

The Winter Fuel Payment, household temperature, and health: A regression discontinuity design study

Viola Angelini¹, Michael Daly,^{2*} Mirko Moro,^{3*} Maria Navarro Paniagua,⁴ Elanor Sidman,² Ian Walker,⁴ Matthew Weldon⁴

¹ Faculty of Economics and Business Economics, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

² Management, Work, & Organisation, Stirling Management School, University of Stirling, Stirling, UK

³ Economics Division, Stirling Management School, University of Stirling, Stirling, UK

⁴ Department of Economics, Lancaster University Management School, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK

* Corresponding authors: michael.daly@stir.ac.uk & mirko.moro@stir.ac.uk. Authors listed in alphabetical order.

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Scientific Summary

Background

The Winter Fuel Payment (WFP) is an unconditional cash transfer which was introduced in 1997 to help older people to meet the costs of heating during the colder winter months. Although the payment can be spent on any goods and services, labelling the cash transfer as payment for 'winter fuel' attempts to 'nudge' recipients towards increasing domestic heating, thereby combating fuel poverty, raising indoor temperatures, and reducing morbidity and excess winter mortality. Previously, the UK data from the Living Costs and Food Survey (LCF) for the years 2000-2008 has been used to demonstrate that almost half (47%) of the WFP is actually spent on fuel. However, it remains unknown whether this increase in household energy expenditure has resulted in higher indoor temperatures and, most importantly, in health benefits. As the total expenditure on the WFP has been estimated to range between £2 and £3 billion per year, studying the effectiveness of this program seems crucial.

Objectives

In this study we first test the association between indoor temperature and health. We then test whether the WFP protects older people from low indoor temperatures and the associated adverse health effects. To do this we draw on high-quality micro data from the English Longitudinal Study on Ageing (ELSA).

Specifically, the current study asks four questions:

1. What health measures are most likely to respond to changes in ambient indoor temperature (specifically examining blood pressure, C-reactive protein and fibrinogen

levels, forced expiratory volume, reports of chest infection, and mental and physical health ratings)?

2. Does the WFP increase the household temperature in households eligible for the transfer?

3. Does the WFP improve recipient households' health outcomes and what is the magnitude of these effects?

4. Do the household temperature and health benefits of the WFP differ based on the social position of household members (e.g. income, social class)? Is there evidence that the WFP produces beneficial effects for those at risk of fuel poverty?

Methods

Participants

We draw data from the first six waves of the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, covering the period 2002-2012. ELSA is a multidisciplinary and longitudinal study which collects detailed information on the health, well-being and socio-economic status of individuals aged 50 and over and living in England through a computer-assisted personal interview (CAPI). A nurse visit is carried out every other wave (starting in wave 2) to collect biomarkers and additional measures of physical functioning. Analyses examining the association between household temperature and health had a maximum sample of 11,751 adults aged between 50 and 90. The RD analyses draw on a maximum of 7,032 observations.

Outcome measurement

Ambient indoor air temperature in the participant's household was gauged as part of the ELSA nurse assessment in waves 2, 4, and 6 of the study. Temperature was assessed using a digital thermometer placed on a surface where the measurement probe was

positioned so that it did not come in contact with any object (e.g., hanging over the edge of a table). After 5 min the study nurse recorded the ambient temperature correct to one decimal place. A set of health measures and a blood sample were taken from consenting participants during each of the nurse assessments. Following an extensive literature review of relevant participant reported health indicators and objectively recorded biomarkers likely to be affected by indoor temperature we selected a series of key measures. C-reactive protein and fibrinogen were used to assess inflammation. Systolic blood pressure provided an index of cardiovascular functioning and respiratory functioning was gauged using a measure of forced expiratory volume. In addition, participants indicated if they had recently experienced a chest infection and also rated their general health and the presence of depressive symptoms in the past week.

Indoor temperature and health

First, to estimate the link between ambient indoor temperature and the health outcome measures we examine three waves of ELSA spanning an eight year period from 2004/2005-2012/2013. The longitudinal nature of the study allows both random and fixed effects models to be tested. Fixed effects models examine within-person variation and in this way adjust for non-observed time-invariant confounders (e.g. social background, genetic factors) providing more reliable estimates of the naturalistic relationship between temperature and health in the general population.

