

Nowhere is Safe: Chronic Fears Among Latinx University Students

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ABSTRACT

Research on fear among college students in the US is under-studied. Fear of various forms of violence among college students is associated with adverse health outcomes including anxiety, depression, and substance use. Latinx college students often experience a higher prevalence of fear compared with White college students. Less is known about the types of fears commonly experienced by Latinx college students and the perceived impact of fear on health and well-being. Self-identified Latinx university students (n=20) were recruited, via convenience sampling, to participate in focus group discussions. The research team employed an inductive thematic analysis to explore various types of fears among students and their effects on health and wellbeing. Five themes emerged from the data including: (1) Hypervigilance, (2) Fear of White people, (3) Burden of being a person of color (POC)/Latinx, (4) Impacts on health, and (5) Interventions and programs to assist with decreasing fears. Proof and power quotes were identified and selected to substantiate the importance of each theme. Results of this exploratory qualitative study underscore substantial fear, particularly race-based fear, among Latinx college students and their perceived impacts on various aspects of health. Particular attention and intervention are needed to address the impact of these specific fears reported by Latinx college students that influence the prevalence of adverse mental and physical health outcomes in this population.

KEYWORDS: Hispanic/Latino, Latinx, college students, fear, mental health

Introduction

Twenty and a half percent of all undergraduate enrollment and 30.2% of all graduate school enrollment between 2019-2020 consisted of Latinx students (Kim et al., 2024). However, there are few studies examining experiences of fear specifically among this population. Experiences of fear have been linked to an increased risk for anxiety, depression, and other health issues (Couture et al., 2020; Grinshteyn et al., 2022; Garcia et al., 2024).

Fear is largely determined by perceived rather than actual risk. Existing studies have found that respondents' personal characteristics (May et al., 2015; Snedker, 2015) and neighborhood context (Glas et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2020) have been identified as determinants of fear. One study that examined both individual- and area-level determinants of fear among adolescents found that identifying as Latino was associated with increased fear (Grinshteyn et al., 2016). A recent assessment of college students found that Latinx respondents had higher levels of fear of

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microaggressions, fear of hate speech, and fear of hate crimes compared with White college students (Grinshteyn et al., 2020b). Hispanic college students also had a higher prevalence of fear of violent crime compared with White students (Grinshteyn et al., 2020a).

However, the Latinx population in the US experiences unique fears. For example, Latinx individuals, regardless of immigration status, worry that friends and family members may face deportation or detainment in addition to their own fear of potentially being affected by immigration policies because of their physical appearance (Vargas et al., 2019; Ayón et al., 2017; Domínguez et al., 2022). Fear of immigration enforcement has also been associated with mental health outcomes among high school students (Capps et al. 2020), undocumented Latinx college students (Suarez-Orozco & Lopez Hernandez, 2020), and older Latino immigrants (Rodriguez et al., 2017). Latinx people are seven times more likely to report being affected by fear of law enforcement (e.g., police) (Bader, 2016) and four times more likely to fear police brutality (Graham et al., 2020) than their White counterparts.

Fear has been associated with adverse health outcomes including reduced physical functioning (Stafford et al., 2007) and diminished walking among adults (Foster et al., 2014). Worse perceived neighborhood safety has been associated with increased body mass index (Fish et al., 2010), reduced well-being (Pearson & Breetzke, 2014), poor self-reported health (Chandola, 2001; Macassa et al., 2018), and increased mortality among males (Grinshteyn et al., 2019). Among adolescents, fear of crime has been associated with increased depression and anxiety (Grinshteyn et al., 2017), and being afraid on the way to or from school has been associated with increased absenteeism (Grinshteyn & Yang, 2017). Among college students, fear of discriminatory violence has been associated with increased anxiety and depression, and fear of victimization has been associated with substance use (Couture et al., 2020; Grinshteyn et al., 2022).

The few existing studies that specifically examined the association of fear and health outcomes among Latinos have revealed similar findings. Among Latinx adolescents, fear of immigration enforcement was associated with increased somatic and separation anxiety and was partially mediated by perceived discrimination (Berger Cardoso et al., 2021). Fear of deportation among Latinx men who have sex with men (MSM) has been associated with a higher likelihood to avoid the healthcare system and chronic anxiety, which was managed by hypervigilance and reduced social interactions (Yamanis et al., 2021).

Despite this emerging evidence, we could only identify a handful of studies that examined the impact of fear among Latinx college students. The current study can assist in expanding the body of knowledge by better understanding fear in this population and the impact it can have on their health and wellbeing. Understanding the contexts in which Latinx college students experience chronic fear is imperative to developing effective interventions to prevent and reduce the effects of fear. This qualitative study sought to explore the types of fear commonly experienced by Latinx college students, how these fears impact their health and wellbeing, and interventions that may assist in reducing these fears.

