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INTRODUCTION



Understanding the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Mental Health of Latinx Children, Youth, and Families: Clinical Challenges and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT



Latinx children, youth, and families in the United States have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic compared to non-Latinxs, experiencing a higher burden of deaths, economic adversity, parental stress, and mental health problems. At the same time, Latinx children, youth, and families in the United States have rich cultural and community resources that serve as a source of protection and promotion. To our knowledge, no special issue has been devoted to the impact of the pandemic on Latinx children, youth, and families, which limits opportunities to examine its implications for clinical theory, research, assessment, policy, and practice. To address this gap, we present this special issue entitled “Understanding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of Latinx children, youth, and families: Clinical challenges and opportunities,” a collection of nine articles written by Latinx scholars. In this introduction, we explain why it is important to center Latinx children, youth, and families and why we need to use a structural-intersectional approach. We summarize the articles in this collection by grouping them by themes: immigration and family separation; the impact of family economic adversity; school and family contexts of mental health; the pandemic experience of Latinx LGBTQ and AfroLatinx youth; and a model to imagine the future of Latinx children, youth, and families. We conclude with a brief summary and suggestions for future research.

RESUMEN

Les niños, jóvenes, y familias Latines en los Estados Unidos de América han sido afectadas de manera desproporcionada por la pandemia de COVID-19 en comparación con no Latines, sufriendo niveles elevados de mortalidad, adversidad socioeconómica, estrés parental, y problemas de salud mental. Sin embargo, les niños, jóvenes, y familias Latines en los Estados Unidos cuentan con un rico bagaje cultural y comunitario que les sirve como fuente de protección y promoción. Que nosotros sepamos, no hay ninguna edición especial en revistas científicas dedicada al impacto de la pandemia en niños, jóvenes, y familias Latines, lo que dificulta nuestra comprensión de sus repercusiones para la teoría, investigación, evaluación, políticas, y práctica clínica. Para hacer frente a este desafío, presentamos esta edición especial titulada “Comprendiendo el impacto de la pandemia del COVID-19 en la salud mental de los niños, jóvenes, y familias Latines en los Estados Unidos: Desafíos y oportunidades clínicas,” una colección de nueve artículos escritos por autores Latines. En esta introducción, explicamos por qué es importante centrarse en los niños, jóvenes, y familias Latines en los Estados Unidos, y por qué debemos emplear un enfoque estructural-interseccional. Resumimos los artículos en esta colección y los agrupamos en temas: inmigración y separación familiar; el impacto de la adversidad económica familiar; la escuela y la familia como contextos de salud mental, la experiencia de la pandemia de jóvenes LGBTQ y AfroLatines; y un modelo para imaginar el futuro de los niños, jóvenes, y familias Latines. Finalizamos con algunas conclusiones y direcciones futuras.

Latinx¹ children, youth, and families in the United States have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Salgado de Snyder et al., 2021; Villatoro et al., 2022). Latinx children living along the U.S.–Mexico border have experienced the highest burden of COVID-19-associated death of parents and

caregivers: over 20,000 Latinx children living in California, Texas, and New Mexico are now orphaned (Hillis et al., 2021). Latinx adults were more likely than non-Latinx White adults to know someone who had been sick with or died of COVID-19 and have reported the highest levels of pandemic-related stress among any

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¹We use the term “Latinx” to refer to people of Latin American ancestry living in the United States, including, but not limited to, people of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central American, Caribbean, and/or South American origin. We see the term Latinx as interrelated yet different than terms such as Hispanic, Chicano, Latino, and others. We prefer this term, as well as Latine, because we believe it is more gender inclusive. We recognize that there is no consensus on this issue, and people of Latin American ancestry living in the U.S. have different preferences in terms of labels for self-identification (see Lopez et al., 2021).

racial/ethnic group in the U.S. (American Psychological Association [APA], 2021).

