Intergenerational Correlations in Health Over the Twentieth Century

Historical studies of intergenerational mobility have typically relied on occupational data, using correlations between fathers' and sons' occupations to assess the intergenerational transmission of socioeconomic status. These studies of occupational mobility can offer only a crude view of mobility patterns over time due to the large variance in incomes within occupational categories, changes in occupational structure over time and the difficulty in interpreting occupational status for females throughout much of the United States' history. This paper introduces a new approach to assessing intergenerational mobility that focuses on intergenerational correlations in health outcomes rather than labor market outcomes. A new intergenerational dataset is constructed containing data from the death certificates of individuals and their parents for the years 1900 to 1975. These data include age at death, cause of death and information on chronic health conditions. Intergenerational correlations in these long term health outcomes offer measures of intergenerational mobility that have a consistent interpretation over time and across gender. Using these new data, we document the evolution of intergenerational mobility for both males and females over the past century. Occupational data from the death certificates and census records are used to assess how these new measures of mobility compare to traditional occupational mobility measures.

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