



INTRODUCTION

Latino youth are both a growing and extremely diverse population. One of the most important issues facing Latino youth is that of reproductive and sexual health. This brief presents a profile of adolescent Latino reproductive health and addresses areas that affect this crucial aspect of young Latinos' lives. **Section I: Demographics** provides a demographic summary of the Latino youth population. **Section II: Reproductive Health of Latino Adolescents** summarizes current knowledge and findings pertaining to adolescent Latino reproductive health. The remaining three sections (**Socio-Economic Status, Immigration and Generation** and **Family**) address issues that are of both general importance to Latino youth and play key roles in their sexual and reproductive health. Under each topic, an overview is presented, followed by how the topic of interest is related to the reproductive and sexual health of Latino youth.

I. DEMOGRAPHICS

Size and Growth

The extraordinary growth of the Latino population living in the US during the last decade propelled them past African Americans to become the largest minority group in 2000.¹ More than one-third (36%) of the 35.3 million Latinos counted in the US Census in 2000 were under the age of 18, compared to only 24% of non-Latino whites.² These youth accounted for 16% of the total US youth population; by 2025, Latinos are projected to make up one-quarter of the youth population.³

Diversity

Like all large groups, Latino youth vary in terms of their family backgrounds and resources, their experiences, talents and skills, and their goals for the future. Latino youth differ from one another in additional important ways. Most of these differences stem from the effects and experiences of immigration and/or growing up in an immigrant and/or minority household. Most Latino youth were born in the US; most are also being raised by immigrant parents. Thirteen percent of young Latinos are immigrants to the US, 39% are the US-born children of immigrant parents and 48% were born here to parents who are also US natives.⁴ Each generation has different experiences and thus, different challenges, needs and strengths.

Latinos in the US represent about twenty countries, each with its own culture and history. Therefore, another source of diversity in the Latino youth population is national origin or descent. Two-thirds (66%) of Latinos are of Mexican origin; Central and South America (14%), Puerto Rico (9%), Cuba (4%) and other Caribbean island nations account for the rest of the US Latino population.²

Latinos are a sizable presence in many large states. In fact, in California and Texas, the two most populous states, Latinos accounts for 32% of residents. Most of these are of Mexican origin. In New York and Florida, the third and fourth largest states, Latinos comprise about 15% of the population.⁵ Latinos in New York are predominately of Puerto Rican and Dominican origin and Cubans account for the majority of Latinos in Florida.

Conclusion

The growth and youth of the Latino population in the US offers both challenges and opportunities for communities, as well as those who plan and provide services for youth. Growth is occurring in areas that have traditionally been the home to US Latinos as well as many that have little history with Latino residents. If this growth is handled wisely and policies take all concerned parties into account, these changing demographics can help strengthen and revitalize communities. Such positive outcomes are more likely when federal, state and local governments collaborate with community organizations. The youthfulness of the Latino population suggests that many issues important to this population are related to children, youth and families. Meeting the needs of Latino youth necessitates a substantial investment by both the Latino community and society in general; not meeting these needs will entail far greater economic and personal costs for Latinos and non-Latinos alike.

II. REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH OF LATINO ADOLESCENTS

Sexual Intercourse

Latino youth are more likely than non-Latino white^A youth and less likely than African American youth to have ever had sex.⁶ Among Latino youth, males and females have different patterns of sexual activity. Males are somewhat more likely to have ever had sexual intercourse than females. Half (52%) of Latinas, ages 15-19, had ever had sex in 1995, compared to 61% of Latino males.^{7,8}

^A From here on, "white" refers to non-Latino white.

However, males and females have similar rates of recent sexual activity (i.e., had sex in the last 3 months). Latina females are more likely than males to continue being sexually active: 78% of sexually experienced Latino females are sexually active, compared to 71% of males.⁶ Together, these numbers suggest that although Latinas have lower overall rates of sexual activity than Latino males, once they become sexually experienced, they are more likely than males to continue to be sexually active. This is also the case for whites; two-thirds (67%) of sexually experienced white male teens are sexually active, compared to 78% of sexually experienced females. African American teens have a different pattern. Three-quarters of both males (74%) and females (76%) who have ever had sex reported having had intercourse in the previous three months.⁶

