Risk and Resilience in Latinos
A Community-Based Participatory Research Study

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Background: Latino youth in low-income households have a higher likelihood of poor educational and health outcomes than their peers. Protective factors, such as parental support, improve chances of success for youth. A community–academic partnership used community-based participatory research principles to examine perceptions of resilience among Latino young people in low-income households.

Methods: Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted in 2007 with Latino young people living in an urban low-income housing complex (n=20); their parents (n=10); and representatives from local community-based organizations (n=8) to explore their definitions of youth “success,” and barriers to and facilitators of success. Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, coded, and analyzed using content-analysis and grounded theory in 2007.

Results: Participants identified self, family, and community factors as potential sources of support. Parents appeared to de-emphasize community resources, expressing that success resulted primarily from a child’s individual desire, bolstered by family support. All stakeholder groups perceived peers more as potential barriers to achieving success than as potential sources of support.

Conclusions: These findings raise the possibility that in this community, low-income Latino parents’ beliefs about community resources may act as a barrier to seeking assistance outside the family. Results also suggest that Latino youth recognize the benefits of interacting with adults outside the family and are accepting of help from the community. Resilience promotion programs in this population may benefit from engaging parents and community members in addition to young people. Parent-focused programs could explore parental beliefs about youth success, and youth programs could engage adult community members to generate positive interactions and messages.

Introduction

For young people, risk factors such as poverty, violence exposure, and family conflict are associated with poor developmental outcomes, including school failure, substance abuse, and violent behaviors. Latino young people are among those at highest risk for poor outcomes. About one third of Latino young people in the U.S. live in poverty. Young Latino men have higher rates of exposure to violence among family, friends, and acquaintances, and death by gang-related violence, than young men in other racial/ethnic groups. Homicide is the second leading cause of death among Latino young people, with four times as many Latinos dying of homicide as white young people. Rates of attempted suicide are higher than those of African-American and white young people, and the high school dropout rate is 22% for Latinos nationally. In California, these issues are of particular importance, as Latinos constitute 32% of the population.

Not all who grow up in challenging environments, however, have poor outcomes. The process of overcoming the negative effects of risk exposure, or the ability to cope positively with adversity, is called resilience. Resilience is promoted by protective factors, which improve the chances of success for at-risk individuals. In resilience models, risk and protective factors include characteristics of the child; his/her family; and his/her peers, community, society, and culture.

Individual protective factors include intrapersonal (e.g., cognitive functioning, creativity, adaptability, self-
efficacy, self-esteem, anger and impulse control, positive temperament, motivation, purpose); interpersonal (e.g., social skills, empathy, communication skills); and group membership (e.g., activism, religiosity, racial identity) factors. \(^7\) Family-level protective factors include those that provide instrumental (e.g., stable family resources); social (e.g., family connectedness); and moral (e.g., spirituality and religion, high academic expectations) support and stability. \(^7\) Many family-level protective factors specifically relate to parent–child relationships and parenting skills (e.g., parental support, monitoring and supervision, consistent discipline, household rules and responsibilities, good family communication, authoritative parenting style). \(^7\)

Characteristics of the larger community, particularly of neighborhoods and schools, are also associated with increased resilience in young people and mirror family-level protective factors. \(^9\) Support systems in the community, high community expectations for children, racial diversity, low unemployment, and high levels of community resources and networks improve resilience. \(^8\) School-related protective factors include school connectedness, opportunities for children to participate in school programs, high-quality education, positive school experiences, and socially supportive, pro-social peer groups. \(^7\)

Although some research has focused on risk and protective factors for African-American and white young people, \(^4\) few studies have attempted to identify culturally specific factors among Latino young people. Proposed risk factors for Latino young people include acculturative stress, lack of parental English-speaking ability, and low parental education. \(^16\) Cultural constructs such as emphases on family (familismo) and relationships (personalismo) are identified as potential strengths that can deter health-compromising behaviors. \(^1\) Family life may have a particularly large effect for Latino adolescents’ behavior. Studies suggest family solidarity, cohesion, and interdependence are important for Latino families, even into adolescence; in one study, Latinos (89%) were more likely than whites (67%) or African Americans (68%) to agree that relatives are more important than friends. \(^17\) To better understand protective factors among Latino young people, an exploratory study was conducted using a community-based participatory research approach focusing on Latino young people living in low-income housing.

