

The Promise of Latino Youth in Montgomery County

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Background

Between 2000 and 2017, Montgomery County's Latino population increased by 90%, the most dramatic growth of any minority group. Latinos now make up 18.6% of the Montgomery County population (approximately 190,550 individuals). About one-third of the county's Latino population are 19 years old or younger¹ and they are, in fact, the fastest growing demographic in the county's public schools, now exceeding 32% of the student population (approximately 52,320 Latino students).

With this exponential growth, the percentage of the county's Latino community now mirrors that of the Latino population across the United States — approximately 18% of the total population² (or 56.6 million residents), 32% of whom are youth under 18 years old. However, Montgomery County's Latinos are distinct from the national Latino population, which is primarily U.S. born and of Mexican descent. Montgomery County Latinos are predominantly from Central American countries and have come to the United States to escape civil wars and human rights abuses. The majority of the county's Latino youth are immigrants or children of immigrants who fled their homelands due to civil wars, violence, political instability, or economic crisis.

Identity has been working with at-risk youth and their families for the last 20 years to close the gap between the promise of young people and the negative life outcomes they face without opportunities to reach their highest potential. Identity provides direct services to youth and families, and works to make community systems more responsive and appropriate to the needs of the local Latino community.

The rapid growth in the county's Latino youth population, which continues to outpace the infrastructure available to serve them, combined with current political and social stressors on Latino families, lead to significant concerns about how Latino youth in the county are faring. In response, Identity partnered with a team of researchers from the

University of Maryland School of Public Health to assess select indicators and determinants of social-emotional and academic well-being, and job readiness, in order to guide Identity, educators, policy makers, and county stakeholders in efforts to improve outcomes for our county's Latino youth.

Data Used for This Report

The data referenced in this report come from several sources as noted throughout the report, including Maryland State Department of Education, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), the National Children Health Survey, the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, Kids Count, and other research studies.

The report also uses data from the Identity baseline survey given to all new Latino youth participating in Identity programs in middle schools, high schools, and Youth Opportunity Centers, in fiscal years 2016 and 2017. These data consist of the youths' self-report, and therefore represent conservative estimates of challenges, as youth often underreport problematic behaviors or distressing symptoms. All Identity baseline data presented in this report were collected upon entry into Identity's programs, prior to receiving any intervention. This is not evaluation or outcome data.

The Identity middle and high school youth sample includes 1,125 Latino youth from nine middle schools (38%) and five high schools (62%), of which 54.5% are male and 45.5% are female. The sample from the Identity Youth Opportunity Centers (YOCs) includes 309 Latino youth of which 63% are male and 37% are female, with a mean age of 19 years. In the YOC group, 14.9% had a high school diploma; 49.8% dropped out of school; 7.4% were expelled; 27.8% were still in school; and 60% were unemployed. Additionally, the report includes FY2018 data from a sample of 440 parents of youth enrolled in Identity's elementary, middle and high school programs.

Summary of Findings

The Promise of Latino Youth report tells a story of lost potential, and a breach in the compact between a community and its youth to help them achieve their highest potential. The data present a group of Latino youth in Montgomery County who express great hope and motivation for their futures, in stark contrast to the reality we see unfolding for them.

- Latino youth in Montgomery County report high academic motivation, high academic expectations, and a positive outlook for the future, which diminish as they get older and/or face significant challenges.
- In actuality, Latino youth in Montgomery County are exceptionally vulnerable, facing significant barriers to success in their studies, work, and life: starting school unprepared for kindergarten, reading below grade level throughout elementary school, experiencing the school system's highest dropout rates, struggling to earn a post-secondary credential, and experiencing high rates of adversity and psychological distress.

