

# SPEAKING OUT: LATINO YOUTH ON DISCRIMINATION IN THE UNITED STATES



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.

Founded in 1968, NCLR is a private, nonprofit, nonpartisan, tax-exempt organization headquartered in Washington, DC. NCLR serves all Hispanic subgroups in all regions of the country and has regional offices in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, Phoenix, and San Antonio.

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# **SPEAKING OUT:** LATINO YOUTH ON DISCRIMINATION IN THE UNITED STATES

By Patricia Foxen, Ph.D.



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## FOREWORD

Our nation is going through a period of demographic and social transition: Within the next few decades, the ethnic and racial composition of the United States will become ever more diverse, rich, and vibrant. The nation's child and youth population, itself increasingly multicultural, is at the center of this change, and the well-being of today's youth will determine our country's future success. Latino youth, and Latino children of immigrants in particular, are the fastest-growing group of young people in U.S. and should be viewed as one of the country's biggest assets. Yet, as this report depicts, Latino teenagers are hampered by a social climate that is fraught with anxiety and increasing intolerance toward both immigrants and Hispanics.

NCLR recently published a report titled, *A Wake-Up Call: Latino Youth Speak Out About Arizona SB 1070*, which depicts the frustration and concern that young Hispanics have felt regarding the controversial immigration legislation in Arizona—a law that sought to legalize racial profiling in that state. This year, Arizona also banned the teaching of ethnic studies in public schools, and this summer, a heated national debate was raised concerning the validity of the 14th Amendment, which guarantees American citizenship to all children born in the U.S. These public debates and laws, spawned during a period of profound economic insecurity, have created an increasingly hostile environment that, if unchanged, runs the risk of eroding the core values of diversity, tolerance, and opportunity that make America a strong nation.

The following report shows that Hispanic teenagers are absorbing and coping with this discourse in courageous and pragmatic ways. This report shows that in the face of significant challenges, Latino teenagers remain hopeful and resilient, often inspired by the dreams and encouragement of their parents to become the best that they can. At NCLR, we know that nurturing these youth—through programs and policies that empower them to become strong, confident, and educated—supports healthy individuals, families, and communities. But the challenge is not theirs alone: Communities across America need to find better ways to understand and interact with the growing numbers of Latino children and youth. Listening to the voices of these teenagers—to their strengths, vulnerabilities, and future aspirations—is an important step toward building bridges that create a better future for these youth and for the country.



Janet Murguía  
NCLR President and CEO

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our nation's Hispanic youth are coming of age during a challenging period for the Latino community. It is by now well-known that Latino children—92% of whom are U.S. citizens—are the fastest-growing population in the country. As our future adults, workers, taxpayers, and voters, they are central figures in a changing demographic landscape, and our nation's well-being depends upon their success. Yet Latino youngsters increasingly find themselves surrounded by a discourse and environment that is hostile and detrimental toward both Hispanics and immigrants. Hispanic adolescents in particular—situated at the crossroads between childhood and adulthood, between their parents' culture and the American mainstream—grapple with this complex reality as they define their identities and develop future aspirations and skills.

This report examines the ways in which Latino adolescents perceive and engage with formative social settings or institutions—school, work, law enforcement, and the juvenile justice system—on a daily basis. It reveals findings from a series of focus groups undertaken in 2009 with 60 Latino youth ages 15 to 17 in different regions of the country: Langley Park, MD; Nashville, TN; Providence, RI; and Los Angeles, CA. Participants were all first- or second-generation children of immigrants, a segment that currently composes a full 58% of all Latino children and youth in the U.S. and one that often faces pronounced economic, cultural, and educational barriers. These adolescents play a leading role in the successful integration of immigrant Latino communities into American society. It has therefore become more urgent than ever to deepen our knowledge of how they experience, interpret, and navigate their environments. While the study presents an in-depth, nuanced view of the youth's perceptions and experiences, our findings generally point to the following themes:

- Latino youth tend to have an optimistic outlook on the role of education and a strong desire to achieve successful careers. These attitudes are often associated with the hopes and expectations of their immigrant parents and with their own desire to contribute to their community and nation:

*My father always tells me to always keep studying, because look at how they have to work, in factories and things like that. That they want us to do better.*  
(RI, immigrant, female)

*Since I graduate next year, I want to go to college, I want to study the medical field, 'cause I want to become a surgeon, because I like to help people. I really want to help my community, the Hispanic community, 'cause they don't really have much opportunities...They need somebody like me.* (TN, U.S.-born, female)

- Despite these optimistic attitudes, the teenagers expressed a pervasive sense of being negatively stereotyped by institutional actors as varied as teachers, employers, and police officers. They described how assumptions about Hispanic youth and Latinos in general are manifested within the different social settings discussed:

**SCHOOL:** The youth reported significant ethnic stereotyping by teachers, administrators, and peers. Such stereotyping, they feel, often leads Hispanic students to be overlooked, excluded, or negatively tracked and results in unequal educational opportunities:

*They'll say, "He's not going to graduate, he's Hispanic...He's just going to work in construction or something." They really stereotype Hispanics more than any other group there in school. (TN, U.S.-born, female)*

*When I moved here from California they put me in [ESL] because they thought I didn't speak English but, I did. It was only because I was Hispanic. The first day I went to that class, and they left me there and they put me in the reading class like for dummies, like para tontos I guess. (TN, immigrant, female)*

**WORKPLACE:** The youth often perceive the workplace as a site of unfair practices based on racial and ethnic assumptions on the part of employers. Many of these youth's perceptions of discrimination in the workforce were directly related to the experiences of their parents and other community members:

*My father was working at a golf course and he had been working there a long time and here came this guy, he was an American White man, and just because, I don't know, he couldn't stand my father, my father was Latin, he fired him without my father doing anything to him. And he didn't want to pay him or anything. (MD, immigrant, female)*

*Well sometimes they [Latinos] get paid minimum wage to do more work than anybody, for doing work that nobody else wants to do, but they're still being paid lower amounts. And like, some people don't want to hire you 'cause you're a Latino...Some people probably think you are not going to do a good job. And some people also take advantage of you. (TN, U.S.-born, female)*

**LAW ENFORCEMENT:** Across all focus groups, the youth emphatically described feeling unfairly and habitually profiled by law enforcement as a result of negative assumptions regarding Hispanic youth, gangs, and immigrants. Such regular contact with the police, which takes place in a variety of spaces, compounds feelings of vulnerability and distrust in their communities:

*I have this White friend named Rick...And you look at this guy, and you think, "This guy's family's been White forever. He's come from England," or whatever. And it was me, him, my friend José, and our friend Junior, and the police stopped us...They gave all of us curfew tickets except for Rick. They just stopped us, they lined us up, and they said, "Okay. You can go," to Rick. And he just, like, walked away. And then they just got my friend José mad, and he's, like, "Hey, why are you letting the White boy go?" And they're like, "Hey, you shut your mouth." And then they threatened to arrest him. (CA, U.S.-born, male)*

*I got stopped like five times by the same cops for no reason. I be walking down my street 'cause, you know, on Valley Street, there's a park right there. I be walking down there all the time...to play basketball. I see these [police] were over there [and they said], "Come over here, son. Come over here." I said, "What now?" "You got anything on you?" "No." "Put your hands up. You're under arrest." I said, "For what? I just came to play basketball!" "So what. You ain't supposed to be here." I didn't know! (RI, U.S.-born, male)*

One of the most consistent findings across the focus groups was the teenagers' pervasive sense of being racialized—or constructed as different, as “other”—on a regular basis, and in practically all realms of experience. The report focuses on how, according to the youth, such stereotyping and differential treatment plays out in specific ways, and is manifested or reinforced through institutional practices and systemic discrimination. Listening to these adolescents' own voices in order to better understand how some of the more toxic images circulating in today's discourse impact their lives in concrete ways, and how responses to these processes shape young Hispanics' broader outlooks, is pivotal to envisioning better policies and programs that will allow these youth to thrive and become successful adults.

The study also shows how young Latinos are struggling to shape a sense of belonging and forge future aspirations despite being surrounded by numerous barriers. They are under strong pressure from their parents and communities—and from our society—to acculturate rapidly to American society while serving as cultural bridges between their families and mainstream American institutions. They are often expected to do so with limited resources and support. Despite these challenges and the discrimination they face, the youth described here generally have a remarkably positive orientation with respect to their educational and future aspirations and their broader desire to become successful, responsible adults.

Given the importance of young Latinos to the future of our country, it is essential that our systems and institutions support these teenagers in their efforts to become successful adults and citizens. Clearly, one critical step in finding solutions to these issues consists of changing the tone of public discussion about the role of immigrants and Hispanics in U.S. society, and helping the

public feel more comfortable and less anxious about demographic change in the country. But it is not enough to address the discourse alone; attending to the structural issues that contribute to stereotyping and discrimination within our institutions—particularly those dealing with youth—is fundamental. We should invest more in policies and programs that have been proven to make a difference in the lives of Latino youth, as well as in initiatives that build community support and social cohesion. We must strengthen and empower more Latino parents to engage with their children’s teachers and school administrators. We should also find more ways to help defuse rather than escalate tension between the police and youth. These and other steps will strengthen our children, and in doing so, strengthen the fabric of our nation.

# TODAY'S LATINO YOUTH: WHAT DO WE KNOW?



## INTRODUCTION

Latino\* youngsters are coming of age during a period of severe economic and social difficulty for the broader Latino population, and for youth in particular. Today's Hispanic youth have higher chances than average of living in poverty and having unemployed parents. Over the past decade, cuts in publicly funded services have led to substantial declines in the resources and institutional support that are fundamental to enabling poor and minority youth to achieve their full potential. Other factors have also contributed to uniquely difficult conditions for Latino youth. In recent years, for example, policies purportedly designed to improve the security of urban neighborhoods have translated into the growing detention and incarceration of Hispanic and Black youth, usually for nonviolent offenses. In many areas of the country, moreover, increasingly harsh immigration policies and a new tolerance for racial and ethnic profiling lead Latino youth to be viewed as suspect by virtue of their ethnicity, and in many cases to live with the fear—or worse, the reality—of their parents' detention or deportation.

Increasingly, Latino youth also confront a host of negative public discourses and media images about themselves. Young Hispanics are routinely depicted in mainstream discourse as low achievers, high school dropouts, teen parents, or violent gang members, all stereotypes that paint a picture of an unassimilated population marked primarily by exclusion and difference. Given an increasingly hostile anti-immigrant discourse that conflates “Latino” and “immigrant,” Latino youth are also exposed to the demonization of their immigrant backgrounds. Everyday interactions of youth with their environments are clearly affected by such images, and a significant majority—close to 83%—of Hispanic youth reported in a recent national survey that discrimination is a personal problem for them.<sup>1</sup>

Less prevalent in the public discourse are the many positive attributes that today's diverse Hispanic youth population embodies, and the successes that many have achieved despite the barriers they face. Research shows that principles such as a strong work ethic, family- and community-oriented values, respect for culture and nation and, above all, a strong desire to fulfill the American Dream, form the basis of many Latino youngsters' capacity to excel and become productive adults and citizens. Unfortunately, however, social impediments, divisive discourses, and negative portrayals run the risk of chipping away at young Latinos' resiliency and creating a confusing—if not daunting—environment for those striving to define future goals and pathways of opportunity.

In light of this broader context, the ways in which Latino youth perceive and engage with formative social settings or institutions—such as school, work, and

\* The terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this report 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 juvenile justice system—can play a principal role in influencing how they weigh their present and future options, therefore shaping their long-term success or failures. Given how fast the Latino youth population is growing throughout the country, and in light of the adaptations that must be made by our systems and institutions to deal with this demographic shift, it has become more urgent than ever to deepen our knowledge of how Hispanic youth navigate these different settings. Within the current environment, are school and work viewed by Latino youth as a great “equalizer,” part of an opportunity structure that can give them the tools and security to succeed and progress? Or, do Latino youth perceive these settings as further reinforcing the broader inequalities that they already face? Do young Latinos feel that they are treated differently within such settings, and if so, in which specific ways do they experience and interpret these differences? Broadly speaking, how do young Latinos’ interactions within all of these systems affect their sense of well-being, identity, and belonging in U.S. society?

To answer some of these questions, the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) undertook a series of focus groups in 2009 with 60 first- and second-generation Latino youth ages 15 to 17 in different regions of the country. Given the wide diversity of the Latino population—by culture of origin, recency of arrival, and context of reception—the study incorporated the voices of Latinos from four different sites: Langley Park, MD; Nashville, TN; Providence, RI; and Los Angeles, CA. As existing research on Hispanic youth tends to focus primarily on educational aspirations and barriers, we sought to include views on work, law enforcement, and juvenile justice in order to gain a more holistic knowledge of how these different systems together affect Latino teenagers’ lives, outlooks, and choices. To complement and contextualize focus group findings, NCLR also conducted in-depth interviews with teachers, employers, and juvenile justice professionals who could provide a better understanding of some of the institutional perspectives on Latino youth. This project thus sought to fill a gap in existing policy research by examining how Latino youth themselves articulate their own positioning in our nation at this critical demographic juncture in the United States.

## THE BIG PICTURE

Given the prevalence of negative images and misunderstandings surrounding Latino youth, it is imperative to gain a clearer idea of who is represented in this demographic group. Not only is today’s Latino youth population approximately double what it was 20 years ago, it is also largely composed of U.S. citizens: A full 92% of Latino children under the age of 18 are citizens.<sup>2</sup> This population is increasingly diverse in formative ways that include generational, geographic, and cultural differences. As with the broader Latino population, the majority of Hispanic youth are concentrated in several traditionally Hispanic states such as Texas, California, New Mexico, and Arizona, but a significant number are increasingly growing up in new immigrant gateway states such as those

of the Southeast, where the Latino growth rate has proliferated in the past two decades, as well as in large pockets of immigrant growth throughout the Midwest, Northeast, and Western United States. Moreover, while Hispanic youngsters often continue to be clustered in poor, resource-scarce urban centers, many are increasingly living in working-class suburban contexts or semirural communities, which tend to offer a weak infrastructure—and in some cases an unwelcoming reception—for immigrant and Latino families.<sup>3</sup>

When looking at a national snapshot of this population, it is clear that Latino children and youth are, generally speaking, at a disadvantage relative to their White counterparts on a number of critical indicators of well-being. In 2009 for example, 33.1% of Latino children under age 18 lived below the federal poverty level, compared to 11.9% of White children.<sup>4</sup> Equally disturbing, a majority of Latino children (63%) currently live in low-income families, which is more than twice the number of White children growing up in such families (28.7%).<sup>5</sup> Many low-income Latino parents are employed in jobs with few benefits and little security; children in these families are disadvantaged on numerous fronts, often having worse health and educational outcomes and experiencing more violence than their more affluent peers.<sup>6</sup> Latino youth are also far less likely than White or Black youth to have health insurance, putting them at greater risk of experiencing a variety of health problems; in 2008, 19% of all Latino children under 18 were uninsured, compared to 10% of Black and 7% of White youngsters.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to these social disparities, young Latinos lag behind White youth on a number of educational achievement indicators, and are also significantly more likely than Whites to drop out of high school: The dropout rate for Latino youth in 2007 was 21.4%—nearly one in five—compared to only 5.4% for White youth.<sup>8</sup> In addition, young Latinas between the ages of 15 and 19 are nearly three times as likely as White girls, and slightly more likely than Black girls, to become pregnant; in 2008, the pregnancy rate for Latinas in this age range was 12.5%, compared to 4.3% for White teens and 12.3% for Black teens.<sup>9</sup> Finally, Hispanic children are disproportionately represented in the juvenile justice system: While Latinos ages ten to 17 made up 19% of all youth within that age group, 25% of all incarcerated youth in that age range are Latino.<sup>10</sup> Teenagers who drop out of school, become pregnant, or are placed in the justice system are at risk of reduced socioeconomic options in the future and of reproducing the cycle of poverty and marginality.