**Methods**

**Setting and Sample**

This qualitative study was developed as a community-based participatory research (CBPR) effort in collaboration with residents from the second largest Section 8 (low-income) housing complex in Los Angeles, and providers of support services in the neighborhood. The housing complex has 2200 registered residents. Almost 1000 of these are aged <18 years, and 500 are aged 14–17 years. Over 60% are Latino, and many speak Spanish as their preferred language, although most young people are English-speaking or bilingual.

Community-based participatory research encourages researchers and community members to collaboratively answer questions posed by the community, collect data locally, build community capacity to conduct research and to address local needs, and communicate results directly to the community for its use. \(^16\) The collaborative nature of CBPR makes it a valuable methodology for understanding how participants in various domains of young people’s lives affect the resilience process, and use this information to promote community-level change.

The CBPR team included academic researchers; members of the housing complex’s Resident Management Council (RMC); and providers of social services in the neighborhood. Prior research conducted with adults in this housing complex had identified a need to explore youth resilience promotion and youth engagement in the community, with a focus on assets rather than deficits. Using CBPR principles, community-identified needs were responded to by collaboratively designing a research study to answer these questions. Each step of the project was developed in close collaboration with the RMC of the housing complex and local community-based organizations (CBOs). Community input was elicited regarding study design. After various data collection methods such as surveys, focus groups, and interviews were discussed, consensus for the design was a set of qualitative, semi-structured interviews of young people, parents, and leaders of local CBOs to explore each group’s definition of youth success and perceptions of risk and protective factors for Latino young people living in the housing complex. Data collection was conducted from June 2007 to August 2007.

**Data Collection**

This study was approved by the University of California, Los Angeles IRB. Young people and parents were recruited in partnership with the RMC. Research team members attended public community and monthly regional meetings to introduce the project to the community. The RMC distributed flyers and information sheets in the community, and community center staff distributed informational flyers to young people during community center activities. All Latino young people aged 11–17 years living in the complex and all adults currently raising adolescents in their home were eligible to participate. English and Spanish flyers were delivered to all housing units. Until thematic saturation for the interviews was reached, all respondents who called the research team were invited to participate, and all accepted. Four adults and two young people were excluded because they called the researchers after thematic saturation was reached. Informed consent and assent forms, in English and Spanish, were reviewed in person with each participant. These included permission to audiotape. Forms were translated into Spanish; back-translated
into English for accuracy; and reviewed by RMC members as well as two adolescents, two parents, and one CBO representative. Two parent interviews were conducted in Spanish by a Spanish-speaking interviewer. Representatives of CBOs were identified and recruited using a snowball sampling technique.

The interview guide was developed with contributions from the researchers, RMC, and other community members. With input from parents, young people, and CBO leaders, questions were designed to include topics and information that would benefit each stakeholder group. The initial document, created by the CBPR team, was reviewed and modified by two adolescents, two parents, and one CBO representative. Table 1 shows the youth interview guide.

The first author conducted semi-structured interviews with Latino young people aged 11–17 years (n=20) and parents (n=10) from the housing complex and with representatives of CBOs, including after-school and recreational program staff and directors (n=8). Three of the parents were parents of interviewed young people. The number of young people and parents interviewed was determined through thematic saturation. Sets of five interviews in each of these stakeholder groups were conducted and analyzed, and interviews were stopped when thematic saturation was achieved. One representative from each of the eight CBOs that provide most of the youth and family services in the housing complex was interviewed. Youth interviews were 45 minutes. Young people answered open-ended questions about the social structures of youth in the housing complex, their definitions of success, and perceptions of risk and protective factors for themselves and their peers. Young people also completed demographic questionnaires. Parents participated in similar 45-minute semi-structured interviews, answering open-ended questions about their definitions of youth success and perceptions of risk and protective factors for young people in the housing complex, and completed demographic questionnaires. Representatives of CBOs participated in 45-minute semi-structured interviews as well. Participants completed questionnaires regarding services provided by their organizations. They answered open-ended questions regarding their perceptions of success, risk factors, and protective factors for young people in the housing complex and what they felt their role was in helping young people be successful.