Social-Emotional Trends

Future Expectations

Research has demonstrated that having hopeful and positive expectations for one's future is related to the positive development of a range of important social-emotional outcomes including self-regulation, self-efficacy, and good relationships.³ However, Latino students may have fewer of these positive expectations than other groups of students. For example, in one study of 9th graders, Latino students were less likely than Black and White students to have high expectations regarding their education.⁴

Identity youth generally report at baseline that they feel positively about their futures, feel confident they will accomplish life goals, and feel prepared to deal with problems they may face in the future. However, the percentage of Identity youth who have these positive future expectations significantly decreases with age: **87%** of middle school students feel positively about their futures, and this number decreases to **76%** of high school students. Indicators related to life expectations for YOC youth reflect even lower future expectations, with only **67%** feeling positive about their future. These baseline data suggest that as they get older, and face significant challenges without adequate support, increasing numbers of Latino youth lose this important sense of hope and confidence about their futures.

Conflict Management

A young person's ability to effectively navigate challenging situations with peers or adults is an important component in the development of positive relationships and job readiness and retention. Youth who manage conflict through positive communication and effective problem-solving are better able to handle problems with peers and family, show an increased ability to cope with anxiety, and may be less likely to engage in substance abuse or have interactions with the police.⁵⁻⁸

At baseline, the youth served by Identity are struggling with the development of these important skills. Among middle and high school youth, **80%** reported at least some degree of challenge with conflict management skills such as communicating with others they have a problem with, finding ways to relax in order to deal with things that get on their nerves, or finding non-aggressive ways to deal with anger.

Symptoms of Depression

Studies have shown that Latino youth are likely to experience much higher rates of depression symptoms than White youth, and other minority youth, and the rates of depression symptoms in Latino youth are on the rise⁷. Depression symptoms can negatively impact social-emotional health, physical health, and the overall quality of life for an individual. Depression symptoms are related to many of the stressors that the youth served by Identity face: immigration, acculturation, and family separation.^{9,10}

Nationally, Latino youth have been found to be more likely than White youth (**34%** compared to **30%**) to feel sad or hopeless, a key symptom of depression.¹¹ A separate national study found that **22%** of Latinos reported depressive symptoms compared to **18%** of White youth⁹. This pattern is seen in the youth served by Identity: at baseline, **30%** of Identity middle and high schoolers report heightened levels of depression

symptoms, and **37%** of youth from the YOCs report heightened levels of depression symptoms (sadness, easily bothered, lack of enjoyment, loneliness). Foreign-born youth were even more likely than US-born peers (**34% vs 29%**) to report experiencing elevated symptoms of depression.

We also find that depression levels negatively impact Identity youths' academic motivation. Those who reported heightened symptoms of depression were **almost two times** as likely as youth reporting lower levels of depression symptoms to express uncertainty about graduating high school.

Academic Trends

Academic Expectations

Academic motivation among Identity youth is high, with **93%** reporting that they care about getting good grades. Yet only **83%** of Identity high school youth report that they expect to graduate from high school. This percentage is dramatically lower than the **98%** of high school students nationally who expect to graduate from high school;¹² it is also far lower than the **92%** of Identity middle school youth expecting to graduate high school. This discrepancy suggests that as Latino students age and experience barriers to academic success, they become markedly less optimistic about their ability to graduate.

3rd Grade Reading level

Reading proficiently by the end of third grade (as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP] at the beginning of fourth grade) is a critical benchmark in a child's educational development. Up until the end of third grade, most children are learning to read. Beginning in fourth grade, however, they are reading to learn, using reading skills to gain more information in subjects such as math and science, to solve problems, to think critically about what they are learning, and to act upon and share that knowledge in the world around them.¹³

The Maryland 2017 NAEP reading results for a sample of Maryland fourth graders show that only **22%** of Maryland's Latino fourth graders are proficient or advanced in grade level reading, compared to **55%** of their White and **27%** of their Black peers. Results from the 3rd grade Maryland Comprehensive Assessment Program (MCAP) English/Language Arts standardized testing for Montgomery County, similarly show that Latino 3rd grade students underperform all other student groups in reading. Only **25%** of Latino students met 3rd grade expectations, in stark contrast to **67%** of White 3rd grade students and **33%** of Black 3rd graders who met or exceeded the expectation.¹⁴

