

Does Lighter mean Healthier? Skin color and health status among Mexican immigrants

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Abstract:

A vast amount of research reveals a negative association between dark skin tone and individual's life chances (Keith & Herring, 1991; Klonoff & Landrine, 2000). Structural racism, at the macro level, and racial discrimination, at the individual level, are the main drivers suggested by the literature explaining this association. In terms of health outcomes, darker skin shades have been associated with worst outcomes among U.S. born Americans, and among lawful immigrants and permanent residents in the United States (Williams et al. 2003; Borell et al. 2006; Han 2020; Painter and Tabler 2022). Yet, there are no studies investigating this association among undocumented individuals, which account to 25% of the immigrant population in the United States (about 11 million). In this paper, we contribute to the literature by examining the association between skin tone and physical and mental health among a recent cohort of Mexican migrants that moved to the United States after 2002. We use data from the Mexican Family Life Survey (the MxFLS), which is a novel panel dataset that has followed respondents even if they moved to the United States. In 2002, when the MxFLS baseline was conducted all respondents (N=35,000) were residing in Mexico. In 2005, and in 2010, when the second and third waves were conducted, respectively, about 10% of the sample moved to the United States. Using the MxFLS for this investigation offers unique advantages to study the association between health and skin tone. First, about 80% of the MxFLS sample consisted of undocumented immigrants, a population that has not been previously examined. Second, the MxFLS collected information about the skin color of the respondents using a skin color palette. Interviewers would choose the skin color of the respondent based on this skin color palette. Third, the MxFLS included a wide array of health information (i.e., mental health, and subjective measures of health) that was collected every wave. This is a clear advantage over other surveys given that having pre-migration information about the health status of immigrants allows controlling for potential biases caused by health selection of migrants. Fourth, the MxFLS collected information about the context of reception of migrants. Finally, it included socio-demographic information that may influence the association between health and skin tone. This paper will contribute to the literature investigating how the existence of racial and color hierarchies shapes life chances among immigrants, in particular those undocumented.