

Research-to-Results ^{Brief}

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...the value of out-of-school time programs for children of Latino immigrants

Publication #2011-30

December 2011

CHILDREN OF LATINO IMMIGRANTS AND OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS

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OVERVIEW

Children who have at least one parent born outside the United States or U.S. territories presently make up almost one-quarter of the children in the country.¹ Moreover, these children represent the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. child population.² As of 2006, the majority of children of immigrants were Latino, with 41 percent of all child immigrants having parents from Mexico, 11 percent from Central America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, and 6 percent from South America.³ This brief identifies reasons that it is important to focus on children of Latino immigrants, discusses what out-of-school time (OST) programs can do for these children, and provides advice on how to attract and retain children of immigrants in these programs.

BACKGROUND

Compared with native-born children, children of immigrants are over-represented among the ranks of the poor.⁴ However, the children of both established and recent Latino immigrants are even more likely than are other children of immigrants to live in poverty, exposing them to risks that can jeopardize their healthy development.⁵ For example, children who live in low-income neighborhoods and are unsupervised are at greater risk for delinquency in the hours when they are not in school. One reason for this circumstance may be that high-quality out-of-school time activities are not as accessible to low-income families as they are to those of higher socioeconomic status. Other barriers to Latino youth involvement in out-of-school time activities and programs include responsibilities that young people may have (such as caring for siblings); lack of transportation; concerns about safety; and the negative influences of peers.^{6,7} Moreover, immigrant families may not be aware of OST program options, especially if information is not available in their native language.

Children are both influenced by and exert influence on their surroundings. OST programs are one such context that shapes and is shaped by children⁸. Among other benefits, participation in OST programs has been found to increase academic success⁹ and positive social development.¹⁰ Research suggests that the advantages of these programs are greatest for children at risk for poor developmental outcomes, such as Latino children of immigrants. In fact, OST programs may serve to protect adolescents from negative outcomes.¹¹

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO FOCUS ON CHILDREN OF IMMIGRANTS?

Studies have found that most children and youth benefit from involvement in out-of-school time programs. However, minority children—and in particular, children of immigrants—tend to shy away from participating in these programs.¹² Relevant risk factors that have been associated with lower rates of participation in OST programs are highlighted below:

- **Poverty:** As families leave their home countries and immigrate to the United States, they are faced with the challenge of finding a suitable place to live. Leaving behind friends, family, and professions, many of these families have to start over and end up settling in areas of deep poverty. Recent reports find that more than 6 million Latino children in the United States live in poverty, with 4.1 million having immigrant parents.¹³ Children of immigrants may participate in OST programs less because low-income youth and their families have less access to high-quality OST programs.¹⁴
- **Limited English proficiency:** About one in five of the children of immigrants have trouble speaking, reading, and writing in English.¹⁵ Studies have found that students who lack fluency in English, particularly those who are the children of immigrants, end up in less rigorous courses—either because of self-selection or placements by schools—where they have fewer opportunities for higher-level learning.¹⁶ For these students, language difficulties act as barriers to achievement, and schools can often misinterpret a lack of language skills as a lack of academic skills. Immigrant students often find themselves placed in lower-track courses, and many drop out without completing high school. This disillusionment with school may result in less interest in school-related activities, such as OST programs.
- **Discrimination:** Many immigrant families feel that they are victimized by anti-immigrant sentiment and ongoing discrimination, and struggle with the feeling of being unwanted in American society. The stress of discrimination can be taxing on the children and youth in these families who are just beginning the identity formation process. Children of immigrants may avoid group settings such as OST programs for fear of being stereotyped and treated unfairly because of prejudice.
- **Lack of supervision:** Many immigrant parents work long hours, have irregular work schedules, or work late shifts. This situation often results in children being unsupervised by an adult while their parents fulfill their employment responsibilities. Older children are often burdened with the responsibility of caring for and supervising younger children, making them unable to participate in the types of cultural and educationally enriching activities that might be important for their development. The lack of structure and family connection can make youth susceptible to gangs and involvement in delinquent activities.¹⁷
- **Lack of parental education:** Children of immigrants are more likely to have parents who do not have a high school education; among immigrants, children of Mexican descent are even more likely to have parents with less than a high school education.¹⁸ Parents with little education are typically less knowledgeable about how to navigate educational institutions,¹⁹ which results in limited access to additional resources, such as OST programs. Parents with limited education are also less able to advocate for their children and to provide the extra assistance needed with schoolwork at home.
- **Undocumented status:** Children of undocumented immigrants may not be eligible for a variety of public benefits because of their parents' immigration status. Immigrants who are legal residents or citizens may also face discrimination due to their association in the public mind with undocumented immigrants. Immigrant families are less likely to use public benefits, such as OST programs, even when they are eligible. Such families may not be aware of their eligibility or they may think that using public benefits will affect their ability to become citizens or to sponsor other relatives who want to immigrate.

WHAT CAN OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS PROVIDE CHILDREN OF IMMIGRANTS?

