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Latino Youth Activists Push for Healthy Changes in Their Community



SaludableOmaha is community health movement being driven by Latino youth activists in South Omaha, Nebraska.

“*SaludableOmaha* is making tremendous strides in spurring Latino youth advocacy in the city,” said Dr. Terry Huang, professor and chair of the Department of Health Promotion, Social, and Behavioral Health at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, and a former *Salud America!* advisor. “These youth are rallying local residents to push for policy and environmental changes that pave way for healthier lifestyles.”

A new [article](#) in the journal *Preventing Chronic Disease* explains how the program was developed, and analyzes the program’s youth advocacy framework.

To prepare for developing the program, researchers used the “community readiness model” to assess supply and demand for health programs, engage the

community, determine the community’s baseline readiness to address childhood obesity (which was low), and guide youth advocacy program development.

Researchers then trained a cohort of Latino youth, who then created and launched *SaludableOmaha*.

The researchers are currently analyzing the work of a new youth cohort, which has successfully led a healthy eating initiative in schools.

One long-term goal of the project is to examine the potential of youth advocacy to shift individual and community norms regarding obesity prevention in Omaha, and to spur advocacy for health-promoting communities.

SaludableOmaha has been integrated within existing high school curricula and potential synergies with other community organizations are under development. Ongoing strategies are

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Director's Corner

Letter to members from Dr. Amelie Ramirez

Encouraging news! A new study found declining obesity rates among children ages 2-4 in low-income communities, *ABC News/Univision reports*.

The percentage of obese children overall dropped from 15.2 percent in 2003 to 14.9 percent in 2010. Extreme obesity also fell.

The news for Latino children also was good:

Hispanics were counted among the groups that experienced modest declines in obesity within this age group. This marks the reversal of a startling trend in the Latino community where 38.2 percent of Latino children between the ages of 2 and 19 are either overweight or obese, according to a study conducted by

the Leadership for Healthy Communities in 2010. In comparison, 31.7 percent of all children fell within the same categorization.

The researchers didn't identify a definitive cause for the decline, but said that possible causes include increases in the number of low-income mothers who breastfeed, marketers spending less money advertising sugary foods to youth, and national initiatives to curb childhood obesity.

This news is certainly exciting, but we're not done yet—nowhere near it.

Obesity is an epidemic, one which continues to affect Latinos at a higher rate than the general population. Our work remains as crucial as ever.

Amelie G. Ramirez, Dr.P.H.

Director, *Salud America!*

Director, Institute for Health Promotion Research
UT Health Science Center at San Antonio



News Brief

What Are Students Doing to Make San Antonio a Healthier City?

The City of San Antonio's "SA 2020" effort aims to expand existing public-private partnerships or create new ones in the areas of education, economic development, public health and safety, government accountability, and energy. As part of that effort, the Mayor's Fitness Council, which includes *Salud America!* Director Dr. Amelie G. Ramirez, has developed

a student ambassador program for youth in grades 5-12 to promote health and fitness in their schools and neighborhoods across Bexar County, Texas. A new [video](#) showcases the youth ambassadors and their plans for improving local health.



Funding

Grant Listings

RWJF, the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and the National Collaborative on Childhood Obesity Research (NCCOR), have obesity-related funding opportunities that are seeking applications, or compile lists of funding opportunities.

[RWJF](#)

[NIH](#)

[NCCOR](#)

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Latino Youth Activists

built around three pillars: social marketing with an emphasis on online media, continued integration and development within the community's schools, and engagement with community organizations, businesses, and leaders.

"We found that the community readiness model is an important tool for addressing issues such as childhood obesity in underserved communities because it provides a framework for matching interventions to the community," Huang said. "Efforts like *SaludableOmaha* can help shift a community's climate and aid in its adoption of much-needed obesity prevention programs."



Stepping Up Against Latino Childhood Obesity

Research Success Spurs Advocacy Action, Latino Family Health Improvements

Editor's Note: The following is an excerpt from a larger magazine article on the past and present of Salud America!

Shari Barkin, M.D., a professor of pediatrics at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn., is among the 20 *Salud America!* grantees who conducted research focused on Latino childhood obesity.

Her study focused on 132 Hispanic families with children aged 3 to 5 in Nashville's Davidson County. Some families were introduced to their community recreation center for routine physical activity, while others had the same access but were not brought inside and educated about using the facility for fitness and well-being.

"What we found was that exposure to and routine use of recreation centers by Latinos led to sustained use for physical activity one year later by both parents and their young children," Dr. Barkin said. "Activity habits set in early childhood can profoundly influence lifelong paths for health. Our goal is to encourage



Juan Carlos Mondragon, 32, and his family participated in a *Salud America!* pilot study from 2009-11

policymakers to create programs that encourage Latino families to walk through the door and learn how to use their community recreation centers. It's not just about building or refurbishing recreation facilities. Healthy lifestyle programs targeted at

children as young as preschool age have enormous potential to prevent obesity."

