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Intimate Partner Violence Among Latinos

Research Brief

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Marriage and relationship education (MRE) programs may include Latino couples and individuals who could be experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV), although some of the couples may not identify it as such. Understanding what research says about IPV among Latinos, including cultural beliefs and practices that may be in play, can assist MRE program staff and facilitators in safely and respectfully addressing the issue.

This Research Brief discusses the prevalence of intimate partner violence among Hispanics in America, as well as the known risk and protective factors associated with IPV in the Hispanic community. The Research Brief also provides recommendations for marriage and relationship educators and uses the terms Hispanic and Latino interchangeably.

Background

The U.S. Census Bureau defines Hispanics as people of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin¹. Hispanics may self-identify in the Census as any race, however (e.g., White, Black, etc.). According to the 2010 Census, the Hispanic population grew by 43%, rising from 35.3 million self-identified Hispanics in 2000 to 50.5 million in 2010. The rise in the Hispanic population accounted for more than half of the 27.3 million increase in the total U.S. population.² Almost 60% of U.S. Hispanic citizens were born in the United States and Puerto Rico;³ another 11% are naturalized citizens. Nearly 30% of Hispanics in the United States are foreign born non-citizens. Most Hispanic adults living in the United States are married. In the 2000 Census, 51.3% identified as currently married, 3.7% as separated, and 7.4% as divorced.⁴



Most Hispanic families are well-functioning, supportive households and many Hispanic cultures place a high value on family support, cohesion, and child-rearing. It is not uncommon for nuclear families to interact closely with and be intertwined with their extended family. Hispanic families can be more insulated from intimate partner violence since multiple adults are often directly involved in the family. Domestic violence researchers and practitioners know, however, that IPV is an insidious and often hidden part of many people's lives.

Prevalence of Hispanic Intimate Partner Violence

Strong family ties may be thought of as a protective factor against IPV; nevertheless, Latinos experience rates of violence greater than or equal to those of other groups in the United States. For example, Hispanic female reports of rape are statistically different than those of other U.S. ethnic groups, but Hispanics and Whites report similar levels of other types of IPV, according to the National Violence Against Women survey (NVAW).⁵

When asked whether the following violent acts have ever been committed against them by a cohabiting or married partner, Hispanic and White women and men reported the following percentages, published in 2000. As these statistics show, women disproportionately experience rape, physical assault, and other types of violence.

Women		
Act of Violence	Hispanic	White
Rape	7.9%	5.7%
Physical Assault	21.2%	22.1%
Stalking	4.8%	4.8%
Any violence	23.4%	25.6%

Men		
Act of Violence	Hispanic	White
Rape	NA	0.3%
Physical Assault	6.5%	7.5%
Stalking	NA	0.7%
Any violence	7.4%	8.0%

The risk of IPV may be higher in some Hispanic cultural sub-groups. Controlling for socio-economic characteristics, migration, and previous abuse, a study of lower income Latinas indicated that Puerto Ricans residing on the mainland were far less likely to report IPV in the past 12 months than did Mexicans, Dominicans, or other women of Latina ancestry.⁶ Additionally, another study found that men of Cuban descent were far less likely to report assaulting their wives than men of Mexican descent.⁷

Types of Interpersonal Violence

Generally, studies define IPV as some level of physical, emotional, or mental violence that is *purposely inflicted* on a romantic partner or spouse. All types of intimate partner violence toward men or women are problematic. Although men can be victims of IPV, this Research Brief largely focuses on violence against women because women are more likely to be victims of abuse and are more frequently the subjects of IPV research.

