

YOUNG LATINO CHILDREN— READY TO LEARN AND LEAD?

The increasing diversity of the American child* population provides policymakers and elected officials a glimpse into our future—a future which is becoming increasingly Latino.† The United States is undergoing a dramatic demographic shift in which a large share of the White population is aging at a time when children of color have now become the majority of all births.¹ Currently, Latino children comprise a third of the Latino population and nearly a quarter of the overall child population. Given these demographic changes, the success of Latino children is becoming increasingly important to the future success of the country as a whole. Yet the contributions they will end up making as adults are largely dependent on decisions made by today's leaders. Our leaders must address the challenges Latino children face to ensure that both they and our nation have a bright future.‡

While all children deserve access to a good education, quality health care, safe communities, a family able to provide for them, and communities ready to nurture them, Latino children ages 0–8 face multiple challenges that can hinder their future success. Young Latino children are coming of age during a time of rapid economic, political, and demographic change. Today's young Latino children are experiencing these momentous changes at an especially vulnerable time during their development—early childhood—when their minds and bodies are going through critical stages of growth and are strongly influenced by the families and communities in which they live.

The need for investments in these young children is urgent given that by 2018, Latinos will make up 18% of our country's workforce² and compose a significant share of the workers responsible for funding America's social safety net. The education they receive today will directly affect our future economy, so investments in these early years are critical to put young Latino children on the path to success. Policymakers must invest now in the programs and policies that will promote and nurture their development and prepare them for the future. If today's young Latino child is not adequately prepared to enter the workforce ready to compete in the global economy, then our nation is neglecting an important segment of the population crucial to our future growth and economic success.

* Throughout this document, the term "child" or "children" refers to all children under the age of 18, and "young child" or "young children" refers to children ages 0–8, unless otherwise noted.

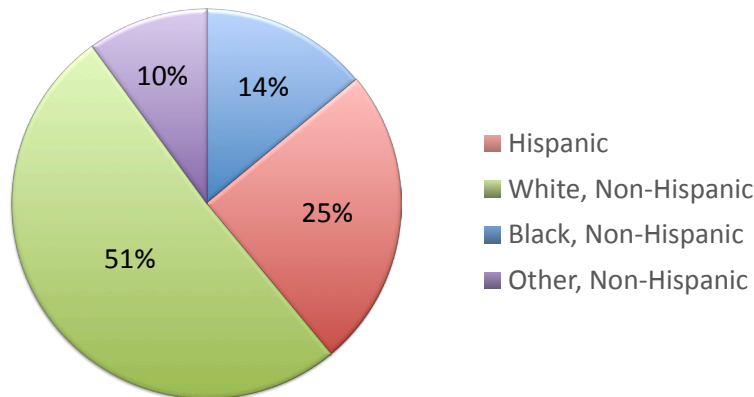
† The terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race.

‡ This fact sheet was authored in October 2012 by Liany Elba Arroyo, Associate Director of the Education and Children's Policy Project of the National Council of La Raza's (NCLR) Office of Research, Advocacy, and Legislation, with input provided by Sara Benitez, Research Analyst, and Patricia Foxen, Deputy Director of Research, NCLR. NCLR is the largest national Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States. This fact sheet was produced with funding from the Birth to Five Policy Alliance and a funder who wishes to remain anonymous.

Sociodemographic Characteristics

The overall Latino population grew rapidly over the last twenty years, totaling 52 million* in 2011.³ Since the 2010 Census, the Latino population has grown by 1.5 million individuals, representing more than half of the people added to the entire U.S. population during that time.⁴ However, contrary to popular belief the growth of the Latino community is being driven by births, not immigration. From April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2011, Latinos accounted for 26.1% of all U.S. births.⁵ Latino children ages 0–8 now represent slightly over 25% of all U.S. young children and are set to become an even larger segment of the population if current trends hold (see Figure 1).⁶

Figure 1.
Child Population Ages 0–8 by Race/Ethnicity, 2010



Source: National Council of La Raza calculation using U.S. Census Bureau, "Annual State Resident Population Estimates for Six Race Groups (Five Race-Alone Groups and One Group with Two or More Race Groups) by Age, Sex, and Hispanic Origin, April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2011," *Population Estimates Program*. Washington, DC, 2012.

The growth in the Latino child population is fueling the growth of the nation's overall child population. From 2000 to 2011, the overall child population growth rate was 2.2% for the country, while for Latinos, it was 40.4%. The data for children ages 0–8 reflects the same trend, with growth for all young children at 2.9% and for young Latino children, 37.2%. However, these figures do not tell the full story of the impending demographic shift facing our nation. Among Whites, the growth rate for children ages 0–8 was -11%, while for Blacks it was -5%.⁷ Had it not been for births to Latina women, the nation's growth rate among young children would have been negative, making the overall child population growth rate negative in turn.

