Social mobility refers to the extent to which life outcomes are determined by the circumstances into which a person is born and raised. Greater social mobility – the ability to move through the socioeconomic ‘ranks’ over generations – is often seen as an indication of a fair and open society, and is therefore high on the policy agenda in Britain. Popular perceptions of social mobility are that the divisions in life outcomes are persistent and often related to geography, with those living in Wales and northern England having fewer opportunities to move up the economic and social ladder than those in more affluent areas in the south of England. However, new research suggests the picture is more nuanced than previously believed, and that previous education policies may not have the large impacts on social mobility commonly mooted by media and policy commentators.

Behind this research are economists Dr Emma Gorman and Professor Franz Buscha from the Centre for Employment Research at the University of Westminster in London, and Professor Patrick Sturgis, a professor of quantitative social science at the Department of Methodology at the London School of Economics. They analysed four decades of post-war census data, examining how social mobility varies across regions in England and Wales. They also took advantage of a period of fundamental change in education policy in England to examine whether the extent of selective schooling in an area had any impact on social mobility.

Tracking social mobility

Key to their research was the UK Office for National Statistics Longitudinal Study – a 1% sample of the population of England and Wales, drawn from decennial censuses from 1971 to 2011. They used the National Statistics Socioeconomic Classification (NS-SEC) to measure social class, comprising seven categories of occupational groupings ranging from higher managerial and professional, to ‘routine’ work. Tracking three birth cohorts, born in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s respectively, they were able to get a clearer picture of how social mobility varies between and within regions, as well as across generations.

The researchers published their findings in 2021. They showed that, while there was an increase in social mobility in many regions between the first and second cohorts, as several regional economies shifted from manufacturing and mining to services, these increases in social mobility slowed, and sometimes even stalled, for more recent cohorts. This was around the start of the 21st century – a period of socioeconomic change – with increased globalisation, the 2008 economic crash, and the start of the ‘gig economy’. However, what stood out for the researchers was the patterning of regional disparities. In addition to the expected variation between large regions, they found substantial geographic heterogeneity in social mobility at the local level. Indeed, all regions in England and Wales contained local districts in both the top and bottom 20th percentile of social mobility nationally.

But what about schooling?

Gorman, Buscha, and Sturgis then turned their attention to another popular perception – that selective education is an effective policy solution for increasing social mobility.
and social mobility were small. The findings do not support the idea of selective schooling and social mobility in England, Wales, the researchers examined whether patterns of intergenerational social mobility were related to selective schooling during the period of transition from the predominantly selective to the predominantly mixed-ability schooling system. This meant that primary school pupils – no matter their social background – could be selected to go to a more academically focused, state-funded grammar (secondary) school if they performed well in specific national exams. Successive governments proposed that such a system would support otherwise disadvantaged young people to achieve their full potential. The system was progressively phased out in England and Wales in favour of the current comprehensive, or mixed-ability, education system, with only a selection of UK grammar schools still being in existence today.

Using census data linked to administrative records on school selectivity within local education authorities in England and Wales, the researchers examined whether patterns of intergenerational social mobility were related to selective schooling during the period of transition from the predominantly selective to the predominantly mixed-ability schooling system. While tracking cohorts across this period, they found that, accounting for local area characteristics and broader changes in the national economy, correlations between exposure to selective schooling and social mobility are in fact more granular than this. Even if there is increasing upward and relative mobility at the national level, aggregates of this kind will be of little relevance to the experiences of people in local areas with markedly worse mobility prospects than the national average. Taking a localised perspective to policy is important for reducing geographic inequalities in economic opportunities.

Where would you like to take your research next in the search for a better understanding of social mobility? Given the recent economic trends of stagnating real wages and living standards, many in the younger generations are concerned that they have been excluded from the upward mobility and economic security experienced by their predecessors. However, relatively little is known about the social mobility prospects of these cohorts. Our future research will aim to quantify the social mobility experiences of recent generations as well as shed light on the drivers of geographical patterns in social mobility.

The findings do not support the idea of either selective or comprehensive schooling improved overall social mobility. Furthermore, neither the comprehensive state-school education nor the selective school system showed large benefits for social mobility. This would suggest that education is not a ‘silver bullet’ solution to the larger problems of economic inequality and stalling social mobility.

What would you say to those who argue for the return of selective schooling to encourage social mobility? While there is evidence that for some individuals, improved educational outcomes were indeed facilitated by attending a grammar school, we hear less about the group of people who missed out on attending a grammar school. That is, those young people who did less well in a secondary school than they would otherwise have done in a mixed ability school. To properly assess the effect of a schooling system on social mobility, it is necessary to consider the outcomes for all affected individuals, not the beneficiaries only. This is what our research does, and it shows that selective schooling does not improve social mobility in society as a whole. Social mobility should not be used as a justification for expanding the grammar school system.

If education is not the ‘silver bullet’ solution to stalling social mobility, what is? This and other research show that there is unlikely to be any one silver bullet to improve social mobility rather, a multifaceted approach is required.

Where would you like to see fellow researchers in your field build on your research? Further work examining these questions in Scotland and Northern Ireland would offer a more complete picture of patterns of social mobility for the UK as a whole.

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