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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past 20 years, the Latino population in Western North Carolina (WNC) has grown rapidly. Today, nearly 50,000 Latinos live in the WNC region. However, research on this population segment is lacking, which makes it difficult to plan and advocate for the development of programs and services that meet the needs of WNC Latinos. To address this, Camino Research Institute (CRI) conducted a strengths and needs assessment of Latinos living in the Western North Carolina region. Following Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approaches, CRI partnered with community leaders and Latino-serving organizations to hear directly from Latino community members to better understand the strengths, needs, and experiences of Latino communities in WNC.

This study uses a mixed methods design involving an anonymous, electronic survey and semi-structured interviews with WNC community leaders. Any Latino who is at least 18 years old and residing in North Carolina is eligible to take the survey. This report presents results based on the 512 survey responses collected between September 2021 and June 2023 and 11 community leader interviews conducted between January and April 2024 across nine WNC counties, which include Buncombe, Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Haywood, Henderson, Jackson, Macon, and Transylvania. Immigrants were oversampled; 91% of participants are immigrants from 16 different countries. 51% of participants are undocumented. Exemplary quotes of themes detected through rapid qualitative analysis of interview data with WNC community leaders are presented alongside survey results.

WNC Latino survey respondents rate their work ethic, bilingual language skills, entrepreneurial aspirations, and their spirit of service and volunteering as the top community strengths. A majority of respondents report having strong social support systems, leaning primarily on family, friends and personal faith when they have a need. Results suggest that access to health-related resources like dental, bilingual medical providers, and preventative health services are the most needed services in the survey sample.
The top barriers preventing access to these services are lack of health insurance, cost, and language. Findings also suggest that WNC Latinos have limited work opportunities due to factors like lack of legal paperwork verifying residency in the United States, lack of English language skills, and low educational attainment. Three-fourths of respondents do not have a North Carolina issued driver's license, with residency status reported as the top barrier. Only around one-third of respondents think that local and state governments support Latinos. NC-issued driver’s license, with residency status reported as the top barrier. Only around one-third of respondents believe that local and state governments support Latinos.

Results suggest that the development of accessible dental and preventative healthcare services is a priority for the Latino immigrant communities of WNC. There is a need for more Spanish-speaking staff across multiple sectors, including government, healthcare, and public-school systems. Creating pipelines to support bilingual Latino youth to become professionals to fill positions in these sectors can help fill this gap and aid in relationship building between government and Latino communities. Access to driver’s licenses for undocumented individuals can create new employment opportunities, assuage fears of deportation and family separation, and reduce barriers to healthcare services. We urge community organizations to use this data to address the urgent needs of the WNC Latino immigrant community.

To create systemic and sustainable changes, we urge elected officials and funders to consider this data when making or adjusting existing policies and when deciding where and how to allocate funding and resources aimed to serve the most vulnerable communities in Western North Carolina and across NC.
Acknowledgments

Thank you to each participant, volunteer, intern, Community Advisory Board member, funder, partner, and Camino staff member who made this project possible. We would also like to thank our partner organizations who allowed us to present to their networks and event organizers who were gracious enough to allow us to table at their event, spreading awareness of this project.

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By 2060, one in four Americans will be Latino\(^1\), topping 111 million.\(^2\) Latinos account for more than 50% of the growth of the United States (US) population over the last decade.\(^3\) Historically, this growth was driven by immigration. Throughout the 1980s and early 2000s, there has always been at least 1 million more Latino immigrant arrivals than Latino births in the US.\(^4\) However, immigration rates dropped sharply in the 2000s, causing the US Latino population growth to be led by new Latino births rather than immigration.\(^4\) This trend further accelerated from 2010 to 2019 when over 9 million Latinos were born in the US, while only 3.2 million immigrated.\(^4\) As a result, the majority of the US Latino population today is US-born. Given the spike in Latino births over the past two decades, it is not surprising that Latinos are the youngest ethnic minority group in the US.\(^5\) The median age of Latinos is 31, which is 8 years lower than the median age of non-Latinos at 39.\(^6-7\)
The US Latino population is also becoming increasingly diverse. Latinos represent 33 different countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, each with distinct cultural values and traditions. While Mexicans historically make up the majority of the US Latino population, the number of immigrants from Central and South American countries is growing.⁸ The chart below displays population estimates of the largest Latino heritage groups.

### LARGEST US LATINO HERITAGE POPULATION⁹

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTRY</th>
<th>TOTAL POPULATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>37,414,722</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puerto Rican</td>
<td>5,905,178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salvadoran</td>
<td>2,480,509</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>2,435,573</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominican (Dominican Republic)</td>
<td>2,396,784</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guatemalan</td>
<td>1,878,599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombian</td>
<td>1,451,271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honduran</td>
<td>1,219,212</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Over 30% of Latinos in the US are under 18 years old, demonstrating future population growth and contributions to higher education and the economy.¹⁰ In recent years, Latino enrollment in and attainment of higher education has exponentially increased, topping 3.5 million students.¹¹ In 2022, one in five students enrolled in postsecondary school were Latino¹¹ and nearly one in four young Latino adults have a bachelor's degree.¹¹
Latinos play a significant role in shaping the nation's economy, contributing $3.2 trillion to the country's GDP and holding more than $3.4 trillion in purchasing power.¹² If US Latinos were an independent country, their GDP would be the fifth largest in the world, growing faster than the US economy.¹³ Latinos participate in the labor force at higher rates than non-Latinos, with Latino males having the highest labor force participation rate of any racial or ethnic group.¹⁴ By 2030, Latinos are projected to account for 1 out of every 5 workers in the labor force.¹⁵ With 29 million Latinos currently in the workforce¹⁵, Latinos earn more than $2.5 trillion across the US.¹²

Furthermore, Latino immigrants are 25% more likely than the overall US population to own a business.¹⁶ In fact, Latino-owned businesses are the fastest growing segment of the US business community, approaching 5 million.¹⁷ Although Latino-owned business have lower average outstanding debt compared to White-owned businesses, Latinos have lower approval rates on larger loans.¹⁷
SOCIOECONOMIC AND HEALTH DISPARITIES

Despite the many strengths of Latinos, they experience disparities in income levels, educational attainment, and health insurance coverage compared to their non-Latino White counterparts, both nationally and statewide.

Latinos have lower high school graduation rates at 83%, compared to the US average (87%), Whites (90%), and Asians (93%).¹⁸ Young Latinos also have lower rates of bachelor’s degree attainment (23%) compared to all other race and ethnic groups.¹¹ 70% of Latinos identify needing to earn an income as a top barrier to education.¹¹

Though Latinos have high labor force participation rates, Latinos are more represented in industries like service (23%); production and transportation (17%); and agriculture, construction, and maintenance (15%), compared to non-Latino whites.¹⁹⁻²⁰ Almost half (47%) of non-Latino Whites work in managerial or professional positions compared to a quarter (26%) of Latinos.¹⁹⁻²⁰ Occupations commonly held by Latinos are often low wage and do not offer benefits like health insurance.²¹ Moreover, Latino household median incomes are nearly $9,000 less than the national average.²² The poverty rate of US Latinos is 7% higher than the non-Latino White population.²³
Aside from income disparities, Latinos face numerous barriers to accessing services, contributing to inequities in health outcomes. Latinos have the highest uninsured rates of any racial or ethnic group in the US, at 17% compared to 6% of non-Latino Whites and 8% of the national average.²⁴ This factor may explain why Latinos tend to have higher rates of obesity in both children²⁵ and adults²⁵ and have more poorly controlled blood pressure.²⁶ In addition, serious mental illnesses are on the rise for Latino adults.²⁷ Only 35% of Latino adults with mental illnesses receive treatment, compared to the US average of 46%.²⁸ These disparities are attributed to lack of access to culturally competent diagnostic tools and treatment in Spanish or other Latin dialects, residency status, lack of health insurance, and stigma related to seeking mental health treatment among Latino communities.²⁸ However, despite such health disparities, Latinos have higher life expectancy than the national average.²⁹
LATINOS IN NORTH CAROLINA

