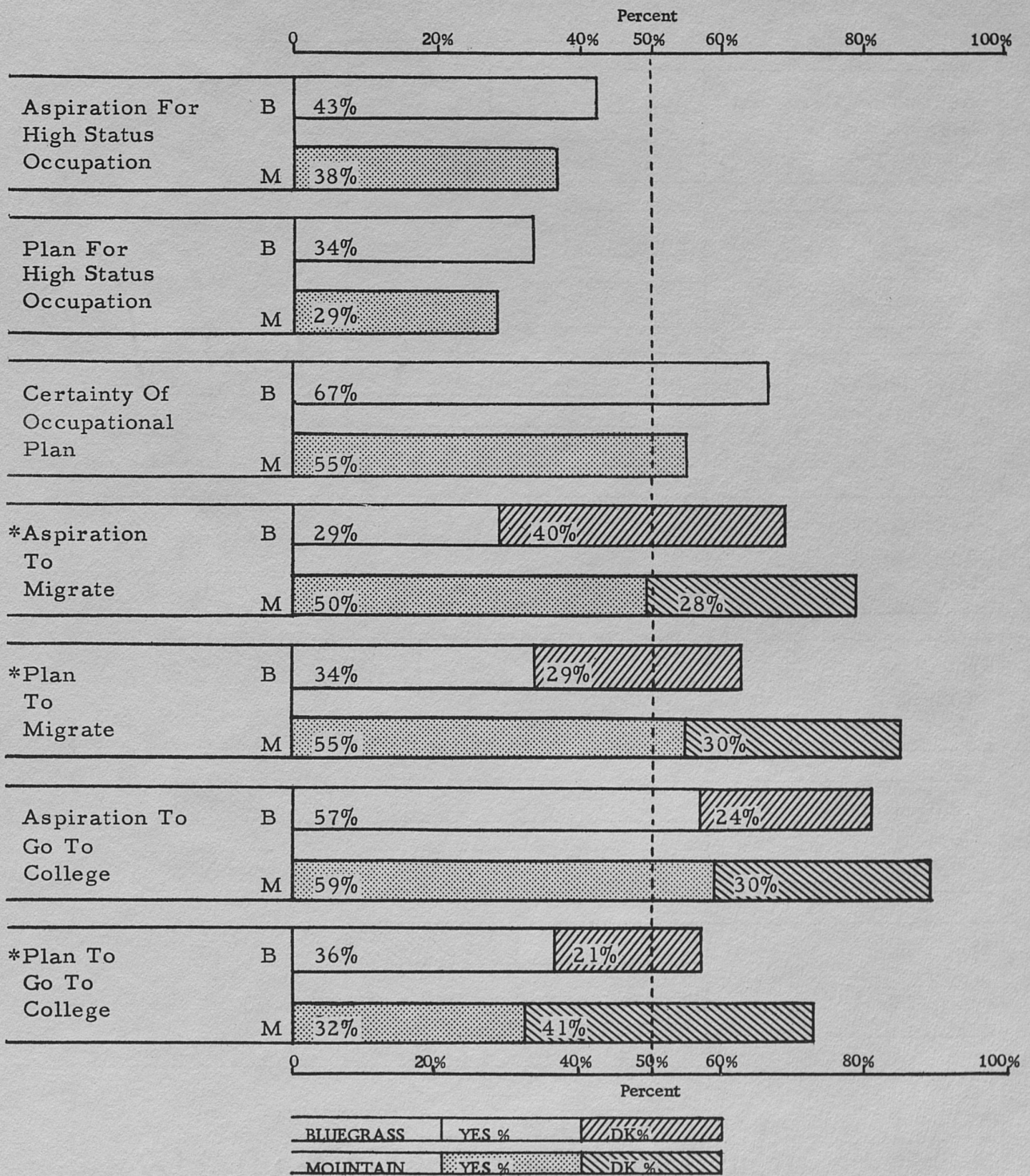
Previous research in Kentucky has called attention to the cultural differences between the Central Bluegrass region and the Eastern Mountain region. An attempt was made in this study to determine if the career patterns of high school seniors reflect these cultural differences.

Analysis reveals no significant difference between the two regions in the occupational choice pattern of boys or of girls (Fig. 2 and 3).

These findings should be interpreted in light of two important facts: (1) a greater proportion of Eastern Mountain youths drop out of school before their senior year, and (2) the material level of living of Eastern Mountain seniors is much lower than that of their Bluegrass counterparts.<sup>5</sup> The first

