

# MITIGATING THE EFFECTS OF LOW BIRTH WEIGHT

## Evidence from Randomly Assigned Adoptees

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### ABSTRACT

Infants who are underweight at birth earn less, score lower on tests, and become less educated as adults. Previous studies have found mixed evidence that socioeconomic status mitigates these effects. In this paper, we reconcile these findings using a unique data set in which adoptees were quasi-randomly assigned to families. We find that median income within a zip code mitigates the effects of low birth weight, as in Currie and Moretti (2007). Interactions between low birth weight and other family characteristics are not statistically significant, which is consistent with Currie and Hyson (1999). These results cannot be explained by differences in genetics, prenatal health care, or neonatal health care.

**KEYWORDS:** low birth weight, adoptees, socioeconomic status, earnings, education

**JEL CLASSIFICATION:** I1, J1

### 1. Introduction

Infants who are underweight at birth earn less, score lower on tests, are more likely to commit crimes, and are less educated as adults.<sup>1</sup> Researchers have found mixed evidence that socioeconomic status (SES) mitigates the negative effects of low birth weight (LBW). Currie and Hyson (1999) find little evidence that SES, as measured by father's occupational status, mitigates the negative effects of LBW.<sup>2</sup> Lin, Liu, and Chou (2007) show that the decreased likelihood of college attendance is partially mitigated by parental education but only for moderately LBW and full-term LBW children. Zvara and Schoppe-Sullivan (2010) also show that the correlation between LBW and cognitive development at age three is weaker for children whose parents attended college. Cheadle and Goosby (2010), on the other hand, employ a family fixed-effects analysis and find little evidence that family characteristics mitigate the effect of LBW on cognitive development or the likelihood of high

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1 See Case, Fertig, and Paxson (2005), Black, Devereux, and Salvanes (2007), Chen, Lin, and Liu (2010), and Almond and Currie (2012).

2 Black, Devereux, and Salvanes (2005) also find no evidence that the effect of LBW is mitigated by mother's education, family income, or birth order, but they cannot rule out small effects because of their sample size.

school graduation. On the other hand, Currie and Moretti (2007) find that LBW women are more likely to have LBW children, and these effects are larger for individuals born in low-income zip codes.

Why these papers find conflicting results remains an open question. Almond and Currie (2012) argue that the differences between Currie and Hyson (1999) and Currie and Moretti (2007) could be due to improvements in technology. They note that Currie and Hyson analyze a 1958 birth cohort and that it is possible that there were few effective interventions for LBW infants in 1958. Improvements in neonatal technology that might only be accessible to high SES families may explain the results in Currie and Moretti (2007), which uses data from a later period.<sup>3</sup> Alternatively, these papers might differ because they look at different populations or because they use different measures of socioeconomic status. Socioeconomic status is multidimensional and some measures may mitigate the negative effects of LBW whereas other measures might not.

In this paper, we ask whether childhood environment mitigates the effects of LBW using five measures of SES. Specifically, we use the median income in a family's zip code (the measure used by Currie and Moretti 2007), mother's education, father's education, family income, and family size. To study how these measures interact with LBW, we use data from Sacerdote (2007) in which an adoption agency quasi-randomly assigned Korean orphans to American adoptive families. Because we have random assignment, childhood environment is not confounded by genetics, prenatal health, or neonatal health care. Consistent with the findings of Currie and Hyson (1999) and Cheadle and Goosby (2010), the interaction of LBW with parent's education, family income, or family size is not statistically significant. The interaction between LBW and median neighborhood income, however, is positive and significant. This indicates that neighborhood income mitigates the effects of LBW, which is consistent with Currie and Moretti (2007). Specifically, we find that a \$4,600 (in 1970 dollars) increase in median neighborhood income from the sample mean would offset the negative effect of LBW on adult earnings. Additionally, a \$3,600 increase would mitigate the negative effect on educational attainment.

It is important to note that although adoptees were randomly assigned to families, families were not randomly assigned to neighborhoods. Consequently, unobservables correlated with neighborhood income might be driving our results. For instance, many of the symptoms of LBW manifest during childhood (McCormick 1985; Brooks et al. 2001), and residing in a disadvantaged neighborhood decreases the likelihood of obtaining recommended preventative care (Kirby and Kaneda 2005). Thus, neighborhood income might only matter to the extent that it is correlated with health-care quality after the neonatal period.<sup>4</sup> It could also be that neighborhood income is a better proxy for wealth and lifetime earnings, which allow families to make compensatory investments.<sup>5</sup> How parents

3 In the 1960s, the first neonatal intensive care units were developed, as were ventilators for infants and phototherapy for jaundice (Cutler and Meara 2000).

4 If the true mechanism is access to health care after the neonatal period, then it is important to note that the correlation between SES and health-care quality likely differs by country. For example, SES should be a weaker predictor of health-care quality in countries with universal health care.

5 McClellan and Skinner (2006) note that individual-reports can be noisy measures of lifetime earnings and wealth because of reporting errors, the transitory nature of income, and inadequate measures of financial

respond to early-life health shocks is theoretically unclear. Empirically, some have found that parental investments compensate for early-life health shocks (Loughran, Datar, and Kilburn 2008), whereas others have found that parents reinforce these shocks by allocating resources towards their healthier children (Datar, Kilburn, and Loughran 2010).<sup>6</sup> Although we cannot precisely identify the mechanism, we can rule out genetics, prenatal environment, or neonatal environment as potential mechanisms.<sup>7</sup>

Because many of the determinants of prenatal health are unobservable, researchers often use LBW as a proxy for poor prenatal health. Birth weight is determined by gestational age and intrauterine growth rate (Kramer 1987). Infants born prematurely and the children of mothers who were born LBW are more likely to be LBW (Currie and Moretti 2007). Furthermore, infants exposed to air pollution or famines while in utero have lower birth weights, higher infant mortality rates, and higher adult mortality (Currie, Neidell, and Schmieder 2009; Almond et al. 2010; Barker 1995). Maternal behaviors such as smoking or drinking during pregnancy also negatively influence birth weight (Markowitz et al. 2013; Evans and Ringel 1999). Public policies targeting the health of pregnant women have had modest success at increasing birth weights (Almond, Hoynes, and Schanzenbach 2011; Currie and Gruber 1996).

