

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

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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. 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 (Saunders 2010). 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 (Cabinet Office, 2011).

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 (Blanden et al 2004; Nicoletti and Ermisch, 2007), increased (Lambert et al 2007; Li and Devine 2011) and remained static (Goldthorpe and Jackson 2007; Goldthorpe and Mills 2008). Logically, of course, it is difficult to envisage the circumstances in which all these authors can be correct.

In this project we use the Office for National Statistics Longitudinal Study (LS) to shed further light into the changing nature of social and intergenerational mobility in the UK since the 1970s. The LS currently provides representative cross-sectional and longitudinal information about the population of England and Wales for the years 1971, 1981, 1991, 2001; and as part of the LS Beta test we also made use of the 2011 data. Key advantages of the LS 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 LS has excellent coverage of the population of England and Wales due to the census’ low rates of non-compliance and high linkage rates (>95%)

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 these 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) (Rose, et al 2005). For social status, we will use the Cambridge Social Interaction and Stratification Scale (CAMSIS) (Prandy and Lambert, 2003) which is a measure representing occupational prestige. Finally, we also impute measures of income using the approach set out by Ermisch and Nicoletti (2007) whereby a ‘donor’ data set is used to impute income based on a series of predictor variables.

Preliminary evidence suggests that the levels of social fluidity are increasing in the UK. In other words, 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.

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