These young children are overwhelmingly U.S.-born citizens. Among all Latino children ages 0–17, 92.4% are U.S. citizens. This percentage rises to 96.9% among the younger 0–8-year-old group, which is an increase of almost 2% since 2007. Although the citizenship rate for Latino 0–8-year-olds is less than for White (99.5%) and Black (99%) children of the same age, the percentage of young Latino children who are citizens will continue to increase given that 98.8% of the youngest group, Latino 0–2 year olds, are U.S. citizens.⁸

The impact of the increase in the young Latino child demographic will be particularly felt in the American electorate. In 2010, there were nearly 9 million Latino children ages 0–8.⁹ When these children turn 18 between 2020 and 2028, they will add an additional 8.7 million potential voters to the electorate.¹⁰ This will represent at least 1.6 million more potential voters than the older age group of 9–17-year-olds who began turning 18 in 2010.

* These data do not include the 3.7 million residents of Puerto Rico.

Barriers

Young Latino children are on the cusp of becoming a critical part of our nation’s workforce and future leadership if the right supports are in place. However, they face a precarious situation. Without much-needed investment in their well-being, education, and the communities they reside in, they—and by extension our nation—face a bleak future.

Multiple barriers confront young Latino children. Factors such as poverty, lack of health insurance, lower levels of being read to, and low preschool attendance act increasingly as barriers to their development and readiness to enter the educational system. In order to provide young Latino children with the best shot at becoming productive adults, we must invest in policies and strategies that address these factors.

Poverty

From 2008 to 2010, the nation’s poverty rate increased for all racial/ethnic groups due to the recession and slow recovery, and while the latest data show that the poverty rate is stabilizing, poverty among children remains stubbornly high. Young Latino children are especially hard-hit with 32.5% of them living in poverty.¹¹ While young Latino children do not have the highest poverty rate among all young children, they represent the largest share of young children in poverty. From 2008–2010, young Latino children represented over a third of all 0–8-year-olds living in poverty (see Table 1).¹² This represents an increase of three percentage points over the 2005–2007 timeframe. With the exception of Hispanic and Other non-Hispanic 0–8-year-olds, all other racial and ethnic groups saw a decline in their share of 0–8-year-olds living in poverty as a percentage of the overall total.

Table 1.
Distribution of Children (0–8) Living in Poverty by Race/Ethnicity, 2008–2010

Race/Ethnicity	Percent
Hispanic	36%
White, non-Hispanic	32%
Black, non-Hispanic	25%
Other, non-Hispanic	8%

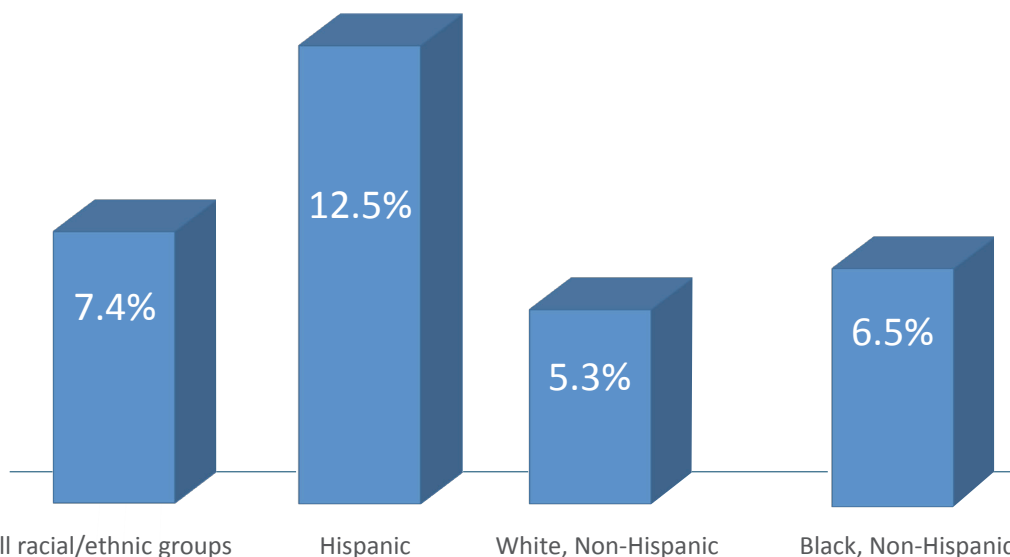
Source: Population Reference Bureau Calculation using U.S. Census Bureau, “2008–2010 American Community Survey 3-Year Public Use Microdata Samples (PUMS),” *American Community Survey*. Washington, DC, 2009, www.census.gov/acs/www/data_documentation/pums_data/ (accessed August 2012).

Reducing childhood poverty is essential, as poverty experienced in childhood has been shown to produce many harmful and long-lasting effects. For example, children born into poverty are likelier to be poor as adults, not graduate from high school, become teen parents, and/or be in poor health than children not born into poverty.^{13, 14}

Health Insurance

A healthy child is ready to learn. However, many young Latino children lack health insurance, placing them at risk for missed school days and falling behind academically. Among young children ages 0–8, 12.5% of Latinos are uninsured, more than double the percentage of White and nearly double that of Black 0–8-year-olds (see Figure 2).¹⁵

Figure 2.
Percent of Children Ages 0–8 Without Health Insurance, 2008–2010



Source: Population Reference Bureau Calculation using U.S. Census Bureau, “2008–2010 American Community Survey 3-Year Public Use Microdata Samples (PUMS),” *American Community Survey*. Washington, DC, 2009, www.census.gov/acs/www/data_documentation/pums_data/ (accessed August 2012).

