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# Security-Autonomy-Mobility Roadmaps: Passports To Security for Youth

Jeremy Schulz

Laura Robinson

*Santa Clara University*, [lrobinson@scu.edu](mailto:lrobinson@scu.edu)

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## CHAPTER 10



# Security-Autonomy-Mobility Roadmaps

## *Passports to Security*

JEREMY SCHULZ AND LAURA ROBINSON

### WELCOME TO RANCHO BENITO

Taking the highway along the California coast and swinging inland into one of the state's agricultural belts, the hills appear golden in the distance, spotted with gnarled oak trees. Vineyards rise up on either side of the highway, and occasionally cowboys may be seen in the distance herding grazing cattle. Yet as clouds of dust rise from the fields in this agricultural community, the idyllic scene fades dramatically in the town of Rancho Benito, a community wearing the signs of the hard economic times. This once relatively prosperous community is now a place in which many families sit down to dinner in dramatically different circumstances than just a few years ago. After the 2008 recession hit this community, gaping holes appeared in all areas of the economy. Just driving through town, one sees evidence in the strip malls of the failure of one local business after another. Local industry has felt the ravages of the new economic landscape, from a partially empty mall to burgeoning bargain stores. While not all families have endured the same kind or degree of economic insecurity, nonetheless they dwell in a community strongly affected by the Great Recession. While not all have directly felt the effects on their immediate personal circles, all community members live in an environment indelibly stamped by the recession's imprint.

Within this hard-hit community we find Miguel.<sup>1</sup> During his childhood, Miguel's family owned and operated a successful landscaping business catering to the growing tract housing developments in the area. As a youth, he enjoyed playing competitive golf. Miguel's future had appeared clear to him: "I thought that I would get a big time golf scholarship to college." Yet with the damage the Great Recession wrought on his family's finances, his plans changed: "My family hung on for a long time . . . everything went into keeping the business open . . . but we just couldn't make it . . . eventually I had to give up golf." Currently, despite his family's hardships, Miguel still counts himself among the lucky ones. Unlike many of his peers, he is pursuing his goal of becoming an architect by attending a public four-year university: "I found out that colleges outside of California can be a lot cheaper so I'm still going away to school next year." Miguel has adjusted his goals in light of his family's unexpected financial hardship. He has downsized goals in terms of attending a pricey private university and delayed any dreams of becoming a professional athlete. These strategies further Miguel's two-pronged goal. On the one hand, Miguel hopes that a college education will help him recapture his family's middle-class lifestyle. On the other hand, Miguel's decision to forgo an expensive education avoids the financial risk that accompanies reaching for the stars.

Carla is taking another path to minimize risk when planning her future. Unlike Miguel, Carla feels compelled to make financial contributions to her family as soon as possible. Whereas Miguel is reacting to an unexpected reversal of fortune, Carla has never known financial security. Her parents are both fieldworkers who struggle to provide for her and her siblings. By contrast, Miguel's parents attended college and have a circle of educated friends. No one in Carla's family has finished high school; few in her personal community can boast a living wage. While Miguel had to adjust his plans in an attempt to reclaim future security, Carla must venture into uncharted territory to realize a better future. When asked about her plans after high school graduation, Carla explains: "I'm going into the military. I found out that I can get all sorts of skills that will get me a good job when I'm out." In Carla's eyes, gaining vocational skills her parents lack is the recipe for financial security. At the same time, her plan stems from endemic financial insecurity. Carla's planning is both rational and selfless. By joining the military, Carla will immediately bring home a paycheck and will gain what she sees as valuable vocational training: "I will start earning money right away . . . help my family . . . the military gives you job training for free." Carla's sense of duty toward her natal family places an immediate burden on her to contribute financially right out of high school. While this priority lies beyond the experiential horizon of students from the

middle classes who have not known unrelenting financial insecurity, it is not uncommon in Rancho Benito.

From this brief sketch it is clear that, while both Miguel and Carla have experienced economic insecurity and deprivation to different degrees, they differ in important and intriguing ways where their responses to this insecurity are concerned. Because of their different family backgrounds and contrasting experiences, both before and after the Great Recession of 2008, Miguel and Carla have developed different perspectives on their futures. But what accounts for this divergence? As we show in this chapter, Miguel and Carla harbor differing visions of their future because of their divergent firsthand and secondhand experiences of economic (in) security, opportunity, and risk. More specifically, they belong to distinctive subgroups of youths in Rancho Benito. The divergent *security-autonomy-mobility* roadmaps articulated by members of these subgroups illuminate the interplay between these experiences and more commonly examined sociological factors.

Miguel belongs to the subgroup of youths adopting what we call a protective reclamation roadmap. Miguel's mobility strategy is best described as a reentry strategy, as it aims to reclaim the lost economic security of the past while protecting his financial future. Unlike Carla, Miguel has some firsthand experience of economic security, even though it lies in the past. Furthermore, the adults in Miguel's circles, particularly his parents, did succeed in scaling the educational ladder and making a stable and comfortable livelihood. By and large, during the years before 2008, their families held secure jobs and took middle-class comforts for granted. From housing to family cars, comforts and basic needs were met on a regular basis. However, for these youths, the stability and prosperity of the prerecession years proved transitory. Even though their families "did things right" in terms of their education and "played by the rules," the Great Recession brought unanticipated reversals of fortune, sweeping away their families' fragile good fortune. During the onset of the recession, protective reclamation youths had a front-row seat to their parents' economic collapse, watching their parents lose their jobs and benefits as well as their houses, cars, and other taken-for-granted possessions. As a result, youths like Miguel desperately wish to recapture the economic security their families enjoyed during the prerecession years. Thus Miguel still desires the long-term economic security which now eludes his stricken parents. At the same time, however, he questions the utility of expensive college degrees as a means of assuring his own future economic viability. Like the other members of this subgroup, Miguel has become more skeptical of the potential of college degrees to act as a buffer against future economic insecurity. For this

reason, he also has lost much of his faith in the long-term economic value of pricier college degrees as he believes that no credential will ensure the security he wants. With restrained optimism about the potential of credentialing as a safeguard against financial hardship, protective reclamation youths have downsized their educational aspirations, seeking to minimize the amount of debt incurred in order to finance a college education.

Unlike Miguel, Carla belongs to the subgroup of students who adopt what we call a vocational escalator roadmap. Like Carla, vocational escalator youths have never enjoyed ongoing economic security either before or after the Great Recession. Students like Carla have grown up with an extreme level of precariousness and economic insecurity. Compounding this pervasive firsthand economic insecurity, they also bear witness to the long-standing travails of their parents and other adults in their personal communities that were exacerbated by the Great Recession. Carla has grown up surrounded by parents and other adults who remain stuck at the lowest rungs of both educational and occupational ladders. Lacking any postsecondary training or credentials, the parents of the students adhering to the vocational escalator roadmap have spent their entire lives “living hard” (Howell 1973). They toil in low-level, unstable, and badly paid jobs where they are afforded little autonomy by their bosses and employers. Further compounding this lack of autonomy, their jobs are the first to go when times grow tough and business slows. In the absence of adults who have achieved economic security or have secured educational credentials, vocational escalator students conclude that it is their parents’ lack of vocational training and credentials that is ultimately responsible for the precariousness of their lives. This conclusion leads vocational escalator youths to think of vocational credentials as the magic bullet which can assure them the economic security so lacking in the lives of the adults they know. The vocational escalator roadmap is best characterized as an exit strategy that will allow these students to leave behind the precariousness which mars the lives of their parents and other adults in their personal communities.

