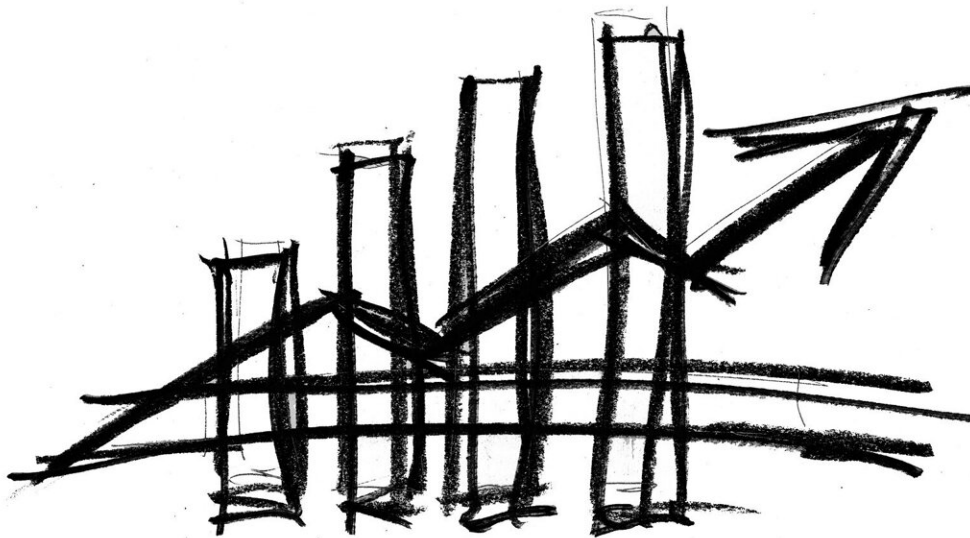


Is economic growth good for our health?

January 16 2024, by Andrew C. Patterson



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Is [economic growth](#) good for us? Put another way, we know that growing the economy is good for business and for creating jobs. But does it help everyone in society? One way to answer this question is to explore what it does for population health.

Our [health](#) is one of the most important aspects of our lives, considering how it affects our everyday comfort and ability to survive. Given how wealth contributes to health [on the personal, individual level](#), the case for economic growth might seem intuitive.

However the picture gets murkier when looking at income per capita, where people both rich and poor depend upon a fluctuating economy.

There are also problems of interpretation. Most financial advice includes the disclaimer that the past does not predict the future. The [same may be true](#) of the relationship between growth and population health.

Economics and life expectancy

There is a reliable [historical correlation](#) between economic prosperity and trends in [life expectancy](#), which is enough for many scholars to suggest that growth is generally a good thing. However, this is not to say that we can expect continued improvements in health whenever we see economic growth.

[As I argue in a recent paper](#), a lot of this has to do with how governments understand growth: its purpose, how to get it, what to do with it once it happens.

As a political sociologist and epidemiologist, I understand health as a fundamentally political problem. I am not alone in this; scholars have connected politics to population health [since ancient times](#). Nor is this an outmoded idea. Far from it. As of the time of this writing, after searching for the terms "politics" and "health" it seems Google has stopped counting at 2 billion hits.

Politics and economics

Economic growth is also a political subject—the inevitable talking point for candidates on the campaign trail. The problem is that too many scholars have come forward with concerns that growth can be *bad* for our health.

A [classic sociological study published in 1897](#) found that [suicide rates](#) spike after sudden improvements in a society's economic prosperity. [Similar observations](#) come a century later, linking growth with an increase in poor health outcomes. There is also evidence that economic growth [harms public health](#) when governments do not plan for it carefully.

And then there is the story as economists tell it. A prevailing economic theory has supported [tax cuts, trimming budgets, deregulation and other business-friendly policies](#), but more and more economists are [recognizing that these tactics](#) can harm societies and [even pose obstacles to growth](#).

How, then, can these misgivings be harmonized with the long-term historical trends, which show a very strong correlation between economic growth and increasing life expectancy? This was the question I set out to answer in my recent research.

The answer to whether or not economic growth improves [population health](#) seems to be, "It depends." More precisely, it's a qualified yes: Economic growth promotes health in some respects, for some countries, and only in conjunction with other life-saving priorities.

Priorities and population health

Arguably, many growing societies happen to be the same ones that [invested in education](#) and other beneficial infrastructures, which explains the correlation with health.

By the same token we cannot expect better health to come from [economic growth](#) if the pursuit of growth ends up [increasing income inequality](#). Nor can we expect better health after slashing budgets allocated to key priorities such as education or [health care](#).

Greece, for example, learned a hard lesson about austerity when its cuts to health-care programs for drug users resulted in a [steep increase in HIV infections](#).

And then there is the issue of how health is defined. When looking beyond life expectancy, other patterns emerge.

Medical research has found that economic development worsens cancer rates for example. [One recent study](#) links [economic prosperity](#) to higher incidence of most major cancer types. The authors suspect this may be an issue of industrialization, and they have a point. The rise of modern industry came with the innovation of [innumerable toxic substances](#), many of which are suspected carcinogens.

A better way to grow

Such findings prompt the question of whether there is a better way to grow. For many researchers, the answer is obvious and the case for it clear: Yes. Absolutely.

The takeaway here would seem to be that growth *can* be good for health. However, it should by design benefit the ordinary citizens it presumes to serve. I and other researchers (including prominent economists like [Amartya Sen](#)) agree that systems for education, health care and welfare, which support the everyday Jane, are the very [engines of growth](#). This is because they enhance workforce capability and local purchasing power. They also promote health.

Investing in the systems that support populations—their earnings capability, their quality of life—appear to result in both growth and health. However, neglecting these priorities may well result in neither outcome.

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