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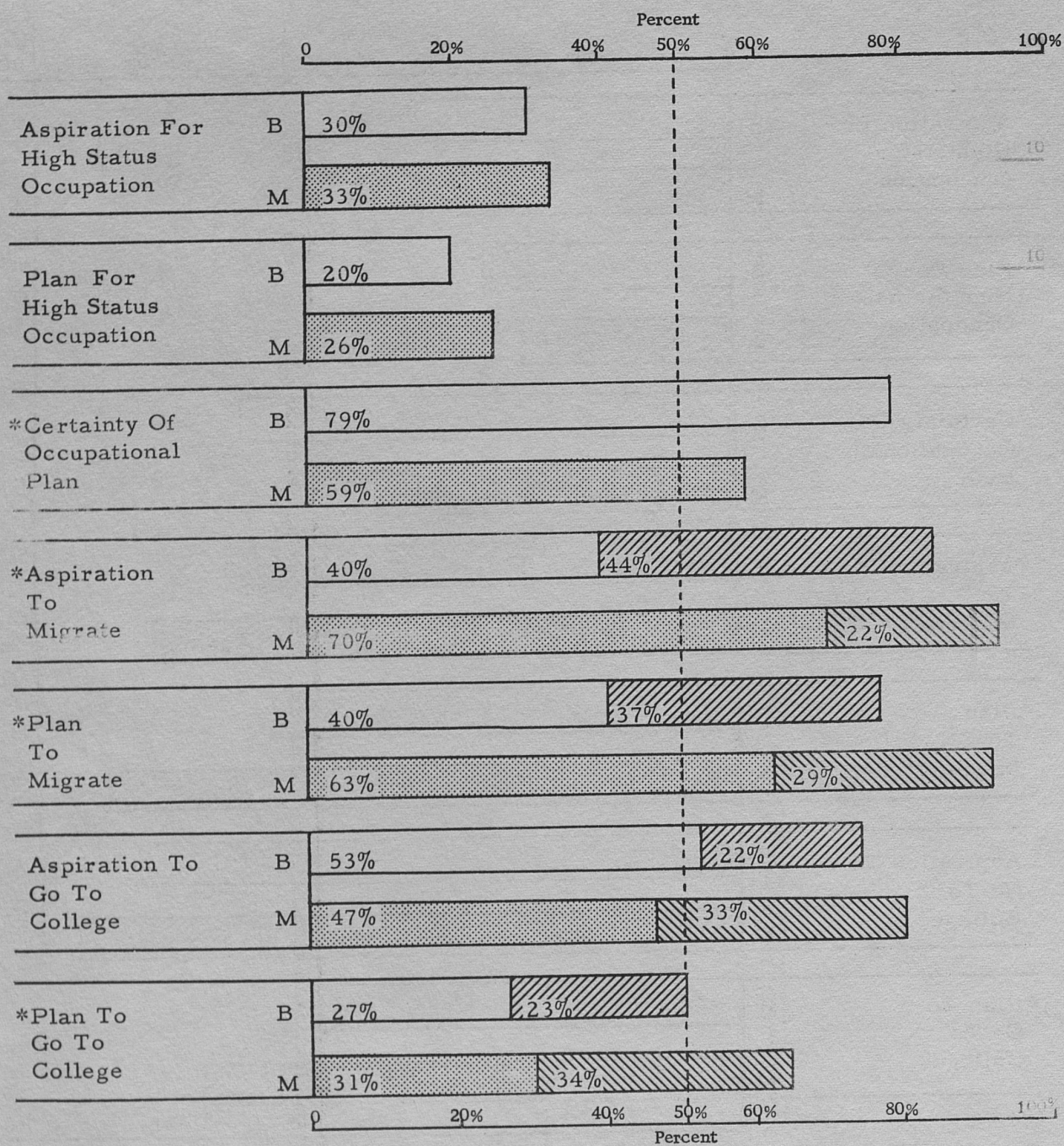
<sup>5</sup> Statistical test shows that the difference in level of living between Eastern and Central Kentucky seniors, as measured by either the Cornell Level of Living Scale or the Sewell Socioeconomic Status Scale, is highly significant.



\* = Difference is significant at or above the 0.05 level of probability.

Fig. 2 - Career Aspirations and Plans of Rural Kentucky High School Senior Boys By Region





BLUEGRASS      YES %      DK %  
 MOUNTAIN      YES %      DK %

Percentages are rounded to nearest whole number.

\* = Difference is significant at or above the 0.05 level of probability.

Fig. 3 - Career Aspirations and Plans of Rural Kentucky High School Senior Graduates By Region

fact suggests the possibility that Mountain youths whose career patterns differ have already dropped out of school. The second fact suggests that high school experience tends to diffuse similar criteria of success, similar occupational value orientations, and similar knowledge about culturally approved means to culturally prescribed goals in two vastly different subcultural regions of American society.

Bluegrass seniors, particularly the girls, are more certain of their occupational plans. This is probably indicative of differences in opportunity structure between the two regions. Since job opportunities are more limited in the Mountain region, occupational plans for many are contingent on leaving the region. This tends to prevent the development of definite plans.

Migration aspirations and plans, therefore, play a much larger part in the career schemes of Mountain seniors (Figs. 2 and 3). If job opportunities are limited in an area, young people must look elsewhere to implement their occupational aspirations. The tremendous propensity of Mountain youths to migrate is clearly demonstrated by these data. Only about 15 percent of the Mountain boys and 8 percent of the Mountain girls say they do not plan to leave their home communities, compared with 37 percent of the Bluegrass boys and 23 percent of the Bluegrass girls who do not plan to leave. The tendency to look beyond the local community for career opportunities does not depend on the kind of occupation desired. Regardless of the level of achievement toward which a youth aims, rural youth in Kentucky must consider migration in planning a career. This is truer for Mountain than Bluegrass youths.

There are so significant differences between the seniors in these two regions in the proportion who aspire to go to college (Figs. 2 and 3).

Over one-half of the boys and approximately one-half of the girls in each area indicate that they would like to go to college "if they could." However, when these young people are asked whether they actually expect to go to college, some interesting variations are exhibited in the pattern. Although there is no great difference between the two regions in the proportion who say "yes" to this question, there is a significantly large difference in the proportion who say "don't know." To what extent this may reflect differences in economic resources for going to college cannot be determined with precision. Mountain seniors are as aware of the desirability of furthering their education as their Bluegrass counterparts, but their chances to implement these aspirations seems to encounter more situational blocks.

A consistent theme runs through these data. In terms of career goals, there is very little difference between youth from the two regions of Kentucky. However, at those points in the career-choosing process which are associated with the implementation of goals, the pattern reflects cultural differences. This can be noted by the following facts: more Mountain boys are uncertain about their college plans, more Mountain girls are uncertain about their occupational plans, more Mountain girls consider college in their career scheme, and a much higher proportion of youths from the Mountain region want to and plan to migrate.

