

## Engaging with Rural Latinx Families

### Abstract

For a growing number of rural communities, Latinxs – a gender-neutral term for individuals originating from Latin America, have positively affected community prosperity and economic security. In order to sustain and further promote rural economic growth, Extension should take bold actions to embrace the strengths and to address the needs and desires of this diverse population group. This paper highlights findings from 14 studies related to the USDA Hatch Act–funded multistate research projects, Rural Families Speak and Rural Families Speak about Health, and shares recommendations for strengthening Extension’s engagement with Latinx populations across rural America.

Keywords: Latin American origin, rural, economics, well-being, Extension

### Introduction

Latinxs are socially, economically, racially, and culturally diverse, as are their behaviors, experiences, history, places of origin, and immigration trajectories (Bustamante, 2019; Fortuna, n.d.). The term *Latinx* is a gender-neutral term for people of Latin American descent, and includes people of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race (Office of Management and Budget, 1997, as cited in United States [U.S.] Census Bureau, 2020). Between 2000 and 2017, the U.S. Latinx population increased by 67.0 percent, and originated from multiple places (e.g., Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Central and South American countries, Spain) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001, 2018a). Despite the

decrease in immigration rates in recent years, the U.S. Latinx population will continue to grow substantially as growth will be driven by U.S. births and not by immigration trends (Brown, 2014; Litcher, 2012).

In 2017, 1.2 million Latinxs lived in rural U.S. counties (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018a), a 63.1% increase from 2000. Over three fourths (78.3%) of Latinxs in rural America are U.S. citizens (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018b). For a growing number of rural communities, the Latinx population has positively affected community prosperity and economic security (Kandel & Cromartie, 2004; Lichter, 2012). Latinxs have helped to reverse population loss in rural communities and stimulated rural economies through employment in agricultural, manufacturing, and service labor forces (Coates & Gindling, 2013), and the creation of small businesses (e.g., bakeries, restaurants, stores) (Barcus, 2006). In order to sustain and further promote rural economic growth, it is important to recognize and build upon the strengths of the Latinx population, as well as address factors that positively or negatively influence their health and well-being (Acevedo-Garcia et al., 2012; Ashida et al., 2012).

Extension, a key outreach arm of land-grant institutions, mobilizes resources of the land-grant system to address public needs to improve the quality of life across rural, as well as suburban and urban America (National Institute on Food and Agriculture, n.d.). During the past century, Extension has adapted to changing times and landscapes to carry out its mission and continues to have tremendous opportunities to make positive impacts on people's lives and the communities in which they live. The dramatic and continued growth of the U.S. Latinx population has called for Extension to focus attention on building upon the strengths and addressing the issues and needs of the Latinx population. In this paper, we highlight findings from a review of 14 studies related to the USDA Hatch Act-funded multistate research projects, focused on rural America,

Rural Families Speak (RFS) and Rural Families Speak about Health (RFSH) (Mammen & Sano, 2018), as well as other studies to help inform Extension programming with Latinx families in rural America. Information pertaining to recruitment, methodology, etc. of the RFS and RFSH projects is detailed in Mammen and Sano (2018).

## **Approach**

To identify findings from the RFS and RFSH projects related to Latinx families, we reviewed a compiled list of titles, abstracts, and key words of published products (e.g., manuscripts, research briefs, presentations) based on data derived from the RFS and RFSH projects. Fourteen products that included the words Latino, Latina, Latinx, Hispanic or other identifiers (e.g., Mexican) were reviewed. Key findings from each of the products were compared and contrasted to create a summary of findings. The summary of findings, as well as additional literature related to strengths and challenges experienced by Latinx families, were reviewed to inform this paper. While this paper does not represent an exhaustive review of the literature focused on Latinxs in rural America, it contributes to the knowledge base and offers suggestions for responses from the Extension system, an integral arm of the U.S. land-grant system.

## **Overview of Findings**

### ***Family Strengths***

Findings from a review of 14 studies based on RFS and RFSH data revealed that cultural values and traditions, family ties, and support networks are key strengths prevalent among Latinx families (Cancel-Tirado et al., 2018). *Familismo* and *respeto* are core values that underlie these strengths. *Familismo* represents the importance of family relationships and specifically, the

interdependence among family members (Parke & Buriel, 2006). *Respeto* (the value of respect) (Calzada et al., 2010) is a value embedded within *familismo* and shapes decisions and behaviors within families. Family is a source of pride, identity, and support. Interdependence is emphasized over independence, and cooperation is emphasized over competition. Thus, the needs of the family are more important than the needs or concerns of individual members.

