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## Their Pain is Our Pain: The Intersectionality of Identity Formation, Socioeconomic Status (SES), and Transgenerational Trauma in Latine Youth

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Their Pain is Our Pain: The Intersectionality of Identity Formation, Socioeconomic Status (SES),  
and Transgenerational Trauma in Latine Youth

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of other requirements for Honors Studies in  
Political Science

By

Fernanda M. Alcantara Martinez

Spring 2022

Political Science

Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences

**The University of Arkansas**

Acknowledgments

I never thought that as a first-generation student that I was capable of producing such intellectual and important work to contribute to my Latine culture and my field of study. A special thank you to Dr. Xavier Medina for being the first Mexican- American professor I got to learn from and for fueling my passion for Latine Politics. To Dr. Jarred Cuellar, thank you for taking investing in me and teaching me not only about academia but about my identity. To a dear friend of mine who sat with me in Champions and helped me develop my idea. Thank you to my tribe of friends, mentors, and family- you are the reason I am able to do this! Most importantly, thank you to my parents for their sacrifice, los amo, este diploma es para ustedes también.

### Abstract

This thesis will explore the intersectionality of identity formation, socioeconomic status (SES) and transgenerational trauma in Latine youth. There is extensive research in the Hispanic identity formation and the factors that influence it. However, there is little to no research that focuses on the role SES and transgenerational trauma from growing up in a Hispanic household with adversities specific to the immigrant experience and how they influence identity formation during the pre- adolescent and adolescent years. As well as how the Hispanic identity they form influences the adversities they face and SES they shift to or stay in. This research aims to shine light on the complexity of Hispanic youth development and identity formation in order to better understand the systemic issues that can aid/ harm their cultural and/ or their socioeconomic development. In the political realm, Hispanics are referred to as the “waking giant” which alludes to the belief that the Latine population has political power due to their increasing population. This research will allow us to find the disconnect between a Hispanic identity that is civically engaged and socially thriving, and the oppressed population with no voice. I expect to find a correlation between advancements in SES, a weaker Hispanic identity, and high transgenerational trauma with resources that increase resiliency and opportunity or a low transgenerational trauma with low resources.

*Keywords:* Latine Politics, Transgenerational Trauma, Intersectionality

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In Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*, the concept of *identification* is best characterized by the understanding that one's identity comes from the "love of the citizens" rather than "love of the soil". Meaning that an individual's identity is the cause and effect of our daily lives, making it essential to understanding the formation of identity. This is especially important to examine in marginalized communities. Mexico's history with the United States has altered how Latines residing in the U.S. develop their identity to this day. The most recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau totals the Hispanic population at 60.5 million, making them the largest minority in the nation, accounting for 18.5% of the total population. In political literature, Beltran coined the term the "sleeping giant" when referring to the Latine population due to growing population and presence in the American political arena. As a result, this population is vulnerable to prejudice and discrimination. The word "giant" symbolizes the power and strength gained through their strength in population. The reality of this is that the Latine population is not homogenous in their political ideals, engagement, or education. Another factor that hinders the unity of this group is their socioeconomic status and mobility. According to recent data from Kaiser, the national poverty rate at 12.3%, while the Hispanic population has a much higher poverty rate at 17.2%. While there are external factors that suppress Latine communities into low SES; there are also internal factors that are not often discussed such as trauma. This research aims to focus on the intersectionality of the cultural transgenerational trauma, SES, and identity

development of Latine youth in order to better understand the obstacles surrounding SES mobility to provide policies specifically catered to the supporting the Latine population.

Throughout this paper, I will use the term Latine to reflect a more all-encompassing term. Both Latinx and Latine are pan-ethnic labels that aim to be gender-fluid and inclusive, but my preference for the term Latine comes from the attempt to decolonize what this community is referred to as. It has been difficult to find a term that not only unites the Latine community but is representative of the diversity within it. The term Hispanic refers to individuals from Spanish speaking, colonized, Latin-American countries. Hence the creation of *Latino(a)*, which accentuates machismo within the community and excludes non-binary individuals. As a result, *Latinx* was generated with its roots in the U.S. This term is difficult to pronounce in Spanish, was fashioned by non-Hispanics, and still excludes non-binary individuals. The Spanish language is very gendered, but there are some words (*estudiante* for example) ending in neither *a* nor *o*, but rather *e* to refer to all. The term Latine respects the grammar rules of the Spanish language, is non-binary, pan-ethnic, and roots from within the community.

