“Nuestra Salud”

Summary of a Report of the Health Status of the Finger Lakes Region’s Latino Population

Finger Lakes Health Systems Agency
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The Poverty of Health Care

The fastest-growing population in the Finger Lakes region continues to face some of the most significant challenges when it comes to health care. Ethnic disparities in health are troubling and persistent in our region, and the Latino population is no exception. The poverty expressed by Mother Theresa clearly is evident in the Latino community of the Finger Lakes region.

Geographic health disparities are present in our community, and they suggest that where we live is an important contributor to health – that "place" matters.

Finger Lakes Health Systems Agency and its Latino Health Coalition believe that improving the health of Latinos should be a community priority. This summary of the comprehensive “Nuestra Salud” report identifies the scope of the disparities facing Latinos in our community and offers a better understanding of the potential underlying causes.

A Concentration of Disparities

Poor health among the Latino population is most evident in the Coalition’s identified Target Area of just three ZIP codes in the city of Rochester: 14605, 14613, and 14621.

This area is home to 28 percent of all Latinos living in the Finger Lakes region. Unfortunately for their health, it also is marked by largely segregated neighborhoods and significant poverty, providing some evidence that the individuals in this area may be among the most vulnerable Latinos in the region. Latinos living in these ZIP codes are more likely to have serious, chronic, and often preventable diseases, and they have a higher rate of premature death – death before age 75 – than those who live outside this area.

The Target Area also is significant because it encompasses several close-knit neighborhoods, or "los barrios," that are the centers of the Latino community given their culture and historical significance to Latino immigrants.

"We think sometimes that poverty is only being hungry, naked, and homeless. The poverty of being unwanted, unloved and uncared for is the greatest poverty. We must start in our own homes to remedy this kind of poverty."

Mother Theresa
Living Environment and Health Behaviors

Several factors, which influence health and longevity, provide important insights into the root causes of racial and ethnic disparities, such as lifestyle, environmental exposure, health care, and social circumstances. Latinos living in the Target Area face a unique set of environmental conditions, and these factors likely have an influence on both the health behaviors and the health outcomes of its residents. For example:

- **Poor diet & lack of exercise**: Poor diet and a lack of exercise, which may contribute to Latinos having a higher rate of obesity (41 percent compared to 21 percent of whites).
- **Brownfields**: A high number of former industrial sites that often contain toxic waste and have been linked to cancer and respiratory diseases.
- **Lead paint**: A higher concentration of old homes with lead paint, which causes serious physical and cognitive illnesses in children.
- **Limited healthy food choices**: A preponderance of neighborhood “corner stores” that lack fresh fruit, vegetables, and other health foods.
- **Violence & criminal activity**: A concentration of violence and criminal activity.
- **Poverty**: The highest percentage of poverty in Monroe County, with 46 percent of this group falling below the poverty line.
- **Low education levels**: The lowest levels of education — 44 percent of Latinos in the Target Area hold less than a high school diploma.
- **High population turnover**: Frequent population turnover.
- **Unhealthy lifestyle choices**: Unhealthy lifestyle choices, such as smoking tobacco, poor diet, risky sexual behaviors, lack of exercise, and substance abuse, which may, in part, be facilitated by a physical environment that impedes healthy living.
The physical and social environments faced by Latinos, particularly those living in the Target Area, create many barriers to achieving good health. Access to timely and appropriate medical care also appears to be a key issue.

Insurance Coverage

Latino adults under the age of 65 in Monroe County have more than twice the rate of uninsured than whites (15 percent vs. 6 percent, respectively). Additionally, Latinos also were more likely to have lacked coverage at some point in the past two years relative to whites. Within the Target Area, 19 percent of working-age adults report being uninsured, compared to 7 percent of residents in the rest of Monroe County.

- 35 percent of Target Area residents were without coverage at some point in the past two years, compared to just 15 percent of those living in the balance of Monroe County.
- This lack of coverage can create significant cost-related barriers to accessing medical care. More than 15 percent of individuals living in the Target Area report facing cost barriers compared to just 7.5 percent of other Monroe County residents.

A lack of consistent health insurance not only threatens getting proper medical care, it can contribute to a detachment from the health care system. This may explain why Latinos were the most likely to report not having a personal physician and were significantly less likely to have received a blood pressure screening, flu shot, or pneumonia vaccine in the past year compared to whites. The lack of these relatively inexpensive preventive measures likely increases the risk for more severe health issues and may contribute to ethnic health disparities among this population.