### GENERATIONAL PATTERNS AND INTEGRATION

While these numbers point to the large obstacles currently confronted by many Hispanic youth, it is impossible to fully understand the landscape for Latino children and youth in the U.S.—or to anticipate their future prospects—without also examining diverse and shifting generational patterns. A growing

body of research shows that in many respects, the situation of Latino children improves through time and with greater degrees of integration, but this picture is complex. Certain critical indicators of youth well-being clearly get better with each generation, indicating that in many respects, Latinos integrate into U.S. society at roughly the same pace as other immigrant groups.

Studies comparing the situation of first-generation (immigrant)\* and second-generation (U.S.-born) youth show that the latter do substantially better than their foreign-born peers with respect to key outcomes such as English proficiency, high school completion, and college enrollment.<sup>11</sup> Some demographers have shown a classic pattern of socioeconomic status gain into the third generation and beyond, with family income levels increasing with each generation of Latinos.<sup>12</sup> This pattern is closely associated with Hispanic parental educational levels, which also improve substantially with the generations and are connected to child well-being. Thus, although 47% of first-generation Latino children have parents who have less than a high school education, this proportion drops to 40% for second-generation and only 16% for third-generation Latino children. Improvements in English-language fluency parallel these changes over time: While 43% of first-generation Latino children are not fluent in English, this rate diminishes to 21% in the second generation and to 5% in the third.<sup>13</sup>

However, research has shown that acculturation brings certain problems, and there is a noticeable trend of generational decline over time for several important outcomes. For example, while U.S.-born youth do better than their first-generation cohorts with respect to the outcomes described above, they are also twice as likely to have ties to a gang, carry weapons, or go to prison,<sup>14</sup> and are also more likely than immigrant youth to suffer from mental health problems<sup>†</sup> such as substance abuse, depression, and suicidal behavior.<sup>15</sup> While teen pregnancy rates drop substantially between the first and second generations, they increase again among third-generation Latinas, as does obesity. School performance, moreover, does not improve substantially between the second and third generations, and researchers have in fact found that grades, test scores, and dropout rates are comparable across the generations for Latino youth (including immigrants) who attend U.S. schools.<sup>16</sup>

Underlying many negative outcomes for the third generation is that poverty persists among Latino children and youth—although it does decline slightly over the generations—and remains a significant environmental barrier to success.

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\* First-generation children of immigrants who arrive to the U.S. before age 13, despite being foreign-born, tend to have schooling and earnings trajectories that are closer to U.S.-born children than to foreign-born immigrant youth who arrive at a later age.

† In general, Hispanic youth are at lower risk for mental health disorders than non-Hispanic White youth. Researchers caution, moreover, that the “immigrant paradox”—the protection against risk factors that foreign-born youth arrive with—must not be generalized to all Latino children, as some subgroups are more protected against particular behaviors or disorders than others. See Margarita Alegria et al., “Prevalence of Mental Illness in Immigrant and Non-Immigrant Latino Groups,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 165, no. 3 (2008): 359–369.

While 34% of first-generation Latino children live in poverty, a full 26% and 24% of second- and third-generation Latino children, respectively, continue to live in poverty.<sup>17</sup> Thus, while the generational trajectories of Latinos vary and are positive for the majority of Latino children, sociologists have described a process of “downward assimilation” that affects a sizable portion of the Latino youth population that continues to be marginalized by a cycle of discrimination, menial jobs, and risky or violent inner-city subcultures, which greatly impedes their opportunities as adults.<sup>18</sup>

### CHILDREN OF IMMIGRANTS

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in and body of research concerning children of immigrants, who account for a major part of the growth in the general child population over the past two decades.<sup>19, 20</sup> Indeed, one of the most significant factors differentiating today’s under-18 Latino child and youth population from previous generations is that a majority—a full 58%—are either first- or second-generation children of immigrants whose families have been part of the large Hispanic immigration waves of the past two decades. First-generation children of immigrants—that is, children who themselves immigrated to the U.S.—account for 9% of the Latino population under age 18, while nearly half of all Latino children (49%) are second-generation U.S.-born residents with at least one parent born outside the U.S. By contrast, 42% of all Latino children under age 18 are third-and-higher-generation Latino youth whose parents have been integrating for decades.<sup>21</sup>

Researchers have found that while Hispanic children in immigrant families\*—whether they were born abroad or in the U.S.—tend to have a positive outlook toward school and the future, they also suffer particular drawbacks since their experiences are heavily influenced by their socioeconomic situation, limited integration, and the legal status of their immigrant parents.<sup>22</sup> As new waves of Hispanic adults—particularly the majority coming from Mexico and Central America—have been more likely to work in low-wage jobs, speak limited English, and have lower levels of education and educational resources at home, their children are often at a disadvantage relative to those born to native families. Having an undocumented immigrant parent in particular may hinder children’s access to important education, health, and other benefits, particularly in today’s climate when parents often refrain from contacting federal or state agencies for fear of being detained or deported.<sup>23</sup> In addition, many children of immigrants live with the pressures created by the acculturation gap between themselves and their parents, and often have to take on critical household, language, and social responsibilities for their families—pressures that may instill strong social skills

\* “Children in immigrant families” are defined as those under age 18 who were born outside of the U.S., or as native-born children with at least one foreign-born parent.

and maturity, but can also remove children from valuable school experiences or activities, or negatively impact family dynamics.

Despite these similarities, there are some important distinctions to be made between foreign- and native-born children of immigrants. Indeed, although second-generation children of immigrants fare better than foreign-born youth on a number of key socioeconomic and educational outcomes as described above, recent studies have also found that Latino immigrant children often arrive in the United States with valuable protective factors—high educational aspirations, traditional family values that reinforce social cohesion and classroom skills, and a strong degree of resiliency and emotional well-being, all cultural assets that are less prominent among their U.S.-born peers—that unfortunately often erode with time and acculturation to the mainstream.<sup>24</sup>

Clearly, then, the integration of Hispanic children and youth is variable, and researchers have attempted to understand the different factors that lead to either positive or negative patterns of incorporation. Positive outcomes for Latino youth are often related to strong parental, peer, and social support, cohesive family bonds, encouraging school environments, and interventions that address the particular needs of English language learners (ELLs), at-risk youth, and immigrant families. In addition, research has shown that maintaining a bicultural, bilingual orientation is an important adaptive strategy and one that contributes to a strong sense of identity for many Latino youth; in today's multicultural environment, retaining the protective elements of one's parents' culture or home culture while establishing a positive relationship with the dominant U.S. culture instills multiple skills and values that promote resiliency.<sup>25,26</sup> A worst-case scenario, conversely, occurs when youth are marginalized and feel alienated from both the culture of origin and the host culture; for these adolescents, the additional pressures of poverty, weakened families, and poor educational opportunities can sometimes leave them vulnerable to risky circumstances and behaviors that result in negative outcomes.

Interestingly, a majority of today's Latino children and youth, unlike many past generations, have espoused bicultural orientation rather than adopting more linear assimilation strategies; recent research shows that a significant share of Latino youngsters today identify with both their family's culture of origin and the host culture, and maintain Spanish proficiency while attaining fluency in English as well. For example, among U.S.-born Latino youth ages 16 to 25, 98% say that they can speak English very well or pretty well; a full 79% of second-generation and 38% of third-generation youth simultaneously report that they are proficient in speaking Spanish, which demonstrates the buoyancy of the mother tongue for several generations after immigration.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, the bicultural orientation of Latino youth should not be overstated, as many also feel strong pressures to assimilate rapidly but lack the resources or language skills to do so. Maintaining

a strong sense of cultural and ethnic coherence—one that bridges the cultures and languages that shape their lives—is not only fundamental to the healthy integration and development of children in immigrant families, but will likely affect their children’s children and future generations as well.<sup>28</sup>

### **RACIALIZATION, STEREOTYPING, AND DISCRIMINATION**

Today’s Latino adolescents, like all teenagers, are defining the pathways that will shape their prospects as adults; it is imperative to understand some of the more subtle processes that impact their decisions and behaviors in both positive and negative ways. Despite their relatively strong sense of ethnic identity, Hispanic youth are growing up in a social landscape fraught with conflicting ideas about race, ethnicity, and cultural diversity—one increasingly defined by detrimental perceptions and treatments of the Hispanic population. Academics broadly define racialization as the social and historical processes through which a group of people come to be viewed, categorized, treated, and incorporated into a dominant culture based on alleged physical and cultural characteristics.<sup>29</sup> For Latinos in particular, the process of racialization has been conflated with a social discourse on immigrants, citizenship, and belonging, and the Latino “other” has, in recent years, increasingly been constructed as a “threat” to American mainstream culture through negative or dehumanizing metaphors of criminality, disease, and uncontrolled fertility.<sup>30</sup> This process takes place not only at a larger ideological level and through public representations, but in everyday scenarios and dynamics in hospitals, schools, banks, work environments, and public spaces, among others.

How do these social processes affect Hispanic adolescents in particular, and more specifically, how are they manifested in different social settings? While the research in this area has been relatively sparse, there is a growing body of work that studies the impact on Latino youth of institutional stereotyping and discrimination and the implications for adaptive youth development.<sup>31</sup> Stereotypes refer to simplified, standardized, and often derogatory images or assumptions that are made about members of a particular group. Stereotypical assessments of individuals can result from, as well as reinforce, unequal treatment within institutional settings and the discriminatory practices that ensue; for young people, such discrimination can have a wide range of emotional and academic implications.

A large part of the research in this area for Hispanic youth has focused on educational settings, and has pointed to the detrimental effects of perceived discrimination on academic outcomes. The stigma of inferiority created by negative stereotyping in schools and classes has been found to adversely impact Latino students’ academic adjustment by lowering students’ self-esteem and motivation, leading to disengagement, alienation, and disciplinary problems.<sup>32, 33</sup> In addition to the subjective impacts of perceived discrimination on academic behavior, researchers have also found that actual

stereotyping by teachers and administrators with respect to Latino students' intelligence and capabilities can lead the latter "to be unjustifiably tracked into less challenging classes, thereby reducing their educational opportunities and completing a self-fulfilling prophesy."<sup>34</sup>

A number of psychological processes underlie the relationship between stereotyping, discrimination, reduced academic performance, and other negative outcomes. Through "social mirroring," for example, youth sometimes internalize the stereotypes that they are confronted with and subsequently engage in behaviors that confirm the negative image.<sup>35</sup> In other cases, Hispanic students have been found to underperform because of unconscious fears of living up to negative group stereotypes, leading them to sabotage their own potential success.<sup>36</sup> The awareness of being stereotyped, in addition, can sometimes influence youth's interactions with others and lead them to interpret social information negatively. For example, youth who feel stigmatized by ethnic stereotypes can be more likely to perceive even ambiguous feedback as discriminatory and thus discount useful advice.<sup>37</sup> Overall, a strong sensitivity to stereotyping and discrimination has been associated with behavioral problems and a lack of trust that inhibit youth from engaging in healthy behaviors and seeking academic support from teachers and peers. Perceived discrimination has also been found to relate to substance abuse among Latino youth,<sup>38</sup> and to lead to psychological and acculturative distress, anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem.<sup>39, 40, 41</sup>

The gendered aspects of discrimination are noteworthy, as Hispanic girls and boys—who are both often subjected to negative images concerning their academic capability—tend to experience stereotyping and discrimination in distinct ways. Young Latinas, for example, often cope with dual stereotypes that merge assumptions about gender and culture and that consequently paint them as submissive, as caretakers, as lacking in ambition, and as unlikely to attend college in favor of starting a family early—stereotypes that are often reinforced by their families, communities, schools, and the media. If internalized, such images may lead Latina girls to lack a vision for future options and abandon education early to start a family.\*<sup>42</sup> Latino boys, for their part, are more likely to be assumed to be troublesome and criminal, and tend to be sensitive to the feeling of being surveilled, contained, and treated as criminals by authorities in different locations such as schools and neighborhoods.<sup>43</sup> Researchers have also argued that the relationship between perceived discrimination and negative academic or psychological outcomes is stronger for Latino boys than it is for girls;<sup>44</sup> that Latino male youth may be more susceptible to environmental factors such as discrimination is, they argue, partly due to traditional socialization patterns in

\* One noteworthy study found, however, that Latina adolescents were more likely than Latino boys to react to negative stereotyping and expectations by making sure they excelled, graduated, and dispelled negative images, thereby marking a status change for them in their community and in mainstream society. See Julio Cammarota, "The Gendered and Racialized Pathways of Latina and Latino Youth: Different Struggles, Different Resistances in the Urban Context," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (2004): 53–74.

Latino families, which encourage boys to be exposed to and engaged in the outside world—where discrimination occurs—and encourage girls to remain more within the protective space of the family and home.<sup>45</sup>

Fewer studies have looked at the specific effects of perceived discrimination and stereotyping among Latino youth outside of the school environment; those that have, however, have found that discrimination is a major stressor in the lives of many young Latinos beyond the confines of school. In one study, at least half of Black and Hispanic youth reported that they were hassled by store personnel, viewed as dangerous, or targeted by police because of ethnic prejudice.<sup>46</sup> There is an especially conspicuous dearth of material on young Latinos' perceptions of ethnic stereotyping and discrimination in the juvenile justices system, primarily because such research focuses mostly on Black youth.<sup>47</sup> Research that does exist shows that like their Black counterparts, Latino youth perceive more injustice within the law enforcement system and view the police less favorably than White youth—a factor most likely connected to a higher rate of negative contact with the police. Research on perceived racial bias in the criminal justice system among adult Hispanics also shows that Hispanics have a strong sensitivity to real or perceived group vulnerability to abusive or unfair practices.<sup>48</sup> There has been little research, however, on how ethnic stereotypes influence specific, concrete interactions between law enforcement or juvenile justice professionals and Latino youth.

