

# Salud America!

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

### RESEARCH BRIEF

December 2011

## A Family-Centered Program to Promote Wellness for Latino Children

### Introduction

Latino youth are at greater risk of being overweight or obese. More than 38 percent of Latino youth ages 2 to 19 are overweight or obese compared with 31.7 percent of all youth ages 2 to 19 who are overweight or obese.<sup>1</sup> In addition, more Latinos are likely to suffer from related health consequences such as type 2 diabetes. Latina teens have a 52.5 percent lifetime risk developing diabetes compared with White girls who have a 31.2 percent chance of developing diabetes.<sup>2</sup> Because Latinos are one of the fastest-growing population groups,<sup>3</sup> have higher obesity rates, and are more likely to be physically unfit compared with other groups,<sup>4,5</sup> programs and policies to increase physical activity and fitness in Latino school children are particularly critical. In lower-income communities, sustained engagement of older teens in after-school activities (including physical activity) is particularly challenging because a variety of factors, such as concerns about safety, access to transportation, competing demands of jobs and childcare, and high rates of teen pregnancy. A recent study<sup>6</sup> of after-school programs in six U.S. cities found that giving urban youth leadership opportunities and a “voice” in decision-making significantly increased retention rates.

### PRELIMINARY RESEARCH RESULTS

Our *Salud America!* pilot research project was a mid-course evaluation of a project called Healthy Tomorrows for Teens (HTT). It is a five-year (2007-2012), federally-funded obesity prevention and advocacy training program for adolescent girls. The

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#### PEER REVIEW

Peer review for this research brief was conducted by *Salud America!* National Advisory Committee Member Terry Huang, Robin Hamre, Ph.D., M.P.H., R.D., professor and chair, Department of Health Promotion, Social & Behavioral Health, University of Nebraska Medical Center.

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

<sup>1</sup> Ogden CL, Carroll MD, Curtin LR, Lamb MM and Flegal KM. “Prevalence of High Body Mass Index in US Children and Adolescents, 2007–2008.” *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 303(3): 242–249, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Saenz R. Latinos in the United States 2010. *Population's Bulletin* [2010]; <http://www.prb.org/Publications/PopulationBulletins/2010/latinosupdate1.aspx#>. Accessed January 14, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Lee NE, De AK, Simon PA. School-based physical fitness testing identifies large disparities in childhood overweight in Los Angeles. *J Am Diet Assoc*. Jan 2006;106(1):118-121.

<sup>5</sup> Shaibi GQ, Ball GD, Goran MI. Aerobic fitness among Caucasian, African-American, and Latino youth. *Ethn Dis*. Winter 2006;16(1):120-125.

<sup>6</sup> Deschenes SN, et al. *Engaging Older Youth: Program and City-Level Strategies to Support Sustained Participation in Out-of-School Time*. Boston: The Harvard Family Research Project, 2010.



program was implemented in New Britain High School, which has a large population of Puerto Rican students and is the largest high school in Connecticut. Within the school, the self-reported obesity rates for Latina girls ages 14 to 16 are significantly higher than African-American or White girls (18 percent, 9 percent and 0 percent, respectively); they are less likely to engage in physical activity; and they are more likely than their African-American or White peers to fail gym (53 percent, 45 percent and 20 percent, respectively).<sup>7</sup> About 20 percent of Latina teens never dressed for gym and 67 percent had no involvement in after-school team sports. As part of HTT, Latina girls participate in nutritional counseling, YWCA fitness programs and community service learning and leadership projects. The mid-course evaluation assessed HTT strengths and weaknesses to support performance improvements and sustainability in Years 4-5 (emphasizing Latina teens' participation in physical activity). To identify factors that promote or prevent consistent physical activity among Latina teens, we conducted nine focus groups with 36 teens and 40 parents (87 percent Latino). HTT staff also conducted three Photovoice sessions to amplify and clarify themes identified in focus groups. Photovoice is a research method that puts cameras in people's hands as they assess community problems and assets, and then connects them to policymakers to pursue change. In HTT's Photovoice sessions, adult and teen community members served as co-researchers assessing the city of New Britain to identify barriers to physical activity. After the group analyzed key findings, team members shared them with city, school and health system leaders. Key findings include:

