

In US, Hispanics outlive whites, blacks by years

October 13 2010, By MIKE STOBBE , AP Medical Writer

(AP) -- U.S. Hispanics can expect to outlive whites by more than two years and blacks by more than seven, government researchers say in a startling report that is the first to calculate Hispanic life expectancy in this country.

The report released Wednesday is the strongest evidence yet of what some experts call the "Hispanic paradox" - longevity for a population with a large share of poor, undereducated members. A leading theory is that Hispanics who manage to immigrate to the U.S. are among the healthiest from their countries.

A Hispanic born in 2006 could expect to live about 80 years and seven months, the government estimates. Life expectancy for a white is about 78, and for a black, just shy of 73 years.

Researchers have seen signs of Hispanic longevity for years. But until recently, the government didn't calculate life expectancy for Hispanics as a separate group; they were included among the black and white populations. The new report projecting future life spans is based on death certificates from years earlier.

By breaking out the longer-living Hispanics, the life expectancies for non-Hispanic whites and blacks both declined slightly, said the report's author, Elizabeth Arias of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Hispanics are the largest, fastest growing minority in the United States, accounting for 15 percent of the population.

An estimated 40 percent of them are immigrants, who in some cases arrived after arduous journeys to do taxing manual labor. It takes a fit person to accomplish that, suggesting that the United States is gaining some of the healthiest people born in Mexico and other countries, said Dr. Peter Muennig of Columbia University's school of public health who has studied life expectancy in different countries.

Compared to the estimate for all U.S. Hispanics, life expectancy is nearly two years lower in Puerto Rico, more than two years lower in Cuba, and more than four years lower in Mexico, according to World Health Organization figures.

However, experts say that immigrant hardiness diminishes within a couple of generations of living here. Many believe it's because the children of immigrants take up smoking, fast-food diets and other habits blamed for wrecking the health of other ethnic populations.

"The American lifestyle is very sedentary. That's not a good thing," said Jane Delgado, president of the National Alliance for Hispanic Health, which focuses on improving health services for Hispanics.

Health researchers have seen a strong link between poverty, lack of education and life-shortening health problems. Hispanics are disadvantaged in those areas: About 19 percent of Hispanics live at or below the federal poverty level - three times more than whites. As for education, fewer than 13 percent of Hispanics have a college degree, compared to 17 percent of blacks and 30 percent of whites.

Indeed, past CDC studies have shown that Hispanics suffer some diseases at higher rates than whites, including diabetes and heart disease.

But their death rates from those diseases were lower, not higher.

As early as 1986, some researchers had been reporting what appeared to be lower death rates among Hispanics compared to other groups in some parts of the country. But a national estimate was difficult.

Calculating life expectancy is a tough task that requires analyzing extensive information about how people died and how old they were, as well as statistical modeling to predict how long people born today will live if current trends continue.

Until fairly recently, there was significant uncertainty about the accuracy of death records for Hispanics. Most health records only had data on blacks and whites. U.S. death certificates didn't provide for a way to identify someone as Hispanic until 1989.

Arias' new report suggests that the life expectancy for non-Hispanic blacks and whites is lower by a couple of months than was previously estimated. Specifically, life expectancy for whites born in 2006 is now 78 years and 1 month and for black, 72 years and 11 months.

There are limitations to the report. It could not completely account for all Hispanics who move back to their countries of origin to die. It did not include people in nursing homes, prisons and mental hospitals. Also, the report is based on deaths that occurred from 1990 to 1998, a time when some states were still upgrading their death certificates to include Hispanic information.

Even so, "CDC is the ultimate authority on life expectancy" in the United States, said Muennig, the Columbia expert.

Delgado, of the Hispanic Alliance, said one thing the report should do is erase any lingering belief that whites are the longest-living group of

Americans.

More information: CDC report: <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs>

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