Examining the Influence of Family Environments on Youth Violence: A Comparison of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Non-Latino Black, and Non-Latino White Adolescents

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Abstract Existing research rarely considers important ethnic subgroup variations in violent behaviors among Latino youth. Thus, their risk for severe violent behaviors is not well understood in light of the immense ethnic and generational diversity of the Latino population in the United States. Grounded in social control theory and cultural analyses of familism, we examine differences in the risk for severe youth violence, as well as its associations with family cohesion, parental engagement, adolescent autonomy, household composition, and immigrant generation among Mexican (n = 1,594), Puerto Rican (n = 586), Cuban (n = 488), and non-Latino Black (n = 4,053), and White (n = 9,921) adolescents with data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. Results indicate a gradient of risk; White youth had the lowest risk for severe violence and Puerto Rican youth had the highest risk compared to all other racial/ethnic subgroups. Within-group analysis indicates that family factors are not universally protective or risk-inducing. While family cohesion decreased the risk of severe violence among all groups, parental engagement was associated with increased risk among Blacks and Whites, and adolescent autonomy was associated with increased risk among Puerto Ricans and Cubans. In addition, Cuban and White adolescents who lived in single parent households or who did not live with their parents, had higher risk for severe violent behaviors than their counterparts who lived in two parent households. Among Latinos, the association of immigrant generation was in opposite directions among Mexicans and Cubans. We conclude that family and immigration factors differentially influence risk for violence among Latino subgroups and highlight the significance of examining subgroup differences and developing intervention strategies that are tailored to the needs of each ethnic subgroup.

Keywords Youth violence · Families · Latinos · Hispanics · Mexicans · Puerto Ricans · Cubans

Heterogeneity of Latinos in the United States

Latinos 10–19 years old are projected to constitute 30% of all youth by 2050 in the United States (US) (Osius and Rosenthal 2009). Violence is the second leading cause of death among this population; national estimates have generally found the risk for Latinos to fall between the risk of White and Black youth. For example, in 2006, the homicide rate among Latino youth was 8.6 compared to 1.6 among non-Latino Whites and 21.2 among non-Latino Blacks (per 100,000; CDC 2010). In addition, in 2007, 40% of Latino youth were involved in a physical fight compared to 32% of White and 45% of Black youth (CDC 2008). Additional evidence points to considerable variations across Latino ethnic subgroups. Felson et al. (2008) found that Puerto Rican youth had higher risk for violent behaviors compared to Whites, while Cuban, Mexican, and
Central American youth did not differ from Whites. Sampson et al. (2005) found that, in Chicago, Mexican youth had lower risks for violent behaviors than did Whites, but Puerto Ricans/other Latinos had higher risks compared to Whites. This evidence suggests that grouping all nationalities within the pan-ethnic “Hispanic” or “Latino” labels may distort differences and avoids a critical analysis of the differing contexts of risks for violence for the ethnic subgroups.

Differences in risks may stem from variations in the environments they experience. For example, Mexican-Americans make up 60% of the US Latino population and are the most heterogeneous. The geographic proximity to and continuous migration from Mexico has, in part, established immigration patterns that create temporary separation of nuclear families and force greater reliance on extended networks in ethnic enclaves and traditional ports-of-entry. This picture changes with later generations who are more established, have higher socioeconomic status (SES), and are less segregated from Whites (Rumbaut 2006).

Puerto Ricans are citizens by birth since the Jones Act of 1917. By 2008, over half of the population lived on the US mainland (Collazo et al. 2010). Mainly concentrated in northeastern states, Puerto Ricans were subjected to changing economic structures that resulted in precarious economic conditions (Portes and Grosfoguel 1994). Consequently, Puerto Rican families experience higher rates of poverty, unemployment, and segregation than other Latinos (Rumbaut 2006; Fischer and Tienda 2006). Furthermore, Rivera et al. (2008) indicated that due to the longstanding colonial presence of the US within the island, ties to a unique national culture are weaker for Puerto Ricans than for other Latino groups. In contrast, the political conflict between the Cuban and US governments has resulted in stable migration patterns for Cubans compared to Mexicans and Puerto Ricans. As a whole, Cuban Americans have the highest income and education levels among all Latino groups, while exhibiting high segregation levels from Whites. This is partially due to an economically successful ethnic enclave in South Florida (Fischer and Tienda 2006). Such stability in migration patterns and geographic mobility fostered strong intergenerational contacts and is likely to increase the levels of loyalty and family unity found among Cubans (Rivera et al. 2008).

Recent efforts by Felson et al. (2008) and Sampson et al. (2005) attempted to untangle the role of Latino national origin in the risk for violent behaviors among Americas’ youth. Their approach to analysis, however, utilized race/ethnicity as a dummy variable to report groups’ adjusted means for violent behaviors as they compare to non-Latino White adolescents. Understanding how different ethnic Latino subgroups differ in risk for violence from White adolescents is clearly an important contribution to the literature. However, LaVeist (1994) argues that rather than simply including dummy variables in multivariate models, we must conduct group-specific or stratified analyses to better understand how each factor affects outcomes of interest for each racial/ethnic subgroup. Such within-group analysis provides insight into processes that permit greater sensitivity in the development of strategies that target critical factors for each population. Family environments and immigrant generation have been discussed as central in the literature on Latinos, and may provide a reasonable explanation for some of the differences observed elsewhere. The purpose of this study is to address gaps in the current literature by exploring the risk for violent behaviors among different US Latino ethnic subgroups and how this compares to adolescents of other racial groups. In addition, we examine the effects of different family environment characteristics and immigrant generation on youth violence across racial/ethnic subgroups. We use social control theory (SCT) and a cultural framework to inform our research and interpretation of findings.

