



The Impact of Social Contexts on Latinx Students' Health and Education Outcomes: Ethnic Discrimination

Introduction

The Latinx proportion of the United States population has grown from 13% to 19% since 2000, reaching 62.5 million in 2021, and making up 54% of the overall population growth during that period (Zong, 2022). This underscores the requirement to better understand the unique needs and strengths associated with being an immigrant of Latin-American descent who may be facing divisive and stressful environments that undermine well-being. Environmental and acculturation stresses may negatively affect mental health, whereas positive ethnic identity and a strong value on family can be protective for Latinx youth (Robles-Ramamurthy, Sandoval, Londoño Tobón, & Fortuna, 2022).

The *Caminos* longitudinal study follows a school-based sample of Latin American-origin families in suburban Atlanta, GA during youth's transitions from early through late adolescence. In 2018, researchers began collecting survey data from 547 middle school youth and, for half of them, their mothers. Youth were selected at random from 2017-18 school enrollment lists. To date, nine time points of survey data have been collected since 2018. From 2018 – 2022, surveys were conducted with youth and mothers every six months; survey data will be collected annually through 2026 (for a total of 13 time points).

The *Caminos* project is examining how stressors and supports in youth's social environments shape family functioning and a range of indicators of adolescent health and well-being. Adolescents' mental health outcomes are measured by internalizing symptoms (e.g., depression, anxiety) and externalizing symptoms (e.g., conduct disorder, aggression, rule-breaking). Other adolescent outcomes include substance use, prosocial behaviors, and grade point average. Stressors examined include ethnic discrimination, COVID-19, and immigration threats. Supports examined include teacher, peer, and parent support. Additional factors assessed include traditional Latino cultural values as well as cultural gaps between parents and their children and between parents and the school.

The analytic approach utilized in the *Caminos* project primarily entails longitudinal, structural equation modeling techniques. These methods facilitate examining direct and indirect pathways linking extra-familial contexts with Latinx adolescent outcomes and offer a scientifically robust approach to analyzing constructs known to have measurement error. Future studies will examine chronic and acute stress measured by salivary and hair cortisol; findings from these studies will advance knowledge on biological stress processes experienced by today's U.S. Latinx adolescents. In addition, the research team is examining family, neighborhood, and youth protective factors that help mitigate risks. Findings will inform the development of preventive interventions and policies that can promote school success and healthy development for this population.

Perceived Ethnic Discrimination: *What We Know*

Ethnic discrimination experienced in the school environment and community is related to significantly worse academic, behavioral, and mental health outcomes for Latinx adolescents over time.

How this research measured ethnic discrimination. For youth, ethnic discrimination was assessed by student reports that teachers, school personnel, classmates, and/or the broader community mistreated young people due to their Latino background or ethnicity. Example statements included youth being discouraged from joining an advanced level class; considered to have poor English-language skills; assumed not to be smart; being called a name insulting to Latinos; and being excluded from activities because of their ethnicity. For mothers in the study, the researchers assessed mothers' reports of being mistreated by others in the community due to being Latinx or speaking Spanish, and by their perceptions of a cultural gap between home and their children's schools (e.g., having values and ideas that differ from those being conveyed in their children's schools).

What the research findings showed. Ethnic discrimination against Latinx students and experienced by mothers appear to contribute to increases in youth depression/anxiety (internalizing symptoms), declines in GPA, and increases in acting-out behaviors (externalizing symptoms). These changes over time occur regardless of a young adolescents' initial levels of mental health symptomology. Findings indicate:

- Discrimination experienced in the school setting was related to increases in Latinx students' internalizing and externalizing symptomology during the early and middle adolescent years (Bennett et al., 2020).
- Discrimination from other classmates appeared to increase risks that a Latinx study participant would become involved with peers engaged in problem behaviors, which, in turn, was associated with increases in participants' own externalizing behaviors (Bennett et al., 2022).
- Even exposure to lower levels of racial-ethnic discrimination in the school setting appeared to result in vulnerability for Latinx youth developing adverse behavioral consequences (Melendez Guevara et al., 2022).
- While both discrimination and posttraumatic stress (fearfulness, difficulty concentrating, mood changes) predicted increases in rule-breaking behaviors for boys and girls, posttraumatic stress emerged as a possible explanation of how and why ethnic discrimination may increase engagement in rule-breaking behaviors among girls (Melendez Guevara et al., 2022). Specifically, for girls, school racial-ethnic discrimination at baseline was associated with increases in rule-breaking behaviors one year later, at least in part, via intermediate increases in posttraumatic stress.
- Perceived discrimination was related to youth reports of feeling less warmth and closeness to parents, a known protective factor for positive emotional and academic adjustment (Nair et al., 2022).
- When Latina mothers experienced discrimination, they reported increases in feeling culturally marginalized at their children's schools, which, in turn, was associated with declines in their adolescent children's school performance (Partovi et al., 2022).