



Research on the mechanism of intergenerational transmission of relative poverty of persons with disabilities

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Abstract

As China's poverty alleviation strategy transitions from addressing absolute poverty to gradually eliminating relative poverty, the intergenerational transmission of poverty within households has garnered increasing academic attention. The intergenerational transmission of relative poverty among families with disabled members in China stems from multiple factors, including insufficient economic capital, lack of human capital, inadequate social networks, and insufficient policy support. Among these, family education levels and educational attainment serve as the primary channels for intergenerational poverty transmission, while social capital and institutional factors may partially amplify or mitigate the perpetuation of poverty. Based on this analysis, this paper proposes that effective measures to break the intergenerational cycle of relative poverty among disabled individuals include strengthening the social security system for the disabled, enhancing educational support for the disabled, encouraging employment and entrepreneurship among the disabled, establishing comprehensive social assistance systems and support mechanisms, and fostering a harmonious and inclusive social and cultural environment.

Keywords: Persons with disabilities, relative poverty, social capital

Introduction

In 2020, China successfully lifted all rural residents below the poverty line under current standards, achieving a historic resolution of absolute poverty. This milestone marks the country's poverty governance entering a new phase focused on alleviating and addressing relative poverty. Unlike absolute poverty, which primarily manifests as basic subsistence shortages, relative poverty reflects the lagging status of certain groups in income levels, educational access, employment opportunities, and social participation amid overall societal progress. Relative poverty not only indicates economic resource scarcity but also reveals structural inequalities in social opportunities and constrained development potential, making its governance more complex in terms of social and structural characteristics.

Against this backdrop, the issue of poverty among people with disabilities has drawn increasing attention from scholars and policymakers. Due to functional limitations caused by physical impairments, reduced labor capacity, and systemic institutional barriers, individuals with disabilities face significant disadvantages in education, employment opportunities, and access to social resources. Although China has strengthened social security measures for people with disabilities in recent years, leading to overall improvements in living standards, the disability community remains one of the groups with relatively high poverty rates. Studies indicate that families with disabled members generally earn below the national average, relying heavily on single-income sources and transfer payments, which weakens their economic resilience. Notably, poverty in these families often manifests as intergenerational transmission—not just individual hardship but systemic poverty. Low household incomes, limited investment in children's education, and inadequate social support leave disabled children disadvantaged in education, employment, and social integration. This perpetuates poverty within families, creating a cycle of poverty across generations. Compared to ordinary impoverished households, the

intergenerational transmission of poverty in families with disabled members may be more complex. On one hand, the limited labor capacity of people with disabilities may result in persistently low household incomes, making it difficult to reverse the situation and thus reducing families' investment in their children's education and development opportunities. On the other hand, certain institutional barriers and social discrimination objectively exist in society, which can hinder the development opportunities of family members with disabilities, allowing poverty risks to accumulate within households. Existing research often discusses poverty among people with disabilities through lenses such as income disparity, social security, or employment issues, yet pays scant attention to the phenomenon of poverty transmission within their families. In reality, poverty among people with disabilities is not merely an individual issue but a systemic problem involving families, society, and institutional frameworks.

The research value of this study is primarily reflected in two aspects. First, in terms of theoretical significance: While intergenerational transmission of poverty remains a key topic in poverty studies, previous research has predominantly focused on general impoverished populations while neglecting persons with disabilities (PWD). The unique characteristics of PWD may lead to distinct mechanisms of poverty generation and intergenerational transmission pathways compared to general populations. Investigating the intergenerational transmission mechanisms of relative poverty among PWD can expand the application of poverty intergenerational transmission theories in special population research and enrich theoretical perspectives on disability-related poverty studies. Second, in terms of practical value: China's current poverty alleviation efforts have shifted from addressing absolute poverty to tackling relative poverty, with preventing intergenerational transmission being a critical component of relative poverty governance. Research on the intergenerational transmission mechanisms of relative poverty among PWD can contribute

to further improving social security systems, educational support policies, and employment assistance measures for this population.

