

Infant and young adult mortality in London's West End, 1750-1824

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McNeill proposed that, during the process of endemicisation of many infectious diseases, migrants from rural areas were at higher risk than their native-born urban peers, due to lower exposure to these diseases in early life. Alternatively, migrants may have constituted a 'selected' subpopulation of healthy, low risk individuals. Migrants are difficult to identify in historical sources, but the sextons' books of St Martin in the Fields offer some insight. The St Martin's population was characterised by an excess of young adults and a high ratio of females to males, typical of labour migration dominated by service. By the early nineteenth century the age pattern of mortality in St Martin's was quite different from that of the national population, with little evidence of any 'trauma hump' of young adult mortality, and no female disadvantage. Evidence from burials indicates that this pattern also existed in the late eighteenth century. The burial data include cause and cost of burial, and these can be used to infer differences in disease rates between migrants and native-born adults. Taken together the evidence supports the 'healthy worker' hypothesis, and suggests that adult migrants were not more susceptible to diseases such as smallpox. In contrast to young adult mortality, infant mortality was extremely high and showed no secular decline before 1800. In line with national trends, endogenous infant mortality declined while exogenous mortality rose. However maternal mortality remained constant, suggesting that improvements in endogenous mortality were not a consequence of improvements in young adult health.