Overall, researchers have pointed to a range of responses that Latino youth exhibit as a result of perceived stereotyping and discrimination. Some youth, for example, construct adversarial attitudes and behaviors, in which they develop their identity in opposition to the dominant mainstream, a defense that may or may not be associated with negative outcomes in school or elsewhere. Others, confronted with the stress of discrimination, may seek to create a distance from their ethnic group of origin and adopt behaviors from the dominant (White) culture, sometimes abandoning protective factors against the discrimination that they seek to evade.<sup>49</sup> Not all reactions to stereotyping and discrimination, however, are negative. Some researchers have stressed the “positive resistance” of minority students who use education and achievement as a strategy to counter discrimination and social inequality;<sup>50</sup> others have discussed the notion of transformative resistance, through which Latino youth achieve a deeper understanding of social injustice, and a motivation to challenge negative media representations by succeeding in their own lives and serving as a positive example to others.<sup>51</sup>

Given the complex and rather confusing nature of the current national environment—where efforts to promote cultural diversity and the integration of Latino and other ethnic groups into U.S. society clash with an increasingly exclusionary discourse on Hispanics and immigration—it is crucial to listen to

how this environment is impacting Latino youth. These youngsters are not just absorbing and reacting to the broader images and arguments circulating in the public discourse. They are also interacting within specific spaces and institutional settings that strongly influence their experiences and outlook. The following research results help us understand how these dynamics shape Hispanic adolescents' present perceptions and future outlooks, and highlight some of the more complex and challenging social interactions that these youth experience on a daily level.

# METHODS AND RESULTS



## METHODS

In order to explore the perceptions and experiences of a diverse range of Latino youth regarding school, work, and the juvenile justice system, eight focus groups were conducted with a total of 60 Hispanic teenagers from the ages of 15 to 17 (inclusive). With the goal of capturing the voices of Hispanic youth growing up in diverse contexts and regions of the country, the research took place in four cities—Langley Park, MD; Nashville, TN; Providence, RI; and Los Angeles, CA—each of which represents a particular type of setting for Latino youth integration (see Boxes 1–4).

In each site, two focus groups were conducted, one with immigrant youth (first generation) and the other with U.S.-born youth (second generation), all of whom had at least one parent who is an immigrant. Despite the fact that children of immigrants share many characteristics, research has shown that there are significant differences between first- and second-generation youth that include both socioeconomic factors and levels of acculturation, and we aimed to capture both the similarities and divergences between the two groups' perspectives. Recruitment of participants and focus group facilitation was executed by local researchers affiliated with community-based organizations that have strong ties to the Latino community and youth.

The focus groups generally reflected the ethnic composition of each state's Latino population. Participants in Maryland were predominantly Central American (Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Nicaraguan), those in Rhode Island were diverse (primarily Dominican and Puerto Rican, but including some Mexicans and Guatemalans), and those in Tennessee and California were mostly Mexican but included some Central Americans. The focus groups also included a balanced selection of boys and girls; recruiters made efforts to include both youth identified as being at risk and adolescents who were well-adapted to their school and environment.

Most of the discussions were conducted in English, though two of the immigrant groups (Langley Park and Providence) took place in Spanish at the youth's request, and one of the immigrant focus groups (Nashville) went back and forth between the two languages. The discussions lasted between one and two hours, and small gift cards were distributed at the end of the session to thank participants for their time. Informed consent for the study was collected from both youth and their parents in order to ensure confidentiality. The themes covered during the focus group included the youths' general perceptions of and experiences with school (including teachers, course work, and peers); discussions of their future aspirations around college and work; perceptions of and experiences with law enforcement and the juvenile justice system; and more tangential conversations around topics such as parental engagement and the role of gangs in their lives. Focus group discussions were translated if necessary and transcribed; all quotations in this report were taken directly from these transcriptions, but the names of individuals have been changed to protect the anonymity of participants.

**BOX 1: LANGLEY PARK, MARYLAND**

Langley Park is a diverse suburban community close to the Washington, DC metropolitan area, known for its multiethnic population that includes West Africans, Southeast Asians, and Central Americans—the largest immigrant group—who began arriving in the 1980s during the civil wars in that region. Despite the suburban nature of Langley Park, it is a relatively poor community where resources are strained, structures to support the integration of immigrant youth are lacking, and problems such as violence and gangs, particularly in the Latino community, are pronounced. Langley Park has attracted a fair amount of “sequential migration,” in which Latino immigrant parents have arrived first and children have followed them years later, creating difficult family dynamics and acute stress for both youth and their parents.

**BOX 2: NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE**

Nashville represents one of the “new gateway” communities of the Southeast that have witnessed an extremely rapid growth in the Latino population over the past 20 years. The Latino community in Nashville is predominantly Mexican, but includes subgroups of Central Americans and Colombians; because of an important refugee resettlement program in this area, the foreign-born community also includes Kurdish, Somali, Laotian, and Vietnamese populations. Nashville can be characterized as an ethnically segregated city, and along with significant linguistic and cultural barriers, this has hindered the integration of the Latino community. Many Hispanic immigrants in Nashville have chosen this area as a second or third migration destination, having moved with their children from states such as California in search of jobs.

**BOX 3: PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND**

Providence is a New England city characterized by an important and dynamic immigrant sector that has historically provided the labor behind the various industries fuelling Rhode Island's economy. Providence's Latino population is very diverse and includes Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Guatemalans (Mayan and Ladino), Colombians, Bolivians, and Cubans, all subgroups with distinct immigration histories, arrival periods, and patterns of integration. While public attitudes toward Latino and other immigrants in Providence had been relatively positive in past years, the last five or so years have shown a clear increase in ethnic tensions and hostility toward Hispanics in the city.

**BOX 4: LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA**

Los Angeles is a more "traditional" Latino nexus with a long history of Hispanic integration and community-building, particularly for the Chicano/Mexican population. The border state of California itself has the largest Latino population in the country, and the second largest share of Latinos relative to the state's total population; it has also been a primary destination for other immigrant groups, in particular those from Asian countries. Despite being a largely Latino city, Los Angeles has been the site of numerous tensions and difficulties for Hispanics over the past decades, including anti-immigrant legislation propositions, ethnic tensions, and significant gang violence.



## YOUTH ON SCHOOL

Despite an optimistic outlook on the role of education and a strong desire to achieve academic success, Latino youth report significant ethnic stereotyping at school by teachers, administrators, and peers. Such stereotyping, they feel, often leads Hispanic students to be overlooked, excluded, or negatively tracked, and results in unequal educational opportunities.

### *General Outlook on Education and the Future*

Across the focus groups, most of the youth generally had a positive outlook on both school and education, reporting that they primarily viewed school as a place to learn, to prepare for the future and a career, to be “somebody,” and to succeed in life. A fair number also added explicitly that they wanted to “be better” or to “have a better life” than their parents, either in order to have fewer financial problems or to be better providers than their own parents had been. Others expressed the sentiment that getting an education was a duty or obligation to their immigrant parents, who did not have the opportunity or chance to excel through education (see Box 5):

*[The goal of my education] is to succeed in life. To be better than what my parents could give me. To give more to my kids. (TN, immigrant, male)*

*[We want to do well in school] because our parents want us to have the life they didn't have. (TN, U.S.-born, male)*

In addition to viewing education through the lens of parental expectations, some participants expressed the desire to excel in order to defy negative expectations of Latino students:

*Well, I was thinking to become somebody in life, and so you can prove—well, I guess in my, like, ethnicity, to prove that we can—we as Hispanics and Latinos, like, can actually go somewhere. Because the majority of us, like, don't finish high school, or don't finish going to school. (CA, U.S.-born, female)*

Most expressed a clear understanding that, even if school is not always engaging, the skills and knowledge learned there will help in future decision-making processes and will provide a necessary basis for future plans. As one girl expressed clearly, not only is school a place to learn employment-related skills, but the knowledge gained there is also an important step toward citizenship and integration:

*For example, if you want to be an American citizen and you are a resident, history [classes] can be very useful. (TN, immigrant, female)*

**BOX 5: PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL**

Despite parents' high expectations and aspirations for their children, several youth stated that many Latino parents, including their own, are restricted in their ability to support their children in reaching educational and future goals. When discussing the involvement of Latino parents in their children's schooling, and in particular their ability to help with homework, some students mentioned that their parents' lack of familiarity with the American school system and with the contents of their children's class work was a barrier:

*I guess back home they really learned differently, they teach different. And here they teach way different. So you don't really ask [for help] at home.*

(CA, immigrant, female)

*I usually can't go to her. She doesn't know what—she didn't go to school, so she doesn't, like, I can't ask her, you know, like, "How do you do this?" You know? Or "Help me out," 'cause she can't. She can't. She doesn't know how.* (CA, U.S.-born, female)

Many of the youth, in addition, referred to parents' heavy work schedules as impediments to their engagement in their children's schooling:

*They tell you [to do well in school], they tell you but they just don't have the time to be with you right there because they have to work. You know, because they work all the time.* (CA, immigrant, female)

*Like they're just too tired and have too much work. They can't be involved in the school.* (CA, immigrant, male)

The youth discussed language as a particularly strong barrier to parental involvement in school, especially when it comes to parent-teacher meetings:

*My mommy doesn't know how to speak English very well. So that's why she doesn't go. And when she does, she doesn't understand a lot of the stuff.*

(TN, immigrant, female)

*There are parents that don't go because they don't know English. So why would they go if they can't understand what is being said? Or sometimes they give out papers in English that say "Open House." There are some parents that don't know English, and they don't understand.* (TN, immigrant, male)

In spite of these barriers, several of the youth stated that their own parents, often with the help of official or unofficial translators, made special efforts to be engaged in their education:

*Yeah my mom talks to the principal, with the teachers she goes in like every three months so they can talk about how I'm doing in school, my grades...She doesn't speak English, she has a translator. One of the counselors helps her. (MD, U.S.-born, female)*

*Even though my mom speaks Spanish, she still gets involved. So I don't think that should be an excuse why parents should not get involved in their son's or daughter's education...I translate for her. (CA, U.S.-born, male)*

These statements reflect other research findings that show that Hispanic parents are committed to their children's academic success, even if they may not feel capable or confident in assisting them. In recent years, schools and community-based organizations have implemented parental involvement programs designed to engage Latino parents in their children's academic career and to help parents feel more comfortable with the school system. These programs have been proven to increase the academic and emotional support youth receive from their parents and help Latino youth navigate the challenges they face at school.\*

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\* For example, the Salem/Keizer Coalition for Equality's parent education and training program works primarily with farmworker parents, helping them understand their roles and responsibilities as parents of public school students. Additionally, by providing parents with the knowledge and tools to communicate effectively with schools, NCLR's *Padres Comprometidos* program has shown increased and more meaningful interactions between Latino parents and teachers and administrators focused around the student's academic development. Students of parents who graduate from this program benefit from their parents' more deliberate support both at home and at school, resulting in improved conditions for increased academic performance.

### *Perceptions of Ethnic Discrimination and Stereotyping in School*

Despite this positive outlook toward school and education, it was clear throughout most of the focus groups that the youth's enthusiasm toward school was significantly eroded by the perception of being both excluded and stereotyped in a variety of negative ways by teachers, administrators, and non-Latino peers. The exclusion and negative images of Hispanics, many respondents stated, put into motion a series of dynamics and responses that have unique effects on the youth's academic experience. At the broadest level, some students (both immigrant and U.S.-born) reported being separated off from the mainstream culture due to their Latino ethnicity. For example:

*[Some teachers think] that this country is not ours and I don't know what else...that this country is not for the Dominicans, it is for the Americans. (RI, immigrant, male)*

*Yes, like if you are speaking in Spanish and they say, "You shut up, because this country is American, and you have to speak in English." (RI, immigrant, female)*

*I had one teacher, I asked him what he thought about Mexican kids, and he said, "I don't really know if they really belong here," and I'm like, "What do you think?" He's like, "Well I think they should go back to Mexico." And I didn't say anything else. (TN, U.S.-born, female)*

Many youth also reported feeling routinely categorized and judged based on a set of prevailing negative ethnic stereotypes, for example:

*They think, "He's Mexican, he's bad. He's in a gang, probably" or something like that...And some they'll just look at you and they'll just say stuff like they know you, like they know who you are and stuff. They'll just start saying all kinds of stuff, like you look like a "little drug dealer," or "gang member," or something. Or you're "illegal," and stuff like that. (TN, U.S.-born, male)*

*Some [teachers] are cool. But some just really stereotype you, you know, like, oh me being half Hispanic, like well, "You're going to end up pregnant before you get out of high school." 'Cause most girls in general get pregnant, and they're mostly Hispanic girls that get pregnant. Or, "You're going to get knocked up by a gangbanger"...or, "You're just going to join a gang, and just do whatever you want." (TN, U.S.-born, female)*

A fair number of participants specifically mentioned feeling unfairly categorized as students who would either not make it through high school or who would go into low-skill jobs that do not require an educational investment:

*I think some teachers think that Hispanics are a waste of time to teach, and don't really bother, but some want to learn. They try to, and they ask the teachers. But then some are not doing anything, so the teacher thinks it's a waste of time. (TN, U.S.-born, female)*

*They'll say, "He's not going to graduate, he's Hispanic...He's just going to work in construction or something." They really stereotype Hispanics more than any other group there in school. (TN, U.S.-born, female)*

Youth also expressed a high level of frustration over the lack of understanding or over the ignorance of Hispanic culture on the part of authorities in school. This was especially pronounced in Tennessee.

