

**RESILIENT
LATINO YOUTH:
IN THEIR OWN WORDS**



The National Council of La Raza (NCLR)—the largest national Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States—works to improve opportunities for Hispanic Americans. Through its network of nearly 300 affiliated community-based organizations, NCLR reaches millions of Hispanics each year in 41 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia. To achieve its mission, NCLR conducts applied research, policy analysis, and advocacy, providing a Latino perspective in five key areas—assets/investments, civil rights/immigration, education, employment and economic status, and health. In addition, it provides capacity-building assistance to its Affiliates who work at the state and local level to advance opportunities for individuals and families.

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FOREWORD

In recent years, a number of tragic events have highlighted the challenges faced by young people of color. These challenges include poverty, unsafe neighborhoods, and racial and ethnic discrimination—factors that contribute to highly unstable environments that have led, at times, to devastating consequences. Efforts to tackle these issues at the federal level have included the My Brother’s Keeper initiative established by the Obama administration and aimed at improving social conditions for boys and young men of color, as well as the President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing, established to improve policing practices, especially in minority communities.

Often overlooked, unfortunately, have been the particular experiences of Latino youth, who compose one-quarter of all young Americans; these youngsters are found in similarly difficult environments and circumstances, sometimes with the additional challenge of growing up in mixed-status families—families with members of varying immigration statuses. Also missing from the bigger picture is a better sense of the positive stories—those of the multitudes of young minorities deemed “at risk” who are, nonetheless, able to overcome adversity on a daily basis and move toward a successful future. Surely there is much to learn from these youth about what is working, how they are making their way, and what we need to protect in their lives in order to help others like them.

The following report addresses these omissions by delving into the life stories of resilient second-generation Latino youth who have grown up in challenging urban environments: Pilsen, Chicago, and East Los Angeles, California. We invite you to listen to how these young people describe the array of factors that have helped them build the strength, skills, and behaviors that have enabled them to navigate adolescence and young adulthood. While these stories are neither simple nor uniform, one thing stands clear: none of these Latino youth could have persevered without the support and help of adults, mentors, services, and programs that bolstered and nurtured them through critical turning points. Like millions of other youth across the nation, those who spoke with us are vital assets to the country. We must do our utmost to invest in them, their families, and their communities, so that their natural resilience and talent may, in turn, strengthen the nation.



Janet Murguía
NCLR President and CEO

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The major demographic shift currently under way in the United States, characterized by a rapidly growing population of communities and children of color, has made it imperative for policymakers and others to better understand and support minority communities. Much of the existing research on children and youth of color, particularly of those who grow up in impoverished, marginalized environments, focuses on the disparities, inequalities, and other factors that contribute to poor outcomes in areas such as education, health, and juvenile justice. Far less attention has been paid to the substantial number of youth who, despite living in such environments, are able to overcome hardship and reach a solid measure of well-being and success.

This report uses the concept of resilience to shine a light onto a particular group of minority youth, second-generation Latino* adolescents (children of immigrants) who have grown up in extremely challenging circumstances (including poverty, various types of violence and discrimination, and the stresses of living in immigrant families) but have been able to cope with adversity, learn from it, and excel. This group, by sheer numbers alone, is critical to the future of our country: of the nearly 18 million Hispanics 18 years old or younger (one-quarter of all American children), more than half are second-generation.

Identifying resilience factors specific to this group can help us to develop programs and strengthen policies that will nurture positive traits and skill sets among young Latinos rather than allowing them to “fall through the cracks.” This task is all the more important since there is growing evidence that by the third generation, much of the progress made by first- and second-generation Hispanic youth weakens substantially in key areas, leading to a higher incidence of substance abuse, behavioral and mental health problems, disconnectedness from work and school, drops in civic participation, and lowered trust in institutions. Understanding the personal and environmental factors that enable Latino children of immigrants to thrive is thus critical not only to today’s cohort but also to future generations of American youth: this generation serves as a bridge between their parents’ immigrant struggles and future generations of Americans.

Although the notion of resilience has become extremely popular across various disciplines and within the field of youth development in particular, it is not an easy concept to define or measure. This report frames resilience as a complex developmental process that encompasses the individual attributes that enable youth to cope with accumulated stresses and challenges, and that is also learned and nurtured within particular environments, and through exchanges with multiple persons and institutions. As such, the report focuses not only on

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* The terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race.

the personal traits of resilient Latino youth, but also on characteristics of their families, mentors, programs, communities, and culture that have helped them persevere and thrive.

The research uses a grounded, in-depth approach to uncover the various elements of resilience that are unique to second-generation Latino youth. Rather than viewing resilience as a set of objective, measurable traits, the report uses a first-person narrative approach based on individual life stories through which young participants define for themselves the factors that have helped them persevere. From this retrospective lens, we gain a particularly intimate and nuanced insight into how these youth define their own successes, and we are able to view resilience as a process through time, a set of orientations that is informed both by subjective and environmental factors. Interviews were designed to draw out information about the participants' longer stories of adversity, key points in their adolescence during which they struggled, and the main traits and social supports that allowed them to overcome significant challenges.

The qualitative data used in the report are taken from 10 in-depth life stories narrated by young Latino men and women between the ages of 19 and 24 from the neighborhoods of East Los Angeles and Pilsen, Chicago; individual stories were each complemented by separate interviews with the youths' parents and mentors who provide additional insight into specific aspects of each youth's development. All participants were recruited through community-based organizations working with at-risk youth (AltaMed in East L.A. and Gads Hill Center in Pilsen). The report includes full stories, which situates resilience within longer-term life trajectories, as well as key themes pulled from the larger body of data.

KEY FINDINGS:

1. Resilient Latino youth who participated in the study tend to possess a particular set of personal characteristics, including:

- **A long-term sense of vision and optimism**

"I always try to think positive. As blurry, as dark as it gets, I feel like that's the only way I keep going, if I think positive, if I see the bigger picture, if I always imagine where I want to end up; that's what keeps me going."

- **A strong work ethic, ambition, and perseverance**

"I mean, you have a choice either to follow the wrong steps, get into the gangs, into drugs, or alcohol, or just staying focused and going to school and just doing your thing. I mean it does have to do with choice as well."

- **Communication, social skills, and flexibility**

"I'm very open-minded; I'm adventurous, so I like to talk to a lot of different people, and I've talked to a lot of people that have these different points of view, and that will give me information about things, and what I need to actually get somewhere, and to get my point across.... I like to talk to all types of different people, to go places, and it just opens my mind."

- **Empathy, self-awareness, and the desire to break the negative cycle**

"The situation at home, I use it as a motivation instead of victimizing myself, discouraging me. I always see that as a motivation and as a challenge as well, so I don't have to repeat their same story. Just knowing the fact, you know, there's people out there with worse situations that are so successful and they're powerful leaders; they make a huge impact on people like me; it's what keeps me going."

2. While some came from dysfunctional homes, other attributed some of their resilient traits to particular attributes of immigrant Latino families, including:

- **Vigilance and communication of traditional values on the part of parents and guardians**

"My mom taught us, respect your elders, basically all the moral things that you should know, and she pushed us, 'do better; do your homework; don't be afraid to try this; don't cheat; don't steal.'.... It was constant, 'don't get

involved with gangs; pick your friends; be careful; don't let people think you're less because you weren't born here,' that kind of stuff."

- **Expectations of responsibility and solidarity from and toward extended family**

"My brother took a break from college for five years to work so that I could go to university."

"My mom was always working. My step dad, he would leave me in charge of my brother. I would clean for my mom, like clean the whole house, and I would wash... I would do everything because I was ultimately responsible. And I knew that my mom was tired from working, so I would help her as much as I can. And I think that's why I think so differently."

- **However, these cultural strengths were often counterbalanced by the difficulties of living in immigrant households**

"Our immigrant parents don't know, they come to this place, because it's the American Dream, right, but it's actually not the American Dream; it's not. It's where you come to find out everything... and it affects us, because if our parents don't speak English, don't understand the concepts, or what we're going through, they don't understand that going to school here can have a big impact on your life, like you can be bullied, you might do good and be popular or you can be messing up."

3. For the youth in the study, community-based programs and mentors had often played a central role in fostering resilience, serving as a critical support for both parents and youth:

- **Mentors and programs fill a gap and act as a bridge between immigrant parents and their children**

"I mean, the type of people who live in this neighborhood, some of them are first-generation, some of them are just here from another country, and they don't know how to teach us. My mom, for example, she knew nothing about gangs, we knew nothing about universities, so when we came to the community center, they offered all that... they opened up windows."

- **Programs and mentors teach youth skills and knowledge**

"One thing I really stand by is giving a youth confidence and self-esteem. I feel with those two, if you give a child confidence in who they are, what they're about, what's right and what's wrong and live with that understanding and

that self-esteem as a person, if they get swayed any which way in high school, and if they have that confidence and self-esteem, they're like, 'no, I have this exam or this class,' that sense of responsibility."

- **Mentors serve as emotional and psychosocial support for youth**

"Mentors are not just here academically, but they're here for you personally because they do understand the community where you come from and the type of education sometimes your parents have that cannot support you the same way, so they're a great support, especially for Latino students, something that's dedicated for us is a great resource; it's something that connects back to our roots, culture, everything, you know?"

The life stories included in the study show that there is not a single path or personality that leads at-risk minority youth to becoming resilient adults. For some, resilience appears to have taken on a fairly linear path, while for others, resilience traits became severely tested when harsh circumstances led youth to act out and make poor choices, often based on feeling vulnerable, angry, or hopeless within a negative environment. For these youth in particular, programs and mentors that supported and guided the youth in using their strengths toward learning the skills, forging the networks, and building the confidence necessary to make them successful, made all the difference.

Given the tendency of many second-generation Latino youth to grow up in poor, marginal, and violent environments, it is critical that we develop policies and invest in environments and programs that strengthen the natural resilience of these youth and their families, and that teach resilience skills where they might be lacking. Comprehensive, community-based programs such as the NCLR Escalera Program and others highlighted in the study include educative interventions, job training, social services, mentoring programs, and referrals to other support systems such as mental health and prevention-oriented programs that can avert risk and protect youth from the assaults of their environments. Services that engage parents and extended family members are particularly effective in the context of Latino families.

Culturally sensitive, community-based approaches that nurture a strong sense of identity and belonging, while also healing individual and community traumas, are critical as well. Such holistic interventions provide skills, open up options, help youth to feel confident and safe, foster family cohesion, and promote an overall positive outlook in immigrant communities. A major challenge for many promising culturally sensitive programs, however, is that they often find it difficult to find broader support, as their work does not fit neatly into the frame of evidence-based practices often prescribed by funders and policymakers.

Finally, all attempts to build resilience among Latino and other poor youth of color must go hand-in-hand with broader structural changes that will reduce the chances that youth, as well as their families and communities, experience systemic aggressions to begin with. Policy solutions that address and reduce the environmental risk factors that poor communities of color are exposed to—high levels of poverty, unemployment, under-resourced schools, housing discrimination, violence, racial profiling and excessive police force, family separation due to unfair immigration laws and incarceration, etc.—are crucial in this regard. The enactment of policies such as DAPA (Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents) has been an excellent step toward enhancing stability and well-being in immigrant families and among second-generation Latino youth. Proposed legislation in juvenile justice reform such as the REDEEM Act and reauthorization of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act, designed to promote rehabilitation rather than criminalization, would go a long way in promoting more positive environments among at-risk minority youth.

Second-generation Latino youth are a major asset to the nation, and their successful participation in society is critical to America's success. Investing in these Latino youth now, and supporting all American youth in building positive, strong identities, will not only enhance their own lives, but will help them pass their strengths on to future generations of young Americans.



INTRODUCTION

The 53 million Latinos living in the United States today compose 17% of the nation's population, making Hispanics the largest minority group in the country. Hispanic youth under the age of 18, one of our fastest-growing groups, currently represent one-quarter of the nation's child population; within just 20 years, one in three American youth will be Latino.¹ By purely demographic standards, the well-being of today's young Latinos is critical to our nation's success, as these youth represent the potential scientists, entrepreneurs, teachers, caregivers, voters, and engaged citizens of the country's future. These youth are major assets to the United States, and their well-being is closely tied our country's present and future success.

Unfortunately, a large portion of today's Hispanic youth are exposed to extremely difficult environments and circumstances that push them into risky situations and behaviors that compromise their health and well-being, often contributing to poor educational and social outcomes such as high school drop-out, early pregnancy, or involvement in the juvenile justice system. Compounding these difficult environments, Latino youth are often depicted in the public discourse and mainstream media as either potentially deviant and criminal, on the one hand, or as powerless, marginalized victims, on the other. As a result of all these tendencies, too little attention is being paid to the substantial number of Hispanic youth who are, in fact, able to cope with hardship, learn from adversity, and find ways to reach a solid measure of well-being and success.

This report presents a much more hopeful portrayal of today's Latino youth population. In particular, it uses the concept of resilience to shine a light onto a specific group, second-generation Latino adolescents (U.S.-born children of immigrants) who have grown up in extremely challenging circumstances (including poor, violent neighborhoods, and the stresses of living in immigrant families) but have been able to persevere, develop positive orientations, and excel—rather than falling through the cracks of their environments. This group, by sheer numbers alone, is critical to the future of the country: of the nearly 18 million Hispanics 18 years old or younger (one-quarter of all American children), the majority—a little over half—are second-generation.²

Identifying resilience factors among this group not only contributes to our understanding of one of today's most important youth demographics. It is also critical because these youth are the bridge between their parents' immigrant struggles and future generations of Americans; they are key to the social integration of the country's largest ethnic group. This in-between position of the second generation—in between languages and cultures, in between the worldviews and values of their parents and those learned in American institutions—can, on the one hand, generate significant skills and maturity, but for some can also create a great deal of vulnerability within an already difficult environment.

