

Ivette A. López and José E. Rodríguez: Latino health is American health

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(Photo: My View)

Through Oct. 15, the nation will be celebrating the Latino populations in the United States in Hispanic Heritage Month.

Your Latino neighbors can have roots in many countries, from Mexico to Tierra del Fuego, and the Caribbean. Members of this diverse population are joined by a shared culture and language, and by their experiences in the United States. The United States has the second-largest Latino population, surpassed only by Mexico. This population constitutes 54 million individuals, or 17 percent of the total population of the United States.

In Leon County, Latinos constitute 6 percent of the population. So you may be thinking: "Is that all?" But in our county, this translates to 17,026 neighbors. Also, may we remind you, we host a large Latino student population that attends Florida A&M University, Florida State and Tallahassee Community College. So in total, there are more than 25,000 Latinos in Leon County.

The contributions of Latinos can be felt in all arenas, as they occupy every segment of our Leon County workforce, from academia to agriculture, to the many positions in state government that depend on Latinos to conduct the business of our state.

Hispanic Heritage Month is also an opportunity to remember the inequities in health that this population faces. Because health is interdependent and symbiotic, non-Latino Americans are affected by the problems affecting Latino populations. A few examples of inequities in health follow:

- **Health insurance:** Latinos are more likely to lack health insurance than any other racial or ethnic group in the nation.
- **Asthma:** Asthma deaths among Latinos in northeastern U.S. states (34 per million) is more than twice the rate for white Americans (15.1 per million). Current asthma prevalence is higher among Puerto Rican Latinos and blacks than among whites.
- **Diabetes:** Diabetes tends to strike Latinos at younger ages than the non-Latino white population. CDC researchers estimated the lifetime risk for developing diabetes is higher for both Latino men and women than for other ethnic groups. For Latino women born in 2000, the risk of developing diabetes in their lifetime is 52.5 percent; for Latino men, the lifetime risk is 45.4 percent.
- **HIV/AIDS:** Latino males and females are disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS. The overall prevalence rate for Latinos is nearly three times higher (585 per 100,000) than that of whites (224 cases per 100,000 population).
- **Obesity:** In 2010, the CDC found that Latino Americans were 1.2 times more likely to be obese than non-Latino whites. Further, Mexican-American children were 1.6 times more likely to be overweight than white children.
- **Infant mortality:** In 2006, the overall U.S. infant mortality rate was 6.68, but mortality rates differed dramatically across racial and ethnic groups. African-Americans had the highest IMR at 13.35, compared with 5.58 among whites. Among American Indians/Alaska Natives (8.28) and Puerto Ricans (8.01), the IMRs were greater than that of non-Latino whites, while the IMRs for Mexicans (5.34), Central/South Americans (4.52), Cubans (5.08) and Asians/Pacific Islanders (4.55) were lower. These disparities that highlight special needs of Puerto Rican Latina pregnancies over the rest of the Latino subgroups need to be further researched.

Ignoring health inequities is inexcusable, and as Martin Luther King Jr. taught us, "Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane."

When the health of some of our American populations suffers, all of our health suffers.

Disease prevention starts with the recognition that all people should and must become stewards of each other's well-being. The benefits of addressing these disparities are numerous, but most notable are a decreased burden on the health care system, and improved health outcomes for all. To our beautiful Tallahassee, we wish *mucha salud, dinero y amor* (lots of health, money and love).

To get involved in addressing the needs of Latino populations, contact Ivette A. López (Ivette.lopez@fam.u.edu), associate professor of public health and director of the Latino Initiative for Better Health Research and Education, Center for Health Equity (CHE), at Florida A&M University; and José E. Rodríguez (jose.rodriguez@med.fsu.edu), associate professor of the College of Medicine, Florida State University, and co-director of the Center for Underrepresented Minorities in Academic Medicine.

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