

AUTISM AND LATINOS IN THE U.S.

The Issue

Though autism occurs regardless of race or ethnicity, Latino children often experience disparities when it comes to treatment and age of diagnosis. It is crucial that autism be diagnosed at a very early age, so that specialized treatment can ensue.¹ The earlier that treatment for autism is given, the better the opportunities to mitigate its symptoms.¹ Diagnosis at a later age often means that the child will require increased specialized services, and will continue to be dependent as they grow up. Not only do low socioeconomic status, lack of health insurance, and language barriers hinder Latino parents from accessing critical healthcare services for autistic children, but they also hinder early diagnosis and treatment of autism.

Access to Care

- In the U.S., access to healthcare is often dependent on health insurance. It is estimated that 32% of Latinos lack health insurance, a rate higher than any other major racial/ethnic group. This often means that the general Latino population, and the autistic Latino population in particular, find accessing crucial healthcare services difficult.²
- A North Carolina study found that access to care for autism was limited for families belonging to racial and ethnic minorities (including Latinos), those with low parental education, those living in nonmetropolitan areas, and those not following one of the major treatment approaches to autism.³

Diagnosis

- Latino children tend to be diagnosed at an older age than non-Latino white children.⁴
- A study in Texas found evidence that there are fewer diagnosed cases of autism in school districts with higher percentages of Latinos. This raises the question of whether autism is being under-diagnosed or misdiagnosed among Latino children.⁴
- There may be systemic problems with identifying Latino children and youth within the autism spectrum disorders.⁵

Language

- One study found that only 29% of school systems used Spanish-language assessments, as required by federal law, for children who are native Spanish-speakers.⁵
- Another study showed that when assessing Latino children for autism, most community evaluators did not document their assessment of the child in their native language, nor did they address the impact of language in their assessments.¹
- There are few assessment and diagnostic tools designed specifically for children exposed to two languages. Furthermore, many of the translated tests that are available still need to be fine tuned and tested for reliability and validity.¹
- In general, there is an excessive shortage of bilingual educators and bilingual diagnostic professionals in the area of autism.⁶
- In California, Latinos represent one-third of the population, but only five percent of the state's physicians.²
- Although interpreters are often utilized to mitigate the shortage of bilingual diagnostic professionals, this does not ensure accurate and nondiscriminatory assessments.¹
- A lack of bilingual educators can often make it extremely difficult for children with autism to properly and effectively receive the necessary services they require.⁶

Special Education

- An autism diagnosis is one of the diagnoses that make children eligible for special education. Children with autism should be enrolled in special education and should receive specialized treatment as these are essential to mitigate the symptoms of autism.
- Latino children are underrepresented in special education under the autism eligibility category in comparison with non-Latino white children, who are overrepresented in special education under the autism eligibility category.⁵

- Only 5% of U.S. states have Latino children enrolled in special education under the autism eligibility category that is proportionate to their percentage in the general population; in the other 95% , Latino children are underrepresented.⁵

Public Policy Recommendations

Latinos are the second largest and the fastest growing racial/ethnic group in the U.S. At the same time, autism is the fastest growing developmental disability among this population. It is crucial that the needs of Latino children with autism be taken into consideration to mitigate the negative effects that autism can have on Latinos and on society at large. Thus, it is crucial to:

- Ensure that Latinos are represented in policy development
- Target outreach to more effectively and efficiently reach the Latino community
- Develop appropriate community education strategies
- Ensure that services are not only available and accessible, but that they are offered in an efficient and culturally appropriate manner

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