
Advancing Equity for the Latino Community in the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Area

A 2025 community report written by the Center for Latin American & Latino Studies at American University. Based on a community-based survey & the DC Latino Community Forum Coalition organized by CARECEN.

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Washington, D.C.

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The DC Latino Community Forum Coalition – Foro de la Comunidad Latina de DC (FCLDC) - was established to address the pressing challenges faced by the Latino community in Washington, DC. In a rapidly evolving world marked by the aftermath of COVID-19, economic uncertainty and shifting political landscapes, the FCLDC seeks to understand and address the issues impacting Latinos as they integrate into the fabric of the city. This initiative builds on a legacy of community-driven efforts, such as the response to the Mount Pleasant riots in the early 1990s, which brought together stakeholders to tackle barriers and propose actionable solutions. Decades later, the FCLDC continues this tradition by convening leaders and community members to identify current challenges and foster collaboration.

Through its work, the FCLDC has pursued three key objectives: strengthening connections with the Latino community, identifying their needs to inform policy recommendations for city leaders, and fostering unity among supporting agencies. This report synthesizes the outcomes of these efforts, including insights from community surveys, coalition-building activities, and a comprehensive workshop. Together, these initiatives aim to create a roadmap for addressing the needs of the Latino community and ensuring their successful integration into Washington, DC.

Community Surveys

Two community surveys were conducted and gathered insights from 1,325 respondents, primarily focusing on CARECEN users, tenants from workshops, and churchgoers. Outreach efforts also included visits to food distribution sites and schools in Wards 1, 3, and 4.

First Survey (November 7, 2024): Informal interviews with CARECEN users formed the basis for this survey. It featured six themes—education, housing, health, transportation, language, and "Trump." Participants chose the three most important themes and answered a subset of questions about DC-based agencies.

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Second Survey (January 15, 2025): This survey refined the themes—education, housing, health, transportation, and language—and asked respondents to identify the one that most affected their daily lives. It also included two subsidiary questions about "Trump" and DC-based agencies, directing non-DC residents exclusively to these subsidiary questions.

Both surveys provided valuable data to inform discussions and recommendations for addressing challenges faced by the Latino community in Washington, DC.

Stakeholders

To strengthen its efforts, the FCLDC formed a robust alliance with 11 local agencies dedicated to supporting the Latino community in Washington, DC. Since February 2025, the coalition organized seven coordination meetings to foster collaboration and align goals. Additionally, two smaller group meetings were held to address event-specific details, such as scheduling and logistics. This collective effort ensured a united front among agencies and civil society members, laying the groundwork for a successful forum and ongoing partnerships.

Community Meeting and Workshop

The workshop was designed around themes derived from the community surveys, with five primary topics—education, housing, health, transportation, and language—and three additional themes introduced: employment opportunities, public safety, as well as integration and inclusion. Each participating agency or civil society member identified 20-30 individuals to engage in the workshop and prepared them for meaningful discussions.

The workshop utilized a "world café" format, with four sectors of eight tables representing the eight themes. Trained facilitators managed the discussions at each table, ensuring structured and productive conversations. Facilitator training was conducted in the two weeks leading up to the event, with five training sessions held to equip them with the necessary skills.

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On the day of the forum, the workshop was divided into two key parts:

1. **Diagnosis** – Assessing the current situation and challenges faced by the Latino community in DC.
2. **Solutions** – Collaboratively brainstorming actionable recommendations to address these challenges.

The workshop exceeded attendance expectations, with 274 participants present, far surpassing the minimum target of 128 attendees. This high level of participation underscored the community's commitment to addressing shared issues and finding solutions.

After the FCLDC Meeting

A week following the forum, the FCLDC organized a workshop with experts and community agency representatives to analyze the data and insights collected during the event. The purpose was to consolidate these inputs into actionable recommendations. This collaborative effort aimed to ensure that the voices and concerns of the Latino community were accurately represented in the proposed solutions.

The resulting document synthesizes key findings and recommendations derived from all activities conducted during the first quarter of the year, providing a comprehensive roadmap for addressing the challenges and advancing the integration of the Latino community in Washington, DC.