North Carolina (NC) is one of 13 states with over 1 million Latinos.³⁰ Between 2010-2020, the NC Latino population grew by 40% while the non-Latino population only grew by 7%.³¹ Current estimates show that one in ten people in NC are Latino.³² Reflecting national trends, the growth of the NC Latino population is driven mostly through births rather than immigration; six out of ten NC Latinos are US-born.³³ Consequently, nearly half of NC Latinos are 24 or younger.³⁴ The majority of NC Latinos are of Mexican heritage, followed by Puerto Rican, Salvadoran, Honduran, and Guatemalan heritage.³⁵ Census data shows Western NC is more reflective of national proportions of Latino heritage than NC.³⁶⁻³⁸

### Heritage of Latinos by Region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>US Latino Proportion³⁶</th>
<th>NC Latino Proportion³⁷</th>
<th>WNC Latino Proportion*³⁸</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puerto Rican</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central American</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South American</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*WNC in this chart refers to 9 counties: Buncombe, Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Haywood, Henderson, Jackson, Macon, and Transylvania.

Despite the significant growth of the Latino population, research on Latinos is limited. The data presented thus far is primarily demographic or socioeconomic data collected by the US Census. However, there is a gap in race and ethnicity specific Census data in rural areas. Information on local communities can be obtained from Community Health Assessments (CHAs) conducted every 3 or 4 years by public health departments. Though these assessments provide valuable data, they are for the general population and not specifically developed for Latino communities.
The only statewide assessment of NC Latinos was completed in 2003 by the North Carolina Institute of Medicine.³⁹ The study reported that Latinos living in NC faced many barriers to achieving health equity, including issues related to lack of bilingual services, unfamiliarity with the American healthcare system, residency status, and fear of deportation.³⁹ It is important to note, however, that the results of the report were not derived from information directly collected from Latino community members, but rather from a taskforce of notable community and professional leaders with knowledge and expertise on issues impacting Latinos.³⁹

County specific assessments on local Latino populations are scant. To our knowledge, one assessment was conducted in Chatham County in 2016⁴⁰ and two were conducted in Mecklenburg County in 2006⁴¹ and 2022.⁴² Although these assessments were conducted years apart in vastly different areas of the state and used different methodologies, the top issues and barriers were more or less the same: insufficient access to affordable healthcare; lack of bilingual staff and materials at agencies; issues with accessing driver’s licenses/identification; need for English as a Second Language (ESL) classes; and issues related to employment, including discrimination, mistreatment, and exploitation.⁴⁰⁻⁴²

Data from all four assessments provide evidence that Latinos face unique challenges to accessing health, economic, and educational services. Latinos in different regions may be experiencing similar issues, but in different contexts. Therefore, it is important to conduct further research to understand the regional dynamics and circumstances that Latinos face in NC, especially in places with little information on local Latino communities like Western North Carolina.
WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA

Compared to the coastal and piedmont regions, Western North Carolina (WNC) is very mountainous and relatively more rural than the rest of the state. WNC residents tend to be older, less educated, and have lower incomes than residents of the more urban areas of the state. Historically, the economic landscape of the region was shaped by manufacturing, mining, textiles, timber, and agriculture. However, there is a recent, notable growth of finance, insurance, real estate, and service industries in the region, which may be attributable to the tourism industry.

Data collected and analyzed by the WNC Health Network is perhaps the most comprehensive of the area. Results from their 2021 PRC Community Health Needs Assessment of the 18 westernmost counties demonstrated half of residents indicate “Excellent” or “Very Good” health status. However, over a third have high blood pressure and 29% have high cholesterol. Additionally, one in five WNC residents reported experiencing more than seven poor mental health days per month, with the rate for Latinos being higher at 32%. Consequently, nearly one in four take medication or receive treatment for mental health. Despite these indicators, 90% feel satisfied with their lives.

WNC often refers to the region of the state containing the Blue Ridge mountains. However, the term “Western North Carolina” is not consistently defined; official boundaries for WNC are not defined by any state or federal office. While one regional report defined WNC as the 23 westernmost counties, another organization refers to WNC as a group of 16 western counties. For the purposes of this report, we define WNC as a specific group of nine counties: Buncombe, Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Haywood, Henderson, Jackson, Macon, and Transylvania. Although we recognize that other counties are often included as part of WNC, the findings of this study specifically relate to the Latino populations across the counties listed above. Therefore, for practical reasons, we use this narrower definition of WNC hereafter. Altogether, this group of WNC counties is estimated to be home to over 600,000 people. Buncombe and Henderson County are the most populous with nearly 260,000 and 116,000 residents, respectively.
Reflecting national and statewide trends, the WNC Latino population is also rapidly growing. Over the past 20 years, the Latino population quadrupled, growing from roughly 12,300 to nearly 50,000, making up 8% of the population. The table below provides additional demographic details for each WNC county.

### WNC’s Latino Population as Compared to Its Total Population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>Latino population</th>
<th>Latino percentage of total population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buncombe</td>
<td>269,452</td>
<td>21,922</td>
<td>8.14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cherokee</td>
<td>28,774</td>
<td>899</td>
<td>3.12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clay</td>
<td>11,089</td>
<td>438</td>
<td>3.95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graham</td>
<td>8,030</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>2.73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haywood</td>
<td>62,089</td>
<td>2,829</td>
<td>4.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henderson</td>
<td>116,281</td>
<td>14,999</td>
<td>12.90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackson</td>
<td>43,109</td>
<td>3,292</td>
<td>7.64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macon</td>
<td>37,014</td>
<td>3,498</td>
<td>9.45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transylvania</td>
<td>32,986</td>
<td>1,698</td>
<td>5.15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>608,824</strong></td>
<td><strong>49,794</strong></td>
<td><strong>8.18%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The WNC Latino population is notably younger than non-Latinos.\textsuperscript{51-52} While the overall median age ranges from 38.5 - 53.6 years old in different counties, the median age of Latinos ranges from 20.7 - 39.5 years old.\textsuperscript{51-52} The breakdown of the average age by county is summarized in Appendix A. Around 37\% of WNC Latinos are children (under 18 years old) compared to 17\% of non-Latino Whites.\textsuperscript{53} Public school’s student demographic data shows that nearly one in five students are Latino.\textsuperscript{54} Appendix B summarizes the number and percentage of Latino students in each county’s public school system during the 2023-2024 school year.\textsuperscript{54}

Based on limited data provided by the US Census Bureau, most Latinos appear to be employed; Latino employment rates range between 59\% in Jackson County to 76\% in Transylvania County.\textsuperscript{55} WNC Latinos are most employed in service occupations (31\%) and agriculture, construction and maintenance occupations (22\%).\textsuperscript{55} The median Latino household income ranges from $34,000 in Transylvania County to $55,000 in Haywood County.\textsuperscript{55} Despite high employment rates, census data suggest that WNC Latinos have low health insurance rates; in Buncombe County, census figures estimate that around 53\% of nonelderly Latino adults are uninsured.\textsuperscript{56}
RESEARCH ON WNC LATINOS

Previous research on WNC Latinos is very limited and tends to focus on agricultural immigrant farmworkers, with some research on immigrant poultry factory workers.⁵⁷⁻⁶⁰ Such studies show that Latino farmworkers experience elevated levels of depression and anxiety symptoms likely due to factors related to documentation status, family separation, and the presence of anti-immigrant sentiments in certain parts of the state.⁵⁸˒⁶¹ WNC Latinos experience difficulties in accessing primary care, dental services, and mental health resources.⁵⁸⁻⁵⁹ Additionally, issues like low English language skills⁶², disparities related to health information⁶³, and discrimination⁶⁴ were found to impact WNC Latinos.