Uncovering the positive traits and skill sets of resilient second-generation youth is all the more critical because, as a growing body of research shows, by the third generation, many strengths demonstrated by both first- and second-generation Hispanic youth appear to weaken,³ leading to a higher incidence of problems such as substance abuse, behavioral problems, mental health difficulties, obesity, and early pregnancy.⁴ A recent study found that in addition, the third-generation “U-turn” leads to drops in voter participation, school attendance, educational attainment, trust in institutions and neighbors, and disconnectedness from work and school.⁵

By identifying specific attributes, competencies, and social supports that make some second-generation Latino youth resilient, we can better devise programs and policies that will benefit not only today’s cohort but also future generations of Hispanic youth.

What are the factors that make some Latino youth more resilient than others? In order to begin answering this question, it is necessary to untangle the concept of resilience itself, a term that, along with the notion of “grit” (the stamina and motivation to achieve long-term goals)* has become popular in mainstream discourse, across research and policy, and within different academic disciplines. At a very broad level, resilience encapsulates classic American values of hope, struggle, and persistence in the face of adversity—whether it be a sudden disastrous event, everyday struggles, or a lifetime of tough circumstances. Highly successful adults who have overcome particularly challenging backgrounds can teach us important lessons about both resilience and the societal factors that either impede or foster it. Examples of Latino public figures who have surmounted such obstacles include Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor and astronaut José Hernández (see pages 12 and 13). The keys to both of their success stories are often described as an innate curiosity, an early drive to excel, habits of discipline and hard work, and an ability to reach out for help and take advantage of the fortuitous breaks that came their way.

While these stories are inspiring, it is essential to understand resilience not only as a set of innate personality traits that have catapulted exceptional figures such as these into extraordinary careers. Resilience is, in fact, a complex process that develops through time, and while some of its traits might be part of one’s psychological make-up, it is nurtured, learned, and tested as people grow up and develop personal skills and social competencies that help them cope with the difficulties they encounter along the way. Resilience, moreover, is shaped within particular environments and through exchanges with multiple people

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* See, for example, Angela Lee’s Duckworth’s seminal TED Talk on this subject: http://www.ted.com/talks/angela_lee_duckworth_the_key_to_success_grit.

and institutions. Among second-generation immigrant youth, additional factors that may determine both risk and resilience include cultural influences and the particularities of living in immigrant families.

This report examines resilience among second-generation Latino youth by outlining the particular environments that place them at risk of negative outcomes, and proposing a framework for analyzing resilience processes among this group. It then provides an in-depth exploration of the life stories of 10 resilient Latino young adults from East Los Angeles, California, and Pilsen, Chicago. Through this textured, qualitative approach, which also includes interviews with significant adults in the youth's lives, we draw out information about each participant's longer stories of adversity, moments in their adolescence during which they struggled, and the main traits and social supports that allowed them to overcome significant challenges. As the stories show, participants were able to overcome economic, social, and environmental barriers through a multiplicity of factors that include not only personal strengths but also learned life skills, the availability of positive and caring role models, family, community and cultural characteristics, social connectedness, institutional programs and opportunities, and in some cases, plain luck.

While the report pulls out the key themes that cut across stories, the individual narratives themselves show that there is not a single trajectory or pattern of resilience. Several of the participants, indeed, have encountered significant setbacks along the way to a more stable place in the world, and the arc of their stories is not neat or linear. For these youth in particular, we explore the ways in which programs and mentors have supported and guided them in using their strengths toward learning the skills, forging the networks, and building the confidence necessary to make them successful.

Although the narratives recounted here are unique, similar stories are taking place across communities throughout our nation. These Latino youth, like all American youth, are tremendous assets to the nation, and their full participation in society is critical to the nation's success. We must do our utmost to ensure that the well-being and success of youth like these is determined not by luck, or by personal traits, but by policies, interventions, environments, and support networks that can protect them from negative influences such as school drop-out, gangs, or contact with the juvenile justice system, and channel their hope and positivity into successful lives and careers that, in turn, will help their families, their communities, and their country.

SONIA SOTOMAYOR

FROM THE BRONX PROJECTS TO THE SUPREME COURT

Perhaps nobody today epitomizes the notion of resilience among Latinos more poignantly than Justice Sonia Sotomayor, the first Latina and third woman to be appointed to the Supreme Court. Growing up in the gang- and drug-ridden projects of the Bronx, New York, Sotomayor encountered various forms of adversity from the time she was a child. Her father struggled with alcoholism while her mother, who worked night shifts as a nurse, was rarely home to care for her children. Constant fighting between her parents, and the eventual early death of her father—which led Sotomayor’s mother into a long period of despondency—left young Sotomayor and her brother to fend for themselves during a critical moment in their childhood.

One of the most challenging lessons of her youth was Sotomayor’s diagnosis with juvenile diabetes at age eight. Discovering quickly that she could not rely on either parent to administer her insulin shots, she learned to boil syringes and cope with life-or-death responsibility just a year after she had learned how to tell time. In her memoir, *My Beloved World*, Sotomayor writes, “I probably learned more self-discipline from living with diabetes than I ever did from the Sisters of Charity,” whose school she attended as a child.

In addition to learning this “precocious self-reliance,” which itself taught her critical life skills such as patience, persistence, and time management, Sotomayor’s natural attributes such as a strong sense of curiosity, creativity, and introspection led her to question and make sense for herself of the chaotic world around her. It is the combination of these traits that allowed her to make her way as a woman of color through Princeton University and Yale Law School all the way to working in the New York District Attorney’s office and becoming a judge, subsequently appointed to the Supreme Court.

But, she says, she would never have been able to make that journey without the supportive people and environments in her life: “There are uses to adversity,” she says. “But, I’ve always felt that the support I’ve drawn from those closest to me has made the difference between success and failure.” In that regard, her *abuelita* (grandmother)—who from childhood showed her not only unconditional love, respect, and confidence, but also grounded her in the deeply rooted cultural values of her Puerto Rican heritage—gave Sotomayor a sense of identity. The lessons and unwavering support she eventually received from her mother, family and friends, mentors, and community all encouraged her through an extraordinary life and career.⁶

JOSÉ HERNANDEZ

FROM WORKING THE FIELDS TO FLYING IN SPACE

José Hernandez is one of few Americans—and even fewer Latinos—selected by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) to be an astronaut. He is a hero and role model to millions of children and parents around the country. After retiring as an astronaut, he decided in 2011 to make a run for Congress in California, wishing to follow up his contributions to the field of science with a civic duty to serve his fellow Californians.

Hernandez's extraordinary life path was certainly not one that was cut out for him from the start. Raised by Mexican migrant farm workers of indigenous Purépecha roots, Hernandez spent his childhood working the fields alongside his parents, moving back and forth between Michoacán, Mexico, and California's Central Valley. Hernandez's childhood memories include waking up long before sunrise every day, working long hours alongside the adults, and moving from town to town following the harvests.

Although he came from a background that many would view as extremely challenging, and while most assumed that he would continue the farm work tradition, Hernandez dreamed big from very early on. When he was 10 years old, his imagination and vision took him to a very particular place: one night, watching Walter Cronkite on television describing the Apollo 17 moon walk, Hernandez ran outside to look at the moon. He was mesmerized. When he ran back in he said to his parents, "You know Papa, Mama, that's what I want to do. I want to be an astronaut." Rather than dissuading young José, his father told him: "I think you can do it. You just have to follow a simple recipe. Draw yourself a road map. What are the steps needed to get there? And you can't skip steps.... You gotta pay your dues."

Hernandez's parents decided to settle in California so that their children could receive an education and live a more stable life. Hernandez learned to speak English fluently, devised the road map suggested by his father, and followed his advice to work hard and believe in himself. He studied math and science in high school, and went to college to study engineering. At the age of 18, Hernandez heard on the radio that a Hispanic man, Franklin Chang-Díaz, had been selected as a NASA astronaut. As he recounts, that was the final motivator—"that was the moment I said, 'I want to fly in space.'"

After pursuing graduate studies, Hernandez continued his path and went to work for an engineering laboratory where he and a colleague developed the first full-field digital mammography imaging system, used in the early detection of breast cancer. Eventually he was able to find work as a NASA engineer, and in 2009, he finally fulfilled his dream of journeying to the moon. But becoming an astronaut and flying to space did not come easy. Despite the consistent work ethic and optimism that Hernandez had learned to apply since childhood, he had to apply 12 times in as many years before getting accepted into NASA's 2004 astronaut candidate class, and then spent another five years in training.

Although he narrowly lost his 2012 congressional race, Hernandez has not given up on pursuing that dream, either. As he said, "It took me 12 tries to become an astronaut. You think I'm gonna quit my first time as a congressman? I don't think that's in my nature."

Having a dream, being taught the confidence to pursue it, learning the value of perseverance, and seeking to give back to the world: those are the resilience lessons that José Hernandez has taught scores of Latino and other children who want to know how to reach the stars.⁷



ENVIRONMENTAL RISK FACTORS FOR LATINO YOUTH

In order to examine resilience among second-generation Latinos, it is necessary first to understand the contexts within which they grow up. Like the broader Latino population, Hispanic youth are a culturally, racially, geographically, and generationally diverse group. Latino youth represent a variety of subgroups, with the largest share being of Mexican descent, although those of Puerto Rican, Dominican, Cuban, Central American, and South American descent reach significant numbers in particular localities across the country. The experiences of these youth may vary depending on different migration histories, parenting and socialization practices, degrees of acculturation and English language proficiency, and exposure to racism and discrimination, among other factors.

These differences notwithstanding, Latino children and youth demonstrate poorer outcomes than their White peers on a wide range of social indicators, most of which are related to socioeconomic status. Factors associated with risk, described below, contribute not only to marginalization, but also undermine potential protective factors such as supportive relationships within families, neighborhoods, and communities, as well as positive self-esteem and healthy identities.

Perhaps the most glaring gap for Latino children under age 18 is poverty. In 2013, 33% of Latino children were poor, compared to 14% of White children.⁸ The economic recession and unemployment crisis that began in 2007, both of which affected the Latino population disproportionately, greatly exacerbated this situation: between 2007 and 2010, the number of Hispanic children living in poverty grew by a full 36% (compared to 18% and 12% for White and Black children, respectively).⁹ Even more striking is that a majority of young Latinos (64%) live in low-income families, compared to 32% of White children.¹⁰ Children in poor and low-income families are disadvantaged in numerous ways: not only do many have to work to supplement their family's income, sometimes to the detriment of their schooling, but some have worse health and educational outcomes and experience more violence than their peers, all of which impacts their overall well-being.¹¹

As scholar John Powell has noted, place and neighborhood determines opportunity in myriad ways: "Where you live usually determines the school your children attend, your degree of neighborhood safety, your access to public transportation or highways, the availability and quality of finance and credit, your employment opportunities, and your social network. These spatial arrangements of opportunity are contoured by our past, and if not changed, they will have serious implications for our future."¹² For youth and families who live in a geographic area or state with a favorable opportunity structure—a solid tax base, access to transportation, good schools, employment, finance and credit, neighborhood safety, and social networks—opportunity is enhanced. But for

those growing up in neighborhoods of high-concentrated poverty, poor schools, crime, limited economic opportunity, and segregated housing—who for the most part tend to be Black or Hispanic—it takes a very particular set of personal assets, skills, orientations, and support networks to overcome such geographically and racially marginalized environments.

For youth who are growing up in neighborhoods of high-concentrated poverty, it takes a very particular set of assets and orientations to overcome such marginalized environments.

Indeed, many Latino youth grow up in high-poverty neighborhoods, a factor associated with high school drop-out rates, teen pregnancy, and downward economic mobility. Low socioeconomic neighborhoods within which Latino youth grow up tend to be characterized by hazards such as crime, violence, and drug use. A survey of primarily Black and Hispanic youth exposed to high levels of violence found that such exposure was associated with greater physical aggression, diminished perception of risk, lowered expectations for the future, antisocial activity, and diminished academic achievement.¹³ The chronic sense of threat and fear that comes from living in such environments, which also includes schools, has also been linked to depression, anxiety, and behavioral problems.¹⁴ Moreover, a serious issue within some subgroups of poor immigrant and Latino families is that of domestic violence, which is often linked to poverty, occupational stress, and heavy drinking; whether directed at a child or a parent, emotional and physical abuse can have serious psychological consequences for children, and internalized trauma can contribute to the cycle of violence in future generations.¹⁵

A major problem for Latino youth in many parts of the country is the presence of violent gangs, which recruit among young Latinos in neighborhoods and schools and contribute to a culture of violence. A study by the Pew Hispanic Center found that 31% of Latinos aged 16–26 have a friend or relative who is a current or former gang member, a tendency that is especially pronounced for youth of Mexican and Central American origin and for second-generation Latinos.¹⁶ Gangs strive to provide a sense of belonging, protection, and identity to adolescents, and are especially appealing to youth who feel excluded from their schools and perceive a lack of alternatives within their communities. The psychological attraction toward, and the impact of, gangs can thus be particularly strong in communities where youth feel marginalized, where employment prospects are low, and where family cohesion and parental engagement is weak—all problems that affect immigrant families disproportionately.