Method

The present study explored the experiences of fear on Latinx students' mental and physical wellbeing. Researchers conducted a quantitative online survey in Fall 2017 examining the impact of fear on university students' overall health and found that Latinx students reported higher levels of all fear types compared with all other student racial/ethnic groups. The current qualitative study, using an inductive Thematic Analysis framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was developed to explore the previous quantitative findings to better understand the higher rates of fear found among Latinx college students. Two focus groups were conducted with Latinx-identified students (n= 20) in the

same university where the quantitative data was collected in November 2019. The study sought to understand different types of fears and their effects on health outcomes and behaviors, contextualize chronic experiences of fear among students, identify factors impacting students' chronic experiences of fear, and examine fear-reducing strategies among college students. The use of qualitative methods allowed us to hear directly from historically marginalized students about their experiences and perceptions within oppressive social systems affecting their ability to fully integrate in academic and social structures.

Study Participants

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects at a private, urban university in Northern California. Participants were eligible for this study if they were (a) matriculated students at the time of recruitment, (b) 18 years of age or older, and (c) self-identified as Latinx. Given the exploratory nature of this study, we set out to conduct two focus groups ($n=9$, $n=11$, respectively) to understand the high rates of fear found in a previous quantitative study conducted at the same institution. All participants were enrolled university students and the majority were female (84%), identified as heterosexual (63%), and all were U.S. citizens (see Table 1). While all participants identified as Latinx, 10.5% reported a biracial identity (e.g., Latinx and White, AfroLatinx, etc.). Participants ranged in age from 18-41 years old ($M = 22$, $SD = 5.62$).

Table 1.

Demographic Characteristics Among a Latinx University Student Sample.

Variable	n	%	M	SD
Age (years)			22.3	5.62
Gender				
Male	3	15.8		
Female	16	84.2		
Race				
Latinx	17	89.5		
Biracial Latinx	2	10.5		
Sexual Orientation				
Heterosexual	12	63.2		
Bisexual	4	21.1		
Questioning	2	10.5		
Pansexual	1	5.3		
Documented Legal Status				
U.S. Citizen	19	100.0		

Note. n = number of participants; % = percentage of total sample ($N = 19$).
M = mean; SD = standard deviation.

Procedures

Participants were recruited via convenience sampling employing targeted recruitment strategies. Study flyers were sent via email correspondence to various on-campus groups and

departments that were identified as having Latinx students. Study flyers were posted at targeted on-campus locations where students congregate (e.g., the Cultural Centers, dorms, library, coffee house, bookstore) and were posted on social media accounts. Students were offered a meal (lunch or dinner) and a \$40 gift card to the university bookstore for their time and participation. Interested students contacted the study via email or phone, and a trained doctoral-level student research assistant provided information about the study and screened them for eligibility. Eligible students were scheduled for one of two focus groups based on their availability. A total of 23 students were screened for eligibility, two students did not respond to attempts to schedule them for a focus group, and one student did not attend their scheduled focus group.

Focus groups were conducted on the university campus. The structured focus group guide included questions related to various areas of fear including: chronic fear, fear of violent crime, fear of discriminatory violence, fear of detainment and deportation, and thoughts about interventions and programs to reduce fear. All participants provided informed consent. Focus groups were conducted by two Latinx-identified faculty who are licensed clinical psychologists with expertise in qualitative methodology. Prior to beginning the focus groups, students were asked to select a pseudonym for privacy and confidentiality. At the end of each group all students were provided with a community referral list of low-cost or free mental health services in the greater Bay Area. Focus groups lasted between 1.5 to 2 hours and were audio recorded and transcribed using a professional online service, Rev.com. After transcription, the RA and one faculty facilitator listened to the recordings and read through the transcripts for data cleaning and quality assurance.

Data Analysis

An inductive thematic analysis approach using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process was used as the analytic method for this study given its theoretical freedom, flexibility, and rigor. Given the exploratory nature of this study, an inductive approach to data analysis allowed themes to emerge from the data without predetermined categories allowing the researchers to explore and identify patterns and meaning from the data. Thematic Analysis is a descriptive method that uses both *a priori* and *post hoc* themes to develop, interpret, integrate, and report emergent themes. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step approach includes: 1) familiarizing yourself with the data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) producing the report. Each step in this process allows for structure and flexibility in the coding process. Thematic analysis is well suited for focus group data given its focus on identifying patterns within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