These findings acquire meaning and significance when viewed in relation to the limited career opportunities available to Eastern Kentucky youth. For example, since very few jobs are available to girls in the Mountains, a girl interested in a career would think of college as a means of assuring future "success." A non-career girl contemplating future marriage would

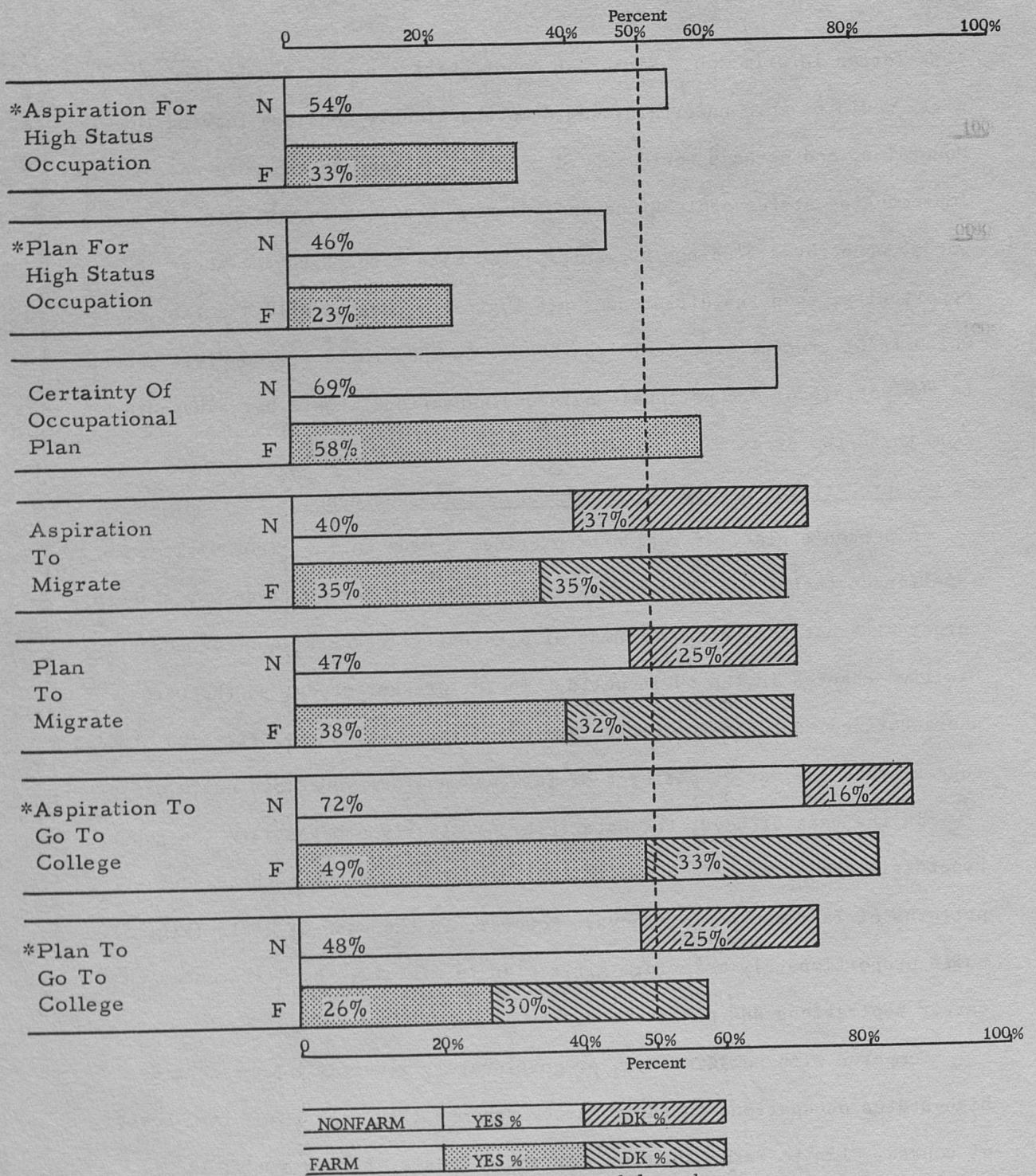
look for an interim job. Since job opportunities are extremely limited, this girl would be more uncertain, would more seriously consider leaving the Mountains, and perhaps would regard going to college as one more way of implementing status aspirations and assuring a secure future. In other words, when these findings are interpreted with respect to the quest for opportunity, then the differences are logically consistent. The fact, which is of crucial practical importance, is that there are no differences in the pattern of occupational goals and educational goals between youth from these two areas.

#### C. Career Patterns According to Farm or Nonfarm Residence

A person's place of residence provides a clue to the kinds of learning experiences that he has had. Furthermore, where a person lives may shape his career alternatives, his awareness of alternative careers, and consequently his life chances in the adult world. In the present study, youths were characterized as having either a farm or nonfarm residence. Previous studies suggest that the career patterns of farm and nonfarm youth are quite different.