*They go like, "Go back to your country and eat beans and rice...frijoles." (TN, U.S.-born, male)*

*Like, they hear you speaking Spanish and they're like, "Oh, you speak Mexican. Oh you're just another Mexican." Like, they don't really care...And then, they just think all Hispanics are Mexican and that's what, really gets me mad. 'Cause not all Hispanics are Mexicans. There's different types. There's Puerto Ricans, Honduran, Guatemalan, El Salvadoran, or whatever. Not everyone's from Mexico. You do not stereotype me! (TN, U.S.-born, female)*

Some participants stated that stereotypes and assumptions about Latino students can result in unjust treatment such as being ignored and discouraged in the classroom:

*Say the teacher is American. He doesn't like Hispanics and always calls on the American students. If a Hispanic raises her hand and wants to sincerely give the answer, the teacher pays no attention! (TN, immigrant, female)*

*Sometimes the teachers treat us badly. Sometimes the American students are talking a lot, and us Hispanics are too, and they tell us to be quiet but not the Americans. (TN, immigrant, female)*

*[The goal of my education] is to succeed in life. To be better than what my parents could give me. To give more to my kids. (TN, immigrant, male)*

Others gave specific examples of how such stereotypes, in their opinion, have led teachers to unjustly fail or even dismiss them:

*The first time I went to that school, the teacher already judged me saying, "Oh he is in the Mara 13," I looked at him, but I'm in no gang. He said, "Oh you look like it. You Salvadorian right?" He looked at my paper and attendance. He said, "You in Mara 13. I don't like you." Just saying, just like that...and he failed me too. I did all the work. He didn't care. And I was this close to hitting him, but my coach came and took me away. (MD, U.S.-born, male)*

*Well this happened recently: Like, [my teacher] thought I was skipping class. And since that he don't like me, he was like "Oh, watch, I'm going to check your grade." He said, "I'm going to make everything possible to kick you out of school." And he looked at everything, my grades and everything, he was trying to kick me out*

*because I had one E, and I was like, “You can’t do that, that was the third quarter.” And the first and second quarter, I had all As and Bs and just for that class he tried to kick me out...So they did kick me out, I got an out-of-school suspension, I just recently went back, just for the last two weeks of school...It was just for that one class and he made a big deal for nothing. (MD, U.S.-born, female)*

The youth often referred specifically to style of dress as a cultural element that translates into negative stereotypes—in particular the assumption of gang identity or drug use—on the part of school authorities:

*Yeah people just assume that [if] you’re Latino, you must be from there, from a gang. And it’s dumb, it really bothers me. Because sometimes people be like what you wear, certain colors...If you wear blue, you’re MS [Mara Salvatrucha]. If you wear red, you’re Blood. (MD, U.S.-born, female)*

*Well I got friends, well me myself like, we dress kind of like...they think that we’re in a gang or stuff, so they kind of see us like in a bad way. Think we do bad stuff, like either we do drugs or drink alcohol, stuff like that...But we don’t really do that! (TN, U.S.-born, male)*

*They just see the people you hang out with, and they stereotype, you know. If you’re dressed a certain way, and you hang out with other people who’re dressed a certain way...You know, they, they’re, well, gangbangers...Like if you hang out with them, you might not even be involved with them, just have one friend. (TN, immigrant, male)*

According to some youth, such negative images of Latino students lead to profiling of Latino students by school security:

*Like in school, like almost every Hispanic they see they think they’re in a gang. So then they be asking them questions and searching them, and stuff...You don’t see a White kid get in trouble that much, or getting searched...We’re always getting searched and then being questioned. (TN, U.S.-born, female)*

*They check the Hispanic lockers more than any other race...They think that we have like drugs and everything inside. (CA, U.S.-born, male)*

*They just assume you do bad stuff...and some of them they’ll even call the school cop and tell him to search you, there’ve been a lot of those at our school. (TN, U.S.-born, male)*

Being stereotyped is particularly difficult for students who actually do fall into behaviors that reinforce negative images of Latino youth (joining a gang, becoming pregnant), but then seek to change their behaviors and return to and excel in school. For these students, being slotted as a hopeless case by teachers and school authorities can be particularly demoralizing and challenging. One U.S.-born teen in Maryland, who was previously in a gang and was imprisoned for a year, states of his reentrance to school:

*[One of the things I like least in school is] how I'm treated by the security. They always think I'm the same person I was, and the reason I don't like school no more is because they always keep an eye on me. You know, I've changed. I don't know why they got to keep going on me. That keeps bugging me, you know. I don't feel like going back to school because they think I'm a hoodlum. You know, I changed. I like football...I go to school to study, and they think I got a weapon on me.*

(MD, U.S.-born, male)

A girl from Maryland—a former gang member who decided to “go straight” after her mother was severely beaten by members of the daughter’s gang—explains:

*I had a fight with the principal. He's been trying to kick me out ever since I got to that school....Because it's like he heard about me, and the teachers already know how I am, and that is just bad, real bad. I'm doing good in school and trying to graduate...They think that I used to be affiliated with gangs and doing bad things. But like people change in life. So like I'm really going somewhere in my life...But they think that I'm just never going to change, that I'm still going to be the same girl I was. (MD, U.S.-born, female)*

### **Experience of Academic Isolation and Tracking**

In addition to these more general perceptions and experiences of ethnic stereotyping, many of the youth—especially those who were or had been ELLs—recounted more specific ways in which assumptions by teachers and administrators, about language issues in particular, led to a diminished academic experience for Hispanic students. For example, some youth explained how English-as-a-second-language (ESL) placement can lead to isolation from the larger student body, less language integration, and a feeling of being judged as inferior; this perception by others seemed especially frustrating to immigrant students:

*Well the thing is that we have ESL classes and they treat us like, excuse the word, like if we were stupid. Because, I don't know—I think that if they would try to put us with the other students, maybe we would learn the English language faster. But since they put us all together with people who speak Spanish, and we just got here, we're going to speak Spanish, we're not going to speak another language. (MD, immigrant, female)*

*Personally I don't like the ESL classes. There's a big difference, the teachers teach you different. They're like classes that you would give to—like children who have problems. (MD, immigrant, female)*

*That [ESL] is like, that's something bad...Yeah, it's like, “Oh they're from ESL.” That sounds, I don't know, it sounds bad. (CA, immigrant, female)*

*Because keeping us separate, it's like making us feel different, and I don't think that the fact that we don't speak English makes us different from the others. (MD, immigrant, female)*

Several expressed annoyance about the fact that Latino students (either immigrant or U.S.-born) are often automatically assumed by teachers and administrators to be in need of ESL or other special classes, despite their English-language abilities. This was particularly evident in Tennessee, where a significant portion of immigrant students had in fact arrived in the U.S. at a young age, and many had already gone to American schools in another state:

*They look at your last name or the way you look, and like, “Oh, you belong in ESL.”* (TN, U.S.-born, female)

*They tried to put me in [ESL classes] because usually when you start school and you enroll, it has your race, it says you’re Hispanic. Like, “Oh, but your kid needs to be in ESL because she’s Hispanic.” I was like, “I don’t need to be in it.” And they still put me in it anyway, and I told my mom. My mom came down to the school. She was like, “My daughter might be Hispanic, but she doesn’t need to be enrolled in ESL, because she knows perfect English. She was raised here, she was born here, she does not need English classes.” And I think you noticed that when she first came in here, she talked to you, she does not need a translator.* (TN, U.S.-born, female)

*When I moved here from California they put me in [ESL] because they thought I didn’t speak English, but I did. It was only because I was Hispanic. The first day I went to that class, and they left me there and they put me in the reading class like for dummies, like para tontos I guess. But at the end of the year I was in the class for more intelligent kids.* (TN, immigrant, female)

*I had one teacher, I asked him what he thought about Mexican kids, and he said, “I don’t really know if they really belong here,” and I’m like, “What do you think?” He’s like, “Well I think they should go back to Mexico.” And I didn’t say anything else.* (TN, U.S.-born, female)

Even more troublesome for immigrant students is that not only are they being tracked negatively into either ESL or more remedial classes because of their ethnicity and perceived language skills, but they sometimes feel that they are in fact more advanced in certain classes due to their past training:

*The problem is that because of the language, they give us all the basics and you may have already have had that in the past.* (MD, immigrant, female)

*And the math I’m getting now, I already took it—five years ago I had already taken all of that.* (RI, immigrant, male)

*When I got here they gave me a math class that I took in fifth grade, and I was in ninth grade.* (MD, immigrant, female)

Across the board there was a strong feeling that placing Latino students in different tracks leads not only to lower standards and expectations for achievement, but also to differential access to school resources and learning, and other types of educational capital, all of which puts them at a disadvantage relative to other students. A major area in which several expressed feeling disadvantaged in this regard was their ability to learn the right materials to be able to take standardized graduation and placement exams:

*So we're in ESL classes separate from all others, but then we got to take the HSA.\* They give us the same ones and we're like behind and we don't know what the others have been taught. (MD, immigrant, female)*

*I believe that the HSA is not fair because all the students, let's say those who speak English or were born here, they've lived here all of their lives so, it's obvious that when they're in high school, they know what they're talking about. But us who have been living here for three, four, five years, it's not the same because we speak another language. I don't think it's fair that we have the same tests...They try to treat us different and they don't teach us the same material and they want to give us the same test. (MD, immigrant, female)*

Some felt that in addition to not being taught the same material as other students, Latino students are at times not counseled to take crucial tests necessary for college admission, based on the assumption that they are not likely to graduate from high school. For example:

*Like you know the ACT [college entrance] test everybody has to take? I didn't know about it until my last year of high school. I was like, how come nobody told me? None of my teachers told me. None of my counselors told me. So like, the other students had a year ahead to take it more than once. Like, I was only able to take it once. Sometimes they don't give you the right information that you need...Like, I guess they look at us, "He might not graduate so he's not going to need to take the test," you know, "So I'm not going to tell him nothing about it." And then, you know, that's something colleges look at. They didn't tell me nothing about it, so you know I felt kind of bad that they didn't help me. (TN, immigrant, male)*

ELLs who had been placed in mainstream classes with English-speaking teachers also tended to feel a sense of isolation, though they seemed to view this situation with more understanding as it was due to a lack of ability to communicate rather than being based on stereotypes:

*When [teachers] are American, and don't know any Spanish, don't know how to explain things to you, they just leave you in a corner and that's it. You have to work it out as best you can. Since they can't help you, since it is not their fault, because since they don't understand you and you don't understand them, then they just leave you in a corner. (RI, immigrant, male)*

\* HSA is the High School Assessment test, which is necessary for high school graduation in Maryland.

More disturbing to some youth, however, was that language issues, or more specifically the use of Spanish language in classes, had led them to be chastised by teachers, who at times became hostile or punitive:

*If you are speaking in Spanish with the teacher, because in English you don't know how to say something, I mean, the teacher speaks Spanish, but she just tells you like that you have to speak in English. But you have just arrived in this country, and she expects you to speak in English...And that same teacher, every time you spoke in Spanish, [she charged] you 25 or ten cents. As if English was obligatory! And if not, she will write down a note, you have to pay her 25 cents. (RI, immigrant, female)*

*I don't understand a lot of English, and [the teacher] was asking me about the tables, but since they were in English, I didn't know them, so he came, and when I told him that I didn't know them, I said, "Oh, mister, I don't know." And he...he hit with his hand, on the chair, and he pulled me up with his hand and he told me to get out of there, to get out of the class, and he tells me that, that I am here to learn...And I didn't answer him. (RI, immigrant, female)*

*I got written up 'cause I was talking in Spanish, and [the teacher] thought I was talking bad about her. But I wasn't really talking about her, I was talking to a friend, and after class she gave me a referral and sent me to the principal's office, and he gave me like three days, and they were about to suspend me. (TN, U.S.-born, male)*

A number of students additionally reported on differential treatment of Spanish-speaking students in nonacademic activities, for example:

*What happened to me, in the eighth grade, they always had trips and called people, do you remember? And we [ESL students] never got any trip for us, never, never. All the trips were for the regulars only...Because look, there were like three floors, and so the first floor was for people who know how to speak English—the ones that were regulars. Then the third and the basement were for people who knew, who did not know English...And they had trips for the regulars, and they never made trips for us, they never called us. (RI, immigrant, female)*

*And when there are meetings, and things like that that they do in the school, they almost never call us. (RI, immigrant, male)*

Several also mentioned that the feeling of being overlooked or unjustly chastised by teachers and administrators led Latino youngsters to detach themselves from learning and engaging in school:

*If the teachers are not helping us or do not understand us, then we should do the same in return. Let's say, if they don't pay attention to us, why pay attention to them? (TN, immigrant, female)*

*[There are] teachers that...get mad and when you like, you don't understand something in class, and you decide to ask or something, sometimes you get kind of, like, viewed wrong. Like, as if you're dumb. Or sometimes they're, like, "You should know this already." Or they start blaming you for stuff, and then you sometimes feel like you don't want to answer things, and you don't want to ask them no more 'cause they're not going to answer you the right way. (CA, U.S.-born, female)*

*I think that teachers may not understand [Hispanic] kids, because they don't know all about them, and they don't know what they're going through in life, and maybe if they act the way they do, it's because they're having problems at home, or something, and maybe that's why they act bad in school. And then just, like, not paying attention to them isn't helping at all, because they're just going to convince them more to do worse. And not try. (TN, immigrant, female)*

Finally, the feeling of being excluded or treated as different in school seemed particularly salient for immigrant youth and ELLs, who tend to be less acculturated than other students. Unfortunately, some of the stereotyping experienced by these youth comes from their own peers, including both non-Latino and U.S.-born Latino students:

*I also think that it's the students' fault because some students if you don't know English, and you say something wrong, they will laugh at you, instead of correcting you, like it should be. (RI, immigrant, female)*

*They [ELLs] get picked on a lot by other kids because they speak different. We were reading this poem and it's like Romeo and Juliet. And then one of the guys didn't know how to speak English good, and he went up and then nobody could stop laughing. They were just laughing because he, you know. He tried. He did, and I was just like, oh, that's good that he tried at least. And but everyone was just laughing at him...I just feel bad for him. It's like that with parents too when they don't know. They want to try and talk to, you know, anybody. (MD, U.S.-born, male)*

*[I don't like] the attitude that some students have—specifically, a lot of Latin people who speak English and they kind of put you to a side because you only speak Spanish. Basically, those born here or have been here for a long time and speak English better, they're the ones who behave that way with those that have just gotten here...and you think, "Why are they so racist if they're Latin just like us?" (MD, immigrant, female)*

Not only is language a divide, but immigrant youth also feel that their precarious socioeconomic and legal situation leads them to become the target of stereotyping by their peers:

*Yes, because a lot of us just came over here, we come to a new country, it's not the same culture, we don't have a house, we don't have economic stability. Those who were born here and have been living here for long, their parents have given them a better stability. (MD, immigrant, female)*

*They [newly arrived immigrant youth] even have nicknames. They call them “chanchis” because of the way other students dress when they have just come over from their countries. They say they dress differently from them and they talk different and act differently...Not everyone is like that, there are some people who try to help us. (MD, immigrant, female)*

Overall, despite a generally positive orientation toward school and education, and a pronounced sense of duty or even pressure to succeed and satisfy family and community expectations, the youth recounted feeling consistently viewed as “other” in school, which became manifest in dynamics with teachers and peers and in specific trajectories. While a number of students did have more positive experiences with teachers and with learning (see Box 6), there was a predominant attitude that, in the absence of these exceptional teachers, isolation and tracking contributed to lessening their ability to excel and meet requirements for graduation and college.