The educational challenges of Latino youth have been widely studied, and experts generally agree that the performance and graduation gaps between Latino and White youth at nearly every level of education continue to be a major problem.¹⁷ Schools attended by Hispanic students often serve a disproportionate amount of low-income students; they are often understaffed, overcrowded, and run-down. Research has shown that Latino students are often negatively tracked, resulting in a lack of access to high-quality content-area instruction, including college-bound coursework.¹⁸ All of these factors contribute to low educational achievement, and Latino students tend to lag behind White students on test scores in both math and reading.

Low expectations from teachers and a lack of rigor in the classroom can also lead Latino students to feel isolated and alienated,¹⁹ a factor that contributes to the high drop-out rate among Latino students; in 2013, approximately 14% of young Latinos ages 16–24 had neither finished high school nor were attending school, compared to 7% of Black youth and 5% of White youth.^{*20} Dropping out of school not only reduces Latino youth's socioeconomic options for the future, it also exposes them to numerous risky situations and behaviors that can leave them disconnected from both school and work, and can be detrimental to their overall well-being.

The health of Latino youth is another area of disparity for this population. Lack of access to health care is one of the most serious problems facing Latino youth. In 2013, 12% of Latino children lacked health insurance (compared to 7% of Black and 5% of White children)²¹ and only 36% of Latino youth receive health care through their parents' jobs, primarily because a high proportion of Latino workers are in jobs that do not provide health insurance and other benefits.²² Latino children and youth are also at high risk of both food insecurity and obesity, both problems that are intimately connected to poverty and environment.²³ Approximately 41% of Hispanic children under age 18 are obese, compared to 27% of White children, and high rates of obesity put Latino youth at high risk of contracting diabetes, cardiovascular disease, asthma, hypertension, and other health problems. While the rate of teen pregnancy has dropped among Latino teenagers in recent years, it continues to be extremely high, and is approximately three times the rate among non-Hispanic White teenagers.²⁴

The experience of racial and ethnic discrimination is common among Latino youth, and is a stressor that is linked to a variety of negative health and educational outcomes.²⁵ The effects of repeated ethnic and racial discrimination by peers or others have, for example, been associated with depression, anxiety, and risky health behaviors.²⁶ A growing body of research shows that institutional stereotyping and discrimination also have major implications for youth

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* Note that this definition includes Hispanic immigrants who did not go to school in the United States. Using a narrower definition that captures fewer immigrants decreased the Latino drop-out rate to one comparable to Blacks. See Richard Pérez-Peña "As Latinos Make Gains in Education, Gaps Remain," *The New York Times*, May 9, 2013. http://www.ny-times.com/2013/05/10/education/latinos-sharply-narrow-education-gap.html?_r=0.

development, particularly when youth internalize negative images. Stereotyping of Latino students in schools, for example, has been found to lower students' self-esteem and motivation, leading to disengagement, alienation, disciplinary problems, and lowered academic achievement.²⁷ Racial profiling by police, moreover, is a common experience for young Latinos, as it is for Black youth.²⁸ For Latino boys in particular, who are often assumed to be troublesome or criminal, the feeling of being surveilled and stereotyped at school and in public can be pervasive.²⁹ Repeated exposure and a strong sensitivity to discrimination have also been associated with behavioral problems and a lack of trust, and can lead toward hardening and defiance toward authority and society.

For young Latinos who live in such environments, the cumulative effect of these various affronts experienced on a daily basis may lead to a chronic sense of stress and trauma. Particularly when reinforced by a lack of cultural connectedness (the feeling of being disconnected or excluded from both the culture of origin and the American mainstream), trauma becomes magnified; such trauma intensifies further when it is experienced not only by individuals but by whole families and communities.³⁰ Given that the accumulation of these negative environmental influences and messages can lead to mental health or behavioral issues, it is not surprising that, overall, young Hispanics are more susceptible to emotional distress and substance abuse and suicidal behavior, engage more in risky sexual behaviors, and are more likely to enter the juvenile justice system than White youth.³¹ If not addressed, the effects of chronic trauma can become transmitted generationally through biological and psychological mechanisms.³²

While this overall picture seems discouraging, things have improved in a number of areas over recent years, showing that some outcomes can change with policies and programs that tackle disparities. Between 1990 and 2012, for example, high school drop-out rates among Latinos dropped significantly, from 32% to 13%.³³ In 2012, a record 69% of Hispanic students enrolled in college, up from 49% in 2000 and, for the first time, surpassing White college enrollment (67%).³⁴ Although Latino child poverty soared from approximately 27% before the recession to 35% in 2010, by 2013 it dropped to 30.4%, demonstrating a downward trend.³⁵ Health insurance coverage for Latino children, in addition, has improved in recent years due to a number of safety-net programs such as Medicaid and the federal Child Health Insurance Program (CHIP).³⁶ Nonetheless, some alarming gaps remain for Latino youth as evidenced by some of the more conspicuous disparities discussed above, including the high percentage of Latino youth who continue to live in poor and low-wage families and the very low rate of college graduation rates (only 14.5% of Latinos attain a bachelor's degree, compared to 34.5% of all Whites and 51% of Asians).³⁷

Thus, it is critical to understand that the risk factors contributing to poor outcomes for Latino youth are largely rooted in a nexus of poverty, race/ethnicity, and marginalized neighborhoods. Some researchers have argued, moreover, that it is the segregation of such neighborhoods that contributes to isolating both youth and their families from important social networks and capital found in more affluent spaces, thus trapping them in environments that offer little way out and perpetuating generational poverty.³⁸ Others have argued, in addition, that the sense of disconnectedness and high stress in many poor neighborhoods is buttressed by a predominant cultural model that emphasizes short-term goals (focusing on immediate needs) rather than on long-term ones (which may seem unobtainable or remote)—a factor that may impede the self-control and long-term vision associated with resilience.³⁹

SECOND-GENERATION LATINO YOUTH

Given today's large proportion of second-generation Latino youth (those with at least one parent who is an immigrant), researchers have become particularly invested in better understanding both the challenges and strengths of this demographic group. Broadly speaking, second-generation youth are exposed to all of the risk factors outlined; they often struggle, in addition, with specific barriers that come from living in immigrant families.

Second-generation children are exposed to the many difficulties that their immigrant parents face. These can be especially severe for parents who are unable to obtain legal status, who often work very long hours for minimal wages, without job security or legal recourse when subjected to exploitative labor practices. Regardless of immigration status, moreover, many Latino immigrant parents are overrepresented in substandard jobs that do not pay a living wage, do not offer health or retirement benefits, and do not offer paid leave.⁴⁰ Because of the precarious economic situation of their families, many second-generation youth start working in their early teenage years to contribute to household expenses or help pay for their own or their siblings' education. Children of undocumented parents, in addition, live with chronic fear that their parents will be detained or deported, and many live with the reality of their family members' deportation, a separation that can have a hugely detrimental economic and psychological impact on the entire family.

Second-generation children are exposed to the many difficulties that their immigrant parents face. These can be especially severe for parents who are unable to obtain legal status.

The previous migratory experience of immigrant parents may also affect their U.S.-born children; the loss of social support and extended families (including grandparents), and difficulties acquiring English language skills and learning to navigate new systems, can lead to significant stress among different family members. The combination of these processes, along with adapting to new cultural values, norms, and behaviors—a process called acculturation—often leads to acculturative stress for family members. As researchers have noted, the impact of acculturation varies depending on a number of variables such as the length and pace of the process, exposure to discrimination, coping strategies and social support, and other characteristics. Because Latinos often maintain elements from their culture of origin through time, moreover, acculturative stress may be experienced by both immigrants and their U.S.-born children, although it takes on different qualities for different generations.⁴¹

In many cases, for example, immigrant parents and children acculturate at different rates, often reversing traditional power dynamics within the family. Parents may feel helpless as they become dependent upon their children and sometimes lose the ability to discipline them, while children in immigrant families are often burdened by taking on critical household, language, and social responsibilities for their parents. Family conflict can result from differing rates at which new cultural norms—such as gendered behaviors, dating, clothing style, manners, and values—are adopted.⁴² Also, parental depression and neglect and other mental health or marital issues among immigrant parents, usually associated with the social and economic difficulties of migration and acculturation, are linked to depression and distress among their children.⁴³ Acculturative stress among Latino children of immigrants has been associated with anxiety, low self-esteem, depression, and suicidal ideation, as well as with behavior problems and substance abuse.⁴⁴

An area in which second-generation Latino youth may be particularly vulnerable in the acculturative process is in the lack of support or engagement they receive from their parents vis-à-vis their education. As English language learners with low educational attainment and heavy work loads, many Latino immigrant parents who wish to be supportive of their children find it difficult to help them navigate the educational system and aid them with school work and other skills or tasks that can help prepare them for future success, whether that is defined as a college education or entry into the workforce. At the same time, second-generation Latino youth often feel pressured by their families to succeed, to do right by their parents and families, and to build the family's path to the "American Dream"—the social and economic upward mobility envisioned by so many struggling immigrant parents.⁴⁵ The inability of parents to understand or, for some, appreciate the effort, skills, and work it takes for their children to cope with the demands of school, jobs, work-study programs, and important

extracurricular activities while dealing with many of the environmental, cultural, and familial difficulties described above, can be experienced as frustrating, and even hurtful, by their children.

Such distress can become pronounced if and when youth enter the postsecondary phase, especially if parents are still expecting financial and other forms of familial commitment from their children, who are now struggling with the demands and expectations of a more independent college life, often with fewer resources, support networks, and preparation than non-Hispanic students. These factors at least partially explain why second-generation Latinos who attend college are less likely than their White counterparts to be enrolled full-time and only about half as likely to complete a bachelor's degree.⁴⁶

Second-generation Latino youth often feel pressured by their families to succeed, to do right by their parents and families, and to build the family's path to the American Dream.

The environments within which immigrant families live can also contribute to the challenges and stressors that second-generation youth experience. For immigrants and their children, adapting to difficult environments (such as those described above) has been labeled by sociologists a pattern of downward assimilation, whereby immigrant families can become acculturated to the negative influences in their surroundings rather than the upwardly mobile path suggested by conventional assimilation models.⁴⁷ In some places, linguistic and cultural isolation can further reinforce the distance between such communities and the life pathways promoted by mainstream values and aspirations. However, Latino families and communities are diverse and their experiences of integration can vary depending on local or state models of immigrant welcoming and integration, among other factors.

While all of these obstacles are challenging for second-generation Latino youth, research on this population has suggested that there is a much more positive way of understanding the experiences of these youth. Despite the difficulties outlined above, for example, second-generation Latinos do fare substantially better in adulthood than immigrant youth when it comes to key indicators of social integration. Second-generation Latinos are less likely to live in poverty, and are more likely to have higher incomes, graduate from college, become homeowners, and speak English fluently than the first generation. When comparing second-generation youth to their first-generation (immigrant) counterparts, we also see significant improvements in the realm of educational attainment (such as high school completion and college enrollment, which for second-generation

Latinos are similar to those of their White peers). Although the experiences of first- and second-generation youth cannot be compared, the relatively successful integration of the latter does suggest a resilient element among this cohort, particularly given the significant challenges they face as outlined above.

It is when second-generation young Latinos are compared to their third-generation counterparts that the trajectory of Hispanic youth becomes a concern. A recent study has found that Hispanic children of immigrants tend to start their lives with a substantial advantage over third-generation children of U.S.-born Latinos. Children of Latino immigrants are more likely than third-generation children to live in a family with at least one securely employed parent and are less likely to live in a one-parent family. These children tend to be healthier than the children of Latino U.S.-born parents, and are more likely to be in school or working in their teen years. The study authors argue that these positive attributes are due to the fact that Hispanic parents arrive with strong family structures, traditional cultural diets, and a work ethic that motivates them to find and maintain employment—resilience factors that are reflected in their children’s development.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, not only did this study find that many of these advantages come to be erased over the years, but as mentioned earlier, a number of the positive outcomes gained by second-generation Latinos become reversed by the third generation. While research on this issue is not conclusive, it has been suggested that the erosion of the parental “immigrant narrative,” in addition to the experience of exclusion and discrimination, may lead to the “U-turn” that occurs in the third generation, which may point to serious educational, economic, and other disparities for more acculturated Latinos in future years.

Given the gains of many of today’s second-generation Latino youth, and the possibility that the attributes they embody may become eroded with time, it is critical to take a close look at how today’s resilient Hispanic youth have coped with the significant challenges in their lives, and how they describe the perspectives, orientations, and systemic supports that have allowed them to transcend significant barriers and develop pathways to success and well-being.



WHAT IS RESILIENCE?

Despite the fact that the notion of resilience has become extremely popular across different fields (such as psychology, biology, sociology, and environmental sciences) as well as in popular discourse, it is not an easy concept to define. It is an especially important theme in the field of youth development, since researchers, practitioners, and policymakers interested in improving the lives of disadvantaged youth have increasingly supported asset-based (rather than deficit-based) interventions. Definitions of psychological resilience are abundant; succinctly put, the term is usually recognized as “a dynamic, multidimensional process through which individuals experience positive outcomes despite exposure to significant adversity.”⁴⁹ Perhaps a more complete way to describe resilience is as “a set of inner resources, social competencies, and cultural strategies that permit individuals to not only survive, recover, or even thrive after stressful events, but also to draw from the experience to enhance subsequent functioning.”⁵⁰

By definition, resilience assumes exposure to significant adversity, on the one hand, as well as some current measure by which to describe positive functioning, well-being, or success. However, while risk factors such as poverty, abuse, or early pregnancy are relatively easy to define and measure, how and when to describe an individual as resilient is less clear. Indeed, measurements of resilience might range anywhere from the mere absence of psychopathology to more rigorous academic standards of success such as college graduation or a professional career orientation.