A few studies also highlight the labor conditions impacting WNC Latinos.⁵⁷˒⁶⁵ One study found that while Latinos valued the stability and higher income offered by poultry factory work, they disliked the negative impact the physically demanding jobs had on their health, the exhaustively rapid pace of work, and the unfair treatment of Latinos, especially undocumented workers.⁵⁷ Similarly, another study found that while most of the WNC Latino farmworker participants valued safe work practices, most also reported a lack of safety equipment provided by employers, insufficient safety training, and predict that they will likely get injured at some point within the year.⁶⁵

Census data and scholarly research provide some information on WNC Latinos; however, they do not provide much insight into Latino’s perspectives on which resources they and their families need most. Therefore, it is important to conduct a landscape assessment to understand the types of resources needed by the growing Latino communities in WNC. It is important to simultaneously identify strengths, as they can be leveraged to meet identified needs. In collaboration with community organizations and leaders based in WNC, CRI conducted this Latino Community Strengths and Needs Assessment. Although data collection across the state is ongoing, data collection is considered complete Western North Carolina. From September 2021 to June 2023, we collected 512 survey responses and over 96% of those responses were collected within the 2022 calendar year.

After survey data collection was complete, we conducted 11 interviews with Western North Carolina community leaders from January to April 2024. Interview data provides deeper insight into some of the issues uncovered by the survey data and into the community leaders' experiences working with Latino immigrants living in Western North Carolina. This report shares the method of collecting the data, presents key results, and identifies potential solutions to improve quality of life and access of WNC Latinos.
METHODS

This report presents WNC results, which is a part of a larger statewide study to understand the strengths and needs of Latino communities across North Carolina. A pilot of this study was first conducted in Mecklenburg County, with results released in 2022. At the time of writing this report, the larger study is currently ongoing across the state, but data collection in WNC is complete. This report presents results based on surveys and community leader interviews in Western North Carolina.

The current study is mixed methods and was conducted in two parts. The first part is a 15-minute anonymous, electronic survey to identify the strengths, needs, and barriers experienced by Latino adults (at least 18 years old) living in WNC. The second part consists of semi-structured interviews with community leaders based in WNC.

Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approaches were used in the design and implementation of this study. CBPR is an effective approach to conducting research with minority communities, including Latinos. CBPR emphasizes strengths and asset based approaches to address individual and community needs, ultimately decreasing disparities and increasing quality of life. CBPR prioritizes treating community members as equal research partners, working together to leverage the strengths of the community to solve problems and issues. Camino Research Institute (CRI) uses CBPR approaches to collaborate with all entities of Camino and other community partners to identify strengths and address issues faced by Latino families.
The research team throughout this study included four full-time staff members: Director of CRI (principal investigator), Manager of CRI, Lead Community Researcher, and Data Scientist. The interdisciplinary team has extensive experience conducting social science research. Eight student volunteers and interns assisted the research team at various times throughout the study. All interns and volunteers were trained by CRI staff on the principles of CBPR and study procedures, including study methodology, recruitment methods, data coding, data analysis, and data interpretation.

Following CBPR principles, CRI researchers developed a Community Advisory Board (CAB) of 7 community leaders based in WNC. Six members are Latino immigrants from different countries, including Colombia, Mexico, and Venezuela. One member is non-Latino. The CAB met monthly from October 2022 to April 2024; most CAB meetings were held virtually and one was held in person at UNETE, a Latino-serving nonprofit organization located in Buncombe County. CAB members were instrumental in guiding survey and interview participant recruitment for this study, as well as informing interpretation of results and suggesting potential solutions to identified issues.
SURVEY DEVELOPMENT

The survey used for the present study was originally developed as a pilot study to assess the strengths and needs of Latinos living in Mecklenburg County. The initial development of the survey involved reviewing the literature to identify previous Latino needs assessments conducted in the US. Based on these previous assessments, a preliminary survey structure and categories were developed by the CRI team in April 2021. Survey categories are related to the Social Determinants of Health: health, social support, housing, food security, stress and coping, education, employment, and family specific questions, including questions on the needs of their children.

A draft of the survey was written in English and presented to the Mecklenburg CAB in May 2021. CAB members provided input, suggested revisions, and recommended new questions. Based on these recommendations, the CRI team revised the survey to create a second version of the English draft. CAB members were then separated into smaller groups based on their areas of expertise to review relevant sections of the survey and recommend final edits.

Once the final version of the survey was agreed upon, a group composed of five CAB members from various Latin American countries assisted with translation. The Spanish version of the survey went through four rounds of revisions; each draft was cross-checked for comprehension across multiple Spanish dialects by native Spanish speakers. The final English and Spanish versions of the survey were inputted into JotForm, a HIPAA compliant electronic survey platform.

The English and Spanish electronic surveys were then piloted with CAB members and immigrant community members from various countries of origin and socioeconomic status to ensure comprehension of questions, ease of use, and survey length. Small changes to the survey were made based on community member recommendations to simplify select questions for widespread comprehension. Later, during the data collection phase of the Mecklenburg County pilot study, the survey was shortened due to feedback from participants and CAB members. The survey received initial approval from Solutions IRB in June 2021 and for the revised survey in November 2021. This revised version of the survey was distributed across WNC.
Survey participant recruitment primarily relied on convenience and snowball sampling. While random sampling is regarded as the traditional standard, immigrants, especially the undocumented, tend to not engage in research due to fear and mistrust.⁷² Consequently, studies on “hard-to-reach” populations typically use non-random sampling methods to collect data.⁷² While such sampling methods limit the generalizability of the results, they tend to be more successful in the recruitment of immigrant populations.⁷² It is also important to note that generalizability is typically not the goal of CBPR studies.⁷³ Because CRI and WNC CAB members agreed to prioritize the participation of immigrant and undocumented Latino community members, recruitment relied heavily on established networks of trust. WNC CAB members leveraged their personal and professional networks to recruit survey participants. Recruitment materials like flyers, example email prompts, example text message prompts, and one-page infographics with preliminary results were shared with CAB members to use for recruitment. CAB members also informed CRI staff of upcoming, important Latino community events to recruit survey participants at.

Once survey data collection was complete, data was exported from JotForm as a Microsoft Excel file and reviewed by the CRI team to remove invalid and duplicate survey responses. Open-ended survey responses were reviewed by bilingual CRI staff and interns to create a common codebook. Using this codebook, bilingual student interns and CRI staff coded the open response questions. Once the data file was cleaned and coded, descriptive statistical analysis was conducted for each question by CRI staff members and a student intern from UNC Charlotte’s Master’s Program of Health Informatics and Analytics. Select questions were also analyzed via cross tabulation to find potential response differences between different backgrounds, including gender, documentation status, and age.
COMMUNITY LEADER INTERVIEWS

To gain a deeper understanding of the strengths and needs identified in the survey data, interviews with WNC community leaders were conducted. Interview questions were drafted in English based on preliminary results of WNC survey data. Questions were written to confirm whether or not preliminary results aligned with the perspectives and lived experiences of interview participants. Questions were also written to elicit community issues related to immigration, employment, and access to health services. Interviewees were asked to provide recommendations for policy and programmatic solutions to help address identified issues and improve quality of life for WNC Latinos. The interview guide was translated by a bilingual CRI staff member and cross-checked by a Latina immigrant community leader with extensive community engagement experience to ensure understandability.