Velez-Ibanes and Greenberg (1992) underline that fund of knowledge are not easily transferred to the following generations unless they remain in the same class or find new way to convert their knowledge. I believe this idea can be applied to identity formation, because identity is a result of our complex historical process (Gracia, 2008), which allows it to count aa fund of knowledge. This is where identity formation and the socioeconomic effects of transgenerational trauma begin to intersect.

### **Literature Review**

A large portion of my literature review focuses heavily on intergenerational trauma. This is since I plan on making this factor the core of my research. The Latine immigration experience is

unique in comparison to non-Latin American migration. In this section I will show that the intersectionality of transgenerational trauma, identity formation, and other factors within the Latine have not been properly studied. The literature review will show that there is a gap in knowledge, which I argue this paper will help fill.

### **Identity**

The Latine culture is rooted in *familismo* which places family as the focal point in their lives (Leidy; Santiago 2016). Santiago et al., (2016) found a correlation between familism and Latine adolescent's response to stress. This underlines the importance of familial relationships in the Latine culture. Velez-Ibanez and Greenberg (1992) bring attention to this topic in their *Formation and Transformation of Fund of Knowledge Among the U.S.-Mexican Households*, by highlighting the social relationships children participate in at home and how it affects their cultural personality. A study by Velez (1983) explained that there might be a “possible link between early childhood experience and the formation of these expectations in clustered household settings and establishes the theoretical bases for understanding the phenomenon” (Velez-Ibanez and Greenberg 1992).

The identity formation of Hispanics is unique due to the proximity to their home country and how it factors into their assimilation process. Other factors that affect the Hispanic identity formation of Hispanic youth includes acculturative stress, which are the challenges immigrants face when negotiating the differences in their home and host cultures (Sirin et al., 2013). Research has shown that prevalence for developing depression, anxiety, and psychosomatic complaints is higher for youth who experience this type of cultural stress during their identity formation process (e.g., Fisher, Wallace, and Fenton, 2000). This is where the connection

between the negative effects of the transgenerational trauma and identity formation begin to intersect.

### **Transgenerational Trauma**

Transgenerational trauma was first truly studied in the 1960s when it observed the lasting psychological effects on Holocaust survivors and their families (Phipps and Degges-White, 2014). In a recent study, Lurie-Beck and Janine Karen (2007) looked at *The Differential Impact of Holocaust Trauma Across Three Generations*. In this empirical study, they took 27 Holocaust survivors, 69 children of the survivors, and 28 grandchildren of survivors, they determined the strong influence the survivor's trauma had on their incoming generations. This study argues that the symptoms experienced by Holocaust survivors are transmitted through generations when their experienced trauma goes unsolved. This is due to their inability to develop a healthy attachment to their children and grandchildren, which resulted in a distrust from the children that their parents could meet their emotional needs. They also found was an increase in vulnerability to transmit trauma in younger children than older children due to a having experienced a different attachment style prior to confinement in concentration camps. This study successfully highlighted the role of trauma in multiple generations and looking at the factors that allow them to become easily transmitted.

Applying this knowledge to the Latine community, Phipps and Degges-White (2014) specifically look at second generation Latino immigrant youth and how trauma is transmitted. They define transgenerational trauma as trauma that extends beyond the generation of the primary experience leaving an impact for years to come. Phipps and Degges-White point out that transgenerational trauma is more prevalent in the Latine community because this is a culture with familismo at the core of it. Meaning that the strong familial bond is instrumental to passing down



trauma even long after the experience(s). The study is focused on Latine youth who are born in the U.S. with immigrant families. In other words, they wanted to specifically look at the transmitted effects of trauma rather than youth who experienced the trauma of migration directly. This study found that with familismo at the core, fatalism, the historical trauma of the Latine culture, and immigrant trauma are factors that allow the transmission of transgenerational trauma and hinders the youth's ability to act with resiliency in stress.