Findings

From the surveys, the main concerns expressed by the Latino community in Washington, D.C. are related to Housing (45%), Health (23%), Language (20%), Education (7%), and Transportation (5%).

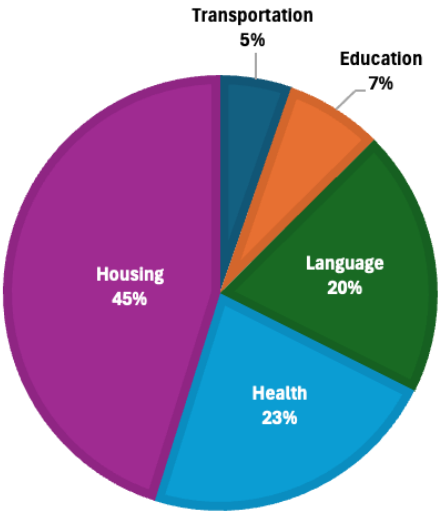


Figure 1: Main thematic concerns voiced by the Latino Community

From each thematic concern, Latinos chose their highest priority challenges.

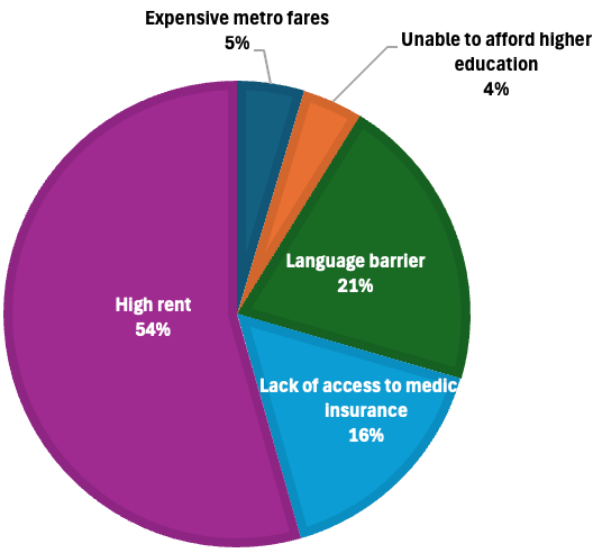


Figure 2: Main challenges faced by the Latino community

The following report discusses each thematic concern and the short- and long-term solutions proposed by community members at the forum.

Housing

The biggest concern expressed by the Latino community is regarding housing, more specifically, high rent, lack of affordable housing, required documentation, and language barriers in housing applications. The following charts show the expressed housing concerns and solutions the community felt were most efficient in resolving the issues.