Findings from these RFS- and RFSH-related studies revealed that *familismo* and *respeto* helped Latina mothers cope with challenges of low income, low formal educational attainment, discrimination, language barriers, lack of appropriate legal migration documentation, and separation from family members who remained in their home countries (Greder, 2012).

*Familismo* may help to explain the lower prevalence of depressive symptoms among Latina mothers compared to non-Latina mothers who participated in RFS and RFSH (Browder, 2011; Downey & Greder, 2014). However, *familismo* and *respeto* may also have led to increased stress among some mothers as they felt obligated to accept decisions and practices of members of their extended families (e.g., child feeding practices) who lived with them even though they disagreed with them (Greder et al., 2012). Similarly, findings revealed that perceived respect between mothers and their spouses or partners was associated with more positive nutrition and physical-activity-related behaviors (Routh, 2018).

### ***Challenges Facing Families***

**Health Disparities.** In the U.S., Latinxs have lower rates of cancer screening (Montealegre et al., 2013) and a disproportionate burden of disease and death compared to the overall U.S. population (Heron & Anderson, 2016), and are less likely to have health insurance (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2016). These disparities have been associated with genetic, medical, cultural,

socioeconomic, and built environment factors and have increased at faster rates in rural areas than in urban and suburban areas (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, 2012). Findings from RFS and RFSH help to explain these disparities (Cancel-Tirado et al., 2018; Greder et al., 2009, 2012; Reina et al., 2013), and revealed that rural Latinx families experienced

- a lack of access to preventative and culturally responsive health care;
- distrust of, and perceived discrimination by, health care providers;
- social and geographical isolation;
- financial and language barriers;
- poor health literacy and numeracy;
- lack of access to facilities to be physically active; and
- lack of access to affordable foods associated with Latinx culture.

Additionally, food insecurity and depression were more prevalent among Latina mothers who were born in the United States compared to Latina mothers who were born outside of the United States and among Latina mothers who had resided longer in the United States compared to Latina mothers whom had more recently migrated to the United States (Cancel-Tirado et al., 2018).

**Immigration Status.** Studies have shown that risk for poor health is even greater for Latinxs who were not born in the United States and who lack legal migration documentation such as a passport, visa, or residency (De Leon Siantz et al., 2013; Messias et al., 2015). Lack of such

documentation contributes to chronic stress (Messias, 2010), which can involve complex processes related to settlement, reorientation, and adaptation, all of which can have long-lasting health consequences (Infante et al., 2012). Poverty, victimization, fear of deportation, and lack of access to health care and other needed services also create on-going stressful conditions among Latinx immigrants (Martinez Tyson et al., 2016; Perez & Fortuna, 2005). Additionally, families who have members with mixed citizenship status may be fearful to seek resources such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) for members who are entitled to these resources. Furthermore, lack of access to a driver's license due to immigration status can make it difficult to be employed, to access health care and food, and to participate in education programs.

Media reports of overt acts of racism, prejudice, and discrimination toward immigrants and minorities, especially towards Latinxs and Muslims (Krogstad & Lopéz, 2016), and renewed interest and actions to enforce immigration policies have further aggravated and expanded challenges confronting Latinxs. U.S. immigration-related practices (e.g., zero tolerance of unauthorized migration, separation of family members at the U.S.– Mexican border) and fluctuating immigration-related policies (e.g., Deferred Action for Child Arrivals [DACA] program) have led to increased stress and trauma among many Latinx families.

## **Recommendations for Engagement**

### ***Key Elements***

When designing and implementing Extension programs that engage Latinx families, it is important to understand underlying factors (e.g., values, beliefs, priorities, past experiences, community contexts, policies), including the significant role of family and roles within families, that shape desires, goals, decision making, and behaviors (Greder et al., 2012; Delgado, 2003).

Identifying, embracing, and building upon family strengths; recognizing challenges families face; and being aware of diversity among Latinx families (e.g., place of origin, education, socioeconomics, citizenship and documentation status, language) are essential to developing programs that effectively meet family needs and interests.