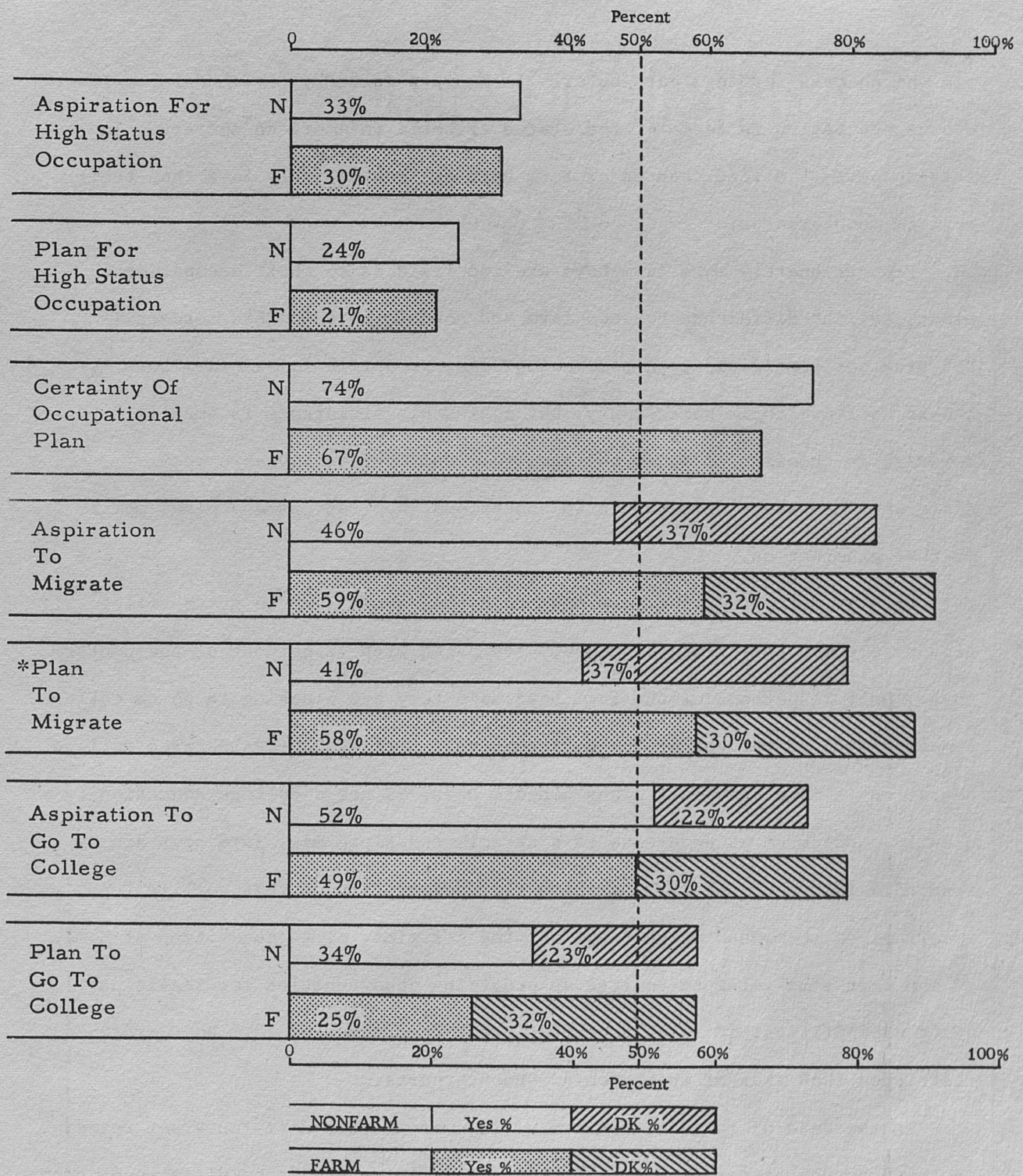
In the case of boys, the data (Fig. 4) clearly substantiate the general hypothesis above; there are significant differences between the career patterns of farm and nonfarm boys. However, in the case of girls (Fig. 5), while proportionately more farm girls plan to migrate, the differences in career aspirations and plans are small.

Compared with nonfarm boys, proportionately fewer farm boys consider high-status occupations in their career schemes (Fig. 4). Some farm boys, of course, plan to farm, farming, for the purposes of this study, is classified as a "lower status" occupation. Although there is considerable variation of status levels among farmers, it is nonetheless true that a young



\* = Difference is significant at or above the 0.05 level of probability.

Fig. 4 - Career Aspirations and Plans of Rural Kentucky High School Senior Boys By Farm and Nonfarm Residence



\* = Difference is significant at or above the 0.05 level of probability.

Fig. 5 - Career Aspirations and Plans of Rural Kentucky High School Senior Girls By Farm and Nonfarm Residence

man who chooses farming, particularly in Eastern Kentucky, is choosing a lower status occupation in terms of the status criteria in American society. In this respect, the life chances of farm boys are considerably less than their nonfarm counterparts.

Proportionately more farm boys are uncertain as to their occupational plans, but the difference between farm and nonfarm boys in this respect is not great or significant. A somewhat greater proportion of nonfarm boys choose to leave their home county, but again this difference is small. However, in choosing to go to college, farm and nonfarm boys are very different; and these differences in educational aspirations and plans merit further examination.

Only 49 percent of the farm boys said they would like to go to college "if they were completely free to choose," compared with 72 percent of the nonfarm boys. Only 26 percent of the farm boys said they are planning to go to college, compared with 48 percent of the nonfarm boys. Clearly, the value of a college education is more prevalent among nonfarm boys. Since a college education is usually considered as an avenue to a career, and since many farm boys are assured a future on the farm, perhaps the desirability of this goal is less important to them when weighed against the certainty of a job waiting at home. If one thinks of going to college as providing opportunities for realizing one's capabilities, it is evident that the life chances of farm boys are more restricted than that of their nonfarm counterparts.

In the case of farm and nonfarm girls, very little difference was revealed in their career patterns (Fig. 5). Statistically, there is no difference in the patterns of their occupational choices and in the certainty of these choices. As predicted, however, migration plays a much more dominant part in the implementation of the career plans of farm than nonfarm girls. Career opportunities near home

are limited for farm girls, whereas the town girl is often in a more strategic position to find job opportunities nearby. Thus, a larger proportion of farm girls seeks work elsewhere. A greater proportion of nonfarm girls, also, is definite as to their plans to go to college, but the difference is not significant.