Latino males and females also differ in other aspects of sexual activity, including number of partners and substance use in conjunction with sex. Latino male teens average more lifetime sexual partners than Latinas. One-fifth (21%) of males have had four or more partners; only one in ten (10%) of females have had this many partners. African American teens have a similar gender pattern; 39% of males report at least four sexual partners, as do one in six (16%) sexually experienced females. White males and females are equally likely to have multiple partners; 13% of males and 11% of females report three or more partners.⁶

Overall, one in four (24%) Latino youth report using alcohol or other drugs at last sex. This figure falls between the proportion of whites (28%) and African Americans (18%) who used alcohol or other drugs. Among all racial/ethnic groups, males are more likely to have used alcohol or other drugs than females. One-quarter (26%) of Latino males and 22% of Latinas report such use.⁶

Too many young people experience unwanted or forced sex. Females report higher levels of forced sex than males; in 2001, 12% of Latina teens reported having been forced to have sex, as did 6% of Latino males.⁹ Unwanted and forced sex is more common among younger people who tend to have less say in relationships with older partners and less experience in protecting themselves. One-quarter (24%) of females whose first sex occurred before age 14 report it was non-voluntary; one in ten women who first had sex between ages 19 and 24 said that it was non-voluntary.¹⁰ One in five Latinas (18%) whose first sex occurred before they were sixteen reported that the experience was non-voluntary, a category that includes rape, as did 15% of both whites and

African Americans. The numbers decline to 3% and 5% respectively among those whose first sex occurred after their teens.⁷

Contraceptive Use

Condom use among both males and females and among all racial/ethnic groups of youth increased during the 1990s. In 2001, 59% of Latino males reported using a condom at last sex, an increase from 55% in 1993. Condom use at last sex by females also rose, but remains much lower than for males. In 1993, just over one-third (37%) of females used a condom, by 2001, 48% had.^{6,11} While these trends are positive, four in ten males and more than half of females were potentially at risk for pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) the last time they had sex.

Meanwhile, the proportion of Latino adolescents who reported that they used the pill at last sex declined for both males and females. This trend probably reflects the emphasis placed on condom use in sex education and outreach efforts that target both unintended pregnancies among teens and the risk of STI and HIV transmission. There is little information on the use of other forms of contraception, such as Norplant, Depo-Provera or withdrawal among Latino youth.

Pregnancies and Births

Overall, 16% of Latina teens, ages 15-19, became pregnant in 1995; of every 1,000 Latina teens who had sex, 314 became pregnant.⁸ These figures are similar to those for African Americans (326/1,000), and about twice as high as those for whites (156/1,000).⁸ One-quarter (24%) of pregnant Latina teens chose to have an abortion, 11% experienced a miscarriage. Pregnant white and African American teens were both more likely to opt for abortion; 28% of white teens chose abortion as did 36% of African Americans. One in ten African American teens suffered a miscarriage; among whites, 17% did.⁸

Overall birth rates among 15-19 year olds declined 22% during the 1990s, from 60/1,000 teens in 1990 to 46/1,000 in 2001. During the same period, the Latino teen birth rate fell by 8%. In 1994, it peaked at 108/1,000. That year, Latinos passed African Americans to become the racial/ethnic group with the highest teen fertility rate.¹² By 2001, the Latino teen birth rate fell to 92/1,000. In other words, just over one in eleven 15-19 year-old Latina adolescents gave birth in 2001. In comparison, the birth rate for white teens declined by 29% from 1990 to 2001, from 42/1,000 to 30/1,000. African Americans experienced the steepest drop in rates, falling

from 113/1,000 in 1990 to 73/1,000 by 2001, a 35% decrease.¹²

Conclusion

The high Latino teen birth rate and its relatively slow decline underscore the need to design and implement interventions and programs that are effective in lowering risky sexual behavior among Latino youth. Early and ongoing comprehensive family life education, encompassing information on abstinence and other safer sexual behavior, is necessary given the large proportion of Latino youth that becomes sexually active at a young age. Culturally competent and relevant information and services are needed to reach Latino teens and affect changes in their behavior. Such efforts entail moving beyond solely providing information, resources and services in Spanish; they must be based on a greater understanding of how familial and cultural factors affect the sexual attitudes and behaviors of Latino youth.

III. SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS (SES)

Overview

As is true of any large group, Latinos are represented in all social classes. Nevertheless, Latinos are disproportionately likely to be poor and have low levels of educational attainment. The reasons for this situation are numerous, complex, and not well understood. Certainly, one important reason for the overall lower mean socioeconomic status (SES) of Latinos is the high percentage of immigrants from developing countries who come to the US to escape poverty and improve their families' futures. Many arrive with few years of formal education, skills that do not command high wages in the US economy and low levels of English proficiency. These disadvantages make it more difficult for their children and grandchildren to advance economically. In addition, discrimination against Latinos based on race/ethnicity and country of birth has yet to be eliminated in this country, raising barriers to socioeconomic progress for many Latinos.

Education

Education is a primary route to becoming a productive and financially secure adult; the lack of education is strongly associated with poverty, unemployment and dependence on public assistance. Latinos lag behind whites and often trail African Americans in educational performance and attainment. Less than two-thirds (64%) of Latino young adults had completed high school in 2000, compared to 84% African Americans and 92% of whites.¹³ Early school failure is a key predictor of whether students finish high school. As early as kinder-

garten, Latino children tend to score lower on reading and math proficiency tests than do white children.¹³ This pattern persists through primary and secondary school as the scores of Latino (and African American) students continue to trail those of whites.¹³

Just as early academic performance is a predictor of completing high school, rates of high school graduation are similarly related to college attendance. One-fifth (19%) of Latino young adults are enrolled in college, as are 30% of African Americans and two-fifths (39%) of white youths.¹⁴ Even among high school graduates, Latinos are less likely to go to college than whites or African Americans. Almost half (46%) of whites and two-fifths (39%) of African Americans who graduated from high school go to college. In comparison, only one-third (32%) of Latino high school graduates go on to college.¹⁴

Parents' characteristics influence the educational outcomes of their children. For example, children of college-educated parents tend to do better and go farther in school than the offspring of parents who did not finish high school. Almost half of Latino students' parents have less than a high school education, compared to less than one-fifth of African American and one-tenth of white students' parents.¹⁵

Poverty Status

Poverty is also a risk factor for doing poorly in school, failing to graduate from high school, and failing to go on to higher education. Latino children (27%), along with African American children (30%), are more likely than white children (9%) to live in poverty. An additional 20% of Latino children live in near poverty (between 100 and 150% of the poverty line).¹⁶ Thus, nearly half of Latino children experience deprivation severe enough to potentially interfere with their ability to learn and progress in school. Children from poor families are also more likely to attend schools that have fewer resources than children from non-poor backgrounds. To exacerbate this situation, schools with large numbers of poor children must often deal with additional challenges, such as large class sizes, fewer certified and experienced teachers, and poorer physical facilities.

Reproductive Health

The lower SES of Latino youth plays an important role in their sexual and reproductive health and behavior, particularly in the high teen birth rate among this population. The research literature suggests that higher SES teens delay sex longer¹⁷ and are more likely to use contraception, including condoms.^{18,19,20,21} Moreover, higher SES

teens who become pregnant are more likely to opt to terminate their pregnancy than lower SES teens.^{22,23}

Education

Among young women, teen pregnancy and parenthood is often related to leaving school. Some studies show that teens who become mothers are less likely to graduate from high school; other work shows that teen girls who drop out of high school are more likely to subsequently become pregnant and give birth.^{24,25} In either case, the high rate of teen births among Latinas appears to be linked to their low high school graduation rates. While the vast majority of teen pregnancies are unintended, Latinos are far more likely to say that their pregnancies were intended at the time of conception than are whites and African Americans. Just over half (54%) of Latinos who gave birth said that the birth was intended at conception. In comparison, only one-third (33%) of white teens labeled their birth as intended as did one-quarter (23%) of African Americans.⁷ This suggests that a significant proportion of Latina teens choose, at some level, to forego education for early family formation and parenthood.

Expectations for the Future

Young people's hopes, plans and goals for the future are shaped, in part, by their socioeconomic situation. Expectations for the future, in turn, are a powerful predictor of educational attainment and of teen parenthood. Low SES teens tend to have lower expectations for their own educational attainment and occupational success because they see their chances of achieving either as slim.²⁶ They are more likely to go to poor quality schools that are ill-equipped to prepare them for higher education, they have less access to enriching activities or items such as trips or computers, and they have fewer resources to use for college or other training than more advantaged youth. Thus, they may see themselves as having less to lose by risking pregnancy and teen parenthood. A related line of reasoning suggests that people with few material or human resources, including teens, feel relatively powerless to affect the course of their lives through their own actions.²⁷ Such teens may be less likely to believe that they can refrain from sexual activity or convince a partner to use a condom. Moreover, they may also be more apt to believe that being unsuccessful at either matters little in shaping their lives.