### Analysis

Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and entered in a qualitative data management system (ATLAS.ti) for initial coding. Content analysis was conducted using a combination of inductive and deductive techniques. The constant comparison method of grounded theory was used in the analysis to look for similarities and differences in statements within informant interviews and between interviews. Transcripts were analyzed using a multi-stage cutting-and-sorting technique. Two coders reviewed the transcripts and categorized text into general themes. Quotations within each of these themes were then sorted into subthemes.

Two additional coders were then given a basic operational definition of the general themes and asked to categorize quotations based on the themes identified through prior analysis. Cohen’s kappas were used to assess inter-rater reliability between the sorts of the independent sorters and the initial sorts listed in the codebooks for each major theme. Cohen’s kappa was between 0.77 and 0.93 for themes. Typically, kappas above 0.70 are considered acceptably reliable. Thematic coding helped determine similarities and differences across groups—young people, parents, and CBO representatives. Initial results of themes and subthemes were discussed with the RMC, two adolescents, two parents, and one CBO representative. Interpretation of results, relevance to community members, and optimal ways to present findings to community members were discussed.

### Results

The average age of the adolescent sample was 13.5 years (range, 12–17 years), and average length of residence in the housing complex was 8.3 years (range, 1 month–17 years). Fifty-five percent of youth were female, 95% were U.S.-born, and 40% were from households with single mothers. The average age of the parents was 42 years (range, 20–52 years), and average length of residence in the housing complex was 13.2 years (range, 4–43 years). Seven of the 10 interviewed parents were mothers as opposed to fathers, and two were exclusively Spanish-speaking. Each parent had 1–4 adolescents aged 11–17 years in their household. The eight CBO representatives were from CBOs located within 3 miles of the housing complex. Representatives came from the health, juvenile justice, mental health, education, and recreation service sectors.

General themes identified in participant interviews include: definitions of success, barriers to success, and facilitators of success. Barriers and facilitators were
subdivided into individual (or self-perceived); family; peer; and community domains. General themes were identified a priori, and subthemes were identified through the data using an inductive approach.

**Definitions of Success**

The themes observed in participants’ definitions of success provided information about goals and expectations in this community. A successful person was often described by young people, parents, and CBO representatives as one who is able to “overcome problems and reach goals.” Goals included financial security, employment, and the ability to leave the complex and live independently.

One parent described a young man who “was already tagging and trying to get into gangs but now he’s a computer engineer, he can make $75 an hour, he married one of the girls from here. They have their own house, their own things, their own work, and have a beautiful family. To come up from the projects and be somebody, do something, that’s the point.” Likewise, a CBO representative said a “26-year-old young man, a former gang member, is getting his tattoos removed, graduated from high school, came to me for a letter of reference to get a job.” An adolescent told a similar story: “She went down a bad road, she barely made it out of high school, but she had a dream and she wanted it real bad, and now she has her own house, she owns a car, she’s got a job. That was a real successful person. I don’t want to end like them bums in the street, so I’m trying to go to school and do what I have to do because I believe I want to go to college. And I’ll be, like, one of the first from the hood to actually make it out.”

The act of overcoming obstacles appears to be an important part of the definition of success for adolescents in this community, and is perceived as a significant goal. The other goals include financial security, employment, and being able to leave the complex and live independently.

**Barriers to Success**

The process of goal attainment among adolescents was explored by investigating barriers to and facilitators of success in their lives. From participant responses, the researchers identified the major themes of individual, family, peer, and community domains. General themes were identified a priori, and subthemes were identified through the data using an inductive approach.

All stakeholder groups identified individual fear as a barrier to success. Participants expressed fear of gangs, violence, crime, and police harassment. Stigmatization by those outside the community was identified as a barrier by many of the parents and CBO representatives but only a few adolescents. Commonly cited family barriers included lack of parental involvement, low family expectations, and negative influence of family members. Interestingly, all stakeholder groups generally considered peers to be a negative influence and barrier to success. Even adolescents stated that, although their friends sometimes helped them, it was easy to succumb to peer pressure and to become involved in a negative peer group: “Sometimes you pick the wrong crowd to hang out with even if you know it’s wrong, little by little their habits start to kind of rub off on you.”