Another difficulty in measuring resilience is defining at what point in life might it be ascertained that a person is resilient. Increasingly, research shows that resilience skills are developed early on in life, and many are often in place at a relatively young age.⁵¹ However, the ability to cope with adversity is often especially tested—and sometimes strained—during adolescence. To begin with, recent research has made clear that the stage of brain development for adolescents can create a proneness to risky and impulsive behaviors, poor self-regulation, and changes in motivation and emotion.⁵² Hormonal changes during this stage may affect behavior dramatically. Although adolescence can also be a period of tremendous creativity, energy, and emotional growth—one in which more privileged youth might explore their identity and self-actualization in relatively safe environments—it can be a time of great vulnerability. This is particularly true for poor and minority youth who are exposed to many of the challenging external factors described above, but do not have the resources, relationships, or social capital to protect and motivate them, or the skills and models to envision and build a successful adulthood. Moreover, even

disadvantaged youth who show great motivation through their high school years and enter college are sometimes unable to cope with the stressful postsecondary environment, where they may feel less prepared than other students, are preoccupied with financial concerns, and no longer have older support systems.

Some researchers argue that because teenage brains still have much plasticity and flexibility for change, adolescence is a prime time to develop and cultivate resilience skills, such as enhancing self-control, learning how to persist in the face of frustration and failure, developing qualities such as grit and empathy, and strengthening one's identity.⁵³ Thus, even though certain resilience traits may be developed earlier on in life, cultivating and reinforcing resilient outlooks and behaviors during adolescence is critical to the future of these youth.

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For highly disadvantaged youth, some forms of recurring hardship and trauma cut very deep and can leave lasting scars that impede one's ability to move on successfully; during the vulnerable adolescent years, such adversity can lead to the brink between disaster and success. The vulnerability to risk is especially acute for those surrounded by negative peers or environments (including gangs, substance abuse, and other influences). For them, individual attributes and the message of "pulling oneself up by the bootstrap" is not enough. As we will see in the following stories, it is essential to make accessible programs and interventions that can fill some of the existing gaps and voids that come with disadvantage and adversity both in high school and beyond; mentors, in particular, can complement personal resilience attributes with the concrete knowledge, skills, advice, and confidence that is necessary to guide these youth toward successful adulthoods.

Although some research on resilience among youth uses relatively fixed measurements and time frames, the fluidity of this concept has led most researchers to examine this concept within an ecological-transactional framework, one that views resilience as an interaction between the individual and the broader environment within which his or her development is taking place.⁵⁴ From this perspective, certain personality traits that may be characterized as resilient must always be understood as taking shape

through dynamic interplay between the individual and his or her family, peers, neighborhood, community, and broader society. In other words, resilience is not a static set of innate attributes; it is, rather, an ongoing developmental process that may be learned and nurtured within particular environments and through exchanges with multiple persons and institutions.⁵⁵

TRAITS OF RESILIENT YOUTH AND COMMUNITIES

In addition to framing resilience within an ecological model, resilience must also be understood as a process that examines the dynamic between risk and protective factors. Resilience develops or emerges when young people can benefit from positive protective processes that offset the effects of exposure to risk. Protective factors and competencies that contribute to resilience, and to positive outcomes for most youth (including those relating to school achievement, mental health, and overall well-being), include the following:

General Skills and Competencies that Foster Resilience

Personality traits: self-concept and self-esteem; self-monitoring; persistence; motivation; high expectations and aspirations for educational and career goals; optimism; positive coping strategies

Cognitive skills: critical thinking and reasoning; creativity; problem-solving skills

Social competencies: communication skills; ability to adapt to and acting appropriately in different contexts; help-seeking behavior; social skills and network building

Prosocial behavior (acting with altruism): social conscience and values; civic engagement; positive resistance

Environmental factors: cultural capital/knowledge of specific plans and access to networks that will enable one to carry out plans; positive connection to family, peers, school, and community; social support and attachment to networks; attachment to mentors and positive role models

In addition to these factors, a growing number of researchers point to the tremendous array of culture-specific sets of knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed by marginalized groups, particularly minority families. As Kuperminc and others point out, when seeking to understand both risk and resilience among Latino youth (and specifically immigrant families), it is crucial to incorporate a cultural perspective into this framework. Youth who feel both alienated from their parents' culture of origin and excluded from the U.S. mainstream can exhibit behavioral problems that include anxiety or rage,

which become internalized or externalized to various degrees and can result in aggressive or abusive behavior.⁵⁶ Conversely, second-generation Hispanic youth's ability to cope with adversity (i.e., their potential for resilience) may be influenced by their ability to balance or bridge aspects of their culture of origin—which include the expectations and values of their families—with mainstream American culture, whose values and expectations may conflict with the latter.⁵⁷

A particularly useful model for understanding the personal, cultural, and environmental factors that enable resilient behaviors among Hispanic youth in particular can be found in Yosso's six forms of "community cultural capital." This researcher argues that Latino youth, and especially children of immigrants, bring very specific strengths to the classroom and beyond—strengths that can serve as tremendous assets in their development but that are unfortunately often overlooked or even suppressed in mainstream institutions.⁵⁸ These factors, which all help to shape resilience among second-generation Latino youth, are:

Aspirational capital, or the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers

Linguistic capital, including the intellectual and social skills attained through communicating in more than one language or style

Familial capital, or the cultural knowledge nurtured within the family that carries a sense of community history, memory, and identity

Social capital, which is understood as networks of people and community resources that can provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society's institutions

Navigational capital, or the ability to maneuver through social institutions by drawing on culture-specific skills and experiences (for example, strategies for maneuvering through hostile environments)

Resistant capital, or the knowledge and skills fostered through a resistance to subordination that creates self-esteem, self-reliance, and desire and strength to persevere in order to combat unequal structures and transform society

In order to understand resilience among second-generation Latino youth, thus, it is critical to take into account cultural processes—whether related to the culture of origin or to the experience and challenge of living in immigrant families—that shape both risk and protective factors. These include culturally rooted values, attitudes, and behaviors, and may also include the ability to negotiate bilingual and bicultural identities in different settings such as the family, the neighborhood, and institutional spaces such as school, college, or the workplace.

One example of how culture-centered strengths and values are transmitted through families and generations is *dichos*, sayings or proverbs that are fundamental to Latino discourse. According to Bermudez and Mancini, “many Spanish *dichos* reflect the spirit of maintaining a positive disposition, having a sense of determination, and spiritual beliefs that strengthen one’s sense of resilience. They foster a sense of unity in the face of challenge and adversity, and the belief and pride in having the ability to be strengthened by life’s challenges.”⁵⁹ As pointed out by the National Latino Fatherhood and Family Institute, other cultural elements defining resilient Latino values (values that, nonetheless, can get lost or distorted with negative acculturation), include:

- **Purpose (*destino*), based on individual, family/community dignity (*dignidad*)**
- **Responsibility based on respect (*respeto*) for family/community vision**
- **Interdependence based on individual, family/community trust (*confianza*)**
- **Development or circular learning based on love (*cariño*) for life⁶⁰**

For immigrant families, who are situated between cultures, intergenerational communication and support among the extended family are known to be such vital protective factors, and its absence or weakening can be harmful to youth. For this reason, culturally sensitive mental health and healing programs designed to help foster familial cohesion and connection among at-risk Latino youth often integrate cultural idioms such as *dichos*, *dignidad*, and *confianza* into their therapeutic models. As we shall soon see, moreover, many of these elements are recognized by resilient Latino youth themselves who, in recounting their stories, attribute their own successes to either the personal and community protective factors outlined above, or to the programs and interventions that have taught them the essence of these lessons.

METHODS

The following stories and interviews were collected in November and December of 2013 from second-generation Latino youth living in East Los Angeles, California, and the Pilsen neighborhood of Chicago. In each site, five in-depth life-story narratives were elicited from youth between the ages of 19 and 25. Interviews included guided questions and probes seeking to draw out information about the youths' longer stories of adversity, the key points in their lives during which they had most struggled, and the main traits and social supports that had allowed them to overcome challenges and build resilience over time. Although the study focused on the period of adolescence, older youth (rather than adolescents) were interviewed so as to provide more mature and reflective retrospective accounts of their own trajectories.

Each interview with a youth was complemented by a separate interview with a significant adult—either a parent or a mentor—who could provide an additional perspective on the youth's story and specific attributes. Altogether, six young men, four young women, and ten adults were interviewed. All interviews with the youth and with mentors were conducted in English, while interviews conducted with parents were in Spanish. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and all individual names have been changed in this report to protect the anonymity of participants.

The interviews were set up through NCLR Affiliates Gads Hill Community Center in Pilsen and AltaMed in East L.A. Participants were selected by senior staff at these centers who used guidelines outlining specific risks factors (taken from those outlined above) and resilience outcomes. In order to avoid elitist notions of success and well-being, resilience was not defined solely by college graduation (though a majority of the respondents had either graduated from or were currently enrolled in college). Some of the noncollege-bound youth, after experiencing significant setbacks, had taken steps toward ensuring their future success, for example by finishing GEDs, getting trained in vocational skills, or working toward degrees such as certified nursing assistant. By eschewing static or strict definitions of resilience, we sought not only to avoid a "one size fits all" approach to well-being and success, but also to capture the fluidity of resilience processes as they develop through time.

Although the interviews with mentors were originally conceived as simply adding dimension to the youth's stories, the mentors' narratives and reflections were so enriching that the analysis incorporates some of the mentors' observations about their role in nurturing resilience in individual youth and in the community.



STORIES AND KEY THEMES

Rather than viewing resilience as a set of objectively measurable traits that may or may not be present in a person, the retrospective, first-person narratives here provide a glimpse into how youth reflect on and acknowledge their own life experiences. Broadly speaking, the life stories and themes that emerged from the interviews richly illustrate a number of the elements that have been outlined above as contributing to resilience for Latino youth. By listening to these young adults define for themselves the factors that have helped them get through very difficult circumstances, we gained a particularly intimate and nuanced insight into the matter. This subjective approach, complemented through the adult interviews, was designed to dig deep into the struggles that second-generation Latino youth experience, as well as revealing their own perspectives on the various elements that have guided them toward resilience.

The analysis below pulls out key themes that were pronounced across the interviews. To give a fuller sense of some of the different personalities, trajectories, forms of adversity, and varying responses to it, four illustrative stories have also been selected. By presenting these fuller narratives with their details and fluctuations, we are able to view resilience not just as a set of attributes, but as a process through time, a set of orientations that are informed both by subjective and environmental factors. As the stories show, being resilient does not mean never falling prey to one's environment or never experiencing setbacks. Indeed, some youth fall into risky behavior precisely because of their sociability and curiosity—both resilience traits—and these very same attributes then enable them to seek their way out. Other resilient youth are able to keep at bay many of the risk factors to which they are exposed through their lives, but can still become vulnerable within their environments and families in particularly stressful circumstances and times. The narrative life-history approach allows us to attain a more nuanced perspective on how resilience traits play out in particular environments and at specific periods of a youth's trajectory.

The full stories recounted here were chosen to introduce two broad categories of resilient youth. The first is represented by Carmen and Pedro, who demonstrate resilience traits such as inherent discipline, focus, and a strong sense of responsibility to their parents and siblings. This group tended to have developed skills and maturity early on that allowed them to stay out of trouble and excel. The other group is represented by Freddy and Alicia, who demonstrate traits such as strong intelligence, curiosity, psychological depth, and interpersonal skills, but at some point in their lives these very attributes, combined with difficult environments or circumstances, have led them to rebel or fall into risky behavior such as gangs and drugs. For the former group, resilience seems to have

emerged in a more linear manner throughout their lives, while for the latter it appears in incremental steps and spurts. For both groups, the narratives make clear that programs and mentors from within the community have been essential in supporting successful trajectories and in helping youth cope with the risk factors that surround them.

PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES

Resilient Latino youth who participated in the study tend to possess a particular set of personal characteristics, including:

- **A long-term sense of vision and optimism**

Almost all of the youth stated that they have had a **vision or plan** for their lives from early on. While this vision was sometimes based on their immigrant parents' aspirations for their children, for the most part it was a goal that the youth themselves had envisioned since a young age:

"I've always been really interested in politics and I always wanted to run for office. I wanted to focus on health care, especially in Latino communities. I want to work on the disparities, you know, because I feel like as a low-income community, sometimes we don't receive the same care, the same quality of care that others, you know, well-off communities, receive." (Daisy)

"I always knew I wanted to pursue a higher education, I just didn't know how I was going to do it. I never thought about the way I was going to do it, and the steps it was going to take me to get to that. So when I was in elementary school I was great, but after middle school it just started going downhill." (Freddy)

"I've always had this crazy idea, you know, trying to make this world a better place from what it is right now, and I've always told my mom that, and she told me that in order for me to make a difference in this world, I'd have to first change myself." (Alicia)

Many of the youth also talked about a fundamental **sense of optimism** that has enabled them, even through the tougher periods of extreme adversity, to maintain their longer-term vision for a good life, and to draw inspiration from experiences and role models both within and outside their immediate communities:

"I always try to think positive. As blurry, as dark as it gets, I feel like that's the only way I keep going, if I think positive, if I see the bigger picture, if I

always imagine where I want to end up, that's what keeps me going.... I think it's because at the end I know that I'm going to be successful.... I think I see that there is something better out there, and I meet so many people that have similar stories to me, you know? I don't consider myself a victim. I don't consider myself the only one going through this." (Daisy)



CARMEN

From the time she was a little girl, Carmen was independent, optimistic and “*tranquila*,” or calm, according to her mother. Though she has many friends, Carmen describes herself as shy and a life-long nerd, qualities that she says steered her clear from any number of bad influences in her environment and that kept her focused on interesting projects. Today, at age 26, she works at Gads Hill Community Center; having attended the center’s programs from childhood through adolescence, she decided after college to intern there, and was then offered a full-time job in their finance department. As she says, she wanted to give back to the community that offered her so much.

