

Research Brief: Sexual violence and the impact on Latin@ communities

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This research brief explores the prevalence of sexual violence against women who identify as Latina or with the Latin@¹ community. The publications below, published between 2009 and 2013, examine sexual violence against Latinas and cultural norms that impact reporting or disclosing abuse.

This research brief can assist sexual assault advocates, community advocates, law enforcement, mental health professionals, and medical professionals in understanding the issues confronting Latin@ survivors, their families, and their communities. Accessible and relevant post-assault services are crucial for all survivors regardless of racial or ethnic identity, requiring service providers to be confident and affirming to all cultures and communities.

Bryant-Davis, T., Chung, H., & Tillman, S. (2009). From the margins to the center: Ethnic minority women and the mental health effects of sexual assault. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 10*, 330-357. doi:10.1177/1524838009339755

Aims: The authors looked at experiences of African American, Asian American, Latina, and

Native American female survivors of sexual assault. The article looks at the prevalence, risk factors, mental health effects, and barriers to service for each group of women.

Methods: The authors looked at available literature and research on cultural and sociocultural factors for mental health effects of survivors of sexual assault.

Key findings in regards to Latina survivors

- Latinas reported a higher rate of attempted sexual assault than the other three racial or ethnic groups in the review.
- Some of the research available reported that Latinas experience higher rates of intimate partner sexual violence.
- Fear of deportation is a significant barrier to accessing support services for undocumented immigrant Latinas.
- Culture-bound syndromes are part of post-traumatic symptoms for Latina survivors of sexual assault. These occur in Latinas in addition to PTSD, disassociation, depression and suicidality, substance abuse, and somatic issues.
 - *Ataques de nervios*, attack of the nerves,

is a stress reaction that includes screaming or yelling, trembling, palpitation, and aggressive behaviors.

- *Susto*, intense fright, is the result of a traumatic or frightening event where it is believed the soul leaves the body and causes sickness and unhappiness.

Summary: Women of color who experience sexual assault – particularly those groups of women focused on in the literature review – also experience multiple forms of violence and oppression. Intergenerational trauma, racism, sexism, and economic inequality are daily stressors that impact reactions to and effects of a traumatic event.

Practical implications: Latin@ communities may fear not being believed by other members of their community, as well as systems and individuals outside the communities. Societal stereotypes, coupled with this fear, may deter survivors from reporting. Sexual assault centers, counselors, and practitioners can keep these considerations in mind when engaging in outreach, implementing on-going training and professional development, and educating the general public on the role oppression plays in sexual violence perpetration and victimization.

Cuevas, C., & Sabina, C. (2010). *Final report: Sexual Assault Among Latinas (SALAS) Study (Document No. 230445)*. Retrieved from the National Criminal Justice Reference Service: <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/230445.pdf>

Aims: The purpose of SALAS was to:

- Determine the extent of sexual victimization among adult Latinas.
- Determine the coexistence of other forms of violence, as well as risk factors for subsequent victimization.
- Examine patterns of formal support service utilization among Latina survivors.
- Examine patterns of informal support service utilization among Latina survivors.
- Examine culturally-relevant factors associated with sexual violence among Latina survivors.
- Determine the psychosocial impact of sexual violence on Latina survivors.

Methods: The authors interviewed 2,000 Latinas

living in high-density areas within the U.S. between May and September 2008 via random digit dialing (RDD). The interviews were conducted in the participant's language of preference (English or Spanish).

Key findings:

Sexual violence

- Seventeen percent of participants reported experiencing sexual violence.
- Almost nine percent of the sample experienced a completed sexual assault, 8.9% experienced an attempted sexual assault, and 11.4% experienced fondling or forced touch.
- Almost 8% of participants experienced at least one sexual assault in adulthood. 44% of these individuals reported a partner or spouse as the perpetrator; 49% reported the perpetrator was someone else they knew.
- More than 12% of participants experienced at least one sexual assault in childhood. These individuals reported the perpetrators were either relatives (43%) or non-family members (38%).

Support services

- Approximately 21% of the respondents sought one or more types of formal help.
 - The most common type (41%) was medical services among women who reported injuries.
 - Criminal justice responses were not common, with only 6.6% of women contacting police, 7.1% obtaining a restraining order, and 6.1% pressing criminal charges.
- More than 58% of women who experienced sexual assault sought informal help. Disclosure of sexual abuse was most often to friends (31.7%) and parents (30.9%).

Cultural factors

- Immigrant Latinas are less likely to report being sexually assaulted.
- Anglo acculturation is associated with increased odds of sexual victimization, suggesting that women who are more acculturated to U.S. culture are at greater risk of sexual victimization.

- Older women were less likely to report sexual violence and women of higher socioeconomic status were more likely to report experiencing sexual assault.

Summary: The SALAS Study highlighted some important considerations for understanding sexual violence within Latin@ communities. It gathered experiences across the lifespan, looked at possible connections between victimization in childhood and adulthood, and collected responses regarding other forms of violence.

Practical implications: Findings from this study can help practitioners and organizations in helping Latina survivors of violence. Recommendations for practitioners included:

- Spanish-speaking advocates, staff, and volunteers to help survivors and families navigate the various systems they may encounter.
- Partnering with or outreaching to bilingual Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners (SANEs) to assist in providing services to Latina survivors of sexual violence.
- Comprehensive and culturally-relevant public education and awareness-raising. Engaging friends and family members could serve as a strategy to connect survivors with formal support services available in the community.

National Sexual Violence Resource Center. (2013). Preventing sexual violence in Latin@ communities: A national needs assessment. Retrieved from http://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/publications_nsvrc_assessments_latina-needs-assessment_0.pdf

Aims: In partnership with the University of Puerto Rico Center for Evaluation and Sociomedical Research (CIES), the National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) wanted to gather strengths and needs from the anti-sexual violence movement regarding prevention with Latin@ communities.

Methods: Researchers used a mixed-methods approach that included a web-based survey, phone interviews, and focus groups. There were 250 participants that represented all 50 states and three U.S. territories (Puerto Rico, U.S. Virgin Islands, and American Samoa). Participants were staff from

sexual assault coalitions, local sexual assault centers, and health departments.

Key findings:

Culturally-informed resources for the community

- Need for in-person guidance and resources beyond print materials for implementing effective and relevant prevention with Latin@ communities.
- Almost 39% of participants reported “never” using culturally or linguistically relevant resources.
- Requested topics for prevention materials included: addressing stigma of sexual violence, best practices for prevention in Latin@ communities, engaging Latino men and boys in prevention, adapting curricula, and human trafficking.

Organizational capacity

- One-on-one interviews revealed a lack of organizational commitment beyond a surface-level approach to culturally-relevant work. This conflicted with survey responses that individuals felt their organization was committed to culturally-relevant services and providing ongoing training.
- While around 91% of participants identified Latin@ communities as a high-priority population, only 19% felt as though their client base matched this goal.
- Participants reported feeling as though Latin@ advocates and Latin@-specific organizations were often “tokenized.” Latin@ advocates are often responsible for all services and activities regarding Latin@ communities, even if these activities fall outside the scope of their job responsibilities.

Community partnerships and collaborations

- Almost 19% of participants reported they “never” involved community members in planning efforts or programming. About 45% “sometimes” involve community members.

Summary: Assessment findings point to the need for stronger collaborative and intentional efforts to improve intervention and prevention strategies within and with Latin@ and Spanish-speaking communities.

¹The @ symbol is used to represent that feminine (Latina) and masculine (Latino) versions of words in order to promote a more inclusive approach to language.

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