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**Findings from the Puerto Rican Maternal and Infant Health Study
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Statement of the Problem

The maternal and infant health outcomes among ethnic groups in the United States need improvement. Some ethnic groups have a greater risk of negative health outcomes, such as low birthweight and infant mortality, than the general population. In addition, there is considerable evidence that infants born in areas of the U.S. mainland in which Puerto Ricans are concentrated (e.g., New York City) have poorer health outcomes than those born in areas less densely populated by Puerto Ricans.

The Puerto Rican Maternal and Infant Health Study investigated the causes of low birthweight and mortality among two groups of Puerto Rican infants: (1) infants who live on the U.S. mainland and (2) infants who live in Puerto Rico. A study of maternal and infant health was conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics, but Puerto Rican mothers and infants were not included.

Research Objectives

Both descriptive and analytic research objectives were pursued. The descriptive objective was to identify the major barriers to prenatal care and to determine the prevalence of prenatal care utilization. The analytic objective was to determine the extent to which barriers to prenatal care and prenatal care utilization arise from the complex circumstances that surround pregnancy. Special attention was paid to migration, capital accumulation, lifestyles, medical risks, and pregnancy desirability.

Study Design and Methods

A survey was developed and administered to Puerto Rican mothers on the U.S. mainland and in Puerto Rico to gather information on pregnancy, childbirth, infant health, and infant mortality. The study design incorporated a number of important features that facilitated significant advances in research on the health of Puerto Rican infants: (1) oversampling of low-birthweight infants and infant deaths to ensure adequate variability in these outcomes; (2) collection of data on a wide range of predictors hypothesized to influence the health of Puerto Rican infants; (3) use of in-person interviews to obtain data; and (4) coverage of a broad geographic area to produce a representative sample of Puerto Rican infants born on the U.S. mainland and in Puerto Rico. The data from this study represent a significant improvement over data from previous studies.

Findings

Using pooled origin/destination data, the authors examined the effects on infant mortality of maternal migration from Puerto Rico to the U.S. mainland. Results indicate that barriers to prenatal care and prenatal care utilization cannot be accounted for entirely by financial problems or problems associated with migration. Rather, results indicate that the social and psychological circumstances surrounding pregnancy (e.g., pregnancy desirability) are also barriers.

An analysis restricted to the U.S. mainland shows that infants of migrant Puerto Rican women have a lower risk of mortality than infants of mainland-born Puerto Rican women. A critical question is whether this pattern indicates that the increased exposure to U.S. culture of mainland-born women undermines infant health or whether the pattern indicates the selective migration of healthier or more economically advantaged women to the mainland. Study findings show that the women's duration of mainland residency is positively related to mortality among infants of migrants, suggesting that a process of negative assimilation is occurring. However, an analysis that included Puerto Rico demonstrates the importance of selective migration in explaining the U.S. mainland pattern: Infant mortality is substantially lower among recent migrants to the mainland than among nonmigrant women in Puerto Rico. The influence of socioeconomic status, cultural orientation, health habits, and prenatal care utilization on infant mortality was also assessed.

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This web site is a collaborative effort of the MCHB Research Program, the National Center for Education in Maternal and Child Health (NCEMCH) at Georgetown University and the Center for the Advancement of Distance Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