First, each member of the four-person research team read through both transcripts and identified all possible themes. Next, the research team met to generate and discuss themes and codes that emerged from the data. Themes and codes were then discussed, selected, and appropriately named. Final themes were selected via consensus based on the prominent themes found across both focus groups. The inductive nature of theme development assisted the research team in coding the data without trying to fit it into a preexisting coding frame, allowing for a more nuanced and data-driven approach. Once themes and codes were confirmed, the research team split into groups of two to concurrently code the data. During the coding process, the team discussed and evaluated whether the codes were used reliably throughout the two focus groups. Engaging in concurrent data coding allowed for consensus coding and reliability. A third coder assisted with making final coding decisions when needed. Excel was used for coding and recording themes. Proof and power quotes (Pratt, 2009) were employed to assist in coding themes. According to Pratt (2009) power quotes are the most compelling data that highlight the targeted theme while proof

quotes assist with additional proof of themes or assist in highlighting the point being made. Power quotes are included below, per theme, and proof quotes are included in Table 2.

Researchers' Positionality

The authors of this article engaged in all aspects of the research study. Researchers' positionality and identities were acknowledged and discussed during study development, data collection, coding, and interpretation. The two primary authors, who facilitated the focus group discussions, are Latinx-identified individuals; three of the four authors identify as Latinx with personal or family histories of migration. One of the team members is a White female. Field notes, group discussion, and reflexivity were used after each focus group, and a debrief session was conducted by the two focus group facilitators. A similar process was used during theme development and data coding to monitor and reflect on any potential biases. Independent coding during the initial steps of Thematic Analysis was employed to reduce bias, cross-check, and identify potential themes and codes across the research team.

Results

A total of five themes were identified in the data including: 1) Hypervigilance, 2) Fear of White people, 3) Burden of being a person of color (POC)/Latinx, 4) Impacts on health, and 5) Interventions and programs to assist with decreasing fears. The Fear of White people theme had one subtheme, a) Fear of institutionalized discrimination. The Burden of being a POC/Latinx theme had three subthemes, a) The facade, b) Not fitting in, and c) Guilt.

Hypervigilance

All participants reported constant fear that affected their behavior and resulted in hypervigilance. Areas of hypervigilance included fear of the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) regarding detention and deportation, sexual assault and harassment, and gun violence/school shootings. Students discussed their constant hypervigilance and the threats felt in various contexts and from certain groups. Female students shared their fears of sexual assault:

"I would find myself not leaving the house unless for school or work and then, also, even when I graduated high school, and I got a new job ... the anxiety, being in a city, I just felt nervous ..."

"I think for rape, just being a woman and taking public transportation or going to college. Just existing, really is kind of every day. We get really inappropriate comments from other men and women. Everybody. And it's just one fear that we have to deal with every single day and it's unfortunate that we can't feel comfortable ... ever."

Another female student shared her fear of being sexually assaulted on public transportation:

"It happens really often when you're commuting. I'll be sitting and there'll be so much open area and a guy, an old White man, would usually sit next to me. And it's happened where they'll start heavy breathing and I'm just like, "I can't get myself out of the situation," or you're just walking and

people cat call you or I've had people follow me ... I have to go into a store where there's security just so that nothing happens."

One student shared her fear, anxiety, and hypervigilance about being in public alone, which is reinforced by her mother.

"In public places where there's a lot of people, I don't like going to stores where there's like a ton of people ... I just can't handle being with large groups of people, unless I know that I'm going to be safe or with someone who can back me up. My mom even tells me, 'You need to have your antennas, eyes behind your back' just in case, because you never know."

Many students spoke about their constant fear of and hypervigilance related to ICE agents and their fear of deportation of family members resulting in separation from their families.

"Back at home, ICE actually came ten minutes away from where I lived. So it was that fear of, my parents have to be careful and also, we have to be careful about them coming nearby and checking people. That fear of every time they went to the store we had to go to the store, we had to come along, we would stay in the car and keep an eye out. That fear, just being aware at all times ... thinking about all they sacrificed, and how in one second that could all be taken away."

Another student shared:

"Since I was young, whenever we saw ICE ... you have to position yourself in a way that you won't be targeted. I think just traveling sometimes with my loved one's. The fear of what if because they look a certain way, they're just going to be stopped ... you have to act calm even though you're not calm, just because you don't know if they see you stress or see you position yourself in a certain way, they're going to stop you and see what you have, and then, the asking, the papers."

Many students shared the ever-present fear of ICE and always having "your papers" with you when you left the house and how this impacted the entire family unit.

"My dad never left the house without his social security card. His wallet, he'd have two wallets ... So many nights, we'd be looking, dad where'd you leave your wallet? ... well, can't find it? It's probably not a good idea to head to Fresno for that birthday party or go on that long trip ... you always need your papers and your documentation."

