



LATINO RESEARCH AND POLICY MAKING A DISCUSSION PAPER

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The purpose of this brief is to begin a conversation regarding the degree to which the growing body of research on Latinos is influencing policy-making. We know policy-making occurs on both the public and private institutional levels. Furthermore, we know that policy-making can have a myriad of intentions regarding issues and populations they are directed to impact. Inherent in the discussion is whether or not and to what extent we can point to research-policy causal connections aligned with improvements in 'quality of life' indicators among Latinos. Of particular concern are impacts on those Latinos who are at-risk or are already in poverty, less educated, unemployed, or in poor health, etc.

A core issue relates to weaknesses in our capacity to influence policy making in ways that 1) more closely reflect our beliefs and values, 2) research outcomes move to policy actions and implementation, and 3) are positively received by Latinos themselves and meaningfully impact them and the issue targeted. Within this framework is included the perspective that improvements in Latino education levels, poverty, and health have been small and not very substantive over the last 30 to 40 years.

The Latino population continues to grow at rates greater than most other groups. They are comprised of sub-groups, of which Mexican Americans are the largest. Latino foreign-born/immigrants, particularly from Mexico and Central America have contributed significantly to the growth. Latinos are not homogeneous; each sub-group has its own unique history and evolution in the United States; though research and policies more often have treated them as being homogeneous.

The public and private sectors have increased their attention to the Latino population. This heightened attention is partly attributed to the population growth but also to the combination of documented social, economic, and health and human service issues affecting them and from the corresponding voices of Latinos and other advocates at national, state, and local levels. Also, there's the reality that the public and private sectors are reaching out to Latinos because they want their money - whether as a tax payer or private-buying consumer, i.e. we represent a large 'market' important to for-profit goals.

How much progress has been made among Latinos relative to their quality of life? I offer here the term '*bienestar*' because it represents an inherent cultural perspective encompassing 'social determinant' indicators in its meaning. Social determinants are increasingly major factors in current paradigms of disparities research.

A series of observations are presented below. They are presented as statements of relevant issues important to efforts in order to positively impact policy-making.

- Policy-making is political. How political, varies as related to factors, such as the issue it addresses, populations intended to be impacted, policy propagating institution, involved stakeholders and vested interest, program costs, financial gain or loss, ideologies, etc.
- Latino advocates have contributed to giving voice and heightened attention to social inequalities resulting in *bienestar* problems impacting Latino communities.

- Latino advocacy has been a contributing 'political' factor nudging and influencing attention to bienestar issues, particularly in the public sector, e.g. influencing legislation to encapsulate service programs and research to target Latinos.
- There are a significant number of Latinos and non-Latinos conducting research on Latinos. It's suggested that the social sciences, education, and health comprise the overwhelming majority of the research conducted.
- Most Latino-based research is not 'policy research' - research which is action-oriented and attempts to apply scientific findings to the solution of problems.
- Most research is being conducted predominantly through academic institutions with a large amount conducted through university 'research centers', some identified as 'disparities, Latino, or other racial/ethnic' center designation.
- Latino research centers or "think tanks" outside of academic settings are near non-existent.
- Non-Latino "think tanks" exemplified by organizations like the Economic Policy Institute, Urban Institute, and others have conducted some Latino focused policy research.
- 'Disparities' as a term appears to be the guiding mantra as to why we must direct research efforts at Latinos and other people of color - albeit, varied definitions exist for 'disparities'.
- Public and private sector funding is dominated by a disparities research focus.
- There are major gaps between research outcomes and their use in practice, e.g., in individual and system problems in the health and education arenas.
- Participatory and translation research are two approaches intended to bridge the research to practice gaps. One is intended to be a collaborative method to test new ideas and implement actions for change involving targeted participants and the researcher in a more interactive research process, and the other more about translating basic 'bench' scientific research into practical application.
- To date, there is little significant evidence that participatory or translation research has had any impact on Latino concerns and problems.
- Independent non-profit based 'conservative and liberal' think tanks may be exemplar models for Latino application because they appear to effectively combine a) academic and policy research, b) proactive political and policy process involvement, c) development and mobilization of multiple support constituencies, d) communication strategies that translate, frame, and disseminate their messages to multiple audiences, and d) financial resources that supports their work, principles and ideology.
- A perspective exists that 'disparities research' is a nice euphemism for inequality and social injustice, and ultimately will predominantly have a history of contributing 'paternal' disempowering solutions. The arguments are that disparities research paradigms shy away from systemic institutional structures and behaviors as key components of social and health problems. Therefore, for Latinos, the over-arching reason for specific problems becomes our language and culture characteristics - values and beliefs.

In summary, each of us interested in assuring that public and private sector policies are responsive to our communities bring our own set of perspectives, ideologies, and experiences related to some of the above issues. The common thread must be our common interest to focus on influencing the policy-making process in a way that it reflects an objective understanding of our communities' priorities to continually improve our *bienestar*.