

# FOCUS

Views from the National Council on Crime and Delinquency

## Bridging Community, Research, and Action: An Emerging Center on Latino Youth Development

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*This NCCD FOCUS is an update on the community conversations held across California with Latino community stakeholders on the status of Latino youth and the creation of a Center on Latino Youth Development.*

### Introduction

For the past year, The National Council on Crime and Delinquency has met with over 150 individuals, including youth, parents, and community-based organizations, within the fields of juvenile justice, government, health, education, public policy, youth leadership, and law enforcement in a planning process to help establish a

Center on Latino Youth Development (CLYD). Across the country, but especially in California, the shifts in demographics dictate a more unified and concerted response to the issues facing the largest and fastest growing adolescent population. In doing so, we work towards strengthening all communities and our future.

## What Do We Know?

We can no longer fail to pay attention. Latino adolescents have strength in numbers, strength in culture, and strength in communities. However, too little information exists on this very important population. According to the U.S. Census, Latinos represented 12.5% of the U.S. population in 2000, and the Latino population in the United States grew by 58% between 1990 and 2000. It is expected to grow at three times the rate of the total U.S. population during the next decade.

The Latino community in the U.S. is younger than its

### Positive Characteristics

Latinos share these resilient characteristics:

**Work ethic:** have one of the highest workforce participation rates.

**Family:** have a high rate of family formation, are more likely to be married.

**Government assistance:** are unlikely to be dependent on government assistance programs.

**Health:** are a healthy group with low death rates for chronic illness.

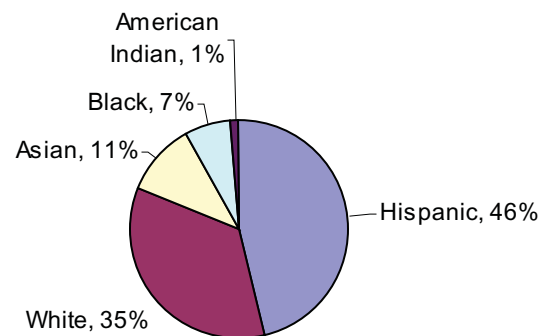
Source: Hayes-Bautista, D., 2004.

Black and White counterparts. More than one third of the Latino population is under the age of 18. Latino adolescents make up 42% of the general adolescent population in California, 40% in Texas, 35% in Arizona, 21% in Florida, and 19% in New York (Puzzanchera, Finnegan, & Kang, 2005). Latina adolescents are the largest racial/ethnic group of girls in the country. Nationally, statistics show that most Latino adolescents come from two-parent households, participate in the

labor market at high rates, value education, and work extremely hard at reaching their goals.

With a growing population come increased challenges. The poverty rate among Latinos is three times higher than that of Whites, even with two-income households (Kockhar, 2004). In California, Latino children and youth are more likely to live in poverty than children of any other ethnic group. In 1999, 32.3% of Latino children lived in poverty. One in four Latino children is uninsured and has limited access to health care. With regard to education, Latino adolescents drop out of school at rates as high as 50% in some districts or graduate unprepared to go on to college, thus ultimately decreasing their competitive advantage in the workforce. For Latina youth specifically, a 1999 report by the National Coalition of Hispanic Health and Human Services Organizations suggests that the most serious threats prevalent among Latina girls included pregnancy, depression, substance abuse, suicide, and delinquency. Particularly challenging for both second and third generation Latina and Latino youth is substance use. (Vega, Alderete, Kolody, Aguilar-Gaxiola, 1998).

*California Population under Age 18 by Race/Ethnicity, 2003*



Source: Puzzanchera, C., Finnegan, T. and Kang, W., 2006.

**Age Comparisons Among Latino Ethnic Groups**

- Cuban Americans are the oldest, with a median age of 43.6 years.
- Mexican Americans are the youngest, with a median age of 24.6 years.
- Puerto Ricans fall in between, with a median age of 26.9 years.
- A growing segment of the Latino population, Central Americans and South Americans, reported a median age of 28.6 years.

Sources: U.S. Census, Demographic Profiles, 2000; U.S. Census, Educational Attainment, 2000.

**Contact with the Juvenile Justice System**

Nationally, Latino youth under the age of 18 are incarcerated at twice the rate of White adolescents, and they receive harsher treatment, even when charged for the same offenses (Villarruel & Walker, 2000). The average length of incarceration in state public facilities is longer for Latino adolescents than any other racial/ethnic group for every offense category (Villarruel & Walker, 2000).