## OVERVIEW OF ROADMAPS

If Carla and Miguel epitomize two subgroups of youths with contrasting roadmaps, they do not exhaust the array of roadmaps evident among Rancho Benito youths. In fact, there are at least two more subgroups which merit their own designation: the academic elevator subgroup and the parental emulator subgroup.

Members of the academic elevator subgroup typically suffer from similar levels of economic insecurity and hardship as their peers in the vocational escalator group. Furthermore, they resemble their vocational escalator peers. Both groups are witnesses to their families' unsuccessful struggles to stay financially afloat even in the best of economic environments. Despite the absence of economically secure adults and substantial levels of continuous privation and hardship, both vocational escalator and academic elevator youths trust in the power of credentialing to ward off financial hardship. However, the resemblance ends there, as the postsecondary plans of the academic elevator youths are vastly more ambitious than the plans outlined by their vocational escalator counterparts. The academic elevator youths stake their hopes on the potential of academic credentials to catapult them into a very different occupational and economic stratum. Unlike the vocational escalator youths who trust in vocational credentialing as the magic bullet, these youths aim to strike out into uncharted territory by pursuing extensive postsecondary educations culminating in BAs or even advanced degrees. Academic elevator youths put their faith in higher education as a pathway to economic security, even if it means taking on educational debt. In contrast to vocational escalator youths, academic elevator youths sign up for a delayed entry into the labor force so that they may complete more ambitious educational goals. The youths who cleave to the academic elevator roadmap sacrifice the possibility of earning money earlier in order to potentially earn more later. The mobility strategy of this subgroup thus trades off early-stage earning opportunities in adolescence for the possibility of a more dramatic break with the circumstances of the youths' families.

The youths who fall into the subgroup outlining a parental emulation roadmap stand apart from the other three subgroups in several respects. First of all, they have come of age in households graced with substantial economic security and minimal hardship both before and after the Great Recession. These youths have observed their parents' steady march to occupational success and economic stability and see no reason to deviate from their parents' paths. After all, the adults have benefited from the dividends of their relatively high-powered academic credentials and socioprofessional networks, dividends which have kept accumulating through easy and difficult times alike. When these parental emulators imagine themselves following in their parents' tracks through the world of higher education, they also envision obtaining similar educational credentials and positions conferring the same durable economic rewards. At the same time, they know from the experiences of their parents and adults in their personal communities that credentials alone cannot guarantee long-term occupational

success or economic stability. They recognize that, particularly if they return to Rancho Benito after college, they will need to cultivate the same kinds of social and professional ties that have served their parents so well in building their careers. For parental emulator youths, the crucial challenge is to ensure that nothing stands in the way of securing the appropriate academic credentials and taking possession of the social capital which their parents' personal communities have at their disposal. In their eyes they need to arrive at the doorstep with the necessary credentials and keep the door open with their social networks.

### ANALYTIC FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In this chapter we delve more deeply into each of these four subgroups. We show how these differently positioned youths chart their imagined futures, given their varied positions within a community afflicted by generalized economic insecurity and uncertainty. To illuminate these issues, we compare and contrast the four *security-autonomy-mobility roadmaps* sketched by youths with different experiences of economic insecurity. We map the contours of these *security-autonomy-mobility roadmaps* and trace these roadmaps to the distinctive life circumstances of each of the groups. Exploring how economic security and insecurity resonate through the lives of these youths and how they perceive and respond to the economic circumstances of the adults and peers around them, we investigate the kinds of experiences, preoccupations, and strategies that inform these roadmaps.

One of this chapter's contributions is its focus on a nonurban town located in an agricultural area, a relatively understudied type of community that is culturally and geographically distant from the economically polarized urban centers of the United States. Another contribution is the chapter's emphasis on the role of agency and actors' own strategies for coping with the economic hardships that neoliberalism has posed. Taking a hard look at the consequences of insecurity culture for the imagined futures of planning youths, the chapter probes the links between youths' firsthand and secondhand experiences of economic security and insecurity, both short-term and long-term, and the ways they frame their economic futures. The focus of the analysis is the complex interrelationship between the youths' varied economic circumstances, their class background, and the roadmaps they fashion to give some shape to their futures.

In comparing and contrasting these divergent roadmaps, this chapter pulls together several different strands of scholarly literature: scholarship focusing on youths' imagined futures and aspirational identities (Frye

2012; Schneider and Stevenson 1999; Silva 2012, 2013); scholarly literature on the ways in which families across the class spectrum experience various forms of economic insecurity (Pugh 2015; Western et al. 2012; Sherman 2009; Newman 1999 [1988]); and scholarly literature regarding the emotional and psychic strategies parents and children develop for handling these forms of insecurity (Cooper 2013). Finally, it reveals how the cultural imperative to see oneself as in control of one's economic circumstances, even in the face of uncertainty and risk, intersects with these varying formative experiences of economic (in)security.

### RESPONDENTS: YOUTHS IN RANCHO BENITO

The data are drawn from interviews with high school students attending two different schools in an agricultural belt of California. Part of a larger study (Robinson and Schulz 2013), students in our respondent pool are ethnically and economically diverse. The most economically privileged youths have professional parents. Many of these parents are college educated and work as teachers, engineers, and administrators in this town's professional stratum. While slim, the town's professional stratum is joined by the high flyers in the area's big agriculture industry. Professionals in the "big ag" sector may sport Wranglers, but they are likely to pair denim with designer shirts and fancy dress boots (or "shit kickers" to use the patois) that can cost more than an average family's monthly food budget.

On the other end of the economic spectrum, youths come from families comprising the working poor. These youths may have parents who cobble together seasonal work in the fields or have been unemployed since the meltdown. Many of these youths and their families have been afflicted by long-term financial hardship as well as long-term material deprivation. For the youths at the extreme end of this continuum, housing and food can be scarce resources. Those hardest hit often have no fixed address and rely on "couch surfing" to keep a roof over their heads. For these youths, life is marked by constant uncertainty as to where they will reside, what they will eat, how they will get around town, and even whether the water or power will be shut off.

In contrast to these youths, other respondents grew up taking for granted many of the comforts of a middle-class American lifestyle: a family car, a single-family dwelling, hot food on the table for dinner, etc. This being said, while many of these families are keeping their heads above water, since the meltdown they have pinched the pennies to keep a tight rein on their budgets. These families are neither completely secure nor completely insecure.