Theoretical Basis

1. Intergenerational Transmission of Poverty Theory

The intergenerational poverty transmission theory is a key framework in poverty studies. It posits that poverty is not merely an individual's temporary economic condition, but rather a systemic phenomenon transmitted across generations through family structures, educational access, social resource acquisition, and environmental factors, perpetuating poverty. Previous research primarily examined poverty transmission through economic lenses, attributing it to impoverished families' inability to provide adequate living conditions and educational resources for their offspring, thereby limiting future employment opportunities and income. As research progressed, scholars recognized that intergenerational poverty transmission involves multiple dimensions beyond economics, including educational capital, social capital, and institutional environments. The mechanism manifests in three primary ways: First, educational opportunities are the main transmission channel. Impoverished families' financial constraints limit their ability to invest in quality education, reducing their human capital and employment competitiveness. Second, social capital deficiency contributes to poverty transmission. Poor individuals often lack extensive networks and information resources, diminishing their children's access to job opportunities and social resources. Third, limited employment opportunities reinforce poverty. Due to low education levels and scarce social resources, children from impoverished families are confined to low-tier, unstable jobs, perpetuating their poverty. In households with disabled members, these challenges may be exacerbated. Individuals with disabilities often face reduced labor capacity and employment opportunities due to physical limitations and social constraints, which typically results in lower household income. Consequently, families tend to cut back on educational investments for their children, creating a cycle that perpetuates intergenerational poverty. Thus, the intergenerational poverty transmission theory provides a crucial analytical framework for understanding the emergence and persistence of relative poverty among disabled populations.

2. Social exclusion theory

The perspective of social exclusion is one of the key social structural theories explaining poverty among vulnerable groups. Originating from European social policy research, it posits that poverty is not merely about low income but a state where individuals cannot access social resources due to structural barriers and institutional discrimination. Social exclusion refers to the prolonged inequality in development status when certain individuals are excluded from normal social life in areas such as education, employment, social security, and social activities. There are multiple reasons why people with disabilities are excluded from mainstream society: First, physical disabilities lead to employment discrimination. Employers often deem them unfit for jobs, resulting in reluctance to hire or limited recruitment. Second, educational inequality contributes to social exclusion. Some disabled individuals lack access to educational resources or support, preventing them from

enjoying equal opportunities with other groups. Fourth, restricted social participation also impacts their development, such as inadequate accessibility in public facilities and services. These factors objectively limit their ability to engage in social life. Third, insufficient social support exacerbates social exclusion. Weak support from social security, public services, and organizations leaves disabled families without effective development opportunities or risk protection, profoundly affecting both individuals and their families. This further perpetuates intergenerational poverty transmission within households. Therefore, it is helpful to reveal the structural causes of poverty of the disabled and to understand the intergenerational transmission of poverty to look at the poverty of the disabled from the perspective of social exclusion theory.

3. Social Capital Theory

Social capital theory examines the significance of social networks and interactions in human development, positing that individuals rely not only on their own economic and human capital but also on resources within their social networks. Social capital encompasses social relationships, trust, reciprocal norms, and information resources—all of which can facilitate greater developmental opportunities. As a pivotal concept in poverty research, social capital plays a crucial role in intergenerational poverty transmission. It includes information, support, and development opportunities provided by family and community networks, which can mitigate risks for impoverished populations. Conversely, a lack of social capital means individuals struggle to access social resources, thereby hindering their upward mobility. For families with disabled members, the absence of social capital is a primary cause of poverty. On one hand, family members may face barriers in social interactions and activities, resulting in limited social connections. On the other hand, the lack of diverse information sources places these families at a disadvantage in accessing employment opportunities, social policy information, and resources. Additionally, the absence of societal support and assistance negatively impacts the quality of life and developmental prospects of families with disabled members, rendering them particularly vulnerable to life risks. Therefore, from the perspective of social capital, the poverty of persons with disabilities is not only related to their lack of economic capital, but also to their lack of social capital. When they lack social capital, it makes it difficult for their children to obtain better educational resources, employment opportunities, and even other social resources, leading to the intergenerational transmission of poverty within families.