In most data sets, the unobserved determinants of LBW (genetics, prenatal environment, and maternal behaviors) are correlated with childhood SES (both observed and unobserved).<sup>8</sup> To identify the causal effect of fetal nutritional intake while holding genetics and family environment constant, many studies have used twin designs (Almond, Chay, and Lee 2005; Oreopoulos et al. 2008; Black, Devereux, and Salvanes 2007; Royer 2009). In our data, family environment is quasi-randomly assigned; therefore, the unobserved determinants of birth weight are orthogonal to childhood SES. Birth weight has the potential to affect long-run economic outcomes through several channels, such as cognitive development and adult health. Consistent with this literature, we find that low birth weight infants earn less and become less educated as adults.

## II. Data

### A. SURVEY

Holt International Children's Services is an organization that places Korean orphans into adoptive families.<sup>9</sup> A unique feature of the Holt adoption program is that children were

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wealth. On the other hand, Geronimus, Bound, and Neidert (1996) and Geronimus and Bound (1998) argue that aggregate measures cannot be interpreted as if they were micro-level variables; aggregate data reflect both characteristics of the individual and characteristics of the areas in which they live.

6 See Almond and Mazumder (2013) for an overview of this literature.

7 This, of course, does not imply that genetics, prenatal environment, or neonatal environment do not mitigate the effects of LBW. In fact, Bharadwaj, Vellesen Loken, and Neilson (2013) find evidence that LBW infants with access to neonatal health care have lower mortality rates and score higher on tests.

8 Although children from low SES families are more likely to be LBW, Costa (1998) shows that this difference has narrowed since 1900.

9 Much of this paragraph is based off of both Sacerdote (2007) and Holt's website ([www.Holtintl.org](http://www.Holtintl.org)).

quasi-randomly assigned to families. The only exception to this is that families could avoid special needs children. For this reason, special needs children are excluded from our sample as well as the sample used in Sacerdote (2007). Holt assigned children to families using their application date and a first come, first served rule. Because potential applicants did not know whether the next available child is healthy or not, adoptive families could not have strategically timed their applications to increase the likelihood of adopting a healthier child. To be eligible to adopt, adoptive parents had to be married for at least three years, have no more than four children, have a household income greater than 125% of the federal poverty line, and be between the ages of 25 and 45. Many of these restrictions were imposed by Korean and US law.

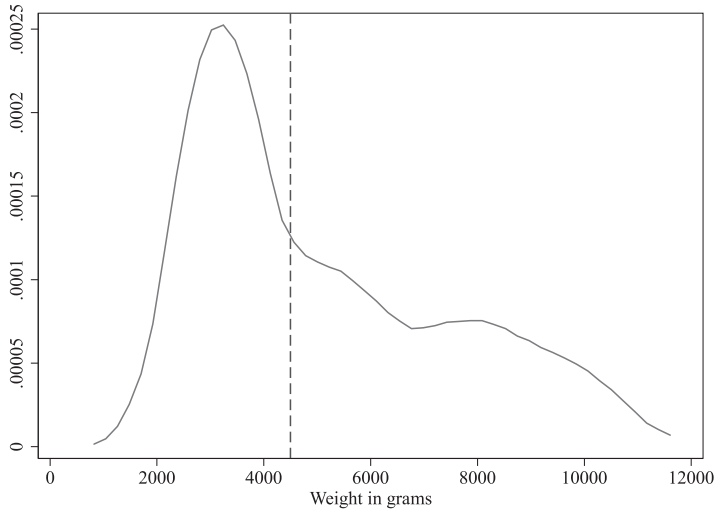
Sacerdote (2007) surveyed adoptive families and obtained information regarding their family characteristics at the time of adoption and the adult outcomes for each of their children. Sacerdote surveyed 3,500 of the 7,700 families that adopted a child through Holt's Korea program between 1970 and 1980.<sup>10</sup> Of the surveyed families, 1,103 (or 32 percent) responded to the initial survey. Sacerdote resurveyed 400 of the nonresponders, receiving an additional 141 responses. Comparing the two samples, Sacerdote finds no statistically significant relationship between a child's outcomes and whether a family responded to the initial survey. Using Holt's records from the time of adoption, Sacerdote finds some evidence that higher-income and higher-educated families were less likely to respond to the survey. However, as evidenced in Table 2 in our paper and Table 3 in Sacerdote's paper, there is still a significant amount of variation in parental characteristics from those that responded.

Sacerdote linked these data to Holt records and showed that family characteristics do not predict an adoptee's initial health, age at time of adoption, or gender. Because family environment was quasi-randomly assigned to adoptees, these data allowed Sacerdote to separately identify the effects of family environment (nature) and genetics (nurture). Sacerdote finds height, weight, and BMI to be determined by genetics; smoking and drinking behavior appear to be influenced by family environment; education and income appear to be influenced by both nature and nurture.

## B. BIRTH WEIGHTS

In addition to the outcome data collected by Sacerdote, we rely extensively on one other variable: the weight that first appears in the adoptee's medical records. These "initial weights" come from Holt records, but they do not always correspond to an adoptee's birth weight. This can be seen more explicitly in Figure 1, where we plot the distribution of these weights. The vertical line corresponds to 4.5 kilograms, which is the 99<sup>th</sup> percentile of the US birth weight distribution. The thick right tail in the Holt distribution results from adoptees entering Holt with a medical history that does not date back to birth. Unfortunately, it is not possible to restrict our sample to those whose initial weight is their birth weight because the age at which the initial weight was taken is not reported in the

10 Sacerdote also surveyed a subset of children (both adoptees and nonadoptees) to measure the extent to which parents and children reported the same outcome data (e.g., years of education, income, and marital status). The response rate for this survey was 55 percent and the rate of agreement was high.