Research on the link between future expectations and sexual behavior supports this assertion. Early research found a significant negative relationship between educational expectations and the odds of becoming a single teen

mother.²⁸ This relationship appears to be due to the effect of expectations on the steps leading up to teen parenthood. Adolescents with higher educational expectations are less likely to be sexually active, more likely to use contraception, and more likely to choose abortion once pregnant.^{29,30,31} Occupational expectations are also a predictor of teen motherhood; teen females who expect to be working in a professional occupation are less likely to have a child than teens without such expectations.³² Whereas better-off teens may see a baby as derailing, or at least hindering, their plans for college and a professional career and thus be motivated to prevent a birth, other teens are less likely to view teen birth as costing them much in terms of future opportunities.

Family SES

Among pregnant Latina teens, those from higher SES families are more likely to have an abortion than less advantaged teens.^{22,23} Latinas with more educated mothers may be more likely to envision a similar educational future for themselves and to view early motherhood as endangering that future, whereas teens with less educated mothers are less likely to view additional years of formal education as an option for themselves. Therefore, teen parenthood is often not viewed as an obstacle to a choice they do not perceive of as possible.

We currently have a rather rudimentary understanding of how socioeconomic status affects the sexual and reproductive behaviors of Latino youth; much work remains to be done to test promising hypotheses and disentangle the roles and mechanism of the various components of SES. Nevertheless, the research to date on Latino youth, as well as on other young people, strongly suggests that higher SES is protective against early sexual activity, is positively associated with using contraception once sexually active, and increases the likelihood of opting for abortion if pregnant. Taken together, these relationships result in a lower teen birth rate among more advantaged youth. This pattern is doubly grim, as not only are poverty and its companion disadvantages predictors of teen parenthood, the children of teen parents are also more likely to experience poverty, deprivation and low educational attainment. This threatens to extend the cycle of poverty and teen childbearing to the next generation. On the other hand, interventions at the family, school and community levels that help teens stay in school and give them realistic reasons to view their futures with hope and optimism have been shown to break this cycle.

Conclusion

Latino children and youth are disproportionately likely to

be poor. Reducing poverty among Latinos requires many of the same commitments and interventions necessary for lowering poverty among other groups, such as improving the quality of child care and education, providing access to adequate nutrition, housing and health care, and increased opportunities for parents to secure higher-paying work. Latino children in poverty face additional circumstances that must also need to be addressed. These include language and cultural barriers for children, and often their parents, and the stresses and challenges of adjusting to US society for immigrant families. Given the key role of education in improving the life chances of people, a focus on improving the rates of high school and college graduation among Latino youth promises to pay dividends in terms of future earnings, lower teen birth rates and lower costs to society.

IV. IMMIGRATION AND GENERATION

Overview

Immigration shapes the Latino youth population in numerous powerful ways. Just over one-third (36%) of Latinos in the US are estimated to be foreign-born, a proportion second only to that of Asians (61%).³ Some of these immigrants arrived as children and make up part of the youth population. Many more are the parents of US-born children. Immigrant Latino youth, along with their parents, have experienced leaving their homes and coming to a place where people have different customs and social norms and speak a different language. They have left behind family, friends and familiar places, many to escape threats such as poverty, repression and/or violence. Once here, they must adapt to new surroundings and balance the expectations and outlooks of the new culture with those of their native one.

Many Latino youth (39%) were born in this country to immigrant parents.⁴ They are exposed to American culture at a young age yet are raised by parents with quite different childhood experiences. This often results in teens and parents holding disparate views, attitudes and expectations for their behavior and futures. Such youth often live in two, sometimes conflicting, worlds. They face the challenges of defining themselves, their values and their life courses within the context of two cultures as well as the day-to-day challenges of functioning in each.

