

Mexican Americans confront high disability rates in later life

March 26 2015

Life expectancy for Hispanics in the U.S. currently outpaces other ethnic groups, yet a new study finds that Mexican Americans—especially women who were born in Mexico—are spending a high proportion of their later years with some form of disability, a fact that suggests a growing need for community assistance and long-term care in the future.

These findings are reported in a new article published online in *The Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological and Social Sciences* titled "[Longer Lives, Sicker Lives? Increased Longevity and Extended Disability Among Mexican Origin Elders.](#)" The authors are Ronald J. Angel, PhD, and Jacqueline L. Angel, PhD, at the University of Texas at Austin, and Terrence D. Hill, PhD, at the University of Arizona.

This is the first study to document the fraction of time the Mexican-American population over 65 years old will spend with significant physical disability prior to death. Employing a unique longitudinal data set that followed older Mexican Americans for 18 years, the researchers estimate that those who reach age 65 spend over one-half of their remaining years, on average, with serious physical impairments.

"The fact that Mexican Americans have an average [life expectancy](#) of 81.4 years indicates significant progress against the chronic diseases of aging, although longer life is not an unmixed blessing," said Jacqueline L. Angel. "Unfortunately we have not compressed morbidity as much as we would have liked and many older Mexican Americans need extensive care, either from their families or others. Such a burden has serious

implications for Mexican-American families and for long-term care policy."

The data used in this study come from the Hispanic Established Populations for Epidemiologic Studies of the Elderly and are based on changes in objective performance-oriented mobility assessments (POMA) in a cohort of several thousand Mexican-origin elders who were interviewed multiple times between 1993 and 2011. The POMA instrument is widely used in clinical settings to provide an objective evaluation of physical performance abilities such as balance, the ability to stand and to walk, the ability to get out of a chair, and grip strength. Respondents with less education and lower financial stability were more likely to experience functional decline than those with higher levels of education and financial stability. In addition, the data reveal that older women who were born in Mexico suffered longer periods of disability.

This research was supported by the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities and the National Institute on Aging.

"These findings reveal that poverty and lifelong disadvantages seriously undermine the health of many older Mexican Americans," concluded Jacqueline L. Angel. "Our data also show though that the family steps in to provide care to even seriously impaired older parents, we must develop policies and programs that complement the family in their ability to provide care to older infirm parents in order to improve the quality of life of both the older parents and their caregivers."

Provided by The Gerontological Society of America

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