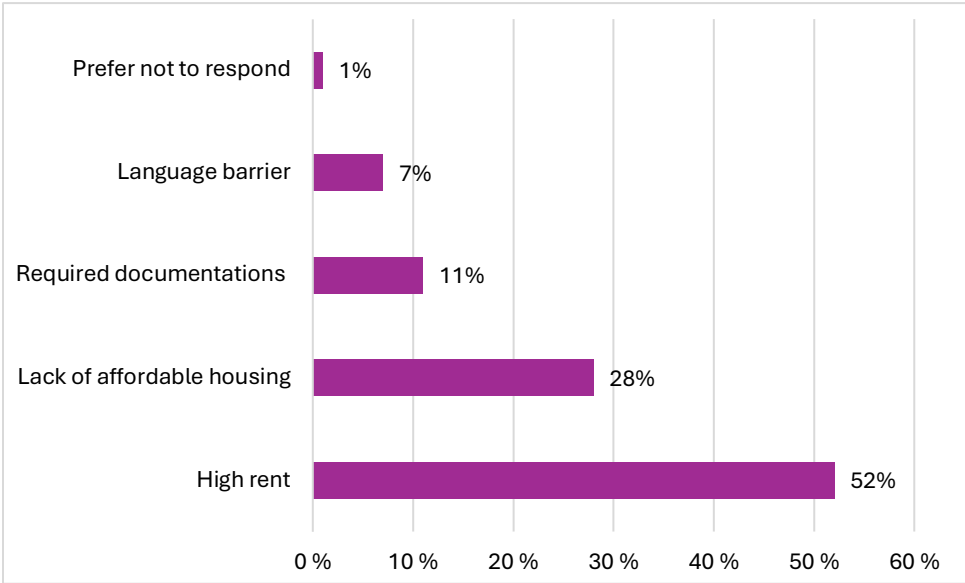


Figure 4: Housing Problems Faced by the Latino Community

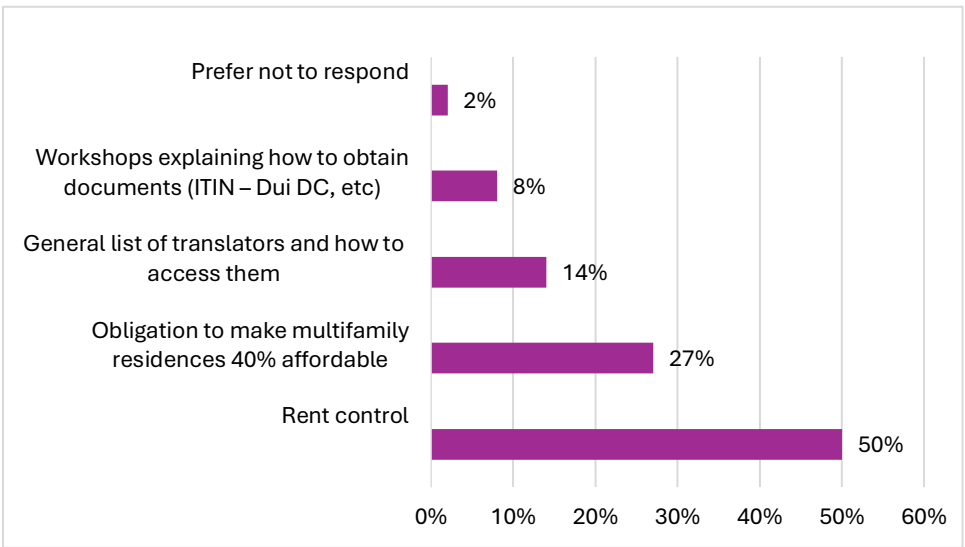


Figure 5: Housing Solutions Proposed by the Latino Community

During the FCLDC, our community stakeholders discussed solutions to the largest housing issue amongst the community: **high rent**. Local DC residents cannot afford the high rent prices, nor compete in the market due to wages being stagnant. In addition to this, the cost of living is increasing.

Short-Term: Eliminate rent increase for the Elderly and Disabled. Give an increase every 2-3 years instead of yearly. Keep the rent increase to a steady 3% for good. Look into the variables that increase each year and identify areas for improvement to keep the cost of living affordable, while also allowing the building to keep up with expenses.

Long-Term: Focus on the issue with the Section 8 voucher system. It's over-saturated with long waiting times for availability. Focus mostly on the elderly and disabled. There should be a public list to increase transparency for the public.

Health

During the FCLDC forum, the barriers to healthcare that were of the highest concern to Latino community members were accessibility of medical insurance, heavy paperwork, and cost of visits and medications. The most popular solutions to these and other issues of healthcare accessibility included free/less costly medical care and community outreach sharing information about health resources.