Moreover, the pandemic impacted Latinx children, youth, and families differently. Latinx families with young children under 12 faced considerable disruptions to childcare during the pandemic that aggravated parental stress because of quarantines, financial barriers, and health concerns (Chen, 2023). Among Latinx adults, those who are sexual and gender minorities (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer; LGBTQ) reported higher levels of financial and household stress, mental health symptoms, and alcohol and substance use compared to nonsexual and nongender minority Latinx adults (Cerezo et al., 2023). Latinx without health insurance reported higher levels of emotional distress and alcohol use following COVID-19 exposure (Pachicano et al., 2023).

To our knowledge, no special issue has been devoted to clinical challenges and opportunities related to Latinx children, youth, and families during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. Special issues in psychology journals have focused on the effects of the pandemic across broad domains of functioning but have not focused exclusively on clinical issues (Branje & Morris, 2021) or on the experiences of Latinxs (Taylor et al., 2022). As a consequence, the implications of the pandemic for clinical theory, research, measurement, training, activism, policy, and interventions on Latinx children, youth, and families are less understood.

To address this gap, we present this special issue entitled “Understanding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of Latinx children, youth, and families: Clinical challenges and opportunities.” This special issue presents a collection of nine articles written by Latinx scholars in the United States on a range of important topics. In this introduction, we explain why it is necessary to focus on Latinx children, youth, and families, and we consider a structural-intersectional approach. We summarize the articles in this collection by grouping them by themes: immigration and family separation; the impact of family economic adversity; school and family contexts of mental health; and the pandemic experience of Latinx LGBTQ and AfroLatinx youth. Finally, we propose PARQUES, a model to imagine the future of Latinx children, youth, and families, and conclude with recommendations for future research.

Why Is It Important to Focus on Latinx Children, Youth, and Families?

The COVID-19 pandemic presents unique challenges and opportunities for focusing on Latinx children, youth, and families in the field of clinical child and

adolescent psychology. Although research often emphasizes the need to focus on Latinxs because they are a growing share of the U.S. population (Lopez et al., 2021; Zong, 2022), centering Latinx children, youth, and families is necessary because of their unique experiences before and during the pandemic, their distinctive cultural and community strengths, and their significant within-group heterogeneity.

First, with regard to unique experiences, Latinx children, youth, and families faced considerable economic hardship and barriers to quality health and educational services during the pandemic (Villatoro et al., 2022). These challenges were compounded by past and concurrent experiences of racial trauma and xenophobia before and during the Trump administration (Causadias & Korous, 2019; Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2019; Garcini et al., 2021). Racism, racial trauma, and racial discrimination are complex and multifaceted (Neblett, 2019) and may increase the likelihood of developing symptoms of depression, anxiety, and somatic complaints, alcohol and drug abuse, and other forms of psychopathology among Latinx children, youth, and families following the pandemic (Penner et al., 2021; Salgado de Snyder et al., 2021).

Second, focusing on Latinx children, youth, and families in the United States is necessary because, despite the aforementioned risks, they have rich and unique cultural and community resources, competencies, strengths, and practices that empower them, help them cope with adversity, and are a source of pride and resilience (García Coll et al., 1996). These include cultural values such as familism, cultural processes such as ethnic-racial identity, and cultural practices, resources, strengths, and competencies (Cahill et al., 2021; Stein et al., 2014; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). For example, some Latinx cultural rituals that mark developmental transitions have no exact equivalent in other racial/ethnic groups in the U.S., such as *Quinceañera*, while other rituals are unique to some Latinx people but not others, such as *Día de los Muertos* for people of Mexican origin (Causadias et al., 2022; González, 2019; Marchi, 2022).