Dr. Barkin and her team shared their results with the Metro Parks and Recreation Board of Nashville, Tenn., the Mayor's Council on Child Wellness, and key community and policymaking partners.

Juan Carlos Mondragon, 32, and his family participated in Dr. Barkin's study from 2009 to 2011. He and his wife, Irma, and their two children, Leah, 7, and Shayla, 4, were given free access to and educated about their neighborhood recreation facility.

"Going to the center helped us exercise together, as a family," Mondragon said. "And we learned about eating healthier too. I know it's going to help us in the long run so we don't become overweight. There should be more programs like this one. And I hope to see more sidewalks, better parks and more bicycle paths in our neighborhood in the future, especially for our children."

Latina Overcomes Her Own Barriers to Empower Others to Improve Their Health

Rosa Soto grew up in a world where the odds were stacked against her. In her community, becoming a teen mother with a low-paying job seemed likelier than graduating from high school, and many people thought she'd always be held back by her lisp.

But Soto overcame her lisp, earned a political science and international relations degree from the University of Southern California, and has worked to empower underserved families and children for more than 15 years, according to a new profile story about her by the Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities (HKHC).

Soto is currently the regional director for the California Center for Public Health Advocacy (CCPHA) and the project director for the HKHC project in Baldwin Park, Calif., a predominantly Latino community.

"I'm a community organizer. I never thought of myself as a public health person," she said, although she has spent her career addressing teen pregnancy, diabetes, and now



Rosa Soto

childhood obesity.

Soto grounds herself in family and in helping others find their voice, according to a Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities profile.

Rosa's parents were immigrants from Mexico.

"A lot of my childhood was about fitting in and finding a place of belonging," she explained. And she wants others to also feel they belong and can make a difference, and that the status quo doesn't have to remain "the norm."

"This work is important to me because it gives me an opportunity to demonstrate that change is possible."

Read Soto's full story [here](#).

Research

Report: Latinos among the Most Obese, Sedentary in U.S.



About 31 percent of U.S. Latinos are obese and 30.6 percent have a sedentary lifestyle, higher rates than for the overall population (27.8% and 26.2%, respectively), according to a new snapshot of the nation's health called [America's Health Rankings](#).

Latinos' obesity and diabetes rates continue to be alarming, the authors say.

But the news isn't all bad: Latinos' rates of premature death, death due to cancers, cardiovascular deaths and infant mortality all improved, according to an *NBC Latino report*.

The rankings, which comes from the United Health Foundation, the American Public Health Association, and the Partnership for Prevention, take into account 24 measures of health, including tobacco and alcohol abuse, exercise, infectious diseases, crime rates, premature birth rates, and cancer and heart disease rates. The report ranks the states based on those indicators.

Vermont tops the list of healthiest states for the fourth straight year. Vermont's strengths include ranking in the

top ten states for a high rate of high school graduation, and the bottom ten for a low violent crime rate and low incidence of infectious disease.

Hawaii is ranked as second-healthiest, followed by New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Minnesota.

Texas ranks 40th.

Mississippi and Louisiana tie for 49th as the least healthy states. Mississippi ranks in the bottom five states on 12 of the 24 measures, including a high prevalence of obesity, a high prevalence of a sedentary lifestyle, a low high school graduation rate, limited availability of primary care physicians, a high prevalence of low birth weight infants, and a high prevalence of diabetes.

On a positive note, New Jersey (18% Latino) and Colorado (21% Latino) were two of the states that saw great improvement in health ranking measures, with New Jersey improving on nine different measures and Colorado improving across five different categories, according to the *NBC Latino report*.



Research Briefs

Study: U.S. Food Culture Proves Difficult Hurdle for Hispanic Mothers

Hispanic mothers, especially those in urban and low-income areas and who have recently migrated to the U.S., have difficulty adapting to the food culture of the United States, a new study shows, Voxxi [reports](#). That influence of fast food, easy microwavable meals and high-fat ingredients makes healthy cooking difficult for Latinas who struggle to keep a sense of food culture at home for their children, who easily become accustomed to the culture of the United States. The data comes from a [study](#) published in the *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal*.

Policy & Built Environment Corner

Two Futures for America's Health

By Risa Lavizzo-Mourey
President and CEO, RWJF

RWJF and the Trust for America's Health recently released our [annual report](#), *F as in Fat: How Obesity Threatens America's Future*.

Obesity rates in the United States remain unacceptably high, and the epidemic persists in affecting Blacks and Hispanics disproportionately. For the first time, this year's report examined how the obesity epidemic could impact our future 20 years from now. Ironically, this forecast has made me reflect on the past.

