

Latina mothers poor in wealth, rich in health

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If you believed the experts, it would seem that Ana Bermudez shouldn't have given birth to a healthy baby boy two years ago.

In Mexicali, Mexico, where Ana grew up, she had dropped out in junior high to work and help her family. In Santa Ana, Calif., where she and her husband, Gerardo, moved four years ago, they scraped by on his carpenter's salary and squeezed into a tiny bedroom they rented inside a tiny clapboard home.

With no health insurance and little access to health care, their firstborn, Gerardo Jr., might have been at risk of being born with a low birth weight, or not even born at all, but he wasn't. Ana fits the profile of most Latinas, according to data pulled from the master birth file of the National Center for Health Statistics by David Hayes-Bautista, a doctor who has found that generally Latinas have less education, low access to health care and are low-income compared with non-Hispanic white, black and Asian counterparts.

Yet today, Gerardo Jr. is anything but weak or unhealthy.

This anomaly is playing out across the nation, with Latina mothers giving birth to few low-birth-weight babies (6.28%, compared with 6.34% for non-Hispanic whites and 13.01% for blacks) and experiencing low infant mortality at 7.6 deaths per 1,000 live births, less than half that of blacks (17.1%) and slightly more than non-Hispanic whites (7.4%), according to Hayes-Bautista.

Like his 4-month-old sister, Paloma, Gerardo Jr. was born weighing a healthy 7 pounds. Neither gave 25-year-old Ana any complications.

What explains this poor-in-wealth, rich-in-health mystery? That's exactly what Hayes-Bautista hopes to discover and what health experts have dubbed the "Latino epidemiological paradox."

His hunch is that Latino culture plays a major role.

"Clearly the outcome has to do with their behavior during the nine months of pregnancy. And diet, behavior, beliefs, family -- all these things are shaped by culture," says Hayes-Bautista, director of the Center for the Study of Latino Health and Culture at UCLA.

Knowledge about Latino health norms and behavior is relatively scarce, with little medical research to provide hard data, Hayes-Bautista says.

It's a major void, especially in states like California, where nearly half the children are Latino and half the births are to Latina mothers, he says.

Though income may seem an indicator of health, he speculates that environment and the meager pocketbooks of immigrant Latina mothers drive them away from unhealthy and expensive fast food and instead toward basic, affordable staples.

"My hunch is we're going to see better dietary habits in particular among the recently arrived Latina than in the U.S.-born Latina, who was raised watching fast-food commercials," Hayes-Bautista says.

Chicken soup, lentil soup, pea soup -- Ana ticks off the list of homemade soups her mother made her during her pregnancy with Gerardo Jr.

In Mexicali, though her family sometimes had enough money only for the basics, Ana grew up eating plenty of vegetables, beans and tortillas.

But food isn't the only secret to her healthy babies, she says.

"My mother coming here to stay with me during the pregnancy made all the difference in the world," says Ana, whose parents arrived during the first month of her pregnancy with Gerardo Jr. and stayed until one month after he was born.

It was her mother, Juanita Rojas, who first bathed Gerardo Jr. as a newborn, who massaged her daughter's legs during pregnancy, did the housework and made sure Ana ate home-cooked meals. When Juanita needed a break, Ana's mother-in-law or aunt stepped in, or she was helped by friends she met while taking prenatal courses at M.O.M.S. Resource Center, the Maternal Outreach Management System in Santa Ana.

It's what Sandra Guzman, author of "The Latina's Bible," describes as the *comadre* factor, a sense of sisterhood, or *comadrisimo*, that protects immigrant Latinas through a network of friends and family that take the time to help one another.

Aware of the benefits of these traditions, and just weeks away from giving birth to her second child in New York where she lives, Guzman said she's resurrecting customs like *la cuarentena*.

The Latino custom calls for a new mother to rest for 40 days and nights while her *comadres* help her care for her newborn. Guzman's return to her roots is something Hayes-Bautista hopes will be replicated not only by the new generation of U.S. Latinas but by all Americans.

"The question should not be 'Why are Latino children doing so well in spite of high risk factors?'" Hayes-Bautista writes in a recently released paper on the Latino paradox. "But instead, 'Why are non-Hispanic white children doing so poorly in spite of all their advantages?'"