



Cornell University
Graduate School

Cornell University Three Minute Thesis (3MT) Competition

Cassandra Benson, Economics: “Born on the Wrong Day?”

[Clock Ticking]

>> Narrator: Cornell University 2019 Three Minute Thesis finalist. Cassandra Benson, Economics: “Born on the Wrong Day?”

>> Benson: Have you ever wondered if your life would have turned out differently had you been born one day earlier or one day later? Presumably your life would have been the same had you been born on either of these days, but for kids born around a school entry eligibility cutoff date, that assumption can be false. These kids can experience vastly different outcomes. I use school entry cutoff dates to examine how special education affects the likelihood that an individual receives disability payments between the ages of 5 and 12. There are currently 1.3 million children on the federal disability roll known as supplemental security income. These children come from extremely disadvantaged backgrounds. The average family income for a child on disability is \$18,000 a year. SSI is actually the most generous cash transfer program in the U.S. With an average monthly benefit of \$662, it far outpaces traditional welfare or food stamps. Despite the generosity of this program, about 45 percent of eligible families are not on the program. The main reason cited for incomplete take up is that the cost to apply is prohibitive. To apply for disability, a child needs a documented medical, mental, or physical impairment, and this often means going to a medical doctor for a diagnosis. After a 1990 Supreme Court decision, disability judges began using school and teacher reports as documentation of a child's impairment. To examine how special education affects the likelihood that an individual has an award for disability, I needed some mechanism that would assign some children to special education and some children to regular education. Here enter these school cutoff dates. Most states adhere to a minimum age of enrollment into kindergarten. The law will typically read that any child who has obtained the age of 5 on or before September 1st is eligible to enter within that year. This means that a child who was born on August 31st enters school at age 5 as the youngest in their classroom, whereas their peer, who was born merely a day later on September 2nd, or two days later, waits a full year before entering as the oldest in their classroom. Using all individuals from the state of North Carolina public school system, I show that the individuals who are born directly before a school cutoff date, the youngest, are 30 percent more likely to receive special education services relative to their peer born the month after the cutoff date. I then go to a national household survey which has been linked to Social Security Administration records. I show that the kids who are born one day before school entry cutoff date are 30 percent more likely to apply and 60 percent more likely to have an award for disability relative to their peer who is born one day later. Remember that the only difference between these two kids is that one entered as the

youngest and one entered as the oldest in their classroom. Overall, my estimate suggests that receiving special education induces a 16 percentage point increase in the likelihood of having an award for disability. Thank you for your time.

[Applause]