Although Carmen and her older brother José have done well by any standards, life has not always been easy for the family. Carmen’s parents emigrated from Mexico to the heart of Pilsen, Chicago, 30 years ago, and had three children—Carmen, and her older and younger brothers. After many years of physical and emotional abuse, her mother left her father and had a child, now seven years old, with another man. Her family is currently divided: Carmen no longer speaks with her father, who has refused to help finance any of her education. José postponed going to college and worked at a fast food restaurant in order to help his family while his sister attended college; he is now studying full-time at Northeastern University. Carmen’s younger brother, however, has struggled with substance abuse, dropped out of school, and has had several stints in the juvenile justice system.

Despite these difficulties, and the fact that the family lived in a neighborhood saturated with gang violence, Carmen attributes some of her success to the fact that her parents were both strict and encouraged independence. Her mother says that from an early age, Carmen simply knew what she had to do, and she set out a plan: “*se programo*.” She was clear about two things: like her mother, she

dreamed of being an accountant—a goal her mother was not able to achieve due to her poor and unstable upbringing. She also knew that—unlike her mother—she did not want to start a family early on. As Carmen says:

“At a young age I’m thinking to myself, I don’t want to [get pregnant young], I don’t want to stop going to school and be taking care of a kid at a young age.”

Through a combination of hard work and an ability to seek out opportunities around her, Carmen was able to fulfill this dream by attending a four-year university, obtaining scholarships and grants that took her through college. She decided to leave Pilsen and attend college in a neighboring state, knowing that pushing herself outside of her known environment would bring new experiences and opportunities:

“I applied to a lot of different colleges and I got into most of them. But then I thought, why stay in my hometown when I could just go experience the whole room and board away from home? And I wanted to go somewhere, like, far but not far at the same time.”

This move was not easy, in part because of the fact that very few Latino students attended the university. At first Carmen felt lonely and out of place, almost to the point of leaving. But she joined a sorority, and applied herself to her courses, and eventually thrived:

“I realized, I have to be more open, or I’m never going to make any new friends, I’m always going to be with the same crowd.”

Balancing this new social environment with her family and old neighborhood has not always been easy; like many Latinos from similar environments who leave for college and expand their networks, she has had to deal with whisperings in her home community that she has distanced herself and is *creida* (stuck up); as she herself states, she no longer socializes with some of her old friends from high school, in order to protect herself from the negativity.

Carmen’s own brand of resilience has been largely based in her ability to imagine her own success, adapt to circumstances, and persevere through tough times. She is clear that nothing in her trajectory has come easily. For example, she explains that she was not naturally a great student, struggling as a child with English and later with science classes; for this reason, she chose to attend a high school science program at the Chicago Botanic Garden, which opened up the doors for her college applications and financing. Naturally on the shy side, moreover, she also pushed herself outside of her comfort zone in college, persevering through a difficult time socially and academically, and ultimately

creating new networks and perspectives that will continue to help her branch out through her life. By viewing each limitation optimistically as a problem to solve, and cultivating a pragmatic, no-nonsense attitude, Carmen has overcome adversity in her own way.

- **A strong work ethic, ambition, and perseverance**

Complementing this positive vision for their lives, resilient youth also tend to have a **strong work ethic and ambition**. Some such as Pedro describe this as something almost innate, or that has been self-instilled at a very young age as a reaction to significant adversity:

“My drive—I found something I’m good at, I found something where I know my work ethic will show. Like if I show my work ethic, I can outrun anybody because nobody went through the things that I went through, and I will be focused; I’ll be determined, and I will kill myself to get to the front.” (Pedro)

Others describe this attribute more as a conscious life choice that one must choose within an environment that offers few options. Several of the youth referred to this as “choosing your mentality.”

“I mean, you have a choice either to follow the wrong steps, get into the gangs, into drugs, or alcohol, or just staying focused and going to school and just doing your thing. I mean it does have to do with choice as well.” (Freddy)

In addition to this strong work ethic, the attribute of **perseverance and persistence**—what is often referred to as “grit” in today’s lingo—has taken most of these youth through difficult and trying times throughout their childhood and adolescence. Whether on their own or with the help of others, they have tended to devise strategies throughout their lives to not be devastated or overwhelmed by the challenges in their environments, whether they be deeper psychological traumas or everyday difficulties such as struggling at school. Maria, one of the youth mentors at AltaMed, whose own life story reflects the adversity she encounters every day among the youth, summarizes nicely the attributes discussed so far:

“I would say that some characteristics for kids who are resilient are perseverance and dedication, and vision because you have to be able to visualize where you want to go but be dedicated to the path that you might need to take to get there. No matter what barriers might come, that perseverance says that you’re going to keep pushing forward and moving ahead. If you start with that self-confidence and self-esteem, even if you might fail, my mom would always say, you got to get up, dust yourself off,

and you keep on going.... So they're going to have that confidence to say, 'I'm going to keep going,' and that's part of the perseverance, is that you just don't give up." (Ana, mentor)

PEDRO

Pedro is a slight 24-year-old fourth grade teacher from Pilsen, Chicago, who received his bachelor's degree from the University of Illinois at Chicago. He is a star track and cross-country runner whose four years of college were fully paid for through an athletic scholarship. Pedro is a born storyteller; in recounting his own life story, he exudes self-awareness, intensity, and wisdom that seems well beyond his years.

Pedro's life got off to a rough start. His mother, who had him at age 16 and his younger brother Willy at 18, died in a car accident when she was 21. Pedro's father, who had emigrated from Mexico, took the boys back to the home country but soon returned with them to Chicago. Pedro describes the two years he lived with his father as "the worst time in my entire life that I would never wish upon anybody." He and Willy were shuffled from place to place, his father often gone for days. He remembers sleeping in the back of whatever car his father, a mechanic, was fixing at the time, sharing a small blanket with his brother. He describes periodically showering outdoors in the cold of winter, "with a gallon of water and a bar of soap, and I could see my breath." He remembers his father buying him and Willy one taco a day, and, in order to appease his crying baby brother, giving him his own food and going hungry—since, he says, "I could deal with that because I felt like I was mentally stronger than he was." He recalls wearing the same clothes for days and being sent late to school. One day, after a particularly abusive episode with the boys, their father dropped them off at their maternal grandmother's house and never returned.

Their grandmother, who was in her 60s and worked as a nanny, got legal guardianship of the boys; moving in with their *abuelita* was the first instance of normalcy and stability they had consciously experienced, though they lived in deep poverty. She was, however, able to place both brothers in a local Catholic



school that covered their tuition costs, and set up a very strict schedule and pattern of expectations for the boys. Their grandmother worked hard to keep them neat, well-fed, on time, well-mannered, and responsible. Nonetheless, Pedro remembers her as being unreasonably strict and unrelenting well into his adolescence. Her goal, Pedro says, was to keep the boys so busy at all times so that they would not have time to think about the streets, or trouble, or girls.

Pedro immediately began to thrive at school, and made sure to work hard and complete all assignments and chores. As he says, “I always felt like I had to prove myself, like, we never had anything, and it just got me mad, I guess, so I worked so hard in school. The thing is that my whole philosophy was that if I can reach perfection, no one can stop me. If I can be the best at something, I can get anything I want.” Pedro became fiercely competitive with his brother and his peers—a competitiveness no doubt tempered by his mild manner and innate gentleness—working hard to figure out how to win spelling bees and keep his grades up.

Not only did Pedro’s drive and discipline lead him to excel academically, he also found out, his freshman year of high school, that he was an excellent runner—a discovery that, as he says, changed his life forever. He says: “I was finally complete with that sport because... like, that was freedom for me.... God gave me a gift that I’m good at; He gave me the way out of here, and this is the way I can finally channel all my negativity, so that after I run I’m like, I don’t have this feeling like I don’t belong.”

Indeed, Pedro speaks a lot about his search to “belong,” “fill the void,” and to find a “sense of worth.” He is introspective and psychologically astute, and recognizes that his drive to succeed through discipline and work ethic is rooted in his own fears of abandonment, as well as by years of veiled anger. He also discusses his need to excel in terms of a responsibility to be a positive role model to his younger brother, as well as his fear of ending up like his uncle, a gang member who, according to Pedro, has achieved little in life.

In addition to his academic and athletic success, Pedro has been able to form strong attachments with two male mentors. From the beginning, their grandmother had placed the boys in an afterschool program at Gads Hill Center (see page 54). There, Pedro formed a close attachment to Paco, a youth counselor. Not only did Paco teach Pedro to be disciplined, follow the rules, and act like an adult, he also “was like the constant father figure that was always missing in our lives. He was strict and firm, but he was honest with his decisions, and that was something that we needed: structure. But he was also very loving, very caring; he hugged us. We needed those hugs. He’d always say ‘I love you, *mijito*.’ Like, I can’t wait to see you tomorrow; I’ll be here when you get here. I

knew he was going to be there; he wasn't going to run away."

Pedro met his second mentor, Roberto, through a scholarship program in high school; unlike Paco, Roberto is a wealthy, high-profile Latino professional in Chicago who, according to Pedro, has adopted the whole family. Roberto, his wife, and his children have organized buses to attend Pedro's track meets, have invited Pedro, Willy, and their grandmother to holiday dinners and birthday parties, have bought Pedro Christmas gifts that he could never afford, and even organized a large college graduation party for him. They are, in a sense, what he has always searched for: a family. He states:

"Like, I have a mom and a dad now. My void has been filled. And I have my grandmother who's sweet; she's sweet now. I'm the most thankful person you'll probably meet in a while because, there's nothing I don't have. I have a girlfriend, you know; it's stable. Everything is good; I teach up north; the kids are great. I don't have anything left to prove. I have nothing to be mad about."

- **Communication, social skills, and flexibility**

As previous research shows, another trait of many resilient youth is that they tend to be good at **communicating with others**, which allows them to cast a **wide social network** among different groups of peers and to **seek out help and support**. This attribute is particularly important for youth who grow up in environments and families where social networks and various types of support are not a given and must be consciously sought after. For example:

"I'm very open-minded; I'm adventurous, so I like to talk to a lot of different people, and I've talked to a lot of people that have these different points of view, and that will give me information about things, and what I need to actually get somewhere, and to get my point across.... I like to talk to all types of different people, to go places, and it just opens my mind." (Alicia)

For several of the youth, the ability to communicate with others seems related to other attributes such as **independence, adaptability, and curiosity about the wider world**. This willingness to be open to different people and experiences allows resilient kids to broaden their networks, create lasting bonds with people who can help them, including mentors and program staff, and increase their opportunities. Daisy, whose own intellectual curiosity and communication skills have led her to obtain fellowships that have enabled her to explore the world beyond her neighborhood, compares herself to her less optimistic peers and sibling:

“All they see is East L.A., some of them have never traveled outside of East L.A. You know, if they could experience trips like I’ve been able, they could see how beautiful the world is, how there’s other things in life, so many more things than what we see in our community—maybe they would aspire to do something better for themselves. And I say that because my brother, he feels that life sucks; what’s the point of trying? He’s undocumented, too. So he’s always like ‘what is the point of me trying if I’m never going to be able to go to school or go to college?’ But I tell him, if you see what is out there, there is so much more than what you see here and than what we live through, then you would maybe have different goals.” (Daisy)

Of course, being open, adventurous, and gregarious in environments that lend themselves to risk behaviors—for example, neighborhoods with gang activity—can also have its down side, as illustrated by Freddy’s story.

FREDDY

Freddy is an extremely affable and thoughtful 20-year-old who grew up in East L.A. with his undocumented immigrant parents and three sisters. While his family is close-knit and supportive, they have had their share of difficulties: Freddy’s father has had a life-long alcohol addiction, and several family members have been seriously affected by gang involvement. Freddy has worked hard to transcend his environment: he is currently studying electrical engineering at California State/Northridge, works part-time as a shoe salesman, and volunteers at the Escalera Program, hoping to become an airplane engineer when he graduates.

Freddy’s vivacious personality and energy have been both a blessing and a curse. When he was in elementary school, Freddy was, in his words, “a great kid; a perfect kid. I graduated from middle school with a 4.0 GPA all around. My professors loved me. I was supposed to go to an advanced school but it was actually expensive, so we couldn’t really afford it.”

