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Mortality and the business cycle: Evidence from individual and aggregated data

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Abstract

There has been much interest recently in the relationship between economic conditions and mortality, with some studies showing that mortality is pro-cyclical, while others find the opposite. Some suggest that the aggregation level of analysis (e.g. individual vs. regional) matters. We use both individual and aggregated data on a sample of 20-64 year-old Swedish men from 1993 to 2007. Our results show that the association between the business cycle and mortality does not depend on the level of analysis: the sign and magnitude of the parameter estimates are similar at the individual level and the aggregate (county) level; both showing pro-cyclical mortality.

JEL codes: E3, I1, I12

Keywords: Death; Recession; Health; Unemployment; Income; Aggregation.

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1. Introduction

There is a renewed interest in the relationship between mortality and economic conditions. Since the work by Ruhm (2000), showing that mortality increases in good economic times, many studies have attempted to replicate the findings using different datasets, different methods, and different outcomes of health and health behaviors. Their results are mixed, with some findings supporting the idea that health deteriorates, or mortality increases, with improvements in economic conditions (see e.g. Gerdtham and Ruhm, 2006; Neumayer, 2004; Tapia Granados, 2005, 2008), while others find the opposite (see e.g. Gerdtham and Johannesson, 2005; Svensson, 2007; Economou et al., 2008).

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