

# Salud America!

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



## RESEARCH REVIEW

August 2013

## Regulation of Food and Beverage Marketing to Latino Youths

### Abstract

Child and adolescent overweight and obesity in the United States are increasing at alarming rates, particularly in the Latino population. Food industry marketing to youths is a big business, with nearly \$2 billion spent annually to target this market segment. Ethnic-minority children, such as Latino youths, present a particularly attractive target to food marketers because of their increasing population size, spending power, and media exposure. However, the vast majority of food products advertised to youths are unhealthy and Latino youths are disproportionately targeted with unhealthy food ads. As concerns regarding the role food marketing plays in youth diet and obesity increases, demand for industry regulation also is rising.

This research review is a comprehensive assessment of food and beverage marketing to Latino youths and the current state of regulation on youth-targeted marketing by the food and beverage industry.

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For more information about *Salud America!*, visit [www.salud-america.org](http://www.salud-america.org).

## Introduction

Currently, 39.1 percent of Latino youths ages 2-19 are overweight or obese, compared with 27.9 percent for non-Latino White youths.<sup>1</sup> Diet is a central component of overweight and obesity and a variety of environmental, social, and cultural factors may contribute to Latino youths diet practices. Food and beverage marketing is one such factor.<sup>2</sup>

Scientific evidence points to food and beverage marketing as a key influence on youth diet owing to its distortion of young people's food preferences, requests, consumption patterns, and nutrition knowledge.<sup>2-6</sup> Leading food and beverage companies spend nearly \$2 billion annually to market branded food and beverage products to young people.<sup>7</sup> These heavily marketed foods and beverages are typically of poor nutritional value with little positive contribution to dietary recommendations.<sup>2</sup> Recent data show that food advertising targeted at Spanish-speaking children is even more likely to promote nutritionally poor food products than advertising aimed at English-speaking children.<sup>8</sup>

Children and adolescents are attractive market segments for the food and beverage industry because they spend billions of their own dollars annually (and are increasing in buying power), influence parental purchases, heavily use media, readily adopt new media technologies, and are future adult consumers.<sup>9,10</sup> African-American and Latino youths are specifically important targets given that they are rapidly growing population segments, and generally consume more media and have higher spending power relative to other youths.<sup>11-13</sup>

Industry members have recognized these factors and, in response to less effective regulation of youth food marketing in U.S. Spanish-language media, increased their ethnically targeted marketing.<sup>8,13,14</sup> As such, public health researchers, child health advocates, and policymakers are actively examining strategies used by the food industry to target Latino children and adolescents in an effort to identify opportunities to improve regulation.<sup>3,13</sup>

## Methodology

This comprehensive research review summarizes the current literature on food and beverage industry marketing to Latino youths. The review further examines the current state of industry and government regulation of food and beverage marketing to the young population in the U.S.

For this review, keyword searches were conducted in PubMed, Google Scholar, and Google with a combination of terms and words in the title or text. Databases were searched with key terms such as: "food and beverage marketing AND children AND diet" and "food-industry marketing AND children AND regulation." We searched variations of these terms, including variants containing the terms "Latino" and "Hispanic."

Article titles and abstracts were reviewed, and relevant articles were retrieved. Additional articles were identified through searches of the references of the initial set of publications found through keyword searches. Also included were reports from governmental agencies and other relevant stakeholders and peer-reviewed, published studies and review articles as additional sources of evidence. Search limits were confined to the English language. Searches were not restricted by date or study design.

## Key Research Results

- Food and beverage marketing practices influence youth diet and disproportionately focus on unhealthy products, especially advertising targeted to minority youths.
- Latino youths are particularly vulnerable to food and beverage marketing because of their high levels of media exposure.
- Food and beverage marketers identify Latino youths as an important market segment and use targeted strategies to sell to and persuade this population.
- The food and beverage industry has integrated itself into the U.S. Latino community.
- Self-regulation of child-targeted marketing by the food and beverage industry has not been effective and is even less effective at protecting Latino youths.
- Various advocacy groups have repeatedly called for government regulation of food marketing to children and, although government intervention has not yet reached fruition, some local avenues exist to potentially regulate marketing in Latino communities.