Several different types of violence occur between intimate partners, according to recent studies. Coercive controlling violence or intimate terrorism is the type of violence that most domestic violence advocates refer to when using the term “domestic violence” and is rooted in the power and control of the victim.⁸ Coercive controlling violence (CCV) is when one intimate partner uses a variety of tactics to exert power and control over the other partner. Other types of IPV include situational couple violence and violent resistance. Situational couple violence (SCV) is when an argument between partners gets heated and emotions escalate out of control, leading to physical violence between the partners. SCV is typically not motivated by power or control over the other person. It is the most common type of couple violence, and can be very dangerous. Violent resistance describes a situation in which a victim uses violence to defend against abuse.⁹

Risk and Protective Factors

There are a number of factors that can contribute to or protect against the likelihood of experiencing IPV. For example, IPV reports are higher among people in poverty.¹⁰ Poverty brings additional stress and problems to a relationship. One study related to spousal abuse among Anglo, Black, and Mexican

Americans found that married women in San Antonio were more likely to report being victims of IPV if their families were under financial stress. In the same study, married men who were instigators of violence also reported financial stress.¹¹

Immigration increases IPV risks for some women, possibly due to the increased financial and cultural stresses associated with such a move, including learning a new language and new social norms.¹² A qualitative study of Latina women experiencing IPV found that immigration to the United States was a socially isolating process. Not only were they dealing with a different culture and language, they were separated from friends and family members.¹³ This may mean that in these situations, as violence increases, victims' abilities to find and receive help may decrease.

A sample of lower income Hispanic women living in the United States highlights some important risk and protective factors for IPV.¹⁴ Latina women who reported IPV in the past 12 months were:

- More likely to be single or cohabiting, as opposed to married;
- More likely to only have a high school diploma, as compared to at least some post-high school education;
- Less likely to work full-time;
- More likely to report being physically abused by their family as children;
- More likely to have been under age 15 at immigration; and
- Less likely to be proficient in English.

Mexican-American women who were in a romantic relationship were more likely to report IPV at the hands of their current partner if they were: under

age 30; born in the United States; lived in an urban area; had four or more children; or attended church less than once a month.¹⁵

Another study illuminated risk factors for Hispanic men committing IPV.¹⁶ This nationally representative study of Latino men found that men who committed IPV against their wives were:

- More likely to be younger;
- More likely to be more acculturatedⁱ as measured by generational status; and
- More likely to be more acculturated as measured by being younger at immigration.

MRE programs working with recently immigrated Latinos should also be knowledgeable about the incidence of domestic violence among immigrants. Foreign-born and minority women are overrepresented among intimate partner victims. In fact, studies have found that:

- Foreign-born women were significantly more likely to be killed by their intimate partners than U.S.-born women.¹⁷
- Nearly half of the Latinas in one study reported an increase in partner violence since their immigration to the United States.¹⁸

Hispanic Cultural Factors That Might Influence IPV

Many Hispanic families share common cultural concepts and practices that are important to take into account when discussing, screening for, or providing support for IPV: *familismo*, *machismo*, and *fatalism*.

ⁱ Acculturation is the process by which members of a cultural group adopt the beliefs and behaviors of another group.

Familismo is a commonly understood concept in Hispanic culture and means that people have “attachments, reciprocity and loyalty to family members beyond the boundaries of the nuclear family”.¹⁹ For many Latinos, their extended family members have significant influence in family decisions. This factor may help protect women from violence since parents and in-laws are heavily involved in the family. However, familismo also may make it more difficult for victims to leave their partners since many family members have a vested interest in the continuation of the nuclear family. Additionally, victims may feel that maintaining a cohesive nuclear family for their children is more important than possibly dividing the family through IPV intervention.²⁰

Other concepts traditionally associated with Hispanic culture are machismo and fatalism. A common meaning placed on machismo is that a man is dominant, virile, and independent. Placing a high value on machismo can foster situations where men socialize with hostility and aggression and place an emphasis on dominance and control.²¹ This may have implications for IPV in relationships.

Fatalism, the idea that an individual has little control over his/her own destiny, is also prevalent in Hispanic culture.²² This cultural idea may manifest in relationships with the belief that suffering is one’s destiny and therefore IPV can be expected and/or tolerated.