Theoretical Frameworks

The role of families in child and adolescents’ development has long been established in the social and behavioral sciences literature. Youth learn norms, values, and behaviors from adult members in their household and broader networks through socialization processes that are adaptive to larger environments. The central premise of SCT is that individuals are naturally inclined towards deviance and that their attachment or bonds to other persons or groups make them conform to specific norms of appropriate behaviors (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990). SCT posits that the development of violent behaviors is more likely to occur when social bonds, primarily developed in the family, are weak or broken (Hirschi 1969). This theory is consistent with several cultural values identified in the literature on Latino culture(s), such as familism, which stresses that family is at the center of one’s life, directly affecting the relationships between individuals within the family and their behaviors when interacting with others outside of it (Mirabal-Colón and Vélez 2006). Consistent with the notion of social control, most familism definitions emphasize the importance of unity, adherence to particular roles in public situations, and deference to authority figures (Ingoldsby 1991; Vega 1990).

Focused on Latino populations in the US, Landale and colleagues describe familism as a concept that includes attitudinal foundations (values that emphasize the centrality of family), behavioral manifestations (fulfillment of obligations and roles), and demographic dimensions (family size and structure, composition and dispersion,
including the presence of fictive and extended kin). Consistent with this construct, Harrison et al. (1990) argued that the socially subordinate minority status and greater exposure to stressors among many families of color in the US has resulted in the development of interdependence and bilateral and extended kin networks as adaptive strategies and socialization goals that help to cope with persistent inequality and discrimination. In turn, these influence parenting goals and styles that have an impact on youth violence.

Familism has been found to persist across ethnic and generational Latino subgroups (Sabogal et al. 1987; Vásquez García et al. 2000). However, rather than a static trait, familism may be flexible and situational, shifting to accommodate more distal factors in the social and political environments. Since each Latino subgroup is embedded differently within the larger society, the degree and expression of familism may vary with other characteristics of their social environments (Bronfenbrenner 1988; Cockerham 2005). For example, immigration and educational policies affect Latino subgroups in very different ways, and may change family dynamics by fostering intergenerational tensions and a sense of alienation that may contribute to youth violent behaviors (Boutakidis et al. 2006). Many Latino immigrant parents encounter a society where their work and educational experiences are not valued. For more recent Latino immigrants, the dearth of culturally affirming, bilingual education can exclude them from full societal participation, encouraging disengagement from schools for parents and their children. In cases where adolescents are more English-proficient than their parents, the status and authority hierarchy may be inverted, affecting parents’ ability to control and monitor their children, increasing adolescent autonomy, and ultimately leading to higher stress and resentment within families. Finally, economic pressures faced by many parents working in low-wage, low-security jobs interfere with their ability to meet with teachers due to conflicting work hours and are forced to leave adolescents unsupervised after school (Schneider et al. 2006), increasing their likelihood for engaging in risk behaviors. This wide range of systemic factors, which are felt at the family level, can fundamentally alter the expression of familism, and influence the ways that youth violence is enacted.

Family Environments and Risk for Violent Behaviors

Family cohesion, parental engagement, adolescent autonomy (or parental control), and household composition have been identified with youth violence and are consistent with SCT and the concept of familism. The evidence regarding their relationship to aggression and violence among Latinos compared to White and Black youth is mixed. For example, Smith and Krohn (1995) found that parent–child attachment was protective against youth violence among Latino and White male adolescents, while Rodríguez and Weisburd (1991) found that family involvement was protective among Puerto Ricans but not Whites. In addition, a study among Cuban adolescents found that the risk for violent behaviors decreased as parental attachment increased (Vega et al. 1993).

On the other hand, some studies show no or a weak relationship between family dynamics and adolescent violence. Pabón (1998), for example, found no association between family cohesion and delinquent behaviors among Puerto Ricans. Walker et al. (2007) found that as parental engagement increased, the risk for violence decreased among Latino males generally, but increased among Black male adolescents. Arbona and Power (2003) found that, after accounting for family SES, there were no racial/ethnic differences in the association between levels of parental attachment and anti-social behaviors between Blacks, Whites, and Mexican–Americans. Different parenting strategies may result in differences in levels of adolescents’ autonomy, particularly behavioral autonomy (Zimmer-Gembeck and Collins 2003). Although it has generally been perceived that higher levels of autonomy are protective as one ages, this association may be contingent on the context in which individuals develop (Zimmer-Gembeck and Collins 2003; Spear and Kulbok 2004). Moreover, adolescents’ level of autonomy may be a reflection of cultural forces that dictate a strong adherence to behavioral and attitudinal expectations of family members, particularly the expectation to place higher value on the opinions of adult blood and fictive kin (e.g., godparents).

