

The Impact of China's College Enrollment Expansion on the Inter-Generational Mobility of Children from Lower-Income Families: Take a Example of the Western Region

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Abstract: This study is based on data from the China General Social Survey (CGSS) and government educational investment, this research discusses the impact of the policy of expanding college enrollment on the inter generational mobility of children from poor families in underdeveloped areas. Some researches has found that since the restoration of the college entrance examination system in 1978, it has indeed provided a channel for upward mobility for some children from low-income families. However, with the implementation of the policy of expanding college enrollment in 1999, the number of people with higher education has increased dramatically, which has led to the phenomenon of "depreciation of academic qualifications" in the job market, and caused social problems such as "difficulty in finding employment" and "fever in taking civil service of exams". Although the policy of expanding college enrollment has promoted the absolute inter generational mobility of children from low-income families to a certain extent economically underdeveloped regions such as the western region in China. But the relative inter generational mobility effect is limited, and the beneficiary group is still a minority. After further research, found that factors such as uneven allocation of educational resources, differences in family backgrounds, and unbalanced regional development have significantly restricted the full implementation of policy effects. Therefore, these findings provide empirical basis for optimizing education policies and promoting educational equity.

Keywords: Higher educations, social mobility, underprivileged families.

1. Introduction

The essential requirement of socialism is common prosperity, which is also an important symbol of achieving Chinese-style modernization. Moreover, social mobility is conducive to achieving social class change, and the extent of mobility reflects the degree of social fairness and openness of economic status classes [1]. And reasonable social mobility helps to achieve personal status improvement and social equality. China's college entrance examination system has long played a vital role in social mobility, especially for children from poor families, the college entrance examination is an important way to change their destiny by providing equal admission opportunities for students from different social classes through a unified standardized test. Aiming to improve the rate of education accessibility and eradicating poverty, the implementation of the policy of expanding college enrollment has further improved the availability of higher education and provided more

opportunities for children from poor families to move up. According to the statistics on the number of applicants from various regions in 2024 from the China Education Network, with the expansion of college enrollment in recent years, more and more students have the opportunity to enter college through the college entrance examination and enjoy the social and economic benefits brought by higher education, thereby promoting social mobility.