**BOX 6: THE POSITIVE ROLE OF TEACHERS**

While many Latino youth expressed frustration about feelings of exclusion in school, they did not characterize all teachers as lacking in empathy or concern. Several youth recounted positive experiences with teachers who had made a significant difference in their educational careers.

*Not all the teachers are the same. There are teachers who help you, help you with your homework, they explain how it is, what you need to do, even if it is not their class they try to help you. That is the positive side of some teachers but not all.* (TN, immigrant, female)

*There's some teachers that are actually pretty good. And some teachers that just read out of the book, that's when it gets boring. When you go off the topic and talk about something that's related to that, but it's related to your life too, then it gets interesting.* (CA, immigrant, female)

*I graduated from [a] downtown magnet, and the teachers right there are really helpful. They tutor, and they stay. If you're failing a grade, they're willing to help you out during lunch or after school. That's what I liked about school.* (CA, U.S.-born, male)

Youth spoke especially fondly of teachers who noticed and cared about them during times of particular difficulty and took efforts to help the student rather than assume the worst:

*I had one who, I never did anything in her class and she noticed and said, "What's wrong?" Then I told her and she gave me advice, and if I wasn't doing well she gave me extra work and had me do extra credit and make up work to help me raise my grade.* (TN, U.S.-born, male)

*[In my new school the teachers are] really helpful. They help me more on my work, because before I was, like, straight failing my whole classes, and I was messed up. I didn't used to do anything. I was a lazy person and everything. Getting into trouble. So they helped me out. They would just talk to me, [tell me to] "just to do my work," and "it's easy," and all this stuff. Like try to push me to get to the right track. And I managed, so right now I'm doing good.* (CA, U.S.-born, male).

*I had a good experience with a teacher, because I was failing her class, and she encouraged me, she gave me more work, and tutored me a bit.* (TN, U.S.-born, female)

The attributes that students praised in such teachers match what some educators have named "authentic caring": a willingness to reach out and explain work, to take an interest in individual circumstances, to make class materials relevant to students' lives, and, in general, to treat them as competent and intelligent individuals.<sup>52, 53</sup> Schools that provide adequate resources, training and support to teachers with Latino and ELL students, and that hold both teachers and students accountable to high expectations, are likely to show better educational outcomes for these students.\*

\* Many teachers in NCLR School Network charter schools have these attributes, as well as high expectations of students, which produces outstanding academic results.



## YOUTH ON THE WORKPLACE

Latino youth have strong career aspirations and plan to become productive members of society; they often perceive the workplace, however, as a site of unfair practices based on racial and ethnic assumptions on the part of employers.

### *Aspirations and Barriers to Graduation and College*

The youth absorbed strong messages from their parents that they should aspire and work hard to attain a good education and career (see Box 7). With the exception of a few, most of the youth across focus groups had not dropped out of school, and while several confessed to skipping classes on some occasions, many gave clear reasons for staying in school (or returning) for the long term: Dropping out would prevent them from getting a good job, and it would go against the family's expectation that they must do better than their parents:

*Well my parents tell me to stay in school, so that I can be better than them and not be working in the sun, not trying so hard like they do, and the truth is I want to study to be someone important, maybe not so important but make a good salary and take advantage of my studies. (TN, immigrant, female)*

*Why would you drop out and throw your life away when you can have the opportunity to go to school and do something that you want to, and have a better life than your parents had, for you and your family? (TN, U.S.-born, female)*

*Because if you say, "I want something different, I don't want to be like my parents," if you drop out, you're just basically doing what they did...if you drop out you're just throwing your life away, like you say "I want to be different, I don't want to be like my mom, worrying about money all the time," and stuff. (TN, U.S.-born, female)*

Several youth—in both immigrant and U.S.-born groups—referred to the fact that having had family members not finish high school, and being able to see first-hand the barriers that dropouts face, was a strong motivator for finishing high school:

*'Cause I have a couple of examples of what happens if you do drop out...Like a couple of my cousins, one of them dropped out and he's, like, we haven't heard of him in a couple years...For all we know, he could be dead. We don't know. Then I have a friend of mine, David, his cousin dropped out of school when he was a senior, so because of that, his parents kicked him out of the house, and they disowned him or something. He was one semester away from finishing, and then no one hired him, and it was, like, bad. So I have examples of what happens—what would happen if I dropped out. So it's like, nah. Not worth it. (CA, U.S.-born, male)*

*No one has given me any advice, but in my family, like all my aunts and uncles, and my mom, like, they all dropped out when they moved here from El Salvador, and I see that their life is pretty, you know, hard. Like, all they do is work. And so I don't want to be like them. I want to go to a good college. I would like to go to Harvard. I want to be someone really important. (TN, immigrant, female)*

However, when asked why other Latino students drop out, several respondents focused on the lure of bad influences such as gangs, while others mentioned factors such as general boredom and a feeling of disconnection in school. Youth in the immigrant groups noted that a main motivation for their peers' dropping out of school was their parents' expectations that they contribute financially. In addition, undocumented legal status was discussed by several as a reason for not staying in school long enough to graduate:

*I know a girl whose mother was forcing her and telling her that if she dropped out of school she would have to work...But she doesn't have any papers. Maybe she thinks that because she doesn't have papers she's not going to have a good future. That's why they start working soon. (MD, immigrant, female)*

Not only did most of the youth clearly aspire to graduate from high school, most also stated that they want to go to college, and many reported specific study and career goals, ranging from law, medicine, and architecture to social work, nursing, mechanics, and information technology. In addition, a few stated that they planned to join the U.S. Army or National Guard. Several youth discussed their career aspirations as a means toward achieving a wider life goal to improve the situation of Latinos in the U.S.:

*I would like to be a lawyer because I hate it that people take advantage of people so I would like to be an immigration lawyer—that is what I really want to do. Because immigrants are often taken advantage of, in their work and for the simple fact that they are illegal, they do not pay them what they should receive, and everyone should be treated equally. (TN, immigrant, female)*

*I want to be someone important. And then I would like to...give back to people, you know. I would like to travel the world, and help all those poor people, and in my community help, like, the Hispanics too, you know. (TN, immigrant, female)*

*Since I graduate next year, I want to go to college, I want to study the medical field, 'cause I want to become a surgeon, because I like to help people. I really want to help my community, the Hispanic community, 'cause they don't really have much opportunities, and most people that work in the medical field only know English, and so how can they communicate with the doctor, so they need a doctor that can speak their language and that can help them understand why they have a certain condition, or why they're going through what they have. They need somebody like me. (TN, U.S.-born, female)*

Nonetheless, some youth expressed concern that despite their plans, they would not be able to attend college for a number of reasons, including financial constraints, or, in the case of some immigrant youth, the lack of documentation. These youth seemed to struggle with envisioning alternate future scenarios that would allow them to succeed after high school:

*I want to go to a college, but if I can't go to a college, then I want to get a job. But mostly I want to go to college 'cause I want to be a pediatrician, because I love working with little kids. [So why wouldn't you go to college?] Because I can't afford it. (TN, immigrant, female)*

*Well I plan to try to get into university if I can, but if not well I will do whatever I can, and if not I will return to Mexico to get a student visa and will come back here to study. (TN, immigrant, female)*

Immigrant youth in particular not only viewed barriers to their dreams of attending college, but clearly perceived undocumented status (whether their own or their friends') as a great impediment toward future career aspirations:

*It's not easy to find [a good job] because you need a Social Security number. So, we just have to, I'm going to look for a job that will actually take you how you are. Because you can't be working just big stores or like anything because you need a Social Security number. (CA, immigrant, female)*

*There are a lot of people who think that they're not going to get a good job. They think that because they don't have papers, they believe that it's good enough to just finish high school. (MD, immigrant, female)*

*They think that because they're not legal they will not be able to go to university. That's what most of them think and that's why when they get out of high school, they don't continue studying. They think that they are not going to be able to continue studying, that's what most of them think. (MD, immigrant, female)*

*I know about three or four like that [undocumented students]. They graduated with honors, but can't go to college. 'Cause many of colleges you have to be, like, I guess, a resident or something? And they don't accept anybody who's not. So it's hard. (TN, immigrant, male)*

*I want to be someone important. And then I would like to... give back to people, you know. I would like to travel the world, and help all those poor people, and in my community help, like, the Hispanics too, you know. (TN, immigrant, female)*

**BOX 7: PARENTAL HOPES AND EXPECTATIONS**

While a minority of the youth stated that they do not communicate much with their parents, most said that their parents express a great deal of concern and encouragement regarding their education and future, often linking the expectations that they have for their children to the lack of opportunities they themselves have faced:

*My father always tells me to always keep studying, because look at how they have to work, in factories and things like that. That they want us to do better. (RI, immigrant, female)*

*My father tells me to study hard because he didn't have that opportunity. That his parents didn't give him that and he's giving me the opportunity for me to study and to have a good job and that I don't have to work like he does. (MD, immigrant, male)*

*They like to say that you have to be doing good, to do everything just to get a good education and not end up like them...So they just try to encourage you to, like, do that. (CA, immigrant, female)*

*Basically what parents want is that we do better than them in our future. They don't want us to be the same as them. If they didn't have the same education that we are having, they want us to have a good education. (MD, immigrant, male)*

*My mom always tells me to do good in school, because she came from El Salvador when she was 15 and she had to leave school, so she always tells me that she wants me to graduate high school, and she wants me to go to college and to have a good job so I won't have a life like her. So I can have a better life. (TN, immigrant, female)*

*My dad works as like a painter and a construction worker. And my mom works as a housekeeper at a hotel. When they have a rough time they just tell me about it. They always tell me to graduate and stuff. And, "You don't want the life we're having right now. It's hard, and we want you to have a better life than we're having right now." (TN, U.S.-born, female)*

### *Perceptions of the Workforce*

A fair number of the youth, both immigrant and U.S.-born, had had some work experience and tended to have a positive attitude toward developing a career path for the future. Some had done community work through school or work projects with after-school or summer programs, and a fair number helped their parents or other adult relatives in various types of jobs:

*My uncle is an auto mechanic, he works at an auto shop, and he just told me to come along with him. I was 15 when I started working with him. The coworkers were other Hispanics too. Mexicans and stuff, they taught me a lot of stuff, I learned a lot. (TN, U.S.-born, male)*

*I was doing community work for school. They called me to help pack condoms, and they were looking for people who could teach and orient in school about STDs. There is not much info in school [in Spanish], so we answer if they need help. (MD, immigrant, female)*

*I worked at two jobs. One was at a Ralph's store as a courtesy clerk, and another was as peer educator at a health clinic. (CA, U.S.-born, male)*

*I go to work with my dad sometimes. I mean, sometimes I don't like it, 'cause we're outside and it's really hot and I mean today he made me paint, like, where we're working at. It's just me, my dad, and my uncle. (TN, immigrant, male)*

*I help my mom babysit—people bring their kids to our house then they pick them up—every day, Monday to Friday. When I get back from school...if they're still there I help. (TN, U.S.-born, female)*

Immigrant youth appeared more likely than U.S.-born youth to view early work experience as an important and necessary skill. For some, this perception seemed grounded in trepidation about the fact that their parents may not always be with them, which may speak to the fear of family separation through deportation, the fear of an accident, or other types of instability that preoccupy many immigrant youth:

*You never know, let's hope not, but if your father has an accident and can't work and for a lot of time, who will be supporting us? There are a lot of jobs where you get experience for your future. (MD, immigrant, female)*

*If our parents are not there one day and we don't know what to do for a job and we go there and we don't know what to expect...so it's better to have work experience early on in life, and that way in the future it will not be that difficult. You learn to appreciate what your parents do. (MD, immigrant, female)*

In spite of this positive attitude toward jobs and toward learning early about the work world, when asked about how they think Latino workers are generally treated in the workforce, many youth responded that they thought there was

a clear ethnic hierarchy and discrimination in the workforce, with different standards for hiring, paying, and treating Latinos in many jobs:

*It's like, look, if you put a Dominican, a Mexican, a Puerto Rican, and a White person, and that they are looking for work, or something, they are only going to look for the White person because they are going to think that they know more than we do. (RI, immigrant, female)*

*I knew a [Latino] guy—he delivers juices to stores and stuff. They used to give him a lot of work and everything. And they gave the White people a little bit. And the White people still got paid more than him. (RI, U.S.-born, male)*

*Well sometimes they [Latinos] get paid minimum wage to do more work than anybody, for doing work that nobody else wants to do, but they're still being paid lower amounts. And like, some people don't want to hire you 'cause you're a Latino...Some people probably think you are not going to do a good job. And some people also take advantage of you. (TN, U.S.-born, female)*

When asked why, in their opinion, Latinos are treated differently, many responded that their appearance, class position and language abilities lead to discrimination on the part of employers:

*That [work discrimination] happens 'cause you might not be able to speak the language, or stuff. Sometimes Americans think that they're better than us. Maybe because we come from, you know, poor families, or something. And they think that they're of a higher class. (TN, immigrant, female)*

*Always the Americans are the bosses. Haven't you noticed that?...[They discriminate] because of the language, because of the nationality...a lot because of the accent. (TN, immigrant, female)*

*My father because, um, he was fired from his work, and because, since my father doesn't speak much, or well, it takes him a while to say something, they preferred to let him go, you know, they leave him, you know, because of that. (TN, immigrant, female)*

Many also stated that discrimination against Latino workers is influenced by the fact that employers are able to exploit them based on assumptions about their legal status. Immigrant youth were particularly likely to be preoccupied by this factor:

*Because, let's say, they will make the Hispanics work more because they know they will do the work because they need the work, or they threaten them that they will report them or something so they'd better do it. Yes, they treat them very differently. (TN, immigrant, female)*

*I believe that sometimes the employers kind of exploit the immigrant workers because I guess they think that because they're not legal and they don't speak English, that they're not going to sue them or something like that. (MD, immigrant, female)*

*Many times it's because of their papers, so there are employers who abuse them. They think, "Because I don't have my papers I can't do this or that. If I go to the police they'll tell immigration and they will send me back to my country." That's what I think. Because there are a lot of employers who tell them, "We are going to do this and that [report them] if you don't do your job." (MD, immigrant, female)*

