

Intergenerational Mobility in Ottoman Istanbul: Evidence from Court Records

Metin M. Coşgel, Jose-Antonio Espin-Sanchez, Emre Özer

We examine long-term trends in intergenerational mobility in Istanbul during the period between the early sixteenth and late nineteenth centuries. Our empirical analysis uses data from the court registers of the Ottoman Empire. The dataset includes information regarding the names and personal characteristics of over 350,000 individuals who came to court in various capacities, such as litigants, witnesses, or representatives. Importantly, the dataset includes the honorific titles (if any) of individuals and their fathers, which we use as indicators of socioeconomic status. Our first objective is to use the data to examine long-term trends in socioeconomic status in Istanbul. The results show that the fraction of high-status (i.e., titled) individuals was low at the beginning of the sixteenth century, about ten percent of court users. The fraction exhibited a cyclical but ultimately upward pattern in the next four centuries. Specifically, it rose continually and sharply by almost six-fold until about the mid-seventeenth century, followed by a gradual decline of about ten percent in the next century, and reversed again by a significant rise of about fifty percent after the mid-eighteenth century. For our second objective, we study the transmission of honorific titles between fathers and sons to determine changes in intergenerational mobility over time. We find that intergenerational mobility followed a similar pattern to the fraction of high-status individuals during this period, indicating that nepotism was the main reason for the increasingly rigid structure of Ottoman occupational hierarchy over time.