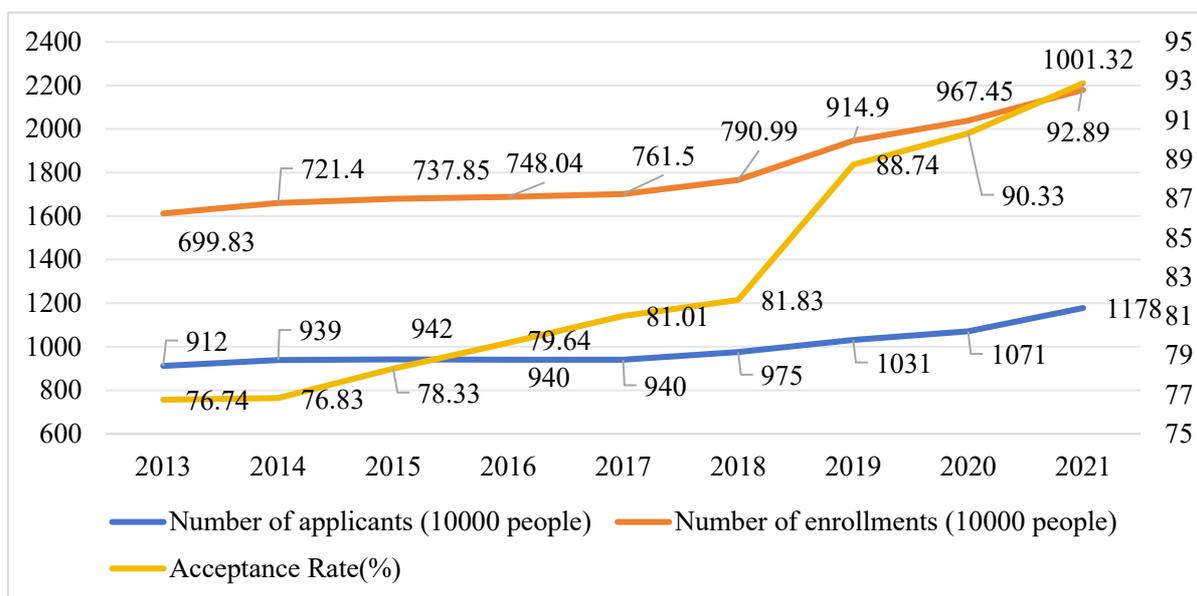


Figure 1: Curve of enrollment and admission numbers in the past ten years

The college entrance examination system and the policy of expanding college enrollment have provided opportunities for upward mobility for poor families, but their actual effects are limited by many factors, including family resources and regional differences. Taking the instance that there is a significant gap in educational resources between the east area and the west region of China. The economy in the east is more developed, educational resources are relatively abundant, and families can provide more guidance and support for their children, so students in the east have an advantage in the college entrance examination. In the west and some central regions, due to the lack of educational resources, poor families are becoming more difficult to provide their children with sufficient extracurricular guidance and educational support, resulting in greater challenges for students in these regions in the college entrance examination, this opportunity is not completely fair and social mobility is still limited, Figure 1 shows the curve of enrollment and admission numbers in the past ten years.

The research objective of this paper is to determine how the system of expanding college enrollment affect the educational opportunities and inter generational mobility of children from poor families in western China. This study uses educational backgrounds variable in the CGSS data to analyze the specific changing trends in educational opportunities and inter generational mobility of children from poor families in western China. This research will discuss the annual changes in the current status of education investment in western China firstly, and then analyzes the extent of social mobility in recent years based on the income gap between parents and children in poor families in the west and employment data, and finally draws conclusions and briefly discusses solutions. This paper explores what factors have influenced the social mobility of impoverished families in underdeveloped regions brought about by the expansion of enrollment in colleges and reveals their role in changing family destiny and promoting social mobility. At the same time, this study can also provide a reference for improving education policies and optimizing the allocation of education resources. Existing research is controversial about the impact of the policy of expanding college

enrollment from now on. This paper will go further to find its actual effect on social mobility based on data from the western region.

2. Literature Review

At the end of the 20th century, in order to improve the quality of the nation, stimulate domestic demand and ease employment pressure, the Chinese government launched a policy to expand enrollment in colleges and universities, the measure has had a profound impact on children from poor families. On the positive aspect, a good deal of poor students have gained the opportunity to receive higher education, and the possibility of changing their destiny through knowledge has significantly increased, broadening their future career options and helping to achieve inter generational transitions and social mobility in families. However, on the negative side cannot be ignored. Educational resources will become tight in the short term, and some poor students may not be able to get adequate support; rising college tuition fees have increased the financial burden on families; and employment competition has intensified, encouraging poor students to face greater employment challenges due to their lack of social resources and job-hunting experiences.

There are debates among domestic scholars about the impact of the policy of expanding college enrollment on the education of the population in underdeveloped areas of China. Xing Chunbing and Zhang Xiaomin found that the increase in the education level of rural residents since the expansion of college enrollment has had an impact on the mobility of rural labor, and found that education has significantly increased the probability and time of migration of rural residents [2]. But Sun Junhua and Wan Yang hold different conclusions. They believe that the degree of inequality in access to higher education opportunities in the context of scale expansion points out that the overall opportunity inequality index has a downward trend after the expansion of college enrollment, but the quality opportunity inequality index is on the rise. They explore the impact of the expansion of college enrollment on the allocation of educational resources and other aspects [3]. Accounting people's intuition, Wei Xiaoyan found that individuals with good family economic conditions are more likely to become "second-generation students" [4]. As the family's economic level improves, the role of inter generational transmission of higher education becomes more obvious. Therefore, poor families in western China are still at a disadvantage in the policy of expanding college enrollment.