Gun violence and school shootings was another source of students' chronic fear, which resulted in hypervigilant behavior. Many students shared how mass shootings and gun violence impacted their daily life on campus.

"I think there's been a lot of shootings in these past few days. I had this conversation a year ago about our school. It's so small that a shooter could

kill a lot of people ... If it's a student, they know those designated spots ... It's just kind of sad that we're having these conversations ... "What's the best building to hide in? What's the best place, room wise? Where can you find an exit? How do you contact people?" ... Where am I going to die if there's a shooting? Who am I going to contact? Will I be able to text my family?"

Many students spoke about the daily impact of the fear of school shootings. One student highlighted how this fear affects what she wears to school as well as her behavior in a variety of ways.

"[It affects] What I wear, so I make sure not to wear a dress, no heels. Same thing, I always make sure I have an exit within view, my back's not to the door. A lot of decisions on a daily, hourly basis sometimes."

These quotes highlight many of the students' responses to constant fear, which leads to hypervigilant behavior, being on alert across contexts, and feeling safe nowhere. Many students are planning an escape route or a survival strategy if a shooter enters their classroom while they are sitting in classrooms and listening to lectures. Many students are identifying next steps if they learn family members have been detained or deported.

Fear of White People

Participants most commonly identified White people when asked who they feared. Students discussed fears related to White privilege, White spaces, police brutality, and people in authority. Female students reported fear of White men. One student shared her fear of and discomfort with being in White-identified spaces, and many agreed with her comments:

"When I'm outside of my community. For me the University is very uncomfortable ... I've never been around so many White people before. I acknowledge it's a thing for me, it's like a culture shock. So, the unknowing is what scares me."

Many students shared their fears of White people given the high prevalence of White people committing mass shootings.

"They're always White, always. I'm sitting there in the movie theater and if a White person comes in with a backpack, that's scary ... I was like, "Oh my God, the one with the backpack." ... It's everywhere we go, even Walmart. It happened in Texas and I'm still not okay with walking into a Walmart."

Many students discussed their frustration with the lack of accountability and the different standards for White people who commit crimes

"I think the most upsetting thing about these shootings is that we're not having a conversation about this common thread. It's the same people. They try to pass it off as, 'Oh, it's mental illness' which is understandable, mental illness does exist, but where is the line between mental illness and

a hate crime? Why is it that only certain groups of people, people of color, are being branded as terrorists?"

Students discussed how White people often hold positions of power and authority and how, in comparison, they are often in vulnerable and marginalized positions. One student shared her fear of losing her academic scholarship:

"I get really nervous about [White] people in positions of power. I went to a predominantly White school. So, I get really nervous around politicians and people that have a lot of money, because then they have a lot of influence. So, the administrators at my school, having to kiss their ass, because knowing that if I don't, I'm not going to have a scholarship."

Subtheme: Institutionalized Discrimination

Within the Fear of White People theme, a subtheme of Institutionalized Discrimination emerged from the data. Fear of institutionalized discrimination was embodied by students' fears of police brutality, people in uniforms, authority figures, and fear of discriminatory and biased treatment from institutions upholding White supremacy. Many students shared their fears of police brutality:

"The one that comes up the most is police brutality. My dad was worried about that, especially when I'm driving. I've seen some of the videos, so many incidents, and read so many different news articles about the different things that happen towards males of color, for me."

For many students, there is a constant fear of police officers. All male participants discussed how this was a primary fear.

"For me it's law enforcement ... I feel microaggressions and most types of discrimination really suck, but I don't think I'd feel as in danger from those things ... When I was 12 my dad was being arrested and they decided to treat me hostile, which was weird, because I was the one who made the call. I was met with hostility ... I got put onto the car. Then I was worried that my dad was going to get tased. I think he did get tased. So, that's what I worry about."

Many students shared the vicarious trauma they experienced witnessing police brutality towards other people of color and how that increased their own fears.

"It happened my first year at high school, I wasn't physically pulled from a car, but I had seen it. It was the most frightening experience as a 17-year-old, to be like, "Oh my gosh, is he going to make it out of here?" Like, what kind of phone call I'm going to have to make to his little sister. It was really frightening ... if he were a White boy, if we were all White, versus being colored students, would my friend have been treated differently?"

