

INFANT HEALTH AND LONGEVITY: EVIDENCE FROM A HISTORICAL INTERVENTION IN SWEDEN

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Abstract

This paper investigates the potential of an infant intervention to improve life expectancy, contributing to emerging interest in the early life origins of chronic disease. We track individuals from birth to death, and are able to identify age and cause of death. The intervention was pioneered in Sweden in 1931–1933, and appears to have been pivotal in the emergence of universal infant care programmes in the Scandinavian countries during the creation of the Welfare State. It provided information and support to mothers, with an emphasis on nutrition and sanitation, while monitoring infant care through home visits and clinics. We estimate that the average duration of programme exposure in infancy led to a 1.56% point decline in the risk of infant death (24% of baseline risk) and a 2.56% point decline in the risk of dying by age 75 (7.0% of baseline risk), and these impacts are much larger for children born out of wedlock. Intervention-led declines in the risk of dying after the age of 50 are dominated by reductions in cancer and cardiovascular mortality. We find no evidence of selective utilisation, and the estimates are similar when we exploit within-mother variation in outcomes. (JEL: I15; I18; H41)

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