INFANT MORTALITY BY CAUSE: A COMPARISON OF UNDERLYING AND MULTIPLE CAUSE DESIGNATIONS *

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Abstract


Through the use of unique data for the 1980–1982 birth cohorts in the State of Florida, USA, the present analysis examines the extent of variability in the social, economic, and demographic characteristics of decedents when grouped by detailed cause of infant death, across four models for identifying cause of death. The analysis first compares cause-of-death-specific infant, neonatal, and postneonatal mortality between each of the four cause-of-death models. Next, interest shifts to an examination of the variability among decedents, specific to cause of death, in a range of background, proximate, and immediate determinants of infant health and survival. Variability is evident in cause-specific mortality rates as well as in decedent characteristics across the cause-of-death models. These findings suggest that more attention be given to the mode of identifying cause of death in studies of infant mortality.

Résumé


Cette analyse porte sur la variabilité des caractéristiques sociales économiques et démographiques des décédés, regroupées par cause détaillée de mortalité infantile, en

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Death during infancy has tragic consequences for families, for disadvantaged groups, and for societies. Any degree of improvement in infant survival will benefit large numbers of individuals and groups, even in low mortality societies such as the United States.

Such phenomena as the recent slowdown in rates of infant mortality decline and continuing ethnic, socioeconomic, and international inequalities require further explanation, and for this purpose it is essential to recognize the importance of examining mortality specific to cause of death. Such an approach is likely to illuminate the range of health, social, economic, and demographic factors which impinge on infant survival, as well as the variability in these relationships which might be expected depending on the specific medical events associated with death. Especially important here, we argue, is conceptualizing ‘cause of death’, in a way that emphasizes the multiplicity of contributory factors rather than in terms of the conventional single underlying cause.

Demographers have long been aware of variability in mortality risk factors during infancy and have studied this variability according to such broad cause-of-death groupings as ‘endogenous’ versus ‘exogenous’ causes and in terms of such age-at-death groupings as neonatal and postneonatal. Several recent studies in the US have pointed out the extent of within-category heterogeneity in the actual events leading to death which result from broad classifications of this kind (Poston and Rogers, 1983; Eberstein and Parker, 1984; Rogers, 1984; Rogers, 1986) and have documented the analytical benefits which stem from making