Third, we need to center Latinx children, youth, and families because they have considerable racial, cultural, and gender heterogeneity, which is related to multifinality in the development of psychopathology (Causadias & Cicchetti, 2018). Indeed, there is substantial variation within and stratification among Latinxs based on race, skin color, acculturation, language, legal status, migration experience, generation, national origin, geographic location, socioeconomic status, religiosity, and racial, sexual, and gender identity (Adames & Chavez-Dueñas, 2016; Cahill et al., 2021; Fuentes et al., 2021;

Noe-Bustamante, 2019; Umaña-Taylor & Fine, 2001). This diversity is represented by the notion that Latinxs are “*a mosaic, not a monolith*” (Zong, 2022, p. 1). This diversity contributes to multifinality in the development of psychopathology, the notion that similar experiences may result in different mental health outcomes (Causadias & Cicchetti, 2018).

Why We Need a Structural-Intersectional Approach to Families and the Pandemic

Focusing on the mental health of Latinx children, youth, and families challenges us to consider the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic using a systemic approach that recognizes the role of structural racism as a fundamental driver of health disparities in the United States (Churchwell et al., 2020). This focus moves away from interpretations of this global health crisis that claim that “*we are all in this together*” and enforce colorblind racial ideologies (Bonilla-Silva, 2022). Antiracist developmental and clinical scientists call attention to the effects of racism on the health and well-being of Black youth, as well as other racially and ethnically minoritized groups, including Latinx children and adolescents (Iruka et al., 2022; Wray-Lake et al., 2022).

We argue for a structural-intersectional approach that is not only focused on individuals or on a single system of oppression but also structural, because it examines the role of institutions, laws, and policies on mental health and wellbeing AND is intersectional, because it considers how the convergence of multiple forms of oppression shape the development of psychopathology. We need a structural approach to understand how families reproduce racial hierarchies (Bonilla-Silva, 2023), particularly in the context of the pandemic (Bonilla-Silva, 2022). A structural approach is fundamental for Latinxs because they experience racism at the family level in multiple ways. First, Latinx children and youth are harmed by witnessing how other family members experience racism in their communities and everyday lives (Martin Romero & Stein, 2023). Second, Latinx children and youth can also experience racism at home from other family members who enforce anti-blackness and colorism by treating favorably those who meet White beauty standards, are light-skinned, and have straight hair, while mistreating family members who look Black, are dark-skinned, and have curly hair (Hernández, 2022).

Acknowledging the impact of structural racism also requires addressing the impact of multiple systems of oppression affecting the mental health and wellbeing of Latinx children, youth, and families in the United States, including state sponsored xenophobia, anti-indigeneity,

homophobia, transphobia, and other forms of violence. An intersectional approach, pioneered by Black legal scholars and activists (Collins, 1991; Crenshaw, 1991), draws attention to the lived experience and perspectives of people who belong to multiple communities and deal with several forms of oppression, such as AfroLatinas in the United States (Romero-Hall, 2022; Sanchez, 2021). Furthermore, concerns about the deportation of a family member, anti-Latinx discrimination, and perceiving the virus as a threat affects the mental health of Latinas in distinct ways compared to Latinos (Díaz McConnell et al., 2023).

This special issue underscores how these structural and intersectional issues shape the development of mental health of Latinx children, youth, and families before, during, and following the pandemic. We believe this special issue is innovative in several ways. First, we focus on the perspectives and lived experiences of Latinx scholars who belong and work with these communities using strength-based approaches and not deficit models (García Coll et al., 1996). All articles included in this issue, as well as this introduction, are led by Latinx scholars. Second, the articles in the special issue include abstracts in Spanish and English, with the intention of reaching different Latinx communities. Finally, we believe this special issue is innovative because a guest editor received financial compensation for his labor by the journal, which is uncommon, because guest editing work (but also reviewing and authoring) is often unpaid in psychology.

Understanding the Impact of the Pandemic on Latinx Children, Youth, and Families

This special issue includes a range of topics from some of the most outstanding Latinx scholars in the United States working in clinical, counseling, and developmental psychology, family and human development, public health, social work, and other fields related to mental health. In Fall 2021, we requested and received 13 abstracts from some of the most accomplished Latinx authors in these fields. Ten articles were submitted and nine were accepted. Although each article in this collection is unique, we summarize their main findings by grouping them by some of the themes we believe they share.