*They take advantage of the situation because they can report them to the immigration people, back to where they came from...And they don't pay them the same as they pay those who have [legal] papers. (TN, immigrant, female)*

Many of these youth's perceptions of discrimination in the workforce were directly related to their parents' experiences:

*My father was working at a golf course and he had been working there a long time and here came this guy, he was an American White man, and just because, I don't know, he couldn't stand my father, my father was Latin, he fired him without my father doing anything to him. And he didn't want to pay him or anything. (MD, immigrant, female)*

*My mom she told me this dude called her a "spic." So me and my cousins went and hit this guy...they arrested us for being on the property of danger or something like that. My mom was mad, she said she needed the job. She kicked me out of the house for a while. But she came back telling me "Hey I love you" ... She got to keep the job...but there's been other things like that where she felt it. (MD, U.S.-born, male)*

*My mom was the manager where she works, and there is a lady there that's taking her place, and she's very racist. My mom's boss was very racist. She did not like her, because she was Hispanic, and because, you know, most of the people there in the community are Hispanic. And what are they going to do with the White person there, nobody hardly speaks English that lives in the community, so they're probably not going to find anybody better than my mom that can speak Spanish and English and communicate with the residents...But they were very wrong to her, her boss would get mad at her for everything, and one day they made her cry, saying [she's] not running the property well. But most people that are buying the houses are Hispanic, and she needs to communicate with them, and she wanted to change her salary. She wanted to go from hourly to salary, and her boss did not like that.*

*She was treated very unfair, where the sales manager, who was American, he got treated better than my mom, and my mom did both of their work, because the people that would come in would only speak Spanish, and he would get the commission on the houses, and she wouldn't until she called the owner and said, "Hey, he's getting all the commissions and I'm selling the houses." It's not fair...I know it's not fair that the other guy who sat there and did nothing got paid more than she did. The people that cut the grass got paid more than what my mom got paid. (TN, U.S.-born, female)*

While negative perceptions of ethnic stereotyping seemed to be primarily based on parental experiences, in a small number of cases it was based on the teenagers' own experience at a job:

*Like where I worked I didn't really have problems, but when I applied to another job, you know, since I look American, I look White you know, they [said], "Yeah we'll accept you," but when they start hearing me talk in Spanish, like if my cell phone rings and it's my stepdad and I talk in Spanish, be like, "Sorry we can't hire you anymore. Because something's come up." You know, they'll make up excuses and then like you know, "Well, be honest. Why wouldn't you hire me?" Like, "Well, because you're Hispanic you know, you're—you might be illegal. We'll probably get in trouble if we hire you." And I was like, "I'm from Fort Knox, Kentucky. I was born here in the U.S. I'm half American, half Puerto Rican. I speak English and Spanish. I'll be a very good advantage when it comes to your customers."*  
(TN, U.S.-born, female)

*It's like, look, if you put a Dominican, a Mexican, a Puerto Rican, and a White person, and that they are looking for work, or something, they are only going to look for the White person because they are going to think that they know more than we do.*

(RI, immigrant, female)

The youth's perceptions of the treatment of Latinos in the workforce were, however, somewhat varied. A number of participants noted that racism is not universal, that the workplace is diverse, and that there are employers who treat Latinos well:

*I don't think they're the same way in all workplaces, my mother works in an American restaurant, and they treat her just the same as any other employee.*  
(MD, immigrant, female)

*I think there might be [racist] people like that, but I don't think all people are like that...I don't think all Americans are racist, like against Hispanics. Maybe some are, but I don't think all of them. Some are nice.* (TN, immigrant, female)

Thus, while the youth tended to have high aspirations for their own future employment and careers, some perceived ethnic discrimination in the workplace, a view that often related to the experiences of their parents or other adult members of their community.



## YOUTH ON LAW ENFORCEMENT

Across all focus groups, the youth described feeling unfairly and habitually profiled by law enforcement as a result of negative assumptions regarding Hispanic youth, gangs, and immigrants. Such regular contact with the police—which takes place in a variety of spaces—compounds feelings of vulnerability and distrust in their communities.

### *Interactions with Law Enforcement*

Perhaps the most unsettling—and unanimous—statements made by the youth in all groups were those revolving around the extent to which they felt consistently targeted by law enforcement based on their ethnicity. Many of the youth reported that they and their friends had sustained regular experience with the police, on a daily level and in numerous spaces: around school, within their neighborhood, and beyond the boundaries of their usual settings. A few reported specific behaviors by their friends and acquaintances that had elicited contact by the police or school security, including tagging, jaywalking, loitering after curfew, getting into fights, driving under the influence of alcohol, or smoking marijuana. Most, however, felt very strongly that they were stereotyped and profiled by the police unjustifiably, and regularly stopped on the basis of their ethnic appearance and styling of their clothes.

A majority of the youth stated emphatically that they believe most police officers maintain clear stereotypes and negative images of Latino youth:

*You know the first thing, they'll come up to you and like, if they're with another cop, "Oh, we've got a Hispanic kid. You know this kid's a druggie. You know this kid's an alcoholic, or their family's alcoholic, or they have tequila in their system," or something like that, or "Oh they're Mexican, they're gangbangers, you know, they're Hispanic they're gangbangers"...They really discriminate against us, because we're Hispanic. (TN, U.S.-born, female)*

*They start discriminating, like "Oh you're Mexican," and that's the first thing that comes to mind, "You're Mexican"...I'm not Mexican, I'm Puerto Rican. I'm half Puerto Rican. I got my—I'm legal, you know. I have papers. Why you got to treat me like that way? You got to stereotype me like that? If you don't know anything about me, don't come around me and start saying stuff. (TN, U.S.-born, female)*

Many of the youth stated their belief that these stereotypes translate into ethnic profiling and harassment, which they see as a primary reason that police target Latino youth on the streets and other public spaces. The feeling of being targeted over other groups for their ethnicity was reinforced by the youth's general experiences with police, who, according to some, sometimes referred to them as "spics" or "amigos" (pronounced with an American accent) when

speaking with them in informal contexts such as the street. These perceptions are reflected in the following statements:

*Sometimes cops just stop you because you might look different, [because of] the way you look. Like they arrest you and stuff. Even though you didn't do anything. (CA, immigrant, female)*

*Well of course they're going to arrest you when you do something, but sometimes you're just walking down the streets when they just stop you. Because I have friends that they just stop them just because they look Latino. (CA, immigrant, female)*

*But the White people are like so against Latinos they'll give you a ticket for nothing. Because officers that stopped me and my friends, after he gave us this one slip, I think it was yellow, and it just said "Hispanic" on it. (CA, immigrant, male)*

*Police officers are just like always passing by. They just grab you. Like if they just grab—like, they, you know, like your stuff and, "What's this?" You know?...And then they'll be, like, "Go," you know, and just like looking at you bad, and asking you stuff for no reason. Like you haven't even done anything, and then they're already stopping you. (CA, U.S.-born, female)*

There was also a perception among a number of the youth that Latinos are not only stopped indiscriminately but also punished disproportionately or unfairly by the police:

*I have this White friend named Rick...And you look at this guy, and you think, "This guy's family's been White forever. He's come from England," or whatever. And it was me, him, my friend José, and our friend Junior, and the police stopped us... They gave all of us curfew tickets except for Rick. They just stopped us, they lined us up, and they said, "Okay. You can go," to Rick. And he just, like, walked away. And then they just got my friend José mad, and he's, like, "Hey, why are you letting the White boy go?" And they're like, "Hey, you shut your mouth." And then they threatened to arrest him. (CA, U.S.-born, male)*

*If there's like a White person and a Hispanic, like, doing the crimes, then they'll probably go after the Mexican, like let the White person off with a warning, but they probably throw the Mexican in jail or something. They think, "Oh they're doing drugs, or doing weapons, or killing," or stuff like that. And not everybody's like that. (TN, U.S.-born, female)*

Some of the youth ascribed the perception of Latinos as criminals to negative stereotypes propagated in the public discourse and particularly by the news media, which influence not only the attitudes of law enforcement but also of the general public toward Latinos:

*Yeah, on the news they say, like, a Hispanic person killed somebody in a gas station, stole all their money, and then they think all Hispanics are that way, and that's why they go after the Hispanics, 'cause they think all Hispanics are the same. And sometimes people are afraid to have Hispanic people in their stores... "What happened in the news might happen to me in my store," and they usually kick us out. They have kicked out me and my friends from the store just because we were Hispanic, and they were afraid that they were going to get their store shot up.*  
(TN, U.S.-born, female)

In addition to the assumption of criminality or gang membership by the police, a fair number of youth mentioned that the assumption of being undocumented is what leads police to stop Hispanics, including Hispanic youth:

*Of course they act differently [with Hispanic kids]!...They'll ask you if you're legal first...The second you say yes, that you're illegal, they'll run to the car and they'll be like, "Oh my god, I got some illegals over here."...They'll tell immigration. So if they ask you, that's why we always say no, we're legal. I'm legal...If you're illegal, you don't want to tell them that, you don't want to tell them that... They will go to your house, they will tell immigration to go to your house and everything.* (TN, U.S.-born, male)

*Whenever they stop you, probably the first question they ask if you're like, if you have papers or something...I heard about this from my friends...They ask if you're like, you have papers. And they ask you what's your name and if you have papers. And if you don't they like take your name and stuff. But you don't have to answer them.* (CA, immigrant, male)

*Well of course they're going to arrest you when you do something, but sometimes you're just walking down the streets when they just stop you. Because I have friends that they just stop them just because they look Latino.*  
(CA, immigrant, female)

Thus, in all the focus groups, a significant number of youth—primarily male—reported that they themselves were stopped “regularly” and “normally” by the police, leading to varying results, including being searched and arrested:

*[The police] thought we were gangsters only because we were running...But not from the cops! We were like running to catch the bus because we were late and then they thought we were some kind of gangsters doing stuff, so they stopped us.*  
(CA, immigrant, male)

*I got stopped like five times by the same cops for no reason. I be walking down my street 'cause, you know, on Valley Street, there's a park right there. I be walking down there all the time...to play basketball. I see these [police] were over there [and they said], "Come over here, son. Come over here." I said, "What now?"*

*“You got anything on you?” “No.” “Put your hands up. You’re under arrest.” I said, “For what? I just came to play basketball!” “So what. You ain’t supposed to be here.” I didn’t know! (RI, U.S.-born, male)*

*One time me and my boyfriend got stopped because—we don’t know why we got stopped. [The policeman] was just discriminating against my boyfriend. Because we have, well when people think about Hispanics and their cars, they think, “Oh, it’s shiny and chrome, and then they have the big muffler making all that noise.” So he was like, “You guys, you know, you ran through the stop sign,” and you know, we didn’t run through the stop sign, we stopped. And we went to court and the cop said, “You ran through a stoplight, you know, you guys are just going to have to pay for your ticket and the court fee.” You know, we just got discriminated against just ‘cause we’re Hispanic and just by the way his car looks is the reason why we basically got stopped. (TN, U.S.-born, female)*

This feeling of being stopped by security and police on a continual basis was expressed more often by boys than by girls, and recognized by both girls and boys to be, to some extent, a gendered experience. As one girl in Los Angeles explained:

*They do it to the guys a lot. They haven’t done it to me. But my friends they’ve been...I have a [male] friend who’s been targeted, yeah. They practically did a joke on him. They stopped him, ‘cause he had paint on his shirt, and they checked. They put their gun to him, and they told him that that was it. And he started crying and whatever. (CA, U.S.-born, female)*

A number of youth reported feeling vexed at being treated harshly by Latino police officers in particular:

*I got stopped here in Langley Park, and like it was me with a group of friends, and it was one cop that he just has something against us Latinos. But he’s Latino too... He’s always going around, and if he sees you in a group he automatically thinks you’re going to jump somebody or do something bad. Like, he’s always everywhere. Somehow he always appears...He stopped us, he arrested everybody. He called reinforcements, he arrested everybody...Just because we were walking down the street, we were going to a friend’s house and to a movie. He’s like, “No, there’s too many of you. Y’all probably planning something.” He took us down to the station and we had to call our parents, they had to pick us up. (MD, U.S.-born, female)*

*Some Hispanic police officers just, like, they try to be, like, they have to realize that they, they’re Hispanics, and they know how to talk Spanish really good. And just because like other officers are there, they start acting like they’re White....And they have to realize where they came from. And some Hispanic officers, like, they’re racist to the Hispanic people. And it’s just like, you’re Hispanic, why are you, like, picking—they, like, they put themselves up too much...And I don’t like that...Like, you become an officer, isn’t it to, like, help your community, protect it, and stuff?... But you’re just being a punk. (CA, U.S.-born, female)*

In addition to such encounters on the streets with law enforcement, several of the youth recounted that they had actually been apprehended, and had either gone to court or been placed in juvenile detention for varying periods of time. While a few had been issued minor citations and had gone to court for reasons such as truancy or driving infractions, others evinced a clear sense of confusion over why they were arrested, and reinforced, again, that they felt they were treated unfairly due to their ethnicity, or for simply being seen as suspect for not “belonging” in a particular part of town:

*They [the police] look for a reason to arrest you. 'Cause they're bored like that. You'll see them driving around the projects. I remember because when I was hanging [at] the basketball court. That's where we always hang out. [The police] come on over there...They said, "Do you live around here?" I told them, "No. But I used to live over here like 15 years ago!" They said [I was] trespassing...I got arrested, for trespassing, for just hanging around there. (RI, U.S.-born, male)*

*I was in Rockville, Maryland, I knew there was a lot of White people there. My friend said there's Hispanic girls there, at the movie theater...I'm like, "Let's go inside." I felt bad you know, I had a long black shirt, and they [said], "What they doing here?" and they called the police on me. The police said, "Put your hands up." I was just buying a ticket and they already had me handcuffed...He threw me on the floor. He hit me too, and I couldn't press charges or nothing. (MD, U.S.-born, male)*

*I have been arrested. I've been put in the back of a police car, arrested... Sometimes I've been pulled over by cops. They question me, 'cause they're afraid of their safety, 'cause we're Hispanics, and they want to be—safe...What they would do is that they would arrest me and put me in the back of the car, me and my big brother, and then they would go into the front seat, you know, so that way nobody would be watching what would be happening, so we wouldn't pull public attention, so you know, the police officer would be like, "Okay, now that I am safe from you guys, since you guys are Hispanic, I don't want nothing bad to happen to me."...And my big brother just looked at the officer like he was crazy. You know it's like, you know what, "You can search us right now, take us out of the car and search us. We ain't got no weapons. This is not necessary." You don't need to be handcuffed. It's unnecessary. (TN, U.S.-born, male)*