The work of Duran and Duran (1995), highlights the importance of understanding intergenerational trauma and the internalized oppression in the Native American community today. Phipps and Degges-White's (2004) laid a strong foundation for how the Latine community faces their unique experiences of trauma, making Duran and Duran's work applicable to the Latine experience. In their book, *Native American Postcolonial Psychology*, they explain how historical trauma is in a way, stored, into the cultural memory of a group. This allows it to be passed down from generation to generation, just as language and traditions are. Even when a new generation does not experience the traumatic experience their elders did, the trauma can be renewed into their generation. This results in them creating their own trauma symptoms to cope with what was passed down. Duran and Duran's work helped me visualize trauma as a stain in a cloth which represents one's culture. Each new generation has the opportunity to try to wash the stain off, but depending on how embedded it is, it might continue to affect them in their future

In 2018, the Society for Research in Child Development put out a Statement of Evidence, which highlighted the long-term psychological and health effects of separating families, specifically children and parents. This came shortly after the U.S. Department of Justice released their "Zero Tolerance Policy for Criminal Illegal Entry", which separated nearly 2,000 children

from their parents as they were approaching the U.S. border in early 2018. They found that “parent-child separations lead to a host of long-term psychological, social, and health problems that are not necessarily resolved upon reunification” (2018). One of the reasons for this is that in general parents act as a “buffer” from negative effect of toxic stress children face. The effects are not limited to children in a critical period of development, in fact, separation impacts children of all ages. This is not to mention the trauma children face in the facilities they are placed in. In recent news, the truth has come out about the horrid living conditions of such facilities. Future research on this issue can allow us to understand the long-terms effects in the affected youth.

This then leads me to narrow down a branch of transgenerational trauma in youth, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). In her book, *The Deepest Well: Healing the Long-Term Effects of Childhood Adversity*, Dr. Nadine Burke (2018), explores the physical, emotional, and mental effects childhood stress has in children’s lives. According to the Center of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), ACEs can be defined as “potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0-17 years) such as experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect; witnessing violence in the home; and having a family member attempt or die by suicide.” ACEs was first discovered through the largest investigation on childhood adversities by the CDC-Kaiser Permanente, and the term, “Adverse Childhood Experiences” (ACEs) was established (Felitti et al., 1998). The ACEs study found a strong relationship between the adversities a child faces and increased health risks in their adult life. Exposure to emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, and household dysfunction(s) are factors measured in ACEs. The more ACEs you are exposed to, the more at risk you are for developing health risks and a decrease in resiliency (Felitti et al., 1998).

This research changed the role of child development in at-risk youth by emphasizing that not supplying positive communal resources will increase the child’s health risks later in life. Dr.

Burke looks further into how exactly toxic stress affects certain a variety of developmental aspects in a child's life. The best way Dr. Burke simplifies her findings is by stating that although one might not remember traumatic events, they encountered in a young age, their body will always remember. Research on ACEs has managed to prove a strong connection between the body and mind. However, Latine youth and those with a 1st or 2nd generation status, face a different set of adversities than their non-Hispanic white counterparts. A recent study concluded that ACEs have a higher prevalence for rural Latine youth from immigrant families that may be linked with emotional and behavioral problems during childhood (Rosado et al., 2020). There is a small amount of research on ACEs focusing on the Latine population, and no published research focusing specifically on youth from immigrant households. According to Benjet (2009), the Latine population faces risk factors such as having a teenage mother, lower education levels, larger family sizes, and low education levels from their parents. This influences my decision to address Latine specific ACEs as a transgenerational problem; due to how these factors contribute to a repeated cycle of adversities within the Hispanic community.

A political study showed a significantly higher rate to mental health disparities among Latines. Yet due to the mental health stigma, lack of resources, poverty, and language barriers, only half of Latine immigrants received treatment, and this does not include Hispanics who do not seek help and are not diagnosed (Caplan, 2016). Caplan's study focused on how the role of stigma in mental health and religion influenced Hispanics not seeking treatment. Stigmas stem from within a culture, and it seem self-destructive to stigmatize an issue that puts their members at risk, but the stigma counters on their religion. Other faucets of trauma specific to the Latine community include the immigration experience, loss of communal and cultural support, prolonged financial difficulties, and severe discrimination (Phipps and Degges-White, 2014).

