

# A Clean (Dollar) Bill of Health: Understanding Parental Socioeconomic Disparities in Child Health as Functions of Timing, Transitions and Exposure

Antwan Jones

## Dissertation Abstract

The three essays in this dissertation examine methodological issues related to parental socioeconomic status (SES) in determining child health. Using eleven waves of data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth Children and Young Adults sample, I explore three different ways parental SES may influence child health. Specifically analyzing childhood body mass index and childhood functional limitation as outcomes, I suggest that the effect that parental SES has on child health may be functions of timing, transitions and exposure.

The first essay attempts to address at what point (or points) in a child's life course does socioeconomic status exude its most crucial impact in enhancing or attenuating health-related outcomes. Thus, in this chapter, I aim to establish whether *timing* matters in understanding how parental SES affects child health. Here, I argue that exposure to socioeconomic advantage or disadvantage during specific critical ages of a child's development could have stronger effects in the health-related development of a child. Indeed, early-life environmental conditions may program a pattern of biological and behavioral responses that have a long-term impact on child health. Age-specific Cox proportional hazard modeling is used to answer this research question.

The second essay concerns parental socioeconomic instability over the child's life course. While mobility is significantly associated with health outcomes, research has not adequately shown whether constant socioeconomic changes are beneficial, detrimental or unimportant to child health. Thus, in this chapter, I aim to establish whether incremental socioeconomic *transitions* matter in understanding how parental SES affects child health. Here, I argue that socioeconomic transitions are associated with "child health shocks" that are initially beneficial for children in low-SES families and detrimental for children in high-SES families. However, over time, these SES effects converge to levels experienced in the parents' new socioeconomic status reference group. That is, health outcomes for children in low-SES families that attain higher SES should be similar to children who are born into consistently high-SES households. To answer this research question, latent growth curve analysis is used.

In the final essay, I address the issue of endogeneity in the relationship between parental socioeconomic status and child health. Some research argues that child health may also affect parental SES. Other research suggests that SES is tied to other mechanisms (such as parenting) that influence child health. To address these arguments, I examine how pre-birth parental socioeconomic conditions influence child health outcomes by employing an endogenous switching regression modeling strategy. Using this technique, I organize the sample into various SES groupings using latent class analysis. I then give high-SES parents the lower initial socioeconomic standing that the low-SES parents have prior to the birth of the child. The same is done for low-SES parents. The purpose is to follow these families to see whether there is a pure SES effect or if there is something qualitatively different about low- and high-SES parents that dictate SES differences in child health. Thus, in this chapter, I aim to illustrate how *exposure* to different socioeconomic conditions before birth can shape child health outcomes.