Main study design

To ascertain whether WFP eligibility (vs. ineligibility) is associated with differences in a series of relevant objectively recorded and self-reported outcome measures we conducted a series of Regression Discontinuity (RD) design analyses. The RD analyses exploit the sharp eligibility criteria for the WFP allowing the potential impact of the WFP to be estimated using non-experimental observational data. To be eligible for the WFP,

the oldest member of the household needs to be over age 60 in the qualifying week of a given year. Our research design treats the WFP as a natural experiment and employs a regression discontinuity design to estimate the potential causal effect of WFP on household temperature and health outcomes. We take advantage of the richness of information on health, demographic, socio-economic characteristics English Longitudinal Study on Ageing (ELSA) and the unique eligibility of the WFP, which depends on the date of birth of the oldest member of the household. The randomisation around the date of birth of recipients and non-recipients allows for identification of causal effects by comparing households who are immediately below and above the eligibility age.

Intervention

The WFP provides households including a member over the age of 60 years in the qualifying week with a lump sum annual payment (e.g. newly eligible households received £200 in 2016/2017) typically in November or December. The goal of the payment is to increase energy expenditure, thus raising household temperature during cold weather and enhancing the health and well-being of older adults.

Statistical analyses

To estimate the potential causal effect of WFP on household temperature and health outcomes, we treat the WFP as a natural experiment and employ a regression discontinuity design. To be eligible for the WFP, the oldest member of the household needs to be over age 60 in the qualifying week of a given year. The assignment to the treatment is therefore determined exogenously by the age of the oldest member of the household in the arbitrary qualifying week, which is an observable variable. This randomisation around the date of birth of recipients and non-recipients allows for

identification of causal effects by comparing households who are immediately below and above the eligibility age.

We estimate a two-stage model in which the first stage predicts the effect of WFP on indoor temperature and the second stage models the effect of indoor temperature on health outcomes.

Results

Results from both random effects multilevel regression models showed that low levels of indoor temperature were associated with raised systolic (increase in blood pressure (mmHg) per reduction in temperature by 1 degree: $B = 0.46$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < .001$) and diastolic blood pressure levels ($B = 0.25$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$) and raised fibrinogen ($B = 0.01$, $SE = 0.002$, $p < .001$) and C-reactive protein levels ($B = 0.008$, $SE = 0.003$, $p < 0.05$). These associations were robust to adjustment for a broad range of relevant confounders including demographic factors, socioeconomic background, the presence of health conditions, body mass index, and month of year and region. The linkages were also replicated in fixed effects panel models. We also integrated weather station data specific to participant assessment times and areas of residence and showed that these associations were unaffected by adjustment for outdoor temperature levels. These analyses strengthened our rationale for examining blood pressure and inflammation as indicators that respond to changes in household temperature and may be affected by the WFP. In particular, systolic blood pressure showed substantial changes in response to differences in household temperature: those living in homes with temperature levels below 17 degrees were found to have systolic blood pressure levels over 4 points higher ($B = 4.56$, $SE = 0.55$, $p < .001$) than those living in household temperatures of 23 degrees or above.

We find little evidence that the WFP alters indoor temperature, a finding that was consistent across RD model specifications. Similarly, whilst eligibility for the WFP was associated with some health outcomes under certain model specifications we found little consistent evidence that the payment may have a beneficial impact on objectively recorded health markers or self-reported health outcomes. However, given the number of observations available in the current analyses further research is required to precisely ascertain the magnitude of the relationship between receipt of the WFP and home temperature and the health of household members.

Discussion

This study capitalised on the sharp assignment rules regarding WFP eligibility to estimate the potential effect of the WFP on household temperature and health in a national sample of English adults. We showed that lower indoor temperatures are generally related to health problems as indexed by high blood pressure and inflammation levels. However, the RD design employed did not identify consistent evidence linking the WFP to warmer homes or specific health and well-being benefits. Studies incorporating high frequency measurement of indoor temperature in multiple rooms over prolonged periods would aid in reducing measurement error in the assessment of home temperature and in precisely identifying the effect of the WFP. Further research utilising larger samples of participants close to the WFP eligibility cut-off is also needed to identify whether the WFP is linked to robust home temperature and health benefits not observed in the current study. Our results suggest that the potential temperature and health benefits of the WFP are unlikely to be large at the aggregate population level. However, we cannot rule out the possibility that the WFP may have important implications for population health for certain individuals under certain circumstances. In support of this contention our supplemental analyses examining

mortality at the local authority level identified initial evidence to suggest that the WFP could attenuate the impact of particularly cold conditions (e.g. temperatures of +2 degrees and below) on mortality.

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