Out-of-school-time programs can enhance the lives of children of immigrants because these programs can offer resources that may be unavailable at home or at school. For example, OST programs can:

- **Provide structure and supervision:** At the most basic level, programs can give immigrant children, as is the case with other children, a place to go—away from the dangers of the street, and away from the isolation and boredom that result from a lack of social interaction and constructive activities.
- **Provide emotional support:** Program staff can enable immigrant children and youth to have the chance to form relationships with caring, nonparental adults.²⁰ OST programs can offer some support and understanding that immigrant parents may be unable to offer due to their lack of time, energy, or understanding about the complex acculturation process their children may be experiencing.
- **Provide cultural support:** Program staff can also help by acting as a link between mainstream culture and the cultural customs many immigrant children experience at home. Some researchers²¹ have studied the role of program staff as “culture brokers” in the lives of immigrant children and youth. Culture brokers are young adults working in OST programs who have an interest in and an understanding of the communities of immigrant children and youth. These young adults may share cultural values and a common language with these children and may possess bicultural skills—enabling them to bridge the gap that exists between the home environment of an immigrant family and mainstream American culture.
- **Provide additional academic assistance:** OST programs can offer children of immigrants’ additional opportunities to build their academic knowledge and skills.²² For instance, additional academic assistance has been shown to improve reading scores for children of immigrants.²³ Also, because English as a second language programs for students with limited English proficiency typically take place during school hours, these programs often substitute curriculum content for English instruction. Participation in OST programs can give children of immigrants the extra language support that can help them succeed in school.
- **Provide or connect with counseling services:** OST programs can help to link children of immigrants with any counseling or mental health services that may be needed.

TIPS FOR OST PROGRAMS ON HOW TO ATTRACT AND RETAIN IMMIGRANT PARTICIPATION

Out-of-school time programs can attract the interest of immigrant children and youth, and ensure continued participation in a number of ways. These include:

Tip 1: Be culturally sensitive. In seeking high levels of retention and participation from immigrant children and youth, programs must keep in mind that different motives may drive the desires of these young people to get involved. These motives go hand in hand with culturally influenced barriers to participation, and thus it is important to consider culture when creating plans to engage children of immigrants. In this context, it may be useful to have bicultural staff members who understand the language and traditions of these children’s countries of origin.

Tip 2: Be aware of personal and family responsibilities. Family generally plays an important role in the decision-making process of Latino immigrant youth. Some research reinforces the idea that Latino youth are particularly concerned with their personal and family responsibilities.²⁴ Many of these young people feel committed to helping their parents (by doing housework, babysitting younger siblings or cousins, or working to make ends meet) and find themselves unable to invest time and energy into other activities. At the same time, programs that provide opportunities to develop job skills might increase the participation levels of such youth. In fact, research suggests that Latino youth who had recently moved to

the United States identified the development of job skills as a motive to participate in programs.²⁵ Recent immigrants often seem to view such participation as a way for them to prepare for the future by fostering skills that will move them up the social ladder and eventually benefit the family as a whole.

Tip 3: Subsidize the cost of participation. Low-income immigrant children may be unable to participate in OST programs that pose a financial burden on their families. Offering more high-quality programs for children and youth at low or no cost may increase participation among children of immigrant parents.

Tip 4: Address language/communication barriers: Although young immigrant children can quickly pick up a new language that they are exposed to in schools and on television, many of them—especially the older ones—have trouble developing their language skills to a level that they feel comfortable. As a result, such children may avoid participating in out-of-school time programs because they cannot communicate with program staff, and are unable to find resources available in their native language. However, programs with support for children with limited English proficiency may offer these children and youth an opportunity to practice and further develop their newly acquired language skills.

Tip 5: Provide safe spaces. Safety concerns can act as a deterrent for program participation for immigrants' children, just as for other children. Program staff can help to alleviate these concerns by providing participants a safe space for activities, and perhaps safe transportation options as well.

Tip 6: Gain the trust of parents. Because family is so important in many immigrant cultures, it is important for OST programs to consider ways to involve parents. Involving parents may provide families with needed resources that will have long-lasting impact on the community as a whole. Some research²⁶ suggests that when program staff focuses on gaining trust from immigrant parents and helps the entire family, participation increases. Providing support to parents as well as immigrant children might improve the communication lines in the family and benefit children immensely. By providing parents opportunities for professional development, such as classes in English, programs can also improve the economic situation of many immigrant families.

Tip 7: Work with parents to overcome gender stereotypes. For many immigrant families, the gender of the child influences decisions about whether participation in activities is appropriate. Some researchers have observed how traditional perceptions of gender roles play out in the lives of Latino families. Generally, young females encounter parental expectations to be involved in domestic chores, whereas young males are encouraged to focus on school and work responsibilities. Moreover, one study²⁷ reported that young females were not allowed to participate in some OST programs due to parental fears that they would become involved with boys. Program staff can overcome this barrier by working with the families to help them become comfortable with the program environment.

In summary, children and youth in Latino immigrant families have numerous needs that can be met by appropriate out-of-school-time programs. The challenge for programs is to recruit and serve these children and youth in culturally relevant ways.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank Kristin Moore, Isaac Castillo, and Lina Guzman for their careful review of this research brief. The support of Atlantic Philanthropies is gratefully acknowledged.

Editor: Harriet J. Scarupa

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SUPPORTED BY: The Atlantic Philanthropies

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