

Nutrition and Physical Activity Data for California's Low-Income Latino Youth

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California's youth population includes 2,604,000 10-14 year old adolescents. Of these youth, 947,800 (36.4%) are Latino. There are 576,000 adolescents in the 10-14 year old range that live at or below the poverty level. Of these youth, 65.4% are Latino. The CANFit Program focuses its programs on the state's 376,700 Latino adolescents that live at or below the poverty level (39.7% of the total 10-14 year old Latino population). (California Health Interview Survey, 2001) Since 1995, CANFit has gathered nutrition and physical activity information from community-based organizations working with low-income Latino youth. A brief snapshot of the health behaviors of low-income Latino youth in California involved in CANFit-funded projects (n=3,908) follows.

NUTRITION

Latino youth do not consume the recommended servings of fruits, vegetables, and dairy products. Less than one quarter of youth surveyed ate the recommended servings of fruit/vegetable each day. About 27% of YWCA, La Clinica de la Raza (La Clinica), El Concilio del Condado de Ventura (El Concilio), and San Bernardino County Department of Public Health (San Bernardino) youth consumed three or more servings of milk and other dairy products daily. Many had little knowledge of the recommended servings of major food groups and are unaware of the importance of proper nutrition and exercise.

Many Latino youth skip breakfast. Over half of youth from El Concilio, YWCA of San Francisco (YWCA), Hispanos Unidos, Innerscity Struggle, and La Clinica rarely or never ate breakfast. Youth cited reasons such as not liking breakfast, not having an appetite, and not having enough time to eat.

Junk food and soda consumption is high. About half of the youth surveyed by InnerCity Struggle ate fast food two or more times per week. YWCA found that their girls frequently chose fast foods over school lunches and junk food snacks over fruit. Almost 75% of La Clinica, YWCA, and San Bernardino youth reported drinking soda at least once a day.

Latino youth lack healthy role models and environments. InnerCity Struggle and Escondido Community Health Center (Escondido) observed that their youth live in neighborhoods with limited access to affordable, healthy food.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Many youth could increase their participation in physical activity. Less than half of Hispanos Unidos, La Clinica, InnerCity Struggle, Mission, and Escondido youth exercised five or more times per week. A lack of time and companions to exercise with were reasons for this.

Most Latino youth watch more than an hour of TV every day. Approximately 40% of youth from Hispanos Unidos, La Clinica, El Concilio, YWCA, InnerCity Struggle, and Monterey County Health Department (Monterey) watched two to three hours per day, while 35% watched four or more hours per day. There has been a correlation found between hours of TV viewing and obesity levels (Grund et al, 2001).

Better facilities would help Latino youth to exercise more. La Clinica, Hispanos Unidos and Monterey youth described the need for more recreation parks and centers, after school activities, improved school facilities and PE hours to increase their physical activity.

BODY IMAGE

Latino youth, especially girls, have body image concerns. About one third of Hispanos Unidos, La Clinica, El Concilio, YWCA, and Monterey youth felt they were overweight, and an even greater proportion – on half – wanted or tried to lose weight. A low self-esteem due to body dissatisfaction was especially problematic among older (12-17) girls at Mission Neighborhood Centers.

ABOUT THE DATA

This information comes from needs assessments and interventions conducted by CANFit grantees that worked with Latino youth between 1995 and 2002 – City of Paso Robles, El Concilio del Condado de Ventura, Escondido Community Health Center, Hispanos Unidos, InnerCity Struggle, La Clinica de la Raza, Mission Neighborhood Centers, Monterey County Health Department, San Bernardino County Department of Public Health, and YWCA of San Francisco. Although some grantee projects produced quantitative data, much of the information presented here comes from focus groups, interviews, and observation.

REFERENCES

Grund, A, Krause, H, Siewers, M, Rieckert, H, Muller, MJ. Is TV viewing an index of physical activity and fitness in overweight and normal weight children? *Public Health Nutrition*, 2001, 4(6) pp 1245-1251.

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