

## ***The Impact of Straddling Two Cultures: Ethnic Minorities in the Juvenile Justice System***

Untangling the effects of race/ethnicity on involvement in antisocial activity is a particularly difficult task for researchers. In most cases, researchers simply document differences among racial/ethnic groups in rates of involvement in delinquency or types of services. This approach, however, is ultimately unfulfilling, usually raising more questions than it answers. The challenge for researchers is to address the question of what it means to be part of a particular racial or ethnic group and why this matters for involvement in crime or positive outcomes in services.

The Pathways study provides a great opportunity for answering some of these latter types of questions regarding Mexican-American adolescent offenders. And it seems useful to focus on these adolescents. As a result of immigration and birth rates, the ethnic minority populations of Latinos in the U.S. has been rapidly increasing in absolute and relative size (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004) and individuals of Mexican heritage are the largest subgroup (58.5%) of Latinos. Knowing more about the experience of Mexican-American adolescents can be valuable for planning policies and practices that will be sensitive to the needs of an increasing number of adolescents in the juvenile justice system.

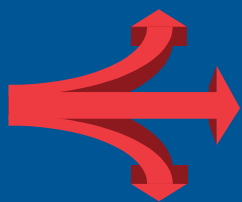
It is particularly relevant to understand what it means to adjust to the American culture and

how the course of this adjustment might affect involvement in antisocial activity. Studies with some ethnic minority groups indicate that increased exposure to the mainstream culture in the U.S. is associated with increased delinquency (see Samaniego & Gonzalez, 1999; Bega, Khoury, Zimmerman, Gil & Warhaheit, 1995) and poor mental health (Katragadda



& Tidwell, 1998; Hovey & King, 1996). In other words, becoming more “Americanized” might raise the risk of problems. Several authors, though, point out that the process might not be that simple. These scholars (e.g. Gonzales, Knight, Morgan-Lopez, Saenz & Sirolli, 2002; Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1993) argue that the demands placed on ethnic and minority youth to adapt to and balance both the mainstream and ethnic cultures are what really create challenges and place these adolescents

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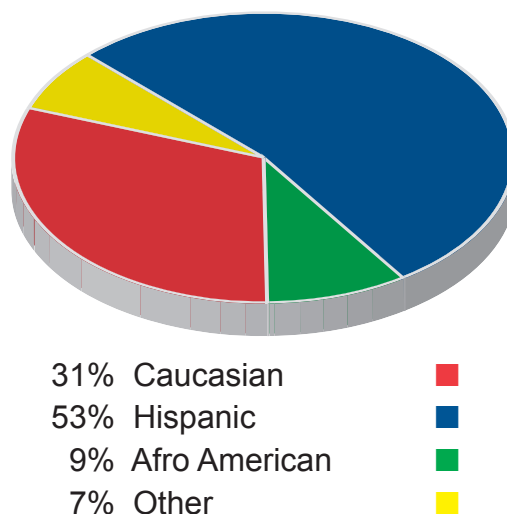
at risk for negative life outcomes (i.e. school failure, drug and alcohol abuse, juvenile delinquency and financial instability). That is, ethnic minority individuals may be at greater risk because they are often expected to adhere to many of the behavioral expectations and values of the ethnic culture in their home and neighborhood while, at the same time, having to adhere to the behavioral expectations and values of the mainstream culture at school and in the broader community. How adolescents balance and negotiate these sets of possibly conflicting demands sets the stage for experimenting with antisocial activities as a way to make a statement of some sort.

This process seems particularly powerful when it comes to drug and alcohol use. Although recent national surveys of adolescent substance abuse show declines in the prevalence rates overall, rates for Latino adolescents continue to be high (Delva, Wallace, O'Malley, Bachman, Johnston, Schulenberg, 2005; Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman, 2001). Why rates of substance use are so high among Mexican-American adolescents, how this is related to issues of ethnic identity formation, and how this relates to other involvement in criminal activity are all critical questions.

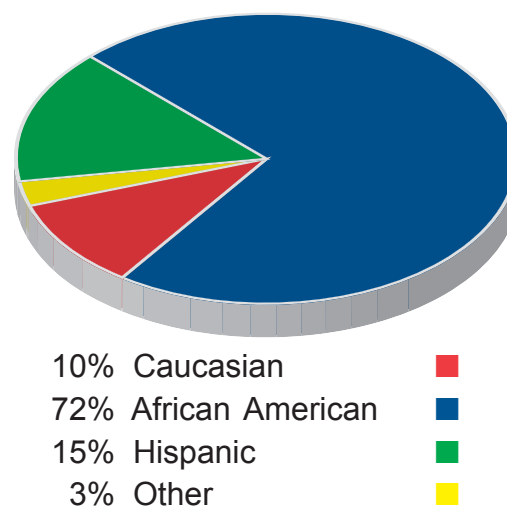
Investigators (Knight, Vargas-Chanes, Losoya, Cota-Robles, Chassin and Lee, in press) from the Pathways study have studied the types of ethnic identity in the approximately 300 Mexican-American adolescents enrolled in the study in Phoenix. If prior studies are right about the effects of adapting to the American culture, a

high proportion of these serious adolescent offenders should have largely abandoned their cultural heritage and gotten into more trouble in the process. Looking at the indicators of ethnic identity in this group over a three year period, however, we see a different story. Knight and colleagues found that, in this sample of serious offending youth, the levels of ethnic identity varied more than they anticipated. That is, these youth weren't all *marginalized* (low adaption to both the ethnic and mainstream culture) or *assimilated* (high