Familismo is hindered through migration because it creates not only a physical, but also emotional disconnect to the core of their culture and identity.

### **Socioeconomic Status.**

A recent study on the *Economic Hardship During Infancy and U.S. Latino Preschoolers' Sociobehavioral Health and Academic Readiness* (Palermo et. al., 2017), focused more on the financial adversities of a child's life. This study found that economic hardships were not directly associated with a Latino(a) child's academic performance. The most effective factors were positive parenting behaviors and maternal health problems. These findings may seem shocking because it is thought to be expected that one's socioeconomic status affects different aspects of a child's life. The Latine population has a poverty rate of 17.2%, almost 5% higher than the national rate (Kaiser, 2019) which intertwines with facing a higher rate of adversities (National Advisory Committee on Rural and Health Services, 2019).

### **Intersectionality.**

Intersectionality looks at not only the source of overlapping characteristics that result in inequalities but helps us better understand how and why they form (Hancock, 2016). In terms of intersectionality, I found Seng et al.'s 2012 study to be helpful. It found a variance in the intersectionality of marginalized identities and frequency of discrimination. In hindsight, intersectionality allows us to better understand the overlapping effects of race, class, and gender on a person's role in society. This study also highlighted how this is a concept that can be measured at four different levels, which is useful considering the number of factors I plan on observing.

### **Research Design**

The following research is an exploratory case study on the Latine youth population in Northwest Arkansas. This is due to the diverse and growing Latine population that has set roots in the area.

### **Participants**

Data were collected through convenience sampling due to the specificity of the population and time available to gather data. The target population focused on Latine youth residing in the Northwest Arkansas (NWA) area ages 14- 18 years old. The NWA area has a very unique Latine population spread throughout the area. The Benton County area which consists of Rogers and Bentonville as the more populated cities is home to 50,540 Latine residents, making up 17.8% of Benton County's entire population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). Having grown up in the NWA area for the past seventeen years, I have seen how the Latine population have been making their roots in the region.

### **Procedure**

Participants were recruited through the use of graphics shared on social media platforms and emails with the specifications of participants residing in the NWA area. Since the sample population consisted of minors, parents and guardians were first asked to review and sign a consent form to allow participation in the study. They were then provided with a four-digit code to give to the child(ren). Before the participants can access the survey through a given link, they must provide their assent along with the specific four-digit code from their parent/ guardian. In order to remove any possible language barriers, all information provided to parents/ guardians and youth was available in both English and Spanish including recruitment material. After

providing proof of parental consent (the four-digit code) and assent, participants completed a survey. The survey measured for three things: identity, socioeconomic status, and trauma.

Prior to collecting data, the study underwent an extensive approval by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Arkansas (220187891). Since this study's target population included children 18 years and younger, there were additional requirements to ensure the safety of minors. One of them being collecting consent from the parents and assent from the children. Consent gives parents/ guardians the control to allow or deny permission for their child(ren) to participate. Assent allows children to decide for themselves (after consent is given) if they want to participate or not. Even if a parent provides consent, a child can refuse to participate; assent can only be given by the child themselves. Collecting both consent and assent on a virtual platform was extremely difficult to orchestrate. The virtual method of data collection was selected due to COVID-19 restrictions on in-person interactions for a non-educator like myself. This research was also awarded the University of Arkansas Honors College Research Grant (008012) to provide financial support. This research grant relieved a financial burden as a dedicated and full-time student. It also allowed me to have the opportunity to present my preliminary research at the Midwest Political Science Association Conference in Chicago, IL.

### **Measures**

Due to COVID-19 restrictions I relied on measures that were simple, yet detailed enough, for Latine youth ages 14-18 years of age to understand and complete. With prior research done in ACEs, Latine identity formation, and SES, I had a foundation to work off of for my measures. Identity and trauma are more of concepts which make them more difficult to quantitatively measure. So I came up with a survey that was not too lengthy, included used measures, and respected the privacy of the Latine youth.