At the community level, some adolescents and parents, and all CBO representatives, identified community violence as a barrier to success. In addition, all stakeholder groups identified low community expectations as significant barriers to youth success. One adolescent mentioned the presence of “the haters’ that tell you, ‘Oh, you’re not going to go to college. That’s stupid.’” Another stated that “a teacher . . . said that we’re never going to get anywhere in our lives.”

**Facilitators of Success**

The researchers identified major themes of individual, family, and community (but not peer) facilitators for success (Table 3). Individual or self-perceived facilitators widely identified by all stakeholder groups included getting a good education and being self-motivated. Goal-directedness was identified by most adolescents but only some parents and a few CBO representatives.

Family involvement and expectations were the main themes in the family domain. Parents focused almost entirely on the benefits of adequate parental monitoring and strong relationships between children and family members. One parent expressed the critical role of families in helping children overcome obstacles: “The families are important because the principles they learn in their families are those they will continue on with. Families have to give them advice, teach them the difference between right and wrong choices, and that makes a difference in what obstacles will be there. Children are weak sometimes . . . but if you are paying attention to them, if you are saying ‘this is bad, this is good,’ they won’t look for attention in other places.”

Family involvement was identified as important by all parents, all CBO representatives, and all but one of the adolescents (the discordant adolescent opinion was that “if you’re a teenager, it’s on you basically, your parents can push you, but you’re old enough to say no”). High family expectations, however, were identified as a facilitator of success by many adolescents, but only a few parents and some CBO representatives. “They expect a lot from me so I can give them that and more,” said one adolescent.

Feeling safe and supported in the community, participating in school and community programs,
and both observing and becoming positive role models in the community were the facilitators most commonly cited in the community domain. Adolescents identified many more of these community-related protective factors than did parents and CBO representatives. Most parents felt that raising a child is a private responsibility of the parents and family, and that community organizations should not ordinarily play a significant role. One parent stated, “It’s the family first,” and another said, “The only thing they know is their mom and dad when they’re young and later if the kid’s got a problem, an older brother, an older sister could be a big help, or then he goes for an aunt, an uncle, a cousin, mostly the family.” Parents identified only two community programs, both of which were based in the housing complex, as facilitators of success; programs identified by the adolescents were more diverse and located both inside and outside the complex. CBO representatives all identified their own programs as resources, as well as the programs in the housing complex.

Although most stakeholders mentioned the importance of positive role models, only adolescents routinely identified specific community members as bolstering resilience; just a few parents and some CBO representatives did the same. Most adolescents identified teachers as important sources of support, whereas only one parent felt that way. In fact, many parents actively viewed teachers as negative influences. While describing her role model, one adolescent talked about a teacher who “paid attention and cared...he would motivate me to go to class, and cared enough to call my parents when he didn’t have to.” Parents, on the other hand, made statements such as, “A lot of the teachers don’t show interest in kids’ lives, it’s more like it’s just a job.” In general, adolescents identified adults outside the family as serving in roles that facilitate success far more often than parents and CBO representatives did.