Eleven semi-structured, virtual interviews were conducted and audio recorded via Zoom between January and April 2024. Interview participants included CAB members and other community leaders invested in WNC Latino communities. A snowball sampling method was utilized, in which CAB members were interviewed first and then asked to identify other potential interview participants. Interviews were conducted in either English or Spanish by a bilingual CRI staff member, depending on the participant’s preference. On average, interviews were an hour long.
Qualitative data analysis is often very time-consuming, taking months to complete the transcription and subsequent analysis of the interview data. A rapid appraisal approach was adopted to ensure that community members and stakeholders could access and potentially take action on interview findings. Rapid appraisal is a research approach that employs data collection methods and analysis in a short time frame to generate preliminary data and results that can be used to guide existing policy decisions and directions of future research. Rapid appraisals are commonly used to study time-sensitive events to gain a quicker insight on current activities in the field. To increase the speed of data collection and analysis, multiple bilingual researchers were actively involved in both data collection and analysis.

Following rapid appraisal practices, interview audio was transcribed by an automated transcription software. All transcripts were reviewed and corrected by two trained bilingual interns, with a CRI staff member providing final review and approval. Once reviewed, all transcripts were uploaded to Dedoose, a cloud-based qualitative analysis software. Two CRI staff members independently read each interview transcript and identified common themes. The two staff members then met and agreed on significant themes. A consensus was reached on what themes were deemed significant across multiple interviews. Quotes were then identified based on relevance to overall themes and quantitative survey findings. Anonymized quotes were translated to English by bilingual team members and are presented in relevant sections of this report to provide insight on the survey results.
RESULTS
DEMOGRAPHICS

SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

A total of 512 Latinos participated in the survey across nine different WNC counties; 95% completed the survey in Spanish and 5% took the survey in English. The majority (92%) are immigrants from 16 different countries, with the top three countries being Mexico (71%), Honduras (6%), and Guatemala (4%). Almost 60% of respondents are women. The average age of the sample is 40 years old. Immigrant respondents report an average of 22 years living in the US. Residency status varies among respondents; 23% are either a US citizen or a permanent resident, 10% have a conditional or temporary status (Visa, DACA-recipient, Temporary Protected Status), 51% are undocumented immigrants, and 16% of participants preferred not to disclose their residency status. When asked which term they prefer to identify with, 43% say Latino, 55% say Hispanic, and less than 2% say Latinx.

INTERVIEW DEMOGRAPHICS

A total of 11 community leaders were interviewed for this study. Most interview participants serve Latinos across all or nearly all of WNC, while others focus more on Buncombe, Henderson, or Transylvania counties. Most participants are employed in community clinics, community-based nonprofits, and advocacy organizations. One participant is a full-time pastor for a church. The average age of interview participants is 46.
STRENGTHS

Survey respondents identified strong work ethic, bilingual language skills, and entrepreneurial spirit as the top strengths of WNC Latino communities; at least 40% of respondents identified each of those aspects as a community strength. The next most selected traits include a spirit of service and volunteering (21.7%), adding cultural diversity to the community (20.5%), and the ability to unite and work together. The chart below provides more details of this result.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strength</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work ethic</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bilingual</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneurship</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteering</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural diversity</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unity</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino orgs</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Respondents can select as many strengths that apply. Therefore, the percentages do not total 100%.

Interview participants highlight similar strengths of the WNC Latino communities they engage with. One participant indicates that the Latino community “is a very resilient community, hardworking, and, despite any crisis, they stay strong”.

Latinos significantly contribute to the WNC community. When respondents are asked what they can personally contribute to their community, the top responses are related to volunteering (27%), working (16%), and personal values (11%) including respect, empathy, and friendliness.

One community leader highlighted the dependability of Latinos as a key strength, sharing “it is a community you can always count on. They are there for you during good and bad times. It is a committed community; they won’t budge.” Similarly, another community leader shared, “[Latinos] are committed to their work, committed to their family, their faith, their religion, and always willing to, you know, to do the best for their families.”

Respondents are also very committed to their families; 22% said they immigrated to the US seeking a better quality of life and future for their family and 23% said they moved for familial reasons like family reunification. After immigrating, respondents maintain ties to family and communities in their home country; 61% of respondents frequently send money or items to family and friends living outside the US. As one community leader explains, “A lot of [Latinos] help not only their families here, but also their families overseas of the countries they come from.”
Children are a central component of most Latino families. About half of respondents (51.4%) are parents or the primary caregiver to a child, having 2.6 children each on average. Consequently, most parents are actively involved in their child's education and development. Half of parents with children under 10 years old (50.5%) read to their child at least 3-5 times a week. Additionally, Latinos want to pass on their culture, as 92% of Latino parents believe it is important for their children to maintain Latino culture and Spanish language. Maintaining strong cultural roots can aid in uplifting the community and promoting a sense of pride in the next generation.

**FIRST RESOURCE RESPONDENTS TURN TO WHEN THEY HAVE A NEED**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Friends &amp; Family</th>
<th>Faith-related sources</th>
<th>Community organization</th>
<th>No one</th>
<th>Gov't agency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>49%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data suggests that respondents have strong social support networks; 79% of respondents report they have people they can rely on for help and three out of four indicate they have someone to talk to about their problems. Additionally, 42% report talking to friends or family as their primary mechanism for coping with stress. Moreover, when asked who they would reach out to first when they have a need, nearly half of respondents (48.7%) indicate turning to friends and family.

Faith is another important value that Latinos say provide them support and comfort. The second most selected activity used to cope with stress is praying or reading the bible (29%), with 28.9% turning to their faith for help. Faith sources are able to provide a safe space for Latinos to connect and share resources, regardless of documentation status. Interviews highlight the importance of trust during service provision.

> [It is important] having organizations that [Latinos] trust, being able to talk to them about this [service] and offer, saying ‘look, we have this available for you’, but it has to come from a trusted source.”
NEEDS AND BARRIERS

Latino communities have many strengths but like all communities, they also experience problems and have unmet needs. The next several sections discuss the needs of Latinos related to education, employment, physical health, mental health, and civic engagement, along with the corresponding barriers that may prevent them from accessing services.

EDUCATION

Survey respondents report low levels of educational attainment. Over half (53%) indicate not having a high school level degree. Nearly a quarter (23%) of the sample have up to a high school diploma and only 15% have postsecondary degrees. In addition, almost two-thirds (64%) report needing little to no help applying or paying for education, which may indicate disinterest in continuing education.

Nevertheless, survey results indicate parents are involved in the education of their children. Only 14% of parents say they are not involved in any activity at their children's school. The primary ways parents engage in their child's education are by helping with their homework (52%), regularly speaking with their child's teacher (41%), and attending parent-teacher conferences (41%).

