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Many County Latino Teens In Crisis, Say Leaders, Survey

Graduation Rates Lower Than in Other Groups

By Donna St. George
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When Adolfo Avalos looks back at his teen years in Gaithersburg, he can see how much went wrong. There were physical fights, school problems, gang involvement, anger at himself and the world: so much trouble that he finally dropped out.

"I got kind of like in a box, and I didn't know how to get out of it," said Avalos, 21.

His experiences reflect what community leaders describe as a crisis for many Latino teenagers in Montgomery County.

High school graduation rates for Latino youths in Montgomery are lower than for any other racial or ethnic group in the county. Last year, 78.13 percent of Latinos in Montgomery received diplomas, compared with 94.5 percent for non-Hispanic whites, 83.94 percent for African Americans and 95.45 percent of Asians and Pacific Islanders. At the same time, the birth rate for Latinas 15 to 17 was nearly three times higher than for African Americans and nearly four times higher than for non-Hispanic whites, according to state health statistics.

Community leaders say such numbers go hand in hand with the results of a 2006 survey of more than 1,000 Latino teens that the leaders have brought to the attention of school and county officials in recent weeks.

The survey reports that 94 percent of Latino teens like Avalos spend no time with an adult mentor, and 50 percent have friends who were or are involved in a gang. More than 40 percent reported being involved in physical fights the previous year, and 30 percent said they did not feel confident that they would graduate from high school.

"We are seriously at risk of losing half of a generation of Latinos," said Anna Maria Izquierdo, co-chairman of the county's Latino Health Steering Committee, who said the numbers are so stark that when she first saw them, she thought, "Whoa. This is serious."

The survey was conducted in person at malls, soccer fields, fast-food restaurants and other teen spots in Germantown, Gaithersburg, Wheaton and Silver Spring. It did not include those at home or in other activities and is not necessarily representative of all Latino teens in the county.

"If we have any chance of averting this crisis, we all need to work together," said Diego Uriburu, deputy executive director of Identity Inc., a youth development organization in Gaithersburg, which conducted the survey with the support of a county grant.

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Uriburu said that the county's schools and support systems are working well for about half of Latino youths in Montgomery. The challenge, he said, is to continue to promote that well-being while improving life for those who might be at risk.

"We are not doing enough in the county, as a society, as a community, to stop that bleeding," said Uriburu, who noted that many Latino children struggle with trauma from extended family separations and other immigration-related hardships.

In recent meetings, county government and school officials have been receptive.

County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) asked the task force and his office's Latin American Advisory Group to join forces and come up with a list of recommended actions. The task force also went to the Board of Education, seeking school system involvement.

School board President Shirley Brandman (At Large) agreed with community leaders that problems are without "quick fixes or easy answers," and she said that "making sure we don't lose kids will take a collaborative effort."

The county's budget crunch might make problems harder to tackle, but "at the same time, just making it a priority can help," said Ana López, executive director of Community Bridges, which provides after-school programs for low-income girls from diverse backgrounds.

Uriburu also said that "some of the things require funding, and others don't." Leadership and attention would go a long way, he said.

According to the teen survey, nearly 50 percent of Latino teens did not participate in school sports, and more than 70 percent did not belong to school clubs. Outside school, more than 60 percent did not belong to any activities.

Oscar Lemus, 20, said he recalls being among the teens who struggled. But he graduated from Magruder High School last year.

"I'm so thankful," he said. "I'm proud of myself, and I also wanted my family to be proud of me."

Noting that many Latino teens do well despite adversity, Henry Montes, a task force member, said that the county as a whole has a lot at stake. It is in Montgomery's "enlightened self-interest," he said, to help those at risk become "a productive and active population that's contributing to the county."

For Avalos, who dropped out of high school, what made a big difference was caring adults in his life: one at school and several at Identity's after-school program.

Avalos, an immigrant from El Salvador, said he recalls that when he arrived at Gaithersburg High School, "I felt so frustrated. I didn't have no friends, I didn't understand the language, I didn't understand anything the teacher told me, and I didn't understand the system in school."

He got into a lot of trouble before things improved, he said, but ultimately, he came to see that "I could be someone in my future."

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