### Table 2. Quotations for barriers to success

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pathway</th>
<th>Youth</th>
<th>Parent</th>
<th>CBO representative</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Self-perceived</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Fear</td>
<td>“… because when they shoot I get worried just in case one of my family members or something” – girl, age 12</td>
<td>“sometimes you’re afraid to just walk out of your house”</td>
<td>“dangers of people they called enemies”</td>
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<td>Stigma</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Family</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Influence</td>
<td>“Because that’s what they’re used to...3-year-olds tearing up their daddy’s hoods, like yeah I’m from here...because that’s what they’ve grown up to see” – girl, age 17</td>
<td>“drugs and things start at home sometimes because mom and dad are into it”</td>
<td>“there are kids who follow the footsteps and stray as their parents did”</td>
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<td>Lack of caring</td>
<td>“… when parents don’t really care” – boy, age 17</td>
<td>“… he says that I kind of neglected him, that’s what made him go into gangs”</td>
<td>“some parents ... do not offer their support to their own children”</td>
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<td><strong>Peers</strong></td>
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<td>Peer pressure</td>
<td>“you hang out with the wrong crowd, ... their habits start to rub off on you” – girl, age 16</td>
<td>“A lot of the children are not leaders, they are followers, they are the ones that fail”</td>
<td>“It is the degree to which their peers value what they’re doing, think that what they’re doing is cool.”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Community</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Violence</td>
<td>“My mom doesn’t want me there because they just killed one of our friends there.” – girl, age 12</td>
<td>“There’s drugs and the gang members that are always collecting children”</td>
<td>“I think that any kid who can make it past the age of 18 without being shot at, or shot, from what I’ve seen that’s a biggie in this community.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low expectations</td>
<td>“the ‘haters’...there’s a lot of people out there that will put you down, like tell you, ‘Oh, you’re not going to go to college. That’s stupid.’” – girl, age 15</td>
<td>“(people) will constantly tell them you’re not going to do nothing in life, you’re good for nothing”</td>
<td>“you get a sense of helplessness”</td>
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</table>

CBO, community-based organizations
Discussion and Implications

This CBPR study of Latino young people in a Los Angeles housing complex sheds light on youth perceptions of risk and resilience, and the similarities and differences between these perceptions and those of parents and CBO representatives. Success for this group of young people was defined as overcoming the many obstacles they face, and reaching the educational and financial goals they identify for themselves. These young people believed that although their peer groups were influential, it was the adults in their lives who had the most ability to help them achieve their goals—and it was these adults whom they looked to for guidance.

Parents, schools, and CBOs all appeared to have a role in resilience promotion. Although parents focused primarily on the individual and family as protective factors, young people identified potential positive influences in many areas of their lives and looked beyond themselves and their parents for resources to help them achieve their goals. These Latino parents’ strong perception that family is the main mode of helping children may be a reflection of familismo.1 Why their children appear more likely to look outside of the family and accept help from the larger community is unclear; having grown up in a more multicultural environment where concepts such as familismo are attenuated might be a contributing factor.24 It is also possible that parents in this housing complex are simply more isolated, less aware, and less trusting of available resources than their children.

### Table 3. Quotations for facilitators for success

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<th></th>
<th>Youth</th>
<th>Parent</th>
<th>CBO representative</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>“going to school, getting a good education” – boy, age 13</td>
<td>“I think it’s all about education . . . for their future.”</td>
<td>“coming to school and being able to focus and learn”</td>
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<td>Goal-directed</td>
<td>“looking around, you don’t want to live here forever” – girl, age 15</td>
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<td>Self-motivated</td>
<td>“It’s all in that person. You have to be strong enough.” – girl, age 17</td>
<td>“It’s up to the child the way they want to do.”</td>
<td>“you plant seeds and you never know when the seed will just sprout and give them life”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family</td>
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<tr>
<td>Involvement</td>
<td>“they motivate you and push you to do good” – boy, age 13</td>
<td>“it’s the family first”</td>
<td>“the power of families . . . as resources”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“if you’re a teenager, it’s on you basically, your parents can push you but you’re old enough to say no” – girl, age 17</td>
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<td>“the facilitator and barrier is the degree to which the family is engaged, that is number one”</td>
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<td>High expectations</td>
<td>“they expect a lot from me so I give them that and more” – boy, age 13</td>
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<td>Community</td>
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<td>Support</td>
<td>“when I’m sad she’s always helping me, like a real mother would do” – girl, age 12</td>
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<td>“a person who cares about the kids, loves them, shows them when mama and dad don’t care, we do”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“you meet so many people here, and then they become your family” – girl, age 12</td>
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<td>Teachers</td>
<td>“teachers get kids motivated, and doing what they have to do instead of throwing their lives away” – boy, age 12</td>
<td>“A lot of the teachers don’t show interest in kid’s lives, it’s more like it’s just a job.”</td>
<td>“They’re just trying to get them out of the system.”</td>
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<td>Programs</td>
<td>“instead of sitting around in your house you get to do something, they keep us out from the streets” – female, age 16</td>
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<td>“Throughout the years I’ve seen more and more programs offered in the Gardens that offer the kids opportunities for participation beyond the parents”</td>
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<td>Role models</td>
<td>“Having a good role model gives us an idea of what we should be” – boy, age 13</td>
<td>“They show the kids they could go a different path than being a gang member selling drugs.”</td>
<td>“It’s good to show someone that kid can relate to that came out of that neighborhood.”</td>
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CBO, community-based organizations
Youths’ ambitions and goals can either be encouraged by positive messages or be derailed by negative messages they receive from the adults surrounding them. Parents and community providers showed little evidence of considering the effects of adult expectations on young people, despite the fact that young people often identified these expectations as having a positive impact.

