

Inter-cohort Trends in Intergenerational Mobility in England & Wales: income, status and class (InTIME)

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Summary

In this project we add to the existing evidence base on recent trends in inter-generational social mobility in England and Wales. We analyse data from the Office for National Statistics Longitudinal Study (ONS LS), which links individual records from the five decennial censuses between 1971 and 2011. Counter to widespread prevailing beliefs, our results show evidence of a small but significant increase in social fluidity for cohorts born between the 1950s and the 1980s for both men and women.

Background

The level of intergenerational mobility in a society is widely taken as a key barometer of its fairness and equality, outwardly signalling whether citizens achieve social and economic status through hard work and ability, or as a result of advantages bestowed upon them by their parents. Therefore, as a concept social mobility has become one of the key motifs of our political epoch, with politicians of both left and right now championing it as a core policy objective.¹ In 2011, for example, the coalition government announced its 'social mobility strategy' in which improving relative intergenerational mobility was specified as the government's most important social policy objective for the parliament.²

However, in contrast to the near universal consensus amongst politicians and social commentators that social mobility in Britain is waning, academic research on the question presents a far less united front. Within the past ten years, leading academic researchers have concluded that social mobility in the UK has declined,^{3,4} increased^{5,6} and remained static.^{7,8} Logically, of course, it is difficult to envisage the circumstances in which all these authors can be correct.

Design

The aim of this project was to use the ONS LS to shed further light into the changing nature of social and intergenerational mobility in the UK since the 1970s. The ONS LS currently provides

representative cross-sectional and longitudinal information about the population of England and Wales for the years 1971, 1981, 1991, 2001 and 2011. Key advantages of the dataset for social mobility research are that:

1. The occupation of sample members' parents is observed when they are children which eliminates recall bias.
2. It is possible to estimate intergenerational correlations at different points in an individual's life-course.
3. The ONS LS has excellent coverage of the population of England and Wales due to the census' low rates of non-compliance and high linkage rates.

Taken together, these features mean that it will be possible to produce robust, fine-grained estimates of intergenerational associations, with cohorts by year of birth. The estimates of mobility rates in our study are based on three different measures of socio-economic position. For our measure of social class, we use the seven category version of the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC).⁹ For social status, we will use the Cambridge Social Interaction and Stratification Scale (CAMSIS)¹⁰ which is a measure representing occupational prestige. Finally, we also impute measures of income using the approach set out by Nicoletti and Ermisch⁴ whereby a 'donor' data set is used to impute income based on a series of predictor variables.

Findings

Our findings suggest that there is a marginal increase in downward absolute mobility for men, and a relatively large increase in upward absolute mobility for women. By 2011 both rates have equalised and approximately 45% of men and women will have increased their social class relative to their parents whilst approximately 25% will have decreased their social class. In terms of relative social mobility, our results suggest an increase in social fluidity for men over successive cohorts whilst for women this increase is somewhat smaller. Our findings thus suggest that the strength of the association between parents and children is falling implying that social mobility is increasing. Importantly, evidence from the latest 2011 data suggests that this is part of an ongoing trend.

Conclusions

The commonly held belief that social mobility is declining cannot be replicated in the ONS LS. Indeed, our findings suggest a small positive improvement to social mobility which suggests that the chances of moving up and down the social class, occupational prestige and income ladder appear to have improved. Our results are subject to some caveats (such as income imputation), however, they broadly mirror recent results by Bukodi et al¹¹ and we see our study as an important update to the recent social mobility debate.

References

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www.ucl.ac.uk/celsius/projects-using-the-ons-ls/buscha-401004

Further information about Census & Administrative data Longitudinal Studies Hub

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