Immigration and Family Separation

Latinx children, youth, and families are affected by federal and state immigration policies that separate immigrant families from Central America seeking asylum at the Mexico-United States border, or that separate families living in the United States by deporting their

undocumented parents (Lopez, 2019; Rodriguez Vega, 2023). Policies enacted during the pandemic by the Trump administration, namely Title 42, had the effect of separating Latinx families arriving at the border. These policies have continued, and even expanded, under the Biden administration, even though a long line of research highlights the severe consequences of family separation on youth development and mental health (for a review, see Humphreys, 2019). Two articles in the special issue focus on these dynamics by documenting how immigration policies affect the development and wellbeing of Latinx children, youth, and families in the United States.

Garcini et al. (2024) used a narrative summary methodology informed by community-based work to advocate for the health needs of undocumented and mixed status Latinx families. They were among the most affected by the pandemic because they dealt with multiple and enduring daily stressors, such as social and economic disadvantage, discrimination, and hazardous living and labor conditions (Garcini et al., 2024). Garcini et al. (2024) underscore the influence of policy in these families by examining stressors such as anti-immigrant rhetoric and actions, economic changes and financial losses, and restricted access to healthcare (Garcini et al., 2024).

Venta et al. (2024) discuss the impact of the pandemic on unaccompanied immigrant children from Central America seeking asylum in the U.S., separated from their families, and interned in overcrowded facilities under harmful conditions and lack of protections against COVID-19. Using a methodology focused on the perspectives of clinical experts and providers working with this population in Texas, they examine how the pandemic taxed these facilities and aggravated children's uncertainty about the length of their detention, what would happen to them once released, when they would be reunited with their families, and their basic human rights (Venta et al., 2024).

The Impact of Family Economic Adversity

Latinx children, youth, and families are affected by economic, financial, and labor dynamics that determine their access to income, occupations, and education. In fact, family economic adversity, defined as difficulty securing stable and safe employment to cover a family's basic needs, is closely related to the previous theme of immigration and family separation. Barriers to make a living in their home countries often force Latinx adolescent men from Latin American and the Caribbean to leave their families and migrate to the United States (Carlos Chavez et al., 2022). The pandemic increased

the risk of economic adversity for Latinx families living in the U.S., because it disrupted the economy and exposed essential workers to infection, which added to the stress of parents who also had to take care of their children during school closures. Two articles in the special issue focus on these dynamics by documenting how economic adversity has affected the development and wellbeing of Latinx children, youth, and families in the United States.

Carlos Chavez et al. (2024) report evidence from a study on Mexican-American parents as essential workers, and how this form of labor is related to COVID-19 economic and academic stress, and the mental health of adolescents. Using a survey methodology with a national sample of 398 Mexican American adolescents, they found the effects of household economic stress on psychological distress were more pronounced for adolescent boys than girls whose caregivers were essential workers (Carlos Chavez et al., 2024). In addition, they reported a three-way interaction among academic stress, caregivers' essential worker status, and gender on psychological distress, showing a disproportional impact on the psychological distress of adolescent boys (Carlos Chavez et al., 2024).

Capielo Rosario et al. (2024) conducted a study on the mental health of Puerto Rican adolescents living in the mainland territory of the U.S. during the COVID-19 pandemic by focusing on individual (gender and race) and family level (financial stress and violence) determinants of health. Using survey methodology with a sample of 119 Puerto Rican adolescents, they found that food insecurity and family financial stress predicted individual psychological distress, especially for adolescents who identified as racial minorities (Capielo Rosario et al., 2024). These results highlight the need for interventions with Puerto Rican adolescents that incorporate access to financial resources and nutritional resources, in addition to clinical services (Capielo Rosario et al., 2024).

