

Unlucky to Be Young? The Long-Run Effects of School Starting Age on Smoking Behavior and Health

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Smoking and its health consequences cause considerable costs in both the US and Germany. The economic literature shows that social outcomes such as smoking behavior are largely affected by childhood factors including cigarette prices, taxation, and school peers. School starting age is a further important factor because it significantly affects a child's school environment.

While most studies focus on the short-run effects of school starting age on smoking and health, we examine the causal long-run effects for adults who are in their late thirties. We employ a fuzzy regression discontinuity design to account for the endogeneity of school starting age by using exogenous school entry rules, which are based on a child's date of birth, as instrument. The analysis is based on survey data from the German Socio-Economic Panel.

Our results show that an increase in school starting age by one month reduces the risk of smoking by 1.3 percentage points and increases the likelihood to report good or very good health by 1.7 percentage points in the long run. Furthermore, the effect on self-rated health can be explained by differences in physical rather than mental health. Moreover, we show suggestive evidence that peers are an important mechanism through which school starting age affects smoking behavior and health.