Mirabal-Colón and Vélez (2006) argued that socio-cultural factors reproduced within the family protect Latinos from higher rates of youth violence compared to Blacks, even though both groups fare poorly in many SES indicators. This assertion, however, must be viewed with caution given the potential ethnic and generational subgroup differences in parental marital status and household composition, which in turn are tied to SES. Compared to 69.5% of Cuban children, 42.4% of Puerto Rican children live in households with married parents (Landale et al. 2006). Conversely, 15.8% of Cuban and 33.6% of Puerto Rican children live in households headed by a female with no partner present (Reimers 2006). Unfortunately, commonly used measures of household composition do not provide information about additional kin who may live in the households, such as grandparents. The importance of extended family systems has been extensively demonstrated among Black families (Harrison et al. 1990; McAdoo 2000). These findings highlight the importance of how specific dimensions of the family involvement are relevant for different subgroups.
This article aims to address some of the limitations of previous research by examining differences in violent behaviors among ethnically diverse youth, and how these relate to different dimensions of the family environment and immigrant generation. Although there are a number of other factors that are highly correlated with violent behaviors (e.g., involvement with deviant peers, gang membership, and drug use), research suggests that these may be a result of the involvement in violence rather than a precursor to it (Nofziger and Kurtz 2005). Some studies have found that the family context has a stronger influence on the risk for violent behaviors among Latino (Rodríguez and Weisburd 1991; Smith and Krohn 1995) than peer influences. Given our cultural analysis and focus on sources of protection, we examine family environments as critical to understanding ethnic subgroup differences among Latinos.

The Current Study

We address several limitations in previous research by examining three questions. First, do adolescents of different Latino ethnic origin differ from each other and from other racial/ethnic groups in their odds of severe violent behaviors? We hypothesize that all minority groups will have a higher risk than White youth and that all the Latino subgroups will have lower risk than Black youth; the critical question is whether the Latino groups would show a gradient in risk. Based on the historical patterns of immigration into ethnic enclaves and the socioeconomic status of the groups, we hypothesize that Cubans will be at lowest risk and Puerto Ricans at highest risk for severe violent behaviors among the Latino subgroups. Second, does the family environment decrease the chances of engaging in severe violent behavior? Do different elements of the family environment protect against violence regardless or adolescents’ racial/ethnic background? Consistent with SCT, we hypothesize that greater family cohesion and parental engagement will decrease the risk for severe violent behaviors, while increases in adolescent autonomy will increase the risk across all groups. We also hypothesize that adolescents who live in households with additional adult kin will not differ from two parent households in their risk for severe violent behaviors. Third, are Latino adolescents who are more recent immigrants (i.e., first and second generation) at reduced risk for severe violent behaviors compared to their more established peers? Is the effect of immigrant generation consistent across Latino subgroups? We hypothesize a gradient of risk regarding immigrant generation, where Latino adolescents across all groups who are first and second generation will be at lower risk than third generation adolescents.

A primary strength of the current study is that we use a nationally representative sample to examine the above questions by using both across and within ethnic group analyses, thus highlighting the diversity among Latino populations. The strength of this approach is the use of group specific analyses in order to examine the role of these different elements of the family environment and immigrant generation for each group separately, providing greater insight into processes that will strengthen the development of effective interventions strategies to reduce racial/ethnic disparities in youth violence (LaVeist 1994).

Method

Study Design

The data for this study come from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health; Harris et al. 2008), which examines the health related behaviors among adolescents. As primary sampling units, 132 middle and high schools were selected to be representative of schools in the country. Student selection was stratified by grade and sex. We utilize data from the in-home interviews at Wave I (1994–1995), which had a 79% response rate. A major advantage of Add Health is that Puerto Rican, Cuban, and non-Latino Black adolescents with highly educated parents (i.e., at least one parent was a college graduate) were oversampled allowing for nuanced subgroup analysis. Subsequent waves of Add Health significantly reduced the number of Cuban and Puerto Rican participants due to general attrition and non-follow up with adolescents who had graduated from high school after the first wave. Furthermore, many of the independent measures of interest were not assessed beyond Wave II.

Sample Description

Respondents who self-identified as non-Latino White, non-Latino Black, Cubans/Cuban American, Mexicans/Mexican–American/Chicano (hereafter referred to as Whites, Blacks, Cubans, and Mexicans), and Puerto Rican origin (N = 16,799) were selected for the study. Violence scores were missing for 184 respondents, who were eliminated, for a final sample size of 16,615, weighted to represent 20,201,501 adolescents in the country. The sample was comprised of 9.5% Mexicans 3.5% Puerto Ricans, 3% Cubans, 24% Blacks and 60% Whites. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics for the full sample and by racial/ethnic subgroups. Fifty-one percent of respondents were male and the average age was 16 (SE = .12). The majority of respondents’ mothers had completed some college education (50.5%), 34% had completed high school/GED, and the
average family income was $45,000 \ (Med = $38,000)$. Racial/ethnic subgroups differed in family income, $F(4, 128) = 26.3, p \leq .001$. Mexican and Cuban adolescents were more likely to have mothers with less than a high school education, $\chi^2(4, 13,205) = 772, p \leq .001$, and less likely to have mothers with a high school diploma/GED, $\chi^2(4, 13,205) = 77.54, p \leq .001$, or some college, $\chi^2(4, 13,205) = 119.7, p \leq .001$, than the rest of the sample.