Almost half (48%) of Latino youth are the US-born children of parents who were born in the US. Many of these youth and their parents share a high degree of understanding of American society along with a high level of

acculturation. In addition, nearly all third and higher generation teens are fluent in English, as are the vast majority of their parents.⁴ While growing up in an immigrant family often involves hardships, growing up with the identity of a member of an often disadvantaged minority group presents difficulties as well. Many Latinos face prejudice and discrimination, but higher generation youth tend to be more aware of this fact.

Family SES

Among Latino families, average parental education increases with generation as does mean family income. Yet, even third generation Latino parents average less education and lower incomes than third generation whites.³³ The fathers of seven in ten Latino immigrant youth have less than a high school education. This falls to six in ten second generation youth and three in ten third generation Latino young people. Meanwhile, only one in eight third generation white teens have fathers who are not high school graduates.⁴ As family income and parental education rise with generation, family size decreases. While 14% of immigrant Latino youth have five or more siblings, this declines to 9% of second generation youth and 8% of native-born youth with native-born parents. In comparison, 4% of third generation whites and 10% of third generation African Americans have more than four brothers and sisters.⁴

Latino families headed by immigrants have higher poverty rates than the overall Latino population. In 1996, 28% of all immigrant Latino families were poor. Mexican and Central American immigrant families are more likely to be poor than other immigrant Latino families with 34% living below the poverty line.³⁴

Education

High school completion rates improve with each generation. Just over half (56%) of 16-24 year old immigrant Latinos are either in school or have finished high school; this figure increases sharply to 80% of second generation youth and 84% of third generation young Latino adults.³⁵ However, the generational pattern of college completion is not one of continuous improvement. Nine percent of foreign-born Latino adults (ages 25-44) have a college degree. This increases to 18% of second generation Latinos, but dips to 11% of third generation Latino adults. In comparison, one-third (32%) of whites in this age group have at least a college degree, as do 17% of African Americans.³⁶

Reproductive Health

The research to date suggests that immigrant and less

acculturated Latina teens are less likely to be sexually active than their more acculturated sisters, but use contraception less consistently and effectively. The proportion of Latino teens who have had sex tends to rise with generation. Among Mexican-origin youth, the proportion rises from one-third (32%) of first and second generation youth to 41% of third generation teens.³⁷ The proportion of Mexican-origin youth who use contraception also rises with generation, from 42% of immigrant youth to 56% of third generation teens.³⁸

Among pregnant teens, less acculturated teens appear to hold more positive attitudes towards their pregnancy, are more likely to have intended to become pregnant and have similar or better birth outcomes than their more acculturated peers.^{39,40,41} Thus, low rates of contraception use may stem from their desire to have a child; they may also be a result of lack of information and access to contraception.⁴²

Pregnant immigrant Latinas are less likely to choose to have an abortion than native-born teens. Thus, although the rate of sexual activity is lower among immigrant adolescents, their birth rate is higher, evidently because of their decisions about contraception and abortion.^{43,44,45,46} Further research is needed to understand the reasons for these generational patterns, how the experiences of different generations of Latinos affect their aspirations and expectations, and how their experiences interact with other factors, such as socioeconomic status, to shape goals and behaviors.

Conclusion

First, second, third and higher generation adolescents have different experiences and contend with different challenges. Some risk factors show steady increases with generation, whereas others decline. Still others exhibit a non-linear pattern. These trends intertwine to create unique environments for each generation of Latino youth and lead to a variety of generational patterns of outcomes. Programs and interventions designed to protect Latino teens' sexual health and to reduce teen pregnancy rates must take generational influences into account in order to be effective.

V. FAMILY

Overview

What families look like and what happens within them shape teens' values and perceptions which, in turn, shape the decisions they make about their sexual behavior and

reproductive health. Important family attributes include family size, composition and structure, family atmosphere, and parent-teen communication.