One or both parents may work in blue- and pink-collar occupations that are heterogeneous along three dimensions: service and manual labor, skilled and unskilled jobs, and licensed and unlicensed professions. For example, one parent may have obtained licensing or specialized training (examples: security guards, welders, real estate agents, and cosmetologists). Another parent may work in unskilled or service occupations such as janitorial and retail (as store clerks). While some parents have fared better than others, most have experienced significant economic stress. Youths have seen their parents slide economically in the face of long-term unemployment, reductions in pay and benefits, vanishing retirements and savings, plummeting home values, “upside-down” mortgages, and a rash of foreclosures.

Finally, to differentiate between these groups’ relative financial well-being, it may be helpful to consider what these families regard as a special occasion. Youths from the vocational escalator and academic elevator roadmaps live on the financial edge; for them, a family trip for ice cream is a real treat. As one interviewee recalled, an ice cream sundae splurge for the whole family would be an important occasion and something to remember: “Yeah we were good ... [we would] get all dressed up and do it right.” By contrast, for parental emulators, a quick stop at Baskin Robbins is a run-of-the-mill activity. Protective reclamation youths would have once taken such an expenditure for granted. However, in their current circumstances, they no longer take this for granted as a routine and mundane activity undeserving of special attention.

## METHODS AND ANALYTIC STRATEGY

In this chapter, our data comes from one-on-one interviews and focus group interviews with several hundred youths attending two high schools in an agricultural of California. Relying on the well-respected tradition of qualitative interviewing (Pugh 2013), we mine respondents’ rich narratives replete with details regarding their daily lives, economic circumstances, personal communities, aspirations, and future plans.

In this chapter our goal is to examine the imagined futures of high school students from a working class town in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis. We are particularly interested in how these youths craft their financial and occupational futures in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis. For this reason, this chapter focuses on a theoretically revealing subgroup of *planning students* who have given thought to planning their educational and occupational futures.

Planning students attend high school alongside their non-planning counterparts. As this characterization suggests, such planning students

stand apart from their non-planning counterparts, who resemble the young women in Julie Bettie's study (2003) or young men in Paul Willis' study (1977). For example, some of the non-planning youths interviewed, common in this economically depressed community, are so engrossed in the everyday struggle to make ends meet that their primary concern is putting food on the table for their families. For such students, meeting immediate needs precludes investing resources in planning their future options. They often find it difficult to imagine let alone discuss a future in which they are acting as "agents" vis-à-vis the individuals and institutions that they will encounter as their adulthood unfolds. Indeed when asked about their futures, some non-planning youths supplied only the vaguest vision such as "I will work more hours" or "I will try to get a better job." Some of these students can also be characterized as oppositional in the same way as the adolescents populating the studies by Bettie and Willis. Such oppositional youths often regard school as an institution designed to thwart them or force them into an ill-fitting mold (Bettie 2003, 102, 137).

Non-planning youths, although worthy of future study, do not take center stage in our analysis. Rather the goal of our chapter is to examine the consequences of formative exposure to economic insecurity for youths' imagined financial and occupational futures, particularly how youths perceive and manage risks and rewards. Therefore we concentrate on the planning youths who have invested in weighing their future options. Our analytic strategy involves the intensive study of planning youths who view the future as something they can anticipate and plan for—at least to some extent—rather than something that simply happens to them. These planning students view educational and occupational institutions as potentially useful steppingstones in their quest for a better future. Planning students believe—rightly or wrongly—that they can engage with institutions to chart their own courses. These students also acquiesce to the neo-liberal game of self-directed disciplined striving in the service of improving or enhancing their economic circumstances, implicitly accepting the neo-liberal mandate to be economically self-sufficient as adults whatever the obstacles life throws in front of them.

## FINDINGS

In this section we present representative cases for each of the four types of roadmaps we identify—namely vocational escalator roadmaps, academic elevator roadmaps, parental emulation roadmaps, and protective reclamation roadmaps. These exemplars have been carefully selected to

illuminate ideal typical cases. Through systematic coding, the exemplars have been matched and systematically compared with the larger respondent pool along axes relevant to the study. Previous studies indicate that this matching strategy (Schulz 2012) pays analytic dividends when it comes to illuminating the general patterns characteristic of each type of *security-autonomy-mobility roadmaps* associated with each of the groups of youths. For each of the four groups, representative exemplars are presented. Each group is comprised of two representative youths, one female and one male, who represent the larger patterns in each group of youths who have sketched out roadmaps. The groups are compared and contrasted in order to highlight the ways that past experiences come into play in molding future roadmaps. These exemplars illustrate the complex ties between experiences of economic security and instability and the contours of individuals' *security-autonomy-mobility roadmaps*.

## THE VOCATIONAL ESCALATOR ROADMAP

As the case of Carla suggests, youths in the vocational escalator group are no stranger to intensive and prolonged economic insecurity predating the Great Recession. These youths come from “hard living” families compelled to take one day at a time because of the omnipresent unpredictability and insecurities of their precarious livelihoods (Bettie 2003, 13; Howell 1973). Even before the Great Recession, even a modest degree of economic security lay beyond the reach of these youths. Furthermore, very few of the youths who frame this kind of roadmap can look to parents who have any kind of postsecondary training or credentialing. Many of their parents have not attended, let alone graduated from high school. In this group, a high school diploma is a badge of honor. Vocational escalator parents have spent their adult lives working in low-wage jobs offering little in the way of either security or autonomy. The lack of credentials disqualifies them from certified labor such as daycare operator, cosmetologist, auto mechanic, and welder, all jobs that appear to promise a modicum of economic stability. Observing their parents' difficulties in spite of beating the sun to work and valiant efforts to secure some measure of security, the adopters of the vocational escalator roadmap attribute their parents' struggles to their lack of vocational credentials.

The youths who exemplify members of the vocational escalator pathway place their faith in the power of certification and vocational credentialing as an insurance policy in a hostile and uncertain world. By obtaining vocational credentials, they believe that they can escape the economic insecurity

and deprivation plaguing the adults in their own families. Youths favoring the vocational escalator roadmap presume that certification and vocational credentialing will insulate them against future economic risk and insecurity and, at the same time, assure them dignity and autonomy in the workplace. Their trust in the power of such credentials often borders on magical thinking. Lacking any firsthand knowledge of the challenges that await even the most vocationally qualified workers, they regard the acquisition of vocational credentials as a potent panacea that can by themselves ensure an upward trajectory and a high degree of economic security. The seed of this idealized vision of certification and vocational credentialing is planted and cultivated by teachers, coaches, and guidance counselors who sing the praises of vocational credentials at school.

Because many of these youths' parents have worked for many years in low-wage jobs where they exercise little power and control over their work conditions, the framers of the vocational exit roadmap show an affinity for occupations where self-employment appears as a tempting and viable option. Young women often idealize the scheduling flexibility of self-employment. Young women are more likely to savor the prospect of working as their "own boss," thereby avoiding the indignities inflicted by supervisors who see employees as nothing more than expenses on their balance sheet. Thus both genders configure their vocational exit roadmaps so that economic security, incremental mobility, and autonomy all figure prominently.

