

Children of color make strides facing major disadvantages

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Male students of color in the east valley face serious disadvantages, such as high rates of poverty, low college completion rates, limited access to health care and healthy foods and unmet infrastructure needs, according to a new report from Building Healthy Communities-East Coachella Valley.

But in many cases, they are responding with healthier behaviors, including lower drug use and fewer thoughts of suicide than their west valley counterparts and distancing themselves from the stereotypical “wounded” portrayal of young men of color, according to the report’s author.

“There’s a tremendous resilience among the young men I was looking at in the study,” said Christian Paiz, the report’s author and a doctoral student at USC.

“This requires some really thoughtful reflection as to the strengths in the community, the role of parents and educators in supporting these students but also the need to use these things to improve the social conditions,” said Paiz, who also is a former Desert Mirage High School teacher and Coachella Valley High School student. “The fact that these kids are resilient should not be an excuse for not doing anything.”

The “East Coachella Valley Landscape Study,” compiled over the course of a year using various reports and interviews with stakeholders starting in July 2012, was funded by the California Endowment and conducted in conjunction with the Coachella Valley Unified School District.

CVUSD students were more likely to have health problems than students in the western Coachella Valley, Riverside County and the state, with roughly 50 percent or more of 2011-12 students considered unhealthy by the California Department of Education in aerobic capacity and body composition. Riverside County students as a whole were 10 percent more likely to be healthy.

There were also disparities in weight, according to Health Assessment Resource Center data cited in the report. Latino parents recorded more than double the instance of overweight children as white parents — at 51.8 percent to 24.1 percent. The parents of young males were more likely to report their children as overweight, at 43.4 percent compared to 39.7 percent of the parents of young females.

The report also pointed out the lack of a “health-focused community effort” outside of the schools and stigma in accessing mental health services.

The report noted east valley students of color faced exposure to toxins, environmental hazards, substandard and expensive housing, and limited access to safe public parks and drinking water that presented health challenges.

Community leaders interviewed for the study often addressed “the commonality of emotional and psychological stress (rooted in social and economic marginalization)” among this population, with the various socioeconomic problems they face viewed as possible contributors to mental illness. Paiz said he’s not sure if that’s the case, saying there would need to be access to health services before they can determine a level of need.

HARC data showed that 28.1 percent of minors in eastern Riverside County did not have access to mental health services. That lack of access was higher in Latino and Hispanic youth (35.5 percent), those who lived in households with an annual income below \$25,000 (41.5 percent) and those who had parents without a high school education (44.1 percent).

Still, the boys showed similar levels of depression, anger and thoughts of suicide as west valley students. CVUSD students in 11th grade and nontraditional students actually had lower levels of suicidal thoughts than their peers in Desert Sands Unified and Palm Springs Unified. In addition, the report found that female students struggled more with these mental health indicators.

CVUSD middle and high school students reported lower drug use than students in the west valley and state, and more Latinos in the district reported not having used alcohol or drugs than both Latino and white students in the western Coachella Valley.

However, more than a third of male CVUSD fifth-graders reported consumption of alcohol, inhalants and/or marijuana in their lifetimes, 11 percent more than female students, and were more likely to have had a full glass of alcohol and sniffed inhalants than fifth-grade males at Desert Sands and Palm Springs Unified. The gender gap for substance abuse at CVUSD was mostly minimal, less than five percent, except for marijuana usage, for which male student use was over 10 percent more than females.

The report also found high disconnectedness between students and their schools, with 32 percent of fifth-graders in the district saying no adults really care about them at the school, compared with 20 percent at Desert Sands and 21 percent at Palm Springs Unified.

But it made significant gains in graduation rates — except in male English learners — and also had comparable rates of college eligibility as other schools in the valley. Desert Mirage college eligibility for male students of color was at 33.8 percent, more than the state average for the demographic at 32.5 percent and the rate of 32.6 percent at La Quinta High School.

It pointed out low college completion rates, however, particularly among those further from College of the Desert and other college campuses.

“If you live in Mecca or in North Shore or in Oasis or Thermal or even Coachella, you’re going to have to take a tremendous amount of time and energy and money to make it to go to campus,” Paiz said, adding there was a financial tilt toward funding to west valley programs. “This has a negative effect on students in enrollment and in completion of programs.”

The report also highlighted the region’s poverty levels in the bottom five percent in the state and the heavy reliance on low-wage labor in the east valley in the agriculture, tourism and retail industries and the high rates of poverty for male students of color in the east valley.

Matthew Maldonado, a 16-year-old student at Desert Mirage High School, is one of seven valley males who spent the past week meeting with state political leaders in Sacramento and attending a camp designed to encourage leadership skills and address these issues and disparities as part of the Boys and Men of Color initiative.

He has been involved in Raices Cultura, a Latino organization focused on improving the health of the east valley and encouraging expression from its residents.

“I thought this was going to be a great opportunity for me to break the cycle and create a new cycle for the next generation,” Maldonado said.

Maldonado added that he has been learning that “we are not alone out there” and that others have similar experiences. He also has been learning about his heritage, brotherhood, expressing himself, respecting women and keeping his word.

Ricardo Flores, a 2012 graduate of Coachella Valley High School and a student at College of the Desert, has also been involved with Raices for about two years. He said that a lack of resources is a huge problem they face, and his group tries to give youth a voice through art, music, poetry and other outlets, rather than antisocial behavior or vandalism. He also said there are a lot of stereotypes about people like him and sometimes people will look and see something that isn't there.

“Everybody is doing something different on the poor side,” he said. “They're all fighting for the same cause to make a better life.”

Elizabeth Toledo, hub manager of Building Healthy Communities-East Coachella Valley, said the organization is working to start understanding how to support students through the data.

“I think that's the greatest takeaway is, ‘How do we create support to ensure that our most vulnerable young boys and men are able to succeed and thrive?’” Toledo said.

The report suggests ending a ‘broken families’ narrative that places the blame for problems such as lower academic performance on home issues, including a lack of father figures, saying there is no proven link and there is “no room for it.” He said this gives CVUSD a way out of taking responsibility for improving its classrooms and can also stigmatize students and their parents.

The report notes that that type of conversation “further racializes the ECV as a dysfunctional and hyper-patriarchal community — as if patriarchy could be limited to populations of color.”

Other suggestions include organizing a formal group of teachers, students, parents and community leaders to keep an ongoing discussion of the issues, including females in its future programs, a continuation and expansion of the district's health practices and formal health education and strengthening its physical education classes and exercise in its after-school programs.

The report also notes state cuts to substance abuse prevention in schools and a lack of mental health services, suggesting that the new student health clinics can be used for mental health. It encourages strong teacher-student relationships and continued participation in the district's Healing Circles initiative, as well as engaging parents in its processes and providing “culturally relevant curriculum.”

It also encourages the district to engage in advocacy on behalf of the community's infrastructure, including public transportation, living wages, housing, more safe public parks and community youth centers, elimination of toxins and an end to immigration raiding.