

Salud America!

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Research Network to Prevent Obesity Among Latino Children

RESEARCH BRIEF

December 2011

Latino Faith-Based Communities' Perspective on Childhood Obesity Prevention

Introduction

The growing obesity epidemic underscores the need for effective public health interventions for U.S. children. Latino children from low-income families are more likely to be sedentary and obese, requiring more public health attention. More than 90 percent of Latinos are members of faith-based organizations, such as churches,¹ which often offer social, emotional and material support to congregation members. Many churches also serve as a focal point for social networking.

Faith-based communities are emerging as important settings to promote healthy lifestyles for ethnic minority populations who are at high risk for obesity.² Intervention research among churches with a primarily Black congregation has shown promising health behavioral changes among members,^{3,4,5} however, there is a paucity of obesity interventions among Latino faith-based communities.⁶ Gathering the thoughts and insights of Latino church leaders and congregation members on the issue of childhood obesity is the first step to developing effective faith-based obesity-prevention strategies, as well as future policy and environmental changes that will help improve the health of Latino children.

AUTHOR

Meizi He, M.D., M.Sc., Ph.D.

The University of Texas at San Antonio

PEER REVIEW

Peer review for this research brief was conducted by *Salud America!* National Advisory Committee Member Charlotte Pratt, Ph.D., program director for the Division of Prevention and Population Sciences at the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute.

For more information about *Salud America!*, visit

www.salud-america.org

¹ Espinosa, G., Elizondo, V, and Minranda, J. Hispanic churches in American public life: Summary of findings. IN, USA, Institute for Latino Studies, University of Notre Dame. Interim Reports, 2003. [Accessed 3-10-11].

² DeHaven MJ, Hunter IB, Wilder L, Walton JW, Berry J. Health programs in faith-based organizations: are they effective? *Am J Public Health*, 94:1030-1036, 2004.

³ Boltri JM, vis-Smith YM, Zayas LE, Shellenberger S, et al. "Developing a church-based diabetes prevention program with African Americans: focus group findings." *Diabetes Educ*, 32:901-9, 2006.

⁴ Fitzgibbon ML, Stolley MR, Ganschow P et al. "Results of a faith-based weight loss intervention for black women." *J Natl Med Assoc*, 97:1393-402, 2005.

⁵ Young DR, Stewart KJ. "A church-based physical activity intervention for African American women." *Fam Community Health*, 29:103-17, 2006.

⁶ Ramirez AG, Chalela P, Gallion K, Velez LF. Energy balance feasibility study for Latinas in Texas: a qualitative assessment. *Prev Chronic Dis*, 4:A98, 2007.



PRELIMINARY RESEARCH RESULTS

Our *Salud America!* pilot research project, “Building a Healthy Temple—A Faith-Based Community Participatory Research Project for Preventing Childhood Obesity Among Latino Families,” conducted interviews and focus groups among church leaders and congregations to gather their insights on childhood obesity. We included samples of primarily Latino churches (five Catholic and four Protestant) in the West Side of San Antonio, Texas. In-depth interviews were conducted with 35 Latino church leaders and focus groups were facilitated with 41 church-attending Latino children ages 10 to 17 and their parents (one per child) in the West Side. Preliminary results are summarized below and included in Table 1:

- **Latino church leaders and members perceived a link between faith and health.** Church leaders and members viewed life as a God-given gift; the responsibility of caring for the body falls on the shoulders of Christians in the context of the wholeness of spiritual and physical wellbeing.
- **Obesity-prevention efforts should be culturally sensitive.** Latino church leaders and members were aware of the pressing issues of the obesity epidemic and its health consequences, such as type 2 diabetes and hypertension, among the congregation. They identified the need for a culturally-sensitive obesity-prevention program for their congregations and recognized the need to connect health education with a spiritual dimension through health sermons, Sunday school lessons and Bible study sessions. Several other components also were repeatedly identified as necessities for successful health programming in faith-based communities: clergy as role models; free after-school or summer camp providing physical activity opportunities for both parents and children; healthy cooking classes; and changes in the food environment, both at church and home.
- **There are perceived financial, environmental, cultural and lifestyle barriers to obesity-prevention programs in faith-based settings.** Church leaders and members identified several barriers to obesity prevention: financial constraints; parents’ lack of nutrition knowledge; members’ lack of access to sidewalks, parks and physical activity programs; busy lifestyles; and cultural barriers, such as unhealthy traditional Latino foods.

Table 1

Preliminary Findings**Perceived link between faith and health**

"We are stewards of our body, if you will. Yes, they are ours, but they are also ours to care for...And if our bodies are not in particularly good, healthy shape, you're not going to do much serving."

"God gave you a body. A person has to take care of it. Life is a gift from God; you don't abuse it by not taking care of it, not watching what you eat, not getting exercise and so on. I think that's fundamental to our existence."

"Healthy eating and a healthy person is more likely also to be more interested in their spiritual life."

"Gluttony is a sin, but He (God) loves us all unconditionally and if it's a sin we should be fit and not overeat."

"God does care about our health and how we choose to be healthy."

Needs for obesity prevention programs

"We're seeing our Hispanic population suffer tremendously due to diabetes as a result of unhealthy eating habits."

"If there's any health programs that will be addressing the issues, they need to come with the agenda of 'how we are going to be educating and helping this community,' not to make a dollar."

"If some people come in who have expertise, then...the church could be used as a conduit for getting these resources out to the people."

Conclusion and Policy Implications

Our Latino faith-based communities are aware of and willing to address childhood obesity among their congregations, according to our preliminary research findings. The preliminary results of this study highlight the need for obesity prevention among Latino children *and* reveal the strong potential of a faith-based community as a venue and infrastructure for implementing effective obesity-prevention strategies.

Findings from this study are important for informing public health policy, public funding allocations, and programming/service delivery through the faith-based supportive infrastructure that may help curb the obesity epidemic among Latino children. Public health and non-profit organizations should consider supporting and sustaining obesity-prevention strategies specifically for Latinos using existing faith-based community infrastructure and supportive social networks. Our preliminary

findings, for example, were shared with local public health department staff members and community stakeholders to encourage their support. Future research will use results from this study to develop and sustain culturally-sensitive obesity-prevention programs in Latino faith-based communities.