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Responding to the Challenges Confronting Latino Males: The Role of Public Policy in Promoting Macro and Micro Levels of Intervention

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The steady growth of the Latino population in the US, both through immigration and reproduction, is compelling scholars from a variety of disciplines to study the unique challenges confronting Latinos in the United States. The status of Latino men is drawing particular attention both because of the numerous ways in which they stand out for their vulnerabilities (e.g. high dropout and incarceration rates, concentration in low wage jobs, etc.) and because of the dearth of scholarship that has focused specifically on them. In 1988, David Hayes-Bautista and his colleagues (Hayes-Bautista, Schink, & Chapa, 1988) predicted that as we moved from a multicultural population to a multicultural society, there would be

growing awareness that the future well-being of an aging white population would be tied to the education and employment of an increasingly Latino population. Many economists and demographers now recognize that Hayes-Bautista's prediction of co-dependence is already a reality. As growing numbers of baby boomers slide into their senior years and the number of retirees rapidly expands, the US finds its in a precarious position: there is a growing imbalance in numbers between those who rely on social security and those who work to keep the coffers of social security flush. Gradually, a growing number (though still a minority) of policy makers have come to recognize that it is essential for all children, regardless of their race, language or immigration

status, to be educated and trained so that they can contribute to the growth and prosperity of society. Understanding and addressing the specific challenges confronting Latino males must be central to this effort given the peculiar ways in which the intersection of race, class and gender appears to be contributing to their disenfranchisement in American society.

We have not yet arrived at a point where our policymakers are willing or able to recognize that new policies must be formulated to respond to the challenges confronting vulnerable populations such as Latino males. Until such a moment arrives it is essential for scholars and activists to postulate and offer recommendations on the types of short-term modifications to societal institutions that will be necessary to serve and respond to the needs of this group and others that have been marginalized. While we recognize that more fundamental changes in law, policy and the structure of economic opportunities are needed, we also think it is important to advocate for more limited changes that can alleviate some of the hardships facing Latino men.

We recognize the inherent dilemma and real limitations created by the current state of American politics, and the constraints this places on those who would seek to bring about changes in policy that would benefit Latino men and boys, and other vulnerable groups. In the current xenophobic political climate, finding sane and reasonable approaches to dealing with the needs of the undocumented, keeping juveniles out of gangs and prison, and addressing the health needs of those with HIV, may not be possible. Nonetheless, we believe it is not too early to begin developing policy interventions that are rooted in sound research.

Below we propose some possible policy and programmatic recommendations for restructuring social institutions and re-designing public policy. These are necessarily framed in fairly general terms because in order to be effective, they would have to be modified to meet the needs of particular communities and regions. Despite their obvious limitations, we offer these recommendations in recognition that actions can be taken now to address the needs of Latino men.

- **Educational interventions should be implemented early.** The longer that the educational hardships experienced by Latino boys are ignored, the more difficult it is to address them. Increasing access to quality early childhood programs, providing extended learning opportunities, cultivating literacy and bilingualism during the elementary years, are just some of the ideas that the authors in this volume have suggested. A substantial body of research has shown that early intervention programs are both more cost effective and have a greater long term impact than those that are implemented after a problem has become manifest and been allowed to fester (Rothstein 2004; Kirp 2011). For example, any effort to reduce the dropout rate among Latino males and to increase college attendance must begin with a concerted effort to improve educational support for Latino boys during the early years of their education.
- **Policy interventions should be holistic and integrated.** Policy interventions must be designed in a comprehensive manner in order to respond to the broad range of individual needs – economic, social, psychological, emotional, etc. that impact individual development. For example, any effort to reduce recidivism among recently incarcerated youth must not only address the educational and employment needs of young men as they make the transition to life on the outside but must also provide psychological and social support. Interventions should also involve efforts to transform the institutions that serve young men so that they become more responsive to their needs. For example, serious efforts to increase college enrollment must focus both on the changes that individuals might need to make (i.e. improved study habits, more proactive help-seeking, etc.) as well as changes that are needed in the structure and climate of educational institutions (i.e. great access to counselors and mentors, access to campus jobs, etc.).
- **Policy interventions must be evaluated regularly and modified to insure effectiveness.** Too often, local communities and school districts adopt programs aimed at addressing a social issue or problem (gang involvement, youth unemployment, etc.) but fail to carry out effective evaluations of these efforts. Similarly, foundations frequently launch funding initiatives in response to a pressing problem but fail to consider how such interventions can be sustained. Sporadic efforts that are not evaluated or assessed for their effectiveness are unlikely to succeed in addressing the complex challenges confronting Latino males. Good intentions are not good enough, and without a commitment to sustain and adjust intervention efforts as necessary, there is no reason to expect that they will have a lasting impact.
- **Policy interventions should be sensitive to ethnic and racial differences among different groups of Latino men and boys.** The challenges confronting Latino men must be differentiated by national origin, class, geographical location, educational level and age. The most effective interventions will be based upon an intersectional approach that acknowledges the complex interaction between ethnicity, gender, social class and sexuality. Rather than a “one size fits all”

approach, special attention needs to be paid to social context and the ways in which social identities are shaped by the unique conditions in a particular milieu.

- **Policy interventions should be designed to construct environments that benefit multiple constituencies.** Rather than designing interventions that are exclusively targeted at Latino males it will be beneficial to focus policies based on need rather than race or gender identity. Such an approach will make it less likely that policy interventions will inadvertently contribute to the marginalization of those they were designed to help.
- **Policy interventions should consider both individual and institutional/ system levels of change.** A growing body of research has shown that the most successful interventions for supporting students focus on both school change strategies and provide additional support for individual students. Similarly, interventions that are designed to address social problems like unemployment and under-employment, domestic violence, gang violence and HIV, must focus on both individual behaviors and the need for system change.
- **Policy interventions must embrace social support that creates a context for intense interpersonal interactions.** Changes in the attitudes and behavior of Latino men are most likely to occur if they are carried out within a collective, community-based approach rather than one that focuses exclusively on the individual (de Jesus Acosta, 2007). A collaborative approach that occurs within support of a community is more likely to result in the internalization of a new set of attitudes and behaviors. This is true for health and education-based interventions and it may also be true for other social issues.

This is only a partial listing of the many principles that can be derived from the chapters in this volume* and other related research on successful policy interventions. We encourage readers to expand upon these recommendations, to critique them, and to offer new ones based upon further experience and research.

* *Invisible No More: Understanding the Disenfranchisement of Latino Men and Boys.* Edited by Pedro Noguera, Aída Hurtado, Edward Fergus

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