

Father's occupation, children's vocabulary, and whether changing occupation creates social mobility in the UK.

In the UK the issue of social mobility, the link between a person's life outcomes and that of their parents, has been of concern since the 1970s. Despite many interventions and policy initiatives this link has become "entrenched"¹ with those who are born into low-income families taking on average 5 generations to reach the mean national income².

Education is a key lever for social mobility, the development of language skills and vocabulary are not just an important prerequisite for learning but are an essential skill for later employment and life outcomes.

Using data from two large UK birth cohorts we investigated:

- The potential influence of father's occupation on children's vocabulary in early childhood at age 5 and later at age 14-16³.

How do the two cohorts compare?

Based on father's occupational status at birth significant differences were found in children's vocabulary both in early and later childhood. These differences are largely unchanged between children born in the 1970 cohort and those born in 2000.

- The prevalence of father's changing occupation status during the early years and whether this impacts child vocabulary outcomes.

The cohorts used were the 1970 British Cohort Study and Millennium Cohort Study, conducted by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies:
<https://cls.ucl.ac.uk/cls-studies/>

Father's occupation at birth and child vocabulary outcomes over time:

- Father's occupation is a common proxy measure to indicate a household's social class and a child's socio-economic background.
- For both children born in 1970 and 2000 whose fathers were unemployed or in what is considered a low occupational status jobs (i.e. caretaker, cleaner, van driver) when they were born had significantly lower vocabulary outcomes at age 5 and at age 14-16, compared to children whose fathers had a high occupational status jobs (i.e. solicitor, office manager, teacher).

Father's changing occupation during the early years:

- Focusing on just the Millennium cohort, we found many fathers changed their occupational status during the first 3 years of children's lives. Over a quarter (28%) who started in low status jobs moved to mid and high jobs, and 17% of those who started in higher status job moved down.

¹ Social Mobility Commission (2019) State of the nation 2018-2019: social mobility in Great Britain.
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/798404/SMC_State_of_the_Nation_Report_2018-19.pdf

² OECD (2018) A broken social elevator? How to promote social mobility.
<https://www.oecd.org/social/broken-elevator-how-to-promote-social-mobility-9789264301085-en.htm>

³ Children were tested at age 16 in the 1970 cohort and at age 14 in the Millennium cohort.

- Where these changes occur we observed corresponding changes in children's vocabulary outcomes. However, these changes were marginal and not equitable across different circumstances, i.e. children whose fathers moved from a low to higher status job had higher average vocabulary outcomes than those whose fathers remained in low status jobs, while children whose father moved from a high to lower status job had lower vocabulary outcomes compared to peers this difference was smaller.
- Of particular concern were children of fathers in the mid occupation group who moved down, as they experienced a dramatic drop in average vocabulary outcomes. This could be highlighting a vulnerability in resource and social capital, where those who start in high status jobs and move down are more likely to have resource and social capital "saved", while those who start in mid status jobs do not. The sample size here is small but warrants further investigation as this is a potential at risk group.

What happens when fathers change occupation status?

In the more recent cohort of children born in 2000 we found evidence of father's changing occupational status (both upwards and downwards) and this was related to a marginal change in children's vocabulary outcomes.

With frequent job changes an increasing global trend it is important for future research to include this in analysis and identify potential mechanisms.

Further reading:

Journal papers of this work are under review. Further information and future copies of papers can be requested from: admin.seed@ncl.ac.uk

Policy implications and recommendations:

- Data from both cohorts shows the entrenched nature of inequality in the UK, with differences in child outcomes at different time points based on fathers' occupation evident in the 1970 cohort and these differences continuing to remain significant 30 years later for children born in 2000.
- Changes in father's occupation during the early years has an impact on child outcomes throughout childhood. At a time when retraining and upskilling are priorities it's important that these opportunities reach parents and are linked with wider educational and social equality agendas.



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Website: <https://research.ncl.ac.uk/norfaceeed/> **Email:** admin.seed@ncl.ac.uk

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