Parents also report facing barriers that prevent them from being more involved in their child's school, with the most common ones being language (24%) and not having enough time (17%). Interview participants point to the lack of sufficient bilingual school staff members to facilitate Latino parental engagement. As one community leader shares, bilingual staff are stretched so thin across their school systems that it hampers their ability to effectively serve Latino families,

“The [bilingual] counselors in each school have to see between 250 and 300 students. So during an exercise, we ask [students] if they trust the counselor and all the students decide no, because [they] feel like [the counselors] don't make a connection. Helping so many students is not efficient or effective for them.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EDUCATION LEVEL</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never attended school</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No high school diploma</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school graduate/GED</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college credits</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical/Associate's degree</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's degree and above</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lack of bilingual and Latino school staff may inhibit a sense of belonging and trust within the Latino community. In fact, of those who reported being discriminated against for being Latino, one in four indicated to have been discriminated against in school settings.

Increasing bilingual staff and providing cultural competency training may aid in reducing discrimination and increasing parental involvement within this community. Latino staff members and those familiar with the sociocultural factors impacting this group are able to better understand the cultural and acculturation challenges Latino families face.

Engagement in their children's academics seems to also be informed by what Latino parents understand about the education system. One leader discussed how Latino parents may conceptualize their role and responsibility differently in regards to their child's education:

“We believe, as Latinos, when we come [to the US], we bring the kids [to schools] like, ‘this is [the child’s] responsibility. Go to school and make good [grades]’ and not knowing that the [school] system is totally different, the language, the culture. And unfortunately in Buncombe County and most of the counties, the situation is not welcoming for all youth who just came from their countries and [are trying] to adapt.”

Interview narratives illustrate that parents may not understand or agree with the importance of family involvement in their child’s school. The fact that many participants have low educational attainment may contribute to these perspectives, in which the need for work may supersede the prioritization of education. The next section elaborates on issues related to employment and socioeconomic status and how it can impact access to resources and wellbeing.
Approximately 4 out of 5 WNC Latinos are employed. 50% have full-time employment, 29% have part-time employment, and 4% are self-employed. In contrast, 17% indicate they are either a housewife or caregiver and only 5% report being unemployed. Regardless of employment status, all survey respondents are asked to identify any barriers to finding work. While half of the sample indicates they either had no barriers (32%) or preferred not to respond (18%), the most selected barriers to work are lack of identification or documentation (21%), language (17%), and lack of childcare (13%). These issues are at the forefront of community members' minds; when asked about the top issues in their community, economic issues such as employment opportunities rank third, and language and communication issues ranked fourth.

Results demonstrate a desire to resolve these issues, with 73% of all respondents and 86% of undocumented respondents indicating a need for English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. Half (53%) report a need for employment training programs. In fact, 42% of immigrants report that they moved to the US for better economic opportunities, citing low wages and lack of employment in their country of origin as the primary drivers. Of employed immigrants, 17% held professional careers like educators, healthcare professionals, business administrators, counselors, and engineers in their country of origin.

18% of employed Latinos held professional careers after moving to the US. Approximately 83% of employed immigrants worked as skilled laborers in their country of origin, which remains relatively the same after moving to the US at 81%. Among immigrant respondents, upon moving to the US, the top industries for employment are: 1) Agriculture, construction, carpentry, and warehouse work (37%); 2) Food service and hospitality work (16%); and 3) Housekeeping, nannying, and cleaning work (14%).
Due to the significant presence of agricultural businesses and farms in the WNC region, interview participants mention how the seasonality of work in the areas can contribute to instability and uncertainty for some Latino workers.

“We find that especially during the winter months, when there are less options for work, it is a lot harder for [Latino farmworkers] because our communities generally work in either the farms or in construction, painting, various jobs. Let’s say that [work] really picks up in the spring and summer and starts to decrease a little bit in the fall and, of course, disappears during winter. Still, because of their strength, they endure.”

The inconsistency of work may lead to financial insecurity during different times of the year. This can impact one’s mental health, housing stability, and access to services. Almost half (48%) of respondents reported feeling worried about money and 43% worry about work. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of the sample report they sometimes, rarely, or never have money left over after paying monthly bills. In addition, 23% indicate they sometimes, often, or always run out of food before being able to buy more and 19% say they frequently skip or reduce meals before having money for more food.

A lack of disposable income may indicate financial instability and the inability to save money securely. A little over a third (35%) of respondents do not have a bank account; the top reported barriers were lack of identification or documentation (43%), having insufficient funds to open an account (19%) and language (16%). Many respondents report barriers to obtaining loans, including not having personal identification or other required documentation (24%), no credit history (14%), or a low credit score (13%). These barriers make it difficult to obtain assets like cars or houses. Only 21% of respondents own their home, which is far lower than the overall NC population at 67%.

All of these issues can lead to feelings of stress, which can impact mental and emotional wellbeing. These topics are discussed in the next section.
MENTAL HEALTH

The socioeconomic issues discussed in the previous sections can have a negative impact on the emotional and mental wellbeing of Latino community members. To gain an insight on the conditions and utilization of mental health resources, respondents answered various questions related to mental health resources, symptoms, and life areas that cause the most worry.

Survey respondents rate how much they worry over ten different topics. Results show that the majority of the sample express significant worry over speaking, reading, and writing in English (57%), family responsibilities (55%), and immigration status (54%). In contrast, respondents expressed the least worry over issues relating to domestic/family abuse, gang activity, and Spanish language skills.

Although Latinos are experiencing significant worry, less than a third (31%) of respondents indicate a need for mental health services. When asked if the respondent or someone in their household are having difficulties with any mental health symptoms, the majority (64%) indicate not having any difficulties. The most common symptoms reported were difficulties in managing stress (17%), persistent sadness (9%), and loss of interest in things they enjoyed (8%).

Results suggest that few Latinos engage with mental health resources; only 19% indicate that they or someone in their household has ever received counseling. When asked why they have not received therapy, 68% say they do not want or need it, 14% cannot afford it, and 8% report being uncomfortable using such services.

AVERAGE LEVEL OF WORRY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Average Level of Worry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Immigration</td>
<td>1.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English skills</td>
<td>1.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money</td>
<td>1.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical health</td>
<td>1.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>1.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish skills</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gang activity</td>
<td>0.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic abuse</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Respondents indicate their level of worry about each item above on a 4-point Likert scale. Answers were assigned a score from 0 to 3, with 0 indicating no worry and 3 indicating a lot of worry. The chart above reflects the average scores of worry.*
Several interview participants explained that the low engagement with mental health resources is more likely due to cultural attitudes towards mental health rather than an actual lack of symptoms or disorders. As one participant explained:

“In general it’s the culture, like ‘We are not locos. We are not crazy. We don’t need that.’ [Latinos] utilize the phrase ‘echale gana (give it your all). We don’t have that. I don’t know what’s wrong with you. Just, you’re lazy.’ So the cultural perspective about mental health in our culture, is wrongly based on ‘we don’t need help.’ You just need to ‘ponerte las pilas (get it together)’. You know, work hard.”

Other participants shared that the scarcity of health resources in the more remote, rural areas of WNC may explain low utilization. Although some of the more urban areas like Buncombe have more resources within the county, other areas have a large gap in this type of care. One community leader highlighted his experience seeing community members pushed to drive hours to receive these services.

