Does ancestry shape access to education? Evidence from surnames in Colombia

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Resumen:

We examine the deep historical roots of contemporary disparities in access to high-quality education in Colombia. Using rare surnames to follow lineages of ethnic minorities and elites from the colonial era to the early 20th century, we analyze whether ancestry predicts access to educational institutions. Our findings reveal strong correlations: Students with Afro-Colombian or Indigenous surnames are less likely to be enrolled in high-quality schools and more likely to be attending low-quality schools, while those with elite surnames show the opposite pattern. Although we observe regression to the mean for some historical elites, privileged access to education holds over time for persistent elites. We explore assortative mating as a mechanism behind this persistence in inequality of opportunity. We find that marriage patterns differ significantly between attendees of high- and low-quality schools, with homogamy reinforcing educational disparities. These results demonstrate the enduring influence of past-rooted hierarchies on contemporary educational inequality in one of Latin America's most unequal countries.

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