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Intergenerational Economic Mobility in the United States —Measures, Differentials, and Trends*

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Abstract

Economic research on intergenerational mobility has tended to focus on the extremes of the distribution of economic well-being—either on the inheritance of wealth or on the persistence of poverty. In the general population, there are few reliable measurements of the persistence of income or earnings across generations, and there are no trend data. In this context typical occupational levels of economic compensation may be a useful proxy for personal

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income or earnings, for many large, national surveys have ascertained the occupations of adult workers and of their parents. For purposes of comparison, I index occupations in two ways, by typical income levels and by typical education levels of workers. I have estimated age-specific intergenerational economic mobility over a 35 year period, using these indicators and data from the 1962 and 1973 Occupational Changes in a Generation Surveys (OCG), the 1986 to 1988 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), and the 1972 to 2006 NORC General Social Surveys (GSS). Education levels of occupations persist much more strongly across generations than income levels of occupations. For example, among nonblack men, the former regressions or correlations are about 0.37, while the latter are about 0.21. This fact raises interesting questions about the differences between economic and social mobility. While there are differences in intergenerational occupational persistence by race and sex, there is no global trend in the intergenerational persistence of occupational income or education from the 1960s to the 1990s. However, occupational stratification has increased in the Black population, and intergenerational occupational stratification by education has decreased among nonblack men.

Key Words: intergenerational mobility, social mobility, economic mobility, occupational status