“On this side of the state, there are not that many options for mental health. I know a lot of families that have to travel from Jackson County all the way to Buncombe County because that’s the [county] that has the most resources. But, at the same time, it is not sustainable. It’s driving and then, those locations, those offices are helping already the county and the people from other counties that are coming over too. So it’s not sustainable either, but I think that was the main reason why we don’t look for mental health help, assistance, etcetera. “

Mental and physical health are closely related and both impact quality of life. The next section discusses some of the issues faced by Latinos related to accessing healthcare services.
PHYSICAL HEALTH

Results suggest the most needed services among WNC Latinos are healthcare related. Out of a list of 20 different resources, the top three needed services identified are related to health: 1) Dental care (85%), 2) Preventative health care services like annual checkups and physicals (82%), and 3) Having a doctor that speaks your primary language (81%). This may be explained by the fact that nearly 82% of respondents report not having health insurance. Among undocumented respondents, 95% indicate they are uninsured. Consequently, health insurance has been found to be the biggest barrier across nearly all health care services.

Dental care ranks highest amongst all of the needs; 85% of participants indicate a need for dental services. Only 27% of respondents say they visit the dentist every 6 months. Additionally, 77% of undocumented individuals do not receive regular dental care. Among respondents that do not get regular dental care (71%), lack of dental insurance (80%) and affordability of the services (42%) are the most commonly reported barriers.

Results also show that vision care access is a significant need among respondents; 73% of respondents report a significant need for vision care services. While less than half (48%) of respondents who are citizens or permanent residents do not receive regular vision care, 80% of undocumented respondents do not have regular access to this service. The most reported barriers to regular vision care were lack of vision insurance (71%) and affordability (35%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AVERAGE LEVEL OF TOP 10 NEEDED SERVICES</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dental care</td>
<td>2.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctor speak preferred language</td>
<td>2.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preventative health</td>
<td>2.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English classes</td>
<td>2.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vision care</td>
<td>2.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cancer screenings</td>
<td>1.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliable internet</td>
<td>1.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job training</td>
<td>1.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial education</td>
<td>1.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prescribed medicine</td>
<td>1.36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Respondents indicate their level of need for 25 different resources on a 4-point Likert scale. Answers were assigned a score from 0 to 3, with 0 indicating no need and 3 indicating high need. The chart above reflects the average scores of need.*
Around 4 out of 5 participants (82%) need preventative healthcare services, which increases to 86% for undocumented individuals.

In this study, 54% of respondents received a routine physical or checkup within the past year, but 22% of respondents had not had a checkup within the past 3 years. To better understand what kinds of resources respondents primarily utilize, respondents were asked where they typically go when they are sick. Results show that 28% go to a community clinic, 15% go to a doctor’s office, 13% go to a county health department, and 10% go to the hospital emergency room. Of note, 14% said they tend to stay home, and another 7% claim to never get sick. In contrast, among undocumented respondents, 35% go to a community clinic, 19% go to the health department and only 7% go to a doctor's office when sick.

While 87% prefer to speak Spanish, only 23% of respondents have a regular doctor that speaks to them in Spanish. Several community leaders point to the need for cultural understanding that extends beyond speaking Spanish. One participant shared that, besides the lack of services in Spanish, “there are no culturally appropriate services that go beyond language” and that it is important to “understand the culture” when serving Latinos. Another community leader shared that it is necessary “to be able talk to someone...someone who can understand me, someone who I think I can really communicate with; not only someone who speaks the language.”

Although personal choices impact health, there are larger governmental policies that can impact healthcare access, such as health insurance, immigration laws, and language access policies. The following sections highlight government and broader community related topics.
COMMUNITY AND CIVIC RELATIONS

Overall, study results illustrate neutral perspectives towards local and state government. A third of respondents (37%) agreed or strongly agreed with the idea that their local or city government supports Latinos. Similarly, 35% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the idea that the North Carolina state government supports Latinos. Roughly one-third of respondents answered neutrally to both questions.

Community leaders shared that these lukewarm sentiments towards local and state government may be explained by the lack of Latino representation in government. One community leader shares that Latinos are not present in significant roles in “the school system and government, you can see just white people you don’t see a Latino person on the top.” Another participant shares that representation and language access are crucial for effective community engagement,

“These activities that [the local government does] in our community need to show that there's someone there, in the government, that looks like them, will speak the language. And I said that if they don't have that in our community, they think that there is no support because there's nobody there who does speak my language. There's nobody there who looks like me.”

Other interview participants state that relations between Latino communities and government entities can only improve by changing anti-immigrant policies across federal, state, and local levels. As one participant said, “Until government officials actually make something change with the laws, I don't think they're going to gain much of the community's trust.”
Likewise, another community leader recommends the following:

“Let’s pass immigration reform. Let’s get DACA students legalized. Let’s do all this stuff for our folks that are here and that have made a life here, who have family here, who are working the job, they’re paying their taxes. Let’s get them a solution to improve their lives and we as a nation have tried a number of times to get this done. And, for some reason, we never come through. And we need to come through.”

Participants also mention that police activities targeting undocumented immigrants may disrupt a sense of trust and welcoming in WNC. A majority of respondents (65%) indicate that they feel safe around the police. Interestingly, the proportion of participants who feel safe around the police varies by residency status; half (54%) of documented individuals affirm to feel safe around the police compared to two-thirds (67%) of undocumented respondents. In contrast, only 16% of undocumented indicate not feeling safe around the police compared to 28% of documented individuals.

Despite these results, community leaders readily share past events when police would purposefully set up checkpoints along routes and locations commonly used by Latino immigrant workers. One participant shared,

“How too long ago, here, in this area, [police] stopped a lot of people with checkpoints for the purpose of checking your driver’s license...Sometimes [these checkpoints] would go on as late as midnight because there are people who work until midnight. And [the police] would know where they would go and they would wait for them there. People would call me, ‘Hey, can you help me find someone because I can’t drive because they will catch me’...The police would never ask me if I had a license, maybe because of how I look. Because I think I look gringa, I don’t know. People would sometimes ask me, ‘Where did you learn Spanish?’...That makes me really mad. And now, my hair is white, it used to be red and I would look like someone from Ireland who is undocumented, because they exist. I was never, ever asked about my license.”
Survey results also show discrimination experiences by WNC Latinos. 35% of respondents have experienced discrimination for being Latino while living in NC. Among those who said they were discriminated against, the most common reasons for why they think they were discriminated against are appearance (50%), language (48%), skin color (41%), and immigration status (28%). Respondents indicate to be most commonly discriminated against in areas of businesses, such as restaurants and stores (45%), employment (30%), and in schools (25%). Sense of discrimination may impact community involvement and engagement. As one community leader shared,

“Schools call police much more readily. They have more police on site, often with school resource officers or off duty cops. That could be unnerving itself. And also the fear that, you know, if you're arguing in a different language, how close are they to like calling for, 'Hey, you're being threatening to me.' And that could make trying to [be involved in your child’ school] seem more daunting. Or even that might put your child in a worse situation because it’s becoming an ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’ situation that's based out of ethnicity.”

Nearly 3 out of 4 respondents (73%) do not have a North Carolina issued driver's license, Immigration status reported as the most common barrier (79%). The fact that 73% of respondents report using a personal vehicle as their primary mode of transportation suggests that many respondents are driving regardless of whether or not they have a license. Driver's license and related immigration policies are the top reported community issues among all respondents.