### **Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)**

The scores of the participants ACEs were measured by modifying the original CDC Kaiser Permanente ACEs study (Felitti et al., 1998) in order to cater to Latine specific experiences. The original ACEs measure consists of 10-items that reviews if participants ever experienced adversities before the age of 18 years-old. Such adversities include: abuse (emotional, physical, and/or sexual); neglect (physical and/or emotional); living environments where a household member is suffering a mental illness, incarcerated, and/or engages in substance abuse; and witnessing their female parent being abused and/or parental separation. I incorporated three additional questions specific to Latine adversities. This included asking if they had ever faced language discrimination or discrimination against their race. To measure if they have any possible connection to immigration trauma, I added a question that asked if they themselves or a family member are foreign-born. Immigrating at any level, legally or illegally, as a person of color places them at a much higher risk of facing trauma. The scores are added up by each adversity faced valuing at 1 point, with the higher the score, the more prevalent ACEs and its effects are in their lives.

### **Socioeconomic Status (SES)**

To determine SES status in a way that this age group would be able to answer with the most accuracy, I asked if the participant and/or a sibling qualified for free and reduced lunch at their school. The Arkansas Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education within the Arkansas Department of Human Services oversees the Arkansas Special Nutrition Program. They outline that in order to qualify for free lunch, the household income of the child(ren) must fall below 130% of the poverty level. This means that a family's income can be up to 30% past the poverty line and still qualify for the assistance. Reduced-lunch eligibility requires an income

between the 130%-185% of poverty levels. Qualifying for either free or reduced-price lunch places participants in a “low” income category. I want to highlight the importance of using the word “qualify” when asking this question; it allows us to not account for the COVID-19 food program that provides free lunch for students. The usage of qualifying versus receiving differentiates the two.

### **Identity**

Identity is an extremely subjective and personal process. To truly encompass their Latine identity, I separated the measures into how they feel about themselves in a cultural context (interpersonal) and how their identity shapes their education (intrapersonal).

#### **Interpersonal**

This section included questions that pertain to their demographics: nationality, religion how much they identify with their nationality, language, and familismo.

#### **Intrapersonal**

This section included questions that pertain to how they feel about themselves within their Latine identity: pride in their cultural identity, afterschool activities, educational goals for themselves, and if they feel like their family is supportive of what *they* want.

### **Results**

There were certain limitations that prevented a large enough sample to yield significant results. There were sixteen youth who initially began filling out the survey but did not continue when the four-digit code from the parent/guardian was required to access the survey. This shows that my efforts to ensure parental consent was provided were met. There were eight fully completed surveys with the parental consent and assent provided. From the eight participants,



there were four females and four males, with varying ages from 14 to 18 years of age (See *Figure 1*).

### **Interpersonal Identity**

Identify As	Latine	Catholic	Mexican	Strongly Proficient in Spanish
Percentage	100%	88%	70%	62.5%

Majority of the participants (88%) identified as Catholics (Figure 2), which is expected considering the large presence the local catholic churches play in the NWA area. These parishes often serve as a cultural hub for the community, especially Mexicans, which is supported through this data. All the participants identified with being Hispanic/Latine; majority of the participants identifying with a Mexican nationality (Figure 3). Figure 4 shows a positive correlation between having a strong identity with nationality and the importance of family time, which was used to measure for familismo. For SES, majority of the participants have personally, or through a sibling, recieved free and reduced lunch (Figure 5). All participants selected Spanish as the primary language that is spoken at home, but there was a slight difference when asked about their Spanish proficiency, which I will discuss in the following paragraph since I consider that an intrapersonal identity question.

### **Intrapersonal Identity**

Figure 6 breaks down the after-school activities the participants engage in. There does not seem to be positive nor negative trends with this information. When asked about the strength of identifying with their nationality, there were strong feelings of nationalism, regardless of their fluency in Spanish (Figure 7).

### Adverse Childhood Trauma

As previously mentioned, participants were provided with the original ACEs Kaiser 10-item questionnaire to measure mental, physical, and emotional abuse, neglect, and household dysfunctions. In order to include adverse experiences specific to the Latine identity I added three additional questions. The questions focused on racial discrimination, language discrimination, and foreign-born status. *Table 1* provides a breakdown of the average ACEs score for both original and modified versions.

