



April 2018, *no*49

SNS RESEARCH BRIEF SUMMARY

The effect of general and free infant care on health, education and income*

The life expectancy in Sweden has increased since the mid-19th century, and it does not show any signs of ceasing. Despite this trend, there are still gaps in longevity among different socioeconomic groups.

Recent research suggests that the conditions of early childhood affect long-term outcomes, such as education and labor market attainment, as well as financial self-sufficiency, health, and risk of being hospitalized. Interventions in early childhood may, therefore, be key contributing factors to better living conditions.

This report describes the effects of an experimental program with publicly provided infant care that was implemented in Sweden in the beginning of the 1930s. The program was offered for a limited time in certain areas, which makes it possible to study its impact on the children who participated. With the help of collected and digitized material from historical archives, the children can be followed from birth to 75 years of age.

We find that preventive infant care had a significantly positive effect on children's health. The implementation of the publicly provided infant care program led to a 24 percent decline in the risk of infant death.

There were also positive long-term effects of the program. Children's proficiency in reading and writing improved, especially among high-ability girls. In adulthood, women's employment and income

also increased. The experiment also led to increased longevity for both men and women.

The intervention was especially beneficial for children of single mothers and children in families that had previously lost one child before the age of one year. This finding can partly explain the substantial decrease in infant mortality and relatively low health inequality in Sweden.

The report was presented at a seminar at SNS in Stockholm on April 18, 2018. Ella Bohlin, Children and Elderly County Councils in Stockholm, Sahar Nejat, Child Health Physician, and Anna Sarkadi, Professor of Social Medicine at Uppsala University, commented on the report.

Authors

Martin Karlsson, Professor of Economics of the University of Duisburg-Essen

Therese Nilsson, Associate Professor at the Department of Economics, Lund University

* This is a summary of a research brief in Swedish titled "Den allmänna och fria spädbarnsvårdens betydelse för hälsa, utbildning och inkomster".

