

Latinos and Alcohol Abuse

Influx is Posing New Challenges for Employers and EA Professionals

By Carl Maas

The Latino population in the Southeastern United States has exploded over the last 10 years, and is now estimated to comprise as much as 7% of the region (excluding Texas and Florida). An estimated 40,000 Latinos are moving into states like South Carolina, and this number will likely increase well into the next decade.

In many respects, what is happening in the Southeast mirrors what has been happening in the rest of the country. Latinos comprise the largest ethnic population in New York and Los Angeles, and in 2003 they became the largest minority in the United States (U.S. Census 2003). But the influx of Latinos into the Southeastern U.S. marks the first time since the slave trade of the 1800s that this region has experienced large-scale immigration by a non-traditional population (Scarsdale 2003). This is prompting many employers in the Southeast to establish policies that address the needs of this population.

Latinos in the Southeast do not fit the mold of the typical migrant worker who spends three months at a farm and then moves on to another state. The largest employers in South Carolina, for example, tend to be aggregated in construction (including roofing, road, and demolition work), poultry and meatpacking, plastic products, textiles, and produce packaging and handling. Though these industries generally offer year-long, full-time jobs, the work frequently is dangerous.

The majority of Latino workers speak only Spanish, and many settle in communities in rural areas. Assisting these communities is difficult because few service providers in rural or semi-rural areas speak Spanish (Barber 2004).

Factors Affecting Drinking

Many national studies have looked at changes in drinking patterns among Caucasians, African-Americans, and Hispanics. These studies suggest that Hispanics tend to represent a larger percentage of heavy drinkers. Interestingly, acculturation *increases* rather than decreases drinking behaviors in Mexicans (Caetano and Mexdina 1988, 1999).

A service provider's ability to respond to alcohol-related problems tends to be limited without the resources of a bilingual and bicultural staff. Furthermore, studies show that even when intervention programs specifically target Latino populations, the utilization and success rates remain the same over time. Nevertheless, there are some factors that can increase intervention success: civil status, age, gender, and acculturation.

Civil Status. An individual's civil status (i.e. single, married, separated, divorced, or widowed) can help an EA professional determine whether an intervention needs to be more or less intense. Individuals who are divorced or separated usually will have more serious alcohol-related consumption and behavioral problems. Although single individuals have higher consumption rates than their married counterparts, the probability of serious alcohol behavioral problems is lower than for divorced or separated Latinos. Individuals who have left their families back in Latin America can be considered separated, as they frequently experience many of the same problems that a divorced or separated individual faces.

Civil status can also help the EA professional understand the home environment of the Latino client. If the client lives alone or with roommates, peer relationships have a stronger impact on

drinking behavior. This finding remains constant for older Latino males, not just those ages 25 and under.

The immigrant individual may feel isolated during holidays, when separation from family and friends is most severe. Winter weather, with its cold, wet, and drab days, can add to the sense of depression, which can lead to self-medication.

Age. Latino males tend to begin drinking at about the same time (in their late teenage years) as Caucasian males, and continue until they reach their 50s. At that time, rates of consumption and drinking decline significantly. Latina females, on the other hand, do not drink at all until their late 40s or early 50s, especially in immigrant populations. This finding is based on self-reported drinking behaviors and reflects cultural norms based on expectations from the individual's country of origin.

Gender. I have found that it is not uncommon for Latino men to report no drinking during the week but heavy drinking (i.e., more than five beers per sitting) during the weekend. The result is that an employer may not realize an employee has a drinking problem until the individual fails to show up on Monday morning due to an arrest or hospitalization during the previous weekend. It is very important that EA professionals inquire about Latino males' drinking patterns, especially during weekends.

Acculturation. Acculturation is the extent of cultural accommodation an individual attains while in a host country, and it typically relates to the level of linguistic mastery of the native language. For Latinos, this is a more complicated process due to the proximity of the home country to the United States and the ability to circulate between the two cultures. Mexican adults, for example, tend to acculturate more slowly than Cuban adults, who tend to acculturate quickly, probably because political barriers keep them from returning to their home country.

Acculturation tends to increase the rate of drinking. There are two reasons. First, disposable income increases in immigrant populations relative to time spent in the host country, thereby increasing an individual's ability to purchase alcohol. Second, the longer an immigrant is separated from family, friends, or familiar sights and customs, the more likely he/she will become depressed or disillusioned.

My experience is that most immigrants, when asked, claim they are going to return to their home country in a few years, regardless of whether they have been in the United States a few years or most of their lives.

Successful Interventions

As the Latino population in the Southeastern U.S. continues to increase over the next decade -- and perhaps beyond -- so, too, will the demand for services, especially those related to addressing alcohol and substance abuse. Treatment will depend mostly on available resources, which would include services found in 12-step programs, individual counseling, and inpatient treatment centers.

Unfortunately, without proper linguistic skills and professional credentials, most service providers will struggle with effective interventions.

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