#### D. Socioeconomic Background Factors and Career Choices

It is well known that socialization experiences of young people vary from one social class to another. That is, the social layers of a community are characterized by different ways of life. It is also true, in a general sense, that a young person socially inherits his parents' social status. Through family connections he is provided access to career opportunities and to means for achieving valued career goals. Thus, to a degree, even in America, a young person's life chances are influenced by the socioeconomic status of his parents. One may therefore expect to find differences in the career patterns of youth from different social strata.

Three indices of socioeconomic status were employed in this study: amount of father's schooling,<sup>6</sup> status of father's occupation,<sup>7</sup> and family level of living.<sup>8</sup> These indices, of course, are interrelated among themselves and with many other socioeconomic variables.

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<sup>6</sup>Categorized into (1) over eight grades, and (2) eighth grade or less.

<sup>7</sup>Classified according to the Edward's Scale into (1) professional, semi-professional, and managerial, (2) farm operators, and (3) all others.

<sup>8</sup>Measurement was based on a nine-point scale devised by Robert A. Danley and Charles E. Ramsey, Standardization and Application of a Level of Living Scale for Farm and Nonfarm Families, Cornell University Agricultural Experiment Station, Memoir 362, July 1959. This scale gave a more uniform distribution of the sample population than the Sewell Short-Form S.E.S. scale. However, use of either instrument yields similar findings, which would further substantiate the reliability of these generalizations.



In the case of boys, all three indices of socioeconomic status are found to be positively associated with occupational and educational choices (Table 1). That is, the probability that a boy will choose a high-status job or choose to go to college is significantly greater if he comes from a high-status family background than if he comes from a low-status family background. One might interpret this to mean that the life chances of a boy from the upper strata in a community are considerably greater than the life chances of a boy from the lower strata. The causes of these differences between strata are the subject of much research in the social sciences. What is of paramount concern in the present research is the strong relationship between occupational and educational career choices of boys and the socioeconomic status of their parents. Clearly, for the young man, social inheritance of high status seems to beget achievement of high status.

Socioeconomic background is unrelated to the migration choices of boys. It does not make any difference in the migration propensity of these senior boys whether they are reared in a "high-status" or "low-status" family environment. As noted previously, a very high proportion of young men in both regions seriously considers leaving the home county owing to the scarcity of job opportunities in these counties.

In the case of girls, occupational and educational choices appear not to be greatly affected by socioeconomic background factors (Table 2). Only in the plans for a high-status job was a positive association found with status of father's occupation. Perhaps a professional man's daughter is encouraged to think more about a professional career than the daughter of a farmer or other non-professional. In any case, the socioeconomic status of the girls' parents does not seem to be as important a factor in their educational and

TABLE 1. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CAREER CHOICES OF RURAL KENTUCKY HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR BOYS AND SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUND FACTORS

Career Choice Variable	Direction* of Relationship	S.E.S. Variable	N	D.F.	X <sup>2</sup>	p**
Aspiration for High-Status Occupation	+	Father's Schooling	203	1	11.12	<.01
	+	Father's Occupation	190	2	9.67	<.01
	+	Family Level of Living	203	1	13.68	<.01
Plan for High-Status Occupation	+	Father's Schooling	203	1	17.63	<.01
	+	Father's Occupation	190	2	11.75	<.01
	+	Family Level of Living	203	1	17.02	<.01
Aspiration to go to College	+	Father's Schooling	203	2	10.70	<.01
	+	Father's Occupation	190	2	11.15	<.01
	+	Family Level of Living	203	2	9.46	<.01
Plan to go to College	+	Father's Schooling	203	2	18.60	<.01
	+	Father's Occupation	190	2	13.39	<.01
	+	Family Level of Living	203	2	22.76	<.01
Aspiration to Migrate	0	Father's Schooling	203	2	0.06	NS
	0	Father's Occupation	190	2	0.48	NS
	0	Family Level of Living	203	2	3.83	NS
Plan to Migrate	0	Father's Schooling	203	2	0.44	NS
	0	Father's Occupation	190	2	5.34	NS
	0	Family Level of Living	203	2	1.73	NS

\* + indicates a positive relationship, - indicates a negative relationship, 0 indicates no relationship.

\*\* P refers to level of probability, NS indicates relationship is not significant.

TABLE 2. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CAREER CHOICES OF RURAL KENTUCKY HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR GIRLS AND SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUND FACTORS

Career Choice Variable	Direction* of Relationship	S.E.S. Variable	N	D.F.	X <sup>2</sup>	P**
Aspiration for High Status Occupation	0	Father's Schooling	248	1	0.78	NS
	0	Father's Occupation	240	2	2.22	NS
	0	Family Level of Living	248	1	1.78	NS
Plan for High Status Occupation	0	Father's Schooling	248	1	1.05	NS
	+	Father's Occupation	240	2	6.05	< .05
	0	Family Level of Living	248	1	0.88	NS
Aspiration to go to College	0	Father's Schooling	248	2	1.34	NS
	0	Father's Occupation	240	2	1.36	NS
	0	Family Level of Living	248	2	2.26	NS
Plan to go to College	0	Father's Schooling	248	2	2.65	NS
	0	Father's Occupation	240	2	3.22	NS
	0	Family Level of Living	248	2	5.95	NS
Aspiration to Migrate	-	Father's Schooling	248	2	8.71	< .05
	0	Father's Occupation	240	2	1.82	NS
	0	Family Level of Living	248	2	5.83	NS
Plan to Migrate	0	Father's Schooling	248	2	1.68	NS
	0	Father's Occupation	240	2	0.40	NS
	0	Family Level of Living	248	2	1.21	NS

\* + indicates a positive relationship, - indicates a negative relationship, 0 indicates no relationship.