### THE VOCATIONAL ESCALATOR ROADMAP: CRYSTAL

The adherents of the vocational escalator roadmap have all witnessed harsh economic realities. They have seen their families, particularly fathers and male relatives, thwarted in their efforts to provide for them and their siblings. Thus vocational escalator women foresee that they will need a steady income in order to provide for their own families and often their natal families as well. Crystal's case illustrates what happens when young women grow up in an economically unstable home environment and seek a vocational escape path.

Women who adopt a vocational escalator roadmap often blame their parents' economic struggles on the heartlessness and bad business sense of employers who are quick to shed workers when the going gets tough, regardless of the commitments made to their employees. Crystal's dad lost his job as an employee of a small local nursery when business dried up. Crystal interprets her father's situation as evidence that it is better to run

your own business on your own terms than accept employment at a firm run by someone else who is happy to fire you the moment things turn sour. As she says, “My dad . . . worked hard . . . he was so good with the plants and telling people what to do to make them grow.” It wasn’t “his fault.” Crystal explains that, although money was always tight, her family’s situation really deteriorated when the nursery started to founder after the 2008 recession. Borrowing from her father’s critiques, Crystal assigns blame to the business owner: “He [the owner] just made all of the employees pay . . . my dad worked there for over ten years . . . and walked away with nothing.” During this time of familial hardship, Crystal’s mother was unable to right the family ship. For Crystal, her mother’s inability to rescue the family from deprivation stems from her lack of marketable skills and vocational credentials: “My mom wanted to run her own day care center but she stopped school early and so she never got the certificate.”

Women such as Crystal gravitate toward the possibility of running their own small-scale business, both for the sake of scheduling flexibility and to ensure a greater degree of control over their economic fate. Reviewing her own parents’ situation, Crystal has arrived at the conclusion that she needs to earn her certificate in early childhood studies, a credential she will ultimately require to establish her own day care operation. Crystal plans to run her own day care program after earning her certificate at Jefferson, the local community college. Crystal explains: “I just love kids . . . so I wanna work with kids . . . and be a good mom.” Unlike youths planning on attending a four-year college and thereby delaying their entry into the labor market, Crystal has decided to enroll in a certification program at the local community college: “It will be better for me to work and go to school at the same time . . . that way I can get my certificate quickly at Jefferson [Community College].”

In assuming the responsibility to provide for her natal family through her own efforts, Crystal is expressing a willingness to step into the breach. Even more important, she is looking into the future to her imagined family. Should her future partner not be able to bring in an income, Crystal can keep the family afloat. As she says: “I want to know that if my guy hits a rough patch . . . you know, so I can still have a job and we’ll be ok.” Like other such youths who have seen their parents flounder over a long span of time, Crystal presumes that by obtaining skills, she will avoid a similar fate. In her mind, by earning credentials, she will be prepared and able to step in to rescue her family’s finances if her husband finds himself unable to work:

I really want a family . . . but like it’s scary everyone being out of work . . . made me think of you know what I need to do so like if I have kids . . . get ahead with

my education. I would like to have stable money for my family. If I get married and my husband breaks his leg I want to be able to support us financially.

Crystal does not intend to become a stay-at-home mom; her plan is to be a working mother who can provide for her family.

Although Crystal's larger goal appears clear to her, she acknowledges that she cannot look to any adult role models to fill in the blanks. Unable to ask her parents for advice in this realm, Crystal turns to the school's career counselor as an "expert" to help her plan her future strategically: "I didn't know what I could do or how I could do it . . . but Ms. Schoefeld was real helpful . . . when I told her I was interested in working in having a day care center she told me that I can get my certificate at Jefferson [Community College] after I graduate from high school . . . she said I don't even have to leave town and go away to school . . . I can do it all right here." Significantly, for Crystal, the guidance counselor serves as an aspirational role model who has already taken the path Crystal sees for herself.

### THE VOCATIONAL ESCALATOR ROADMAP: VICTOR

While Victor could count on a roof over his head and food on the table, he never had access to middle-class comforts such as his own bedroom. Even before the Great Recession the adult males in Victor's personal community coped with job losses and inadequate work hours. Long before the Recession's onset in 2008, the "lucky" adults in Victor's personal community had to settle for diminished and more infrequent paychecks. For the "unlucky" adults, long-term unemployment has always been the rule rather than the exception. Victor's father was one of the "lucky" ones: "Until then [2008] my dad had—like you know—steady jobs . . . He was working all of the time . . . he can fix anything . . . so he was the go-to guy at [local hotel] . . . for a while he worked at [local plant] fixing whatever they needed." Until the Great Recession, Victor's father provided for his family's basic needs by stringing together jobs from multiple employers. However, with the arrival of the Great Recession, Victor's own living circumstances deteriorated when a steady income eluded his father. Unable to afford the rent, they moved in with their extended family. Victor puts on a bold face: ". . . yeah we made it ok . . . right now we're with my uncle and aunt."

Victor already holds a part-time job to help out his family. He has already learned firsthand that as an employee he has very little control over his hours and income: "I work at the car wash . . . try to get hours . . . but never know if my shift is gonna get cut." Victor imagines that as a small-business owner

he will be able to gain some measure of control over his finances. By opening his own barbershop, he anticipates a more secure livelihood than his father could deliver: "I think it is better to be my own boss . . . I want to know that I take good care of my family." He reasons that he will never lack for clients as his business fills an ongoing need: "Everybody's got hair, right? Needs to cut it, right? No hair? Still hafta shave . . . so this is a good way to go." At the same time, Victor views entrepreneurship as a means to gaining autonomy so that he can avoid the kind of "shaming" his father experienced at the hands of his employers: "My dad did a real good job for them but it didn't matter . . . they just let him go." Raul, Victor's adult mentor, owns his own shop. Victor feels very fortunate to have discovered such a skilled role model:

He lets me just watch, so if I'm not working I go there any time that I can. You know just to watch him. It's amazing. Raul is amazing. I can just watch him for hours and hours . . . that's what I want. You know have my own place like that where I can do my art.

Like Crystal, Victor has opted for an educational path centered around vocational classes leading to an occupation-specific state certification, and, ultimately, ownership of his own small business: "I'm going take my classes . . . the problem is getting my kit together . . . it's like \$500 bucks to get my kit together . . . once I've got my kit and take the classes, Raul said he would work something out . . ." Victor's relationship with Raul also shows the importance of aspirational role models, particularly the vocationally oriented men who benefit from a local entrepreneur's mentorship.

## THE ACADEMIC ELEVATOR ROADMAP

We now turn to the academic elevator roadmap. In many ways, the academic elevator roadmap parallels the vocational escalator roadmap. In both cases, the significant and long-term economic insecurity and hardship marring the lives of the youths have been chronic and unrelenting, even during times of relative economic prosperity. These youths are also accustomed to the chronic unpredictability and insecurities that go hand in hand with hard living. In addition, the parents of both vocational escalator and academic elevator youths lack either degrees or careers which provide either economic autonomy or security.

