



National Hispanic and Latino

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

LATINX YOUTH GANG PREVENTION in School Systems

Desk Reference



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The National Hispanic and Latino MHTTC recognize the complexities associated with gender and ethnic identification. With the intention of both facilitating a fluent reading of the text and supporting an inclusive and respectful language, this document uses terms that are linguistically neutral and inclusive of diverse gender groups and identities. In this document, we also use the term Latinx to encompass ethnic identity as well as non-binary gender identification.

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Institute of Research, Education, and Services in Addiction (IRESA)

The Institute of Research, Education, and Services in Addiction (IRESA) of the Universidad Central del Caribe leads the National Hispanic and Latino MHTTC. The Center serves as a national subject matter expert and a key resource for the workforce and communities seeking to address mental illness prevention, treatment, and recovery support to reduce health care disparities among Hispanic and Latino populations across the United States and its territories. In partnership with state and local governments, mental health providers, consumers and family organizations, Hispanic stakeholders, Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) regional administrators, and the MHTTC Network, the Center seeks to accelerate the adoption and implementation of mental health-related evidence-based practices.

National Hispanic and Latino Mental Health Technology Transfer Center

The mission of the National Hispanic and Latino Mental Health Technology Transfer Center is to provide high-quality training and technical assistance to improve the capacity of the workforce serving Hispanic and Latino communities in behavioral health prevention, treatment, and recovery. We disseminate and support the implementation of evidence-based and promising practices to enhance service delivery, promote the growth of a diverse, culturally competent workforce, and bridge access to quality behavioral health services. We are committed to increasing health equity and access to adequate culturally and linguistically grounded approaches.

The School-Based Mental Health Project (SMH)

The School-Based Mental Health Project (SMH) of the National Hispanic and Latino MHTTC works specifically with schools, organizations, and professionals to strengthen their capacity to provide culturally and linguistically responsive school mental health services. This initiative facilitates training, technical assistance, and capacity-building efforts led by experts in the field. Our goal is to increase awareness to attend to Latino students' mental health needs, promote the implementation of school mental health services that are culturally appropriate, encourage the use of promising and evidence-based practices, and disseminate information on practical strategies and implementation efforts of mental health services within a cultural context.

Introduction

This resource contains a compendium of the Youth Gang curriculum that can help understand the Hispanic and Latinx youth gang involvement and the context and implications for the mental health repercussions.

This desk reference will include a quick look at the following topics:

- Mental Impacts of Gang Involvement
- Trauma and Stress
- Substance and Abuse and other Mental Effects
- Common Reasons for Gang Joining
- Geographic and Environmental Factors
- Push and Pull Factors
- Hispanic and Latinx Identity
- Cultural Considerations when working with Latinx Youth and Families
- Cultural Inclusive Approach
- Main Takeaways

Why Focus on Youth Gangs?

Gang members contribute to a large portion of overall violence in society. In many US cities, gang members commit more than half of violent offenses. Young gang membership is prevalent in the US. Youth gang membership is associated with serious violent offending and victimization. Youth gang membership elevates the risk of various negative, potentially long-term social and health consequences, including:

- Substance use & abuse problems
- Risky sexual behavior
 - High rates of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and teenage parenthood
- School dropout & unstable employment
- Arrest, conviction & incarceration
 - Gang membership is also associated with an increased risk of recidivism
- Early mortality

Why Hispanic/Latinx & Youth Gang Members?

With over 60 million people identifying as Hispanic/Latinx, these groups make up 18% of the US population and are the largest minority group in the US. Therefore, law enforcement data from the National Gang Intelligence Center has indicated that approximately 50% of gang members in the US identify as Hispanic/Latinx. That about 41% are adolescents under the age of 18.

- It is estimated that 1 in 6 Latinxs living in US cities identifies as gang members. National Gang Intelligence Center (NGIC)

While gang membership varies across demographic groups, Latinx gangs are among the largest and most active in the US (e.g., MS-13, Latin Kings). Hispanic/Latinx youth are disproportionately impacted by cultural, social, and educational marginalization, assimilation stress, and other economic and health disparities that make them more vulnerable to gang involvement.

Mental Health Impacts of Gang Involvement

The interacting traumas and stressors of the historical oppression and systemic discrimination endured by Hispanic/Latinx people contribute to significant and complex mental health consequences among many Hispanic/Latinx youth. In the context of the environment, exposures, and traumas associated with gang involvement, Hispanic/Latinx youth suffer disproportionately from a variety of mental health conditions, including:

- Trauma & Stress-Related Disorders
- Substance Use Disorders
- Depression & Anxiety
- Externalizing Behaviors
- Suicidality
- Issues with Identity & Personality Development

Additionally, Hispanic/Latinx people tend to experience **delays** and/or **barriers** to care, including a lack of culturally appropriate treatment options (e.g., bilingual providers).

Trauma & Stress

Hispanic/Latinx gang-involved youth experience early & prolonged exposure to trauma and violence that contributes to a **high prevalence of trauma and stress-related disorders** in these groups. Sources of trauma range from acute events to more chronic stressors.