In the western region, the problem of uneven distribution of educational resources is particularly prominent. Teaching infrastructures in the part of colleges and universities in there are still outdated, multimedia teaching equipment is scarce for a long time, teaching staffs are weak, and a large number of excellent teachers have left. Although the state has increased its support in recent years and the situation has improved, the gap is still significant compared with the developed eastern regions. Taking Zhejiang Province and Gansu Province as examples, which along to the eastern province and the western respectively. In 2024, Gansu province invested 950 million yuan in education-related people's livelihood projects, and the total budget funds for its 17 provincial undergraduate colleges in 2024 were more than 7.3 billion yuan; while Zhejiang province only used the 2024 provincial education development special funds allocated in advance for multi-faceted education support, and in 2025, two universities had funding of more than 4 billion yuan, and eight had funding of more than 2 billion yuan, far exceeding Gansu in terms of the scale of education investment. Massive research has achieved certain results in exploring the impact of college expansion on the social mobility of children from poor families in western China, regarding the impact of uneven distribution of educational resources on children's enrollment and the educational decisions of families under economic pressure.

3. The Impact of Geography and Blood Relationship on Inequality in Access to Educational Resources

The study mainly uses the case study method to analyze the changes in the college entrance examination enrollment data of children from poor families in western China under the background of the expansion of college enrollment so that reveal the differences in educational opportunities.

A scholar named Zhang Yun Bin studied the heterogeneity of the impact of the expansion of college enrollment on absolute inter generational mobility and analyzed it. He concluded that after the expansion of enrollment, developed regions such as the eastern region benefited more from the enrollment expansion policy, and the probability of upward inter generational mobility in the eastern region increased significantly. However, the effect of the college enrollment expansion policy on promoting upward inter generational mobility in underdeveloped regions such as the central and western regions was relatively limited [5]. So the policy of expanding college enrollment has not significantly increased the higher education enrollment rate in the underdeveloped western regions. Instead, it has benefited the eastern regions, which are already rich in educational resources. These phenomena have led to a serious brain drain problem in the western region, with a large number of high-level talents flowing to the developed southeast coastal areas, creating an imbalance between educational resource input and talent output in underdeveloped regions [6]. From the perspective of policy implementation, authority and relative departments at all levels tend to prioritize the allocation of limited educational equipment and high-quality teachers to key urban schools with better foundations. Although this resource allocation method can improve political performance in the short term, it exacerbates the uneven distribution of education resources between regions and between urban and rural areas, artificially creates a large number of weak schools, and further widens regional differences in education quality. This situation reflects the general dilemma faced by the western region in the process of higher education development.

From the family stratification place, the research data shows that the probability of children from poor families whose parents have not received higher education achieving social mobility through higher education has not been significantly increased by the expansion policy after controlling for geographical factors. In a word, the lower the family's economic standard, the lower the effect of inter generational transmission of higher education; the higher the family's economic standard, the more obvious the effect of inter generational transmission of higher education [4]. That conclusion reflects a reality that when parents have sufficient education and concepts, the family's economic level may still be a decisive factor in whether an individual can receive higher education.

Not only that, children from poor families in remote areas of the west often do not have high human capital investment. Their educational resources are not only limited by geography, but also to a certain extent by their low-income economic conditions. In the relationship both personal education development and inter generational mobility of family income in the western region, compared with parents who are self-employed or unemployed, the children who work in government agencies and enterprises are more likely to achieve upward inter generational mobility.