**FIGURE 1.** Distribution of Holt initial weights

Note: The vertical line at 4.5 kilograms corresponds to the 99<sup>th</sup> percentile of the US birth weight distribution.

Holt data. We would like to treat initial weights as birth weights to determine whether an adoptee was low birth weight, but low birth weight adoptees that cross the LBW threshold before their medical history begins will be misclassified as normal birth weight.<sup>11</sup>

To reduce the likelihood of misclassification, we truncate the sample by excluding adoptees with an initial weight greater than 4.5 kilograms, the 99<sup>th</sup> percentile of the US birth weight distribution.<sup>12</sup> Truncation also addresses a second problem: higher initial weights are likely correlated with late entrance into the Holt program, and late entrance will be associated with a longer time in their preadoption environment. However, children grow rapidly in the first months of life and 4.5 kilograms becomes the third percentile of the weight distribution by age three months.<sup>13</sup> Thus, for the set of adoptees whose “initial weight” corresponds to their weight at the time they entered Holt, truncation at 4.5 kilograms also limits the potential time that an adoptee spent in their preadoption environment.

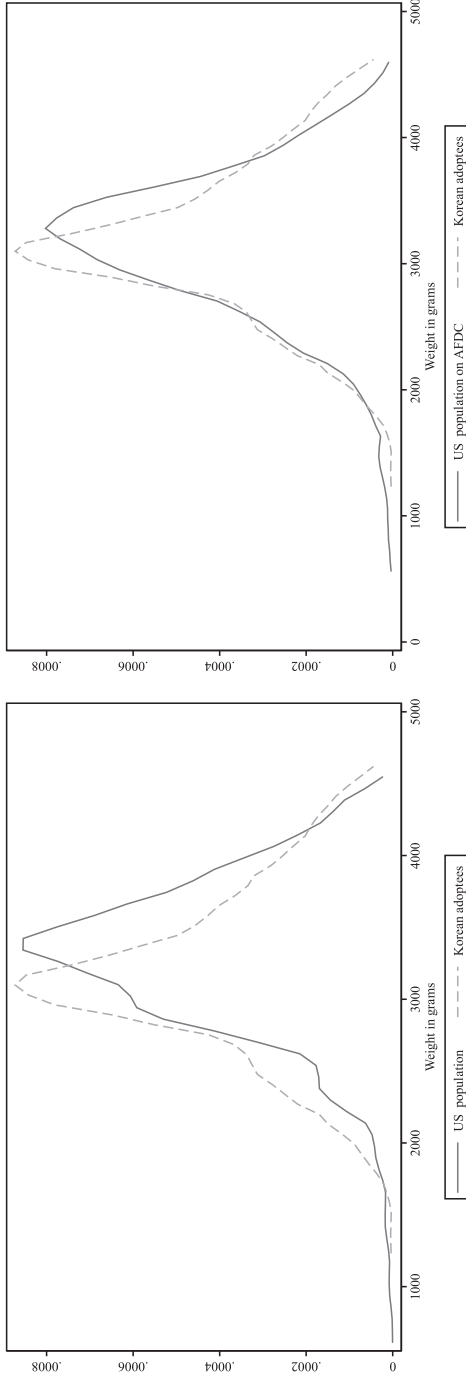
Figure 2 illustrates that truncation leaves us with a distribution of weights that resembles a birth weight distribution. In the first panel of Figure 2 we plot the truncated

11 As is standard in the literature, we classify children as low birth weight if they are born weighing less than 2.5 kilograms. This is justified further in Section II.C.

12 US birth weight distribution comes from a 2012 Centers for Disease Control (CDC) vital statistics report (Table F, [http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr62/nvsr62\\_09.pdf#table25](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr62/nvsr62_09.pdf#table25)). According to Shin et al. (2005) the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile for Korean children with a gestational age of 42 weeks is 4.2 kilograms.

13 CDC weight for age tables are available at [http://www.cdc.gov/growthcharts/html\\_charts/wtageinf.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/growthcharts/html_charts/wtageinf.htm).

**FIGURE 2.** US and Korean weight distributions



Sources: AFDC birth weight refers to the birth weights of US children whose mothers receive AFDC. These data come from the 1988 sample of the Integrated Health Interview Series. All distributions are truncated at 4.5 kilograms (the 99<sup>th</sup> percentile of the US birth weight distribution).

distribution of Holt initial weights against the US birth weight distribution.<sup>14</sup> In the second panel we restrict the US birth weight distribution to the set of children whose mothers receive Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). For the sake of comparability, we also truncate the US birth weight distributions at 4.5 kilograms.<sup>15</sup> Although adoptee initial weights are less than the US population as a whole, they are similar to children whose mothers receive AFDC. Specifically, the mean “initial weight” for the truncated sample of adoptees is 3.19 kilograms while the mean birth weight from the truncated sample of children whose mothers receive AFDC is 3.14 kilograms. Furthermore, 14.3 percent of the truncated Holt sample has an initial weight less than 2.5 kilograms, which compares to 13.8 (the percentage of children in the truncated AFDC sample that were low birth weight). A Pearson chi-square test comparing LBW in the truncated Holt and AFDC samples produces a test statistic of 0.106 with a  $p$ -value of 0.744. For these reasons, we are confident that truncating the sample at 4.5 kilograms allows us to recover a distribution of birth weights with minimal error. Accordingly, we treat “initial weights” as birth weights for the remainder of this paper.

Our results are not sensitive to truncation. We illustrate this more precisely in Section IV where we replicate our main findings using the full sample of adoptees. As a robustness check, we truncate the data using age of arrival rather than initial weight, since adoptees that entered Holt during the first year of life would be more likely to have medical histories dating back to their births.<sup>16</sup> Truncating based on age of arrival produces nearly identical results.

