

## Ethnic differences in birth outcomes in England

There is an increasingly large literature showing that longer gestation and higher birthweight are positively associated with cognitive and non cognitive abilities later in life, so understanding sources of ethnic differences in these outcomes and identifying factors that may influence birth outcomes has a lot of potential policy interest. A new paper published today (8 March 2006) in *Fiscal Studies*, studies the differences in birth outcomes between different ethnic groups<sup>1</sup>.

The authors, researchers at the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Institute of Education, look at the effect of maternal behaviour before birth, such as smoking behaviour, drinking behaviour, pre-pregnancy body mass index and weight, attending antenatal classes and working during pregnancy. They also look at the effect of other sets of characteristics that cannot easily be altered by policy, such as family characteristics, longer-term socio-economic background factors and characteristics such as parental height and the mother's long-term health conditions.

The paper shows that, even after controlling for background characteristics in a number of ways, there still remain unexplained differences in both gestation and birthweight outcomes across broad ethnic groups. In particular, after controlling for socio-economic factors and the behaviour of the parents, the authors find that:

- Asian babies are around 6 percentage points more likely to be of low birthweight than White babies;
- Black babies are around 5 percentage points more likely to be of low birthweight than White babies

The following factors have a *positive* impact on children's birthweight and *negative* impact on incidence of low-weight babies:

- Mother and father's height and good long term health condition of the mother
- Mother not smoking before and during pregnancy
- Mother not being underweight or obese
- Not having a multiple birth
- Qualifications of father and mother
- Mother being young

The results also suggest that there may be potential policy levers that could be used to narrow the ethnic gap in birth outcomes, such as reducing the proportion of underweight Asian mothers and over-weight Black mothers and increasing ethnic minority attendance at ante-natal classes, which increases length of gestation and, through this channel, birthweight.

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### Notes to editors

1. The study uses data on a cohort of children born in England in 2000 and 2001.
2. The paper, *Ethnic differences in birth outcomes in England*, by Lorraine Dearden, Alice Mesnard and Jonathan Shaw, is published in *Fiscal Studies*, vol. 27, no. 1, pp. 17–46.
3. Lorraine Dearden is Director of the *Centre for Early Years and Education Research* at IFS and Professor of Economics and Social Statistics at the Institute of Education, University of London. Alice Mesnard is a Senior Research Economist and Jonathan Shaw a Research Economist at IFS.