

Political and Welfare State Determinants as Primary Interventions for Infant and Child Health: An Analysis of Wealthy Countries

Carles Muntaner MD, PhD.¹⁾ Hae-Joo Chung, RPh, MSc.²⁾

1) Department of Epidemiology and Community Health, School of Nursing, University of Maryland, Baltimore and
Department of Mental Health, The Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

2) Department of Health Policy and Management, The Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

Economic indicators such as income inequality are gaining attention as putative determinants of population health (1). On the other hand, we are just beginning to explore the health impact of political and welfare state variables such as total medical coverage and social welfare policies. To determine the impact of political and welfare state variables on low birth weight rate, infant mortality rate and under-five mortality rate, we conducted an ecological study with unbalanced time-series data from 19 wealthy countries for the years from 1960 to 1994. Infant and under-five mortality rates were more strongly associated with Gross Domestic Product per capita (GDPpc) than with Gini coefficients. Among the political/ welfare state variables, total public medical coverage was the most significant predictor of the mortality outcomes. The low birth weight rate was more strongly associated with the Gini coefficient than with the real GDP, and was more sensitive to political predictors such as percentage of vote obtained by social democratic or labor parties. Political and welfare state variables (including indicators of health policies) are associated with infant and child health indicators. While a strong medical care system seems crucial to some population health outcomes (e.g., the infant mortality rate), other population health outcomes might be impacted by social policies enacted by parties supporting strong welfare states (the low birth weight rate). Our investigation suggests that strong political will that advocates for more egalitarian welfare policies, including public medical services, is needed to maintain and improve nations' health.