AUTISM IN CUBA:
THE TRAVELERS' PERSPECTIVE

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**AUTISM SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS**

CUBA IS DEVELOPING, COMMUNIST COUNTRY

- Many roads in poor condition
- Electric and plumbing infrastructure dated
  - Each person in our party sick one day with traveler's diarrhea
- Lodging is tight
  - Hotels pricey, scarce compared to demand (esp with increased US visitors)
  - Staying with families may be best, AirBNB, others (all hosts friendly/helpful)
- 'Funny' economy
  - Professionals, including doctors and autism teachers, are becoming taxi drivers and restaurant servers
- Two sets of currency
  - Our perception: Havana much safer than US cities

OUR CUBA TRAVEL

- Molly and her parents (Bennett, Betty Mitchell), Jessica (therapist from Garden Colorado)
- Molly, age 18
  - Full spectrum autism
  - Some speech, can difficult to be understood
  - Generally happy, laughs a lot
  - Doesn't like travel
- 12 days in February 2016
  - Havana
  - Vinales (rural, tobacco growing, national park; 2+ hrs by car from Havana)
  - Varadero (beach 1+ hour from Havana)

US CITIZENS AND CUBA TRAVEL

- Tourism not permitted; must have reason for travel from approved list, such as People-to-People, religious, research.
- As of March, People-to-People does NOT require a formal tour group
- Tours more expensive
- Tour harder if a traveler has autism
- People-to-People now allows independent travel for virtually everyone.
- Must go by charter flight (more expensive)
  - Hard to get info on chart times and costs
  - Difficult or impossible to go Denver to Havana without Miami overnight
  - Cruises from US as of May
  - Non-stop commercial US airlines by end of year (Denver non-stop to Havana)

TRAVELING WITH A TEEN WITH AUTISM IN CUBA

- Molly opened more doors than she closed
- Cubans universally friendly, accepting, helpful, such as...
  - Molly welcomed with complete acceptance first night dinner on rooftop of first AirBNB in Old Havana (first guest with autism).
  - Molly pulled to dance on stage. Back to audience, troupe adapted.
  - Taxi driver at Hemingway villa made sure that Molly did not pay.
DORA ALONZO, HAVANA’S ONLY AUTISM SCHOOL

• Unable to contact in advance, phone attempts failed, no email found
• Miguel (AirBNB host) unable to arrange official visit, including with Dept of Education
• Our unofficial visit
  • Location at former military base, now large educational campus with many different schools
  • Staff very receptive at gate
  • Welcomed sensory supplies

RESULTS

• n=27
• 11 male, 10 female, 1 couple (knew same person), 5 no data
• 8 young, 8 middle aged, 1 old, 8 no data
• 12 Havana, 7 Vinales, 8 Hicaco
• Occupations incl home hosts, park attendants, pedicab, taxi, store clerks, hotel workers, restaurant workers, hotel dancer, tobacco farmer, cowboy
• 11/27 yes, 41%
• 14/27 no, 52%
• 2/27 yes in USA, 7%
• Suggests the possibility that autism may be more prevalent than reported

AUTISM IN CUBA—PREVALENCE

• Reported rate 1:2500, US is 30x (!) more prevalent
• Implications for the vaccination theory of autism
  • Great public health system in Cuba, 99% vaccination rate
  • Could the true rate be higher, due to under detection or under reporting?

LIMITATIONS

• Convenience sample of Cubans who have some contact with foreigners, not random sample
• Some data missing (eg, gender, age)
• Small n
• Possible language barrier
  • Our Spanish not great
  • Could "autismo" be misunderstood?
  • One area of Cuba only
  • Can’t convert "knowing someone with autism" to prevalence

HOW COMMON IS AUTISM IN CUBA: OUR STUDY

Methods

• Asked Cubans who were with us longer to have some observation of Molly
• We said that Molly has autism (in Spanish)
• Asked this: “Usted conoce alguna familia que tenga un hijo con autismo?”
• Possible answers: Yes, Yes a Cuban in USA, No
• Did not ask when answer obvious, eg, the staff at Dora Alonzo school
• If two people knew the same person with autism, counted as one

FINAL THOUGHTS

• Tourism with autism to Cuba very possible and potentially very satisfying
• Collaboration with Dora Alonzo School would be welcomed
• Autism in Cuba may be more prevalent than reported
Questions?

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