

Economic conditions at birth and later mortality: Scarring or selection?

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Abstract

Prior research focusing on single countries suggests that children who were born in a boom have higher life expectancy than recession babies, mostly due to decreased old-age cardiovascular mortality. The difference is interpreted to reflect physiological scarring resulting from deprived conditions that recession babies experience in-utero or post-birth. We analyse the association between economic conditions at birth and later mortality in 9 countries covering the 1821-1917 birth cohorts. We find that the life expectancy advantage of boom babies is attributable to decreased mortality at ages 5-20. Moreover, the advantage is conditional on surviving to age 5 as boom babies have decreased odds of surviving to age 5. Old-age mortality is similar for boom and bust babies. The age pattern of differential mortality suggests that the boom babies' life expectancy advantage results from early-life selection rather than scarring of the recession cohorts.

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