### C. QUASI-RANDOM ASSIGNMENT AND SUMMARY STATISTICS

Sacerdote (2007) shows that parental characteristics do not predict an adoptee’s initial health. In Table 1, we show that this remains true for our preferred sample and the other samples used as robustness checks in Section IV. Specifically, we regress an indicator variable for whether the child is LBW (less than 2.5 kilograms) on parental education, family income, neighborhood income, number of children, parental heights, BMI, and drinking behavior. Parental characteristics are neither individually nor jointly significant at predicting whether an adoptee is LBW.

Table 2 produces summary statistics restricting Sacerdote’s data set to adoptees that weighed less than 4.5 kilograms at their initial medical history. This data set contains 535 adoptees, of which nearly 450 were at least 25 years old at the time of the survey. We restrict attention to adoptees over the age of 25 when examining adult income, educational attainment, and college attendance. The sample is only 25 percent male, suggesting that

14 The US birth weights were obtained from the 1988 Integrated Health Interview Series.

15 Because 4.5 kilograms corresponds to the 99<sup>th</sup> percentile of the US birth weight distribution, plotting the truncated distribution of initial weights against the full distribution of US birth weights produces a qualitatively similar picture.

16 The age at which the adoptee entered Holt does not necessarily correspond to the age at which the “initial weight” was taken. For example, there are adoptees that entered Holt at age two with an initial weight of about 5 kilograms. It is highly unlikely that the weight of 5 kilograms corresponds to the adoptee’s birth weight or their weight at age two.

**TABLE 1.** Relationship between family characteristics and whether the adoptee is LBW

	(1) Full sample	(2) Arrived at Holt by age one	(3) Holt initial weight <4.5 kg
Mother's education	0.004 (0.005)	0.005 (0.007)	0.009 (0.010)
Father's education	0.002 (0.004)	0.002 (0.006)	0.002 (0.008)
Log of family income	-0.016 (0.017)	-0.033 (0.024)	-0.042 (0.030)
Log of neighborhood income	-0.019 (0.041)	-0.032 (0.058)	-0.006 (0.079)
Number of children	-0.002 (0.008)	0.000 (0.011)	0.011 (0.015)
Mother's BMI	0.002 (0.002)	0.002 (0.003)	0.003 (0.004)
Father's BMI	0.001 (0.002)	0.002 (0.004)	0.003 (0.005)
Mother drinks	-0.023 (0.026)	-0.030 (0.038)	-0.059 (0.048)
Father drinks	0.022 (0.026)	0.042 (0.038)	0.062 (0.048)
Mother's height (inches)	-0.003 (0.004)	-0.004 (0.005)	-0.006 (0.006)
Father's height (inches)	-0.003 (0.004)	-0.004 (0.006)	-0.004 (0.008)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.063	0.085	0.112
Observations	936	630	485
F-test, parental coeffs. = 0	0.648	0.665	0.793
p-value: Joint significance	0.663	0.650	0.556

Note: Robust standard errors (clustered at the family level) in parentheses.

females were more likely to be given up for adoption (see Edlund and Lee (2013) for a discussion on son preference in Korea).<sup>17</sup> Most adoptees arrived in the United States around age one. Information on parental characteristics at the time of adoption was obtained from a retrospective survey conducted by Bruce Sacerdote in the early 2000s (described above). Adoptive mothers had an average of 15.06 years of schooling, while adoptive fathers had an average of 15.89. Adoptees over the age of 25 have an average of 15.03 years of schooling.

17 In the 5 percent sample of the 2000 Census (Ruggles et al. 2010), only 43 percent of adopted children born in Korea are male.



**TABLE 2.** Summary statistics

	Characteristics of the adoptee				Observations
	Mean	SD	Min	Max	
Low birth weight	0.144	0.351	0	1	535
Male	0.234	0.424	0	1	535
Age	28.867	3.834	19	40	535
US arrival age	1.108	0.545	1	5	529
Married	0.426	0.495	0	1	530
BMI	23.040	3.828	16.499	38.008	522
Income*	50.252	36.640	10	200	437
Attended college*	0.565	0.496	0	1	448
Education*	15.033	2.110	9	21	448
Characteristics of the adopting family at the time of adoption					
	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Observations
Mother's education	15.060	2.450	9	20	535
Father's education	15.888	2.864	9	20	535
Log of family income	3.165	0.672	2.303	5.298	535
Log of neighborhood income	2.953	0.256	2.179	3.743	535
Number of children	3.2	1.398	1	7	535
Characteristics of US families in 1970					
	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Observations
Mother's education	11.107	2.780	0	17	91,881
Father's education	11.010	3.250	0	17	78,453
Log of family income	2.403	0.326	2.303	4.094	97,276
Log of neighborhood income	2.984	0.328	1.445	4.623	97,276
Number of children	2.351	1.449	1	9	97,276

Notes: Adoptee sample restricted to adoptees with an initial weight of less than 4.5 kg. Characteristics of US families obtained from IPUMS 1970 neighborhood sample (Ruggles et al. 2010), restricting to families with at least one child. Family income is binned at the same intervals as the adoptee survey to make the data comparable. However, the US sample is top coded at \$50,000 while the adoptee sample is top coded at \$200,000. Neighborhood income from 1970 census adjusted to 1980 dollars so that it is comparable with adoptee sample. Although families could not have more than four children at the time of adoption, this constraint does not restrict a family from having more children after adoption. Thus it is reasonable to observe families with more than four children. \*Restricted to adoptees over the age of 25.

Family income is reported categorically for both parents and children.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, three adoptees and one adoptive family are top coded with family income greater than \$200,000. Neighborhood income refers to the median income (in 1980) for those residing in the same zip code as the adopting family. This measure was obtained from the census; it is not simply an average across Holt families that happen to reside in the same zip code.