All items were coded as yes or no (or missing). If participants reported not engaging in any violent behavior they were classified as none (0); if they had engaged in at least one act of moderate violent behaviors, they were classified as moderate (1); if they had engaged in at least one severe act, they were classified as severe (2). This strategy allowed for an ordinal analysis using a measure that examined increasing risk for violence.

### Measures

#### Violent Behaviors

A total of seven items were used to assess violent behaviors. As in other studies of violent behaviors, these items were heavily skewed, and log transformations did not correct this problem. In order to gauge increasing risk for violence, we created categorical indicators that distinguished between moderate and severe violent behaviors.

**Moderate Violence** Four items were used to create a dichotomous indicator of moderate violence. Adolescents were asked: “During the past 12 month how often did you… get into a serious physical fight?”, “injure someone badly enough to need bandages or care of a doctor or nurse”, “use or threaten to use a weapon to get something from someone”, and “take part in a fight where a group of your friends was against another group”. Original response categories ranged from never, 1 to 2 times, 3 to 4 times, and 5 or more times.

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### Table 1 Sample description

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mean (SE)</th>
<th>Full sample</th>
<th>Whites</th>
<th>Blacks</th>
<th>Mexicans</th>
<th>Puerto Ricans</th>
<th>Cubans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N*</td>
<td>16,642</td>
<td>9,921</td>
<td>4,053</td>
<td>1,587</td>
<td>586</td>
<td>449</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence\b***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>None</em></td>
<td>56</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Moderate</em></td>
<td>35</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Severe</em></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males N\b</td>
<td>8,083 (.51)</td>
<td>4,858 (.51)</td>
<td>1,892 (.50)</td>
<td>794 (.52)</td>
<td>297 (.53.5)</td>
<td>242 (.47.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>16.0 (.12)</td>
<td>15.9 (.13)</td>
<td>16.2 (.21)</td>
<td>16.0 (.28)</td>
<td>15.9 (.37)</td>
<td>16 (.78)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family income\c***</td>
<td>45 (1.64)</td>
<td>50.0 (1.85)</td>
<td>29.6 (1.68)</td>
<td>31.7 (1.77)</td>
<td>34.0 (2.56)</td>
<td>27.79 (4.52)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother’s education\b***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Less than High School</em></td>
<td>16 (.01)</td>
<td>10 (.01)</td>
<td>21 (.02)</td>
<td>54 (.04)</td>
<td>29 (.03)</td>
<td>43 (.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>High School/GED</em></td>
<td>34 (.01)</td>
<td>35 (.01)</td>
<td>35 (.02)</td>
<td>21 (.03)</td>
<td>38 (.02)</td>
<td>30 (.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Some college or beyond</em></td>
<td>51 (.02)</td>
<td>55 (.02)</td>
<td>45 (.03)</td>
<td>25 (.03)</td>
<td>33 (.04)</td>
<td>28 (.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigrant generation\b***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>First</em></td>
<td>2.5 (.01)</td>
<td>0.1 (.00)</td>
<td>1.4 (.01)</td>
<td>19.1 (.02)</td>
<td>6.1 (.04)</td>
<td>32.2 (.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Second</em></td>
<td>10.7 (.01)</td>
<td>8.2 (.01)</td>
<td>8.6 (.01)</td>
<td>32.0 (.03)</td>
<td>26.5 (.03)</td>
<td>50.2 (.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Third</em></td>
<td>87.7 (.01)</td>
<td>90.4 (.01)</td>
<td>89.3 (.01)</td>
<td>46.2 (.05)</td>
<td>64.2 (.03)</td>
<td>17.7 (.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family environment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Family cohesion</em></td>
<td>3.98 (.02)</td>
<td>3.97 (.02)</td>
<td>3.97 (.03)</td>
<td>4.04 (.05)</td>
<td>3.98 (.05)</td>
<td>4.05 (.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Parental engagement*</em></td>
<td>3.57 (.04)</td>
<td>3.62 (.04)</td>
<td>3.53 (.06)</td>
<td>3.31 (.11)</td>
<td>3.59 (.18)</td>
<td>3.00 (.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Adolescents’ autonomy**</em></td>
<td>5.14 (.05)</td>
<td>5.20 (.06)</td>
<td>5.04 (.09)</td>
<td>4.78 (.11)</td>
<td>5.16 (.12)</td>
<td>5.02 (.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household composition\b</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Two parents***</em></td>
<td>63 (.01)</td>
<td>71 (.01)</td>
<td>36 (.02)</td>
<td>56 (.02)</td>
<td>51 (.04)</td>
<td>47.6 (.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Two parents &amp; adult kin***</em></td>
<td>7.5 (.00)</td>
<td>6.8 (.00)</td>
<td>7 (.01)</td>
<td>15 (.02)</td>
<td>7 (.01)</td>
<td>19.2 (.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Single parent***</em></td>
<td>16.8 (.01)</td>
<td>13.6 (.01)</td>
<td>30 (.02)</td>
<td>15 (.02)</td>
<td>26.6 (.04)</td>
<td>15.4 (.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Single parent &amp; adult kin***</em></td>
<td>7.6 (.01)</td>
<td>5.2 (.00)</td>
<td>17 (.01)</td>
<td>8.4 (.01)</td>
<td>11 (.03)</td>
<td>14.5 (.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Adult kin, not parent(s)***</em></td>
<td>4.7 (.00)</td>
<td>3.3 (.00)</td>
<td>11 (.01)</td>
<td>5.1 (.01)</td>
<td>4.8 (.01)</td>
<td>3.2 (.02)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SE standard errors; \* Unweighted sample size; \b Weighted percentage; \c In thousands; * p \leq .05; ** p \leq .01; *** p \leq .001
Severe Violence Three items were used to create a dichotomous indicator of severe violence. One item asked: “During the past 30 days, how many days did you carry a weapon—such as a gun, knife, or club—to school?” Original response categories included none, 1 day, 2 or 3 days, 4 or 5 days, or 6 or more days. Two additional items were part of a listing of violence-related experiences. Adolescents were asked: “During the past 12 months, how often did each of the following things happen?” We noted “You pulled a knife or gun on someone” and “You shot or stabbed someone” as indicators of severe violence. Original response categories included never, once, more than once.