Graduation Rates

In 2017, the U.S. Department of Education and the National Center for Education Statistics announced that high school graduation rates rose to a new high, with more than **84%** of US students graduating on time in 2016, up almost a percentage point from 2015.¹⁵ While all minority groups saw a rise in on-time graduation rates, gaps persist. Only **76%** of Black students and **79%** of Latino students graduated on time, compared to **88%** of White students and **91%** of Asian/Pacific Islander students.

In contrast to the increase seen nationally, Latino student graduation rates in both Maryland and Montgomery County have been trending downward:¹⁴

Maryland and Montgomery County Graduation Rate: % by group (4-year adjusted cohort)

Year	Latino		Black		White	
	MD	MoCo	MD	MoCo	MD	MoCo
2017	73.98	78.54	85.44	88.21	92.66	≥ 95
2016	76.55	80.37	84.06	87.69	92.41	≥ 95
2015	76.89	79.64	82.29	86.78	92.03	94.94
2014	77.46	80.03	80.54	86.42	91.91	94.94

Consistent with these state and county data, **71%** of Identity youth report at baseline expecting that they will attend college or university. This is significantly less than the **87%** of a nationally representative sample of high school students who expect to attend college.¹² Such limited educational attainment creates and perpetuates a cycle of poverty, economic hardship, and negative health outcomes for local Latino youth.

Workforce Development Trends

Dropout Rates

Workers with less than a high school credential are the lowest earners, on average. High school dropouts (16 to 24-year olds who are not enrolled in school and have not earned a high school diploma or equivalency credential) earn approximately \$600,000 less over a lifetime than high school graduates. In turn, high school graduates earn approximately \$1,000,000 less over a lifetime than college graduates.

While the Latino high school dropout rate has been falling nationally to 10% in 2016,¹⁶ Montgomery County and Maryland high school dropout rates show Latino youth trending in a troubling direction.

State and County Level Dropout Rates: % by Group¹⁴

Year	Latino		Black		White	
	MD	MoCo	MD	MoCo	MD	MoCo
2017	19.5	13.76	8.43	6.25	5.28	≤ 3
2016	16.82	12.27	9.04	6.12	5.51	≤ 3
2015	15.55	11.9	9.88	6.69	5.58	≤ 3
2014	14.68	11.1	10.57	6.79	5.85	≤ 3

College Completion Rates

Nationally, Latinos are making big inroads in college enrollment. In 2016, **35%** of Latinos ages 18 to 24 were enrolled in a two- or four-year college, up from 22% in 1993. Yet, graduation is elusive. As of 2014, only **15%** of Latinos held a bachelor's degree or higher.¹⁷

Identity youth express a strong desire to attend college, with **78%** of middle school students and **66%** of high school students reporting that they expect to attend college. However, in Montgomery County, where a quarter of public high school students go to Montgomery College (MC), only **10%** of Latinos earn an associate's degree within three years. In their first year at MC, **87%** of Latino students require remedial Math and **50%** require remedial English.¹⁸ This additional educational and financial burden of not being prepared for college studies is a significant impediment to Latino youth completing college. Overall, only **25%** of Latinos age 25 and older in Montgomery County have a Bachelor's Degree, as compared to **71%** of White residents and **43%** of Black residents.¹⁹ By the year 2020, **69%** of the jobs in Maryland will require a college education, potentially leaving large numbers of Latino residents out of the job market.²⁰

Unemployment

Nationally, the unemployment rate has fallen since the height of the recession in 2009. In 2018, the national unemployment rate is **4.9%** for Latinos, **3.7%** for Whites and **6.8%** for Blacks.²¹ The unemployment rate for Latinos in Montgomery County is also trending down, with rates ranging from 3-4% in recent years. However, approximately six in ten Latinos in the county work in low-wage occupations that do not offer health insurance.¹