When children have health insurance, their overall well-being improves as they receive timelier diagnoses of health conditions, are able to avoid unnecessary hospitalizations, receive improved asthma care, and miss fewer days of school.¹⁶

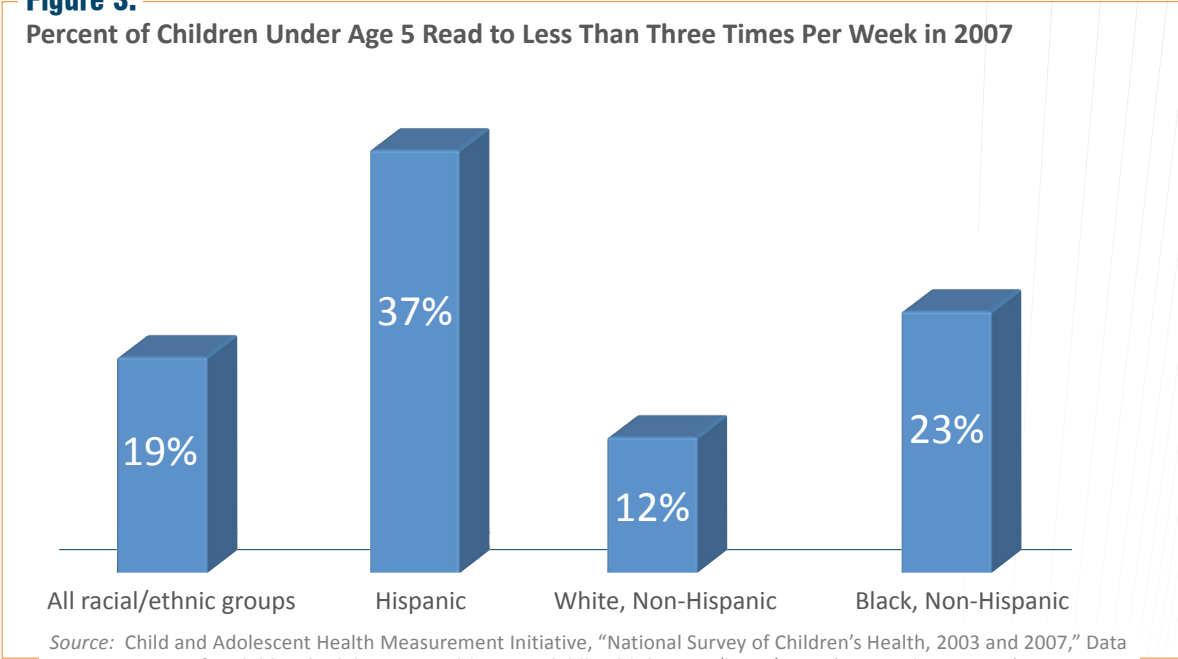
Family Literacy and Preschool Attendance

The development of language and reading skills starts in infancy. One of the ways that these skills are developed is by being read to. Recent research finds that infants learn to speak by watching a parent’s lips,¹⁷ and a child learns to read by seeing and hearing the connection between words and sounds.¹⁸ Latino children start off at a disadvantage in this area due to numerous factors including lower levels of parental education, literacy, and knowledge about the importance of reading to children. In 2007, 36% of Latino children under age five were read to less than three times per week, the highest proportion among all racial/ethnic groups (see Figure 3).¹⁹

Latino young children also attend preschool at rates far lower than their White and Black peers. In 2010, nearly half (46.6%) of all Latino children ages 3–5 were not in preschool or kindergarten, compared to only 38.5% of White and 37.4% of Black 3–5-year-olds.²⁰

The benefits of preschool cannot be overstated. Several long-term studies have demonstrated that children who attend high-quality preschool do better in school overall, are more likely to graduate from high school, are less likely to be arrested, and earn more income over their lifetime than their peers who did not attend preschool.^{21, 22} A lack of preschool participation contributes to the school readiness gap; one California study, for example, has documented that Latino children begin kindergarten two months behind White students in reading and math.²³ It is apparent that the achievement gap that plagues our nation is truly a readiness gap that starts well before a Latino child steps into a kindergarten class. To address this gap, it is critical to expand the number of young Latino children who are read to since birth and who attend preschool.

Figure 3.
Percent of Children Under Age 5 Read to Less Than Three Times Per Week in 2007



As a large and growing part of the child population, young Latino children’s multiple barriers to success must be addressed by our leaders so that they can reach their full potential. Not only is their potential at risk, but so is our country’s future if we do not make the necessary investments so that they, and the communities that support them, can thrive. That investment must start now when they are at their most vulnerable and when future harms can be prevented rather than remediated later in life.

Endnotes

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