

Why Do Immigrants Lose Their Health Advantage?

An Intergenerational Analysis

PRELIMINARY AND INCOMPLETE DRAFT

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Abstract

Previous studies show that immigrants have initially better health outcomes than natives, but they lose this health advantage over time (Hispanic Health Paradox). However, the mechanism underlying this convergence and the intergenerational transmission of health among immigrants is less clear. This paper uses a unique dataset of linked birth records from Florida (1975-2009) to analyze birth outcomes of second and third generation immigrants in US. The paper discusses the possible factors underlying the observed downward assimilation in birth outcomes. While the initial positive selection on health characteristics at the time of migration and the subsequent regression toward the mean are likely to be important factors behind the paradox, I provide evidence that the adoption of less healthy behaviors among second generation immigrants can account for at least part of the birth outcomes deterioration. In particular using within sibling variation in inter-marriage as a metric of acculturation and controlling for birth outcomes of previous generation, I show that second-generation siblings who inter-married are 10% more likely to give birth to low-birth weight children than their siblings who married within their own ethnic group. This result partially reflects differences in risky behaviors during pregnancy (alcohol, tobacco consumption, inadequate or excessive weight gain) and mother's health (pre-eclampsia, diabetes, obesity) that are known to affect birth outcomes and are more present in the second-generation, particularly among women who are more likely to be culturally assimilated.

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