Among Identity youth enrolled in Youth Opportunity Center programming in FY2016 and FY2017, **60%** were unemployed and, of these, **82%** wanted a job. A 2014 Identity study of nearly 1,000 Montgomery County Latino youth, ages 14 - 24, found that **77%** of high school dropouts surveyed had never received any job training. Even among the high school graduates who were not employed, the percentage who had never received any type of job training was high at **62%**.²²

Contributing Factors

Adverse Childhood Experiences

The negative impacts of exposure to abuse, neglect, or household dysfunction in childhood can persist well into adulthood. Such Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are associated with a significantly increased risk for a growing number of health problems including heart and lung disease, cancer, smoking, alcoholism, drug abuse, mental health issues, suicide attempts, diabetes, and stroke; and this risk increases as the

number of experienced ACEs increases²³⁻²⁵ Identity youth are experiencing a number of these possibly life-altering adversities, including witnessing domestic violence, parental divorce, parental death, household substance abuse, and racial discrimination, at higher rates than youth across the state or the nation:

Percentages of Identity Youth Who Have Experienced Specific ACEs: Comparisons with Youth Across the State and the Nation²⁶

	Identity Youth (%)	MD Youth (%)	US Youth (%)	Latino Youth in MD (%)	Latino Youth in US (%)
Parent Separation/Divorce	30.7	18.1	25	19.3	27.8
Lived with someone who is a problem drinker/drug user or has substance use disorder	16.6	6.3	9	9.9	8.8
Felt they were treated unfairly due to their race	13.7	4	3.7	6.3	4.4
Witnessed Domestic Violence	7.5	4	5.7	3.4	5.7
Lived with someone who has a mental illness	7.3	5.4	7.8	1.9	6.4
Parent Death	5.2	3.2	3.3	1.6	3.1
Parent Incarcerated	1.9	3.9	8.2	3.9	8.3

The vast majority of Latino youth in Identity programs (**84%**) have experienced at least one ACE (including adversities listed in the table above, plus economic hardship). More than a third (**38%**) of Identity youth have experienced two ACEs, and **12%** have experienced three or more.

The events considered to be standard ACEs overlook potentially significant adverse events unique to immigrant youth, particularly separation from parents due to immigration issues. In our sample, **45%** of Identity youth reported being separated from one or both of their parents due to immigration issues. On average they report being separated from their mother for **6.7** years and from their father for **8.9 years**. Recent research has clearly established the long-term psychological impact of separation for both parents and children.²⁷ After being separated, children are at greater risk for a range of social-emotional difficulties including impairments in emotional attachment, self-esteem, and mental health.²⁸

ACEs impact more than just an individual’s health and well-being. New research shows that they can also have lasting effects on subsequent generations. Parents’ exposure to ACEs during their own childhoods may affect their own mental health and parenting behaviors in ways that negatively impact the health and well-being of their children.^{29,30} Therefore, in order to promote child mental health, we must also address the effects of adversities experienced by their parents. To better understand this contributing factor, Identity surveyed 440 parents of children served by Identity in FY2018. Like their children, parents of the youth in Identity programs also report high rates of ACEs: **71%** had been exposed to at least one ACE in their youth, and **29%** were exposed to three or more ACEs. Like their children, adults typically underreport trauma at intake before a rapport and trust have been established. Parents reported exposure to specific ACEs at the following rates:

Percentages of Identity Parents Who Have Experienced ACEs During Their Own Childhoods

ACEs	% of parents
Parent Separation/Divorce	26.5
Parent Death	20.3
Witnessed Domestic Violence	17.8
Lived with someone who is a problem drinker/drug user or has substance use disorder	15.9
Lived with someone who has a mental illness	7.9
Parent Incarcerated	4.4

Limited English Proficiency

Students with limited English proficiency have greater challenges academically as they navigate school in an unfamiliar language. For all age groups, the percentage of students with limited English proficiency in Montgomery County is approximately twice the percentage of that across the state. We see these high levels of limited English proficiency among foreign-born Identity youth, approximately **81%** of whom indicate a preference for using Spanish. Having parents with limited English proficiency creates additional challenges for students because parents are not able to help with homework, or to communicate easily with teachers. Among the sample of parents of youth served by Identity, **88%** report not feeling comfortable speaking English.