Immigrant Generation

Respondents who self-reported being foreign-born with foreign-born parents were classified as first generation immigrants. Those who were US-born with at least one foreign-born parent were classified as second generation. Those who were US-born with both US-born parents were classified as third generation and above. This variable was only included in the within-Latino multivariate analysis (Bui and Thongniramol 2005).

Family Cohesion

This variable is a modified version of López Turley et al. (2010) measure of family cohesion (original $\alpha = .78$). We used the average score of a five-item scale ($\alpha = .76$; $1 = \text{not at all}$ to $5 = \text{very much}$) where higher scores indicate higher family cohesion. Items included “How much do you feel that... your parents care about you?”, “people in your family understand you”, “you and your family have fun together”, “your family pays attention to you”, and “you want to leave home”. This last item was added to the original scale and reverse coded to assess the consistency of adolescents’ responses prior to constructing the final scale.

Parental Engagement

Parental engagement was measured using ten yes–no items that indicated the breadth of activities adolescents did with resident parent(s) (Kapinus and Gorman 2004; for modified versions see Ornelas et al. 2007 and López Turley et al. 2010). Adolescents were asked to list whether in the previous 4 weeks they had shopped, played a sport, attended a religious service, gone out for entertainment, worked on a school project, talked about a personal problem, a date, a party, or about a school project with their resident parent(s). A 10th item asked whether the adolescent had not participated in any of the above. If adolescents answered no to all first nine items, we confirmed that the 10th item was coded as yes. Scores were summed to create a count for each parent, and then averaged if the adolescents had two parents in the household. The final measure ranged from zero to nine, where higher scores indicate more parental engagement. We do not report alphas for parental engagement because the measure is an averaged count of activities.

Adolescent Autonomy

The adolescent autonomy measure included seven yes–no items, previously utilized by Kapinus and Gorman (2004) and Perreira et al. (2006) as measures of parental control. We reverse coded the scale so that higher scores reflect more independence in decision-making. Adolescents were asked whether their parents let them make their own decisions about “the time you must be home on weekend nights”, “the people you hang around with”, “what you wear”, “how much television you watch”, “which television programs you watch”, “what time you go to bed on week nights”, and “what you eat”. Scores were summed to create a count that ranged from zero to seven. We do not report alphas on adolescent autonomy because the measure is a count of activities.

Household Composition

Adolescents named each person living in the household and provided his/her sex and relationship to self, including those who were extended or fictive kin. Biological or adoptive mothers, fathers, and/or step-parents who had lived in the household for more than 5 years were considered primary females and males in the household and classified as parents. Grandparents, great-grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other adult kin (over 21 years of age) were considered secondary males and females and classified as other adult kin in the households. Households with two primary persons were classified as two parent households. Household composition categories included: (a) two parents, (b) two parents with an additional adult kin, (c) single parent, (d) single parent with an additional adult kin, and (e) adult kin with no parents. In the overwhelming majority of cases the additional adult kin category was made up of grandparents ($n = 1,917$), aunts or uncles ($n = 1,339$), and other relatives ($n = 1,312$) who lived in the household. Two hundred adolescent respondents lived with their spouses; 100 of these lived in households without their parents.

Analytic Strategy

Add Health utilized a complex sampling design with unequal probability of selection. Post-stratification weights...
were used to achieve nationally representative results. All analyses were conducted using SAS 9.3 PROC SURVEY procedures to account for the regional and school clustering in the sampling design (Chantala and Tabor 1999). Ignoring the complex clustering would underestimate standard errors, increasing the probability of a false-positive test. In the first analytic step we calculated descriptive statistics for the full sample and by each racial/ethnic subgroup, testing for differences using ANOVAs and Chi-squares ($\chi^2$). In the second analytic step we conducted pairwise contrasts using ordinal logistic regression to determine racial/ethnic differences in the unadjusted and adjusted odds for severe violent behaviors. The third step was a systematic analysis of the effect of different factors in explaining severe violent behaviors among the full sample after considering racial/ethnic differences using multivariate ordinal logistic regression. Finally, in order to assess how effects of the different elements of the family environment and immigrant generation varied across different racial/ethnic groups, final analyses were stratified by adolescents’ racial/ethnic background.