In the third panel of Table 2 we obtain family characteristics from the 1970 census neighborhoods sample. This 1 percent sample was obtained from IPUMS (Ruggles et al. 2010). We restrict to households with at least one child. Relative to the US population, adoptive families are more educated and earn more, but they live in zip codes with similar average incomes. For the sake of comparability, neighborhood income in panel three was adjusted to 1980 dollars and family income is transformed into a categorical variable (where the categories match Sacerdote's survey). As in the second panel, a family's neighborhood income refers to the median income for all households (with or without children) residing in the same zip code as the family. It should be noted that we do not make the same restrictions for the sample of US families that were required for adoptive families. Therefore, the US sample includes single parents, parents of all ages, and those with incomes below 125% of the poverty line.

Table 3 presents the correlations between each of our five measures of SES. Although income, neighborhood income, and parent's education are positively correlated, with the exception of mother's and father's education, the correlation between any of the other measures never exceeds 0.20 in the adoptee sample. The correlations are somewhat stronger for our sample of US families, but they never exceed 0.35, with the exception of mother's and father's education. This highlights the multidimensionality of SES and illustrates why papers that only use one measure of SES might find conflicting results.

### III. Results

Figure 3 visually displays our data. Figure 3 presents local linear smooth regressions of the adoptee's years of schooling for each measure of SES: mother's education, father's education, log of family income, the number of children in the family (including the adoptee), and the log of the median income within the neighborhood. Because we are using a small data set, our data are not well suited for nonparametric analysis, and the standard errors for the estimated difference between these two smoothed regression lines are large.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, Figure 3 should be viewed as a visualization of the data and not as further evidence in support of our findings. Nevertheless, several features of Figure 3 are consistent with our findings. First, LBW adoptees become less educated than normal birth weight adoptees for every level of mother's education, father's education, family income, family size, and neighborhood income. Second, the effect of LBW (measured by the gap between the two nonparametric regression lines) remains approximately constant across

18 The categories are as follows: Less than \$20,000; between \$20,000 and \$30,000; between \$30,000 and \$50,000; between \$50,000 and \$70,000; between \$70,000 and \$100,000; between \$100,000 and \$150,000; between \$150,000 and \$200,000; and greater than \$200,000.

19 For this reason, we use parametric methods for our main analysis.

**TABLE 3.** Correlation between each measure of socioeconomic status

Panel A: Characteristics of the adopting family at the time of adoption					
	Log of neighborhood income	Log of family income	Mother's education	Father's education	Number of children
Log of neighborhood income	1	0.119	0.148	0.119	-0.013
Log of family income		1	0.157	0.043	-0.049
Mother's education			1	0.562	0.057
Father's education				1	0.045
Number of children					1
Panel B: Characteristics of US families in 1970					
	Log of neighborhood income	Log of family income	Mother's education	Father's education	Number of children
Log of neighborhood income	1	0.241	0.293	0.350	-0.059
Log of family income		1	0.147	0.169	0.002
Mother's education			1	0.609	-0.081
Father's education				1	-0.073
Number of children					1

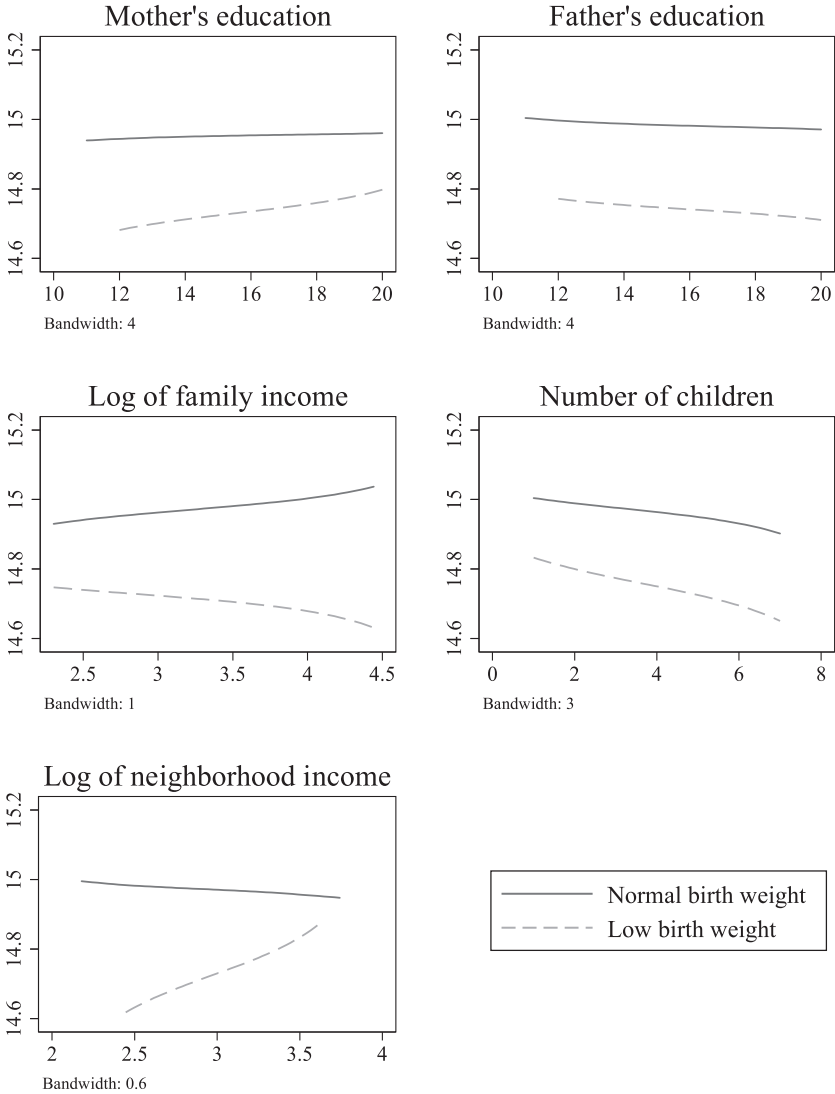
Notes: Sample of adopting families restricted to adoptees with an initial weight less than 4.5 kg. Characteristics of US families obtained from IPUMS 1970 neighborhood sample (Ruggles et al. 2010), restricting to families with at least one child. Family income in US sample is top coded at \$50,000, compared with \$200,000 in adoptee sample.

