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Cycles and trends of mortality in 18 large American cities, 1871–1900

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Abstract

In this paper I examine the mortality history of 18 of the largest cities in the United States during the period 1871–1900. The mortality data come from a long-overlooked compilation of annually registered deaths. These data reveal that most of the cities shared a common temporal pattern of short-term mortality variation, a pattern remarkably similar to the business cycle. To explain this surprising correspondence, I propose a simple model that relates short-term fluctuations in the urban death rate to the fluctuations in general business activity via a procyclical demographic variable, immigration. In addition, longer-term trends in the urban death rates are measured and analyzed, and a novel conclusion about the most common shape of the trends is reached. Overall, the paper provides a detailed description and analysis of the mortality transition as it occurred in the largest American cities during the late 19th century.



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