## Studies Supporting Key Research Results

### **Food and beverage marketing practices influence youth diet and disproportionately focus on unhealthy products, especially advertising targeted to minority youths.**

A 2005 report from the Institute of Medicine (IOM), *Food Marketing to Children and Youth*, describes media (in all of its various forms) as the central environmental factor influencing the dietary patterns of young people and states that food and beverage marketing is a likely contributor to less healthful diets.<sup>2</sup> The report concludes that television (TV) advertising, specifically, influences children ages 2-11 to prefer and request high-calorie and low-nutrient foods and beverages. Moreover, the IOM found evidence that TV advertising influences both the short-term and usual dietary intake of children ages 2-5. Weaker evidence supports a role for influence on older children's diets.

In line with the IOM report, additional recent studies show that the vast majority of food industry advertisements targeting children are for unhealthy foods. A 2009 study found that fewer than one in 100 food ads promote a healthy product that can

be eaten safely on a daily basis. The study showed that in the 10 hours of watching children's TV programs that is required to identify one healthy food ad, children are exposed to 55 ads for foods that are nutritionally poor.<sup>15</sup> A second study reported that 86 percent of food product advertisements viewed by children aged 2-11 years were for foods high in saturated fat, sugar, or sodium.<sup>16</sup>

Minority youths experience even higher rates of advertising of high-calorie, nutrient-poor foods than White youths. Data show that fast-food TV advertisements viewed by African-American children contain 7 percent more calories per ad compared to White children, and both Latino and African-American children are significantly more likely to see ads for high-calorie, low-nutrient fast-food meals available at McDonald's Corporation, Burger King, and Yum! Brands' chain restaurants (e.g., KFC and Taco Bell).<sup>17</sup> Additional recent findings show that 84.2 percent of youth-targeted food and beverage advertisements on Spanish-language TV promote foods in the lowest nutritional category. This is notably higher than the already high 72.5 percent on English-language channels (see Figure 1).<sup>8</sup>

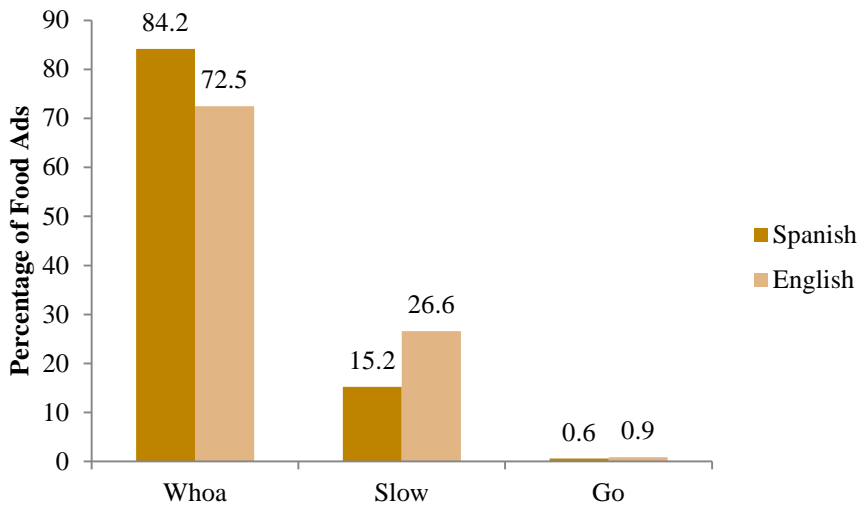
#### **Latino youths are particularly vulnerable to food and beverage marketing because of their high levels of media exposure.**

Like other minorities, Latino youths have higher overall levels of media exposure in a typical day than do their White counterparts (13 hours for Latino youths compared with 8.36 hours for White youths; see Figure 2).<sup>12</sup> A large chunk of this increased media exposure reflects more TV watching; Latino youths watch an average of 5.21 hours of TV per day, much more than the 3.36 hours watched by White youths. Latino youths are also more likely to have a TV in their bedroom (77% Latinos vs. 64% Whites).