The Latino population in the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation rose nearly 20% between 1989 and 1999. Currently, involvement in the juvenile justice system for all girls is increasing at a greater rate than for boys. The same is true for Latinas. On a given day, there are approximately 18,000 Latino adolescents incarcerated in the U.S. In 2003, more than 8,000 of them were in California alone (Sickmund, Sladky, & Kang, 2005). Of all youths undergoing legal action in juvenile court, Latino youth compared to Whites, Blacks, and Asian Pacific Islanders were more likely to lack legal counsel (California Department of Justice, Criminal Justice Statistics Center, 2003). In comparison to White youth, Latino youth were 1.8 times more likely to be confined in a secure juvenile correctional facility and 3.2 times more likely to be transferred to adult court (California Department of Justice, Criminal Justice Statistics Center, 2004). Zero tolerance policies at school, which have led to higher rates of expulsions and suspension, high school drop out rates, gang involvement, and increased rates of substance abuse have been identified as risk factors for involvement in the juvenile justice system. The chart below identifies self-reported risk behaviors in the last 30 days among Latino students in grades 9-12 for three California counties.

Additionally, Latino adolescents are vulnerable due to poor, urban environments or violence within their families. Contrary to public perception, adolescents are more often the victims of violence rather than the perpetrators of it. NCCD research shows that victimization of adolescents and young children has a direct impact on school performance, alcohol and drug use, physical and mental health, delinquent behavior, and future earning potential (Wordes & Nunez, 2002). Ineffective social institutions, coupled with continued discrimination, racial profiling, unjust law enforcement practices, institutional racism, and family dynamics, too often leave adolescents vulnerable to involvement with the juvenile justice system.

**Risk Behaviors**

	<b>Los Angeles</b>	<b>San Diego</b>	<b>San Francisco</b>
Carried a weapon (school and community)	15%	15%	17%
Alcohol	42%	40%	34%
Marijuana	19%	15%	19%
Attempted suicide (past 12 months)	F 20% M 2%	F 14% M 10%	F 18% M 6%

Source: CDC National Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2005 (9th-12th Grade).

Given the multitude of challenges facing Latino youth, a multi-pronged approach is needed to support Latino adolescent development. Effective strategies in the following areas can work towards improving life chances for more Latino youth.

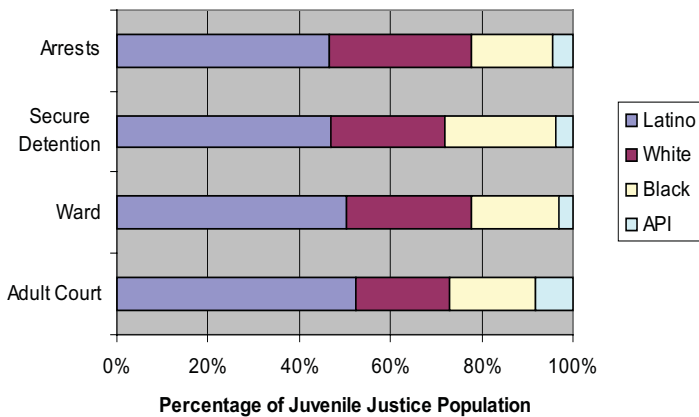
**Individual**--Strengthen cultural and gender identity; foster stronger community relations, including adult/youth alliances; develop life and employment skills; build self-confidence.

**Family**--Increase access to basic resources; strengthen parent knowledge base; increase employment and housing opportunities; strengthen familial connections.

**Education**--Improve the quality of education; develop political representation; increase parent advocacy skills; inspire and motivate youth to lifelong learning.

**Neighborhood**--Forge community development projects; increase employment opportunities; increase and strengthen community youth programming; decrease violence, crime, and social disconnection through multi-agency collaborations.

*Representation of Youth in CA Juvenile Justice System by Race/Ethnicity, 2003*



Source: California Department of Justice, Criminal Justice Statistics Center, 2003.

**Juvenile Justice**--Institute cultural and gender responsive assessments, training for staff, legal representation, and support for families; identify and terminate policies that criminalize youth; increase community-based program options, including re-entry services.

## Center for Latino Youth Development

What needs to be done? NCCD realizes that there has been and continues to be a gap in leadership in the field of Latino youth development and violence prevention. The right leadership can increase access to information, identify best practices, and strengthen the Latino community. With the goal of creating a clearinghouse, NCCD has convened California Latino community-based organizations, public officials, academics, policymakers, adolescents, and parents at three regional planning meetings to listen respectfully to their concerns, priorities, and recommendations for the most effective type of information a Center on Latino Youth Development can provide.

