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LATINO POLICY & ISSUES BRIEF

N O . 1 F E B R U A R Y 2 0 0 2

INVESTING IN CALIFORNIA'S LATINO CHILDREN UNDER FIVE

Since Latino children make up nearly half of the youth population in California, the newly funded early childhood programs must understand Latino living conditions to successfully prepare children to enter school healthy and ready to learn. Many Latino children live in low-income, overcrowded households without health insurance or early school participation. An investment in such families today will yield positive results for California's social and economic future tomorrow.

California is at a critical crossroads. Today, according to the 2000 census, almost 10 million Latinos reside in California. This represents almost one-third of the state's total population. Latino children are an even higher proportion, making up almost one-half (46%) of all children ages 0 to 5 in California (Children Now 1999). Knowing more about this population will help policymakers and educators to ensure that all children benefit from efforts aimed at early childhood development.

For some time we have known, due to the work of Bowlby (1969), Piaget (1947), and others, that the period of early childhood is critical to a child's development. Today, new brain research substantiates the view that the first few years of life are a pivotal time during which the building blocks of future emotional, cognitive, and motor skills are built. In short, the first years of life influence all subsequent development (Shore 1997).

THE LATINO FAMILY

Parents play the most important role in providing the nurturing experiences that children require. Yet parenting can be particularly difficult for families in poverty. Since Latino families have higher levels of poverty, poor education, low wages, overcrowded housing, inadequate health care, and limited English proficiency, they face greater obstacles to supporting positive life course outcomes for their children.

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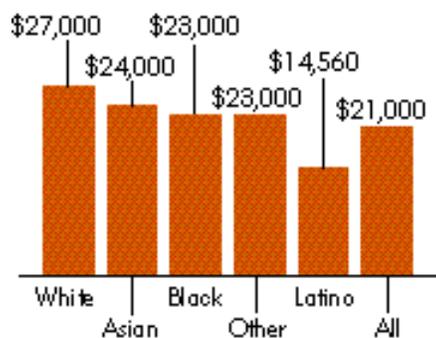


Table 1: Latinos have the lowest median wage of all ethnic groups in California.
(Source: Lopez et al. 2000, 9)

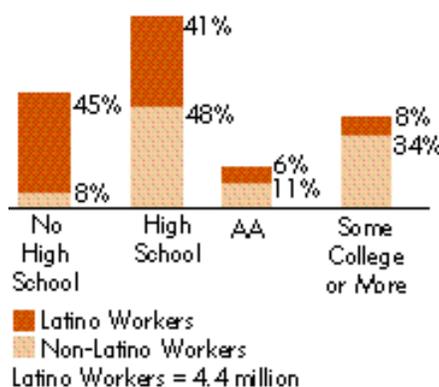


Table 2: Latino workers have less educational attainment (1998).
(Source: Lopez et al. 2000, 1)

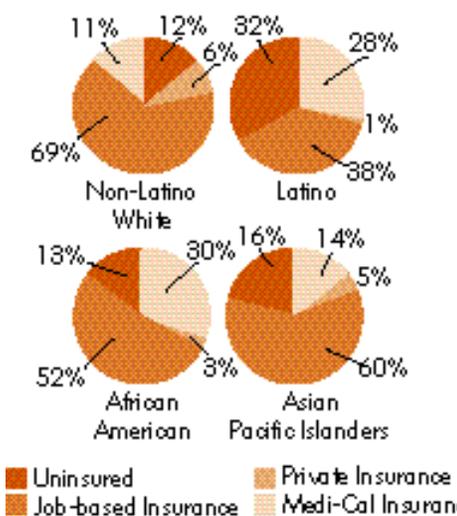


Table 3: Latino children (ages 0-18) are more likely to be uninsured.
(Source: Ponce et al. 2000)

Family Economics: The economic status of a family is an important indicator of its capacity to access resources that can aid a child’s well-being. While parents’ low incomes or lack of wealth do not guarantee poor outcomes for children, they play an important role when combined with other “at-risk” factors (Illig 1998). Over 2.6 million children in California live in poverty. Many of these children are Latino since among families with children ages 0-5 twice as many Latino families as non-Latino families have a family annual income of \$30,000 or less. Latinos’ annual per capita median wage is nearly one half that of Whites and Latinos are the only group below the state annual median per capita wage. (See Table 1.)