\*\* P refers to level of probability, NS indicates relationship is not significant.

career choices as is the status of the boys' parents in the choices that boys make.

As in the case of boys, migration aspirations and plans for girls from different strata differ very little. Of the three indices used in this study, only father's schooling was significantly associated with the aspiration of girls to migrate. With actual plan to migrate, father's level of schooling makes no difference. One might generalize that socioeconomic status factors are not associated with the propensity of girls to migrate from the home county.

#### E. Status in School System and Career Choices

The previous section dealt with the relationship between career choices and the social status of a young person which is ascribed to him because he is a member of a particular family. However, to a degree young people also achieve social status within the structure of the school system. The school system is, so to speak, a microcosm of the adult occupational world where the youngster is introduced to the achievement competition characteristic of American society. A youngster can become a "good" student and attain a leadership position among his peers by virtue of his own efforts and abilities. Status achievement in the school system is probably a good predictor of a high school graduate's future success and functional integration into the Great Society.

The social structure of the school may be viewed analytically as a composite of three distinct social systems: (a) the formal school administrative system, (b) the system of extra-curricular student activities, and (c) the network of interpersonal teenage peer relationships.<sup>9</sup> A young person

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<sup>9</sup>For further elaboration on this perspective, see C. Wayne Gordon, The Social Systems of the High School, The Free Press, Glencoe, Ill. 1957.

attains a status position in each of these systems. The indices employed to measure the relative ranking of students in these systems, are, respectively: (a) school grade average,<sup>10</sup> (b) participation in formal school organizations,<sup>11</sup> and (c) prestige accorded by the students' teenage peers.<sup>12</sup> In this study, a fourth status factor, academic achievement, is also considered. This factor, measured by the student's score on the University of Kentucky College Qualification Test,<sup>13</sup> indicates the youth's position relative to the scholastic norms established by the academic community. One can think of this ranking as the youth's academic status in the American educational system.

In the case of boys, the findings tend to be uniform and consistent (Table 3). Boys who have attained high positions in the various social systems of the school are more likely than their counterparts to choose high-status occupations and to go to college. Furthermore, there is greater association between career plans and status in school than between career aspirations and status in school. These observations suggest that boys, in setting career goals, tend to appraise their potential levels of achievement in the occupational world by their actual past performance in the school system. Since the seniors in this study were aware of their individual scores on the U.K. College Qualification Test about a month before the study questionnaire was administered, the above interpretation may be supported by the consistently good prediction of college plans by the U.K. test.

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<sup>10</sup>Obtained from high school records

<sup>11</sup>Measured by number of school organizations participated in, plus the extent of activity in these organizations (modified Chapin Scale Score technique).

<sup>12</sup>Measured by peer group choices.

<sup>13</sup>This test was administered by the Kentucky Cooperative Counseling and Testing Service. It is based on a composite score of verbal ability, numerical ability, science information, and social studies information.

TABLE 3. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CAREER CHOICES OF RURAL KENTUCKY HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR BOYS AND STATUS IN SCHOOL

Career Choice Variable	Direction* of Relationship	Status in School Variable	N	D.F.	X <sup>2</sup>	P**
Aspiration High Status Occupation	+	Participation Index	203	1	9.67	<.01
	+	Prestige Index	203	1	18.43	<.01
	+	Grade Index	203	1	15.52	<.01
	+	UK Test Score	190	2	14.85	<.01
Plan for High Status Occupation	+	Participation Index	203	1	15.52	<.01
	+	Prestige Index	203	1	26.65	<.01
	+	Grade Index	203	1	31.46	<.01
	+	UK Test Score	190	2	45.25	<.01
Aspiration to go to College	+	Participation Index	203	2	9.49	<.01
	+	Prestige Index	203	2	14.47	<.01
	+	Grade Index	203	2	19.08	<.01
	+	UK Test Score	190	4	26.93	<.01
Plan to go to College	+	Participation Index	203	2	25.52	<.01
	+	Prestige Index	203	2	23.64	<.01
	+	Grade Index	203	2	32.98	<.01
	+	UK Test Score	190	4	33.83	<.01
Aspiration to Migrate	0	Participation Index	203	2	0.96	NS
	0	Prestige Index	203	2	0.39	NS
	0	Grade Index	203	2	2.75	NS
	0	UK Test Score	190	4	2.51	NS
Plan to Migrate	0	Participation Index	203	2	4.51	NS
	+	Prestige Index	203	2	10.04	<.01
	0	Grade Index	203	2	0.84	NS
	0	UK Test Score	190	4	1.88	NS

\* + Indicates a positive relationship, - indicates a negative relationship,

0 indicates no relationship.

\*\* P refers to level of probability, NS indicates relationship is not significant.

TABLE 4. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CAREER CHOICES OF RURAL KENTUCKY  
HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR GIRLS AND STATUS IN SCHOOL

Career Choice Variable	Direction* of Relationship	Status in School Variable	N	D.F	X <sup>2</sup>	P**
Aspiration for High Status Occupation	+	Participation Index	248	1	4.14	<.05
	0	Prestige Index	248	1	3.19	NS
	0	Grade Index	248	1	1.04	NS
	+	UK Test Score	232	2	27.17	<.01
Plan for High Status Occupation	+	Participation Index	248	1	5.80	<.05
	+	Prestige Index	248	1	9.03	<.01
	+	Grade Index	248	1	8.84	<.01
	+	UK Test Score	232	2	31.74	<.01
Aspiration to go to College	0	Participation Index	248	2	2.58	NS
	0	Prestige Index	248	2	5.17	NS
	+	Grade Index	248	2	12.07	<.01
	+	UK Test Score	232	4	16.17	<.01
Plan to go to College	0	Participation Index	248	2	5.41	NS
	+	Prestige Index	248	2	8.99	<.05
	+	Grade Index	248	2	11.36	<.01
	+	UK Test Score	232	4	29.65	<.01
Aspiration to Migrate	0	Participation Index	248	2	5.18	NS
	0	Prestige Index	248	2	0.51	NS
	0	Grade Index	248	2	2.05	NS
	0	UK Test Score	232	4	5.34	NS
Plan to Migrate	0	Participation Index	248	2	3.38	NS
	0	Prestige Index	248	2	1.55	NS
	0	Grade Index	248	2	1.92	NS
	0 (s)	UK Test Score	232	4	14.81	<.01

\* + indicates a positive relationship, - indicates a negative relationship, 0 indicates no relationship.