While concerns about a digital divide (a gap in access to electronic devices due to socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity) persist, growing evidence suggests that access is increasingly available to most minority adolescents, including Latinos.<sup>18</sup> Latino youths spend nearly 3 hours per day watching videos, playing games, and listening to music on mobile devices like cell phones and iPods, while Whites spend only 1 hour, 20 minutes.<sup>12</sup> Latinos also spend increased time listening to music and using computers and are active in newer types of media outlets, and about 18 percent of young Latino Internet users use Twitter compared to 8 percent of all young Internet users.<sup>19</sup>

*Latino youths are particularly vulnerable to food and beverage marketing because of their high levels of media exposure.*

**Figure 1**  
**Comparisons of Nutritional Quality in Food Ads for Industry Overall by Program Language**



**Note:** Go: Foods to eat anytime, low in calories, healthy; Slow: Foods to eat sometimes (at most several times a week), medium in calories, healthy; Whoa: Foods to eat only now and then, high in calories, not so healthy.

**Data source:** U.S. Department of Health and Human Services food rating framework.

Levels of media exposure are important to consider given that repeated exposure can strengthen a marketing message's significance to the consumer, suggest behaviors, and affect the diffusion of the message. Therefore, due to their increased TV exposure and also because of targeted marketing campaigns, ethnic minorities, as a group, are subject to a disproportionate amount of unhealthy food advertising.<sup>17</sup> As discussed in the previous section, several pieces of evidence show Latino youths see more TV advertisements for unhealthy foods than White youths. This difference persists in media forms beyond TV. For instance, Latino youths also visit child-targeted food marketing websites at disproportionately higher rates than their peers.<sup>17</sup>

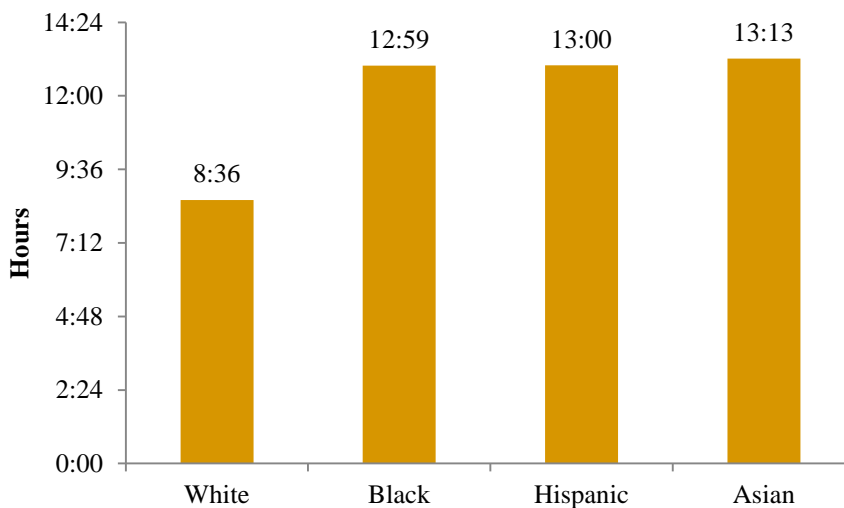
Importantly, multiple studies document the association of increased media use and childhood obesity in the Latino community.<sup>20;21</sup>

### **Food and beverage marketers identify Latino youths as an important market segment and use targeted strategies to sell to and persuade this population.**

The young Latino population's high exposure to traditional media outlets, such as TV, coupled with their increasing exposure to digital media, contribute to their identification as a key target market segment in the marketing world at large.<sup>22;23</sup> Further factors contributing to the targeting of Latino youths include their increasing

size in the population (Latinos are the fastest-growing population segment in the U.S.) and their increased purchasing power (Latino teens spend 4% more than non-Latino teens).<sup>11:13</sup> Marketers are investing significant resources to understand the Latino youth market so as to better appeal to this group.<sup>10</sup>

**Figure 2**  
**Total Daily Media Exposure among 8-18-Year-Olds Based on Racial/Ethnic Group**



**Data source:** Rideout V, Lauricella A, Wartella E. *Children, media, and race: Media use among White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian American children*. Chicago, IL: Northwestern University; 2011.