Unfortunately, by the time he reached adolescence, things took a different turn in his life. His older sister and an older male cousin, who he greatly admired, both joined gangs. One day when he was 14, Freddy found himself in the wrong place at the wrong time. Hanging out at an amusement park on Halloween with his cousin and some friends, the group was suddenly surrounded by police officers. The police grabbed his cousin—according to Freddy because of his shaved head and gang appearance—and since Freddy refused to leave, they grabbed him as well:

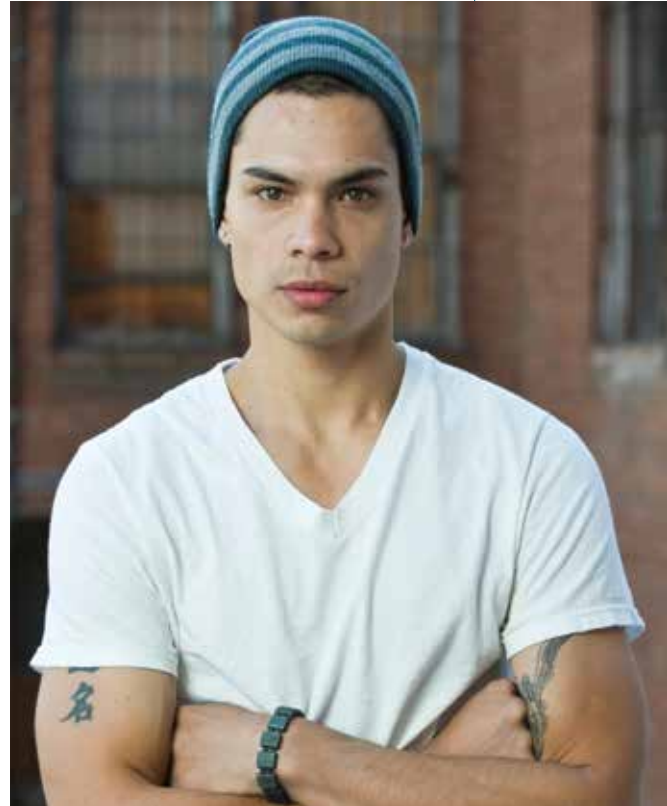
"They tried to arrest me and they grabbed me pretty rough so I accidentally hit one of the officers with my elbow when I reacted.... And then they just beat me up real bad, they just threw me on the floor; they grabbed my head and smashed it against the concrete. When they had me on the floor, smashing my head, there was maybe about five police officers on top of me. So I thought they were going to kill me or something. I was just kicking and screaming and crying. So they took me to the station and to juvenile hall from there. I was there for a couple of weeks."

Because Freddy's parents were able to advocate for him and bring strong letters of recommendation from his teachers, Freddy's sentence was reduced and he was given six months of probation. However, this experience was a key moment in his life, contributing to a negative spiral that lasted through high school:

"I don't know if that kind of brought down my self-esteem in the sense that I thought man, even when I don't do anything wrong I'm still targeted.... First year in high school I still did well, was an honors student, but then I started hanging out with the wrong people, I joined a crew [a small gang], and then I started a crew."

Following this incident, Freddy started to spend most of his time running the streets with gangs, tagging graffiti, fighting, and having brushes with the police. By the time he was in junior year, he was in a fight almost every day, and although he continued to do the minimum amount of work to pass, he dreaded going to school, where he knew he would end up in a fight and ignored by his teachers, who saw him as "another bad kid." He says:

"I feel like everything that was going on in my life, seeing my father drunk, fights in my house, hanging out with my cousin, with the wrong crowds, all of these factors, they, they just didn't let me concentrate on the most important thing that I wanted, which is actually do good in school and go to higher education. It was more of, okay I just won't care anymore. I wanted to have the mentality where I didn't care about what was going to happen. And I got to a point where all of my friends, the guys from my crew, they started being expelled and going to jail."



Thankfully, when Freddy was expelled from school, both he and his parents came to understand the gravity of the situation and decided to take action. One of Freddy's saving graces was his girlfriend Anita, who also came from a difficult background. Anita suggested that Freddy attend her school; after a one-month trial period, and now removed from his old crowd, he started to thrive. One day, their class received a visit from Escalera outreach staff. Excited by the many opportunities that were offered through the program—including college preparation and pregnancy prevention—he and Anita enrolled:

"So once I made it in the program it was a total different change in life. It was like, just, it was great. It was, I couldn't, I couldn't thank God for something more than coming across this program. It was just like they helped me guide myself through a way that I didn't know I was going to be able to guide myself."

With the support of Escalera, Freddy got help putting together college applications, applying for scholarships, and becoming motivated to do extracurricular sports and community service. He also was selected on two different occasions to travel to Washington, DC, for NCLR events—one in which he was able to see President Obama give a speech, and another that brought him directly to Capitol Hill, where he spoke with his legislators. As he says excitedly, these trips made him want to "open [his] eyes, explore the world, and be informed about what is going on around us."

When Freddy got accepted to California State/Northridge:

"I just said, I'm going to go out there and change my whole environment. I wanted something that was going to make me stay out of trouble and just be focused.... So when I moved up to Northridge I met a lot of different people, talented people that were focused in school and not just messing around, people with aspirations, which was what I needed so I can motivate myself as well. That helped motivate me."

Freddy still struggles with the difficulties of his home environment, but he has learned how to meet these challenges head on. As a "young Mexican kid driving around East L.A. in an old car," for example, he still regularly gets pulled over by the police when he goes home. Despite the feeling of racial harassment, he has learned to stay calm on these occasions. Recently, moreover, he has told his father that if he continues drinking to excess, he will no longer visit the family, a conversation that led his father to stop drinking. In addition to doing successfully in his college coursework, Freddy's positive attitude and diligence also recently

earned him “employee of the year” status at the shoe store. By challenging and supporting one another, and by finding people and programs to guide them, he and Anita have been able to keep their eyes on the future they so desire.

- **Empathy, self-awareness, and the desire to break the negative cycle**

A final set of personal attributes characterizing most of the youth interviewed was a **high degree of self-awareness, self-knowledge, and an ability to reflect maturely** on their own challenges. Several of the youth discussed very openly their struggles to surmount the rage and abuse that has shaped their lives, as well as their need to feel part of something, to find a sense of meaning, worth, and understanding.

As part of this self-reflection, many described their own resilience—their drive to succeed and achieve a measure of well-being—as a direct **reaction to the more negative behaviors** they observed within their own families and communities:

“I don’t know why, but I always feel like I had a strong mentality, like strong values for myself.... I’d never been tempted to drug myself or become an alcoholic.... I think it’s because of how you see people throwing their life away, how you see your classmates, your family.” (Daisy)

“[My uncle] was a Latin Disciple [gang member] living with us, my grandmother’s only son, with a bald head, stereotypical, like the ones you see on TV, he looked like them. He would live with us on and off and go to California. Seeing my uncle, he took the easy way out. I saw the conclusion to that story. Drunk guy comes home, destroys house, mad at himself. I took a different route.” (Pedro)

“At a young age I’m thinking to myself, I don’t want to be like that. I don’t want to stop going to school and be taking care of a kid at a young age.... I’m like, at that age I just want to go to school, enjoy life, think about college, not think about raising a kid, the expenses, and everything like that.” (Carmen)

“Like, what made me change was seeing everything around me, like how sad it was to see my friends like being in jail or doing drugs.... I just don’t want to be, I want to get out of the hood, you know? I want to be like that kid that has White parents that when they were young they were taken to the snow or the mountains, taken camping, you know... like that’s my motivation, just to be able to have a future where I’m going to be happy, do things for my kids that my parents weren’t able to do with me.” (Freddy)

Rather than cutting themselves off from their communities, this combination of self-understanding and exposure to poor behaviors around them has led many of these youth **to develop empathy for others** and often talk about wanting to **help their community and family** to succeed and live well. Several discussed wanting to use their own lessons learned and experiences to help others from their community who are in need (e.g. by becoming a teacher, a community volunteer, or a mentor, or through their choice of profession).

“We’re aspiring for our education because of everything we see in our communities, you know? I always say, if those kids were only educated, had bigger goals for themselves, they wouldn’t [get involved in gang activity]. But they don’t, you know?” (Daisy)

“I want to give back because it comes from my heart, and because I’ve stood alone, I know what it feels like to not have anything, to feel hopeless, to be in jail, to be stabbed, to be shot at. I know how it feels to be out in the streets, to survive and to have to make ends meet... so when I can, I help people that are close to me, or just anybody out, and just try to make people’s lives a little easier.” (Alicia)

Indeed, the **desire to break the negative cycle of poverty, violence, and family dysfunction** is a powerful motivator and engine for both their optimism and their empathy:

“The situation at home, I use it as a motivation instead of victimizing myself, discouraging me. I always see that as a motivation and as a challenge as well, so I don’t have to repeat their same story.... Just knowing the fact, you know, there’s people out there with worse situations that are so successful and they’re powerful leaders, they make a huge impact on people like me, it’s what keeps me going, because one day—this is not going to be all my life, I’m not going have this life for the rest of my life. Someday it will be better. That’s how I kind of make myself feel better that one day, you know, I will have a better life and the need to break the tradition, the cycle.” (Daisy)

ALICIA

Alicia is a 20-year-old single mother of a toddler whose father, a gang member from East L.A., is “no longer in the picture.” Alicia, herself a former gang member, has the street-wise look and speech that this identity suggests, though her expressive black eyes and broad smile reveal a softer, more open side that—she admits—has only recently found expression. Alicia is currently enrolled in the Escalera Program at AltaMed, studying to finish her high school equivalency diploma and working part-time. Although her trajectory is not a linear one—Alicia has encountered serious life setbacks along the way—she has been able to create significant changes little by little, through a combination of personal attributes, attachments with caring adults, and critical program interventions.



Alicia is a highly perceptive young woman whose curiosity and intelligence are expressed in passionate commentary about the world, power dynamics, and social injustice; she connects these structural issues to the deep suffering that not only she, but many in her surroundings, have lived through. Her ability to reflect on these topics comes from years of processing her own harrowing life experiences.

When she was five years old, Alicia was sexually abused by an adult that she knew and trusted, an event that scarred her for life; she started “running the streets” by age eight, with little supervision from her parents, with whom she has had a poor relationship. According to Alicia, her father was verbally abusive and deprecating, and her mother was cold and absent. Neither, she says, bothered to attend her middle school graduation:

“They decided to go to San Diego to go to some zoo instead, so I stood there alone, waiting for somebody, and you know, people clap for you and everything, so I stood there alone, like broken, how can you do that to me and leave me like that; that’s not cool.”

The extreme turbulence of Alicia’s adolescent years began, according to her, when her *abuela*, who she visited every summer in Mexico and to whom she was extremely attached, suddenly died. By the time Alicia was 13, she had started to inject methamphetamine:

“After I tried it, it just numbed my pain, the pain that I felt inside.... That pain was everything from my childhood, from my friends that had passed away, from everything in my life, whether it was personal, my family, everything in my life.”

Also around this time, she began cutting herself—specifically, she says, to blot out the memory of her childhood sexual abuse:

“I grew up with that trauma and it would play in my head every day—I would hate it, why do I have to see it every day in my head, every time I wake up, every time I go to sleep, like, I don’t want to see it no more, I don’t want to see it, and I found out that by cutting yourself, it felt good, I would see the blood flow out, it was like my pain flowing out, leaving my body.”

Alicia has struggled with anger since she was 13, at which point she also began causing problems at school, skipping out and hanging out with gang members, including the father of her child. Her saving grace, however, and the one strong attachment that she was able to make during this period, was a social worker named Sandra, to whom she was referred early on due to a suicide threat—a call for help more than a real threat, according to Alicia. Describing Sandra, she says: “She has been really nice to me, really good to me. She can kind of relate to me, because she grew up in an area that was bad, but she decided to do good.” When Alicia told Sandra that she was pregnant, Sandra went out of her way to help Alicia get the help she would need as a teen mother: “she would see me on a daily basis, she would take me to the doctor’s... and right now, because of her, I’m trying to go back to school, and to get back on my feet.”

Through Sandra’s guidance, Alicia also got involved the Escalera Program, designed to help disconnected youth. Through this program and another helpful mentor, Alicia started taking courses toward becoming a certified nursing assistant (CNA), trying hard to balance single motherhood, financial needs, and school, and receiving both material support and mentoring from the program. Unfortunately, Alicia’s residual anger problem reemerged at a low point, and she was charged with assault and battery against an old gang rival who she said was taunting her. Although she was given a 10-month sentence, she spent only a week in jail, due to reduced sentencing resulting from California’s overcrowded prison system. It was during this time that Alicia states she finally had an epiphany. Lying on her prison cot she realized that the primary reason she kept falling back to old patterns was that she was afraid of change:

“I’m just scared to see myself be a successful person. I’m so used to this negativity; I’m so used to being a hoodlum that for [God] to change me—I don’t know what it’s going to do to me; I’m scared to become a better person.”

Seeing her baby again upon leaving the prison made her realize just how much she did, in fact, want to change:

“I was carrying her, looking at her, and telling her I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I know I’ve been bad, I’m not a good mom, but don’t blame me, I’m young, you know, and then she just looked at me with those eyes, and just hugged me and it was like something that I felt that was amazing. It was like this little piece for me, this is a little me, a little piece sent from heaven to make me realize that I need to change, that I have to be a better person.”

Alicia’s trajectory has been rough and uneven. Indeed, when she got out of jail, she had no place to turn and remained homeless, camping out on friends’ couches and Skid Row for nearly a month. Due to her criminal record, Alicia was unable to get certified for her CNA. However, her mentor and counselors at Escalera have steadily helped her to cope with each setback, and to put together a life plan aimed at leading her to stability and independence. They encouraged her to make amends with her parents and return to live in a home environment. For now, they are helping her study for the California High School Exit Examination so that she can earn her degree, and giving her psychosocial counseling. They have also provided her with an internship through which she has learned skills on proper presentation and communication in the workplace, and they helped her to find a job at a shoe warehouse.