levels of mother's education, father's education, family income, and family size. In other words, these measures of socioeconomic status are not mitigating the negative effects of LBW. The birth weight gap does narrow for adoptees from higher-income neighborhoods. Figure 3 indicates that a LBW adoptee assigned to a low-income neighborhood would attain one-half fewer years of education, on average, than a normal birth weight adoptee assigned to the same neighborhood. However, that gap almost disappears for adoptees from high-income neighborhoods. Neighborhood income appears to mitigate the effects of low birth weight. Again, this graph should be viewed with caution, as the standard errors of these regressions are large and do not control for other variables. To address these issues, we turn to parametric analysis.

We analyze the effect of LBW on adult outcomes and the extent to which quasi-randomly assigned childhood characteristics mitigate the negative effects of birth weight by estimating variations of the following equation:

$$y_i = \alpha + \beta LBW_i + Z_i' \Gamma + (LBW_i \times Z_i)' \Delta + \theta male_i + age FE's + \epsilon_i \quad (1)$$

**FIGURE 3.** The impact of socioeconomic status on educational attainment



$$\text{where } Z_i = \begin{bmatrix} \log(\text{zip income}) \\ \log(\text{family income}) \\ \text{mother's education} \\ \text{father's education} \\ \text{number of children} \end{bmatrix} .$$

The outcome variable,  $y_i$ , is either years of schooling, log of income, college attendance, or BMI. The variable  $LBW_i$  is an indicator equal to one if the adoptee's birth weight is less than 2.5 kilograms. This is the LBW cutoff used by Currie and Hyson (1999) and Currie and Moretti (2007). It is also the cutoff used by the Centers for Disease Control, World Health Organization, and many other academic papers. The vector  $Z_i$  contains measures of socioeconomic status. The interaction term measures the extent to which variables in  $Z_i$  mitigate the effects of LBW. We are interested in understanding the coefficients within the  $\Delta$  vector. Each regression also includes indicators for gender and age.

One might be concerned about how misclassification and truncation of the initial weight distribution affect the estimates. Since we are inferring low birth weight status from initial weights, some individuals will be misclassified. This will tend to attenuate our estimates.<sup>20</sup> As noted in the previous section, truncating the distribution at 4.5 kilograms reduces the likelihood of misclassification. This reduction in noise, however, comes at the expense of a reduction in sample size. Because initial weights are only used to infer LBW status, truncation does not reduce the range of our variable of interest.

Table 4 presents our results. For each outcome variable we present three specifications. First, we include the LBW indicator variable with no interactions. Second, we interact LBW with log of neighborhood income. Third, we interact LBW with log of neighborhood income, mother's education, father's education, family income, and the number of children within the family. This is the specification presented in equation 1. As a robustness check, we consider each unique specification that can be constructed by interacting LBW with each measure of socioeconomic status. The results of that exercise (presented in Table 6 and discussed in Section IV) are qualitatively similar to the results presented in Table 4.

In Table 4, we find that LBW adoptees earn approximately 20 percent less and attain one-half fewer years of education. Because the interaction with neighborhood income is positive and significant at the 5 percent level for all regressions, we conclude that neighborhood income mitigates the effects of LBW. These results imply that a \$4,600 (in 1980 dollars) increase in median neighborhood income from the sample mean would mitigate the negative effect of LBW on adult earnings. Additionally, a \$3,600 increase would mitigate the negative effect on educational attainment. None of the other SES measures are significant at the 10 percent level. We repeat this analysis in Table 5 using BMI as the dependent variable. For BMI, we find no evidence of an LBW effect or mitigation at conventional levels of significance for any measure of SES.

At first these results might appear to conflict with Sacerdote (2007), as he does not find that neighborhood income affects economic outcomes. This difference occurs because neighborhood income affects only LBW adoptees (see Figure 3). The majority of the sample is normal birth weight, which explains why Sacerdote finds no effect from neighborhood income.

20 Misclassification should attenuate our results if LBW adoptees are randomly misclassified as normal birth weight. If, however, only the relatively heavier LBW adoptees are misclassified, then what we measure is very LBW.

**TABLE 4.** The effect of low birth weight on adult economic outcomes

	Log of income			Educational attainment			College attendance		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Low birth weight	-0.196 <sup>b</sup> (0.0988)	-2.791 <sup>a</sup> (1.027)	-2.810 <sup>b</sup> (1.272)	-0.422 (0.262)	-7.444 <sup>b</sup> (3.098)	-5.681 <sup>c</sup> (3.293)	-0.082 (0.0622)	-1.836 <sup>a</sup> (0.701)	-1.562 <sup>c</sup> (0.844)
Log of neighborhood income × LBW		0.885 <sup>b</sup> (0.343)	0.863 <sup>b</sup> (0.341)		2.395 <sup>b</sup> (1.066)	2.503 <sup>b</sup> (1.131)		0.598 <sup>b</sup> (0.239)	0.581 <sup>b</sup> (0.249)
Mother's education × LBW			-0.003 (0.039)			0.041 (0.129)			0.008 (0.029)
Father's education × LBW			0.017 (0.035)			-0.038 (0.126)			0.002 (0.028)
Log of family income × LBW			-0.036 (0.140)			-0.625 (0.440)			-0.079 (0.104)
Number of children × LBW			-0.010 (0.078)			-0.056 (0.160)			-0.042 (0.039)
Marginal effect of LBW	-0.196 <sup>b</sup> (0.0988)	-0.176 <sup>c</sup> (0.095)	-0.175 <sup>c</sup> (0.096)	-0.422 (0.262)	-0.371 (0.261)	-0.408 (0.270)	-0.082 (0.0622)	-0.069 (0.061)	-0.072 (0.064)
Observations	437	437	437	448	448	448	448	448	448
R <sup>2</sup>	0.146	0.157	0.158	0.089	0.099	0.104	0.080	0.091	0.094

Notes: Sample restricted to adoptees over the age of 25. Robust standard errors (clustered at the family level) reported in parentheses. Each regression controls for log of family's zip code income, mother's education, father's education, and gender. Each regression also includes a set of dummy variables for parent's income category, the child's age, and the number of children within the family. Letters <sup>a</sup>, <sup>b</sup>, and <sup>c</sup> denote statistical significance at the 0.01, 0.05, and 0.10 levels, respectively.