Many participants shared how fears of institutional discrimination affected them personally. One student, a mother of two young boys, became very emotional as she shared:

“My husband's black, my sons are half black and Mexican. I'm not sure if you guys are familiar with Andy Lopez? He was just a 12-year-old child who got killed. They thought that he had a gun, a real gun, and he died two blocks away. My son just turned 12 ... My husband had let him walk to CVS down the block and I lost my shit ... since the fires, there's a lot of people that are homeless, there's a lot of cops being called out. "Did you tell him, that if a cop...?" [tearful speech] I feel emotional saying it. "Did you tell him to get down on the floor?" And he goes, "No." I'm like, "Well, you have to tell him to get down on the floor." I'm sorry [participant is tearful and chokes up] But that's the conversation. So when he got back we had that whole conversation and it was like, "You have to just put your hands up and get down on the floor. You have to kiss the floor. I don't care how big and bad you think you are. You kiss that fucking floor." That's the conversations I'm having with my kids.”

Burden of Being a Person of Color (POC)/Latinx

Across the two focus groups, all of the students spoke about the extra burden placed on them as people of color and constantly feeling targeted because of their Latinx identity. They expressed anger, frustration, and guilt. Three subthemes, with accompanying power quotes that highlight the daily burden on students of color, are included below and include: the facade, not fitting in, and guilt.

“One thing that comes up is a fear of failure, not just for myself, but also for my community ... my family is very much pushing me in a way that was like, "Okay, you're going to save the community." So, being that person and having that burden, I always feel kind of wound up ... a lot of it manifests with stomach issues, and it has led to a lot of anxiety, and a lot of compassion fatigue.”

Many students felt targeted for being a person of color while traveling.

“It always happens when we're traveling, especially flying. I think the last time I went to Spain I came back, the entire time I was really nervous about whether or not they would accept me getting back even though I have documentation. ... I want to go to Mexico for example, and I'm just thinking if I go, can I get back in? ... I would always get randomly screened. It was just like, okay, this can't be every single time I go to an airport ... that's not random.”

Subtheme: The Facade

Students spoke about how they often put on a facade and felt the constant burden placed on them as POC. Many students felt they could not be authentically themselves and that “acting White” or code switching was a way to survive in White-identified spaces.

"I have to center myself every day and remember what I came to do and who I came to be, which I don't think other people have to do ... Or else, I run the risk of being called unprofessional or 'that crazy Hispanic Latin girl'. I get categorized very quickly so I can't really carry the things that happen to me for very long for risk I'll carry extra stigma."

"I code switch really hard. So, as soon as I get into an environment where I'm like, 'Oh, okay, I need to be more White' then I immediately switch my language, the way I stand, the way I talk to people, even the way I shake your hand. I change myself, to make myself less threatening."

There is added burden for Latinx students who are undocumented to present as perfect citizens:

"[It's] is very different for friends that I know who are undocumented to allow themselves to just relax and enjoy the same thing that somebody from this country could, for a fear that getting caught with something that is going to send them back ... or just not being in control, because they think control is a survival mechanism for most undocumented folks ... I see that fear of losing control, because it might be that the cops get called."

Subtheme: Not Fitting In

Students are keenly aware of having extra burdens placed on them, putting on a facade around others, and knowing and feeling that they do not fit in.

"That kind of fear is not fitting into any group because it's kind of like the Borderlands. You're not from your parent's country, but you don't feel like you're from here cause you may look different ... fear of what's going to happen?"

"I feel less safe in places that are more affluent or White passing. Places that are supposed to be safe. I'm more worried that somebody's going to be like, 'Hey look, it's this other person who is of color and is not supposed to be here. So, we call the cops.' Which has happened to me ... the cops actually came. They were just laughing because I was running ... working out and then they were like, 'Oh he's just running' Nothing was going on."

Many students discussed how they have a persistent fear that others will view them negatively.

"I'm nervous that my professors will think that I'm stupid because of my questions. Or maybe if I have a laptop that's not the most expensive, or the way that I dress, or the way that I carry myself ... I feel like sometimes, coming from where I come from, I have to put more effort into my studies. Based on our socioeconomic stances, I don't have as many resources ... it's

a lot and I think that if I don't have everything all the time, and my professors know that, they look at me as lesser."

"I'm a nursing major, so sometimes in my classes, I feel like I'm the only Latina in that class. Sometimes I feel less comfortable with my identity, as a Latina, because I feel like no one can relate with me ... sometimes I wish I could be expressing my culture, which is hard because I feel like there's no one there to express that, I haven't found anyone else."

Subtheme: Guilt

A major component to feeling burdened was associated with feeling guilt. Many students shared constantly feeling that they were letting their parents or communities down.

"When I think about giving back to the community, guilt is something I really resonate with ... everything feels like, "Oh, I'm going to let my mom down, or I'm going to let my parents down." Which guilts me more than anything, because they're like 'everything I did, I threw my life away to give this to you. I had three jobs, crossed the border ... I can't even pass this psych class. I just think that not only am I letting my family down, but I'm letting down what they sacrificed for me."