Finally, while only two of the youth had had more serious involvement with the juvenile justice system and had spent lengthy amounts of time in juvenile detention (both for gang violence), many did have friends or relatives who had been incarcerated for a variety of reasons:

*My brother was locked up, over something he did like a year ago. And then he got stopped. He like, I don't know, he had done something in the library or something. Everybody got in trouble, and they found a pocket knife or something on him. But they let them go, and a year later he was doing something at a laundromat, he was just there, just chilling, and you know he got in trouble again. And then, for what he did that year, he got locked up, went to juvie just for that...it's like during school, you just can't be around those places. I guess that's why he got locked up. (MD, U.S.-born, female)*

*One of my cousin's friends was locked up, he's 16 and in adult system doing time. He told me he's scared, everybody's big and he's small. And my dad is in there with him. My dad tells me "Don't come here, man. Stay out of trouble. I'm here, got to watch my back, can't even go to sleep. Somebody could try to poke me." You know, you got to take care of yourself in there...He said it's hardball in there. He's there for life. He's got a lady working there with him, but he tells me that what's the point coming out. He said he just do his time and pray for me. He says, "What's the point, it's like the same over here." It's like, he telling me school is like jail, no good food, nobody can help you out. (MD, U.S.-born, male)*

Some also had fathers, uncles, and cousins who had been deported following an incarceration:

*My father um, he went to jail and got deported. (RI, immigrant, female)*

*I have an uncle who didn't have anything to do with immigration and they searched him and deported him. He was supposed to go to court and he didn't, and then he was in a car accident where he wrecked a van, and the lawyer told him to go to court, he would not have problems, but when he was there in court they left him there and he was in jail for three months and then they sent him to El Salvador. He didn't like being there because the Mara people were following him, and because of that uncle we've all had problems. (MD, immigrant, female)*

*They [the police] look for a reason to arrest you. 'Cause they're bored like that. You'll see them driving around the projects. I remember because when I was hanging [at] the basketball court. That's where we always hang out. [The police] come on over there...They said, "Do you live around here?" I told them, "No. But I used to live over here like 15 years ago!" They said [I was] trespassing...I got arrested, for trespassing, for just hanging around there. (RI, U.S.-born, male)*

Again, in order to provide a balanced view of the focus groups, it should be pointed out that a number of youth did not feel that law enforcement officers are monolithically discriminatory, but rather that they are diverse:

*Depending on the person, they might not like us because we're Hispanic or, you know, or they're racist. And if they're not, then, you know, they really won't care. They'll just look at the case that they're working, and they won't care about the ethnicity of people and where they come from. (TN, immigrant, female)*

*Not all cops are the same. I know one dude, he helped me out and everything. He got me out of tickets and stuff. Me and him go way back. But he became police, and I went my way. He's like 20 and I'm 16. He helps me out, even though I deserved my punishment, he helped me out. He says he's my family member, and they let me go. He's like, "Don't do it again...you know, I'm out here for you if you need me but don't make me look bad." (MD, U.S.-born, male)*

### **The Role of Gangs**

Because the issue of gangs played such an animated part of the discussion around law enforcement and juvenile justice in all of the focus groups, it is worth elaborating on this theme here, particularly in light of the connections that youth make between gangs and the perceived stereotypes and unequal treatment the youth attributed to law enforcement (see Box 8). Depending on the state and geographic area Latinos live in, gangs can play a prominent role in the lives of Hispanic teenagers. A fair number of the focus group youth had been exposed to gangs to different degrees, including the Mara Salvatrucha (MS or MS-13) and Calle 18, as well as, in Providence, Dominican and Puerto Rican gangs.\* Much of this exposure came through friends and relatives and took place at school, on the street, and at parties. As revealed in the quotes below, both direct and indirect contact with gangs exposed youth to a consistently violent environment:

*There are many Maras, and a lot of fights. Every day in the hallways. The Mara against the Black kids. Maras among themselves. Not long ago a kid was killed by another Mara because they thought he was in the Mara but he wasn't, he just hung around them but they killed him. (MD, immigrant, female)*

*The other day I heard about some girl gang fight, and then this one girl tried to stop it. She got stabbed and whatnot...I was like, this is crazy. I think she died. That was in the street. (MD, U.S.-born, female)*

*My cousin in El Salvador, he's like, he was young, he was probably nine I think, when he got into that, in MS, and now he's probably 30-something. And he [tried] to get out [of MS]. Now he's hiding, he can't go out...they looking for him. He got shot a couple of times. I'm surprised he's still alive. (MD, U.S.-born, male)*

The daily fear created by sustained interaction with gangs in neighborhoods or elsewhere was particularly acute for the youth in Langley Park, as seen above, and in Los Angeles, where youth talked about a constant, close-up exposure to gangs:

*Like, there's one gang right here, one gang on the other street, the other block... Because they own like one community and then another one owns another community. And they fight...Sometimes they even get killed. (CA, immigrant, female)*

\* Young Latinos often use the terms "mara" or "pandilla," roughly translated as "gang," to connote both a social group of friends and peers as well as established gangs involved in criminal activity; the relationship between such groups can be somewhat fluid and complex, and there is a continuum of behaviors between the two.

*I have a friend [who was in a gang], he passed away, and my cousin, like, he lives in Texas...he, like, told me how it works in Texas, and I'm like, "That's nothing compared to L.A."...I mean, [there] they burn your car. You do something stupid here, they're not going to just burn your car. (CA, U.S.-born, male)*

Youth who had intimate experience with the negative impact of gang violence on their family were sometimes particularly disapproving of gangs, feeling that they not only harm the community but also contribute to negative images of Latinos:

*Well, my grandmother she has a, it's an illegal business, it's like selling drinks, but that's the way she gets her money. And [these] little gang people come around asking for money saying that, "If you don't pay up, you know, because you have this illegal business here, we're going to snitch on you" and whatnot. And I think that's so stupid because we're supposed to be helping each other out, like you know, Spanish people [are] supposed to help each other out to be someone in life. But no, they go against each other and they fight against each other, you know. It's just like what are you doing? Why are you doing that? It's just like, you know, we're like trying to help each other out, [but] you're making us worse. Like I think gangs just make Spanish people look bad. (MD, U.S.-born, female)*

A couple of the youth had been heavily involved in gangs in the past and were explicitly trying to cut all ties with them on account of painful experiences as gang members (which resulted, in both cases, in their family members being hurt). For the most part, however, most of the youth reported relatively fluid boundaries with gangs, since they often had acquaintances, friends, or family members who had joined at some point:

*I know a lot of people. Like some of my friends are in gangs, but like I'm cool with them, I hang out with them. They don't really do anything to me, 'cause they know I will, I'm not the type that would do that. I say, "Go easy on me," and they're like, "Just hang out." (TN, U.S.-born, female)*

*Like me, I go to the park where they arrested my friend and they all are there, and I talk to them but I'm not in their group. When they pass by and they say, "Hi, how are you?" and sometimes one of them comes over to where I am and talks to me, and people there think bad of me. But as I say, "Mom, I don't care if they think bad of me. They're my friends, how am I going to ignore them?" Not friend friends, but...just like friends. People that I know. But if people think bad of me I don't care—they are just like us. (MD, immigrant, female)*

Because of these fluid associations between gang members and non-gang members, and because young Latinos often wear clothing and colors that are associated with gangs, a fair number described having been accused of being in gang by the police or security guards, even though they were not:

*One time we were at a party, and then we got stopped. And just because like two or three people were like in a gang, they put me and my friends down saying we were in a gang, and I was like that's just unfair because I'm not in no gang. I really don't like them, I think they're dumb. (MD, U.S.-born, female)*

*[The police] always think they're gangbangers, just 'cause of...our clothes, our colors, just automatically think you're in a gang. (TN, immigrant, female)*

*[The police] search us [Latino youth] for everything. They search you and if they find sharpies or stuff, they blame you [for tagging]...and that's why you throw them away before they get you. (CA, immigrant, male)*

Several youth discussed how the clothes and appearances of Latino youth elicit aggressive targeting, not only from the police but from gangs themselves:

*They'll say, "Why you wearing that shirt," and I'll be like, "Well, I don't claim nothing." But they'll be like, you know what, they'll leave it at that, and then go. They see you and they shoot you. Or they'll just jump you wherever they see you at, they'll do harm to you and your family. It makes me mad. (TN, U.S.-born, female)*

*Sometimes they beat you up, like...or like the specific shoes you wear or colors that represents where you from. Like if you wear red or blue, those will get you. (CA, immigrant, female)*

*Now we can't even wear a certain kind of shirt without having problems. Mostly with Hispanics and Blacks, you can't wear a shirt or they'll shoot you for wearing that color. (TN, U.S.-born, female)*

While the youth felt unfairly singled out due to assumptions by law enforcement about their ethnicity, some acknowledged that the abundance and fluidity of gangs in their communities, along with the popularity of gangster-style clothing among many Latino youth, probably contribute to such assumptions and, consequently, to the frequency of contact between the police and Latino youth. As such, a few stated that there were particular behaviors and lifestyle choices that contribute to negative attention from law enforcement. For them, steering clear of gangs or evading confrontations with the police were discussed as a question of individual choice:

*I do have friends who belong to the Mara, I hang around them but they've never asked me to be a member. And even if they asked me, I wouldn't do it. I don't like that. (MD, immigrant, male)*

*[The police] pay more attention, like, to Hispanics who dress all gangster. But I think it's also their fault for dressing like that and for hanging out with the people they do. They wouldn't like to get in trouble, then they should just stay away from bad influences and not dress the way they do. (TN, immigrant, female)*

*It's a decision that each person takes. If they want the bad influence—that just gets you into trouble, they kill you, or you go to the hospital or to the grave. I know a lot of people that, when I was doing the community service, there was a guy there who said that he was put in jail, and that when he was with the Mara they would tell him that they were like his best friends. And when he went to jail, there was no friends. Only his mother would go visit him. (MD, immigrant, female)*

Overall, the youth in all four sites described feeling targeted by law enforcement on a regular basis, and gave abundant examples of encounters that they or their peers had had with the police or security officers on the street, in cars, in parks, in public buildings, and in school. In addition to feeling unsafe because of gangs and violence, for the most part these youth felt vulnerable—rather than secure—within their own communities, having experienced profiling and differential treatment by police.

**BOX 8: WHY LATINO YOUTH JOIN GANGS**

Across the focus groups, the teenagers expressed a sound understanding of and sensitivity to the reasons behind the appeal of gangs to some Latino youth. In large part, these reasons, they said, have to do with a search for acceptance and belonging, which may be elusive due to their ethnic identity or “outsider” status:

*Everybody wants to be part of a group. We all want to have friends and people you're cool with, and you just want to hang with them...and you want to belong. You want to belong to something. (TN, U.S.-born, male)*

*Immigrants at times get into that [gangs] when they don't feel accepted in certain groups and they go into the Mara where they are accepted just the way they are. And those who are born here, it could be for fashion. (MD, immigrant, female)*

*I think people create them so they feel more comfortable, like, with their group. And most of the time it's like, the same, the same heritage you know? Like maybe they're all Hispanics in a gang, or all Black, and I think they create them, like, just to be together and so that they know that they have each other, if anything ever happens. (TN, immigrant, female)*

Another primary reason often mentioned for why youth join gangs—a reason related to the feeling of vulnerability created by one’s “outsider” status—is the need for safety and some degree of protection in unstable neighborhoods.

*'Cause they're scared of being alone. They just create a group of people so they feel safe. (TN, immigrant, male)*

*They have friends who are in gangs who tell them, "We will protect you, nobody will bother you," because there are many who bother them, and they say, "If you are with us no one can do anything to you." (TN, immigrant, male)*

Some viewed the need for belonging as resulting also from the lack of understanding or support from parents and families:

*It's because—what they don't find within their families. That's why many of them get into the Mara and also, Mara members tell you, "We're your friends, we're your family, we'll always be with you." That's why a lot of them join, because they don't have good communication and ignorance. (MD, immigrant, female)*

*They need a family...because probably the family doesn't pay attention to them. They have no time. They feel like, something—that's why they go look for gangs. (CA, immigrant, female)*

*Sometimes their family does not support them, so they find in the gang what they think is a family, a gang, that is what they find, brothers and sisters that they have not been able to have, the support they have not had from their parents. I don't agree with it but I do understand it. (TN, immigrant, female)*

*I believe that the people who join the Mara it is because lack of love or lack of communication, and I think that those of us who have that we don't need to look for love outside the house. (MD, immigrant, female)*

These views on the appeal of gangs echo the observations of experts, according to whom primary risk factors for gang involvement include: an absence of support from the school system, a desire for recognition and safety, delinquent peers, and feelings of social isolation or alienation. Moreover, at-risk Latino youth tend to be those who feel abandoned by their parents (who are often working extended hours to make ends meet), overlooked by their schools and teachers, and demeaned by mainstream society. Successful gang prevention programs often involve after-school activities, pathways to academic progress, and outreach and collaboration with parents, schools, and communities; such preventions seek to empower families and give high-risk youth a sense of self-esteem and identity, of safety and belonging, and of control over their decisions and lives.<sup>54</sup>

# LATINO YOUTH AT A CROSSROADS



## DISCUSSION

The conversations outlined above express the viewpoints of an important sector of our nation's young Latinos, who are coming of age within a particularly challenging social climate for the Hispanic community. The various themes raised by the focus groups depict the experiences and perceptions of first- and second-generation Hispanic adolescents, shedding light on their feelings of belonging and place in our society. At a broad level, the discussions reveal a group of youngsters at a crossroads—teenagers who are “in between” categories and processes in a variety of ways. As with all adolescents, they are at the intersection between childhood and adulthood, seeking to define their sense of identity and understand their future options. As children of immigrants, they are also situated between cultures and between languages, and more often than not, serve as cultural interpreters between their family and community and mainstream American institutions. In addition, they are often perceived—by their parents and themselves—as the bridge between sacrifice and success, between their immigrant parents' difficult reality and the dream of upward mobility and stability.

While these youth, like many children of immigrants, allude to a host of barriers and difficulties that they and their peers confront daily at school and in other contexts, one theme stands out in their narratives: the persistent feeling of being stereotyped through assumptions about their Latino ethnicity. The perception of being seen as “other” and of being treated differently in all different settings—whether excluded, overlooked, segregated, profiled, or policed—is palpable. Whether talking about school, work, or their interactions with law enforcement, these Latino teenagers are highly sensitive to the ways in which negative assumptions about Hispanics as a whole are manifested, and often reinforced, through institutional practices and systemic discrimination.