Still and all, the popularization of higher education provides the possibility of promoting social balance, due to the disadvantaged groups in obtaining high-quality educational resources and employment opportunities, higher education may become a tool to solidify social stratification [7]. High-income families tend to invest more in their children's primary education, while low-income families tend to invest less. This further shows that the widening income gap depends more on family background. Different family backgrounds mean that the amount of human capital and non-human capital investment that offspring receive from their parents are contrasting. Poor families cannot make optimal human capital investments because of budget constraints, resulting in their children's human capital levels being below the optimal level, which causes them to remain in poverty. By

contrast, wealthy families may not be constrained by budgets and can make optimal investments, resulting in stronger inter generational transmission and weakened social mobility.

Scholar Arziguli Yasen, through studying the impact of the policy of expanding enrollment in colleges and universities on inter generational mobility in education, once again demonstrated that there are significant urban-rural and regional differences in the impact of the policy of expanding enrollment in colleges and universities on inter generational mobility in education. Concretely speaking, the policy has significantly increased the educational inter generational mobility of individuals with urban household registration, information shows that the correlation between the average years of education of children and their parents has declined by 0.0744 years [8]. For individuals with rural household registration in western area in China, inter generational mobility has shown a weakening trend, which means that it has become more difficult for rural individuals to achieve class transition through education.

In view of regions, the policy of expanding college enrollment has had a positive impact in the western region, significantly reducing the correlation between the number of years of education received by offspring and their parents by 0.0746 years, displaying that the policy has promoted the balanced distribution of educational resources in the western region to a certain extent and alleviated the phenomenon of solidification of educational resources. Despite this, the main beneficiaries of the policy are still concentrated in families with higher-educated parents and in the developed eastern regions through in-depth analysis, while poor individuals in behindhand western areas have not fully enjoyed the policy dividends.

The policy of expanding college enrollment has generally improved my country's education coverage rate, promoted inter generational mobility, and narrowed the education gap between the east and west, its benefits are still significantly unevenly distributed nevertheless. This kind of imbalance is mainly appeared in the following aspects: first of all, there is a significant difference in the degree of benefit between urban and rural areas; secondly, there is a significant gap in the degree of benefit between different family background groups; finally, the policy effects between regions show a gradient distribution feature. These findings show that it is difficult to fully achieve educational equity by simply relying on the policy of expanding enrollment and more targeted policy measures need to be implemented to protect the educational opportunities of disadvantaged groups.

4. Conclusion

This study found that with the continuous promotion of the policy of expanding enrollment in colleges and universities, the education coverage rate in the western region has increased and the gap in educational resources with the developed eastern region has narrowed to a certain extent, but the educational situation of children from poor families in the west is still not optimistic. That is to say that those whose parents are highly educated and have superior economic conditions are still the main beneficiaries of the policy of expanding college enrollment, and the undergraduate enrollment rate in the developed eastern regions continues to be significantly higher than that in the western regions. The social situation indicates that the policy of expanding college enrollment has not yet effectively helped poor students in remote western regions to escape their educational opportunities as those in developed areas, difficulties and achieve the same educational opportunities as those in developed areas. Exploring the reason is that children from poor families generally face the problem of insufficient investment in human capital, including multiple constraints such as a lack of extracurricular education resources, a shortage of high-quality teachers, and a lack of basic living conditions.

In response to the problems revealed by this study, the following measures are recommended. First, the government should increase investment in education in the western region, optimize the allocation of educational resources, and ensure that all students can receive high-quality education. In

the next place, the government should use policy incentives and financial assistance to attract outstanding teachers to teach in western regions to improve the local education level. It is also necessary to work with schools to strengthen the importance of family education, increase parental participation in education, and jointly promote the process of educational equity. One thing must be pointed out that true equal opportunity does not mean treating everyone in the same educational model, nor does it mean that everyone should achieve the same academic results. Rather, it means that everyone can receive appropriate education. Continuously improving the level of educational opportunities is the duty-bound responsibility of society.

Future research directions may focus on the following two aspects: first, exploring the establishment of an education compensation mechanism for children from poor families to ensure their access to high-quality educational resources; second, conducting in-depth research on effective ways to enhance parents' awareness of education in poor areas and break the vicious cycle of intergenerational poverty transmission.

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