Estimating Intergenerational Mobility with Coarse Data: A Nonparametric Approach

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Abstract

Using data from comprehensive socioeconomic censuses undertaken in India in 2002 and 2012, we provide new estimates of intergenerational educational mobility over the last 40 years. Because the data sources are censuses containing the near-universe of Indian educations rather than samples, our estimates are very precise, and there is wide scope for examining heterogeneity across space and time. We first show that, as measured by the intergenerational correlation between fathers’ and sons’ levels of educational attainment, mobility has remained constant over the last 40 years. Previous estimates of improvement in intergenerational educational mobility were confounded by increases in average attainment and increases in the variance of the education distribution. Further, we show that scheduled castes have persistently higher mobility than the general population—a difference which has marginally shrunk over time, but remains significant. This mobility advantage is consistent with the average convergence between these groups that has been observed in other studies. Finally, we present estimates of the local geographic correlates of mobility. Proximity to towns and access to public goods strongly predict intergenerational mobility, but various measures of district/village-level inequality are negatively associated with mobility. Our results highlight that while modernization has dramatically improved overall educational attainment, it has not substantively changed the persistence of birth advantages.

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