Community leaders repeatedly share that access to getting a license would benefit undocumented immigrants and Latino communities as a whole. As one community leader shared, “It is a big barrier in regards to licenses for many reasons. The ability to get a driver's license is very much related to one's legal status. Many in our community drive without a license because they don’t have access to them, but they need to drive; they need to have a car and be able to drive.” Another community leader echoes how access to driver’s licenses for the undocumented can help assuage the fear and stress in their communities,

“We need driver’s licenses for our families. We need to know that this is a place where they can drive safe, that they don't have to be afraid of saying that there is a policeman in the back and they have to have fear. I think there's still a level of fear towards our law enforcement in a lot of areas. So I feel like, you know, the more that we work towards showing our community that we're there to help and that part of the government is also there to help you.”
DISCUSSION

Latino Community Strengths and Needs Assessment

Camino Research Institute
STRENGTHS

Survey and interview results showcase multiple aspects of Latino communities across Western North Carolina. Latinos in WNC have strong work ethics, prioritize their family, and value health. However, there are systemic and cultural barriers that influence their quality of life and ability to leverage these strengths.

Results suggest that Latino respondents have strong social support networks; most survey respondents report, as confirmed by interview participants, to primarily lean on family, friends, and faith-related sources to meet their needs. These networks of trust may be leveraged to provide important resources, as trust takes a long time to build. These trends reflect Latino cultural traits like familismo and spirituality.⁷⁸⁻⁷⁹ Familismo is a value found in many Latino cultures in which one tends to make decisions based on what is best for the family rather than for oneself and feel a sense of obligation to help family members.⁸⁰ Spirituality refers to the centrality of faith and religious activities in one’s life⁸¹, in which activities like prayer and talking to fellow church members and pastors can be a way to cope with stressors.⁸² Previous studies on US Latinos found that high levels of social support is associated with positive physical and mental health.⁸³⁻⁸⁴ However, family can also be a significant source of stress among Latino immigrants,⁸² and results show that family responsibilities are one of the top worries amongst respondents.

Survey and interview results suggest different reasons as to why Latino immigrants tend to rely on informal communal networks rather than formal governmental institutions. The fact that this is a highly undocumented sample point towards the possibility that many respondents do not qualify, or believe they may not qualify, for assistance programs administered by local, state, and federal agencies and, therefore, avoid interacting with government services.⁸⁵⁻⁸⁶
Additionally, language barriers and lack of Spanish-speaking governmental staff may deter Latino immigrants from engaging with governmental agencies. Nevertheless, survey results show that WNC Latinos have mostly neutral to positive attitudes towards local and state government, suggesting there is an opportunity to improve relations between the Latino community and government. Community leader interviews highlight a need for more multicultural, bilingual professionals in various fields, including government, education, and healthcare. It would be extremely beneficial to have government professionals working towards developing relationships of trust with the Latino community. Implementing laws and policies that improve Latino’s quality of life, increase employment, and expand educational opportunities can aid in trust. However, community trust in the government may take time, especially for long term residents. As alluded by community leaders, it is plausible that past practices, policies, and programs that target undocumented immigrants, like 287(g), left a negative imprint on the collective memory of NC Latinos that may delay trust of long term NC residents. In addition, this apparent apathy towards local and state government is reflected in civic activities, as Latinos tend to have lower voter turnout rates than non-Latino White and Black voters. The WNC community would benefit from increased opportunities and empowerment for Latinos to become more civically engaged, both through voting and beyond.

Results suggest WNC Latino participants are less educated than the broader population, however there seems to be an interest in higher education, especially for the next generation. There are a number of organizations in WNC that are working closely with to encourage and guide Latino families through higher education attainment. The education process may be even more confusing for Latino parents, as they have little experience with the higher education process and may have even more difficulty navigating the US education system. This difficulty coupled with language barriers makes it difficult to understand the education process and advocate for their child. There is a large opportunity for expanded programs and funding to not only guide students through the education process, but also parents. WNC Latinos may also benefit from the development and expansion of adult education programs, including GED programs, ESL courses, and trade school.
NEEDS AND BARRIERS

Results demonstrate health related services as the most needed type of resource among respondents. Specifically, survey respondents indicate a high need for dental services, bilingual medical providers, and access to preventative health services. Similar findings were found among Latinos living in Chatham County and Mecklenburg County, indicating that issues with healthcare access among NC Latinos is a statewide phenomenon rather than a localized regional issue.⁴⁰⁻⁴² The community would benefit from increased and expanded services across the region, especially those that are low cost and bilingual.

Survey results also suggest that lack of health insurance is a large barrier in accessing health-related resources, as lack of health insurance is the top barrier for all health services, including annual checkups, dental care, vision care, STD tests, pap smear exams, and mammogram screenings. Census data shows Latinos are less likely to be enrolled in health insurance than other racial and ethnic groups in North Carolina, making access to healthcare difficult to afford.⁹¹ Since roughly half of survey respondents are undocumented, they also do not qualify for low-cost health programs like Medicaid and Medicare. Although half of respondents work full-time, it appears not many of them are able to get benefits like health insurance through their employer. This points to a need for increased opportunities to obtain health insurance, including modifications to employer requirements for providing insurance and insurance eligibility criteria.

Given these results, community organizations that provide low-cost health care regardless of documentation or insurance status are crucial for low-income families. Such services are shown to help reduce emergency room utilization for non-urgent medical cases.⁹² However, per community leader interviews, community organizations, as well social services provided by governmental agencies, are spread thin across the region and tend to concentrate in the urban areas.⁹³ This points towards the need for increased investments and development of community organizations to serve Latino immigrants across WNC counties.
Results suggest that more low-cost health-related resources need to be accompanied with bilingual language options for Spanish-speaking immigrants. Many immigrant respondents have low English language skills and would prefer to have bilingual medical providers. As noted in previous studies, community leaders share how lack of Spanish-speaking staff and bilingual resources negatively impact Latino immigrants' access to resources in multiple sectors, including healthcare, education, and employment. Hiring multicultural, representative staff members can not only aid in overcoming the language barrier, but it can also develop trust within the community. Recruiting Latino immigrant community members that are locally trusted to become community health workers (CHWs) or health promoters can be an effective way to provide Latino immigrants access to resources. CHWs were instrumental during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic to bring services and health information to Latino communities. However, since the end of the pandemic, funding for CHWs and health promoters is reportedly receding, pushing organizations to lay off community health workers.

Participants largely identify work ethic as a key community strength, with most WNC Latinos being employed. Participants primarily indicate working in labor intensive positions, such as agriculture, construction, or warehouse related occupations. These positions are key to the economy and food production of WNC, NC, and the US. However, as reported in previous studies, Latino immigrant workers are prone to labor exploitation and injury from overworking, especially if they are undocumented. In addition, the labor options and pathways for upward mobility towards higher paid work for Latino immigrants tend to be very limited due to language barriers, low education levels, and documentation status issues. Survey results demonstrate a desire for new opportunities, with more than half indicating a need for employment training programs. However, the recent inflation and increase in everyday expenses, including food and housing, may force Latino workers to work longer hours and remain in occupations with exploitative labor conditions. Fear of jeopardizing their stable income and risking adverse events like eviction may deter Latinos, especially the undocumented, from advocating for better wages, workplace conditions, and benefits.
Results also highlight the need for driver’s licenses among WNC Latino respondents. A majority of respondents are simultaneously unlicensed and primarily use a personal vehicle to travel, meaning they are likely driving without a North Carolina issued license. **Almost all community leaders emphasized during interviews that providing undocumented immigrants with access to driver's licenses would benefit the community as a whole.** Previous research highlights how Latinos living in states with more exclusionary immigration policies, like barring undocumented immigrants from accessing driver’s license, report more bad mental health days than those living in states with less restrictive policies.¹⁰¹ In addition, allowing undocumented immigrants access to driver’s licenses can potentially decrease insurance costs.¹⁰² Overall, although WNC Latinos contribute significantly to the local community, there are still many opportunities and barriers towards upward mobility, healthcare access, and community engagement.
Results show that a majority of respondents in our sample identify with the term “Hispanic” rather than “Latino/a.” In contrast, in the sample of the 2022 Mecklenburg County report, the majority of respondents identified with “Latino/a”. It is important to acknowledge that these two terms are technically distinct; “Hispanic” refers to individuals with ancestry from a primarily Spanish-speaking country and “Latino” refers to individuals with ancestry from a country that predominantly speaks a language with Latin roots located in the Americas, which includes Spanish-speaking countries like Mexico and Argentina, as well as countries like Haiti and Brazil. Nevertheless, the two terms are commonly used interchangeably.