Percentage of Students with Limited English Proficiency¹⁴

Year	Elementary School	Middle School	High School
2016	MCPS: 23.6% MD: 11.1%	MCPS: 8.7% MD: 4.5%	MCPS: 9.1% MD: 4.8%
2017	MCPS: 23.9% MD: 11.6%	MCPS: 8.9% MD: 5%	MCPS: 10.4% MD: 5.8%

Kindergarten Readiness

The beginning of a child's formal education is an important developmental milestone. Early success or failure can have a lasting effect. Early childhood education (ECE) is an important step in preparing children, particularly those from low-income families, for success in formal education. Nationally, the rate of ECE participation among Latino children from low-income families is growing, but still low, with usage rates ranging from 50–80%.³⁴ Barriers to accessing ECE include affordability, parents' non-standard work schedules, limited English proficiency, lack of information about ECE options in a community, differences in eligibility and documentation requirements across states, and feeling less safe and welcome in the current political climate.³⁴ The lack of access to ECE for Latino children seen nationally is reflected locally. In 2017, only **24%** of Montgomery County's Latino children demonstrated kindergarten readiness, a key outcome of ECE, compared to **67%** of White peers.³⁶

Poverty

Currently, 27% of all Latino children in the United States, are in poverty, and an additional 30% are near poverty (100–199% of the federal poverty line), which is more than any other racial/ethnic group.^{31,32} Nearly two-thirds of Latino children live in families with incomes less than two times the federal poverty level.^{33,34} The vast majority of Latino children who live in or near poverty live in households with at least one employed adult.³¹ A similar disparity is found in Montgomery County where Latino residents have the lowest median household income at \$68,322 (as compared to Black residents at \$69,482 and White residents at \$122,142). And 15% of Latino children live below the poverty level (compared to Black children at 16% and White children at 3%).¹⁹ These national and county statistics are consistent with what we see among the Latino youth served by Identity, **72%** of whom receive Free and Reduced Meals at School (FARMS). This rate is significantly higher than the **35%** of children across all of MCPS who received FARMS in 2016 and 2017.³⁵

Conclusion

In Montgomery County, as in Maryland and the US as a whole, the inequities in indicators and determinants of social-emotional and academic well-being and job readiness point to a growing and urgent need for interventions and action to close the gap between Latino youths' great hopes and motivation for their futures and the reality of their lost potential.

Founded in 1998, Identity works with Latino youth ages 7-25, and their families, who live in high-poverty areas of Montgomery County, MD and are most at risk for poor social-emotional, academic, and work-life outcomes. Identity supports their successful transition into adulthood in school, in the community, and on the playing fields with bilingual and trauma-informed programs that strengthen social-emotional wellbeing, and support academic and economic achievements. Before and after school programs offer social-emotional skill building, and math and reading enrichment. Identity-run Wellness Centers offer high school students on-site programs and services that build their skills in body and mind. Youth Opportunity Centers, based in the community, provide disconnected youth with the skills and support they need to reconnect to school and the workforce, including GED preparation, soft skill-building and intensive case management. Identity works with parents to increase connection to their children's schools, and strengthen their ability to advocate for their child's education. Wraparound services, available to all clients, include comprehensive family case management, mental health and substance abuse counseling, and recreation. Through its five Youth Centers, Identity works with a multicultural mix of youth and their families who face similar challenges.

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