\*\* P refers to level of probability, NS indicates relationship is not significant.

These generalizations, of course, do not mean that all boys who hold high-status positions in school will plan to go to college and plan for high-status occupations. For example, only 81 percent of the boys who have high grade averages in school say they would like to go to college, and only 61 percent of this same category say they actually plan to go to college. Even though the U.K. College Qualification Test is consistently a good predictor of plan to go to college, 29 percent of the boys who score at or above the 50th percentile does not plan to go to college or is not certain about their college plans.

Status in school seems to have little bearing on the migration aspirations and plans of boys. Only the peer prestige score is associated with migration plan; a greater proportion of boys who are rated as those "most looked up to" by their peers plan to migrate after high school. However, the findings, in general, indicate that a boy's level of attainment in the school system does not have any predictable relationship to his propensity to move away from the home county. This again seems to reflect the fact that nearly all students, no matter what their attainment in the school system, must consider migration when planning a career.

In the case of girls, the pattern of findings does not reveal a consistent and uniform relationship between the general concept, status in the school social structure, and career choices (Table 4). Occupational status aspiration is associated with the degree of participation in formal school organizations and very highly associated with the U.K. Test Score. However, it is not associated with peer group prestige and accumulated grade average in high school. On the other hand, all four indices of status in school are positively related to the plan for high-status occupations. Girls



who are leaders in school, active in school organizations, and get high grades are more likely than their counterparts to plan on a professional career.

Aspiration to go to college is largely a function of past academic performance. It is highly related to grade average and test scores, but not with participation in school organizations and peer group prestige. Similarly, plan to go to college is highly related to grades and test scores, but not strongly associated with the peer prestige factor, and hardly at all with participation in organizations.

Of practical importance is the consistently good prediction of career plans by the U.K. College Qualification Test Scores. Individual scores, it should be repeated, were made known to these seniors prior to the time the study questionnaire was administered. One can only guess as to the effect this might have on "firming-up" any nebulous aspirations to go to college. However, it should be noted that only 58 percent of the girls who score at or above the 50th percentile on this U.K. Qualification Test actually plans to go to college. Presumably the other 42 percent is realistically qualified but undesirous or unable to plan a college career.

None of the indices employed in this study is a predictor of girls' propensities to leave their home communities.

The preceding discussion dealt with relationships between career choices and status in the various social systems of the school. Carrying this inquiry a step further, one might ask, "What are the sociocultural background characteristics of those students who attain high positions in the social systems of the school?" Although this question is beyond the scope of the present study, an attempt was made to throw light on one

important phase of that question, namely, "what is the relationship between socioeconomic status background and U.K. College Qualification Test scores?"

It was found that 81 percent of the boys and 66 percent of the girls who score high on the U.K. Qualification Test come from high socioeconomic status family backgrounds. Clearly, academic status in school is related to the social class origin of the young man or woman.

Furthermore, of those seniors who score in the upper half on this test and come from high socioeconomic status backgrounds, 77 percent of the boys and 66 percent of the girls plan to go to college. On the other hand, only 43 percent of the boys and 41 percent of the girls who score in the upper half on this test but come from low socioeconomic status backgrounds plan to go to college. Previous academic performance is a reality factor that must be considered by youth when planning a career, but often other situational realities, like socioeconomic status, play a larger part in the decision-making process than is generally supposed.

#### SUMMARY AND GENERALIZATIONS

This project was undertaken in order to obtain a better understanding of the influence of sociocultural factors on the career choices of rural high school seniors in Kentucky. The research focused on three major aspects of the career-choosing process: (1) selecting an occupation, (2) going to college, and (3) leaving the home county. An attempt was made to identify both the aspiration and plan aspects of these career choices.

The data were obtained by questionnaire in the spring of 1959 from 248 girls and 203 boys in the senior classes of eight rural county high schools. Four of these schools are located in the Central Bluegrass region and four in the Eastern Mountain region of Kentucky.

Career patterns were analyzed according to five sets of sociocultural factors: sex, culture region, type of residence, socioeconomic status of family, and status in the social systems of the school. These factors, or variables, are indicative of the pattern of socialization experiences to which the youths were exposed, and the culturally approved means available to them for implementing their career goals. Interpretation of the findings, then, was made in terms of the motivational, or internal quest for opportunity and the situational, or external structure of opportunity.

The findings substantiate the generalizations listed below. For the convenience of the reader who is interested in practical implications, the generalizations are grouped according to that aspect of the career-choosing process (dependent variable) which they help to explain.

#### Status Level of Occupational Choice

1. Compared with girls, proportionately more boys choose high-status occupations. Occupation is a more important avenue to success for boys than for girls.
2. Contrary to popular belief, there is no difference in the level of occupational aspirations and plans between Bluegrass seniors and Mountain seniors.
3. Compared with nonfarm boys, smaller proportions of farm boys consider high-status occupations when planning their future careers.
4. There is no difference in the pattern of occupational status aspirations and plans between farm and nonfarm girls.