*Table 1*

ACEs Scores

	Entire Questionnaire (13 items)	Original Questionnaire (10 items)	Modified Questionnaire (3 items)
Mean	6.5	3.875	2.625
Stand. Deviation	3.5	3.14	0.667
Variance	12.25	9.86	0.44

### Discussion

It is important to note that only 50% of the participants completed the survey, but what stands out is that the incompleteness was due to the four digit code required from their parents signing the consent form. Could this be a cultural gap? There might be a disconnect between Latine youth and their parents when having to ask for 1) permission, 2) permission for something they cannot explain very well, or 3) disengagement due to topic. What I can rule out is that it was

most likely not due to a language barrier since I have all study resources available in both Spanish and English.

Every participant identified with being Hispanic/ Latine and an overall strong identity with their nationality. In addition, Figure 4 demonstrates the importance of spending time with family, which as expected was high, which correlates with the high sense of identity. Majority of the participants were categorized as low-income due to their qualification for free and reduced lunch. Spanish was selected as the primary language spoken at home for all participants. If Spanish is the primary language spoken, high proficiency can be expected. The results showed otherwise, even if participants had a lower proficiency in Spanish, it did not make this a secondary language. This shows the power familismo has in the Latine culture. I expected to see a lower proficiency in Spanish being closely associated with a disconnect from the Latine culture. However, even with a less than par Spanish, participants still felt connected to their Latinidad. This can highlight on the “no sabo kids” phenomenon, which some may assume that one does not qualify as a Latine if they do not speak Spanish, or that one might feel less connected to their culture because of the language barrier. This same phenomenon can also shine light on the transgenerational trauma of the Spanish language.

It is hard to determine SES mobility, but the collected data places this Latine population in a low-income status, which is consistent with expectations. To better understand their professional and education goals and how they intersect with their Latine identity, focus groups or interviews could be beneficial.

According to a brief on ACEs completed by the National Conference of State Legislatures, the national percentage for Latine children experiencing at least one ACE is 51% (NCSL, 2020). The youth from this sample surpassed that. Not only is the average ACEs

experienced higher, but something interesting popped up when looking at just the modified questions. In relation to just the modified questions, this had the lowest standard deviation (0.667) and variance (0.44) scores and had a mean closest to the maximum score. This shows a significant relation to Latine specific trauma, more than the original questionnaire.

### **Limitations & Future Research**

Limitations faced during this study include not being able to conduct in-person focus groups, interviews, and recruitment due to COVID-19 regulations. Future research should focus on a mixed methods approach to gather the most in-depth data. Another limitation was the sample size, which was affected by the in-person limitations as well as working with an under-aged demographic. Collecting both consent and assent to a marginalized population over links and QR codes, has a lot of obstacles. Future research should aim to look at cultural barriers that prevent the participants from asking their parents/ guardians to sign the consent form.

### **Conclusion**

Extensive research on ACEs and Latine identity have begun to catch people's attention. Especially when the Latine population is the largest ethnic minority in the U.S. Looking towards the future of the Latine community, there are several external and internal factors that may hinder their success. This study was a case study on Latine youth in Northwest Arkansas, to evaluate their Latine identity, ACEs, and SES status including factors like education that could impact their mobility. With the data collected, I was able to confirm my expectations that when there is a high sense of identity, there will also be a higher number of ACEs, so more transgenerational trauma. What I could not determine from this study was the "what will this result in?" Future research should focus on following the original participants into their adolescent lives and examine their actions and beliefs then to better compare. This study aimed

to discover what gaps there are in Latine politics by approaching pre-adolescent Latines to look at them prior to the period of political engagement.