School and Family Contexts of Mental Health

The mental health and wellbeing of Latinx children, youth, and families is shaped by school environments and family dynamics. Schools are central for children and adolescents because they offer a space for cognitive, social, and emotional development through structured learning activities and engagement with teachers and peers through play, collaboration, problem solving, and conflict resolution. For Latinx children and youth, schools play a distinct role of promoting and/or inhibiting bilingual development, ethnic-racial identity, feelings of belonging in the U.S., and pathways to college

(Azmitia, 2021; Flores-González, 2017). Family dynamics are also crucial for the development of adaptation especially for Latinx children and youth who learn gender roles, family expectations, coping skills, and cultural values at home (Cabrera et al., 2022; Cahill et al., 2021). Two articles in the special issue examine how changes and disruptions in school and family dynamics during the pandemic shaped the likelihood of developing psychopathology among Latinx children and youth in the United States.

Polo et al. (2024) report research on an epidemic of internalizing problems among Latinx adolescents in Chicago public schools before and during the pandemic. Using cross-sectional data from 1220 5th to 8th grade students across four academic years, they found higher internalizing risk and comorbidity rates in the second year of the pandemic, compared to pre-pandemic levels (Polo et al., 2024). Moreover, their analyses revealed that depression, social anxiety, and generalized anxiety symptoms were higher and in the clinical range for Latinx students compared to non-Latinx students, with Latinx girls and gender non-conforming students reporting the highest levels of psychopathology (Polo et al., 2024).

Stein et al. (2024) present a study on COVID-19 stressors and silver linings, familism values, familial resilience, and coping, and their link to the development of internalizing symptoms among Latinx youth living in North Carolina. Using survey methodology with a community sample of 135 Latinx adolescents, they found that youth who experienced high levels of COVID-19 stress who enacted problem-focused coping fared better across the pandemic (Stein et al., 2024). COVID-19 stress was associated with more depressive symptoms, but only for youth who engaged in low and medium levels of problem-focused engagement coping (Stein et al., 2024). Although familial resilience did not carry the same longitudinal benefit, it did bolster mental health concurrently (Stein et al., 2024).

The Pandemic Experience of Latinx LGBTQ and AfroLatinx Youth

A structural-intersectional approach to the mental health of Latinx children, youth, and families invites us to consider the unique pandemic experience of communities within our community. After all, umbrella terms such as Hispanic emerged in the U.S. from coalitions between activists, corporations, and government officials (Mora, 2014). Once created, these categories can determine who can access resources but can also enforce inequality and neglect (Hernández, 2022; Menjívar, 2023). Similarly, some communities can have less

visibility and experience multiple forms of adversity within the broad label of “Latinx children, youth, and families.” This is the case of Yucatec Maya families in Mexico during the pandemic, who dealt with stress but also found solace in community and family cultural practices (Alcalá et al., 2021). Two articles in this special issue examine the pandemic experience of two populations who often deal with discrimination outside and within Latinx communities: Latinx LGBTQ and AfroLatinx youth in the United States.

Abreu et al. (2024) synthesized research on the mental health and wellbeing of Latinx LGBTQ or sexual minority youth following the pandemic. Using a systematic review methodology, they reported evidence from 14 studies that explored the challenges, stressors, and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Latinx LGBTQ youth. They found that most studies included cisgender, gender binary, heterosexual Latinx youth samples, and these studies documented the influence of school closures, pandemic stressors, use of online media, as well as family and Latinx cultural values as a source of both support and stress among LGBTQ youth (Abreu et al., 2024).

Sanchez et al. (2024) examined racial differences in discrimination experiences, perceived inequality, coping strategies, and mental health among 860 Latinx adolescents. Black Latinx (or AfroLatinx) adolescents reported higher rates of discrimination and perceived inequality than White Latinx adolescents and Latinx adolescents of other races, and biracial Latinx adolescents reported higher rates of discrimination and poorer mental health than White Latinx adolescents. Furthermore, greater frequency of discrimination experiences was correlated with lower levels of engaged coping for Black but not White Latinx adolescents and with higher levels of disengaged coping for Black but not Latinx adolescents of other races. The Sanchez et al. (2024) article represents one of the few studies to date that has examined the intersection of race and ethnicity and racial heterogeneity among Latinx adolescents and highlights how different systems of oppression may influence Latinx adolescent race-related experiences and mental health.