**Ethnic Mix of Phoenix Sample**



**Ethnic Mix of Philadelphia Sample**



identification with mainstream culture but low identification with their ethnic group). On the contrary, many of these youth scored at least at moderately high levels of ethnic identity and those ratings changed over time as expected. In terms of cultural identity, this sample looks much like other, more normative samples of Mexican American adolescents. The simple association posited between

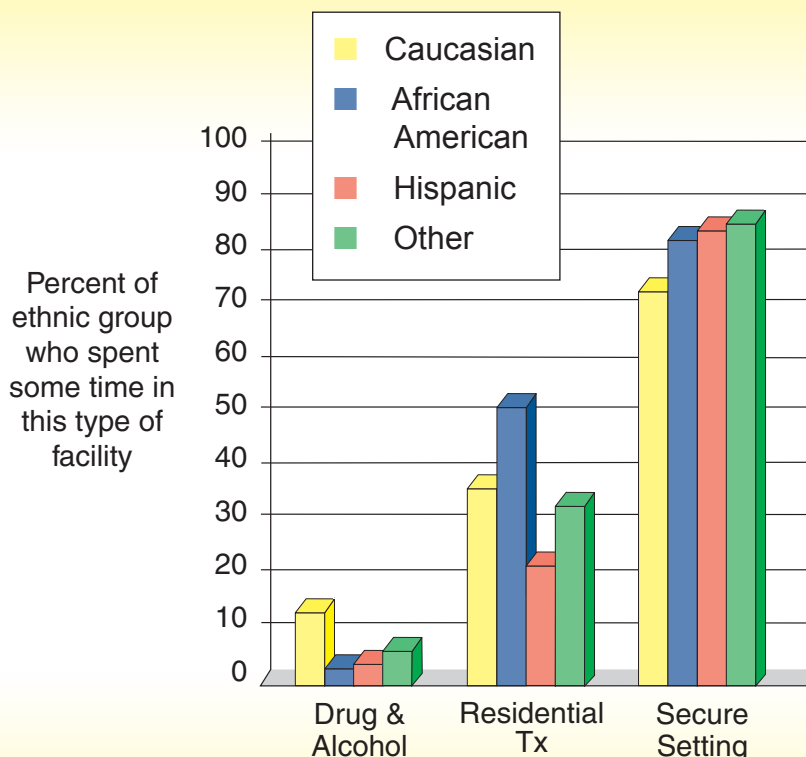


offending and assimilation just doesn't seem to hold up in this sample.

Pathways investigators (Losoya, Knight, Chassin, Little, Vargas-Chanes, Mauricio and Piquero, 2008) also examined the relationship of cultural adaptation to patterns of heavy episodic drinking and marijuana use from age 15 to 20 years. Because of the richness of the Pathways data, these investigators were able to identify subgroups of enrolled Mexican-American adolescents who followed different patterns of cultural adjustment over this time period. Again, the straight assimilation idea did not pan out. Instead, Losoya and colleagues found support for the hypothesis that bicultural adaptation (i.e. successfully adapting to both the ethnic and mainstream cultures) is related to lower substance use. That is, youth who retain some of the values of their native culture while also adapting to the mainstream culture do better.

This work is important because it is the first time that these developmental processes of ethnic identity have been considered for serious offenders, and the first time that multiple indices of cultural change and a rich picture of outcomes have been built into the research design. This work highlights the interaction of cultural values and beliefs with behavior,

Types of settings where Pathways youth (by ethnicity) spent time within the first 4 years of study



*Across all ethnic groups, the majority of Pathways participants are spending time in secure settings such as the state-run juvenile corrections facilities as well as jail and prison settings.*

reminding us that racial comparisons alone do not reveal the full story of ethnicity differences. There is much going on with the process of ethnic identity in adolescence that remains to be explored. Future work should provide valuable information about the potential of these factors for designing more effective intervention and treatment services for the full range of adolescents offenders.

The information summarized here comes from two articles which are currently in press. Please contact the Coordinating Center for copies.

Knight, G.P., Vargas-Chanes, D., Losoya, S., Cota-Robles, S., Chassin, L., Lee, J.M. (in Press) Acculturation and Enculturation Trajectories Among Mexican American Adolescent Offenders, *Journal of Research on Adolescence*.

Losoya, S. H., Knight, G. P. Chassin, L., Little, M., Vargas-Chanes, D., Mauricio, A., Piquero, A. (in press). Trajectories of Acculturation and Enculturation in Relation to Binge Drinking and Marijuana Use in a Sample of Mexican American Serious Juvenile Offenders. *Journal of Drug Issues*.

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### ***Note from the Coordinating Center***

*In this issue of the newsletter we highlight ethnic diversity among adolescent offenders in the Pathways study. We suggest that considerations of ethnicity should move beyond simple demographic breakdowns because such figures provide only a limited understanding of the complexities related to ethnic diversity. Moreover, we provide initial evidence that the level of connection these youth have to their ethnic group(s) matters for later outcomes. We are intrigued by the possibilities opened by this understanding of the role ethnicity plays in later adjustment and hope that considerations of ethnicity become more central to discussions regarding services for these youth. We welcome your thoughts and reactions.*

### ***Data Collection at a Glance***

***as of September, 2008***

- 1,354 participants
- Over 23,800 interviews completed to date (subject, collateral and release interviews)
- All subjects have passed through their opportunity to complete the 60-month interview
- 40 subjects have died since the baseline (3%)
- 40 subjects have dropped out of the study since the baseline (3%)
- Subject retention rates for each time point (6-60-month) are averaging 91%
- As of the 48-month interview, 87% of the subjects have completed 6 or 7 of their six possible interviews
- Yearly collateral reports (for the first 3 years) are present for about 85% of subjects