However, while the same experiences of long-term economic insecurity inform both the vocational and academic elevator roadmaps, the two roadmaps assume divergent forms. The academic elevator roadmap necessitates

buying into an objectively riskier proposition, namely that academic credentials alone can propel one into a more secure occupational track. Akin to the upward-looking “prep” students documented in Bettie’s study (Bettie 2003), these students attend to their grades and coursework diligently. Thus the students who embrace the academic elevator roadmap are willing to defer economic security for themselves and potentially postpone the immediate financial help they could give to their natal families.

To a much greater degree than their vocational escalator counterparts, the academic elevator youths put their chips down in a high-stakes gamble. They are willing to postpone their entry into the labor market and pay for a four-year college education. In effect they are betting that both the earning opportunities they forfeit in the short-term and the potentially greater debt they incur will ultimately pay off in the end with a white-collar job. For example, whereas vocational escalator youths prepare to plunge into the skilled labor market immediately after earning vocational credentials, academic elevator youths are prepared to defer entry into the labor market in order to seize the golden ring of the BA, even if means that she can’t take full-time employment for at least four years. For academic elevator youths, even when it entails the sacrifice of earning opportunities immediately after high school, the opportunities afforded by the BA exert a magnetic pull.

Although they vary by student, there are several, often intertwined, sources of the academic elevator roadmap shared by this relatively small group of students. Often, these students are encouraged by at least one adult mentor, usually teachers and other educators in the school who has taken an interest in them: “Mrs. Smith took me aside after class and told me I could do it . . . ” These adult mentors encourage them to exert themselves academically as well as in extracurricular pursuits. Alongside mentoring, the students feel both empowered by and obligated to their parents and siblings to be the first in their family to clear the hurdle of a college education. In addition, friendships with academically oriented peers are yet another complementary factor steering them toward college.

### THE ACADEMIC ELEVATOR ROADMAP: MAYA

Maya looks forward to securing a BA en route to a secure and stable white collar career. Maya is well-informed about her occupational options and the necessary educational prerequisites (Schneider and Stevenson 1999) thanks to a special mentoring program for low-income students. Maya expresses certainty about her educational goals: “Right now the big decision. . . [is] where I’m gonna go to school.” In her eyes, the important decision facing her



as a high school student is how to find a way to pay for her post-secondary degree. Maya announces, “Gotta do it. Better take loans if you have to. Get a job if you have to. But do it. Go straight to a four-year school. If you don’t go things can happen.” By graduating with her BA, Maya sees a day when she will leave the grinding insecurity and hardship far behind.

Like many students of both genders who place their trust in the power of academic credentials, Maya’s personal community has very few adult role models of either gender who have earned the educational credentials to which she aspires. Maya’s father is not in the picture at all. Maya’s mother, while earning Maya’s admiration for her “stick to it” attitude and her unwavering work ethic, has not trodden the road which Maya wants to follow. As Maya sees it, her mother “works so hard—day after day—work, work, work. And nothin’s gonna change . . .” Her mother’s hard life as a paid caregiver for the elderly makes Maya yearn for a yet unknown degree of economic security. Maya knows that her mother longs for her to join the people who “don’t have to struggle just to make ends meet.”

In Maya’s case adults from the school and her mentoring program played a key role in making the college path seem more attainable. Like Crystal, Maya has turned to educators for the guidance lacking in her personal community. She explains:

I went to Mrs. Lafitte. She sat me down and explained how she was the first person in her family to go to college too . . . I didn’t understand how anything worked . . . She took the time to tell me what I needed to know. She totally helped me . . .

She can also serve as a role model for her younger siblings who aspire to escape their current economic insecurity. By attending college, Maya will pave the way for the younger siblings and “. . . show them they can do it too.” Once she has graduated from college and established herself in a career, Maya looks forward to liberating her own mother from economic insecurity: “I can help my mom that way. . . make it better for her so she doesn’t have to work so hard.” The anticipated rewards of a college diploma weigh so heavily in the balance for Maya that the risks from this path disappear from view.

### **THE ACADEMIC ELEVATOR ROADMAP: RAFAEL**

Like Maya, Rafael has set his sights on securing academic credentials which, in his view, will boost him into a higher and more secure economic orbit than that of his own family and friends. Also similar to Maya, Rafael’s

eagerness is fueled by a teacher who regularly mentors students. “Mr. Chapelle” leads an annual fundraising effort to take students like Rafael to Washington, D.C. with the goal of broadening their sense of what is possible for them. For many of these students, it is their first trip outside of California or even away from home. Rafael recalls how the trip to the nation’s capital was instrumental in shaping his goals: “Mr. Chapelle took us to Washington D.C. talked to us about what we could do . . . made me want to be a teacher.”

To accomplish this goal, Rafael believes he must stake everything on going immediately to a four-year college. He believes that this path will open the doors to a secure future. Rafael has seen family members work themselves to the bone, dependent on seasonal work on one of the many “coolers”<sup>2</sup> necessary to the local agricultural industry. He relates: “They always told me I could do anything . . . that they were working hard so that I could do something better.” Rafael is highly motivated to go to college and become a high school teacher as a result of his parents’ encouragement and having seen their economic struggles.

To keep his eyes on the prize, Rafael refuses to succumb to the temptations of an immediate paycheck attached to a job that may derail his college education, future career, and even his long-term economic security. Rafael frames short-term economic gain from a “dead end” job as an unacceptable risk that might jeopardize his future: “If people aren’t careful . . . they just stop going to school. . . . You can’t get hooked on a paycheck and wind up not getting your degree.” Some academic elevator youths like Rafael have been exempted by their parents from helping support the family through part-time jobs. This dispensation does not come cheaply, but must be achieved with the coin of familial sacrifice on the part of parents struggling to keep the electric and other essential bills paid. With their eyes on the prize of a college education, academic elevator youths forgo immediate income from part-time jobs in order to pursue academics leading to the BA.

Students like Rafael owe a debt of honor toward their family members who are determined to keep them on track for college. To repay this debt, academic elevator youths like Rafael put their shoulders to the wheel to succeed academically. Setting his sights on a full-ride academic scholarship, he has studied hard his entire high school career, taking the hardest classes, going the extra mile to get help, risking the stigma of geekdom, giving up fun activities, etc. Whatever the price of preparing for college, Rafael has willingly paid it both for himself and to honor his family’s sacrifice: “Work now. Play later . . . Make my parents proud.” Finally, like Maya, Rafael also sees greater earning power as a means to help his natal families: “After I finish college I’m gonna help out my folks . . . that’s the way

it should be.” Rafael invests all of his efforts into earning a college degree, which he sees as the necessary step to securing economic security for himself and his family.

### THE PARENTAL EMULATION ROADMAP

Unlike the vocational escalator and academic elevator roadmaps, the parental emulation roadmap stems from different experiential sources and projects a different vision of the future. The parental emulation roadmap revolves around the ideal of replicating the careers and trajectories of parents and other adults. Youths who espouse this understanding of the future treat future economic security and prosperity as guaranteed, as long as they can follow in the footsteps of their parents and other adults in their personal communities.

