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Improving Conditions of Latino Children Brightens the Future of America

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When I was approached to serve as editor of this first issue of the *Journal of Applied Research on Children*, I quickly agreed to participate. This new journal's first issue focuses on Latino children. The topic is one that should be important to all Texans and to all Americans. It is also one that has been close to my heart, as I have served on boards of various nonprofits and served as director of a small group of health centers in the heart of a predominantly Latino community in a large city in another state. Latinos constitute a growing portion of America's school children and are already a majority in many of this nation's largest districts and cities. How we improve or fail to improve the lives of Latino families and Latino children speaks volumes about America's future.

The first article sets the tone. Written by the team of Steve Murdoch, Mary Zey, Michael Cline, and Stephen Klineberg, "Poverty, Educational Attainment and Health Among America's Children: Current and Future Effects of Population Diversification and Associated Socioeconomic Change," examines U.S. Census data and social-economic indicators. Poverty, race and ethnicity, educational attainment, health status, and other factors all interact to influence the general well-being of children in America.

By 2040, Latino children will account for nearly half of all American children living in poverty. In the same period, with the absences of changes in the socioeconomic conditions of minority families, there will be an increase of nearly 2 million children living in poverty in the U.S., of which over 48% will be Hispanic. In Texas, more than 309,000 additional children will be living in poverty by 2040, 75% of whom will be Hispanic. Educational attainment is also clearly a factor affecting poverty. Of the increase of nearly two million children living in poverty, most of that (1.6 million) will be those living in households headed by adults with less than a high school education. In both the U.S. and in Texas, Latinos constitute the majority of these impoverished families. The article rightly concludes, "...doing nothing to improve the conditions of minority children will not ensure that the conditions of America's children will remain as they are but that they, in fact, will deteriorate."

The second article, by Normal Olvera, Stephanie Kellam, Kara Menefee, Jay Lee, and Dennis Smith, examines physical activity in Latino children. Child obesity has more than tripled among children and adolescents. Fast food, changing life-styles, dangerous neighborhoods, and lack of recreational opportunities have resulted in declines among American youth in physical activity, even such previously common-place activities as walking or biking to school. These factors contribute to increased obesity among American youth.

American children spend more time watching television or texting their friends than counterparts in other industrialized countries. Black and Hispanic youth were found to be less likely to be physically active than White students. Hispanic boys and non-Hispanic Black girls were found to have higher rates of being overweight, as well as having the highest body mass index (BMI). The article notes that “the solutions to positively impacting socio-cultural, environmental, and behavioral components rest with comprehensive systems approaches” and conclude with recommendations for policy makers, researchers, and practitioners.

In a similar vein, the third article, by Mendoza, Watson, Baranowski, Nicklas, Uscanga, Nguyen, and Hanfling, “Ethnic Minority Children’s Active Commuting to School and Association with Physical Activity and Pedestrian Safety Behaviors” examines children’s active commuting to school (ACS) and moderate to vigorous physical activity (MVPA). Young children in the U.S. are more likely to meet minimum standards for daily MVPA than are adolescents or adults. The study looks at fourth graders in Houston who were asked to wear accelerometers for one week to measure physical activity (walking or riding their bike to school). Students and parents were interviewed and observed about commutes and perceptions of safety.

Distance from home was found to be inversely related to active commuting to school as was acculturation. That is, the further the distance or greater the acculturation, the less likely the child is to commute by walking or biking and the more likely that child is to take transportation. Latino children had lower rates of active commuting than did non-Latino children, who were less likely to commute than non-Latino children. Compared to other countries, the rate of active commuting to school found in the study was lower than in other developed countries, “which suggests room for improvement.”

Teen pregnancy remains a growing concern in the U.S., particularly among Latinos. This issue is examined in the fourth article, by Tortolero, Hernandez, Cuccaro, Peskin, Markham, and Shegog, “Latino Teen Pregnancy in Texas: Prevalence, Prevention, and Policy.” The birth rate among Latina girls, which the authors found to be “astonishing”, is 98 per 1000 Latinas (15-19 years of age). This translates to more than 32,000 births each year for Latina teens, of which one-fourth (over 8,000) were to teens who have already had at least one child. The study found that Latino students “had lower knowledge about STDs and HIV” and were less likely to use a condom, concluding that “Latino teens are at greater risk of pregnancy.”