- Acute events (e.g., *victimization, physical/sexual abuse, witnessing domestic/community violence*)
- Chronic stressors (e.g., *living in poverty, discrimination, stigmatizing mainstream messaging*)

Hispanic/Latinx youth are often subject to **immigration-specific trauma**. Among foreign-born Hispanic/Latinx youth, traumas occur at various stages of the immigration process.

- **Pre-migration** (e.g., fear of persecution, urgent humanitarian needs, physical/sexual abuse)
- **During migration** (e.g., sexual/physical abuse, exploitation, robbery, dangerous conditions)
- **Post-migration** (e.g., forced family separation, discrimination, limited economic opportunities, increased vulnerability to crime, poverty, and exploitation)

These acute traumatic events and chronic stressors can be both risk factors and outcomes of gang involvement in Hispanic/Latinx youth.

Substance Use & Abuse

Gang-involved youth are more likely to engage in substance use than non-gang-involved peers.

- Substance use in gang-involved youth tends to persist into adulthood
- Substance use is encouraged and reinforced in gang culture

- Elevated substance use in gang culture has been linked to local drug economies

Hispanic/Latinx gang-involved youth may use substances to cope with untreated trauma and chronic stress. Substance use also elevates the risk of violent and delinquent behaviors, further contributing to gang joining and maintenance risks.

Other Mental Health Effects

Youth gang involvement and its associated adversities have been linked to other psychiatric morbidities.

- Depression
- Anxiety disorders
- Externalizing behaviors (e.g., *impulsivity, aggression*)
- Suicidality
- Personality development (e.g., *antisocial attitudes & behaviors*)
- Unstable identity

Common Reasons for Gang Joining

- Economic needs
- Friend/Family influence
 - *Most Hispanic/Latinx youth have close relationships with gang-involved peers/family members.*
- Need for protection
 - *Against community violence, unsafe home environments (abuse)*
- Respect and status
 - *Hispanic/Latinx youth often have restricted access and/or opportunities to mainstream methods of success*

- Support and belonging
 - *Gangs can provide “surrogate families,” new and expanded social networks, welcoming communities/support systems for marginalized youth*
- Outlaw culture
 - *e.g., Deliberate stand against mainstream society; popularized images of gang subculture; “bandidos”*

Geographic and Environmental Factors

Hispanic/Latinx youth are more likely to live in geographic locations that may increase vulnerabilities to gang involvement.

- Shared borders
 - Close proximities to drug-trafficking organizations
 - Need for protection against threats from home country
 - Exposure to drug and illegal immigration pipelines
- Confinement to inner cities
 - Climate injustice
 - Exposure to environmental toxins
 - Lack of green space
 - Low access urban areas (e.g., food deserts)

Push and Pull Factor



The relationship factors and family vulnerabilities that influence youth gang involvement include:

- Single-parent family structure
- Limited parental supervision
 - Parents forced to work long hours/multiple jobs
- Forced family separation or fear of separation (e.g., incarceration)
- Family history of gang involvement
- Abuse and/or neglect at home
- Increased influence of delinquent peers

Hispanic/Latinx Gang Identity

Hispanic and adolescents growing up in the US experience significant social and cultural marginalization for these marginalized youth; gangs can provide a welcoming and supportive environment for identity exploration & formation.



Integrated Gang Identity

Gangs often use aspects of Hispanic/Latinx culture (e.g., images, traditions, and language) as recruitment and branding tactics to foster a strong ethnic identity among youth.



Cultural Considerations when Working with Latinx Youth and Families

Latinxs are the least likely to utilize mental health services. There are several reasons. Mental health services outside schools typically require a copay or a per-session fee. Further, finding and scheduling with a therapist can be a confusing process that discourages many people from engaging in services. Agencies providing services are not always accessible by public transportation, and many areas lack services in a language other than English. In many communities, the stigma associated with engaging in mental health services can prevent youth and families from participating.

School-based services are often more accessible and less stigmatizing than other community mental health services, meaning more students engage in the support.

Culturally Inclusive Approach

The culturally inclusive approach means asking questions. Gathering information about how emotions are experienced or how distress is expressed can be important to understanding family functioning and ultimately students' functioning.

- Ask questions about background and beliefs
- Ask how emotions and stress are expressed in the family
- Ask how they view the issue that is bringing them to therapy - what do they think is the cause?
- Monitor yourself for assumptions you may be making
- Understand clients may need time to feel comfortable
- Be curious and interested to learn!

Main Takeaways

- Many Hispanic and Latinx families experience significant barriers accessing mental health services.
- Helping families address those barriers is important for treatment engagement.
- School clinicians can play an important role in addressing the risk factors for gang involvement by tailoring interventions the risk factors most impacting that Youth and Family.
- Culture impacts how we experience and express distress. Understanding that not everyone expresses distress and the same way his key does not stereotype student Behavior.
- A culturally inclusive approach critical to building relationships and maintaining report to ensure the best treatment engagement possible.

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