### Latinos and the Juvenile Justice System

In comparison to dispositions for White youth in California, Latino youth were:

- Less likely to be diverted out of the court system.
- More likely to be detained in secure detention.
- More likely to be incarcerated in secure juvenile correctional facilities.
- Exceeded the rate of transfers to adult court by more than 3 to 1.
- Less likely to have legal representation.

Source: California Department of Justice, Criminal Justice Statistics Center, 2004.

NCCD held three of four regional meetings, bringing together practitioners and advocates that work with Latino adolescents across the state. The first was held on October 6, 2005, in the Mission District of San Francisco, the second on January 24, 2006, in Pomona, California, and the third on May 31, 2006, in the central valley city of Fresno. These meetings highlighted the link between Latino adolescent development and violence prevention, stressing the importance of a united community to develop a specific Latino youth agenda. The meetings brought together over 150 individuals and set a powerful and energetic tone for the development of the center.

NCCD knows the importance of collaboration and partnered with the Latino Issues Forum, the Precita Center, ESPINO (Escuelas Si, Pintas No!), Community Wellness Partnership of Pomona, and the Inland Empire United Way to conduct these meetings. Given the enormous impact of the juvenile justice system on Central Valley youth, we are adding the city of Stockton as the site of the last meeting before culminating our efforts with a legislative hearing in January, 2007. At this briefing, legislators will hear about the status of Latino youth in California, the impact of violence, the juvenile justice system, and recommended solutions.

## *Lessons Learned*

The regional meetings highlighted the needs of the ever-growing Latino adolescent population in California. Clearly, the time is right for organizing, given the enthusiasm and overwhelming response to both meetings. Community members are seeking data and research that increase their understanding of the problems and point the way to solutions. The CYLD will provide leadership and support to communities in this endeavor.

Participants felt strongly that the Center's approach to youth development and violence prevention be guided by the principles of social and restorative justice. Successful strategies for supporting youth must integrate family and community, the spiritual and the cultural, while acknowledging the diversity within Latino communities.

The Center on Latino Youth Development can function as:

- A clearinghouse of information, including best practices, evaluation, fund development, and community assessment tools.
- A convener of individuals and organizations working to improve U.S. Latino youth outcomes.
- An educator to national foundations and government agencies about the needs of Latino youth.
- An advocate for increased community participatory research.

We have learned that there are many excellent community organizations helping Latino adolescents and their families, and one of our objectives is to increase their visibility and document the strategies that make them successful. To fund new or continuing programs, needs must be clearly documented. With data in hand, agencies can move forward in seeking funds to expand Latino youth programming.

## *Youth Voices*

Young Latinos have experienced many challenges in their lives, including violence. Their perspectives are important to consider in identifying real solutions. At the regional meetings, youth participants shared their ideas about what they need to succeed.

- More quality community programs that engage them and provide leadership opportunities.
- More neighborhood safe places that provide meaningful learning opportunities.
- Better communication with parents.
- Understanding from respectful and caring adults, especially in schools.
- More opportunities to be part of program planning and decision making.



## Accomplishments & Future Plans

NCCD will distribute resource information to convening participants and others interested in the CLYD. We will keep everyone informed about the progress of the center through the NCCD website, email, and periodic newsletters.

To help disseminate best practices, NCCD will document promising approaches, risks and needs, best practices, culturally-related program measures and outcomes (if available), and staff recruitment and training procedures. NCCD will collect data that highlights successful programs, refines the definition of success, and identifies gaps in services.

The Bay Area and Southern California participants have already indicated a desire to come together again. Our goal is to facilitate a California statewide meeting within two years, and identify funding for smaller events in the regions on important and timely topics to be determined by regional members. NCCD is seeking ways to raise funds; information on funders and ideas for proposal partnerships are always welcome.

The CLYD will host a national conference to identify a national Latino adolescent agenda, in conjunction with Dr. Francisco Villarruel, faculty at Michigan State University and Acting Director of the Julian Samora Institute. Details of this convention will be forthcoming.

Riding on the momentum of the first three California meetings, NCCD is optimistic in its wish to create a national center held together by the work of stakeholders and community advocates, boundless in its expectations, and nationally recognized as a critical component to the healthy development of Latino adolescents, the understanding of which is key to the future of California. Please join us!

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