Family Structure

For several reasons, Latino children tend to live in larger households than other children.³⁴ Latino women in the US have higher fertility rates than African American and white women; thus, Latino youth average more siblings than other youth. In addition, Latinos are more likely to live in "horizontal" families, that is, related adult members of the same generation living in one household.⁴⁷ This arrangement results in Latino youth living with aunts, uncles and cousins more often than youth of other racial/ethnic groups. Latino youth are more likely than African Americans, but less likely than whites, to live with both parents. Half (49%) of Latino teens live with both parents, as do 62% of white teens and a quarter of African American teens. About one-third (35%) of Latino teens live with a single parent, as do one-fifth (19%) of whites and three-fifth (61%) of African Americans. White teens are the most likely to live in blended families; almost one in five (18%) lived with a parent and the parent's spouse or partner, compared to 13% of African American teens and 14% of Latino teens.⁴⁸

Family Atmosphere

Latino teens' attitudes and behaviors are also shaped by the quality and tenor of family relationships and by the explicit and unspoken values their families hold. Together, these factors comprise the atmosphere of a particular family. Family atmosphere is a multi-faceted construct. It is composed of factors such as the level of trust and communication between parents and children, the quality of the relationship between parents, and parents' expectations for their children's behavior, future and roles.

Parental Monitoring

Another way that parents influence their children's behavior is by being aware of what their children do, who their friends are, and where they spend their time. This process works in two directions. Parents who are aware of their teens' activities can provide them with guidance or feedback on the events in their lives. Moreover, they are more able to prevent or discourage activities or friendships of which they disapprove, merely by being aware of their existence. Teens who know that their parents are keeping tabs on them may be less likely to engage in activities they know their parents do not sanction out of fear of discovery.

The evidence on the impact of parental monitoring on the sexual activity of teens is mixed. Among Latino teens, strict maternal monitoring is not associated with age at first sex. Nevertheless, it seems that stricter parental monitoring of teens' activities lowers their opportunities to have sex. Teens whose mothers strictly monitor their whereabouts, including who they spend time with and where they go, have sex with less frequency and have fewer sexual partners than those under looser maternal guidance.⁴⁹

Reproductive Health

Many young people raised by single parents become happy, healthy and productive adults. Nevertheless, youth of all racial/ethnic backgrounds from single-parent families are at greater risk for negative outcomes across a variety of domains than those raised by two parents. This is the case for sexual behavior outcomes as well as other measures of youth well-being. For example, teens from single-parent families are at higher risk of having sex than those who live with both parents.^{50,51,52} Moreover, Latina adolescents in two-parent families are less likely to get pregnant than their counterparts raised by single mothers,⁴⁶ and those who do are more likely to have an abortion than to give birth.²² These associations are often attributed to the higher average socioeconomic status of two-parent families; single-parent, particularly single-mother, households have higher poverty rates than two-parent households.

Yet, other factors appear to be at work as well. Teens' view of their parents' lives and what they say about their own potential futures may also be shaped by the structure of the family in which they are raised. Living in a family headed by a single mother increases teens' expectations that they will have a non-marital birth,⁵³ suggesting that being raised by a single mother first introduces the possibility of having children while unmarried and then provides a model for doing so. This reasoning may also explain why pregnant Latina teens from single-mother families are less likely to opt for abortion. Having witnessed their mothers' ability to raise children on their own, they are more apt to view single motherhood as a viable, if sometimes difficult, option.

Adolescents are adept at detecting attitudinal and behavioral messages from their parents and families. Specifically, teens have opinions on their parents' viewpoints on sex, especially on how parents would view their own sexual behavior. These perceptions, in turn, are associated with teens' behaviors. Adolescent Latinos who perceive their mothers as disapproving of teen sexual

activity, who say that their mothers have rules about dating and are in favor of them waiting until marriage to have sex, are less likely to engage in more advanced sexual behaviors.⁵⁴ Adolescent Latinas who think that their mothers would disapprove of their being sexually active are more likely to be virgins than those who perceived their mothers' attitudes as more liberal.⁵⁵

Parent-Teen Communication

The most common finding about communication between teens and their parents is that it is associated with lower rates of sexual activity, less risky sexual behavior and lower odds of teen pregnancy.^{56,46} Although discussion about sexual matters between adolescent Latinos and their parents may affect teens' sexual behavior, the mere occurrence of such conversations may not be enough. The frequency and quality of these interactions, as well as the topics covered, are crucial in shaping the decisions and actions of teens.⁵⁷ A certain type and quality of family atmosphere is necessary for open, honest, comfortable and fruitful discussion between teens and their parents on sensitive topics such as parents' preferences for their teens' sexual behavior, teens' knowledge and attitudes about sex, and their own sexual behavior.

