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A Review of Cohn's "Mortality on Immigrant Voyages to New York, 1836-1853"

Raymond L. Cohn, "Mortality on Immigrant Voyages to New York, 1836-1853," *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 44, No. 2, The Tasks of Economic History (Jun., 1984), pp. 289-300. ✓

1) Identify the question the article is attempting to answer.

In his article "Mortality on Immigrant Voyages to New York" Cohn attempts to answer ^{about} questions ~~on~~ the rate of mortality amongst immigrants entering the United States between the years of 1836 and 1853. The mortality data was then measured against port of origin, sex, season of arrival, crowding, nationality of the immigrant, and year of arrival. These statistics are then compared to the statistics on the mortality rates of slaves voyaging across the Atlantic during that same time period.

2) Explain how the author tries to answer the question.

The primary source for the information gathered within this article comes from a collection of reported and recorded captain's logs for 1077 ships that sailed between 1836 and 1853 and accounted for the passage of 276,000 immigrants. The records of these logs are stored on microfilm at the National Archives. The data was adjusted by eliminating logs that appeared to have skewed data on the number of deaths or where deaths were not reported. In order for data to be considered in the analysis it must have contained at least one marked death in the captain's log, or to have clearly stated that there were no deaths during the voyage. Additionally, only

ships from the time period that carried 25 or more passengers were included.

3) Explain the article's conclusion and relevance.

Immigrants to New York on average had voyage mortality rates of 1.36 percent, whereas slaves at the same time experienced mortality rates of upwards of 5 percent ~~on their respective voyages~~. When these statistics are adjusted to account for monthly death rates, slaves maintain upwards of three times the mortality rate of immigrants. The peak year for immigrant mortality rates was 1849 and coincided with an outbreak of cholera in Europe, which then spread to the US. However, the years between 1845 and 1849 showed the highest mortality rates of any of the years examined, which may or may not have been a reflection of the Irish Potato Famine, whose effects reached beyond Ireland into the European continent.

The port at Rotterdam produced mortality rates that were higher than average. The ports at Bristol, Hamburg, and Le Havre all produced mortality rates that were significantly lower than average. The reason for the atypical averages at both Rotterdam and Le Havre remained unknown at the time of this article's publication, however the success of Bristol was attributed to lower mortality rates in the city as a whole, which reflected the city's above average sanitation standards. Additionally, the success of the Hamburg port was attributed to the port having strict regulations on who could and could not board their ships for emigration, and those standards seemed to reflect favorably on the longevity of the ships passengers.

On average, female mortality rates were higher than those of males on immigrant ships, which is hypothesized to be a reflection of the age of many emigrating females at the time of their voyage. This anomaly contradicts the standard on slave ships at the time, on which mortality rates were higher for males rather than females. This difference is hypothesized by the author to be a reflection of the average age of a female slave in comparison to the average age of a female

immigrant.

Finally, the percentage of death rates for ships arriving between the months of November and February are significantly than the rates for arrivals at any other point within the year. This is assumed to be a reflection of the harsh sailing conditions of the Atlantic at that time of the year and the climate this exposed passengers to when making the voyage.

All of this information is marked as economically significant for a number of reasons. The significance of the years between 1845 and 1849, which were marked by disease and the fallout of the Irish Potato Famine serve as a reflection on global labor markets at that time. Europe saw a loss to its labor markets due to disease and a loss of human capital, whereas the United States, while it experienced a boom in human capital, suffered from the outbreak of foreign disease amongst its domestic workforce.

The success of various port cities can be attributed to government and private intervention into the standard of living and how certain mandates on both sanitation and the qualifications necessary to emigrate rippled throughout the community and extended life expectancy both on foreign and domestic soil.

4) Personal criticisms of the paper.

While the claims established within this article all seem reasonable, the quality of the data analyzed should be critically reexamined. The author openly admits within the article that the tracking of mortality rates by ship captains was notoriously dubious and many records exist to indicate points where ship captains were fined for not reporting data accurately. The author mentions that ^{it} was not uncommon for three various sets of mortality data to arise, one from the numbers the captain reported to the boarding officer, one from the numbers the captain reports to the doctor upon arrival, and one from the numbers the passengers aboard the ship report having

witnessed. That said, which of these three numbers the author chooses to report upon and thus privilege as correct is controversial in my eyes.

Additionally, it is never clearly stated within the article whether the comparison being made to slave ships of the time period is being drawn primarily from slave ships that are entering New York or from slave ships as a whole. This creates confusion in my mind about the relevancy of the data comparison.

Also, the article admits that significant numbers of immigrants often died from sicknesses they contracted during the voyage, but only died once they had arrived. These cases are not counted as voyage-generated deaths, but I believe they could be. If one is going to directly compare the rates of mortality against those of slaves the factor of the length of the voyage needs to be considered. It is highly possible that a slave might contract a disease and die while still aboard the ship due to their longer voyage, where an immigrant might contract that same diseases and only die once they had already arrived due to the shorter length of the voyage.

5) Suggestions for making the paper better.

The issues with the data collection of the article are difficult to suggest improvements for, as the author did attempt to take a number of measures to guard against the inaccuracy of the captains' logs. My suggestion here would be to cross-examine the records cited with the numbers offered to the doctors as well as the numbers offered by passengers to hypothesize a more accurate mortality rate estimate. Also, to improve the relevancy of the information provided on slave mortality rates at the time, it would be more beneficial to have data on, and only on, slaves that were sailing into New York.

very well written
and clear. Good job

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