Cigarette Smoking and the Hispanic Paradox: the Role of Socioeconomic Status

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**Background**

Individuals of Hispanic origin in the United States enjoy lower mortality and higher life expectancy on average than non-Hispanic whites, despite lower socioeconomic status. The so-called Hispanic Paradox long failed to generate a convincing explanation. Recent evidence suggests, however, that smoking may be key. Hispanics and non-Hispanic whites also differ in the relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and both mortality and smoking; the gradients are much weaker among Hispanics.

**Objectives**

1) Estimate the contribution of smoking to the adult life expectancy advantage of Mexican Americans and other Hispanics.

2) Identify differences in the size of the advantage and contribution of smoking by education

**Data and Methods**

Data are from the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) between 1987 and 2004. The sample contains 281,567 individuals aged 35 or higher and 57,467 deaths. Group-specific death rates are predicted using hazard regression. Smoking-attributable mortality (A) is estimated by comparing observed death rates (M_{nx}) to rates among those who have never smoked (M_{nx}^*)

\[ A = \frac{M_{nx} - M_{nx}^*}{M_{nx}} \]

**Percent of deaths due to smoking (ages 35+)**

- Non-Hispanic whites have the highest mortality related to smoking and Mexican-Americans the lowest.
- The relative ordering of groups is the same for men and women.

**Contribution of smoking by Years of Education**

- Smoking aggravates 54% of the advantage for Mexican American women and all of the advantage for men.
- The advantage would be cut by half for other Hispanic women and 40% for men.

**Conclusions**

1) Smoking-related mortality is a major factor explaining the excess mortality of whites compared to Mexican-Americans and all other Hispanics.

2) The Hispanic life expectancy advantage and contribution of smoking are generally larger at lower levels of education.

3) Education differences may reflect assimilation patterns: as immigrants remain in the US longer, their smoking behavior becomes more similar to that of whites and they experience increases in education.

**Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to Laura Blue, Douglas Ewbank, Irene Elio, and Joseph Preston for helpful advice. This research was supported by NIH grant 1F31 AG029188-01. References.