



## Meeting the Needs of Latino Youth: Part I: Risk

**Risk factors** are characteristics statistically associated with an *increase* in health risk – in this case, violence. **Protective factors** are characteristics statistically associated with a *decrease* in the vulnerability to a health risk. Resilience is the ability of individuals to remain healthy even in the presence of risk factors. Prevention – for groups and individuals alike – is largely a matter of decreasing risks and increasing protective factors (that is, creating resilience) in the lives, families, and environments of those at risk. This publication focuses on specific risk factors that are associated with violence among Latino youth. *Meeting the Needs of Latino Youth: Part II: Resilience* explores the protective factors at work in this population.

### *Latino and Hispanic*

*Latino* and *Hispanic* are generic terms for persons of Latin American origin or descent living in the United States. Most U.S. government publications (including those produced by the U.S. Census Bureau and the Youth Risk Behavior Survey System) use the term *Hispanic*. However, the term *Latino* is gaining acceptance in describing those from or with roots in Mexico, Central America, South America, and the Caribbean, many of whom descend from indigenous Indians and Africans, as well as people who came to the New World from Spain and Portugal. This publication will use the term *Latino*.

## Latinos: A Growing Presence in the United States

The Latino population of the United States is large – and growing. There are 38.8 million Latinos in the United States. The U.S. Latino population grew by 9.8 percent over 2000-2002, compared to an overall U.S. population growth of 2.5 percent. Fifty-three percent of this growth was because of immigration.

The U.S. Latino population is young. Immigration and family patterns will continue to keep this population young. More than one-in-three Latinos are under the age of 18. Nearly half live in central cities. Latino children represent 18 percent of all children in the United States, but 30 percent of children below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003).

The relative youthfulness of the Latino population is important. *Youth Violence: A Report of the Surgeon General* put it succinctly: "Most violence begins in the second decade of life." (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). Much of the serious violence in the United States is committed by adolescents or young adults and is often committed against other adolescents or young adults. This is as true of Latino youth as it is of non-Latino youth. From 1993-2000, about 70 in every 1,000 Latino males between the ages of 18 and 24 and about 90 in every 1,000 Latino males between the ages of 12 and 17 were victims of violence. For Latino men of all ages, this victimization rate falls to more than 28 per 1,000 (Rennison, 2002).

It would be misguided to look only at Latino adolescents for the root causes of, or solutions to, the violence that afflicts them. We must also look at the risk factors for violence associated with

their earlier life experiences as well as their families, schools, and neighborhoods, and the larger society.

## Poverty and Social Disorganization

The relationship between poverty and violence is complex and not fully understood. Recent research indicates that the relationship between poverty and violence is not as direct as was once believed. It is socially disorganized communities, rather than purely poor communities, that seem to affect levels of violence – especially youth violence. Social disorganization includes high turnover in residents, a large proportion of single-parent households, lack of economic opportunities, and lack of a strong positive social network among adults. However, it is poor communities, (especially those in urban areas), that tend to suffer from social disorganization (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001).

The poverty rate for Latinos was 21.8 percent in 2002 – compared to a general poverty rate of 12.1 percent and 7.8 percent for non-Latino whites. Nearly half of Latinos in the United States live in center cities (compared with about one-fifth of non-Latino whites. Twenty-seven percent had less than a ninth grade education, compared with only 4 percent of non-Latino whites. Latinos are more likely to be unemployed and, when employed, to work in service occupations (Ramirez and de la Cruz, 2002).

## Educational Attainment

As with poverty, the relationship between educational attainment and youth violence is complex. Lack of educational attainment certainly limits economic opportunity. And young people who drop out of school in areas plagued by gangs and other criminal activity may be more at risk of becoming involved in violence than those who stay in safer school environments. Although measures of academic participation and success for Latino children fluctuates among grade levels, there are some discouraging educational indicators among this group that could contribute directly to the involvement of Latino youth in violence as well as to the social disorganization that contributes to community violence. These include the following:

- Latino children (aged 3 years and under) are less likely to be enrolled in preschools than non-Latino white or African American students children.
- Latino children have higher absenteeism rates than non-Latino white children.
- Twenty-eight percent of Latino students drop out of school, compared with 13 percent of African American student and 7 percent of non-Latino white students.
- Sixty-four percent of Latino children complete high school, compared to 92 percent of non-Latino white students and 84 percent of African American students (Llagas, 2003).

Much, but not all, of the differences in drop-out and school completion rates are accounted for by Latino children who live in the United States but were born elsewhere. Forty-four percent of these children drop out before completing high school (Llagas, 2003).

## Other Risk Factors

The American Psychological Association's Commission on Violence and Youth listed a number of additional family and social risk factors associated with youth violence, including parenting styles characterized by a lack of supervision, support for aversive and aggressive behaviors and use of physical punishment; access to firearms, involvement with alcohol and other drugs, gang involvement, and exposure to violence in the media (American Psychological Association, 1993). Some of these risk factors exist at higher levels in particular communities – and particular Latino communities – than others.

## Risk Factors and Your Community

The Latino population in the United States is incredibly diverse – encompassing people of many different languages and dialects, countries of origin, cultures, and immigration experiences. Each community has its own problems and strengths. For example, the overall rate of Latinos who carry weapons, become involved in fights, or have been threatened or injured by violence in school is no more (and often less) than the rates for non-Latino white and African American students of their age (Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, 2001).

Yet studies of particular Latino communities have found the rates of some of these same indicators to be double or triple the national average (Vaughan, et al., 1996). It is critical for practitioners to be familiar with the specific risk factors at work in the culture, history, institutions, and environment of the particular community with which they are working. Equally important is an understanding of the protective factors that can be powerful allies of those attempting to prevent violence. Those protective factors are explored in *Meeting the Needs of Latino Youth: Part II: Resilience*.

## References

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