**Centrality of Family.** Given the central role of family within Latinx culture, it is imperative to develop programs that promote family unity and benefit the whole family (e.g., parents, children, grandparents) (Reina et al., 2013), as well as to communicate these messages in marketing materials and during recruitment. It is also valuable to (a) build flexibility in programs as parents have multiple demands on their time and commonly have varied work schedules; (b) be aware that there may be gendered roles within families, especially among first generation immigrant families; and (c) recognize that grandparents are revered and viewed as sources of wisdom for family and other life matters. Thus, including grandparents in programs can be an effective way to influence family behaviors (Holst et al., 2017). In Latinx families, mothers are commonly viewed as caretakers of the family and guardians of the family's health (Reina et al., 2013), and fathers are viewed as generous, courageous, respectful, protective (Ruiz et al., 2002), and responsible for providing for and raising healthy children who have good moral character (Behnke et al., 2008; Greder & Arellanes, 2018).

**Relationships.** It is essential to take time to develop relationships with families and with organizations within the Latinx community to build trust and rapport, which in turn can lead to greater commitment to program participation and adherence. Respecting Latinx culture and showing personal interest can help Extension staff win *confianza* (trust) (Duran et al., 2001) with families. When trust is present, Latinxs are more likely to value the time they spend in Extension programs and to consider what staff have to say because they believe staff have their best

interests at heart. Additionally, when time and energy are invested to develop relationships, assumptions and stereotypes that staff may have of families will likely disappear, thus providing greater opportunity to develop effective programs. When staff acknowledge their own values, beliefs, and assumptions about Latinx families, they are better able to understand their own family practices and be more open to understanding practices among Latinx families (Greder & Allen, 2007; Greder et al., 2005). To build Extension's capacity to provide outreach to Latinx families, and especially to families who primarily, or only read and speak Spanish, it is important for Extension to hire staff and/or train volunteers who (a) are culturally competent, (b) understand and respect Latinx culture, specifically, and (c) are bicultural and fluent in Spanish or able to build partnerships with community-based organizations and faith communities that have bilingual, bicultural staff who are trusted by families. Similar to the original Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program model (EFNEP) founded in the 1960s (Brink, 2002), the community health worker and/or *promotora* models are promising approaches for Extension to explore to provide education and outreach to some Latinx audiences (Valenzuela-Yu, et al., 2018).

***Policy Impacts.*** Shifts in immigration policies and their enforcement have led to increased difficulty in recruiting Latinx families to participate in Extension programs. Immigration raids have increased caution among Latinx immigrants who are not lawfully in the United States to participate in programs and meetings that are held in group settings. Careful and intentional efforts can build, as well as restore, trust with Latinx communities. Examples of strategies to build trust include

- partner with established, trusted, and respected leaders and organizations within the Latinx community;



- train members of the community with shared social, cultural, and economic characteristics to serve as Community Health Workers (CHWs) or *promotoras* to advocate, educate, mentor, and translate;
- avoid collecting unnecessary personal information or questions that may disclose citizenship status;
- keep family information confidential unless required by law;
- use intentional recruitment efforts instead of communitywide publicity; and
- allocate resources for additional outreach and recruitment efforts.

*Assumptions and Stereotypes.* Recognizing diversity among the Latinx population and the different ways in which federal, state, and local policies influence families is vital to successfully engage with Latinxs. There are well-established rural Latinx communities with rich histories, strong ties, and involvement in the community, including participation in Extension programs (Behnke & Kelly, 2011; Vega et al., 2016). In contrast, recently settled Latinx communities in rural areas may have weaker social ties and familiarity to community social structures and institutions. For example, after the devastation of Hurricane Maria in 2017, numerous Puerto Rican families migrated to Florida and other states (Center for Puerto Rican Studies, 2018). Some Puerto Ricans may have been familiar with Extension, as 4-H and other Extension programs exist in Puerto Rico. Additionally, Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens and have access to federal assistance programs. Therefore, they may not experience the same barriers or mistrust from some organizations as experienced by Latinxs who are not U.S. citizens. However, Puerto Ricans may face similar language and cultural barriers as immigrants and refugees from Mexico

and Central and South America. These contrasting circumstances in terms of access and trust are important to consider when developing programs to engage Latinx families.