Intimate Partner Violence Among Hispanic Youth

Some studies provide findings regarding IPV in the adolescent population. The Centers for Disease Control’s 2009 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, a nationally representative sample of U.S.



adolescents in grades 9 to 12, indicates that 11.5% of Hispanic youth report being *hit, slapped, or physically hurt on purpose* by a romantic partner in the last year.²³ The 11.5% rate is higher for Hispanics than Whites (where it is 8.0%), but is lower than for African-American youth (14.3%).²⁴

Studies suggest that acculturation increases the risk of IPV among adolescents. Mexican-American girls in Texas were less likely to report experiences of IPV in the past year if one or both of their parents were born outside of the United States.²⁵ The same study found that girls were far more likely to report an occurrence of IPV if they felt they had experienced a great deal of ethnic discrimination.²⁶

A study of adolescent girls of Mexican ancestry in New Mexico further clarifies the relationship between acculturation and IPV.²⁷ Girls born in the United States had similar rates of IPV whether Spanish was their dominant language or not.²⁸ In contrast, using Spanish as their dominant language was a protective factor for girls who were born outside of the United States.²⁹

Implications for Marriage and Relationship Education Programs

Definitions of and standards for IPV in Latino cultures may be different than in the United States. MRE programs may be in a position to help couples and individuals understand these differences by providing accurate information on healthy relationships—helping people recognize abuse and providing skills to manage relationships. MRE practitioners are often prepared to identify signs of IPV and make appropriate referrals to other needed services.

Effective IPV interventions for Hispanics must understand and address the needs and goals of Latina women. Some Latinas resist seeking help for IPV because they are afraid that interventions will encourage them to leave their partners and fracture their families. These women report that they do not want to end their marriages/relationships; they just want the violence to end.³⁰ Less acculturated or newly immigrated women may not know their legal rights, how to interact with the legal system, or that domestic violence resources such as shelters even exist.³¹ Research suggests that some Latino women are also afraid that seeking help for IPV issues might lead to deportation.³²

MRE providers should not assume that acculturation will make IPV less likely. Several studies have suggested that reports of IPV are more common among more acculturated individuals. It is not clear whether this indicates that more acculturated people are more likely to accurately report incidents than newly immigrated Latinos or if the actual rates of IPV are different, possibly due to role strain, where people struggle to balance their roles in mainstream America versus traditional culture.³³

Given the unique opportunity MRE programs can have in helping Latino couples and individuals recognize and respond to domestic violence, the following suggestions may assist programs in appropriately addressing the issue with the couples and individuals they serve.

1. Marriage and relationship education (MRE) providers serving Latinos can partner with local IPV programs to ensure that these programs have bilingual staff or interpreters and provide culturally competent care.
2. MRE programs with a thorough intake process should consider screening for IPV, and all programs should consider providing education about and resources for domestic violence services in their community.
3. MRE programs serving unmarried people should incorporate domestic violence education, screening, and support. Women who were cohabiting or single were more likely to report IPV than married women. In addition, over 11% of Hispanics in grades 9–12 reported being victims of dating violence.³⁴
4. Have referral resources/contacts identified so that appropriate referrals can be initiated immediately, when needed.
5. Programs targeting parents should also provide information about adolescent dating violence so parents can talk with their children about IPV.
6. MRE programs have an opportunity to educate participants about the danger of ignoring or minimizing disclosures and provide them with the appropriate resources for helping IPV victims. Research suggests that Latinos often disclose IPV to family and friends, despite the perception that those confidants prefer to remain uninvolved.³⁵



Need for Additional Research

While this Research Brief presents the current state of the knowledge regarding IPV in the Latino community, it also highlights gaps in the literature. More research is needed to understand the connection between acculturation and increased reports of IPV. If acculturation does actually increase rates of IPV—as opposed to greater truthfulness in reporting—more research is needed to understand what mechanisms are behind this relationship.

Although rates of IPV seem to be higher for couples in unmarried relationships (dating or cohabiting), most research has focused on married Hispanics. We do not know how IPV varies between married and unmarried couples, whether the risk and protective factors differ, and how screening, support, interventions, prevention, and education should differ based on relationship status. Additionally, more research is needed to understand how cultural differences such as country of origin may be related to IPV rates and reactions to IPV victimization.

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