Alicia realizes that she “isn’t quite there yet.” Her passion for her daughter, and her desire to eventually contribute to social change in the tough environment that surrounds her, are the motors that drive her daily to stay on the right path. As she states:

“Right now, everything takes steps, and I’m still struggling with some issues that I have, but I’m trying to keep myself busy.... I’m taking baby steps, because I feel like if I do it all at once, I’m just going to back out and leave it all there. I’d rather change little by little, instead of making a drastic change, and then fall back.”

As Alicia’s story shows, reaching a state of resilience is not always a clear and obvious process, and it is sometimes difficult to define at what point a person may be deemed resilient. At times the line between coping or surviving and resilience may seem unclear; the pull back to risk and vulnerability is strong,



especially for youth who have been deeply traumatized. Alicia's current story is still a snapshot in time, and as she says she is still "making baby steps" toward stability. But Alicia represents the many youth who have at some point along the way been extremely fragile and on the brink, but have had the strength to seek out help and support and are able to rebound. For youth such as Alicia and Freddy, who have struggled but show the desire and potential to improve their behaviors and learn the personal and social skills needed to be successful, support from community-based programs, mentors, and other interventions that steer youth away from risky activities can make all the difference.

FAMILY AND CULTURAL ATTRIBUTES

In addition to personal traits, a number of key family attributes contributing to the youth's resilient pathways emerged from several of the stories. While some participants came from dysfunctional homes, others attributed some of their resilience skills to particular cultural attributes of immigrant Latino families, including:

- **Vigilance and communication of traditional values on the part of parents and guardians**

A child's family situation and relationship with his or her parents is a key determinant of his or her development. Although—as observed above—some of the interviewees had extremely difficult family lives and were exposed to varying levels of abuse, neglect, and separation, others stated that a key factor in their own perseverance as children and adolescents was their **parents' or other family members' continuous presence in their lives, and the traditional values such as discipline and strictness that were imparted on the family**. Even when parents or guardians could not be physically present due to demanding work hours, or were unable to be supportive with schoolwork or college preparation due to their own lack of knowledge, the vigilance, commitment, and concern expressed by these parents and guardians often came up as a key factor that had kept the youth from falling into bad circumstances at various phases in their lives. Several described how their mothers made an extra effort to offer life lessons and encouragement:

“My mom taught us, respect your elders, basically all the moral things that you should know, and she pushed us, ‘do better, do your homework, don’t be afraid to try this, don’t cheat, don’t steal....’ It was constant, ‘don’t get involved with gangs, pick your friends, be careful, don’t let people think you’re less because you weren’t born here,’ that kind of stuff.” (Nelson)

“I saw my friends hanging out, doing what they wanted. I would always say things like ‘oh I wish my mom was cool like your mom.’ But you know, I still went with whatever my mom said. That was the rules, you know? It was engraved; that was it. And now it’s like I’m happy that she was disciplining us like that, ‘cause a lot of those kids there, they’ve had a lot of issues, and they’ve dealt with a lot of things, because their parents were more, you know, lenient with them. So by her being that strict, I would never want to go into that situation.” (Edgar)

Pedro’s grandmother herself explains her own efforts at being vigilant over Pedro and his brother:

“I used to be strict with them as far as being home at a certain time. I say I know what time you get out so I expect you home at a certain time, and if you’re not I’m going to come looking for you and there’s going to be consequences. I will embarrass you in front of your friends.... And I never let them hang around kids that I didn’t think were a good influence on them.... I just lived in the summertime at the parks when they were on the teams.... When they had fundraisers I would go there and help out. I was, you know, I made myself known at the school there... because I had to make sure I was there just to be there observing.” (Pedro’s grandmother)

The type of parenting that seemed most effective in fostering resilience in these youth came from parents who were able to **balance imparting more traditional Latino values and practices—such as strictness, discipline, strong family values, and a respect for authority—with some of the independence and flexibility that U.S.-born children of immigrants desire:**

“I guess my parents were sometimes strict, they were like, ‘you have to take care of yourself, you have to be careful out there.’ But they weren’t like, ‘you can’t do this, you can’t do that.’ Cause I think if they told me I couldn’t do it I probably would want to go out and do it, just to rebel. I understood that I had to take care of myself and be careful out there but I wasn’t going to do something stupid.” (Carmen)

- **Expectations of responsibility and solidarity within extended family**

A significant resilience factor for many of the Latino youth interviewed is the **strong sense of responsibility toward the family** as well as a sense of **support and solidarity from the extended family**, both of which lead family members to think and behave according to the collective well-being. This cultural value of familism—often described as particularly strong among immigrant Latino families—applies to financial, material, and emotional realms alike, and encourages youth to strive to behave responsibly and do well (e.g. set a good example for siblings or contribute financially toward the family). In addition to protecting youth from risk factors, it gives individual family members a sense of collective support and belonging that is crucial for those growing up in difficult environments or in between cultures:

“Both my parents had two jobs trying to give the best to us. I remember when we were little they were actually thinking about buying a house in the suburbia area. Then my dad lost his jobs so then my aunt used to take care of us. My grandma told my mom that she needed to quit one of her jobs, because we started hanging out like around 12 at night running around with older kids. If it wasn’t for my mom quitting her job because my grandma told her, and my aunt helping us... well, like all the kids we used to run around with they became gang bangers and stuff from being on the streets all the time, because their families wouldn’t take care of them.” (Edgar)

Many of the youth interviewed described how siblings and even members of the extended family would help their parents or each other out financially, often taking turns contributing to the household and to each other’s education. Older siblings also talked about the importance of setting a good example for their younger siblings, who would be “following in their footsteps.” For eldest siblings who came from single-parent homes, or homes where there was abuse or neglect on the part of either parent, this responsibility toward their younger peers and this need to be a positive role model was described as a key motivator in many of their life decisions.

Most participants, in addition, described their experience of serving as translator for their parents, from an early age, as a factor that contributed to the sense of familial responsibility as well as teaching them other resilience-related skills:

“My brothers and I all translated for my mother, at different times, in school, at the store. The thing I worried about all the time was getting something wrong; I was always trying to tell if my mom understood. If we were at the doctor’s, I understood what the doctor said so I wanted her to understand me. So I would ask him more questions so he can give me more detail, or say it in

another way so maybe I can explain it to her better.... I guess all this makes you more, like you become more patient, and you become more disciplined.
(Luis)

Several of the youth described this familial commitment as a trait quite specific to Latino and immigrant families, which differentiates them from other American youth. Daisy states, for example, that responsibility toward the family was a cultural value learned back in her home country (Mexico), where her *abuelita* taught her from a young age traditional chores such as ironing, mopping, and fetching cow milk. Once she came to the United States, at age eight, she put this value of responsibility and discipline to use within the structure of her immigrant family, which now included two parents who worked several jobs:

“My mom was always working. My step dad, he would leave me in charge of my brother. I would clean for my mom, like clean the whole house, and I would wash... I would do everything because I was ultimately responsible. And I knew that my mom was tired from working, so, I would help her as much as I can. And I think that’s why I think so differently, you know, because I had to grow up so fast.” (Daisy)

- **However, cultural strengths can be counterbalanced by the difficulties of living in immigrant households**

As the above quote from Daisy suggests, this strong sense of familial obligation and responsibility, while fostering resilience and a sense of purpose, can also at times contribute to a great deal of pressure for children of immigrants as they acculturate to American norms. Some youth expressed guilt about the fact that they had chosen, for their own well-being, to create a separation from the financial and emotional demands of their families—a choice that was sometimes seen negatively the eyes of their families. Others recounted with distress how, upon making the difficult decision to leave home to attend college, they had subsequently become unable to protect their younger siblings from negative environments back home, creating feelings of intense guilt and sadness—and for some, even leading them to drop out of college to attend to their family’s needs. The maturity that comes with learning to balance different cultural worlds and roles, thus, can be counteracted by the pressures and stresses that such juggling can present.

“At the moment, I’m actually trying to mold my mom into the culture of the American child, because I’m like, you know, I have to move out soon. Yeah, and my brothers are going to do the same. She’s not happy about that.”
(Nelson)

An additional stressor expressed by some youth, which may also undermine familial cohesion and resilience, is the perception that their immigrant parents cannot understand or appreciate the tremendous difficulty and effort it has taken them not only to be good family members, help raise siblings, contribute economically, act as cultural and linguistic translators for their parents, and stay out of trouble, in addition to doing well in school, adapting, and succeeding through college despite being disadvantaged on a number of fronts. Several verbalized this frustration quite clearly:

“I remember one report card, straight A’s but a B in social studies, and I was freaking out.... My teacher said, you did a wonderful job, your grandmother’s going to be so proud of you, and I remember telling my teacher no, she won’t because I got that B, and she’ll never see the A’s. And I got home, gave it to her, and she’s like, what’s the B for? And I’m like, can you for once just be happy that I got A’s? She was like, what did you say to me, you’re talking back?” (Pedro)

“Our immigrant parents don’t know, they come to this place, because it’s the American Dream, right, but it’s actually not the American Dream; it’s not. It’s where you come to find out everything... and it affects us, because if our parents don’t speak English, don’t understand the concepts, or what we’re going through, they don’t understand that going to school here can have a big impact on your life, like you can be bullied, you might do good and be popular or you can be messing up. They don’t know that we can be sick; we can have ADHD; they don’t believe in that; they think we’re just trying to find an excuse.” (Alicia)

“At some point it becomes really hard to paint the picture about what it is that you’re doing.... Like Dad, it’s UCLA; it’s a prestigious university that I’m attending. This is part of my accomplishment; it’s not only mine; it’s ours, yours; we did this. You should be proud. It’s UCLA, and now I’m going to USC. These are really big institutions, and it’s not always easy for me. But if they can’t understand it, then it sort of takes away from that sense of achievement.” (Maria, mentor)

Indeed, one of the biggest challenges for children of immigrants from poor backgrounds can be to figure out how to balance and bridge the cultures and worldviews of three sets of values and expectations: those of their immigrant parents, those of their immediate environments, and those of the more mainstream non-Hispanic culture that they often discover upon moving to the world of the university or the workforce. Youth who are resilient have often learned that cultivating the social and linguistic skills to operate in all three worlds and move between these spaces (“code-switching”) enables

them to expand their networks and be adaptable. For others, however, creating clear boundaries (e.g. between themselves and former gang members, between themselves and abusive parents) is key to their psychological well-being and ability to maintain their psychological strength.

COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAMS AND MENTORS

Community-based organizations (CBOs) play a central role in Latino communities around the country, often serving as a critical support for parents, grandparents, and youth. They provide an array of culturally sensitive services, including programs in health and nutrition, language acquisition and education, legal services, and citizenship classes. CBOs that support Latino youth often provide after-school programs, college preparation, job training, mentoring, and other important programs. Given that so many Latino families, and particularly immigrant families, are disadvantaged in numerous realms, CBOs operate as an equalizing force that strive to remedy institutionalized and historic forms of racial and ethnic discrimination.



Adolescents from poor, marginalized communities are vulnerable to the potential negative consequences of their environments. Resilient characteristics such as those described above may simply not be enough to cope with the extreme challenges that can come from living in violent neighborhoods or having experienced highly traumatizing events. This is especially the case during the period of adolescence when youth are experimenting with different kinds of behaviors and adaptations: in the absence of strong and cohesive communities, families or networks, resilience attributes may simply give way to the more negative influences of one's environment. Moreover, resilience attributes—vision, ambition, desire to communicate and change—are bound to become weakened or frustrated if youth are not able to also develop the concrete skills, confidence, knowledge, and social capital necessary to avoid negative influences and succeed in the wider world.

For these reasons, one of the most important resilience factors for at-risk youth from Latino immigrant families, and one that was discussed at length by all of the youth and adults, was the central role played by community programs, and in particular mentors working at these programs, in both bolstering youths' inherently positive traits. Not only did mentors teach youth a wide range of skills

and behaviors necessary for their well-being and success, they also supported youth in making positive choices during key moments of vulnerability or difficulty. Many of the youth discussed how these programs and mentors filled in the gaps created when immigrant parents were absent, fearful, or misinformed, when teachers were overwhelmed or lacked cultural understanding, or when the youth were coping with the many other challenges of being children of immigrants in poor, violent environments.

GADS HILL CENTER—CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

Gads Hill Center is situated in Pilsen, a Mexican American area of Chicago known for its poverty and gang violence. Pilsen is home to many immigrant parents who work at low-wage jobs and have little education or mastery of English; it ranks second among Chicago's neighborhoods for the percentage of adults (56%) without a high school degree, and nearly one out of three students in Pilsen drops out of high school.

Gads Hill Center serves families in the communities of West and Southwest Chicago with programming that includes early childhood education, after-school academic support, a college preparatory program for low- to average-achieving students, STEM-focused college readiness for high school students, mentoring, and home visits for pregnant mothers and young children. Family support and parent engagement are also key components of Gads Hill's programs. Through comprehensive community partnerships, families are connected to the resources necessary to meet their needs and achieve their goals.

