Social mobility and social institutions in comparison
Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States

Miles Corak
University of Ottawa, Ottawa Canada

Sutton Trust / Carnegie Foundation Seminar on Social Mobility, London UK, May 21/22, 2012
1. Generational earnings mobility varies ... the US and UK are among the least mobile among the rich countries, but does this require policy intervention?

Source: Corak (2011).
2. Mobility is lower where inequality is higher. What are the underlying causes?

Source: Corak (2011).
3. Inequality has been rising in most countries, and ...
Three motivating questions
Social mobility and public policy
The determinants of social mobility
Social mobility in an era of rising inequality
Directions for public policy
Three concluding answers

Social mobility varies across countries
Mobility varies with inequality
Inequality has been rising

3. ... this is because top incomes have increased... are the societies experiencing more inequality likely to also experience less social mobility?

Figure 12. The share of top incomes increased, especially in English-speaking countries
Shares of top 1% incomes in total pre-tax incomes, 1990-2007 (or closest year)

Generational earnings mobility as a marker of social mobility

The gradient between the career adult earnings of a child and that of his or her parents

- expressed in percentage terms, and indicating the degree of relative earnings mobility across the generations
- cross-country comparisons are often limited to father-son earnings
- no sense of absolute differences, or of directional changes
Earnings mobility and Equality of Opportunity

The degree of generational earnings mobility may be related to “equality of opportunity”, but only when we appreciate the underlying reasons

- Equality of Opportunity means that inequities of outcome are not defensible when they are the result of different “circumstances”
- What “circumstances” should policy makers seek to level?
  - eliminate the influence of social connections and family income in facilitating access to health care, education, employment?
  - eliminate the influence of parental investments (time and money) that develop skills, beliefs and motivation?
  - eliminate the consequences of the genetic transmission of ability?
A public policy target?

- A completely flat parent-child earnings gradient or a flatter gradient in a particular country is not necessarily a goal for public policy without this appreciation.
- This said, more mobility is associated with higher life satisfaction.
More mobility, more life satisfaction
citizens are more likely to report high levels of life satisfaction in societies that have more mobility: in Canada two-thirds do so, in the UK less than 6 in 10

Source: Corak and Ghangro (2012). MilesCorak.com
The nature of public policy is a social choice determining social mobility ...

Public policies that are of relatively more advantage to the disadvantaged will promote upward mobility
- offering insurance by buffering families from shocks
- offering investment in human capital

But public policy can also be of relatively more advantage to the advantaged, or reinforce market tendencies
- this is more likely in more unequal societies
... but three broad institutions determine life chances
the overlap and interaction between families, markets, and the state together determine social mobility – there is no “silver” bullet

1. Families with more Human Capital invest more in their children
2. Families with more children invest less in each child
3. An increase in the cost of Human Capital investment reduces the amount invested
4. A higher return to Human Capital encourages more investment
5. More "progressive" investment by the state promotes generational mobility
A higher return to education encourages more investment ... changing opportunities and incentives, and thereby determining the degree of mobility.

Source: Corak (2011) and OECD (2011) Table 8A.1 for University earnings premium, about 2009.
... but who has the capacity to make these investments? Families with more human capital invest more in their children, in fact education outcomes are most closely tied to family background in the UK.

Money matters more in unequal societies
Canadian incomes imply that children are less likely to live in households at the top and very bottom of the US income distribution than American children.

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Money matters ....
Families with more money invest more in their children, the race to university starts even during the early years

Among the 10 jobs for new graduates that did not exist 10 years ago, as compiled by *Forbes Magazine*, there are a few we would have all guessed: App developer; Market research data miner; Social media manager. But the magazine also listed something called “Educational or Admissions Consultants”, described in the following way:

“When a certain set of affluent parents watch their toddler stack his or her first set of blocks, they’re not lost in a moment of cute, they’re strategizing their child’s likeliness of getting into the right pre-school. These moms and dads will stop at nothing to secure the best education for their kids—which for many includes hiring an educational or admissions consultant to help ease the process of interviewing and testing into schools from preschool to college. Admissions consultants can be paid thousands of dollars for their skills—which often include personal connections with school administrators.”
Money matters ....
Families with more money invest more in their children enriching their lives outside of formal public schooling

"Enrichment expenditures" in the United States: the amount of money families spend on books, computers, high-quality child care, summer camps, private schooling, and other things that promote the capabilities of their children. Source: Duncan and Murnane (2011).
Money matters

... money also implies “connections” to jobs.
most jobs are found through family and friends, and this constrains mobility particularly at the bottom and top.

Source: Bingley, Corak and Westergård-Nielsen (2012).
Single parents have less capacity to invest in their children

Source: OECD Family Database, SF1.2: Children in Families, Table SF1.2.A.
Inequality and teenage mothers

Source: OECD Family Database, SF1.4: Chart SF2.4.D

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Families, labour markets, and public policy

Family, market, and state determine the well-being of children. The capacities of families has been stretched to the limit, and there is significant time stress leaving children at risk of monetary and non-monetary poverty.

- Labour markets are more polarized, particularly for the young

- Families have adapted and changed as best as they can to shield children from poverty
  - age at first birth, marriage
  - fertility and single/teen motherhood
  - education
  - work intensity, participation of both parents and more hours

- Government policy has been neutral since the early 1990s (but not in UK)
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Institute a Guaranteed Income for the working poor by subsidizing low-pay work, and adopting immigration and education policies to create high pressure economy for those with low skills.

- A job is central to material well-being, but many jobs increasingly do not pay enough to adequately support a family
- top-up wages with a conditional transfer based upon work effort like the earned income tax credit
- develop alternatives to university education that upgrade skills and move the service sector up a value chain: “an artisanal economy”
- limit low skill immigration, and promote immigration of high skill workers
Recommendation 2: Policies to reduce time stress

Broaden the scope and nature of family/care-giving leave permitted and give families more scope to re-allocate their time between market and non-market activities.

- A job may be central to material well-being, but without additional supports children and families are under considerable time stress that detracts from well-being in general.
- The introduction and expansion of maternity/parental leave and leave for care-giving (possibly through unemployment insurance programs).
- Create a “family leave” that can be taken at the discretion of the parents regardless of the age of their children.
Recommendation 3: Policies to promote human capital

Reduce disparities in the quality of education in a way that promotes a public system, encouraging “voice” rather than “exit”.

- Broad-based financing of education, rather than a narrow tax base of local property taxes
- Structure the system and parental involvement so that most engaged parents are promoting the public good alongside their personal good – limit choice?
- Less emphasis on evaluation and league tables as punitive, rather an aid to develop teaching as a high-quality, high-paid profession
Recommendation 4: More policies to reduce income inequality

*Tax reforms that introduce more progressive taxation.*

- Increase income tax rates, broaden the tax base
- Heavily tax rents in the business sector (particularly in resource driven economies)
- Permit income averaging over several years for tax purposes, for example offering rebates to families suffering permanent losses in income
Three answers

1. Social mobility as measured by generational earnings mobility varies across the rich countries, and this variation should be a public policy concern.

2. It varies with inequality but inequality is not the sole cause; it is a signal of a whole set of forces associated with family, market, and state.

3. But with growing inequality, the more unequal societies will likely not experience more mobility without concerted and effective public policies.
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References