All multivariate analyses controlled for age, sex, family income, and mother’s education. These have been identified in the literature as having important effects on the risk for violent behaviors, particularly racial/ethnic differences in risk (Bui and Thongniramol 2005; Blum et al. 2000). In order to maximize the sample, missing data points across all independent variables were calculated using the maximum likelihood estimates for parameters in probabilistic models via the Estimation-Maximization (EM) algorithm (Raghunathan 2004). We note that 159 (1%) respondents had missing values on immigrant generation, 13 (0.08%) on family cohesion, 321 (2%) on parental engagement, 378 (2.5%) on adolescents’ autonomy, and 165 (1%) on household composition. Additionally, 4,156 (23%) had missing values on family income, and 3,435 (19%) on mother’s education.

**Results**

Table 1 shows the distribution of key independent variables for the full sample and by racial/ethnic subgroup. Groups differed significantly in immigrant generation, $\chi^2(12, 16,642) = 2,049.84$, $p \leq .001$, where Whites and Blacks were more likely to be third generation, Cubans were more likely to be first generation, and Mexicans were more likely to be second generation. There were no differences in level of family cohesion by racial/ethnic subgroups; however, Cubans had lower average levels of parental engagement, $F(4, 128) = 3.3$, $p \leq .05$, and Mexicans had lower average levels of adolescents’ autonomy, $F(4, 128) = 4$, $p \leq .005$, than other groups. Analysis indicated racial/ethnic differences in household composition. White youth were more likely to live in two parent households, $\chi^2(4, 16,447) = 2,277$, $p \leq .001$, while Cubans were more likely to live in households with two parents and an additional adult kin, $\chi^2(4, 16,447) = 92.5$, $p \leq .001$. Blacks and Puerto Ricans were more likely to live in single parent households, $\chi^2(4, 16,447) = 325$, $p \leq .001$, while Blacks and Cubans were more likely to live in households with a single parent and an additional adult kin, $\chi^2(4, 16,447) = 414$, $p \leq .001$. Black youth were also more likely to live in households with adult kin who were not their parent, $\chi^2(4, 16,447) = 231$, $p \leq .001$.

Overall, 56% of the full sample reported not engaging in any violent behaviors, while 35% engaged in moderate and 9% in severe forms of violent behaviors. Answering the first research question, we found that compared to White youth, Cubans, $OR = 1.55$, 95% CI [1.22, 1.97], Mexicans, $OR = 1.59$, [1.33, 1.91], Puerto Ricans, $OR = 2.54$, [1.77, 3.64], and Blacks, $OR = 1.64$, [1.48, 1.83], had significantly greater risk for severe violent behaviors. In addition, Puerto Rican adolescents had higher risk than Cuban, $OR = 1.64$, [1.07, 2.53], Mexican, $OR = 1.60$, [1.07, 2.39], and Black, $OR = 1.55$, [1.16, 2.07], adolescents. No other contrasts were significant. After adjusting for age, sex, family income, and mother’s education, all racial/ethnic minority youth continued to have increased odds for severe violence compared to White youth. The differences between Puerto Ricans and Cubans became non-significant, but a strong trend remained. In response to the second research question, results in Table 2 indicate that for the full sample, increases in family cohesion were associated with 52% reduced risk for severe violence. Each unit increase in parental engagement was associated with 6% increased risk in severe violence. Adolescents who lived in single parent households were at 15% greater risk than those in two parent households, while those who lived in households with adult kin without their parents were at 45% increased risk.

Finally, we examined how each family environment and immigrant generation variable affected the risk for severe violence by adolescents’ racial/ethnic background while controlling for age, sex, family income, and mother’s education. Increases in family cohesion were associated with decreased risk for severe violence among all groups, but comparatively less so among Puerto Ricans and Cubans. Consistent with results for the full sample, increases in parental engagement were associated with increased risk among White and Black youth, but had no effect among any of the Latino subgroups. Increases in adolescent autonomy were only associated with increased risk among Puerto Ricans and Cubans. Among Whites, parental engagement and living in households with kin other than their parents were associated with 7 and 58%
among Black adolescents, increases in parental engagement were also associated with 7% increased risk. None of the household composition variables differed from two-parent households among Blacks. Among Mexican youth, increases in family cohesion were associated with decreased risk, but no other family variable was significantly associated. Among Puerto Rican youth, increases in adolescents’ autonomy were associated with 16% increased risk for severe violent behaviors. Among Cuban adolescents, increases in adolescent autonomy were associated with a 19% increase in risk. Cuban youth who lived in households with a single parent or with adult kin who were not their parents were at a 100% and 700% increased risk for severe violent behaviors, respectively. Immigrant generation, which was only assessed among the different Latino groups, was significant among Mexicans and Cubans. First generation Mexican youth had nearly 47% lower risk than their third generation counterparts. In contrast, second generation Cubans had nearly a 200% higher risk of severe violent behaviors than their third generation peers.

