

Stability and change in the land of opportunity: Geography and intergenerational mobility over the twentieth century

Abstract

Recent evidence suggests that there has been a substantial decline in the rate of upward social mobility over the last century. Further, *where* children from low-income backgrounds grow-up appears to be an increasingly dominant force in shaping their life chances. Despite these findings, we know little of how places evolve to differentially shape opportunity, or of the prospects for place-based policy to improve broader social mobility outcomes. In this article, I ask two related questions: How has the geography of opportunity changed over the twentieth century? And why do some places change with respect to opportunity, while others stay the same? Using estimates generated from a newly linked sample of more than two million fathers and sons from the 1900-1915 birth cohorts, I find considerable change in the geography of opportunity over the last century. I show that how places enhance or constrain upward mobility reflects two distinct features: *a)* the evolution of the regional and national economic system, and *b)* more deeply-rooted institutional differences between places. Increasing social mobility in the United States requires that policy contends with these two forces and their interaction over time.