Teachers appeared to have an especially important, potentially positive role. Despite the negative perceptions that parents and CBO representatives had of teachers, young people seemed to value teachers in a way that parents and CBO representatives might have found surprising. Regardless of these differences, all stakeholder groups agreed that education is an important facilitator for youth success. Young people also sought support from other community members and took advantage of a wider range of community programs than parents recognized.

This study contributes to the existing resilience literature by providing insight into the protective factors identified by at-risk Latino young people, their parents, and local CBO representatives. The current results are similar to those reported in studies among other ethnicities with respect to protective factors such as goal-directedness, self-motivation, family involvement and expectations, and the importance of community and school support and resources. A distinct finding here is the strong emphasis on family by young people, parents, and those who assist these families; this finding is consistent with past research about the importance of family among Latinos. Also striking are the overwhelmingly positive perceptions among young people of the importance of teachers in their lives, and the discrepancy between youth and adult perceptions of community resources. Factors such as language barriers and acculturative stress, which have been proposed as risk factors for Latino young people in previous literature, were not identified as barriers by this sample. This result may have been a result of the fact that most of the young people lived in a relatively homogeneous ethnic enclave that is primarily Latino and Spanish-speaking (or bilingual), and they may not have been as affected by these factors.

The results of this study were presented to community members and leaders of local CBOs at community meetings. An attempt was made to address the adults and CBO leaders and emphasize the effects that each of them has on the young people of their community every day. Thus, through this CBPR study, the authors have been able to better understand the concept of resilience in Latino adolescents, and community members have developed a better understanding of the needs of young people in their community.

This knowledge has been translated into action within the community in a number of ways. In response to young people reporting the importance of positive role models, community leaders have worked with local community agencies and academic institutions to begin a mentoring program. This program links college students with students from the local elementary school to form consistent, positive mentoring relationships. Also, adult community leaders and community-based organizations are partnering to create parenting programs to improve parental relationships with teachers.

Finally, in response to the reported importance of teachers in the lives of these young people, community members successfully advocated for a school-based resiliency promotion program for young people, which is being implemented and evaluated in 2008–2009. This resiliency program focuses on the importance of building healthy relationships and learning how to set and achieve goals. The program is facilitated by a consistent group of adults who provide students with a supportive atmosphere and opportunities to participate in the school and community. The goals of this program are to increase facilitators of youth success by having high expectations of students, providing them with the skills to meet these expectations, and creating a safe school and community environment. The program is being evaluated using CBPR methodology through continued collaboration between the authors and community members. The qualitative study has thus led to the development of a sustained, community–academic partnership to support youth development.

Limitations

This qualitative study is limited by the small sample size and the location of participants in a low-income housing complex that may not be representative of broader populations. Because of the lack of youth–parent dyads, it was not possible to make direct comparisons between individual young people and their parents. Direct comparisons may provide greater detail regarding the concordance or discordance between youth and parent perceptions.

Conclusion

Youth resilience is developed through a combination of many factors. Families, schools, and communities must work together to build youth assets and help them be successful. This study suggests that low-income Latino young people may recognize adults outside their families as resources more often than parents and other adults in the community realize. This study illustrates how the CBPR process can successfully explore a research topic that is important to both the community and the researcher, provide information of value to all stakeholders, and lead to community action.
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