- **Multiple barriers prevent Latina teens from engaging in regular sustained physical activity in and out of school.**<sup>8</sup> Major barriers to Latina teens' sustained physical activity were consistently identified across settings, including the role of stress as a deterrent to exercise. Stressors include deteriorating, unsafe neighborhoods; isolation from family and the natural/built environment of Puerto Rico; high rates of teen pregnancy; and inadequate social support systems—especially the lack of information about family planning and access to affordable day care. For parents, major obstacles included lack of resource awareness, perceptions of racism in access to recreational programs, and concerns about their daughters' safety when walking or taking public transportation.
- **Photovoice is an effective strategy to address Latina teens' physical activity barriers across multiple settings.** In addition to giving participants an active role in the research, the evaluation showed that the methodology can instill advocacy skills in youth and adults and encourage them to mobilize around a collective agenda for policy change. In focus groups, Latina teens did not describe themselves as leaders, but Photovoice participation helped teens demonstrate

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<sup>7</sup> Unpublished Survey of 528 9<sup>th</sup> Graders at New Britain High School, May 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Summary of Focus Group Findings: October 2009 to November 2010. Community Health Center, Inc., unpublished.

strong leadership skills. Those skills were on display during discussions with or presentations to various policymakers (e.g., school and city officials) regarding environmental changes that promote greater activity among teens, such as improving access to neighborhood pools and parks. Photovoice is a low-cost strategy utilizing products such as photos and posters that are easily disseminated, displayed and comprehensible to all literacy levels. Photovoice messages can be easily spread to community organizations to catalyze a coordinated response among health, education, youth development and social service providers.

■ **Photovoice can expedite policy change by facilitating direct, informal dialogue between policymakers and youth from lower-income/minority communities.**

Youth and policy-makers found they could overcome cultural and age-related barriers by gathering around the table for a frank discussion about the photographs illustrating community issues. These discussions were catalysts for the following policy changes that have been implemented or are being developed:

- *Physical Education (PE) Credit Recovery Course*: In December 2010, NBHS officials approved HTT's proposal giving students who failed physical education (P.E.) the chance to recover course credit through an independent study curriculum (60 hours of fitness, nutrition and leadership skills training provided by HTT staff at the YWCA). Sixteen girls in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades selected by NBHS official are currently enrolled in the pilot program, which began in January 2011. If successful, it will be sustained, expanded and possibly applied to other academic areas, including a new career-oriented "Health Academy" course.
- *Bus route modifications*: NBHS officials have agreed to add a daily stop at the YWCA for students in the P.E. credit recovery program and participants in other HTT activities.
- *Pool re-opening*: In September 2010, HTT Photovoice participants presented a petition to city leaders to re-open two city pools. The teens reached a state-wide audience when they presented their work at the 2nd Annual Physical Activity and Nutrition Symposium, sponsored by the Connecticut Departments of Education and Health and the YMCA in May 2011. They received feedback and ideas for future action from audience members. The teens have developed an action plan that includes recruiting more teens to develop pool-focused community projects, such as a pool-clean-up day and working with the Human Resources Agency. The groundwork for coordination with the city park and recreation department has been set by their Photovoice work..<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> "Latina Teens Urge City Leaders to Re-open Pools, Boost Activity Options." *Salud-America! E-Newsletter*, Vol. 3, Issue 2, Fall 2010. <http://www.salud-america.org/sites/www.salud-america.org/files/upload/Fall2010.pdf>.

- *Teen center:* Proposals to establish a teen center for youth advocacy with Photovoice training and access to underutilized services (e.g., stress reduction, family planning) have been submitted to several funders.<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion and Policy Implications

Our preliminary findings demonstrate Photovoice’s value on three levels: a demonstrable youth leadership intervention in the HTT program portfolio; a complement to the focus groups in *Salud America!* mid-course evaluation project; and a strategy for rapid translation of focus group findings into action steps and policy changes. Results indicate that Photovoice is a viable, low-cost means of empowering Latina teens to develop leadership and advocacy skills. Further, the program helps to generate community support for increased physical activity.<sup>11</sup> Lastly, it has potential for local sustainability—the NBHS administration has expressed interest in using Photovoice to enhance the administration’s emphasis on career readiness through out-of-school learning.

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<sup>10</sup> Porterfield D, Hinnant L, et al. *Linkages Between Clinical Practices and Community Organizations for Prevention*. Report prepared by RTI International for Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ). 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Dudley R., Hannay J. “Using Photovoice to Engage Latina Teens in Research and Advocacy for a Healthier New Britain, CT.” Presentation at the National Institute for Children’s Health Quality Annual Forum, Childhood Obesity Congress, Atlanta, March 9, 2010.