

The Broad Decline in Health and Human Capital of Americans Born after 1947

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I present evidence of a decline across cohorts in the health and human capital of Americans, beginning with those born after 1947 and continuing until those born in the mid-1960s. Age-adjusted educational attainment, wages, maternal health (proxied by the birth weight of infants), and mortality all exhibit trend breaks near the 1947 cohort, such that each outcome worsens for subsequent cohorts relative to the prior trend. Evidence of these breaks remain when I control for year and age effects or smooth age-by-year interactions, or use a nonparametric test. These cohorts also went through puberty later and scored lower on standardized tests, suggesting the roots of the decline date to at least adolescence.

The cohort decline is large enough to drive aggregate: i) educational declines in the 1960s, ii) increases in the low birth weight rate in the 1980s, iii) mortality increases since 1999, and to contribute substantially to iv) wage stagnation since the 1970s. My theory therefore partially unifies the disparate searches for the causes of each of these declines. The decline is remarkably widespread across geography and race, for those born in the United States.