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Tables and Figures

Figure One: Demographics

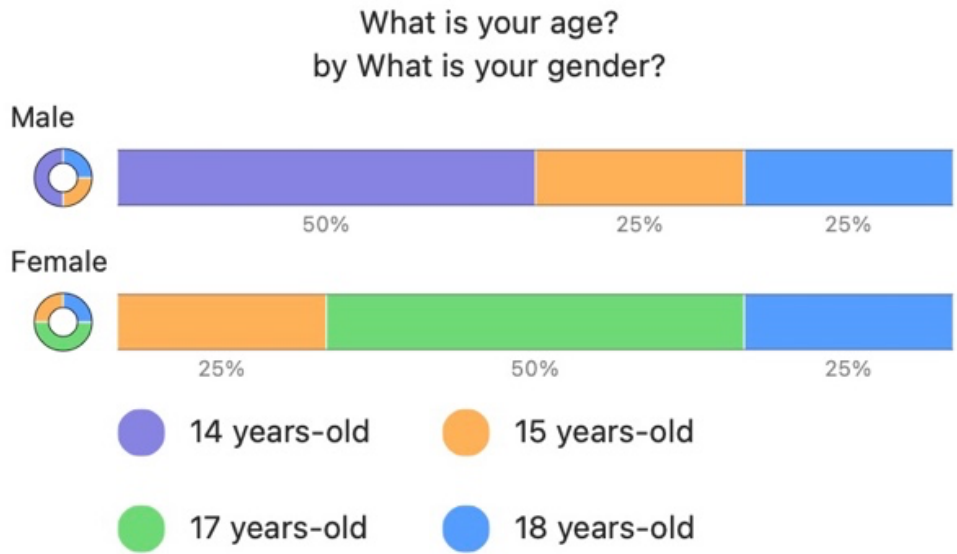


Figure 2: Religion Identification



Figure 3: Latine Identity and Nationality

Do You Identify as Hispanic/ Latine?

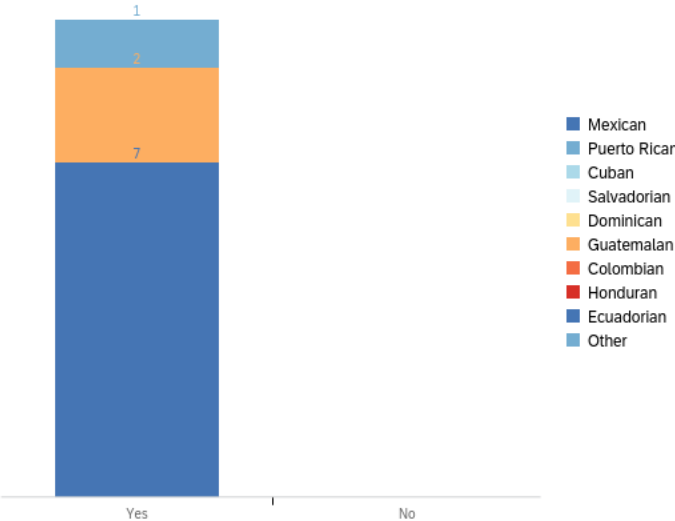


Figure 4:

