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The regional dispersion of income inequality in nineteenth-century Norway

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Abstract

This paper documents, for the first time, municipality- and occupation-level estimates of income inequality between individuals in a European country in the nineteenth century, using a combination of several detailed data sets for Norway in the late 1860s. Urban incomes were on average 4.5 times as high as rural incomes, and the average city Gini coefficient was twice the average rural municipality Gini. All high- or medium-income occupation groups exhibited substantial within-occupation income inequality.

Across municipalities, income inequality is higher in high-income municipalities, and lower in municipalities with high levels of fisheries and pastoral agriculture. While manufacturing activity is positively correlated with income inequality, the association is not apparent when other economic factors such as the mode of food production is accounted for.

The income Gini for Norway as a whole is found to have been 0.546, slightly higher than estimates for the UK and US in the same period.

JEL codes: N33, D31, O15

Keywords: Income inequality, economic development, rural-urban differences, economic history, Kuznets curve

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