Education and Employment: Many Latino parents with young children have low levels of educational completion, which affects their ability to obtain employment in high-wage industries, which prevents them from upward mobility. Four out of five farm workers, two out of three assembly workers, and one out of two household domestic workers are Latino. Of Latino workers statewide, 45% do not have a high school diploma or its equivalent. While 45% of non-Latino workers have education beyond high school, less than 15% of Latino workers do. (See Table 2.)

Housing: Crowded housing is a sign of severe economic constraints affecting child development. Latinos account for two-thirds of the state’s overcrowded households and three-quarters of the state’s most severely overcrowded households (California Budget Report, 2000). In 1997, 29% of Latino renter households in metropolitan areas were overcrowded. Among homeowners, only 3% of White households in metropolitan areas

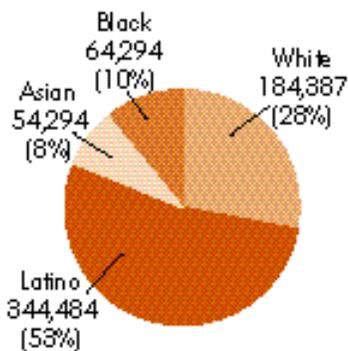
were overcrowded while 14% of Latino households were.

Health Care: Perhaps no area is as critical for small children as their health because their ability to excel in school is highly dependent on their physical well-being. Latinos are twice as likely to be uninsured as any other ethnic group: 32% of all Latino children (0-18) are uninsured compared to 12% of non-Hispanic White children, 13% of African American children, and 16% of Asian and Pacific Islander children. The low levels of health insurance among Latinos is partly due to lack of jobs that provide health care insurance. (See Table 3.)

Preparation for Schooling: Children who do well in school tend to have gone to preschool or kindergarten. Yet most Latino children in the state ages three to five years were not enrolled in preschool or kindergarten in 1997 (53% unenrolled). Most white (28% unenrolled), black (10% unenrolled), and Asian children (8% unenrolled) were. (See Table 4.)

English-Proficiency: English language acquisition is important to doing well in school (CBED 1997-98). Yet almost half of all Latino children enrolled in kindergarten through high school have limited English-proficiency. Even more dramatically, about four out of five Latino children enrolled in kindergarten are classified as limited English-proficient.

Use of State Programs: Many eligible Latino families are not using state-funded programs that provide child health insurance (Medi-Cal and Healthy Families) and preschool education (CalWORKs). Many families are unaware of the programs, do not know that they are eligible, or find the application process too confusing. (See Table 5.)



Total children not in preschool = 650,479

Table 4: Latino children (ages 3-5) are more likely not to attend Pre-K or kindergarten (1997).

(Source: Lopez 1999)

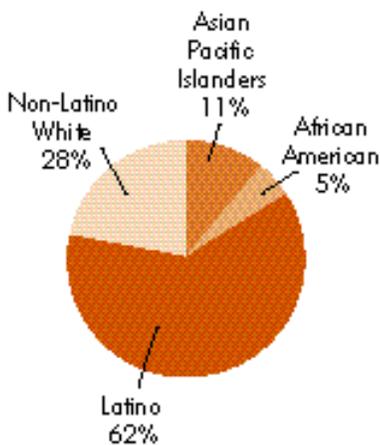


Table 5: Latino children (ages 0-18) are more likely to be uninsured and yet eligible for Medi-Cal and Healthy Families.

(Source: Ponce et al. 2000)

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Policymakers and elected officials must design a coordinated approach to early childhood development that takes into account the impact of “adult” issues—employment, housing, and healthcare—on children.
- Such an approach should focus on improving parents’
 - wage-earning potential
 - access to affordable housing
 - access to education
 - access to healthcare
- Outreach efforts are crucial since many “at risk” Latino families and children are eligible for state-funded programs but are not enrolled. Outreach efforts must be culturally tailored to overcome factors that may inhibit enrollment.
- Newly funded early childhood programs must understand and respond to the specific circumstances and needs of Latino children if these programs are to be successful in preparing Latino children to enter school healthy and ready to learn.

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CHILDREN UNDER FIVE

Newly funded early childhood programs must serve Latino children, who make up nearly one-half of the state's children under the age of five.

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