For those who aspire to emulate their parents, there is nothing unfamiliar about long-term economic security and stability. With substantial and steady incomes derived from their successful law and medical practices or executive positions at local organizations, these parents stand as living proof to their sons and daughters that long-term economic security and prosperity is within their grasp. These optimistic and confident youths have parents who are attorneys, physicians, and local “big ag.” These youths have witnessed their own parents and other adults in their personal communities capitalize on their professional networks and organizational positions to enhance their family’s standard of living and economic security.

These youths also appreciate the mutually reinforcing advantages conferred by college degrees, postgraduate credentials, and local social capital. They realize that credentials serve only as a gateway to professional success and that a remunerative career stands on other legs besides credentials. Grasping the importance of credentials, they also came to realize the indispensability of their community-specific social capital and local connections. Local connections are often forged through groups and organizations including local private school alumni groups, AAUW, churches, and religious organizations, as well as service groups like Kiwanis and Rotary. Parental emulator youths see their parents knitting local networks together through shared activities such as fundraising barbeques, pancake breakfasts, and a variety of other outreach projects in the community. Parental emulators see their parents making contributions to the local community and also making connections that provide professional benefits.

Parental emulators thus see themselves not only following in their parents’ footsteps in terms of education, but also envision capitalizing on

similar social and professional networks. Indeed of the many youths who are considering taking up their parents' occupations, many are counting on the very same local socioprofessional networks, which their parents have cultivated in Rancho Benito during their thriving careers.

### THE PARENTAL EMULATION ROADMAP: LINDA

Linda exemplifies many of the characteristics that distinguish parental emulators from other types. Because of her parents' professional positions and the substantial incomes that accompany them, Linda has never known either long-term or short-term economic insecurity. Family functions and social events are populated by the local bigwigs: lawyers, doctors, and even judges. Unlike the other youths, Linda has never given a second thought to the family's financial health or standard of living. Even when the economy faltered, her family was relatively insulated and never had to make painful sacrifices.

When asked if she will return to Rancho Benito to start her professional career, she considers "it probably would be easier." Indeed, it would be easier for Linda to join this network than to strike out on her own elsewhere. No matter the professional service needed, Linda's family is bound to know someone who can readily supply an introduction or make a phone call. With a ready supply of references in many life domains, Linda understands that members of the network both benefit from connections and also contribute to them: "It's good to know people. If someone needs something you can put them in touch. Then when you need a favor, they can help you out."

Knowing the benefits conferred by personal connections, Linda is optimistic about her future and the jump-start she will get by letting her career piggyback off of her parents' local connections. Where Linda's aspirations are concerned, it is her mother's career which serves as the guiding light. Linda's mother, a physician with her own local practice, belongs to the town's small but powerful class of professionals. Linda has already mapped out a future path that would look very familiar to her mother's experience: "First college, then med. school, then residency, then maybe my own practice." For Linda, the launching platform for this trajectory has never been in doubt. She "always knew" that she would "go to a four-year right away," as "that's what everyone in my family has done."

### THE PARENTAL EMULATION ROADMAP: NICOLAS

Like Linda, Nicolas has little acquaintance with economic instability on account of his parents' lucrative and stable positions within with the

town's professional elite. In his case, Nicolas's dad is a pillar of the legal community, representing some of the agriculture firms in the area. Nicolas has grown up in economic circumstances similar to those of Linda, never lacking for either essentials or indulgences. His dad's resilient law practice flourishes in good economic times and weathers the downturns.

Nicolas admires his dad for working hard over the years and sticking to his own ambitious career plan, a plan which got off the ground because of his dad's law degree from a well-known California law school. He also acknowledges his father's talents as a social networker skillful at drumming up business and sustaining his ties to the local community. When Nicolas talks about his father, he characterizes him as a "great guy." Nicolas is aware that his dad ". . . does a bunch of community service and knows a bunch of people." The tight-knit character of the local community is readily apparent to Nicolas, who remarks that "someone always knows someone."

In contemplating his own occupational and economic future, Nicolas embraces the possibility of settling into the same professional and occupational niche as his dad. Planning to first practice as a lawyer, Nicolas aspires to ultimately become a judge. He anticipates putting himself in a position to establish his own law practice in town (or take over his dad's law practice) by spending many years hitting the books at law school. To accomplish his goals, Nicolas knows that he will have to work his way through the ranks and pay his dues: "To make it I will need to work hard. But that is what everyone has to do. So you do it." Like Linda, Nicolas has his eye on an extended educational trajectory comprised of college followed by a postgraduate professional degree. Nicolas explains: "Law school after the BA. Who knows—maybe Harvard Law!"

## THE PROTECTIVE RECLAMATION ROADMAP

The youths who belong to the protective reclamation group differ in their relationship with economic insecurity when contrasted with the other groups. Unlike the vocational escalator and academic elevator groups, they have tasted real economic security and a comfortable standard of living for more than short periods. Unlike the parental emulators, however, they have felt the sting of the Great Recession in a direct and personal way. Before the 2008 crisis, their families used to enjoy economic security. Protective reclamation youths can recall what it was like to enjoy a comfortable degree of security and to plan for the future with some degree of confidence. By and large, during the years before 2008, these youths took a middle-class standard of living for granted from housing to family cars to

trips to watch baseball at Dodger Stadium. Protective reclamation youths experienced stability unknown to their vocational escalator and academic elevator peers. After the crisis, protective reclamation youths learned to put economic concerns front and center in their future planning.

For protective reclamation youths, the cherished and hard-won economic security provided by their families ground to a halt with the onset of the Great Recession. Without warning, their cocoon of security collapsed, forcing these youths to reevaluate their assumptions about economic security. The sudden reversal of fortune called into question what these youths had believed about their families' economic foundations. It also discredited their families' presumptions about how to create a secure life. In particular, the collapse cast doubt on the power of credentials to guarantee economic security and a middle-class standard of living. Protective reclamation youths recognize that their own parents and other adults had "played by the rules," acquiring college degrees and job experience, but had nevertheless found themselves in dire straits when the going got tough.

For protective reclamation youths, the power of academic credentialing was undermined before their very eyes. For this reason, their attitude toward credentialing stands in opposition to all of the other groups, especially those youths' seeking upward mobility via educational attainment. For these reasons, protective reclamation youths exhibit substantial uncertainty and adopt a risk-averse posture toward the future. These youths express more uncertainty than the others about how they should proceed. They wish to reclaim the lost economic security of the prerecession years, but they have also lost faith in the power of educational credentials to launch them on the path of reclamation. Their risk-averse stance comes across particularly clearly in regards to their stance toward postsecondary schooling. They refuse to countenance the possibility of amassing substantial debt, even if it helps them to obtain marketable degrees in relatively high-paying fields.

### **THE PROTECTIVE RECLAMATION ROADMAP: DANIELA**

Daniela still recalls the halcyon days during her childhood when she dwelt in a roomy and comfortable house in one of the new housing tracts in Rancho Benito. Twice a year her family took her and her siblings to Disneyland, a high point of her life. Daniela recalls feeling very secure before 2008. With the income from her mom's job as an elementary school teacher combined with the income from her dad's successful contracting business, there was always enough money to go around. Unfortunately, the sudden decline in

business following the 2008 slowdown dealt a death blow to her father's contracting business, putting him out of work for several years.