Thirty years ago, I lived in Philadelphia and was an instructor at Temple University. After a long day teaching, I remember heading home with my daughter, who was a preschooler at the time. My office looked down North Broad Street, which ran through some of the worst urban blight of any American city in the past several decades. We wanted to pick up a few items for dinner, but couldn't find a grocery store or supermarket with the fresh fruit, produce and other healthy foods we were accustomed to eating. About 20,000 people—mostly poor, mostly African-American and Hispanic—lived in that neighborhood and had to cope with this type of disadvantage on a daily basis. What I didn't know then was that Philadelphia was a microcosm of how policies and environments affect diets, obesity, and health.

At that time, obesity was not on the radar as a major public health concern, and state obesity rates looked tame compared with what we see today. In 1995, Mississippi had an adult obesity rate of 19.4 percent, and Colorado had the lowest rate, 13.9 percent. According to the latest data, Colorado still has the lowest rate, but it has climbed to 20.7 percent. I don't think we could have imagined it in 1995, but the lowest rate today is higher than the highest rate back then. That's why it's so important for us to look ahead to 2030 and try to chart a better course.

The new analysis in this year's report shows that if obesity rates continue on their current trajectory, it's estimated that by 2030 adult obesity rates could reach or exceed 44 percent in every state—and could exceed 60 percent in 13 states. If so,



Risa Lavizzo-Mourey

new cases of type 2 diabetes, coronary heart disease and stroke, hypertension and arthritis could skyrocket. Obesity-related health care costs could increase by more than 10 percent in 43 states and by more than 20 percent in nine states.

On the other hand, the analysis also shows that if the average adult body mass index (BMI) was decreased by only 5 percent in each state, we could spare millions of Americans from serious health problems and save billions of dollars in health care spending—between 6.5 percent and 7.8 percent in costs in almost every state. By 2030, this could equate to savings ranging from \$1.1 billion in Wyoming to \$81.7 billion in California.

We have made important progress toward preventing and reducing obesity around the country, especially among children. For instance, California, Mississippi and New York City are beginning to show decreases in overall rates of childhood obesity. The trends in those areas also have shown us that children who face the biggest obstacles to healthy choices and are at greatest risk for obesity do not always benefit when progress is made. I saw the evidence of this first hand when I lived in Philadelphia. That's why a study released this fall tells the best story of all.

New data show Philadelphia has reduced its obesity rates in ways that also helped to close the disparities gap. While the city achieved an overall decline in obesity rates among public school students, the largest improvements came among Black male and Hispanic female students. For Black males, rates declined nearly 8 percent; rates for Hispanic females dropped 7 percent.

Although the decrease in childhood obesity rates in Philadelphia is a recent development, community-wide efforts started there more than a decade ago. We need to learn from the City of Brotherly Love and spread the actions and policies that work so all children can enjoy better health.

I am now a grandmother and want my grandkids, and their entire generation, to be healthy. If we take effective action, many Americans could be spared from type 2 diabetes, heart disease, cancer, and other health problems, and the savings in health care costs and increased productivity would have a real and positive impact on the economy. Investing in prevention today means a healthier, more productive and brighter future for our country.



Policy Brief

Report: **La Importancia del Lugar de Residencia y la Raza**

Why Place and Race Matter, a report on the intersection of neighborhood environments and racially based opportunity barriers, is now available in **Spanish** as *La Importancia del Lugar de Residencia y la Raza*. Released in English by PolicyLink last year, the report examines how advocates and activists from neighborhoods throughout California are taking these connections into account as they work to enhance the health of individuals, families, and communities. Access to healthy food, transportation, housing, and health care are among the many issues addressed in the report. Lessons learned from Latino communities in California serves as a model for other groups that want to improve the quality of health in their own communities.



Video Roundup

Click on the images to see the associated video.



How You Can Change School Food for the Better



Solving the Issue of Unhealthy 'Competitive Foods' in Schools



Mexico Starts War against Sugary Drinks, Fatty Foods



The Real Bears: How Soda Can Adversely Impact a Family



What Latino Schools Are Doing to Get Healthy: El Monte City, Calif.



What Latino Schools Are Doing to Get Healthy: Miami, Fla.



Salud America!: Introduction to Latino Child Obesity



Salud America!: Creating Latino Change Agents

About the E-newsletter

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Salud America! is a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The program aims to unite and increase the number of Latino scientists engaged in research on childhood obesity among Latinos to seek environmental and policy solutions to the epidemic. The network is directed by the Institute for Health Promotion Research at The UT Health Science Center at San Antonio. For more information, [click here](#). To learn more about the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's efforts to combat childhood obesity, [click here](#).