Strategies for marketing to ethnic minorities consider relevant attitudes, values, ethnic-specific media channels, social institutions (e.g., churches, clubs), and patterns of shopping and media use.<sup>10</sup> Marketers may use ethnic symbols, linguistic styles, music, and spokespersons of their target demographic to link cultural values, beliefs, and norms with certain food brands/products.<sup>24</sup> In line with such strategies, fast-food companies have developed ethnically targeted web content/sites such as Burger King's "Futbol Kingdom" and McDonald's "MeEncanta.com".<sup>17</sup> These web sites incorporate Spanish language and ethnically relevant activities (e.g. soccer) to target young Latino consumers. Importantly, many Latino youths, even those who speak Spanish at home, use the same English-language media as non-Latino youths. Data from 2010 show that 73 percent to 81 percent of TV food ads viewed by Latino youths appeared on English-language TV.<sup>25</sup> Companies marketing to this demographic often do so in English, with only hints of Spanish, and use themes that are culturally relevant while appealing to all youths (e.g. blending Latin music with general hip hop).<sup>26</sup>

Still, Spanish-language marketing is a prevalent strategy used by the food and beverage industry. Latino preschoolers who are exposed to both Spanish and English-language TV see almost 300 advertisements for fast foods annually on Spanish-language channels alone.<sup>17</sup> The Spanish-language web sites “Comida Kraft” (Kraft Foods, Inc.) and “Que Rica Vida “ (General Mills, Inc.) specifically target Latino mothers, who are viewed as the caretakers and decision-makers for food products bought for their children, and thus are another target market segment for the food and beverage industry.<sup>27</sup> General Mill’s reports that the strategy behind “Que Rica Vida” is to position the brand “as a trusted source of information for Hispanic moms who need help navigating life the U.S.”<sup>27</sup>

Marketers also have identified the urban, low-income Latino youth population as “superconsumers” of soda, candy, and snacks, and evidence shows this population is heavily exposed to advertising of unhealthy foods.<sup>9</sup> For example, a cross-sectional study found that low-income Latino neighborhoods have up to nine times the density of outdoor advertising for high-calorie/low-nutrient food (fast food, sodas, sweetened juices, etc.) and alcohol compared to high-income White neighborhoods.<sup>28</sup> The difference persisted even in high-income Latino neighborhoods, where the density of such ads was still nearly three times higher than in high-income White neighborhoods.

Various research further suggests that exposure to targeted advertising (e.g., Spanish-language marketing) may be more effective in influencing Latino youths than exposure to non-targeted advertising.<sup>10;29</sup> For example, even among bilingual Latinos, recall is greater for advertisements that are aired in Spanish compared to ads that are aired in English.<sup>30</sup>

### **The food and beverage industry has integrated itself into the U.S. Latino community.**

Food and beverage marketers have become an important source of funding for community organizations.<sup>31;32</sup> This is particularly true of soft drink companies and the Latino community. For example, in 2012, PepsiCo donated \$100,000 to the National Association of Hispanic Journalists and the Coca-Cola Company donated \$25,000 to the American Diabetes Association for education outreach specifically to the Latino community.<sup>33;34</sup> Local Latino events and causes are also frequently supported by sugary-drink brands and are promoted on local Spanish-language TV.<sup>35</sup> In addition to sponsoring events and causes, the soda industry specifically targets youths with campaigns that offer healthy lifestyle advice and tout company philanthropic efforts.<sup>31</sup>

While soda company sponsorship is not limited to ethnic minority groups, Latinos and African Americans in particular are characterized as being more interested (vs. non-Latino Whites) in having marketers do good for their communities.<sup>32</sup> This fact is recognized by fast-food advertisers, who are more likely to use messages focused on

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helping the community in their Spanish-language advertisements than in their general advertisements.<sup>17</sup> The “do good for the community” attitude suggests that sponsorships and support for ethnic minority cultural institutions may have significant influencing powers.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, today many Latinos and African Americans see marketing to their communities as evidence that companies value their business, which was not the case even 10 years ago.<sup>10</sup>

### **Self-regulation of child-targeted marketing by the food and beverage industry has not been effective and is even less effective at protecting Latino youths.**

The food and beverage industry has begun some efforts to self-regulate advertising directed to children under age 12. These include the National Advertising Review Council’s strengthening of the Children’s Advertising Review Unit’s guidelines in 2006 and the Council of Better Business Bureau’s sponsorship of the Children’s Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI), which became operational in July 2007 with 11 participating food companies.<sup>36</sup> Sixteen food and beverage companies currently participate in CFBAI and their guidelines underwent revision and strengthening in 2009 and 2010.<sup>6,37</sup>

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) evaluated the progress the industry made towards promoting healthier food choices to youths in a recently released comparison of 2006 to 2009 data.<sup>38</sup> Findings were mixed (e.g. drinks marketed to children and teens were slightly lower in calories in 2009 than in 2006, but still averaged more than 20 grams of added sugar per serving) and the FTC urges broader participation and continued improvement.