Pride in being Latine Vs. Importance of Family Time

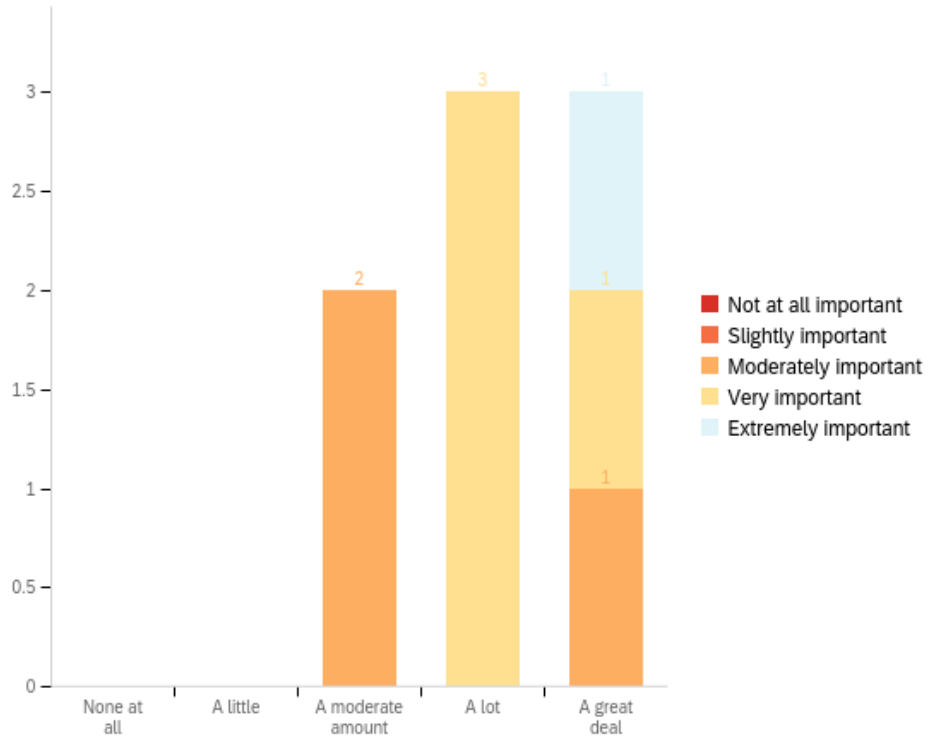
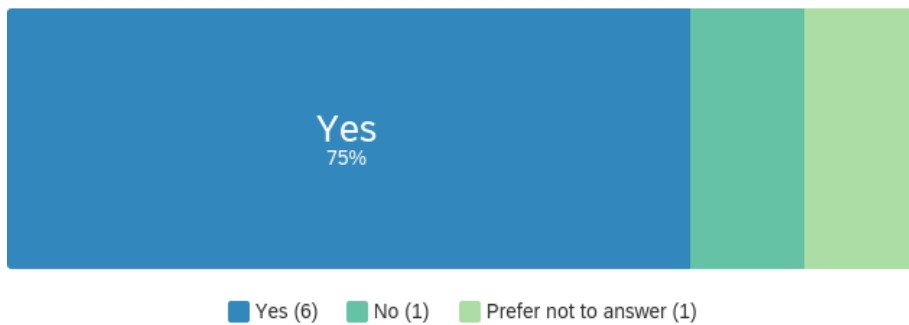


Figure 5: Socioeconomic Measure

Q13 - Do you or any of your siblings qualify for free/ reduced lunch?



After School Activities

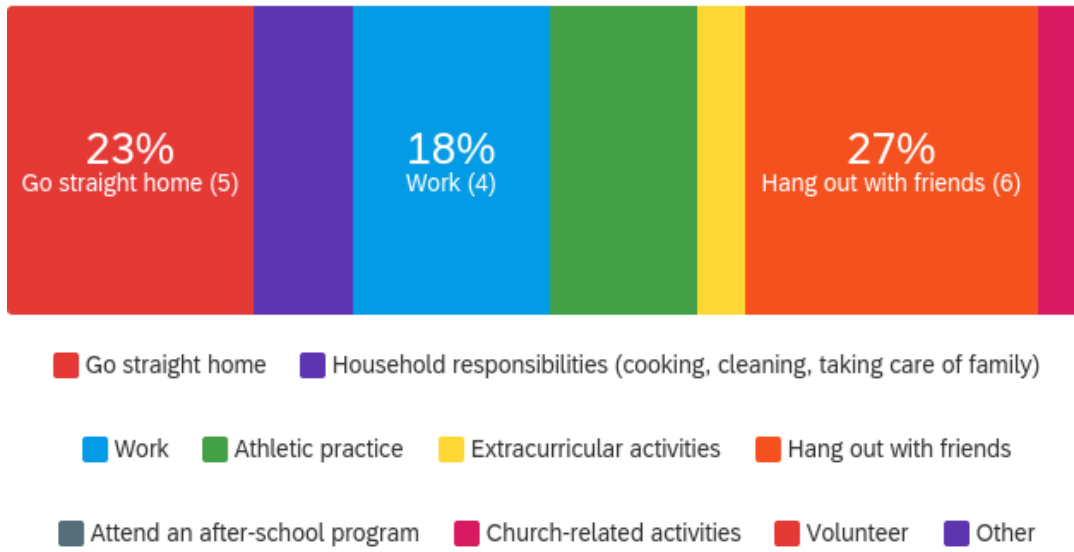


Figure 6: After School Activities

Figure 7:

Identifying with Nationality vs. Spanish Proficiency

