

Malthus Was Right after All: Poor Relief and Birth Rates in Southern England

By George Boyer

“Old Poor Law” - poverty relief program in early 19th century England. Provided support to able bodied workers. Contemporary criticism that it did not affect living conditions of those who received it – only fertility levels.

Thomas Malthus the most influential critic: the program undermined the “preventive check” (late marriage and abstinence).

About 75 percent of the parishes granted child allowances in 1824.

1.5s. per week in child allowances for each child from each from which the child allowance began. Differed between parishes: in 1832 36 percent gave relief to families with three children; 43 began their relief for families with four children; 21 percent began for families with five children.

Regression analysis which explores differences between parishes in child allowances to relate it to differences in birth rates.

Methodological problem: level of child allowance may be endogenous. Parishes with high fertility rate may be keener to give child allowances. Also, there may also be selective migration by preferences: people with preferences to have lots of children may move to parishes with generous child allowances.

Instrumental variable approach: use variables that are unrelated to fertility preferences, but related to the generosity of the child allowances as instruments. Boyer uses proportion of workers in agriculture and distance to London as instruments.

Could increased generosity of child allowances explain the increase in fertility in the early 19th century? No growth in real wages for blue collar workers in the period 1755-1819, but a substantial increase in fertility rates. Boyer uses the estimated model to predict changes in fertility.

Conclusions: (1) child allowances matters; (2) could explain increased fertility.