The Reality of Intergenerational Transmission of Relative Poverty among Persons with Disabilities

With the near eradication of absolute poverty in China, the governance of relative poverty has become increasingly prominent. For persons with disabilities, poverty persists as a persistent and complex issue due to limited educational access, restricted employment opportunities, and low social participation. Currently, families of persons with disabilities are generally in a relatively disadvantaged position—not only in terms of income levels but also due to numerous constraints in educational and employment opportunities, as well as social support. These factors largely facilitate the intergenerational transmission of poverty within households.

1. The economic status of families with disabled members is relatively fragile

Generally speaking, families with disabled members face relatively poorer economic conditions. Compared to average households, these families often struggle with limited income sources and low labor earnings. Firstly, due to physical disabilities, individuals with disabilities face significant barriers in securing higher wages in the labor market, resulting in lower labor income for these families. Secondly, many families bear heavy caregiving responsibilities, which indirectly reflects the overall labor participation rate within the household. Currently, most disabled families rely on government subsidies, social assistance, and transfer payments as their primary income sources. While these financial measures partially meet basic living needs, they also highlight the families' limited capacity to secure employment and income in the market. Compounding these challenges, low savings and unstable income levels leave disabled families vulnerable to unexpected expenses like medical costs, children's education, and other unforeseen expenditures, making them more susceptible to poverty. The low annual household income further creates practical conditions for poverty transmission.

2. Insufficient educational opportunities for children from families with disabilities

Education serves as a vital pathway for social mobility and breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty. However, families with disabled members often face constraints in educational investment due to limited financial resources and low capacity for educational capital accumulation. Economically, many such families cannot afford high costs like tutoring, extracurricular fees, or university tuition, thereby limiting their children's educational opportunities. Additionally, the isolated living conditions of some disabled families restrict access to educational information and resources, further restricting their children's educational choices and development. The lack of family educational resources also plays a role. In some cases, parents with low educational attainment or inadequate guidance fail to provide children with proper learning environments and development plans. These combined factors place children from disadvantaged families at a disadvantage in terms of educational access and quality, making them more vulnerable to future employment challenges and income disparities, which in turn increases the risk of intergenerational poverty transmission.

3. Limited employment opportunities

Employment serves as a primary means for individuals to secure stable income and an essential pathway for social integration. However, people with disabilities and their families face structural barriers in the job market. First, some employers discriminate against disabled individuals by assuming they lack the necessary labor capacity. Second, workplaces often lack accessible facilities and positions, objectively limiting employment opportunities. Additionally, within families with disabled members, other household members' employment may be affected. For instance, family members requiring long-term care may be unable to work normally or freely choose employment options, which impacts household income. The lack of employment opportunities not only affects current household income but also restricts the development potential of family members, thereby perpetuating poverty.

4. Deficiencies in the social support system

In recent years, China has progressively enhanced its social security system for people with disabilities, achieving significant progress in basic living support, medical insurance coverage, and social assistance programs. However, current operational realities reveal several gaps in the disability social support framework, particularly in educational support, employment assistance, and social services. First, educational support for people with disabilities—especially for children from families with disabled members—remains inadequate, with insufficient coverage and precision in educational funding policies. Second, while China has established employment security funds and supportive policies for people with disabilities, implementation in some regions remains incomplete, and employment services lack comprehensive support. Third, social services for people with disabilities are limited in some grassroots communities, and participation from social organizations remains low.

Analysis of the Mechanism of Intergenerational Transmission of Relative Poverty among Persons with Disabilities

Based on this, the intergenerational transmission of poverty in families with disabled members is not caused by a single factor, but rather a process shaped by multiple factors. According to interview materials and case descriptions, the intergenerational transmission of poverty in families with disabled members is primarily achieved through economic capital, human capital, social capital, and institutional resources.