"A lot of my career lies in leaving my community to be here, I'm a native English speaker, I'm college educated, I've got white skin. I've got all of that going for me but it brings me a lot of guilt because I come from East LA which is a predominantly Latino community ... because of my privileges, I should be there at the forefront, helping my community ... I just feel a lot of fear not being there, and a lot of guilt too."

Students also shared their guilt and inability to help address issues in the larger Latinx community:

"Everything that's happening on the other side of the border, knowing right now they're [children] in camps, they're in 40 degrees ... How we can help? How we can assist? It could very easily have been my family ... It could've been me. I don't feel particularly removed from the situation ... it's something like survivor's guilt."

"Had my family not come to America and had these possibilities, would I have been one of those girls that are being sold off, being abused, being in those tents and camps? It's really heartbreaking ... I think it is called survivor's guilt ... I'm only worrying about if I can pay tuition or not, versus me being sold off and not even having a future."

Impacts on Health

Students were asked how their fears affect their mental and physical health and wellbeing. Students spoke about mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and stress. Many students

reported that experiencing fear led to reduced substance use behaviors. Others reported adaptive coping and participating in healthy behaviors to reduce some fear. Stress, anxiety, depression, and poor sleep were common issues identified. One student shared “*you either become very depressed or very angry*” while others noted additional issues.

“I don't sleep. I worry ... Failure of not passing, failure of just not succeeding in what I want to do in the future. So then I just kind of carry that throughout the night and I won't sleep until four or five ... The stress then becomes worse ... I get sick when I get stressed. So, if I get anxious ... I can't do anything because I'm sick.”

Many students shared that some fear had an unanticipated positive impact on reducing substance use behaviors. The notion of being the perfect citizen or feeling that you would be targeted appeared to reduce alcohol and some drug use among participants.

“You sober up if you're intoxicated and you come across that fearful moment ... if I have friends that are doing worse than me. It's like instantaneously I'm sobering up and I'm trying to take care of that person. I think when you fear for someone else or fear for yourself, you kind of jump into the sober phase ... I was once drunk and I saw police, well fuck, I have to mentally be like, I have to walk straight. I have to talk in a certain manner now. You don't know what's going to happen.”

Interventions and Programs to Assist with Decreasing Fears

After students shared their various types of fears, they were asked about what the University can do to address these fears, where they seek support, and what interventions might increase their well-being. One student shared “*I want more resources that are easily accessible.*” All students discussed wanting more Latinx representation on campus such as more Latinx-identified professors and Latinx leadership. Students discussed the importance of having specific spaces on campus where they can be in community with other Latinx and POC students. When students reported having resources on campus, they indicated a problem with having few people of color that could relate to their experiences and long wait times:

“The CAPS [Counseling and Psychological Services] has like two people of color. I'm sorry, they really do. So it's hard and then if you want them, you have to wait like two months to get in with the token person of color.”

Students shared their desire to have community-identified affinity spaces to discuss issues related to their various identities such as being POC or first-generation.

“At my undergrad we have a Centro, which was like a huge room with TV and video games, and lounges ... it was truly just a hang out spot, you know like for printers and people to do homework, but it was just so cultural. Like you would go in there and you would know everyone was first-gen.”

Most students reported distrust of the institution. They felt that their needs were not met on campus and that their issues were not taken seriously by people in power, especially when those in power were White-identified.

“I’ve had experiences where I want something to get taken care of or resolved ... typically what I see is that the person in charge is a White identified person ... I think sometimes problems get taken less seriously if they don’t believe you. Sometimes I don’t feel believed or like the thing I’m saying isn’t being taken as seriously.”

Many students did not feel like the university understood their unique experiences and the types of problems they were dealing with because they were Latinx.

“I’ve got emails surrounding the fire and updates. I really want to know what’s going to happen if ICE shows up on campus or what we’re doing about our undocumented student population ... I would love to see an email just like, we’re aware of the situation, this is what we have in place. Just to know that the place that I go to 20 to 30 hours a week is feeling it just a little bit too.”

Many students spoke about the hypocrisy on campus and many felt misled to think that the campus was diverse.

“They really like to hop on that wagon of, ‘Oh we’re so diverse.’ They put those pamphlets up like every person who they can define as of color. But then when it comes down to faculty people of color, people in power, it’s always a White male ... I feel like there’s not much being done to help people of color ... there’s not many resources, or if there is, it’s kind of hard to find. I think it’s just upsetting that they really like to push this idea of we’re the most diverse school, but then when it comes to helping those diverse people, it’s really lacking.”