While birth rates nationally have declined over the past 15 years, the decline has been slower in Texas, particularly among young Latinas. Logically, in Texas direct medical costs resulting from teen births is estimated at nearly \$159 million, of which Latina teens accounted for 62% of the total (almost \$98 million). Teen pregnancy also affects graduation rates from high school. Over half of Latina teen mothers drop out of high school compared to just over a third of all teen mothers.

The authors note that Latinos were less likely to learn about HIV, AIDS, and prevention of STDs than their non-Latino counterparts. Restrictive policies regarding teen access to contraceptive services, such as Texas laws requiring parental consent for contraceptive services in state-funded family planning programs, restrict access of sexually-active teens to condoms and other birth control devices. Moreover, the study notes, "Texas is not systematically implementing effective programs" related to sexual health and pregnancy prevention and that 96% of Texas students "did not receive medically accurate or evidence-based information on responsible pregnancy and disease prevention."

Since the Latino teenage population is growing at twice the rate of the total Texas teen population, the inadequacy of proper sex and health education is troubling. As the authors correctly observe, "By tackling teen pregnancy, we can positively impact the future well-being of not only Latinos, but all Texans..."

The final article, which is written by Adolfo Santos, examines scholarship addressing Hispanic children's issues. Utilizing one scholarly search engine that has archived more than 1,000 academic journals, the author found fewer than five articles published per year on issues affecting Hispanic children from 1974 to 1991, with increases, thereafter. Santos notes that as the Hispanic population grew, federal response of granting agencies stimulated interest in research on Latino issues.

Most notably, the growth in the number of articles on Latino children increased with emergence of Latino scholars in academia. He notes, "As more and more Latinos earned doctorates, we have seen an increase in the number of scholarly articles that address Latino issues." In fact, he found that "a rather limited number of Hispanic researchers are producing much of the scholarship on Hispanic children's issues."

Latinos are a significant and growing part of the U.S. population. Their educational attainment, health and well-being, and future careers are vital to the future of America. The U.S. is now 10th internationally in the percentage of adult population in attainment of a college degree (associate's degree or higher). We are one of only three of the top 30 industrialized countries in the world in which older adults (45-54 years of

age) are more likely to have attained a college degree than are younger adults (25-34 years of age).¹ The U.S. ranks 21st in high school graduation rates, and ranks 9th in average math scores for eighth graders.² Simply put, we are falling behind.

The economic impact of the educational achievement gap (the difference between attainment of white students and attainment of Latinos, African Americans, Native Americans, and poor whites) totaled just under \$2 trillion in 2008. And, according to a recent report by the McKinsey Corporation, had an impact on GDP and lost earnings and revenues worse than the last three recessions combined (including the current recession)!³

Children of color are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system and frequently experience disparate and inequitable service provision as noted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Children's Bureau in 2003.⁴ Hispanic families and their children are overrepresented in out of home placements and length of care in ten states.^{4, 5}

Latinos now represent an increasing share of the college-aged population. By 2020, nearly 10 million Latinos will be 15-24 years of age and account for almost 23% of the total U.S. college age population. By 2050, Latinos will account for one-fourth of the active labor force in the U.S. Yet, Latinos are more likely to enter pre-school with deficiencies, lag in achievement in elementary school, are less likely to graduate from high school, are more likely to be affected by teen-aged pregnancy, are less likely to go to college, and more likely not to graduate from college once they do. For every 100 Latinos who enter the 9th grade, only 53 will graduate from high school and only 10 will graduate from college within six years of high school graduation.⁶

So, how we respond to the pressing needs of Latino children is critical to the future of America. Latinos value education. In fact a recent poll by Nielsen Corporation and Stanford University found that 87% of Latinos surveyed felt college was important or extremely important compared to only 78% of all respondents.

If Latinos are not healthy, if they drop out of high school, if they get side-tracked from achieving their dreams, not only do they suffer, America risks its future. We risk losing future teachers, social workers, nurses, doctors, engineers, and scientists. This is a loss we cannot afford.

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