There are multiple, often competing, ethical considerations that scholars must take into account when writing reports and describing marginalized communities. Newer terms like “Latinx” and “Latine” have emerged as alternative labels to promote efforts of inclusion and resist the default preference of the male label “Latino” over “Latina”. Different scholars argue that the “Latinx” label should be used when referring to a large group or population of Latinos to ensure gender inclusivity. However, there has been notable pushback against the “Latinx” term based on different grounds, including accusations of linguistic imperialism and elitism as working-class Latinos are reportedly unfamiliar with the term. In addition, a Pew Research Center study found that 61% of a sample of over 3,000 US Latino adults preferred the term “Hispanic” to describe the overall Latino population, while only 4% preferred “Latinx”.

Inevitably, the representations that scholars create of studied communities will always be distorted and contested. As community-based researchers, we often lean on our community advisory board members and survey results to guide us on what terminology to use to refer to Latinos. While most CAB members advised to use the term Latino, one can make the argument that because the majority of the sample preferred the term “Hispanic,” then it is more appropriate to use that term when referring to this specific population throughout this report. This was something seriously considered by the main authors of this report, but decided to keep the term Latino as originally planned. Ultimately, the debate on which terminology social scientists should use to represent Latino/a/x/e or Hispanic communities remains unresolved.
LIMITATIONS

While this study provides broad insights on the strengths and needs of WNC Latino communities, it is very important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. In sum, these study findings cannot be generalized to all NC Latinos. It is important to reiterate that the term “WNC” refers to a select group of 9 counties and it is not recommended to generalize the results of this study to all Latino communities across the whole western side of the state. Furthermore, the aim of CBPR is not to produce generalizable results, but rather to better understand particular local issues and empower communities to think of appropriate ways to resolve them.⁷³

In this sample, there is an overrepresentation of Latino immigrants. While Census data show that on average 63% of the Latino population in the study area of WNC are US-born,¹¹¹ only 10% of Latinos in our sample are native US born. Therefore, the results of this study largely reflect the experiences and perspectives of immigrants rather than US-born Latinos. It is important to note that the majority of participants were recruited through Latino immigrant serving community organizations. While this recruitment strategy allowed us to have access to primarily Spanish-speaking Latino immigrants, it is likely that not many US born Latinos engage with these organizations. In addition, when a person clicks the link and visits the electronic survey site, it displays a page with Spanish text along with a single sentence in English providing instructions on how to change the language settings. It is possible that US born Latinos, who likely prefer English, may be deterred from participating because the survey opens in Spanish.

It is also important to note that the use of an electronic survey designed to be completed independently by the participant may have excluded individuals who do not have access to technology, internet, or adequate literacy skills. We chose to use an electronic survey to allow for a wider reach across the state and to reduce face to face contact during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, given the length of the survey, the use of paper surveys would have been costly to administer and distribute to organizations and partners who assisted in participant recruitment.
Another limitation is the use of a rapid appraisal approach for the qualitative analysis of community leader interview data. Within a period of two months, participants were recruited, interviewed, and analyzed by at least one CRI staff member. While interview transcripts were analyzed for themes and notable quotes to provide more insight on survey results, such rapid research methods may not produce the same kind of results that extended engagement with focus group data can yield. Moreover, the small sample size of 11 community leaders recruited through convenience sampling methods limits the generalizability of the experiences of WNC Latino communities. CRI plans to conduct an in-depth analysis of the qualitative data in the future.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge the large representation of undocumented Latinos in the survey sample. The proportion of undocumented Latino immigrants within the general WNC Latino population is difficult to determine; around 300,000 undocumented immigrants are estimated to live in NC.¹¹² In addition, the agricultural and food production industries in the WNC region and its demand for cheaper labor pulls many undocumented immigrants to the area, which may help explain this potential overrepresentation of undocumented Latinos in the sample. However, due to the low representation of undocumented individuals in research, we see this as a strength of the study and continue collecting data across the state to improve representation.
CONCLUSION
CONCLUSION

The results of this study provide insights on the Latino communities living in WNC. In all, Latino communities perceive themselves to be hard working, have strong social networks, and seek to build a more prosperous life in the US. Nevertheless, several barriers related to documentation status, language access, discrimination, access to health insurance, and low educational attainment limit Latinos access to resources. Survey and interview results suggest a priority need to increase access to affordable dental services, preventative healthcare services, and general Spanish-speaking healthcare professionals for WNC Latino immigrants. Results highlight a need for legislative policies that allow undocumented immigrants to obtain driver’s licenses in order to increase access to work and healthcare resources, and overall quality of life. Other needs include improving language access at schools, upward mobility economic services, and increased Latino representation in government.

Industrial sectors that are key to the WNC economy often depend on the labor of Latino immigrants to remain competitive in the global market. Yet, results show that Latino community members, even when employed, face economic instability and difficulties with accessing and affording essential health and social services. While it is possible to build on the strengths of WNC Latino communities, the agency of many WNC Latino immigrants is limited due to labor exploitation, poverty, and the threat of deportation. Therefore, strong collaborative networks between community organizations, communities of faith, local government agencies, businesses, and other institutions are needed to develop and sustain culturally informed programs and services to meet the needs of WNC Latino communities.

We urge policy makers and elected officials to consider the data from this study when creating or making adjustments to specific policies or laws that impact all communities, including Latinos. We also urge Latino community members and leaders to utilize this data to inform program development and advocacy efforts, including for funding and policy change.
REFERENCES


REFERENCES


REFERENCES


REFERENCES


REFERENCES

54. North Carolina Department of Public Instruction Statistical Profile Database. (n.d.) Table 10 - PUPILS IN MEMBERSHIP BY RACE & SEX- Interactive Report starting from Year 2011. 
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REFERENCES


REFERENCES


REFERENCES


## Appendix A

### WNC Median Ages\(^{51-52}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTY</th>
<th>Overall Median Age</th>
<th>Latino Median Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buncombe</td>
<td>42.3</td>
<td>26.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cherokee</td>
<td>52.1</td>
<td>39.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clay</td>
<td>53.6</td>
<td>25.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graham</td>
<td>46.4</td>
<td>24.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haywood</td>
<td>47.7</td>
<td>24.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henderson</td>
<td>47.6</td>
<td>26.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackson</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>20.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macon</td>
<td>50.4</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transylvania</td>
<td>51.9</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix B

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School System</th>
<th>Total student population</th>
<th>Percentage of the student population that is Latino</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buncombe County Schools and Asheville City Schools</td>
<td>25,935</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cherokee County Schools</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clay County Schools</td>
<td>1,229</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graham County Schools</td>
<td>1,073</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haywood County Schools</td>
<td>6,481</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henderson County Schools</td>
<td>12,623</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackson County Schools</td>
<td>3,428</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macon County Schools</td>
<td>4,393</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transylvania County Schools</td>
<td>3,224</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>61,386</strong></td>
<td><strong>19%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>