Killing Me Softly: The Fetal Origins Hypothesis*

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Abstract

In the epidemiological literature, the fetal origins hypothesis (FOH) associated with David J. Barker posits that chronic, degenerative conditions of adult health, including heart disease and type 2 diabetes, may be triggered by circumstance decades earlier, by in utero nutrition in particular. Economists have expanded on this hypothesis, investigating a broader range of fetal shocks and circumstances, and have found a wealth of later-life impacts, on outcomes including test scores, educational attainment, and income, as well as health. In the process, they have provided some of the most credible observational evidence in support of the hypothesis. The magnitude the impacts is generally large. Thus, the FOH has not only survived contact with economics, but has flourished.

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