**Discussion**

Much of the literature on youth violence among Latinos has been inconsistent, with some studies finding higher risks of violence and others lower. One factor that may contribute to
inconsistent findings is differences in the effect of aspects of the family environment on the risk for violence among various Latino ethnic subgroups. The lack of information on within-Latino differences with regard to family functioning and youth violence may have ultimately hindered our understanding of these issues. In this study, we examined differences in risk for severe violent behaviors, as well as assessed the influence of factors identified as critical among Latino youth using a diverse, national sample. We found partial support for our hypotheses through a more specific ethnic subgroup examination. Consistent with previous research, we found that Black and Latino adolescents have higher risks for severe violence than White youth. However, we found that there was a wide variation within the Latino subgroups, with Puerto Rican youth having the highest risk for severe violence among all groups, including Black adolescents. Furthermore, results from within-group analysis examining the effect of family environments and immigrant generation suggest a more complex picture than classic SCT would propose.

We found that family characteristics showed a complex pattern of influence across the different racial/ethnic subgroups. Thus, results from this study suggest that the assumption in much of the violence prevention literature that places the family as a source of protection and resilience among Latinos (Smith and Krohn 1995; Rodríguez and Weisburd 1991) may need to be qualified. Consistent with SCT, family cohesion was protective among all groups; however, contrary to SCT parental engagement was associated with increased risk among Whites and Blacks. Consistent with SCT, adolescents’ autonomy was associated with increased risk for severe violent behaviors, but only among Puerto Ricans and Cubans. Previous research among Mexicans (Cota-Robles and Gamble 2006), Puerto Ricans (Guilamo-Ramos et al. 2007), and Cubans (Crockett et al. 2009) has highlighted the role of low levels of autonomy (and thus high levels of parental control) coupled with high levels of family cohesion in childrearing. The high risk for severe violent behaviors among Puerto Ricans may be due to their higher levels of autonomy coupled with a more diluted effect of family contexts due to differing neighborhood environments (e.g., a strong family life may not override the effects of living in high risk neighborhoods). It may also be reflective of weaker cultural ties that may not be captured by the current measures (Rivera et al. 2008).

A noteworthy finding is that parental engagement was associated with increased risk for severe violent behaviors among White and Black youth, rather than decreases, as originally expected. Although contrary to the theoretical relationship that proposes decreased risk as a function of more parental involvement in adolescents’ lives, other studies have found similar results among Black youth. In a study in Los Angeles, Walker et al. (2007) found that medium to high levels of parental attachment increased the risk of violence among Black males who had been raised by both parents. They did not find this among Latino males. Unfortunately, other parent characteristics were not included in their study. It is possible that parents who perceive their adolescents to be at higher risk for violence to begin with may engage in more activities with them. The cross sectional nature of the analysis precludes disentangling the temporal nature of these relationships, as discussed in the following section.

Results from the current study indicate that White and Cuban adolescents who live in households without their parents were at higher risk for severe violent behaviors than those in two parent households. Cuban adolescents who lived in single parent households were also at increased risk. Consistent with our hypotheses, adolescents who lived in households with additional adult kin did not differ from those in two parent households across all subgroups. This supports previous research on the protective effects of the presence of extended kin in the household across different racial/ethnic groups (Goodman and Silverstein 2002). The presence of adults may have implications for who is available to provide sufficient supervision and guidance for adolescents. For example, households where parent(s) have the support of additional adults (such as grandparents) may have increased financial and childrearing assistance, especially in cases of young parents. The presence of another adult kin in the household may also provide a strong example for adolescents of family closeness inherent in familism values. On the other hand, our findings suggesting higher risk among Cuban and White youth in households without their parents may indicate that adult kin who serve as custodial guardians may have become so under involuntary conditions, such as parental substance abuse, mental health problems, or child abuse (Goodman and Silverstein 2002). This could increase the stress levels of the adult kin who acts as guardian, lead to strained relationships, and ultimately render them unable to afford the expected protections against opportunities for engaging in violence. The long historical acceptance of the surrogate-parenting role in the Black community and the greater reliance of co-parenting arrangements in Latino subgroups may explain distribution of household composition across the racial/ethnic subgroups examined in this study, and the lack of association among Blacks, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans.

Findings regarding the influence of immigrant generation were mixed. Although first generation Mexican youth were at reduced risk compared to their third generation counterparts; it was second generation Cuban youth whom were at higher risk than the third generation peers. Bui and Thongniramol (2005) also used Add Health data and found
that second and third generation Latinos were at increased risk compared to first generation immigrants for violent delinquency. However, they did not distinguish between Latino subgroups. While research indicates that first generation Mexicans are often protected against adverse outcomes, other immigration-related factors may account for higher risk for violence among second generation Cubans, such as the stress of inverted parent–child hierarchy when they assume the role of language and cultural brokers for their parents. A different cultural and social reference than their first and third generation counterparts, or parents’ work and education-related stressors may also amplify tensions in the household, ultimately increasing risk. The discussion of the role of culture and assimilation in health outcomes among Latinos has received considerable attention in the last decade (see Amaro and De La Torre 2002 for a comprehensive review of this literature). Hunt et al. (2004) argue that it is premature to label things as cultural changes without a clear understanding of what immigrant groups are changing from and into. Much of this literature stems from the assumption that native Latino cultures are less violent and more family oriented than American culture. However, rates of violent outcomes are extremely high in Mexico and Puerto Rico (Dahlberg and Krug 2002). A more thorough exploration of violence and family dynamics within sending countries is needed to make claims about cultural changes. Future research should consider whether and how sociocultural values have similar impacts for Latino subgroups within particular areas of the US, in light of new immigration dynamics that have fueled unprecedented growth of different populations.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