In Daniela's view, the only thing holding her family's economic fortune together is her mom's good fortune to have a secure job. She reflects: "We were lucky my mom had her job . . . and that it was a safe job . . . I think it's good to have a job like that." Even with her mom's income, the family's financial situation deteriorated, ultimately causing the family to vacate their home and reluctantly settle into a rental property. Daniela was called upon to make sacrifices in the interest of saving money. Although she is still active in FFA (Future Farmers of America), moving meant that Daniela had to give up raising animals: "I had rabbit hutches in the backyard . . . but I had to find homes for them when we moved."

In her future planning, Daniela is risk-averse and wants to avoid financial uncertainty even as she badly wants to regain lost ground. She is determined to get an "education and someday get a nice house." However, she also fears entering a risky career path. For Daniela, the ideal pathway promises a dependable income. With this goal in mind, Daniela may sacrifice her pre-crisis goal of going into veterinary medicine for a more stable career as a teacher: ". . . it's pretty pricey to become a vet . . . and besides I like kids as much as I like animals. I can still be a teacher and work with 4H or somethin' like that to take care of animals."

Moreover, seeing her parents struggle to pay their financial obligations, Daniela is wary of shackling herself with educational debt and unmanageable student loan repayments. Her wariness leads her to relinquish the dream of immediately attending a four-year college: "Sure it would be nice to go straight to a four-year. But it's too much money . . . I can go to Jefferson [Community College] and transfer." Without even knowing the dollar amounts, Daniela believes that starting out at a four-year college right after high school does not warrant breaking the bank: "It's not worth it to spend all that money just to go to some big school when Jefferson [Community College] has the classes I need . . . besides you end up in the same place."

Like her counterpart Crystal, the student who stakes her hopes on the power of the vocational credential, Daniela aspires to be a provider for her future family and contributor to the family finances. When thinking about her role in a future family, Daniela believes she can keep the family ship afloat as her mother has done. Daniela strategizes, "It is real important for both people to have a good job so if something happens you can land on your feet. . . take care of your kids." However, Daniela, unlike Crystal, knows what it feels like to experience some measure of economic security and comfort in her daily life. Further, whereas Crystal sees the vocational

credential as the ticket to economic security, Daniela does not see educational credentials as magic bullets. While Crystal wants to gain a toehold that will allow her to climb beyond her parents' circumstances, Daniela is willing to downsize her dreams and expectations as a way of reclaiming the economic security she lost in the Great Recession. While Crystal seeks upward mobility and security that her parents have never experienced, Daniela yearns to recreate the economic security her family once enjoyed.

### THE PROTECTIVE RECLAMATION ROADMAP: JESSE

Jesse illustrates the protective reclamation roadmap as it manifests itself among the male youths. Both Jesse's father, a successful local chiropractor, and his mother, an accountant, took a hit in the recession. As their client lists dwindled, Jesse's mother took over managing the father's practice as a way to help stretch the overhead budget by reducing payroll. With the crisis, the entire family was forced to revise their expectations about wants versus needs: "My mom says we gotta be thankful for what we've got . . . still got our house, still going to a four-year eventually even if I start out at Jefferson [Community College]."

Jesse's response to the loss of economic security parallels the response of Daniela in many ways. Like Daniela, Jesse remembers better times: "We used to go to Dodger games, go camping . . . it's hard to do that now . . . I want to give my kids those things, and I can't do that if I don't have a good job." Before the crisis, Jesse and his brothers had not yet formulated any concrete occupational aspirations. Witnessing his parents' difficulties weathering the recession, Jesse started to lean toward what he considered a "secure" occupation, namely engineering. Like Daniela, when asked about his future plans, Jesse emphasizes the stability of his future career: "I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do but now I'm thinking engineering . . . I like to build things so I can do that . . . We had a speaker and he told us it is pretty good money and there are a lot of jobs even in hard times." Jesse believes that he can manage risk by choosing a path that affords more security by depending on an employer: "I don't want a rollercoaster. I want a smooth ride . . . I've seen what my parents go through with a small business. No thanks."

Like Daniela, Jesse's desire to recapture the lost economic security of the prerecession years has prompted him to shun risk. In addition to selecting what he believes is a more secure career path, he also is wary of committing to an uncertain educational future: "I don't want to waste my time on a major not related to anything in the real world." In order to reclaim past



financial security, Jesse believes he must avoid unnecessary risks that will delay or derail his ability to build a solid financial future: “My dad has told me ‘Don’t study something useless and don’t take loans for a fancy private school unless you want to live on ramen’ . . . get a degree, get a job, get a life.” For this reason, Jesse is reflective about how the price tag of a college education fits into his career plans, “My parents warned me . . . still paying off their loans . . . I don’t want to be in a bunch of debt.” Jesse had originally planned to attend his parents’ alma mater but has revised these plans in light of the situation. Like so many others guided by this roadmap, Jesse expresses a willingness to trade off personal dreams for greater economic security. He is weighing the idea of taking care of his GE requirements at the local community college unless he is offered generous scholarships and grants: “Sure, I would like to go straight to a four-year. But it’s like show me the money. If there is no dinero, then Jefferson [Community College] . . . it’s my next stop.”

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Where it concerns youths’ experiences of economic risk, uncertainty, and stability as well as their future plans, Rancho Benito is home to at least four distinct kinds of roadmaps. These four types of roadmap—the vocational escalator roadmap, the academic elevator roadmap, the protective reclamation roadmap, and the parental emulation roadmap—emerge from our systematic comparison of these youths in terms of their past experiences as well as their future orientations and aspirations. As we have seen, each of these types reflects a distinctive outlook on security and mobility on the part of the youths. The various dimensions of these four categories are laid out in Table 10.1.

When we contrast the four groups across the multiple dimensions specified in the table above, we can discern some general patterns. Whereas the economic insecurity and deprivation of the first two groups has stretched on for their entire lives—both before and after the recession years—the economic insecurity of the reclamation-risk aversion group began only after the onset of the 2008 recession. Furthermore, the escalator and elevator groups attribute the economic tribulations of their families to their lack of credentials, and so prize credentials as the magic bullet which can insulate them against the same problems. Lacking adult contacts in these occupations, and hence usable social capital, the youths who frame these roadmaps invest credentials with transformative significance—a vision that is often reinforced by their mentors at school.

