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The Effects of In utero Programs on Birth Outcomes: The Case of “Buen Comienzo”

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This paper studies the effects of an in utero program on birth outcomes addressed to vulnerable pregnant women. We use information from the Buen Comienzo program, an initiative run by the local government of Medellin, the second largest city of Colombia. In order to identify the effects we obtain matching estimates using data from program participants and the census of birth statistics. We find that the program increased the birth weight of participant children by 0.09 and 0.23 standard deviations for boys and girls, respectively, and reduced the prevalence of low birth weight by 2.6 and 4.6 ppts for boys and girls, respectively. In terms of size, the program reduces the incidence of being short by 3 and 4 ppts, for boys and girls, respectively. The program also significantly reduced preterm births between 3 and 8 ppts. We also provide evidence of the existence of heterogeneous effects depending on a mother’s exposure to the program and her frequency of attendance. Finally, an estimate of the cost-benefit ratio of the program suggests that its benefits could be 2 to 6 times its costs, respectively for boys and girls born from participant mothers with early exposure to the program.

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