**TABLE 5.** The effect of low birth weight on BMI

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Low birth weight	0.514 (0.534)	-1.967 (5.395)	5.254 (7.177)
Log of neighborhood income $\times$ LBW		0.843 (1.826)	1.709 (1.820)
Mother's education $\times$ LBW			-0.264 (0.193)
Father's education $\times$ LBW			-0.143 (0.198)
Log of family income $\times$ LBW			-0.491 (0.859)
Number of children $\times$ LBW			-0.602 (0.389)
Marginal effect of LBW	0.514 (0.534)	0.526 (0.534)	0.627 (0.516)
Observations	522	522	522
$R^2$	0.099	0.100	0.115

Notes: Robust standard errors (clustered at the family level) reported in parentheses. Each regression controls for log of family's zip code income, mother's education, father's education, and gender. Each regression also includes a set of dummy variables for parent's income category, the child's age, and the number of children within the family.

As noted in the introduction, it is important to remember that adoptive families were not randomly assigned to neighborhoods. Thus, it is possible that unobservables correlated with neighborhood income are driving our results. Healthy foods, for instance, are not as accessible in lower-income neighborhoods (Franco et al. 2008), and growing up in a lower-income neighborhood is associated with behavioral problems, teenage pregnancy, and dropping out of high school (Brooks-Gunn et al. 1993; Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, and Klebanov 1994). Additionally, children who attend schools with high concentrations of low-income students fare worse academically (Lippman, Burns, and McArthur 1996). Neighborhood income likely reflects demographic characteristics (e.g., the share of college-educated adults, or the share of divorced/single parents), which might be important given the literature on peer effects (Gaviria and Raphael 2001; Hanushek et al. 2003; Sacerdote 2001). Of course, as discussed in the introduction, it is also possible that median neighborhood income only matters to the extent that it is a better proxy for certain family characteristics (e.g., wealth or lifetime earnings). Nevertheless, genetics, prenatal environment, and neonatal environment can be ruled out as potential mechanisms since (for our sample) they are all independent of neighborhood income.

#### IV. Robustness Checks

This section examines the robustness of our results. Specifically, we show that our results are not sensitive to the inclusion of specific interaction terms or the truncation of the sample.

Because we use five measures of SES, it is possible to model the effect of LBW and its interaction with SES in many different ways. We can estimate the effect of LBW by itself; we can include an interaction with one measure of SES; we can include all five measures of SES; or we can include any subset of those interactions. There are 31 unique ways to organize our five interactions—32 if we include the specification with no interactions. In Table 6, we ask whether our results are consistent across these specifications. For each outcome variable, we run each of the 32 specifications. Each interaction appears 16 times, and Table 6 reports the number of times the interaction produces a  $p$ -value less than 0.05 or less than 0.01. Regardless of whether the outcome variable is log of income, educational attainment, or college attendance, the interaction of LBW and log of neighborhood income is significant at the 5 percent level for every specification in which it appears. For these outcome variables, none of the other interactions are ever significant at the 5 percent level. When the outcome of interest is BMI, the interaction of LBW and log of neighborhood income is never significant. With regards to the effect on BMI, the only interaction that is significant at the 5 percent level is the interaction of LBW with mother's education. However, that interaction is only significant in one of the 16 specifications. These results are consistent with the results presented in Tables 4 and 5—neighborhood income mitigates the effects of low birth weight for economic outcomes but it does not affect BMI.

As discussed in Section II, we do not observe birth weights for adoptees that entered Holt with an incomplete medical history. Low birth weight adoptees that cross the LBW threshold before their medical history begins will be misclassified as normal birth weight. Normal birth weight children, however, should not be misclassified as LBW because weight tends to increase monotonically during the first years of life. If LBW adoptees are randomly misclassified as normal birth weight, then this should attenuate our results and should bias our results towards zero. However, if only the relatively heavier LBW infants are misclassified as normal birth weight because they are closer to the LBW threshold, then what we are really measuring is very low birth weight. In Tables 4 and 5 we limit this bias by restricting our analysis to adoptees with an initial weight less than 4.5 kilograms. This restriction allows us to recover a birth weight distribution resembling that of the United States. To illustrate that our results are not sensitive to this cutoff, we relax this restriction in Table 7.

In the first four columns of Table 7 we estimate the effect of LBW and its interaction with each measure of SES for the nontruncated sample. In the last four columns we restrict analysis to adoptees that entered Holt before age one. This restriction is a natural alternative to truncating by initial weight because an adoptee that enters Holt closer to their date of birth is more likely to arrive with a complete medical history. In both cases, we find results similar to those in Tables 4 and 5. For economic outcomes, the effect of LBW is always negative and is significant for four of the six specifications. Moreover, the interaction of LBW and log of neighborhood income is positive and significant for each specification.



