

## **Latin@ Youth Witnesses of Domestic Violence**

*A Factsheet from the National Latin@ Research Center on Family and Social Change  
Alvina Rosales, M.A. & Lillie Macias, M.A.*



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## Latin@ Youth in the U.S.

- Latin@s make up 23% of youth under the age of 18 in the U.S., and in some states, including California and New Mexico, Latin@ youth make up the largest ethnic group.<sup>19</sup>
- While Latin@ youth demonstrate much strength, they are at higher risk for poorer social, educational, economic, and health outcomes. There are numerous risk factors that have been found to be associated with these inequities. Among them, witnessing domestic violence places youth at higher risk for poorer health outcomes.

## Youth Witnesses of Domestic Violence (DV)

- Youth may be exposed to DV either by directly witnessing violent acts or observing consequences of violent acts (e.g., bruises or broken household items).<sup>1</sup>
- When children see violence in their homes, they typically observe acts of violence from one caregiver to the other. Violent acts include physical, emotional, financial, or sexual abuse. Children may even be asked to participate in violent acts (e.g., to report actions and whereabouts of a caregiver to the other caregiver).
- Literature on youth witnesses of violence is less developed compared to child maltreatment literature; however, research to date suggests that witnessing and/or experiencing violence at a young age can contribute to a number of psychological, neurological and socio-emotional problems in the development of a child.
- For example, studies have found negative outcomes such as higher than expected rates of post-traumatic stress, depression, poor emotional regulation, and negative impacts to brain development.<sup>1,13,8,11</sup>
- Poor outcomes for youth affected by DV is also likely related to underlying issues between caregiver and children. For example, caregivers directly receiving violence are likely to experience higher levels of stress and poorer mental health outcomes. This in turn may impact caregiver's full potential to engage in effective parenting behaviors.<sup>8,12,16</sup>

*Casa de Esperanza has chosen to use "@" in place of the masculine "o" when referring to people or things that are either gender neutral or both masculine and feminine in make-up. This decision reflects our commitment to gender inclusion and recognizes the important contributions that both men and women make to our communities.*

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- 15.5 million children ages 0-17 are estimated to live in homes where they witness DV in the United States.<sup>10</sup> This study oversampled Hispanic youth - 32% of the sample was Latin@.
- A study examining over 1500 police reports of DV in a Northeastern United States community found that 22% of Latin@ youth reported having witnessed violence in the home.<sup>5</sup>
- A meta-analysis that included 19% of Latin@ youth (out of a total of 5,088) concluded that witnessing DV had significant effects on children compared to their peers.<sup>21</sup>
- Children living in homes affected by DV are at high risk for both future perpetration and victimization—that is, they are more likely to commit acts of DV or experience maltreatment from future partners.<sup>6</sup>

## Important Contextual Factors

DV research focusing on the experiences of Latin@ families is limited. Nonetheless, it is important to highlight the importance of understanding DV and its effect on children within the context of immigration, acculturation, higher rates of poverty, and less access to and underutilization of health services.

- High rates of poverty in Latin@ communities is an important contextual factor that impacts many issues faced by Latin@ youth, including higher risk for maltreatment.<sup>13 14</sup>
- Due to documentation status, many immigrant families do not have access to assistance programs such as food stamps or Medicaid.<sup>2</sup>
- Welfare agencies are less likely to receive federal funding for immigrant youth.<sup>18</sup>
- Fear of deportation may prevent utilization of DV support services including calling the police in cases of emergencies.<sup>17</sup>
- Children of undocumented immigrants may be more likely to remain in abusive homes due to parents' fear of deportation.<sup>3</sup>
- A Texas-based study found that Latin@ youth with immigrant parents were underrepresented in the Texas child

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welfare system. However, children of native-born Latin@s were overrepresented.<sup>20</sup>

- First and second generation Latin@s have been found to be less likely to be placed with relatives after removal from their homes due to abuse or neglect.<sup>20</sup> This is likely due to limited access to relatives with residency or citizenship documentation living in the U.S.

## Resiliency in Latin@ Youth

Despite risk factors faced, Latin@ youth in the U.S. demonstrate a number of strengths:

- In a study of toddler and pre-school children, 54% of those exposed to DV demonstrated psychological health and low levels of problem behaviors, suggesting that youth witnesses of violence are able to respond adaptively to violence in the home.<sup>9</sup>
- There is evidence that a child's mothers' mental health, positive parenting, and temperament all relate to wellness in children with ongoing or past family histories of DV.<sup>6,9</sup>
- Youth also have potential for demonstrating remarkable resiliency in overcoming adversity including witnessing DV.<sup>6,7</sup>
- For example, Latin@ youth in the U.S. are narrowing the gap in educational disparities:
  - » 73% of Latin@ high school students are graduating from high school, an all time high.<sup>15</sup>
  - » In 2012, 69% of Latin@ high school graduates enrolled in college, surpassing their non-Latin@-white counterparts (67%).<sup>15</sup>

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