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Mental Health among Chicanos and Chicanas: Barriers to Mental Health Care, Consequences of Disparities, and Resources

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Abstract

Mexican Americans, or Chicanos and Chicanas, face many barriers to mental health care. This literature review was conducted by the Collective Corazón—a VCU student organization, mentored by Dr. Indira Sultanić, that addresses Latinx health equity through service and advocacy—in order to examine the underlying causes and consequences of disparities in mental health in Chicanos and Chicanas. Some of the barriers that affect mental health care in Mexican Americans are racial inequities and discrimination, the societal and/or cultural stigma associated with receiving care, language barriers, lack of health insurance, and legal status. Furthermore, among Chicanos, machismo culture is associated with an increased risk for depression and higher stress levels. Colorism has also been correlated with depression among Chicanos with darker skin phenotypes. Cultural identity also plays a role in mental health for Mexican Americans; a balance of Mexican and American culture is associated with a decreased risk for depression. Among Chicanas, there may be justified mistrust of healthcare systems and services due to historical events. The Latina paradox also has unintended health consequences; Latina women are not screened for prenatal depression as often as other ethnic groups. Lastly, are mental health resources for Latinx communities, like Therapy for Latinx and The Focus on You. However, this review argues that in order to reduce the mental health disparities that Chicanos and Chicanas face, there must be increased awareness of the disparities as well as changes in the healthcare system that address current inequities and barriers.

Barriers to Mental Health Care

Inequity	• According to the 2019 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, only approximately one-third of Hispanic individuals who are have a mental illness receive mental health treatment (compared with 50% of non-Hispanic white individuals)[1]
Stigma	• Fear of being labelled with mental health condition[2] • Religious beliefs prevents some from seeking help[3]
Language Barriers	• Shortage of interpreters[3] • Lack of proper language-access services funded by the government[2]
Lack of Health Insurance	• 19% of Hispanic people have no health insurance[2] • Lack of employer-sponsored insurance in service and retail industries[1]
Legal Status	• Fear of deportation[2] • Lack of knowledge that the children of undocumented immigrants are eligble for health insurance under the Affordable Care Act[2]

Chicanos

Machismo

- Latino cultural phenomenon that influences men to be "manly"
- Associated with higher stress levels and an increased risk of depression, accounting for 14% and 17% variance for each, respectively[4]
- Machismo in Hispanic men is more prevalent when compared to non-Hispanic white men[4]
- Masculine socialization, in the context of the culture, can be harmful for the mental health of Chicanos[4]

Colorism

- Darker skin phenotypes were generally positively associated with developing depression[5]
- Colorism was a larger factor for developing depression later in development, the opposite effect in Chicanas[5]

Cultural Identity

- Lower Spanish proficiency was associated with a higher risk of developing depression[5]
- The Chicano movement seeks to unify the broader range of Mexican-Americans through culturally proficiency[6]
- A balance of American and Mexican culture is associated with a decreased risk of depression[5]

Chicanas and Maternal Mental Health

- The identity of women in Mexican culture has traditionally been linked with their ability to bear children[7]
  - Children often represent personal strength for Mexican women
  - But in the 20th century, some lawmakers and physicians believed that children of Chicana women represented irresponsible decision making → led to policies in some regions of the US that focused on sterilization of Mexican-American women
  - Such policies could have caused justified mistrust of healthcare systems and services among Latinas
- Other factors that may worsen Chicanas' mental health: Inadequate prenatal care and discrimination due to immigration status[8-9]
- It may be difficult for some Chicanas to advocate for themselves because many face barriers like a lack of English fluency, racial minority status, and lower socioeconomic status[9]
- The "Latina paradox" assumes that recently migrated Latina women have protective factors against low birth weight and premature birth[10]

- The Latina paradox has unintended health consequences[10]
  - Latina women are not screened for prenatal depression as often as other ethnic groups
  - Rates of depression during and after pregnancy are rising for Latina women
  - Stress, anxiety, and depression are health concerns that must be understood within historical and social context

Mental Health Resources for Latinx Communities

Therapy for Latinx: Database of therapists who identify as Latinx or who have worked closely with Latinx communities

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Virginia: Provides help on how to talk about mental health, how to decrease the stigma of mental health conditions, and how to achieve recovery

Mental Health America: Provides many resources, including Spanish materials and Spanish-language screening tools

The Focus on You: An inspirational blog that is run by a Latina therapist and that focuses on self-care and mental health

Latinx Therapy: Connects individuals to therapists and speakers as well as offers podcasts, courses, workshops, wellness resources

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