Several study limitations merit mentioning. First, this study is cross-sectional, thus causal arguments cannot be made. Although Add Health has collected additional data in subsequent waves, sample attrition significantly reduces the available data on specific Latino ethnic subgroups, leaving little power for subgroup analysis. Furthermore, questions regarding family cohesion, parental engagement, and adolescent autonomy were only assessed in the first two waves of data collection, not allowing for an assessment of their effects beyond this point. Because this study sought to identify how family factors are associated with the risk of youth violence within racial/ethnic subgroups, we opted to analyze the first wave of data in order to maximize sample size. The surge of the Latino population and increased ethnic and geographic diversity in the 15 years since the data in this study was collected highlights the urgent need to conduct new data collection efforts that reflects the shifting demographic composition.

Second, findings in this study are based on self-reported violent behaviors and family environments, and thus are subject to errors. However, self-reported measures of violence (and other sensitive information) yield a more accurate representation of the problem among America’s youth (Tourangeau and Smith 1996). In this study, interviews used computer assisted personal interviews (CAPI) and audio-computer assisted self-interviews (A-CASI) to protect answers to sensitive topics. The two methods of data recording have been shown to protect the confidentiality of answers and decrease the effect of social desirability bias, increasing the accuracy of the data.

Finally, we consider the family as a cultural category (Lomnitz and Pérez-Lizaur 1991), where values, customs, and worldviews are shaped and reproduced both within the household and extended family (Bronfenbrenner 1988; Harrison et al. 1990). Within this framework, we believe that the household composition measure should be supplemented by one that includes extended kin living in close proximity to the adolescents to better reflect the breadth of the demographic *familismo* dimension. This concept is particularly important for Latino families because studies have found that many immigrants choose to live in close proximity to relatives or fictive kin (Domínguez and Watkins 2003; Kamo 2000). This type of arrangement may provide social support to both new and established families, where other trusted kin provide guidance, supervision, and act as agents who reinforce the sociocultural values of their native countries. At the same time, this may vary by Latino ethnicity. For example, Cubans are more likely to live with additional family members within the same household (e.g., grandparents), while for Puerto Ricans, demographic *familismo* may be more apparent by having family members living in close proximity to the household, rather than within the same dwelling. Although in both cases these may provide additional caretakers, the latter would not be captured in a simple household composition measure. Further, measures that tap into attitudinal and behavioral dimensions of *familismo* should include an assessment of why adolescents do or do not engage in particular behaviors, the importance given to the family as the center of their activities, and the directions given by family authority figures. Although new measures have been developed in recent years that more directly capture these dimensions of *familismo* (Lugo-Steidel and Contreras 2003), their use has been limited to small, local samples that do not allow for subgroup analysis among Latinos. This elusive concept requires more in-depth, qualitative assessments that both examine how it compares across different Latino ethnic subgroups within the US, as well as patterns found in their countries of origin. Until this is done, most studies of within-Latino heterogeneity will continue to use measures that are proxies of culturally-sanctioned attitudes.
and behaviors within the family. In addition, results on immigrant generation among Puerto Ricans must be interpreted with caution, as some born on the island may have answered “born in the US” considering it a US territory. Research that explores the effects of immigrant generation among this population must use clearly worded items to avoid problems in its interpretation.

Despite the above limitations, this study significantly adds to the current literature by examining differences in the risk for severe violent behaviors across different Latino subgroups, as well as the influence of multiple family environment factors and immigrant generation in the risk among each of these groups. When it comes to increasing levels of severity in violence, Puerto Rican adolescents were at the highest risk among all the racial/ethnic subgroups in our study. Furthermore, factors that have been traditionally associated with decreased risk among adolescents did not have a protective influence across all groups. These results strongly suggest that intervention efforts must take into account the differing influences of family and immigration across subgroups. Although interventions for violence prevention that address family cohesion may have an impact among all groups, for Puerto Ricans and Cubans interventions focused on adolescent autonomy and available supervision and support in households may be more effective.

When parents are overworked and have little ability to engage in the larger social structures in which their children participate (e.g., schools) due to limited English-proficiency or available time, their adolescents’ risk of dropping out of school and/or associating with deviant peers increases, which in turn are highly associated with the risk of violent behaviors. It is important that relevant policies and interventions (in instances bilingual or Spanish-only) for both parents and adolescents are put in place that expand parents ability to supervise their children themselves or via other trusted adult kin or fictive kin (who may or may not live in the household). This will enhance their ability to engage in their educational upbringing and maintain the stability of the parent–child status hierarchy. Future studies should examine the pathways by which family dynamics are shaped by community environments and how these affect risk across subgroups. Ultimately this may help policy makers develop more effective intervention strategies that impact adolescents’ violence, thus decreasing the physical, psychological, and social injuries that stem from violence. In summary, this study underscores the importance of conducting studies that examine the heterogeneity of Latino experiences in the US and highlight the need to understand the cultural values and sociopolitical and economic histories of these groups when addressing youth violent behaviors.

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