



Career trajectory in high school dropouts



Kyung-Nyun Kim*

Korea Research Institute for Vocational Education & Training, Kangnam-Gu, Chongdam-dong 15-1, Seoul 135-949, South Korea

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ABSTRACT

This study considers the career trajectories of high school dropouts, which has been given little attention to in the literature. Considering worker heterogeneity for individuals who do not complete high school, we estimate possible career trajectories and investigate the traits related with the decision to drop out. Using latent class growth analysis, three kinds of career trajectories are identified: dead-end, stepping-stone, and advancing careers. Although the majority of dropouts are in the dead-end careers, about 30% are in the process of escaping low-status jobs through acquiring work experience. Individual traits, such as gender, race, and cognitive ability, as well as home computer access are significantly related to the different types of career trajectories.

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1. Introduction

Every year, 1.2 million students in the United States leave high school without a diploma (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011). Dropping out of school not only limits one's life-time opportunities, it also creates a social cost. Legislation and social programs have been implemented to keep kids in school and increase their employment opportunities (Campolieti, Fang, & Gunderson, 2010; Kuenzi, 2007). However, later life opportunities for high school dropouts remain meager, and many become welfare recipients (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011; Danziger et al., 1999; Schwartz, 1995).

Existing studies assume a homogenous population of high school dropouts; however, this population is likely heterogeneous (Brown, 1982; Cluck, Beaulieu, & Barfield, 1998; Waldinger & Lichter, 2003). However, one fact that cannot be overlooked is that not every high school dropout ends up in a dead-end job. Kusmin and Gibbs (2000) demonstrate that one fifth of initial entry jobs held by less-educated workers can lead to subsequent better

paying jobs, implying that some dropouts acquire jobs that require at least a high school diploma or beyond; hence, some earn enough money to support themselves without public assistance. Kusmin and Gibbs (2000) identify initial jobs that move less-educated workers up occupation ladders into better paying jobs. However, few studies attempt to identify career trajectories of US high school dropouts, and it is important to identify the occupational trajectories of these less-educated workers if there is to be successful intervention strategies. Other dropouts located at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy require an occupational intervention that complements their low education levels to help them move into middle-level occupations. Moreover, finding the traits related to lower occupational career patterns better orients policies that create different opportunities for the status of dropouts. The aim of this study is, therefore, to identify how high school dropout career trajectories are distributed and what dropout characteristics contribute to the heterogeneous career trajectories.

2. Career mobility among high school dropouts

Several studies demonstrate the later-life occupations held by dropouts in dead-end (Brown, 1982) and secondary jobs (Waldinger & Lichter, 2003). In dead-end jobs, work

* Tel.: +82 10 8735 1184; fax: +82 2 3485 5140.
E-mail address: kimknr@gmail.com

experience increases wages by only a little (Connolly & Gottschalk, 2002); hence, dropouts in dead-end jobs are resigned to sub-standard career development. Studies on dead-end jobs emphasize that dropouts sort into low-status jobs according to little human capital, and their careers are likely stuck in lower occupational statuses if they do not enhance their skills and knowledge (Farkas, England, Vicknair, & Kilbourne, 1997; Mouw & Kalleberg, 2010).

However, some jobs, even for dropouts, can be stepping stones to higher status occupations (Kusmin & Gibbs, 2000). One approach is work-first, which emphasizes that work experience accumulation may lead dropouts to advance up occupational ladders regardless of their entry level (Holcomb, Pavetti, Ratcliffe, & Riedinger, 1998). US high school dropouts have more frequent turnover and have less attachment to the labor market. For dropouts, high worker turnover can be improved with early employment intervention (Daguerre, 2007).

3. Factors leading to occupational mobility

Studies show that occupational mobility differs by demographics, including gender, race, and parental background (Grusky, 2008). Moreover, women are disadvantaged more than men from lower occupational status due to occupational segregation (Sewell, Hauser, & Wolf, 1980), lower occupational mobility (Topel & Ward, 1992), and labor market discrimination (Maume, 1999). However, opportunities are changing with manufacturing off-shoring, which allows workers to change jobs from the manufacturing to the service industry (Schrammel, 1998). With this off-shoring trend, male dominated occupations have become scarce (Schrammel, 1998) and pushed male workers into lower status occupations compared with women, because women are more skilled with service sector skills. Minorities continue to be discriminated against (Grusky, 2008); there are ability differences (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994) and residential segregation persists (Wilson, 1996). Different distributions also exist for labor market information, and social capital differences between families may have an impact on dropout career development. Parental background through social capital on children's occupational outcomes creates heterogeneity across dropouts and less-educated and single parents have fewer resources, which also creates unobserved variation across dropouts (Evans, Kelly, Sikora, & Treiman, 2005; Lin, Ensel, & Vaughn, 1981).

Studies also demonstrate that occupational mobility differs by individual traits, such as human capital and self-esteem. First, efficiency differences and investment effectiveness by cognitive ability create different opportunities that are related to the occupational status of dropouts (Farkas et al., 1997). Workplace skill-biased technological change (SBTC) leads to increased demands for skilled workers, which accentuate the relationship between cognitive ability and wages (McCall, 2000). SBTC also favors worker computer use skills, which results in higher wage returns (Autor, Katz, & Krueger, 1998; Hotchkiss & Shiferaw, 2011). Moreover, the workplace digital divide is related to computer use at home (Pliskin, Levy, Heart, O'Flaherty, & O'Dea,

2006). Studies also demonstrate self-esteem as a labor market advantage, and high self-esteem workers are more likely to hold high status (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2006; Rosenberg & Owens, 2001). Workers with low self-esteem may take on a low status jobs (Gottfredson, 1981; McNatt & Judge, 2004). These unobserved characteristics have not been considered for US dropouts and their later life job opportunities.

4. Methods

4.1. Data

Data from the National Longitudinal Study Youth 97 (NLSY 97) 1997 to 2008 are used to consider career trajectories of US high school dropouts. The NLSY 97 is a longitudinal survey of 8984 respondents aged 12–16 as of December 31, 1996 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2009). Respondents in NLSY 97 are interviewed each year for information about school-to-work transitions, including schooling and participation in the labor market. NLSY 97 consists of two samples: a cross-sectional sample that represents the U.S. population born between 1980 through 1984, and a supplemental sample of black and Hispanic populations born in the same years. Sample weights are applied to adjust for differences in the probability of selection due to minority oversampling.

To investigate traits related to dropout occupational standing, we limit the sample to those who dropped out of high school by 2003. This is the expected graduation year if 12 year old respondents as of December 31, 1996 finished high school in 4 years. This decreases the number of observations from 8984 to 1813. Moreover, 438 respondents are excluded who enrolled in college after acquiring a GED by 2008, which is the year of the latest release of NLSY 97. This decreases the sample size to 1555.

4.2. Dependent variable

4.2.1. Occupational career

Occupational standing over time is used as the dependent variable, which has information on “a degree of prestige or social standing” (Miech, Eaton, & Liang, 2003, p. 441). Ever since Duncan developed socioeconomic index (SEI), many scholars have updated his SEI. This study uses updated Duncan's SEI measure by Nakao and Treas (1994). Occupations are those respondents held at the beginning of each year.

4.3. Independent variables

4.3.1. Years since high school dropout

Years since high school dropout is used for the time scale variable, which is the baseline of the growth model in occupational standing. Years since high school dropout are a proxy for work experience. Due to missing data in work history, it is difficult to use the actual cumulative work experience in the growth model. This study uses Mincer's approach (1974) for work experience, which is age minus years of schooling. Mincer's approach measures the

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