A more recent (2011) evaluation of the industry’s progress toward self-regulation identified the following specific areas of concern:<sup>6</sup>

- Product reformulations made only incremental progression toward healthier nutrient profiles
  - For example, from 2009 to 2011, some child brand cereals showed small but significant reductions in sodium content (611 to 555 per 100 mg for General Mills brands and 525 to 475 per 100 mg for Kellogg brands), while others had increased levels of sodium and sugar (Post brands: 33% to 34% increase for sugar and 542 to 558 per 100 mg sodium; not statistically significant)<sup>39</sup>
- Companies continued to market nutritionally poor foods and beverages to youth populations
  - For example, media spending to promote child-targeted cereals (the vast majority of them unhealthy) increased 34 percent from 2008 to 2011 and cereal advertising expenditures on Spanish-language TV more than doubled in this time frame.<sup>39</sup>
- Companies used misleading advertising and health claims in youth advertising
  - Companies participating in CFBAI nearly doubled their use of licensed characters from 8.8 percent in 2005 to 15.2 percent in 2009 and 49.4



percent of all advertisements using those characters were for nutritionally poor products. Use of licensed characters in child advertising may be considered misleading given that children trust the characters they see in program content. The 2005 IOM report recommended licensed characters be used only for the promotion of products that support healthful diets.<sup>15</sup>

- Labeling symbols and nutrient-profiling systems hindered consumers' selection of healthy products.
  - For example, manufacturer-developed front-of-package (FOP) labels summarize key nutritional characteristics of food products and are meant to help shoppers select healthier items, yet 84 percent of foods from the CFBAI's food product list that contain manufacturer-developed FOP labels do not meet one or more nutrient criteria for total sugar, fat, saturated fat, sodium or fiber and 95 percent have added sugar.<sup>40</sup>

In addition, some advocates contend that industry has supported the development of self-regulation as a means of deflecting stronger forms of regulation, and that self-regulation proposals are for appearance rather than substance.<sup>3</sup> This could be particularly true when considering Spanish-language media. One study found that 50.9 percent of Spanish-language child-targeted food ads came from companies participating in CFBAI, compared with 71.3 percent of all child-targeted foods ads on English-language TV.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, while 100 percent of TV advertisements from CFBAI-participating companies were in compliance with each company's self-set nutrition standards, 84.2 percent of all of the advertised foods were classified in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services food rating framework's poorest nutritional category. This finding suggests that the CFBAI has not accomplished any meaningful improvements in the nutritional quality of foods marketed to children on U.S. Spanish-language TV.

**Various advocacy groups have repeatedly called for government regulation of food marketing to children and, although government intervention has not yet reached fruition, some local avenues exist to potentially regulate marketing in Latino communities.**

Despite the absence of effective industry self-regulation, governmental bodies have not yet put forth efforts to severely restrict children's exposure to food marketing.<sup>3;41;42</sup> The reasons behind this reservation are complex and a detailed examination is outside of the scope of this review. In short, some reservation stems from the constitutional commercial speech doctrine, which is often cited by food industry groups in an effort to prohibit government regulation. There is, however, increasing opposition to First Amendment protection for commercial speech, specifically food marketing to young people. Legal scholars assert that the inherently misleading nature of food advertising to children diminishes its First Amendment protection, opening the door for the possibility of government regulation.<sup>43;44</sup>

Additional reservation comes from social attitudes and opinions whereby the public or government fail to recognize child obesity as a public health problem for which policy solutions are needed.<sup>3</sup> Such failure lends credence to industry arguments that government regulation infringes on personal decisions. Experts argue that, while the food industry emphasizes personal responsibility for food choices, the misleading qualities of the industry's marketing and advertising practices purposefully undermine consumers' ability to be responsible.<sup>3;43;44</sup> This argument is made particularly strongly regarding children, who do not yet have the cognitive ability to identify and respond to misleading marketing, reducing their ability to be personally responsible.<sup>45;46</sup>