**TABLE 6.** Proportion of specifications with significant coefficients

	Log of income		Educational attainment		College attendance		BMI	
	$p < 0.05$	$p < 0.01$	$p < 0.05$	$p < 0.01$	$p < 0.05$	$p < 0.01$	$p < 0.05$	$p < 0.01$
Low birth weight	17/32	2/32	9/32	0/32	12/32	1/32	3/32	0/32
Log of neighborhood income $\times$ LBW	16/16	5/16	16/16	0/16	16/16	2/16	0/16	0/16
Mother's education $\times$ LBW	0/16	0/16	0/16	0/16	0/16	0/16	1/16	0/16
Father's education $\times$ LBW	0/16	0/16	0/16	0/16	0/16	0/16	0/16	0/16
Log of family income $\times$ LBW	0/16	0/16	0/16	0/16	0/16	0/16	0/16	0/16
Number of children $\times$ LBW	0/16	0/16	0/16	0/16	0/16	0/16	0/16	0/16

Note: This table summarizes the results of repeating the analyses in Tables 3 and 4 for every possible subset of the interactions between LBW and the five measures of SES.

**TABLE 7.** The effect of low birth weight on adult outcomes

	Nontruncated sample			Adoptees entering Holt before age one				
	Log of income [1]	Educational attainment [2]	College attendance [3]	BMI [4]	Log of income [5]	Educational attainment [6]	College attendance [7]	BMI [8]
Low birth weight	-2.366 <sup>b</sup> (1.157)	-5.455 <sup>c</sup> (3.012)	-1.446 <sup>c</sup> (0.760)	5.971 (6.644)	-2.035 <sup>c</sup> (1.223)	-3.038 (3.174)	-0.910 (0.813)	6.809 (7.137)
Log of neighborhood income × LBW	0.918 <sup>a</sup> (0.305)	2.505 <sup>b</sup> (1.042)	0.574 <sup>b</sup> (0.225)	1.098 (1.624)	0.857 <sup>a</sup> (0.327)	2.101 <sup>c</sup> (1.154)	0.492 <sup>b</sup> (0.249)	0.755 (1.794)
Mother's education × LBW	-0.014 (0.033)	-0.026 (0.124)	-0.003 (0.027)	-0.338 <sup>c</sup> (0.183)	-0.022 (0.037)	-0.012 (0.129)	-0.001 (0.029)	-0.180 (0.189)
Father's education × LBW	-0.027 (0.031)	-0.018 (0.125)	0.001 (0.028)	-0.059 (0.190)	-0.019 (0.0347)	-0.063 (0.126)	-0.003 (0.029)	-0.132 (0.197)
Log of family income × LBW	0.054 (0.126)	-0.482 (0.428)	-0.048 (0.100)	-0.457 (0.809)	0.011 (0.148)	-0.788 <sup>c</sup> (0.458)	-0.133 (0.105)	-0.637 (0.918)
Number of children × LBW	-0.019 (0.066)	-0.069 (0.149)	-0.050 (0.034)	-0.344 (0.379)	-0.028 (0.072)	-0.019 (0.148)	-0.051 (0.036)	-0.574 (0.406)
Marginal effect of LBW	-0.172 <sup>b</sup> (0.086)	-0.446 <sup>c</sup> (0.260)	-0.085 (0.060)	0.644 (0.488)	-0.183 <sup>c</sup> (0.095)	-0.531 <sup>b</sup> (0.263)	-0.094 (0.062)	0.409 (0.511)
Observations	856	877	877	995	572	585	585	673
R <sup>2</sup>	0.061	0.030	0.022	0.058	0.046	0.031	0.033	0.082

Notes: For log of income, educational attainment, and college attendance outcomes the sample is restricted to adoptees over the age of 25. The nontruncated sample includes all adoptees regardless of initial weight and treats those with an initial weight greater than 2.5 kg as normal birth weight. In columns 5–8, uses the full sample but restricts analysis to adoptees that arrived at Holt by age one. Robust standard errors clustered at the family level. Each regression controls for log of family's zip code income, mother's education, father's education, and gender. Each regression also includes a set of dummy variables for parent's income category, the child's age, and the number of children within the family. Letters <sup>a</sup>, <sup>b</sup>, and <sup>c</sup> denote statistical significance at the 0.01, 0.05, and 0.10 levels, respectively.

The interaction of LBW and the other four measures of SES appears 32 times in Table 7, but only two of those coefficients are significant at the 10 percent level.

## V. Conclusion

Does socioeconomic status mitigate the negative effects of low birth weight? The answer appears to depend on how socioeconomic status is measured. Currie and Hyson (1999) measure SES with father's occupation and find little evidence that SES mitigates the effects of LBW. Currie and Moretti (2007), on the other hand, measure SES as the poverty rate within a zip code and find that SES does mitigate the effects of LBW. Of the five measures considered, only the interaction of median zip code income with LBW is positive and statistically significant. This result cannot be explained by genetics, prenatal health care, or neonatal health care being correlated with family environment because adoptees were quasi-randomly assigned to families.

This analysis raises the question of why neighborhood income matters more than other family characteristics. One possibility is schooling. Schools in high-income neighborhoods might offer better remedial programs to help struggling students. Another possibility is that neighborhood characteristics are a better proxy for individual wealth than individual income or education. It could also be that high-income neighborhoods have access to better health care during the adoptee's childhood. These explanations are neither mutually exclusive nor jointly exhaustive, but two aspects of our data set prevent us from addressing these mechanisms. First, detailed neighborhood-level school quality, wealth, and health-care data are not available for the 1964 to 1985 time period (the years in which these orphans were adopted). Second, although children were randomly assigned to families, families were not randomly assigned to neighborhoods. Therefore, families sorting into neighborhoods along unobservable dimensions could drive this result. However, this sorting must be independent of birth weight, genetics, and prenatal environment. Why neighborhood income mitigates the negative effects of LBW remains an open question for future research.

Although the unique nature of the Holt Institution ensures that genetics and in utero environment are orthogonal to SES, it also raises the concern of whether these results are externally valid to the general nonadopted population. The set of families eligible to adopt from Holt are not fully representative of families with young children in the United States. Adoptive families must have had an income of at least 125 percent of the federal poverty line, must be married, and must be between the ages of 25 and 45. Any policy attempting to mitigate the negative effects of LBW for nonadoptees would likely affect poorer and younger families as well as single mothers. For these reasons, applying these results to the general population should be viewed with caution.

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