

# AT RISK

## Latino Children's Health



EDITED BY  
RAFAEL PÉREZ-ESCAMILLA  
HUGO MELGAR-QUIÑONEZ

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*Recovering the past, creating the future*

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*To Sofia, Alejandro and Rafaelito.  
In memory of my father, Ricardo Pérez Escamilla.*

—RPE

*To the ones who preceded us in the search  
for a better and more dignified life.*

—HMQ



## INTRODUCTION

### LATINO CHILDREN SOCIOECONOMIC, DEMOGRAPHIC AND HEALTH PROFILE

Rafael Pérez-Escamilla<sup>1</sup> and Hugo Melgar-Quiñonez<sup>2</sup>

#### Introduction<sup>3</sup>

Latinos will continue to account for over half of the population growth in the USA in the decades to come. Thus, the future of the country is very much tied to the health and wellbeing of Latino children. Overall Latinos in the United States confront higher rates of poverty, as well as lower levels of school education and English proficiency, and less access to the nation's health care services, which is highly determined by the financial resources available to the families, and policies affecting millions of Latino immigrants and migrant farm workers. Thus, social and environmental factors strongly influence the health status of Latino children in the United States. These factors also help explain the fact that millions of Latinos in the United States lack access to enough

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<sup>3</sup>The views expressed in this book are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the NIH or NCMHD.

nutritionally adequate foods for a healthy and active life. Almost 27% of Latino households faced food insecurity in 2009, compared to a national rate of 14.7%. About 75% of Mexican-American adults are overweight or obese and over 20% of the children have a Body Mass Index above the 95-percentile for age and gender. Disparities in risk factors for subsequent obesity among Latinos can be detected since infancy. While Latinos have a higher rate of breastfeeding than the general population, supplementation with infant formula starting very early on after birth is also higher when compared to other ethnic groups. Suboptimal dietary and lifestyle behaviors increase the risk of obesity and the development of chronic diseases among Latino children and youth. The rate of diabetes in Latino adults is 50% higher than among the general population. If the current trends in obesity persist half of the Latino children in the United States will develop type 2 diabetes during their lifetime. In addition to obesity and chronic diseases, Latino children are more likely than their white counterparts to grow up in environments strongly affected by violence and opportunities for abusing addictive substances, both of which have negative consequences on their psychosocial and emotional development, as well as their mental health.

*At Risk: Latino Children's Health* examines key maternal, child and youth issues that affect the wellbeing of our very diverse Latino communities. In Chapter One, Flores et al. analyze key Latino childhood health issues, including childhood obesity, within the context of a socio-ecological framework perspective. A framework that strongly acknowledges the major influence that the physical and psychosocial environments where Latino children are born and grow have on their lifestyles including dietary and physical activity habits. Segura-Pérez et al. in Chapter Two review the evidence behind the effectiveness of community health workers (CHW) or *promotores de salud* at improving the health of Latino children. Their chapter first covers prenatal care, a key issue for addressing the childhood obesity epidemic as there is strong evidence suggesting that the intrauterine environment the fetus is exposed to influences the risk of childhood obesity and the development of chronic diseases later on in life. They also address CHW-led programs for dealing with childhood asthma, immunizations and youth sex education. Infant feeding practices are important determinants of maternal and child



health and also influence childhood obesity risk. In Chapter Three, Chapman and Zubieta address the factors that influence breastfeeding and complementary feeding choices among Latino infants. They also review optimal infant feeding promotion approaches, including breastfeeding peer counseling models that are likely to help improve infant feeding behaviors. Olvera, George and Kaiser in Chapter Four present a critical review of the evidence on the influence of parental feeding styles on eating behaviors of children. Because food preferences get established very early on in life, this area of inquiry is crucial for understanding how to protect young Latino children against the risk of obesity and how to maximize their health through fostering optimal caregiver-child feeding interactions. Nutrition is essential not only for physical health but also for attaining adequate academic achievement. Children receive a substantial amount of their nutrition at school, ideal setting for also exposing children to sound nutrition education. Thus, the review by Woodward Lopez and Gosliner in Chapter Five on school feeding programs and how they affect the health and wellbeing of Latino children is very timely. Food insecurity is prevalent in Latino households. This is unfortunate as household food insecurity has consistently been identified as a major nutritional and psycho-emotional stressor. Television viewing has consistently been identified as a risk factor for childhood obesity. In Chapter Six, Mendoza and Barroso examine the evidence for an association between television viewing and physical inactivity, and provide best practice examples of community-based approaches that can be used to both reduce television viewing time and increase physical activity levels of Latino children. Melgar-Quiñonez and Pérez-Escamilla in Chapter Seven review the evidence of an association between food insecurity and the physical and psycho-emotional development of Latino children. They discuss the impact of food insecurity as multifold since this phenomenon not only affects the quantity of the food available but also the quality of the foods families consume.

Accidents and violence are the major cause of premature death among young Latinos. Thus, in Chapter Eight, Vaca and Anderson review recent epidemiological trends regarding violence-related injuries and motor vehicle accidents among Latino youth and propose ways to address them, including ways to curbe alcohol consumption. Castro et al.

in Chapter Nine also address the major concern on substance abuse among Latino youth. They present results from a recent innovative study that conducted an in-depth examination of the relationship between parental acculturation trajectories and substance abuse (alcohol, tobacco, marijuana) among Latino adolescents. *At Risk* concludes in Chapter Ten with a health economics analysis by Treviño of type 2 diabetes and ways to prevent or address this major public health epidemic that disproportionately affects Latinos through lifestyle modification approaches including diet and physical activity. As illustrated in this chapter, the risk for type 2 diabetes starts to develop very early on in life and obesity is a major risk factor for this condition. Thus, cost-effective approaches to curbe this epidemic need to start since gestation and need to be based on the socio-ecological framework emphasized throughout this book.

Our intention in this book is not only to discuss the existence of major challenge and problems but also to provide examples and suggestions with each chapter as to which policies and programmatic approaches may be relevant for improving the health and wellness of Latino children. Although *At Risk* does not include a specific chapter on health care access we fully acknowledge the relevance of this and other topics (e.g. immigration reform) for the health of Latino children and their families. Thus the reader is advised to read recent reviews in these rapidly evolving areas of concern.

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