Overall, students did not feel supported, represented, seen, or heard on campus. They also did not feel there were spaces on campus with which they affiliated, causing a disconnect for many Latinx participants.

Discussion

This study highlights the need to understand the complexities of Latinx students on college campuses and adds to the literature by understanding specific fears relevant to the Latinx student population. The present study highlights five themes related to fear among Latinx college students: 1) hypervigilance, 2) fear of White people (subtheme: institutional discrimination), 3) the burden of being a POC/Latinx (subthemes: the facade, not fitting in, and guilt), 4) impacts of fear on health, and 5) interventions and programs to assist with decreasing fear. The themes that emerged in this study are consistent with factors highlighted in the minority stress model (Meyer, 2003). This study elucidates the chronic nature of fear and the association with mental and physical health concerns among Latinx college students documented in existing literature (Couture et al., 2020). Fear of sexual violence, ICE, and mass shootings were linked to increased hypervigilance. Hypervigilance

can be an adaptive way to manage fear in the short-term, however, it can lead to poor mental health consequences in the long-term (Timmerman & Volpe, 2021). Racial trauma, which is a form of stress where people of color experience ongoing harms as a result of real or perceived direct or vicarious discrimination (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019), can also lead to hypervigilance. The fear that students of color feel as a result of the ongoing racial trauma they have experienced and the resulting hypervigilance is clear. Previous research has shown associations between discrimination and hypervigilance among students (Ozuna-Harrison et al., 2024; Sadek et al., 2025). However, little research has examined fear and hypervigilance among college students. This study adds to the literature by better understanding this relationship and highlighting unique fears specific to Latinx students.

The second theme identified, fear of White people with a subtheme of institutional discrimination, can be partially understood using social dominance theory. Social dominance theory purports that social hierarchy results from individual and institutional discrimination, and behavioral differences among groups, which is often used to enforce inequality (e.g., criminal justice systems; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Guimond, 2023). In this study, the criminal justice system arose often when discussing fears of White people and institutionalized discrimination. The continued fear of institutional discrimination is something that is consistent with other studies (Berger Cardoso et al., 2021; Domínguez et al., 2022; Garcia et al., 2024). This is an especially important finding given that the current study took place in an institution of higher learning where students have repeated and consistent exposure, which can potentially exacerbate the chronicity of the experiences of fear. However, just as institutions have the ability to enforce inequality, according to social dominance theory, institutions can also enforce equality thus, educational institutions can work towards equality rather than reinforcing inequality.

Beyond the experiences of fear, participants also highlighted the burden of being a person of color in spaces that often require code switching to fit in and navigate spaces that are more supportive of White people and White students. Further, the feelings of guilt associated with being a person of color was also a theme that emerged. The guilt related to feelings of letting family down have been documented among African American students (Guiffreda, 2005) and Latinx and Asian American students (Covarrubias et al., 2021). The minority stress model identifies distal processes (e.g., discrimination, violence) and proximal processes (e.g., rejection, concealment) at the center of the model - the outcome associated with minority identities as well as an effect modifier of mental health outcomes (Meyer, 2003). This study identifies one burden of being a person of color as the burden of being a representative of their community, being negatively labeled, or having to act in certain ways, which are reflective of proximal stressors (e.g., internalization of social messages). Importantly, there was less focus on how positive aspects of a person's minority identity may modify these relationships, which could be the focus of future research.

A fourth theme identified was the effect on students' health. The impact on students' stress, sleep, anxiety, and depression was significant in this sample and corroborates findings in previous studies indicating the association between guilt and depressive symptoms among Mexican American college students (Covarrubias et al., 2021). However, there were protective effects of feeling fearful on health, as well. The experiences of fear motivated the use of adaptive coping strategies and less substance use among participants, which aligns with the protection motivation theory, which posits that behaviors that incite health-related fear motivates precautionary behaviors (Boer & Seydel, 1996). Protective effects of family functioning and social support have been identified in the relationship between minority stress and alcohol use (Katz-Wise et al., 2021; Pittman et al., 2022). However, the specific coping strategies exhibited by respondents in this study also appear to be fueled by students' hypervigilant behavior, which indicates interaction between themes. These findings highlight that while fear may result in short-term protective effects, a

prolonged fear response may have negative consequences by elevating stress hormones resulting in subsequent physiological consequences.

Finally, interventions and programs to assist with decreasing fear were identified as a theme. Students identified a number of approaches that the institution could, as discussed in social dominance theory, enforce equality rather than inequality. Hiring and retaining diverse psychologists in the counseling and psychological services office, having accessible communal spaces where students feel welcome, having more people of color in positions of power, communicating more supportive messaging to students who feel fearful related to identity, and working towards creating community for students were all identified as opportunities to reduce fear among students of color.

