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Dreaming of a Brighter Future? The Impact of Economic Vulnerability on University Aspirations

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A body of literature suggests that household socioeconomic status is a determinant of higher learning among youth, thus producing a social gradient in education. We examine whether this gradient represents an inequality of opportunity, partially explained by the educational aspirations for those age 12-15 who are economically vulnerable. Using four cycles of the Canadian National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (2002-2008), we find that among households in poverty, there are reduced aspirations of the youth attending university from the perspective of both the youth in question and their mother. This result persists independent of school performance, health, and level of parental education. Although poverty is associated with comparable reductions in aspirations from the perspective of the youth regardless of their sex, mothers in poverty reduce their hopes the youth will attend university to a greater degree for girls than boys. Surprisingly, a cycle-over-cycle negative income shock is associated with increased aspirations of university enrollment from the perspective of the mother while having no impact on the child's aspirations. Although we argue the mother prioritizes the child's education in hopes he/she will not later experience the same negative outcome, changed aspirations do not manifest in changed behaviour - perhaps due to their lack of options. In particular, mothers experiencing either poverty or a negative income shock do not change the time they spend helping the youth with schoolwork. Our results suggest that improving post-secondary educational opportunities may help offset reduced aspirations among the poor, thereby reducing the social gradient.