

The effect of the Winter Fuel Payment on household temperature and health: a regression discontinuity design study

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Plain English summary

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Since 1997, households with at least one individual aged > 60 have received a tax-free lump sum between November and December, which is labelled as the 'Winter Fuel Payment' (WFP). The payment is labelled as such because its purpose is to provide additional funds so that older people can heat their homes throughout the winter months, thus reducing the potential adverse health effects of cold weather. Already it has been shown that almost half of the WFP is spent on fuel, suggesting that the label may be effective in shaping how the payment is spent. The study aimed to test whether or not receipt of the WFP leads to warmer homes or health benefits.

Using a representative sample of 12,210 older adults, drawn from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, it was first shown that lower indoor temperatures are associated with some negative health effects, such as raised blood pressure and inflammation levels. Drawing on the same data, it was then tested whether or not those qualifying for the WFP (because of the presence of a household member aged > 60 years in the qualifying week) lived in warmer homes than those who were highly similar in terms of age and other characteristics but who did not qualify for the payment.

The results did not identify evidence that qualifying for the WFP was associated with raised indoor temperatures or with improved health as assessed using medical tests (e.g. blood pressure, lung function), blood tests (e.g. inflammation) or participant reports of chest infections, poor health or depression. This was also true in winter months and for more disadvantaged households. Further research with larger samples is needed to rule out the possibility that the WFP may have small, yet potentially important, effects on household temperature and health that were not detected in the current study.

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