Implications

Structural-level implications

Long-term solutions to address fear among Latinx college students should be developed within institutions, which hold the power and resources to create spaces for authentic healing and prevention. Latinx students, including first generation students, experience lower completion rates at community colleges and four-year institutions (DeAngelo et al., 2011, Elengold et al., 2020; Genthe & Harrington, 2022). However, there are protective efforts for minoritized students that align with our findings. This study highlighted the importance of having representation on campus and community-identified affinity spaces to help meet the unique needs of Latinx college students and mitigate the effect of chronic fear. The literature supports these ideas showing that peer and faculty representation as well as designation as a minority-serving institution are associated with improved college completion rates among Latinx students (Bryant, 2020; Bowman & Denson, 2021). Offering culturally responsive mental health and medical services, offices of diversity, cultural centers, student services, student life, student housing, student organizations, and other existing resources should be leveraged to address fear using a multilevel response that specifically addresses fears identified among Latinx students. It has been shown that institutional support (e.g., support programs, counselors, clubs, financial aid) is associated with better outcomes among Latinx students (Tovar, 2015; Bryant, 2020). Institutional structures should be expanded to include new structures that will address the unique needs of Latinx students while taking into account the historic distrust in these institutions.

Universities must also expand their capacity by hiring and retaining Latinx faculty, counseling staff, and medical professionals. Students identified lack of representation as a determinant of fear of White spaces and people, and representation is associated with improved student outcomes. Participants identified representation of faculty, mental health therapists, and health services providers as a way to reduce institutional barriers to their success, which would function as a key mechanism to decreasing fear and the resulting mental, physical, educational, and social consequences. Moreover, university administrators, students, faculty, and staff need to be educated on their role in perpetuating the institutional barriers and racial trauma that exist for Latinx students and how to dismantle these barriers.

Public health, mental health, and clinical implications

Interventions and programs should be developed to address intergenerational trauma, feeling unable to be their true self (the facade), stigma, hypervigilance, vicarious trauma,

depression, anxiety, and stress. An intervention aimed at addressing intergenerational trauma using somatic soothing to manage dissociative and dysregulatory symptoms found improvements in anxiety, depression, psychological functioning, and trauma symptomatology (Mancini, 2020). Culturally responsive interventions addressing mental health as well as interventions conducted in participants' native languages have been shown to be more effective (Griner & Smith, 2006; Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2019).

Participants in this study discussed fear of White power and police brutality. Many respondents identified police brutality when discussing fear of White people indicating that police reform is a potential intervention. Researchers have suggested that police performance metrics should be replaced with public health metrics, evidence-based practices should be implemented, and that agility and accountability should be expected of police departments to modify harmful policies towards people of color (Goulka et al., 2021). More research is needed on this topic, as there is scant evidence showing which reforms are effective to improve the reality and perception of the police as representative of safety (Engel et al., 2020), especially among communities of color.

Clinicians should consider how they might provide space for Latinx college students to talk about their unique experiences of fear. Mental health clinicians need to be equipped to provide culturally responsive treatment to Latinx students and address the role of structural violence on students' health and wellbeing.

Research implications

Future research should collect focus group data from a broader, more representative sample. The Latinx community is not a monolith, and broader, more representative data on Latinx populations would allow for a better understanding of these issues among diverse Latinx college students. Future research should examine sub-group differences (e.g., Afro-Latinx), students from different generational and immigration statuses, socioeconomic backgrounds, and US locations as anti-Latino policies and rhetoric may have different and significant implications. Clinical research should consider examining long-term effects of fear among Latinx college students in order to develop adequate preventative and treatment interventions.

Limitations

Given that these focus groups were conducted at one private, urban university, the data collected may not be representative of all Latinx university students and cannot be generalized to all Latinx college students. It is also important to acknowledge that some individuals may not have felt comfortable sharing their personal experiences in a group format. Since the groups were conducted in English, there may be language-specific issues or fears due to speaking Spanish. Additionally, a broad range of Latinx identities were not included in this sample (e.g., Afro-Latinx). The researchers believe that Afro-Latinx students may face additional barriers that need to be investigated.

While these data were collected before the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and prior to the murder of George Floyd and many other acts of violence against marginalized communities, results could differ if these focus groups were conducted today. In spite of this, our results clearly show substantial fear among Latinx college students that is negatively impacting their health and wellbeing.

Conclusion

Fear is constant and pervasive among Latinx college students. However, much can be done to treat and prevent fear among Latinx college students. Understanding the fear that this group experiences will help researchers, psychologists, public health professionals, university leadership, and others develop appropriate effective and culturally responsive interventions.

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