

Background and Purpose

There are well-documented race disparities in birth outcomes in the U.S.: black mothers are two times more likely to have a low birth weight child than are white mothers. A number of social processes have been hypothesized to contribute to these disparities, including poverty, low levels of education, exposure to toxic environments, bad neighborhoods, poor working conditions, lack of access to health care, discrimination, and high levels of stress. Numerous studies have attempted to explain race disparities, by controlling for some of these risk factors, though few have been able to do so. An alternative approach to understanding race disparities in health is to examine geographic variations in disparities, taking advantage of the differing political, economic, and social contexts across areas. The South has a unique political and social history, especially with regard to race relations, which provides a useful context in which to explore race disparities in birth outcomes as compared with the rest of the nation.

Methods

This study is based on data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey–Birth Cohort (ECLS-B), a nationally representative study of over 10,000 children born in the U.S. in 2001. The current study is based on interviews with mothers when the infant was 9 months old (baseline), to which birth certificate data were appended. The sample was limited to approximately 8700 singleton births for whom the biological mother was the main respondent, and who were non-missing on birth weight, race/ethnicity, and state of residence at the birth.

First, black/white disparities in low birth weight in the South and the rest of the nation will be described. Second, using multivariate logistic regression, the extent to which socioeconomic

status (SES), demographic characteristics, maternal health, and health behaviors explain disparities in birth outcomes by race (black vs. white) within each region will be examined. Finally, the association between SES and birth outcomes for blacks and whites in the South and the rest of the nation will be compared.

Results

The black/white disparity in the South can be almost completely accounted for by differences in socioeconomic status between the groups; while the black/white disparity in the non-Southern states cannot be explained by any of the covariates considered here. Results also suggest that black mothers in the Southern states reap greater benefits from higher socioeconomic status than do black mothers in the non-South states; while the SES/low birth weight gradient for whites is similar across the two areas.

Conclusions and Implications

Despite the legacy of slavery and discrimination in the South, the unexplained portion of the race disparity is much smaller in this region than in the rest of the nation. If some of this unexplained disparity is related to stress and the health endangering consequences of discrimination, these results suggest that this effect may be smaller in these Southern states. More research is necessary to understand what factors contribute to the unexplained portion of the black/white disparity in low birth weight in the rest of the nation.