

The Lifecycle Fertility Consequences of the Great Depression and WWII: Evidence from the Netherlands

Abstract

This paper explores the effects of the Great Depression and World War II (WWII) on lifecycle fertility. In the Netherlands, an immediate and unprecedented baby boom followed the end of WWII and the baby bust of the 1930s. It is unclear whether the war and depression just shifted the timing of fertility or changed women's completed fertility. I combine administrative data on births with historical data and show that women experienced the crisis and war at different ages and differentially across locations. This variation in the timing and spacing of these events across maternal birth cohorts is exploited to estimate counterfactual densities of births using a bunching methodology. I show that the rise in fertility after the liberation did not make up for the "missed" births that did not occur because of the war and depression. Further, the Great Depression had a larger effect on lifecycle fertility than WWII. For women in prime fertile ages during the depression, these "missed" births can be explained by higher childlessness and the formation of smaller families. These findings shed new light on the importance of economic factors in influencing fertility decisions.

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