These youth also appear to have a clear understanding of the links between differential treatment and negative outcomes. They describe the association between being overlooked by teachers or being negatively tracked at school and the decreased motivation that might lead a Latino student to drop out. They refer to the connection between some employers' suppositions about Latino workers' legal status and subsequent discriminatory treatment. And they discuss the relationship between ethnic profiling by police and the possibility of Latino youth falling into or reentering the juvenile justice system. As many of the examples illustrate, the participants' awareness of and reflections on these social realities are based not only on their own experiences, but also on those of their family members, peers, and community members.

While these adolescents do not see these systems as unanimously or solely discriminatory, most do emphasize their belief that the stereotyping of Latino youth significantly impacts their interactions—and the outcomes of their

interactions—within these different settings. In addition to the hostile public discourse on Latinos and immigrants, the compounded effect of discrimination is undoubtedly a heavy and stressful burden, one that can potentially contribute to the perception of an unfair, untrustworthy, and often unsafe overall environment. For boys in particular, the effect of feeling surveilled and policed in some realms, while being viewed as negligible or marginal in others, can be highly detrimental. And as other research has shown, this perceived discrimination can have a damaging impact not only on academic motivation and achievement, but on Latino youth's overall self-esteem and mental health, leading some to underperform and some to engage in risky or unhealthy behaviors.

But perhaps the most important finding of this research is that in spite of these profound feelings of being persistently racialized and exposed to challenging environmental factors, most of the youth in these focus groups revealed a positive, resilient orientation toward their present lives and future aspirations. A fair number discussed particular strategies that they and other Hispanic youth use to surmount the barriers they encounter on a daily level. For example, some spoke with enthusiasm about particular interventions—such as the GED or other educational programs for at-risk minority youth—that they chose to complete outside of the context of public schools in order to attain a more focused and meaningful learning experience and to be able to apply to college, pursue job training, or join the military. Others discussed different strategies they use to avoid getting into trouble with the police, including steering clear of gangs despite their ubiquitous presence. Others stated with pride that their bilingualism was a clear asset to their future job prospects, a skill to be cultivated since it would give them a competitive edge. Thus, in spite of significant pressures and their often vulnerable position both in school and on the streets, these youth evince a remarkable will to surmount obstacles to their well-being and success, and cultivate what they see as their own strengths; the concept of individual choice and the notion of doing things differently from the “bad examples” they observe around them were important organizing themes in their conversations.

Another positive—and related—thread in these findings is the general sense of motivation and hopefulness that these youth feel with regard to their education and future. As these youngsters describe clearly, echoing other research findings, Latino parents and children place a high value on education and have a strong belief in the premise that hard work, discipline, and ethical behavior lead to success and a better life. The youth's own aspirations for the future, and their wish to be treated fairly and make significant contributions to their country, stand out as an important contrast to their feelings of being excluded or otherwise marginalized. The desire to do well comes not only from children of immigrants' need to acculturate rapidly, but also, as mentioned, from their parents' own insistence that their children seek to fulfill the American Dream and seize the

opportunities that they themselves have not had. Some of the youth are clearly pained by the manner in which their parents are treated—by employers in particular—and protectiveness toward their parents may drive their wish to excel. For some, the desire to do well is also framed as a wish to disprove negative public stereotypes about Latino youth; for others still, aspiring to a positive career path is connected to a wish to contribute to and help their own community, the Latino population, and the nation.

While this strong desire to do well might be a protective factor that helps youth develop resilient behaviors and outlooks, it can also be experienced as stressful for Latino youth. The pressure to acculturate and succeed in the dominant culture can cause significant anxiety for youth if the resources and contexts around them are not supportive or, worse yet, are damaging to their development. While many immigrant Latino parents may be emotionally supportive and communicative with their children, they are often unable to help them with their schooling, usually due to heavy work schedules and language and cultural barriers. Moreover, in families with mixed citizenship status, both parents and children often live in fear of eventual detention or deportation. The vulnerability or absence of parents, if compounded by the realities of poverty, discrimination, dangerous neighborhoods, underresourced schools, and the appeal of gangs, can form the perfect storm that leads to poor choices and negative outcomes for Hispanic adolescents.

Furthermore, as these focus groups make clear, the negative public discourse on immigration and race is not only absorbed by Latino youth directly, but is at times replicated by adults (e.g., teachers, law enforcement officers) who work with Latino children. This negative discourse has been further exacerbated over the past few years by a range of federal and state anti-immigration policies, such as SB 1070 in Arizona\* or the federal 287(g) program,<sup>†</sup> 55 both of which make all Latinos, adults and youth alike, suspect in their own communities and potential victims of racial profiling. This year, moreover, the state of Arizona prohibited its public schools and universities from teaching ethnic studies courses or advocating “ethnic solidarity”; this is a law that prevents Hispanic children from studying their own histories and cultures. Such policies, and the negative social climate that spawned them, run the risk of eroding the strength and optimism of Hispanic youth, of doing away with the positive factors that enable resilience, and of encouraging instead hardened responses among Latino youth.<sup>‡</sup> Indeed, as we heard in the focus groups, not all responses to discrimination were

\* On April 29, 2010, Arizona Governor Jan Brewer signed SB 1070 into law, which would have required police officers to verify a person’s immigration status at will and compelled immigrants to carry their documents at all times. In response to several lawsuits, a U.S. district court judge ruled that these provisions of the law could not be implemented. The temporary injunction is expected to be reviewed by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit on November 2, 2010. Similar legislation has been introduced in 22 states.

† Enacted in 1996, 287(g) allows the federal government to enter into agreements with state and local law enforcement agencies, allowing them to deputize local officials to enforce federal immigration law.

‡ For further discussion of Latino youth’s perspectives on SB1070, see *A Wake-Up Call: Latino Youth Speak Out about Arizona SB 1070* (Washington, DC: National Council of La Raza, 2010).

constructive: In describing particular scenarios, the youth also evoked palpable feelings of shame, silence, anger, and resentment about the stereotyping and differential treatment of Latinos.

Although there seemed to be a general consensus across the focus groups about many of the topics discussed, there are important distinctions. The Latino youth in Tennessee appeared to experience by far the greatest degree of negative stereotyping and prejudiced behaviors, and to feel the most blatantly marginalized in school, on the job, and in the streets. This phenomenon is most likely explained by the extremely rapid growth in Tennessee's Latino population over the past 15 years. In the Nashville area, people have struggled to understand and accept the rapid influx of Latinos, as well as other immigrants, and the ethnic segregation of the city itself has kept many Latinos spatially separated and marginalized from the mainstream.

The youth in Los Angeles were distinct from those in the other focus groups in that most did not feel that Latino students are treated unfairly or differently within the school system. Several mentioned that their school had an Hispanic or Black majority and that many of their teachers and administrators were themselves Latino. However, when discussing gangs and violence, youth from Los Angeles and Langley Park appeared to have significantly more exposure than youth in the other groups. Youth attributed heavy police surveillance in these two sites to assumptions by law enforcement that most Hispanic youth belong to gangs. By contrast, the youth in Nashville and Providence often seemed to feel profiled and considered suspect by the police for simply appearing Hispanic and being in a public space. Youth in Providence, which included Dominicans and Puerto Ricans and composed the most ethnically diverse group, reported experiences of marginality and unfair treatment in various settings that were similar to those reported by the other groups, which were composed primarily of youth of Mexican and Central American origin.

Finally, while there did not seem to be a notable disparity between immigrant and U.S.-born groups regarding their overall perceptions and experiences of discrimination, there was a slight difference between first- and second-generation youth with respect to their optimism about the future and desire to excel in both school and their careers. Participants in the immigrant focus groups at times even faulted their U.S.-born counterparts for lacking ambition and becoming apathetic despite the clear advantage that having citizenship and being born in the U.S. gives them. This difference supports findings from several researchers that immigrant youth bring positive attitudes, orientations, and social skills that often wear away with acculturation. Finding ways to preserve positive outlooks and skills and to maintain a healthy sense of identity and purpose would undoubtedly provide a critical clue to reducing the "immigrant paradox" and making sure that all generations of Latinos—first, second, third, and beyond—are strong, confident, and well-prepared for the future.

## CONCLUSION

Given the importance of Latino youth to the future of our country, it is essential that our systems and institutions support these teenagers in their goals to become successful adults and responsible citizens, rather than eroding their confidence in themselves and in American society. The youth described here have, for the most part, a positive orientation with respect to their educational aspirations, career goals, and the desire to stay out of trouble with the law. Their parents, despite often having limited resources and abilities to support them, encourage their children to excel. Yet these youth feel that within the formative social spaces and settings of their lives, they are continuously viewed through the lens of negative ethnic stereotypes. From their perspective, assumptions that are made about young Hispanic boys and girls—based on their appearance, accent, behavior, or social class—often lead to their being excluded, overlooked, or unfairly singled out for punishment.

Clearly, one critical step to finding solutions to these issues is changing the tone of public discussion about the role of immigrants and Hispanics in U.S. society, thereby helping the public feel at ease with demographic change in the country. But it is not enough to address the discourse alone; attending to the structural issues that contribute to stereotyping and discrimination within our institutions, particularly those dealing with youth, is fundamental.

Wise investments should be made in our public school system, where the great majority of Latino youth are educated; teachers should have the support and resources to be able to focus on all of their students and to improve their cultural understanding of the populations that they are serving. We should also strengthen and empower more Latino parents to engage with their children's schools. We must reform immigration and juvenile justice policies at both the state and federal levels so that the profiling and unequal treatment of Hispanic and other minority youth is not exacerbated, and so that tensions between police and youth are defused. We must ensure that our institutions promote a culture of diversity and understanding, and that professionals within these institutions are held accountable to these values.

Overall, we must invest more in interventions that build community support and social cohesion, and in programs that have been proven to make a difference in the lives of Latino youth—interventions that seek not only to address the barriers, but also to fortify the unique strengths of Latino youth and their families. These include after-school, mentoring, and job training programs, educational programs that take into account the needs of English language learners while ensuring college preparedness, and a host of other programs for at-risk youth who are, above all, seeking a sense of belonging and confidence. Only through a holistic approach that aims to fully understand the worlds and perspectives of Hispanic

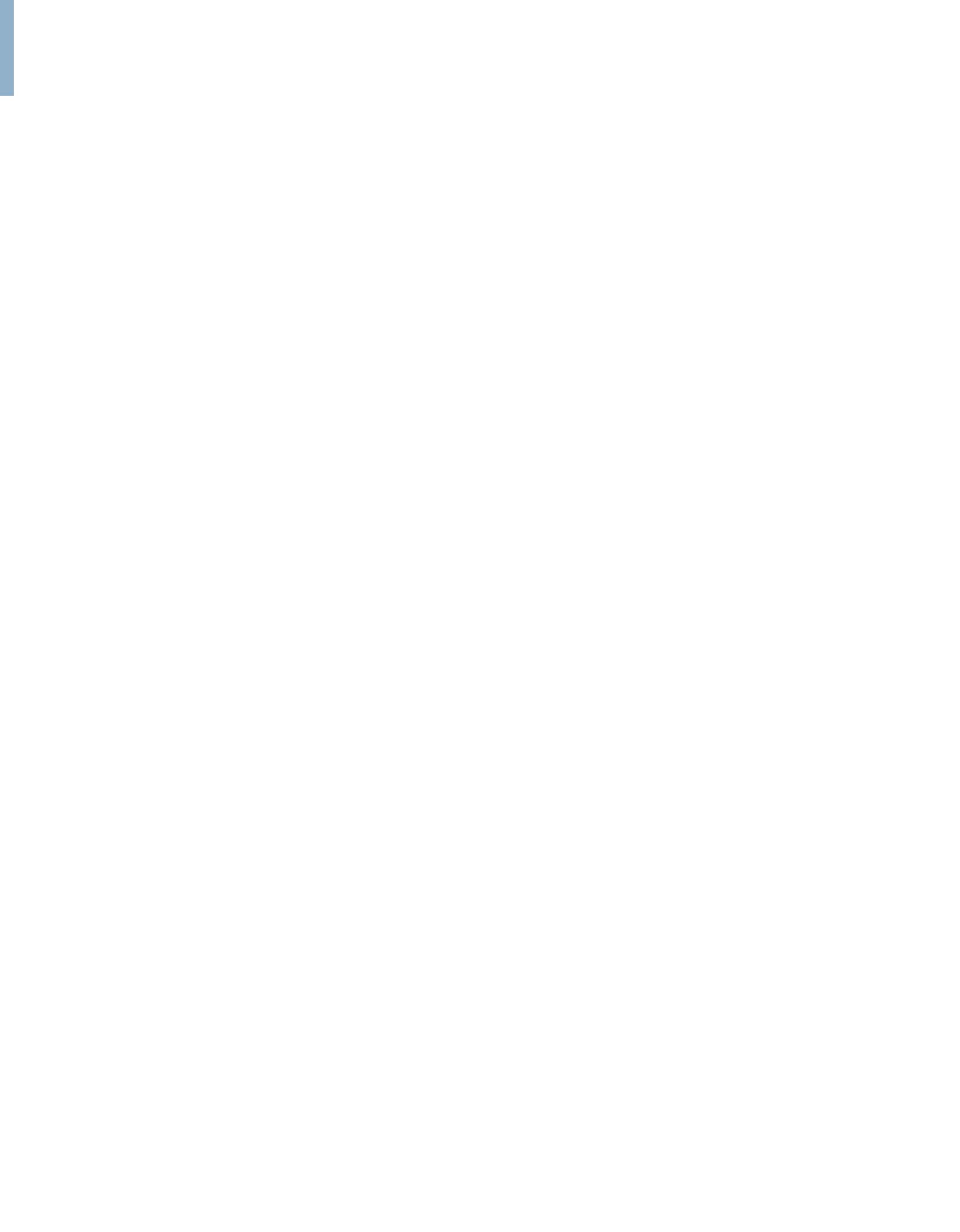
youth will our institutions be able to ensure the integration and success of this important population.

The adolescents speaking out in this report are the Latino youth whose voices are not often heard, and who are rarely depicted in the media. They are the first- and second-generation Latino youth of this country who are seeking to do the best they can despite the many challenges and barriers they face daily, and despite the tremendous responsibilities that they feel toward their parents, communities, and country. Supporting these youth in their quest for accomplishment and inclusion will lead to the successful long-term integration of the Hispanic population into our country. It would be a tragic mistake for us—our schools, our communities, our institutions—to make these youth feel diminished, excluded, and resentful, rather than, through the fundamental American values of opportunity, fairness, and inclusivity, helping them help themselves, thereby strengthening the fabric of our nation.

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