THE ESCALERA PROGRAM AT ALTAMED—EAST L.A., CALIFORNIA

AltaMed is a community-based comprehensive health care center that provides a variety of medical services and youth programs with the goal of eliminating disparities in health care and human services. The organization is located in East Los Angeles, a working-class Mexican American neighborhood composed, like Pilsen, of low-income, primarily Mexican-origin families. AltaMed serves disconnected youth from the area who face multiple risk factors including involvement in the juvenile justice system, homelessness, pregnancy and parenting, and involvement in the foster care system.

Escalera is a model program that promotes economic mobility for Latino youth by increasing educational attainment, career planning, and access to information

about advanced careers. The program's principle components are career exploration, technology skills development, leadership development, personal development, and academic support. In addition, AltaMed also supports youth who are pregnant or parenting. Informal partnerships with local community colleges and universities provide the Escalera Program with volunteers, financial literacy services, and internship placement sites. AltaMed also has an alumni program designed to keep graduating youth connected and cultivate its mentoring program.

- **Mentors and programs fill a gap and act as a bridge between immigrant parents and their children**

As described by the youth, as well as by parents and mentors, community-based programs are particularly important in **filling in for and complementing immigrant parents**, thus serving as a cultural bridge between parents and their children:

"My grandmother could only do so much, because I mean, she's working. She's not around much and a lot of the kids don't understand that. Your parents work, and they're not around not because they don't want to be around—but because they're working, they're working long hours. Why aren't they at my game, at my recital?" (Pedro)

"I mean, the type of people who live in this neighborhood, some of them are first-generation, some of them are just here from another country, and they don't know how to teach us. My mom, for example, she knew nothing about gangs, we knew nothing about universities, so when we came [to Gads Hill], they offered all that.... They opened up windows." (Nelson)

Because immigrant parents are often working long hours, and often on the weekends, community-based programs also serve the simple purpose of providing supervised space and activities for youth, as well as a sense of community, which protects them from negative influences in their environments:

"Every Saturday we'd go to Gads Hill, and I'd play basketball for hours and hours and then go home. Wake up, take the bus, go there. Or I could go there and do homework. So it was always available for us. So that's what I really liked, 'cause they really wanted us off the street. And a lot of the older people that would go there on Saturday for basketball were the ones that used to be there when they were kids." (Edgar)

Because **immigrant parents usually do not know how to navigate educational systems in the United States**, in particular the steps that are needed to prepare for and apply to college, mentors at programs such as Escalera fill an especially significant void:

“Parents, they don’t know what it takes, either academically, or all those extra things, scholarships, extracurricular activities, internships... anything that could further your career, they have no knowledge of that.” (Nelson)

Nonetheless, rather than simply filling in a void, these **programs also actively seek to reach and engage immigrant parents** to teach them how to be more present in their children’s lives and education. As one Escalera mentor stated:

“We try to get the parents to come. We do have monthly meetings. We have a promotora, who goes out into the community. If there’s a youth that we kind of flag as at-risk or high-risk or if we can’t get a hold of them, we send the promotora out to the youth’s house, try go get a hold of the parents to try to get the parents more involved in the program so that they understand what the program does, what our aim is, and what we’re trying to do for the child. They could then be like, I really want this for my son or my daughter. What can I do to help or how do I get involved? We try to incorporate the parents, try to involve the parents as much as possible to make sure that we keep that connection not only with the parents, but also with the youth. So in case the youth does try to drop out, not only do they have us contacting them, but now they have their parent saying ‘you should go to the program because it’s going to do this for you or it’s going to help you with this or that.’” (Letty, mentor)

- **Programs and mentors teach youth skills and knowledge**

Programs such as Escalera, and devoted mentors who can relate personally to the challenges experienced by the youth, are thus critical to building resilience, as they fill in needs and gaps in the development of children of immigrants. In addition, they also teach teenagers concrete workplace and educational skills that disadvantaged youth may not be learning at home or even at school. Both the mentors and youth interviewed spoke about the experience of learning skills such as time management, thinking through the consequences of various behaviors, understanding how to map out the steps necessary to accomplish a goal, and learning how to present oneself in writing and in person—all skills that build confidence and resilience but are not necessarily absorbed within the more chaotic environments of their schools and neighborhoods, and sometimes families. Maria, an Escalera mentor, summarizes her philosophy:

“One thing I really stand by is giving a youth confidence and self-esteem. I feel with those two, if you give a child confidence in who they are, what they’re about, what’s right and what’s wrong and live with that understanding and that self-esteem as a person, if they get swayed any which way in high school, and if they have that confidence and self esteem, they’re like no, I have this exam or this class, that sense of responsibility. Or the other way round: ‘Hey, there’s this career or college fair, we should check it out. Oh, cool, let’s go check it out....’ They can make the right decisions for themselves.

“I feel that if we can just instill that in our youth and that they’re confident about their decisions and what they do and that self-esteem, they’ll tend to make better decisions and hold themselves responsible. And with that comes the accountability factor. And it’s those skill sets you can also learn playing team sports. It’s the dynamic of team work, of following through, someone’s depending on you, and working together to accomplish your goal, having good sportsmanship. You might win, you might lose, how do you handle each situation?... Employers want to know that you have learned a few skill sets: speak to your point, time management, meet deadlines, critical thinking, being able to analyze situations, giving presentations, working with others for group projects, public speaking. Those I like to call universal skill sets because no matter where you go, they’re going to be relevant to the job you have.”(Maria, mentor)

- **Mentors serve as emotional and psychosocial support for youth**

In addition to helping youth develop these pragmatic skills, mentors often serve as a critical emotional support for at-risk youth. Several of those who grew up in difficult, often traumatizing, home and community environments described close personal bonds with their mentors, who for some were the only adults who showed support, affection, and genuine understanding in addition to teaching them the skills they knew they needed:

“Paco was the stability we needed in our lives, like the constant father figure that was missing. He was strict, firm, but he was honest with his decisions. He didn’t yell at you for no reason, if you’re doing something wrong, he was going to let you know about it because you’re not going to get away with it and we need that structure.... But he was also very loving, very caring.... I told Paco, you fill in a lot of the gap, because if you weren’t around, I might have been running on the streets.” (Pedro)

“[Escalera mentors] are not just here academically, but they’re here for you personally because they do understand the community where you come from and the type of education sometimes your parents have that cannot support

you the same way, so they're a great support, especially for Latino students, something that's dedicated for us is a great resource; it's something that connects back to our roots, culture, everything, you know?" (Daisy)

The mentors who were interviewed all acknowledged that their own upbringings, which were similar to those of their mentees, allowed them to empathize deeply with the youth they worked with. This innate understanding led them to take extra care—whether providing informal psychological support regarding how to cope with stressful family environments, or by going out of their way to ensure that their physical security and stability. At the same time, most mentors also serve as examples that youth can expand their experiences beyond the immediate neighborhood and its limitations. Explaining her motivation to help the youth at this level, one mentor describes:

"Well, I come from I guess a broken home, if that's the term to use. My dad was very abusive towards my mom when we were growing up. He was always in and out of jail for domestic violence and there was a lot of drug use. He was involved in gang activity. My mom was a teen mom herself. She had me when she was 15. There were just a lot of things going on at home, and so it didn't really let me focus on schoolwork. There'd be times when we were homeless. We were always living with an aunt, living in someone's garage, renting a room from somebody. At one point we were living out of our car. It was just a lot of negative risk factors.

I think just the fact that because I came from that type of environment; it made me realize there are other kids out there that probably have it worse than I do. I can't sit here and complain like somebody needs to do something for me and everything needs to be handed down to me. I can actually go out there and try to help, try to do something, even if it's just to sit and listen to whatever their story is. I think just that whole concept of me hearing other people's stories is what really got me into this type of work. Just using those experiences as my strength to keep going, as my reason to do what it is that I do. It's not just for a paycheck. It's because I know that someone else is going through something similar or something worse. I know that there's something that I can do." (Ana, mentor)



CONCLUSION

The stories of these young Latinos demonstrate that resilience, particularly among poor youth of color, is a complex process that develops through time, in dynamic interplay with others and within specific environments. As the youth who participated in the study reveal, there is not a single path or personality that leads one to become a resilient adult. There are, however, particular attributes, skills, and support systems that allow youth to cope with adverse environments and circumstances, and to strengthen long-term psychological outlook and skills. For some—such as Pedro and Carmen—the ability to stay focused, disciplined, and perseverant through hardship seems to emerge early on in life, and these traits are further reinforced as measured reactions to a series of challenging circumstances. For others, such as Freddy and Alicia, positive resilience traits may have a less linear trajectory, and become severely tested when harsh circumstances—dysfunctional families, or the instability of marginalized, violent environments—lead youth to act out and make poor choices, often based on feeling vulnerable, angry, or hopeless within a particular context.

For all of these youth, the latter in particular, it is critical to ensure that support systems are in place that can strengthen resilient characteristics and help guide and protect youth through difficult times. Community-based programs such as those described above, and compassionate, committed mentors who serve as role models, can fill in some of the gaps and challenges that come with living in difficult environments and in impoverished immigrant families. Programs and mentors teach youth the skills and outlooks necessary to reach for success, while also serving as psychological support and encouragement for those who struggle or experience a lapse. Successful programs such as those implemented by AltaMed and Gads Hill Center tend to address the needs of youth through a holistic, community-based framework. Such comprehensive approaches to youth development include educative interventions, job training, social services, mentoring programs, and referrals to other support systems such as mental health and prevention-oriented programs that can avert risk, provide skills, open up options, and promote a positive outlook among youth.

As these stories show, resilience among second-generation youth must also be understood in terms of the culture-specific elements that ground Latino youth within their families and communities. Programs designed to help these youth should be informed not only by the challenges and trauma that put Latino youth at risk, but should also cultivate the particular cultural strengths of immigrant Latino families, which tend to include an optimistic outlook, an aspiration for collective improvement and success, and the values of respect and familism (prioritizing familial well-being above individual interest). Despite the significant family disruption that can occur within immigrant families (dispersed relatives, deportations, spousal tensions, etc.), an inherently positive side to Latino families

includes strong bonds of trust, duty, and support that stretch out to an extended family unit that includes grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, and sometimes nonblood-related family.

This extended support system should be engaged and nurtured, as it can boost confidence and resilience in young Latinos. Moreover, given the challenges that many immigrant parents experience in navigating their U.S.-born children's lives, as well as the potentially negative effects of excessive familial responsibility for youth, promoting strong support systems for immigrant families and parental engagement programs can go a long way toward helping both parents and youth to feel integrated and safe, whether in school-based programs, community interventions, alternatives to juvenile justice, or other sectors.

The bicultural orientation of many second-generation Latino youth is a further asset that, ideally, enables them to bridge different worlds, balance different cultural or linguistic orientations, and thus contributes to broadening their perspective on life—all of which strengthens resilience. Youth who learn to navigate different worlds—their culture of origin and U.S. mainstream culture, the environment of their home neighborhood and that of mainstream spaces such as school and the workforce—can build multiple networks and levels of social capital that can be key to their success. Rather than espousing a more linear assimilation model that would push youth to abandon one space or orientation over the other, programs should encourage Latino youth to find ways to harmonize, or at least balance, these worlds both pragmatically and emotionally.

An example of innovative and highly effective programs for at-risk Latino youth that use a multicultural approach is La Cultura Cura,* which offers youth positive alternatives to violence and incarceration, bridging cultures and restoring resilience through art, mental health, and cultural reconnection programs. A major challenge for many promising culturally sensitive community-based programs, however, is that they often find it difficult to find broader support as their work does not fit neatly into the frame of evidence-based practices often prescribed by funders and policymakers. The latter should open their approach to minority youth populations by enhancing the focus on culturally sensitive, strength-based, and preventative approaches toward youth well-being.

Another major challenge for practitioners and advocates is the prospect of encouraging successful behaviors and identities among youth whose everyday environments remain violent and marginalized, and whose outlooks toward the future are limited by feelings of exclusion and hopelessness. In this regard, it is crucial that all efforts to build resilience among Latino and other poor youth

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* See La Cultura Cura: <http://ifrsf.org/programs/la-cultura-cura-youth-program/>.

of color go hand-in-hand with broader structural changes that will reduce the chances that youth, as well as their families and communities, experience systemic aggressions to begin with. Policy solutions that address and reduce the environmental risk factors that poor communities of color are exposed to—high levels of poverty, unemployment, under-resourced schools, housing discrimination, violence, racial profiling and excessive police force, family separation due to unfair immigration laws and incarceration, etc.—are crucial in this regard.

The enactment of policies designed to promote fairness and opportunity can greatly empower Latino youth and their immigrant families to build on their strengths and exercise resilience rather than have these be eroded. A current example in this regard is DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) and its recent extension, DAPA (Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents), two initiatives that have enhanced stability and well-being in immigrant families. New policies and legislation in areas such as juvenile justice reform would also create positive change in Latino communities; legislation such as the REDEEM Act, designed to enhance rehabilitation rather than criminalization, as well as the reauthorization of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act, would go a long way in promoting an environment that can foster resilience among at-risk minority youth.

Second-generation Latino youth are a major asset to the nation, and their successful participation in our society is critical to America's success. Investing in these Latino youth now, and supporting them in building positive, resilient identities, will not only enhance their own lives, but will help them pass their strengths on to future generations of young Americans. While the youth described here have their own unique stories, they ultimately have the same aspirations and challenges as other young Americans across the country. We must ensure that all American youth—the Carmens, Pedros, Freddys, and Alicias—are supported in their fight to overcome significant adversity, remain hopeful, and become productive and successful adults, workers, parents, and citizens.

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