5. Compared with boys from low socioeconomic status family backgrounds, the probability is higher that boys from high socioeconomic status family backgrounds will choose high-status occupations.
6. The socioeconomic status of family background does not make any difference in the status of occupations chosen by girls.
7. In general, high status in the social system of the school, as measured by either grade average, U.K. College Qualification Test scores, peer group prestige, or amount of participation in school organizations, is associated with choice of high-status occupational careers. Achievement in school is a determining factor in setting levels of aspiration.

#### Going to College

1. There is no difference in the proportions of boys or girls who want to or expect to go on to college.
2. In terms of the aspiration to go to college, there is no difference in pattern between Mountain seniors and Bluegrass seniors. Actually, a tendency is noted for college to be a more accepted value among the Mountain youth.
3. There is a difference in the pattern of college plans between youth from the two regions; more Mountain seniors are uncertain about their plans to go to college.
4. Compared with farm boys, a larger proportion of nonfarm boys choose to go on to college.
5. The pattern of aspiration and plans to go to college is essentially similar between farm and nonfarm girls.

6. Compared with boys from low socioeconomic status families, the probability is higher that boys from high socioeconomic status families will choose to go to college.
7. Family socioeconomic status is unimportant in the college aspirations or plans of girls.
8. In general, high status in the social system of the school is associated with the choice of going on to college. The school is a proving ground for future educational capabilities.
9. For boys and girls, one of the most important factors in the decision to go to college is academic background as reflected in U.K. College Qualification Test scores.

#### Leaving the Home County

1. Compared with boys, a larger proportion of girls want to and plan to move away from the home county. Compared with boys, a much larger proportion of girls prefer urban residence.
2. Propensity to migrate is greater among youth from the Mountain region than from the Bluegrass region.
3. Propensity to migrate is essentially the same for farm and nonfarm boys.
4. A greater proportion of farm girls, compared with nonfarm girls, choose to migrate.
- 5.. Propensity to migrate is not associated with the socioeconomic background of these youth.
6. Propensity to migrate is not associated with status in the social system of the school.

In addition to the above generalizations, the following points

should be particularly noted by the reader who is interested in the practical aspects of these findings.

1. The difference between the level of occupational "aspiration" and occupational "plan" is 9 percent. That is, 9 percent of the boys and 9 percent of the girls lower their occupational achievement ambition when confronted with the more realistic question of "what occupation do you actually expect to get into?"
2. Over half the seniors would like to go to college, but only about a third of them actually plan to go to college .
3. Forty-two percent of the boys and fifty-one percent of the girls actually plan to leave the home county.
4. Over two-thirds of the girls and one-half of the boys from these rural areas of Kentucky express a definite preference for living in or near urban areas.

#### PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Although the above generalizations specifically apply to seniors in the eight county high schools included in the sample doubtless these seniors are not unlike many other high school youth in other rural areas of Kentucky. The similarity of career patterns found between seniors in the Bluegrass region and seniors in the Mountain region lends strength to the argument of greater universality of the generalizations. However, as indicated previously, these findings do not apply to those young people who drop out of school before reaching their senior year.

Various background factors were shown to be associated with several aspects of the career-choosing process. These factors help explain the sociocultural context from whence career goals emerge, and the opportunity

structure which makes implementation of those career goals a realistic possibility. It was demonstrated that, in terms of relative probability, certain categories of individuals who share certain social characteristics have less chance to achieve culturally prescribed goals than their counterparts. This is true, of course, in any society. Inequalities of life chances do exist. Practical people who are concerned with the problems of youth as they face the world of work should be aware of the bases for these inequalities, especially in view of present-day world events and the complex, achievement-oriented society in which youth must find a place.

School administrators should note the importance of the school as a proving ground for future career achievement aspirations. The level of future achievement aspiration is set in reference to past performance, and the important past performances of these high school seniors are mainly their performances in school.

School administrators, youth counselors, and teachers are partially responsible for the aspiration levels and career achievement motivation of their students, and must therefore take some responsibility for helping students to evaluate their situation rationally before making career choices. The alternatives available, the consequences of a particular course of action, and the associated rewards should be pointed out. Youth need guidance in making realistic plans so that, in the last part of the senior year, a greater proportion of the students are more certain about their occupational interests and plans, about whether or not they can and should go to college. Furthermore, people who work with youth in these rural areas should be fully aware of the tremendous importance of migration in the career-planning process. The need for counseling is evident in the findings from this study.

Parents also should be made aware of the relationships demonstrated by this study. Parental influence is implied by many of the generalizations. For example, simply because low socioeconomic status of family is associated with low aspiration to go to college, does not mean that this relationship must always be so. It is so because low socioeconomic status background is indicative of a way of life which places less value on a college education and which provides less opportunity for a college education. Through parental influence, guided, perhaps, by a well planned program of information to parents, and assisted by a well planned program to provide greater opportunity to go to college by youth from all sectors of society, greater equality can be attained. If a college education is a desirable goal in American society, then youth from low socioeconomic status families are discriminated against by society. Through PTA groups, extension service activities, and personal contacts by school administrators, parents can be made aware of their role in determining the life chances of their sons and daughters.

Finally, it should be mentioned again that at the time of this writing an almost frantic concern is apparent in Kentucky and the United States as a whole over standards of education, the need for professional workers, scientists, and trained technicians, and the need for raising the levels of productivity of certain depressed areas of the country. Programs of change are being planned with an eye to future well-being and societal survival in a dynamically complex world situation. Any program of change that is geared to the needs of the people must begin with knowledge of existing conditions and the intricate network of human relationships which generate those conditions. Studies such as the one reported here can provide factual information that can be used in planning desired programs and in implementing desired changes.