Mental Health Provider Shortage

In Monroe County, Latinos report some of the highest rates of adverse outcomes related to mental health.

- Almost 20 percent of Latinos reported that they rarely or never felt calm and peaceful during the previous four weeks (compared to 10 percent of whites).
- 13 percent reported feeling downhearted or depressed all or most of the time during the previous month (compared to just 4 percent of whites).

Some communities in the city of Rochester, including much of the Target Area, face a shortage of mental health care providers. What’s more, given the stigma associated with mental illness and the fact – according to the American Psychiatric Association – that many Latinos with mental illness often go without professional mental health treatment – the actual prevalence of mental health issues in the Target Area could be even higher.
Socio-Economic Status

A combination of factors related to financial and social resources also appears to play a key role in health outcomes. The chronic stress of living in an impoverished environment is thought to have significant effects over time. On the other hand, greater wealth typically improves access to a variety of health-improving resources, such as better housing, working conditions, medical care, and social support. And higher levels of education also have been identified as the key pathway to better health due to improved decision-making about health behaviors and the use of medical care.

Poverty is clearly a barrier to good health for members of the Latino community, as shown by the percentages of incomes below the federal poverty level.

Percentages of Incomes Below Federal Poverty Level Relative to Report Target Area

- 46% Latinos in Target Area
- 29% Latinos outside Target Area
- 8% Whites in Other Areas of Monroe County
Conclusion

Ethnic health disparities exist. On a variety of measures, Latinos in our community experience worse health outcomes compared to their white neighbors. However, these differences appear most pronounced in intermediate measures such as self-reports of physical and mental health, obesity rates, and the prevalence of certain chronic diseases. More terminal outcomes, such as premature mortality, suggest greater similarity between whites and Latinos.

In light of the substantial differences in the determinants of health between these two groups, most especially Latinos in the Target Area compared to whites in the rest of Monroe County, it is reasonable to question why the differences in the premature death rates are not greater.

National studies have reported a similar phenomenon, sometimes referred to as the Hispanic Mortality Paradox. It is believed that certain aspects of Latino culture such as *simpatia* (importance of maintaining interpersonal harmony) and *familismo* (importance of keeping warm family relationships) may help protect one from the potentially adverse effects of harmful physical or social environments. The notion is consistent with data in the full “Nuestra Salud” report that show Latinos in the Target Area, a geography with several tightly knit Latino communities, experience the lowest rates of premature mortality compared to whites and African Americans in the same area.

Additionally, it is thought that the gradual assimilation of recently immigrated Latinos helps to create a buffer for the potentially adverse effects of challenging living conditions. This explanation would suggest that, as Latinos stay longer in the U.S., any protective buffer will dissipate, leading to a growth in ethnic mortality disparities. The significant differences in intermediate outcomes discussed in this summary may be a signal that ethnic health disparities will become a growing issue in the years to come.

It is Time to Act

The poverty of our Latino community being uncared for, or inadequately cared for, can be eliminated.

Future action should be directed at policy changes and programs that will improve the Target Area ZIP codes — 14605, 14613, and 14621 — where a large concentration of Latinos lives in our community. Any solutions and policy changes must take into account the roles that social and environmental determinants play in creating and maintaining health care disparities. In addition, it is important to acknowledge that many aspects of our lives, including housing, economics, and safety influence the health of our people.

This work cannot be sustained by one agency or individual. Only with a multi-agency, collaborative approach can we tackle health disparities and ensure that all — regardless of race or residency — have access to resources and opportunities needed to be healthy and to stay healthy.

“Healthy food is very expensive, and hard to find in our neighborhood. You’re not going to find any yogurt place around here.”
The Latino Health Coalition, convened by Finger Lakes Health Systems Agency, strives to eliminate health disparities among Latinos in our community by engaging leaders to design solutions to top priorities, from youth risk behaviors to health literacy, economic stress, mental health, and cultural competency. Using non-medical interventions, the Coalition works to improve the scope, quality, and availability of health services.

FLHSA is an independent community health planning organization working collaboratively with multi-stakeholder groups to improve health quality and access and to eliminate health care disparities. The agency envisions Rochester and the Finger Lakes region becoming America's healthiest community with health equity for all people in the region, while serving as a national model for continuous improvement in community health, health care cost, and quality.
The brochure is a summary of the Latino health status report. The full report, including references, is available online at flhsa.org.