Teens who see their mothers as responsive when talking to them about sexuality and sexual risks are more likely, in turn, to talk to their partners about contraception and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) than teens who perceive less positive affect from their mothers during these conversations. Moreover, teens with responsive mothers are more likely to use a condom at first sex and to have higher rates of lifetime condom use than other teens.⁵⁸ Virgin Latino adolescents who perceive their mothers as responsive when talking to them about sex are more likely to anticipate delaying sex beyond the following year than teens who rate their mothers as having low levels of understanding, openness, skill and comfort in discussing sexual topics with them.⁵⁹

Parent-teen conversations about sex need to cover a variety of topics, including the physical and emotional changes that accompany puberty, dating and choosing partners, abstaining from or delaying sexual activity, including intercourse, when and under what circumstances sex is acceptable, the biology and mechanics of sexual intercourse and reproduction, and protection against STIs and pregnancy. Additional topics on which young people need information and guidance are sexual orientation, peer pressure, the emotional aspects and repercussions of being sexually active, and how to avoid unwanted sexual advances or situations.

Quality communication about sex between teens and their mothers moderates the effects of peer norms and peer behavior on teens' own behavior, particularly when the peers are a topic of discussion between teens and mothers. Teens who discuss peer sexual norms with their mothers are less likely to have sex. Among virgin teens with a high percentage of sexually active peers, having a responsive mother lowers their odds of anticipating having sex in the next year.⁵⁹ Similarly, those who discuss peer norms towards condoms are more likely to use condoms. Conversely, peer norms have a greater influence on the behavior of teens who have not discussed sex or condom use with a parent.⁶⁰ Parent-teen communication also appears to influence the decisions of pregnant teens. Interestingly, pregnant Latina teens who receive pregnancy education from a parent are more likely to terminate a pregnancy than other teens.²²

Cultural Values

Culture also shapes family values and processes, including how communication is handled within the family unit and what topics are addressed. Traditional Latino culture supports distinct roles for males and females leading parents to have different expectations for their sons and daughters.⁶¹ These expectations speak to behavior during adolescence as well as to acceptable adult pathways. Indeed, the actions of teens partially determine the number and types of routes available to them as adults. While Latino culture promotes chastity among young women, valuing sexual abstinence until marriage or a serious, long-term relationship, like many cultures, it looks at least somewhat approvingly on sexual activity among young men. This difference may explain, at least in part, the gap in the proportions of sexually experienced Latino males and females.

Relative to some other subcultures in the US, Latino culture strongly values motherhood as an end in itself.⁶² For this reason, young Latinas may have less cultural support for academic and career achievement. There is some evidence that traditional Latino attitudes towards gender roles are evolving, at least among women.⁶³ This evolution in attitudes, which occurs most often in US-born women, suggests that Latino families' views of acceptable and preferred roles and life courses for their sons and daughters will become more similar with time and with generation.

Families shape teen sexual behavior and reproductive health through a variety of routes and mechanisms. In fact, the structure and environment of families may inter-

act with each other to influence the teens growing up in them. The ability of parents and teens to talk to each other about sensitive matters such as sexual behavior signals a certain type of family dynamic that may itself foster healthy and protective behaviors in teens, over and above any content communicated in discussions about sex. The combination of a positive, nurturing family environment and open lines of communication can protect against the more costly pitfalls of adolescence, particularly those that involve risky sexual behavior.

Conclusion

The families of Latino youth and the programs designed to reach them share the goal of attaining healthy and positive outcomes for this group of young people. Thus, programs and services geared towards Latino youth which take their families into account and win the confidence and cooperation of parents and other key family members will be more effective. Tapping the strengths and networks that exist within families and communities will heighten the chances of achieving positive outcomes for the youth that live in them.

VI. CONCLUSION

This overview provides an introduction to the sexual and reproductive behavior and health of Latino youth. Although there is a growing body of research that focuses on understanding and explaining Latino adolescents' behavior, much remains to be learned about this crucial topic. Here, three key domains that influence the attitudes, beliefs and behavior of Latino teens' lives are highlighted.

Latinos have the highest teen birth rate of all racial/ethnic groups; this fact alone has social and economic repercussions that are felt not only by today's youth and the society in which they live, but also by the next generation, including the children of teen parents. As is the case with teens from other racial/ethnic backgrounds, it is vitally important that Latinos, with assistance and guidance from their families, friends, schools and communities, have the information and tools to be sexually healthy.

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