1. Mechanism of Insufficient Family Economic Resources

Financial hardship in households forms the root cause of intergenerational poverty transmission among people with disabilities. Families with disabled members typically have lower overall incomes, which limits their capacity to invest in human capital development for their children in education, training, and employment. For instance, they may struggle to afford excessive educational or training costs, thereby hindering their children's human capital accumulation. Moreover, when families lack sufficient financial resources, members must prioritize meeting basic survival needs over long-term investments. This economic scarcity not only restricts opportunities for current family members but also, to some extent, diminishes social mobility prospects for future generations, perpetuating the cycle of poverty across generations.

2. Mechanism of limited educational opportunities

The mechanism of restricted educational opportunities refers to the intergenerational transmission of poverty among people with disabilities due to limited access to education. Families with disabled members facing financial hardship or lacking educational capacity encounter multiple constraints during the learning process, including subpar educational quality, scarce resources, or inability to advance to higher schools. These barriers significantly impact their future employment prospects and income levels, substantially increasing the likelihood of poverty. Furthermore, the scarcity of cultural capital within families exacerbates educational disparities. In some households, parents with low educational attainment or inadequate parenting skills fail to provide effective support for children

with disabilities, thereby amplifying the inequity in educational opportunities.

3. Mechanism of Social Capital Deficiency

Social capital plays a vital role in personal development, as extensive social networks provide individuals with employment opportunities, social support, and developmental prospects. However, in some families with disabled members, the limited scope of social interactions and narrow social networks result in a lack of social capital. Consequently, family members face greater challenges in accessing employment information, social resources, and support. Insufficient social capital means that family members lack the necessary support and opportunities during social mobility, which to some extent hinders their personal growth and increases the likelihood of falling into poverty.

4. Insufficient institutional support mechanisms

The institutional environment in poverty alleviation significantly impacts poverty reduction. Although China has established a relatively comprehensive social security system for persons with disabilities, certain areas still lack adequate support. For instance, some family support policies for education and employment assistance for persons with disabilities remain underdeveloped or inadequately implemented. Furthermore, the absence of institutional support leaves families of persons with disabilities without adequate safeguards against developmental opportunities and social risks, thereby increasing their vulnerability to poverty.

5. Mechanisms of Social Discrimination and Psychological Factors

Social prejudice and psychological factors are key drivers of intergenerational poverty transmission among people with disabilities. In some societies, persistent discrimination against individuals with disabilities may limit their employment opportunities and social participation. Meanwhile, family members exposed to adverse social environments often develop low self-efficacy and a lack of social engagement awareness, which hinders their personal growth. The combination of social discrimination and psychological barriers diminishes family members' motivation for education, employment, and social activities, thereby exacerbating intergenerational poverty transmission within households.

Countermeasures to Block the Intergenerational Transmission of Relative Poverty among Persons with Disabilities

The intergenerational transmission of relative poverty among persons with disabilities exhibits pronounced structural characteristics and complexity. Its root causes extend beyond household income levels, educational access, and social capital stock, also involving institutional arrangements and societal perceptions. To address this challenge, coordinated efforts are required across multiple dimensions: the social security system, educational support mechanisms, employment assistance policies, social welfare frameworks, and social ecological environments. (1) Implementing multi-pronged strategies to foster a more inclusive and equitable development environment.

1. Improving the Social Security System for Persons with Disabilities

A robust social security mechanism serves as a crucial prerequisite for alleviating the financial burdens on families with disabled members and mitigating their livelihood challenges. China has established a basic social security system for persons with disabilities, primarily comprising basic living allowances, medical insurance, and social assistance. However, further improvements are needed in both the coverage scope and inter-institutional coordination. Moving forward, it is essential to appropriately increase special subsidies for persons with disabilities while steadily advancing the development of basic living allowances and nursing subsidies, thereby effectively safeguarding their family's fundamental survival conditions. Enhancing coordination among social insurance systems—including medical insurance, long-term care insurance, and social relief programs—will help reduce the financial strain of medical treatment and care for disabled individuals. Additionally, establishing a dynamic monitoring system will enable timely identification and more effective support for economically disadvantaged families with disabled members, thereby improving the effectiveness and precision of social security policies. By strengthening the social security framework, we can significantly improve the economic status of families with disabled members and play a vital role in preventing intergenerational poverty transfer.