The global span of food industry marketing and weak regulatory authority within countries impose further challenges to government regulation.<sup>3</sup> For example, while the Canadian province of Quebec banned marketing to children younger than 13, these children are exposed to U.S. TV channels and are exposed to additional marketing via the Internet and other media produced outside Quebec, making consistency difficult to achieve for regulators.<sup>47</sup>

Despite the lack of broad governmental regulation, there are ways to improve food and beverage marketing at the local level and these practices can be applied to U.S. Latino communities. A recent publication by Harris and Graff (2011) lists options to improve marketing practices at: food retail markets (such as requiring "healthy checkout aisles" that do not allow purchases of unhealthy food products, limiting the total amount of store window space dedicated to signs, requiring retailers to get a license to limit the sale of unhealthy foods, etc.); restaurant-type establishments (such as menu labeling laws, setting nutrition standards for children's meals that include incentives such as toys, prohibiting fast-food restaurants from opening near schools, implementing a program to certify healthy restaurants that encourage fewer sales and advertising of unhealthy foods to children, etc.); schools (such as banning the sale and advertising of unhealthy foods on campus, instituting closed campus policies to decrease student exposure to unhealthy food and beverage marketing, etc.); and communities (such as vending contracts that limit the sale and marketing of unhealthy foods and drinks in parks or other youth-friendly facilities).<sup>48</sup>

## Conclusions and Policy Implications

This comprehensive assessment of food marketing to Latino youths has identified the following conclusions:

- Obesity among U.S. Latino youths is a national epidemic of which diet is a central component. Food and beverage marketing is a powerful influence on Latino youth diet.
- Food and beverage marketing to Latino youths disproportionately advertises unhealthy products.
- Latino youths are a key market segment for food and beverage manufacturers given their increasing population size, spending power, and media exposure.

- The food and beverage industry has integrated itself into the Latino community through sponsorship and ethnically targeted messaging.
- Self-regulation by the food and beverage industry is not yet having an impact. Therefore, it may be necessary to strengthen government intervention or regulation, to meaningfully change marketing to youths. In the meantime, options exist to improve marketing in Latino communities.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Policymakers and the public should recognize the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to youths as a public health problem for which policy solutions are needed. Governments should consider public hearings at the state and local levels to raise awareness and initiate community action.
- The voluntary principles that were proposed by the Interagency Working Group on Food Marketed to Children in 2011 to help guide industry efforts to improve the nutritional profile of food marketed to children should be finalized.<sup>49</sup>
- Immediate action to limit children's exposure to food marketing should be taken by governments. States and municipalities should reduce community-based exposure of food marketing to youths. Particular focus should be paid to eliminate exposure to unhealthy product campaigns that specifically target ethnic minorities, such as Latino youths.

## FUTURE RESEARCH NEEDS

The evidence linking food marketing practices and unhealthy youth diet trends continues to expand. However, evidence focused on food marketing practices and their direct effects on Latino youths is lacking. While the commercial market research industry maintains a wealth of data on marketing to racial/ethnic minority youths, much of this information is proprietary, and the lack of publically available data hinders the public health community's ability to mount counter-marketing campaigns and advance policy change.<sup>13;50</sup> Future research in this area should examine, in particular, the:

- Effects of marketing unhealthy foods to Latino children;
- Effects of the amount and density of unhealthy food and beverage outlets within Latino communities on consumption behaviors;
- ways to gain access to proprietary marketing data on the Latino youth population;
- Influence of food and beverage promotions via different media types on Latino youth health behaviors;
- Effectiveness of culturally specific media campaigns focused on healthy eating and physical activity;
- Identification of industry-self regulatory pledges that might particularly benefit ethnic minorities; and
- Frequency and effectiveness of local level efforts to reduce ethnically targeted food marketing.

### **ABOUT THE PROGRAM**

*Salud America!* The RWJF Research Network to Prevent Obesity Among Latino Children is a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The program aims to educate and support researchers, decision-makers, community leaders, and the public in contributing towards healthier Latino communities and seeking environmental and policy solutions to the epidemic of Latino childhood obesity. The network is directed by the Institute for Health Promotion Research at The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio.

For more information, visit <http://www.salud-america.org>.

### **ABOUT THIS RESEARCH REVIEW**

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