

Overcoming Disparity

Latino Young Men and Boys



Edited by Frank de Jesús Acosta and Henry A. J. Ramos

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Profiles in Best Practice

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and Henry A. J. Ramos**



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Recovering the past, creating the future

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We are also fundamentally grateful to the youth, men, advocates and leaders (especially our incarcerated brothers) who gave of their hearts, considerable gifts, wisdom and time in support of our efforts throughout the completion of this volume and the larger series of examinations of which it is a part.

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In Lak'ech Hala Ken (Mayan saying: “I am the other you,
and you are the other me”).

Editors' Note

Frank de Jesús Acosta and Henry A. J. Ramos

Overcoming Disparity: Latino Young Men and Boys provides surveys about the leading programs and strategies that effectively engage young Latino men and boys in ways that expand their prospects for crafting healthy, productive, prosperous and socially contributing lives. It builds on two prior publications that we have produced on the issues in recent years: *The History of Barrios Unidos: Healing Community Violence* (Arte Público Press, 2007), by Frank de Jesús Acosta, which features the work of Barrios Unidos (one of the nation's most evolved networks working with at-risk Latino men and boys through cultural awareness, community service and healing interventions); and *Latino Young Men and Boys in Search of Justice: Testimonies* (Arte Público Press, 2016), edited by Frank de Jesús Acosta and Henry A. J. Ramos, highlighting the creative voice of California Latino men and boys (many of whom are currently or were formerly incarcerated) in the form of original poetry, essays, drawings, paintings, tattoo art and murals.

In publicizing the experiences and perspectives of young Latino males and those who work most effectively on their behalf relative to community organizing and the economy, violence prevention and justice, health and education, and culture and art, our goal is, in large part, to humanize these young men on the public stage. Too frequently, mainstream media and leaders have demonized Latino men and boys along

with African American and other minority males, generally perceiving and representing them as criminals, predators, drug traffickers or general drags on our economy and civic culture.

In fact, there are many data and much evidence to explain the perception of Latino men and boys by outside observers as a troublesome population subgroup. Recent government and scholarly data reveal that Latino men and boys are among the nation's most at-risk populations in relation to crime and public safety, education, employment, health and early mortality. In many communities, these young men are more likely to be killed in gang- or family-related violence than they are to graduate from college.

According to social scientists such as New York University Professor Pedro Noguera and his colleagues, who recently co-edited *Invisible No More: Understanding the Disenfranchisement of Latino Men and Boys* (Routledge, 2012), Latino males in the United States are confronted with a wide variety of hardships. They are populating prisons, dropping out of school and becoming overrepresented in low-paying service jobs at alarming rates. Young Latino men, especially, earn among the lowest wages in the country; they also experience a rapidly growing rate of HIV/AIDS and one of the highest mortality rates due to homicide. Nevertheless, our experiences over the years working with and around these young men, as well as their families and their communities, inform an enduring sense of untapped potential, a longing for something better and real possibilities for redemption. What is needed and missing is a more serious societal investment in these young men, enlightened and culturally rooted interventions to help them chart a more constructive course and accessible opportunities to work, earn a living and contribute to the larger society.

We know from our own field experience and study that there exist important emerging intervention models showing

real impact in shaping a more positive life course for Latino men and boys who have struggled in our various systems of education, employment and justice. We also know that the pathologies that disproportionately incline Latino men and boys to drop out of school, join gangs and engage in criminal activity are typically systemic. This is not to say that young Latino men who engage in violence and antisocial behavior should be exonerated; rather, it is merely to acknowledge that such proclivities are not generally inherent in such individuals. More often than not, they are the product of their family's socioeconomic circumstance, institutionalized racial inequality and misplaced public anxiety about young men of color generally in America.

Despite these realities and important recent research on the issues by leading Latino intellectuals, such as Professor Noguera, Professor Manuel Pastor of the University of Southern California and Professor Victor B. Sáenz of the University of Texas at El Paso, there remains a relative lack of research and scholarly work available on Latino men and boys, their unmet needs and program models that address these issues. *Overcoming Disparity: Latino Young Men and Boys* includes a bibliography assembled by University of California, Berkeley, scholar and Insight Center research consultant Ricardo Huer-ta Niño. It reflects the most salient works we could identify on contemporary issues related to Latino men and boys and includes an accompanying analysis of lingering gaps in the research that warrant immediate and meaningful investigation.

The balance of content that follows focuses on specific leaders and organizations across California and the South-western United States that have achieved deserved attention for producing impressively positive results with and for Latino men and boys—especially those individuals who have closely engaged with often hostile and impersonal public health and

welfare, education and criminal justice systems. While each of these successful organizational and program models is distinct in its own right, there are common culturally based perspectives, practices and characteristics that connect them. Together these constitute what we refer to here as the *La Cultura Cura* (the Healing Culture) model. Typically, successful organizations and programs build on a combination of efforts involving culturally focused education and awareness, applied learning, community building activities and social enterprise. The most successful models and programs are often led and staffed by individuals who themselves have been at-risk school dropouts, gang members, substance abusers and criminals—individuals who have been there and done that, yet emerged from it better off for having ultimately decided to take a more positive and sustainable path. These kinds of organizational and program principals create unique bonds of trust, legitimacy and respect with the young participants who are intended to learn and benefit from them, based on parallel past experiences and lessons.

Most importantly, perhaps, leading organizations and programs operating in this space share a world view that sees the enduring value of redemption and rehabilitation—the foundational (though too often increasingly forgotten) principles of our nation's correctional system. Conversely, they also share a growing concern about the nation's increasingly punitive justice system, which often seems to be designed precisely to expand, rather than reduce, the scope of Latino and other minority males' incarceration prospects.

We acknowledge that the geographical focus of this work and the historical service constituencies most involved substantially weigh the voices and perspectives highlighted herein toward the particular experiences of Southwestern US Mexican American males. However, we firmly believe the book's

contents promoting cultural proficiency are relevant to the analogous experiences of Latino men and boys of other ethnic backgrounds and individuals from other parts of California and the nation who are also heavily affected by the issues. These include members of America's fast-growing Salvadoran/Central American communities and non-Spanish-speaking indigenous populations from rural Mexico and Central America; the large Caribbean populations of the northeastern United States that are comprised mainly of Puerto Ricans and Dominicans; and the Midwest's large and growing cohorts of all of these Latino sub-groups.

The pages that follow also contain important reference materials. These include, in addition to the bibliography referenced earlier: (1) various informing statements, curricula, evaluations and publications that top-performing organizations and leaders in this space have produced over the years; (2) references to tools and best practices that these groups and practitioners have effectively employed; and (3) contact information on the specific leaders and organizations featured, as well as their allies and others who are actively engaged in this work.

We are most grateful to the various colleagues who contributed to this volume's publication, including especially the various field executives and organizations whose leadership produced the content featured here. We also owe special gratitude to our many generous funding partners, whose financial support made this volume and allied activities possible. These include the California Community Foundation, the California Endowment, the Marguerite Casey Foundation, the Sierra Health Foundation and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. We appreciate the forward thinking of these leading social investment institutions and their shared commitment to advancing democracy and inclusion in America.