2. Strengthening Educational Support Policies

Education serves as a vital tool for social mobility and breaking the cycle of poverty. For families with disabled children, expanding educational opportunities is crucial to interrupt the intergenerational transmission of poverty. Therefore, it is essential to continue strengthening educational support for children from disabled families, ensuring they can fairly benefit from educational advancements. First, we should enhance educational assistance policies by expanding coverage of student aid, disability support, and educational subsidies to reduce financial burdens on families. Second, we need to improve special education support mechanisms, promote equitable distribution of resources, and elevate the educational standards of students with disabilities. Third, we should strengthen inclusive education in mainstream schools to foster a positive learning environment. Additionally, families with disabled children should receive enhanced educational information, services, and guidance. Educational consultation and learning support services should be provided through communities, schools, and social organizations to assist families in developing educational plans for their children. Multi-level educational support can effectively increase the human capital of children from disabled families, laying a solid foundation for their future employment and social integration.

3. Promoting Employment for Persons with Disabilities

Employment serves as a vital pathway to enhance income levels for people with disabilities and strengthen family development capabilities, while also being a key factor in reducing poverty risks. To advance disability employment, it is essential to refine employment promotion policies and expand job opportunities for this group. First, strengthen employment protection policies by implementing the disability employment quota system and employment

security fund mechanisms. Second, encourage employers to hire people with disabilities. Third, enhance vocational training systems through skill development programs and career guidance to improve employment capabilities and career advancement. Fourth, actively develop digital economy and new employment models, offering diversified options like remote work, e-commerce entrepreneurship, and online services. Additionally, improve employment service systems by leveraging public employment agencies and social organizations to provide job information, career counseling, and employment guidance. Diversified employment channels can boost income and enhance economic development capacity for families with disabled members.

4. Strengthening the Social Support Network

Strong social capital helps reduce poverty relapse rates and improve social integration among impoverished populations. For families with disabled members, developing comprehensive social capital can compensate for their limited resources, effectively lowering the risk of poverty recurrence. First, we should leverage social organizations' role in disability services by guiding them to provide social assistance, psychological counseling, and vocational training guidance. Fifth, targeted support programs should be implemented for disabled families. Second, grassroots communities should establish disability service systems where community workers and volunteers offer daily living assistance and information consultation. Additionally, creating mutual aid networks can foster communication and support among disabled families, thereby strengthening their social connections and participation capabilities.

5. Improving the social environment

The social environment plays a pivotal role in the development of people with disabilities. Over time, social discrimination and prejudice have significantly limited their opportunities for social participation. Therefore, improving the social environment and enhancing social inclusion are essential for promoting equal development for people with disabilities. First, we must strengthen awareness campaigns on disability rights protection through media, public education, and social initiatives to raise awareness among the disabled community. Second, we should intensify efforts to build barrier-free environments, enabling people with disabilities to leave their homes and integrate into society. Additionally, we should encourage active participation from all sectors of society in advancing disability-related causes, and bolster public support for this group through public welfare activities and volunteer services.

Conclusions

As China's poverty alleviation efforts transition from addressing absolute poverty to tackling relative poverty, the structural factors contributing to disability-related poverty have grown more complex. Grounded in intergenerational poverty transmission theory, social exclusion theory, and social capital theory, this study analyzes the current status and causes of intergenerational transmission of relative poverty among people with disabilities. The intergenerational transmission of poverty in disabled households is not caused by a single factor, but rather results from a combination of factors including family resource conditions, educational opportunities, social capital levels,

and institutional support environments. Based on these findings, the paper argues that effective intervention requires coordinated efforts across social security, educational assistance, employment support, social aid, and environmental improvements. By fostering a more inclusive social atmosphere, we can better support the sustainable development of families with disabled members.

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