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Can Environmental Policy Reduce Infant Mortality?

Evidence from the Ganga Pollution Cases *

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Abstract

In many developing countries, environmental quality remains low and policies to improve it have been inconsistently effective. We conduct a case study of environmental policy in India, focusing on unprecedented Supreme Court rulings that targeted industrial pollution in the Ganga River. In a difference-in-differences framework, we find that the rulings precipitated reductions in river pollution and one-month infant mortality, both of which persist for more than a decade. We then estimate a pollution-mortality dose-response function across twenty-nine rivers in the Ganga Basin, instrumenting for pollution with its *upstream* counterpart. The estimation reveals a significant external health burden of river pollution, not just in the district of measurement, but also on downstream communities. It further provides suggestive evidence that reducing pollution was an important driver behind declines in infant mortality observed after the rulings.

Keywords: environmental policy, development, pollution, infant mortality.

JEL Codes: Q53, Q56, C36

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