Table 10.1 ROADMAPS TABLE

	VOCATIONAL ESCALATOR ROADMAP	ACADEMIC ELEVATOR ROADMAP	RECLAMATION-RISK AVERSION ROADMAP	PARENTAL EMULATION ROADMAP
SECURITY STRATEGY	CHART UPWARD TRAJECTORY	CHART UPWARD TRAJECTORY	REESTABLISH LOST ECONOMIC SECURITY	MAINTAIN ECONOMIC SECURITY
KEY ASPECTS OF ROADMAPS				
occupational aspirations	blue-collar and pink-collar jobs, self-employment	white-collar jobs	secure white-collar employment	professional elite white-collar jobs
stance towards education and credentials	vocational credentials are "magic bullet"	academic credentials are "magic bullet"	credentials, risk-averse occupation, low debt all necessary	credentials and social capital both necessary
SOURCES OF ROADMAPS				
past and present economic insecurity	chronic long-term economic insecurity that worsened after recession	chronic long-term economic insecurity that worsened after recession	pre-recession economic security and post-recession economic insecurity	continuous economic security pre-recession and post-recession

Parental emulator youths differ the most from the other three groups inasmuch as those youths who adopt the parental emulation roadmap have no firsthand understanding of economic insecurity. Unlike the other three groups, parental emulator youths have experienced long-term economic security. Spectators to their parents' successes, they know how this security can be realized. To the parental emulator youths, the parents' well-trodden path looks like a fail-safe recipe for economic security and a comfortable life.

Finally, members of the protective reclamation group, by contrast, have witnessed the failure of credentials as insurance against economic insecurity. They therefore approach credentials with a skepticism borne of bitter experience. For this group economic security is both extremely desirable and extremely fragile. Things can go right for a long time but then go awry without warning, even when parents have "done everything right." Yearning for the economic dreamland of economically comfortable childhoods preceding the 2008 crisis, these youths evince a skepticism toward a system which has both given and taken away. In this roadmap future autonomy on the job is subordinated to reclaiming the security of the lost economic past. Personal dreams are sacrificed on the altar of financial pragmatism.

## CREDENTIALS AND OTHER PASSPORTS TO ECONOMIC SECURITY

Juxtaposing the four roadmaps allows us to see how different experiences of economic (in)security breed different outlooks on the future among the youths of Rancho Benito. Such a comparison also illuminates the varying roles of what we call *security passports*. In the analysis of the data we can identify three distinct security passports: credentials (both vocational and academic); occupational autonomy (running one's own business or working as a freelancer); and social capital.

The credential passport is the most central passport across all four groups. Both vocational escalator youth and academic elevator youths pin their hopes on the credential passport. Their faith is bolstered by the educators' claims on behalf of credentials. Albeit to varying degrees, each of the four groups sees credentialing as necessary. The occupational autonomy passport resonates with two of the four groups. For vocational escalator youths, credentials in the form of vocational certifications operate synergistically alongside occupational autonomy. Aspirations for occupational autonomy as exemplified by an entrepreneurial orientation appeal to members of the vocational escalator group. In their eyes, once they are properly trained and equipped with a certificate or license, the door will be open to running a successful business and creating a relatively secure and prosperous future. For the women in this group, such a role also promises more freedom and flexibility than working for a boss. For the men in this group escaping the clutches of a boss and running one's own shop carries the intoxicating whiff of masculine self-reliance. On the other end of the spectrum, parental emulators also see the value of the occupational autonomy passport, particularly those who aspire to their own medical or law practice. By contrast, neither the academic elevator nor the protective reclamation youths prioritize the occupational autonomy passport. Credentials are the indispensable passport for the vocational elevator youths. To them, credentials are the only passport that can facilitate entry into an occupation largely unfamiliar to their personal communities. Vocational elevator youths rely neither on occupational autonomy nor social capital passports—for them, vocational credentials carry almost the entire weight of their future plans. Conversely, protective reclamation youths regard both the credential and occupational autonomy passports with skepticism. While they believe they must earn a college degree, they are nonetheless wary of succumbing to the same reversal of fortune as college-educated parents. These youths thus do not pin their hopes on credentials in the same way as do vocational elevator youths. At the same time, they are also wary of the occupational autonomy

passport, particularly when they have seen parental businesses that faltered during the meltdown. Because many of these youths doubt the capacity of small businesses to survive in a bad economy, they have lost faith in the potential of occupational autonomy to deliver a secure and stable life.

In terms of social capital, this passport plays a marginal role in all of the roadmaps with the exception of the parental emulator roadmap. Significantly, while social capital may play a role for reclamation youths, they are well aware that social capital did not suffice to salvage their parents' financial well-being. By and large, they cannot bank on their own social networks or their families' social networks to enhance their future job prospects or prospects of economic security.

In tandem with credentialing and occupational autonomy passports, the social capital passport plays a central role in the roadmaps of the parental emulator youths. These fortunate youths give each passport a specific role. While the credential gets them past the first hurdle, occupational autonomy – particularly when combined with social capital—gets them to the finish line. These youths know well that credentials may be enough to crack open the door to stability, prosperity, and security, but they are not enough to keep the door open over the long haul. So these youths bank on both occupational autonomy and social capital in local networks to help them carve out a successful and secure future in the decades ahead.

Finally, among the findings that emerge from our research on Rancho Benito youths are some insights into the relationship between these roadmaps and gender. Overall, the two genders converge closely in terms of their experiences of economic (in)security as well as their imagined futures. If we contrast the roadmaps of the male youths to those of the female youths across the four types of roadmaps, gender divergence stands in the shadow of gender convergence. This convergence is especially striking in the case of the youths who embrace the protective reclamation roadmap. All the youths in this group have grown up in dual-earner middle-class households in which women have shared responsibility for the family's economic well-being alongside men. These youths, whether female or male, thus view two incomes as a necessary hedge against economic risk and insecurity.

Several of these groups do manifest some unexpected gender divergences. Probably the most striking divergence characterizes the members of the academic elevator group. While the women and men in this group alike express great enthusiasm for the prospect of a secure and stable white-collar job, the women are more concerned about the costs of missing the academic elevator. Many of the academic elevator women entertain grave concerns about their futures should they miss their ride. This concern is fueled by their skepticism about the male breadwinner model, as

well as their goal of strengthening their bargaining position within their own future household. Finally, many of these young women had heard encouraging words from female role models and mentors at school who were themselves anxious to help the students travel down this road. Thus, even more than the men, the women maintain a laser-like focus on the potential of higher education to unlock the kinds of jobs and careers capable of making them financially independent.

This chapter opens a new and revealing window onto the past experiences and future visions of the youths from agricultural California. In chronicling their attempts to exert agency vis-à-vis an uncertain future, the chapter sheds light on this often forgotten population: working-class communities far from urban America. As the youths' vivid narratives illuminate, their divergent experiences have led them to very different understandings of potential futures. Each of the four groups sees both the future's opportunities and constraints in a different light, depending on their past experiences of economic security and insecurity. Despite the differences among the groups, however, they have all, to one degree or another, witnessed the unseen but powerful forces unleashed by the 2008 meltdown that have reshaped the economic landscape beneath their feet. Perhaps most importantly, all four groups are grappling with the collision between the neoliberal ideal of economic self-reliance and the neoliberal realities of risk, insecurity, and uncertainty.

## NOTES

1. All names are pseudonyms. Grammar has been corrected only when necessary for clarity.
2. The "cooler" refrigerates freshly picked fruits and vegetables so that they can be transported.

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