Imagining a Future for Latinx Children, Youth, and Families

Clinical child and adolescent psychology researchers can become disillusioned by the painful experiences that increase the risk of psychopathology—such as sexual abuse, family separation, and extreme poverty—and by how difficult it is to prevent them and ameliorate their impact. In the case of Latinx children, youth, and families, the articles in this special issue have

documented the negative repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to make structural changes to promote their wellbeing (e.g., Capielo Rosario et al., 2024; Polo et al., 2024; Venta et al., 2024). These entrenched problems and emergent challenges can make us feel hopeless and restrict our ability to imagine a positive environment for the development of mental health. The last article in the special issue presents a new model to imagine the future of Latinx children, youth, and families.

Causadias and Neblett (2024) propose PARQUES, a framework to dream about the future of Latinx children, youth, and families in the United States. The final article in this collection employs the Spanish word for parks as an acronym “PARQUES,” that stands for *políticas* (policies), *alegría* (joy), *reparación* (healing and reparations), *querencia* (love and belonging), *unión* (unity), *empleo* (employment), and *seguridad* (safety). The authors leverage existing theory and research to emphasize the importance of these dimensions. PARQUES are imagined as communal spaces for connection, joy, play, rest, and healing that promote the wellbeing and mental health of Latinx children, youth, and families (Causadias & Neblett, 2024).

Conclusion and Future Directions

In this special issue, we used a structural-intersectional approach to the mental health of Latinx children, youth, and families before, during, and after the pandemic. The articles included in this collection cover a range of important topics from immigration to school contexts and family dynamics, each of them offering important new directions for clinical theory, research, measurement, training, activism, policy, and interventions on Latinx children, youth, and families. These articles employ quantitative, qualitative, mixed, and community-participatory methods, including surveys, systematic reviews, and *testimonios*. They focus on Latinx youth across the U.S., from Illinois to North Carolina, and include reports from queer, Black, Boricuas, and/or Chicanxs youth. They discuss past experiences and propose future alternatives.

These papers document the reality of many, but several experiences and themes were not addressed in depth in this volume. These include, but are not limited to, the pandemic experiences and mental health of Latinx children, youth, and families with disabilities; those engaged with the criminal justice and family welfare systems; those whose caregivers went through separation and divorce; those whose caregivers died and who became orphans; and those who are survivors of war, violence, and trauma. Elucidating the

developmental repercussions of these experiences among these families during the pandemic remains a challenge for clinical child and adolescent psychologists.

Attention to the structural-intersectional nature of these issues demands that we go beyond focusing on individuals to question the role of institutions and systems in fostering psychopathology through policies and practices, including families, schools, governments, political parties, corporations, universities, and churches (see Aceves et al., 2022). More innovations that are structural-intersectional are needed to determine the long-term effects of the pandemic across cohorts and generations and to promote mental health and wellbeing among Latinx children, youth, and families following the pandemic. These include the creation of community-driven partnerships (Fleming et al., 2023) between schools, universities, churches, and local governments to improve access and delivery of mental health services, as well as the establishment of assessment and treatment protocols to deal with future pandemics in schools, hospitals, universities, and private practices (Esterwood & Saeed, 2020).

Despite these challenges, we are hopeful that we can do more and better clinical child and adolescent psychological science for our communities and by our communities and that we can learn together from what we went through during the COVID-19 pandemic. This hope is rooted in our belief that when we work together, we can enact change at the individual and collective levels. This is fitting for a special issue centered on Latinx people, who despite all of their challenges and diversity, often share a devotion to family and a commitment to the wellbeing of their children and youth. This collection of articles was made possible by people who embody that spirit. We are grateful to all the authors, reviewers, editors, community members, students, staff, and research participants who worked so hard to make this research possible during such a challenging time. This collection is a testament to your love. *Gracias familia.*

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