### *Learning from Families*

Engaging with and learning from Latinx families and community partners who are trusted by Latinxs can inform Extension programs to ensure that they are culturally responsive; address families' strengths, needs, and interests (Greder & Brotherson, 2002); and include culturally relevant communication and marketing strategies that meet the linguistic and literacy needs of intended participants (Francis et al., 2014; Mammen et al., 2018). It is important to engage Latinxs of diverse backgrounds (e.g., place of origin, language, education level) in the development of practices and programs, unless the intention is to develop a program for a specific subgroup of Latinxs (e.g., Mexican). Materials should be carefully reviewed when they are translated from English to Spanish to ensure cultural relevancy. Following are examples of strategies that have engaged Latinx families and entrusted community partners to inform Extension programs.

**Individual and Focus Group Interviews.** Data from individual interviews with Latina immigrant mothers in RFSH revealed that mothers felt isolated in their new rural communities and were concerned about how their children were treated at school and foods their children were consuming at school. Mothers desired to learn about growing food, eating healthfully, and preserving cultural foods and traditions (Greder et al., 2012). Analysis of interview data also revealed barriers to health including lack of access to health care, lack of culturally sensitive and relevant services, and poor quality housing (Greder et al., 2009; Reina et al., 2013). These findings, coupled with information gained through a follow-up focus group interview, informed

the development of a series of health-focused workshops for Latina immigrant mothers (Greder & Romero de Slowing, 2014).

**Partnering with Cultural Guides.** *Educacion: Nuestra Mejor Herencia* (Education: Our Best Legacy) is a curriculum developed by the University of Minnesota Extension that promotes school success and access to higher education (Hurtado et al., 2018). Extension educators and community-based Latinx cultural guides identified key community-level factors that promoted or inhibited school success among Latinx youth, and then conducted focus group interviews with Latinx immigrant parents to gain their perspectives regarding these factors, as well as strategies and additional factors that parents perceived related to school success. Findings from the focus group data helped to inform the content, process, and organization of the curriculum.

**Asset-Based Community Development.** The University of California employed three strategies to learn from and develop relationships with local Latinx communities and Latinx-serving organizations and networks to strengthen Extension programming with Latinx youth. Strategies included the following:

- Extension and community partners completed a Latinx engagement resource chart to identify potential resources for connecting with local Latinx communities including cultural settings and traditions, businesses, physical spaces, cultural heritage(s), institutions, individuals, associations, and community festivals and events. The resource chart helped Extension staff consider multiple ways that Latinxs are engaged in their local communities and provided pathways for staff to connect with local Latinx populations;

- Extension used online databases of nonprofit organizations and program websites to identify existing local settings that supported Latinx youth development and recorded information (e.g., mission, core activities, program duration) in a Latinx Youth Development Resource Log. Staff then assessed each organization against a set of evidence-based criteria regarding characteristics of high quality Latinx-serving positive youth development programs; and
- Key informant interviews were conducted with individuals who could offer a broad perspective on area Latinx populations and settings that supported youth development. Interview questions helped Extension learn about local Latinx histories, challenges and assets facing Latinxs, and programs and places that served Latinx youth well (Erbstein et al., 2017).

### **Conclusion: Facing the Future**

Over the past 20 years, previous data related to the RFS and RFSH projects have provided researchers and practitioners valuable insights to the needs, challenges, and strengths of rural Latinx families and the communities in which they reside. The data have led to a collection of scholarly work that has served, and can continue to serve, as a resource to inform Extension programming to address the needs of a growing diverse rural America.

From the beginning, Extension has provided research-based information and education and built capacity in rural, suburban, and urban communities to address public needs to improve quality of life. Influences associated with the growing Latinx population on the racial, ethnic, cultural, and economic landscape of rural communities is undeniable. Extension has the opportunity to center programming in communities where population shifts have created the Latinx majority/minority

phenomenon, many of which are in rural areas. However, Extension needs to take bold actions to embrace the strengths and to address the needs and desires of Latinxs across America. Extension is faced with navigating tight spaces between addressing the needs and priorities of Latinxs, the current political environment, and budget constraints. To successfully address the needs of a growing Latinx population and the communities in which they live, it is important for Extension staff, and the organization as a whole, to (a) gain trust from Latinx communities, (b) embrace Latinx communities as partners, (c) build upon Latinx strengths, (d) think outside of the box, (e) prioritize efforts, and (f) diversify the racial and ethnic composition of Extension administrators, faculty, staff, and volunteers.

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