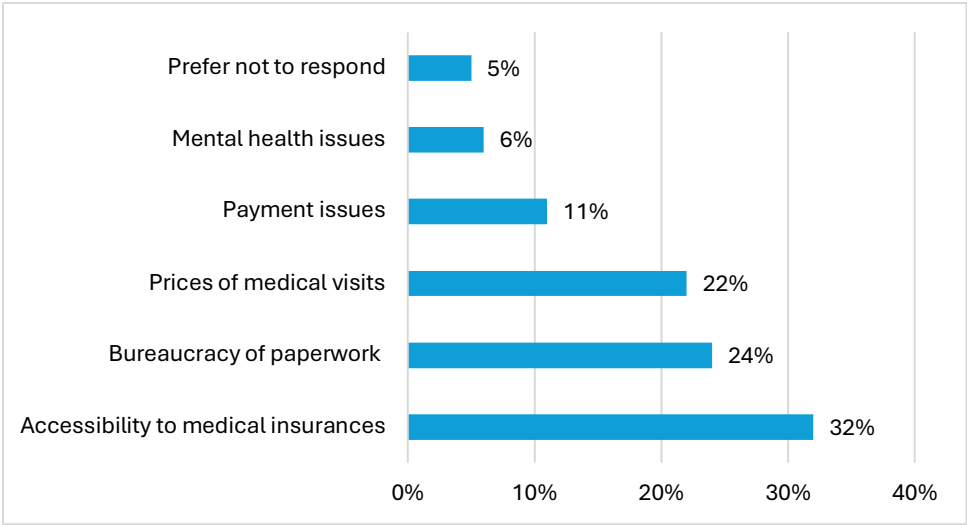


Figure 6: Health Challenges Faced by the Latino Community

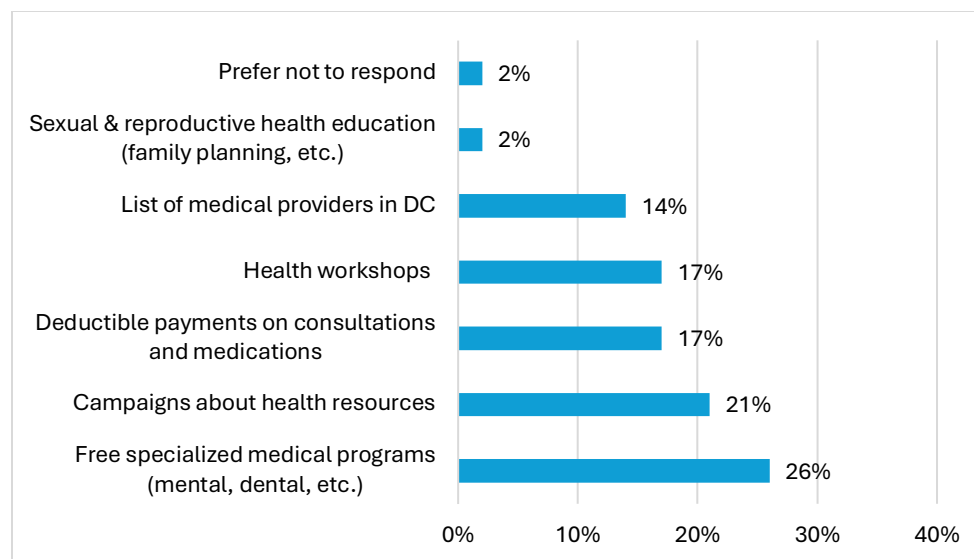


Figure 7: Health Solutions Proposed by the Latino Community

Figure 6 portrays the percentage of community members who expressed concern regarding these issues, and Figure 7 shows similar data about solutions to problems accessing healthcare. Proposed actions towards these solutions include the following:

Culturally Sensitive Healthcare Access.

Short-Term: Provide informative talks to people on how to access health insurance. Offer more community resources to promote preventative health and early disease detection.

Long-Term: Invest in a community health center and culturally relevant resources. Government assistance provides more funding to health centers, thus providing more resources for the community. Focus on training medical staff to better serve the community.

Bureaucracy & Discrimination.

Short-Term: Facilitating access to interpreters in medical institutions and penalizing the system for violations. Educational campaigns (email, text robot, document renewal campaign, etc.) for DC Alliance and Medicaid renewals to lower the barrier of complicated paperwork.

Long-Term: Training and education of healthcare personnel. Have insurance renewals every 2 years instead of 1 year.

Mental Health Access.

Short-Term: Invest in a community mental health center for low-income families. Fund drug treatment programs. Continue advocacy for parity between Medicaid and the DC Alliance in their reimbursement rates for services.

Long-Term: Dedicate more resources to the healthcare system. Implement preventive medicine. Mandate mental health coverage by insurance.

Language

Language access is a critical part of equitable access to both social and legal resources. In D.C. and the DMV, approximately 40% of Latino residents cited language-related challenges as a top concern. These include difficulty navigating official legal documents, limited access to interpretation services, virtual communication barriers, and broader integration issues.

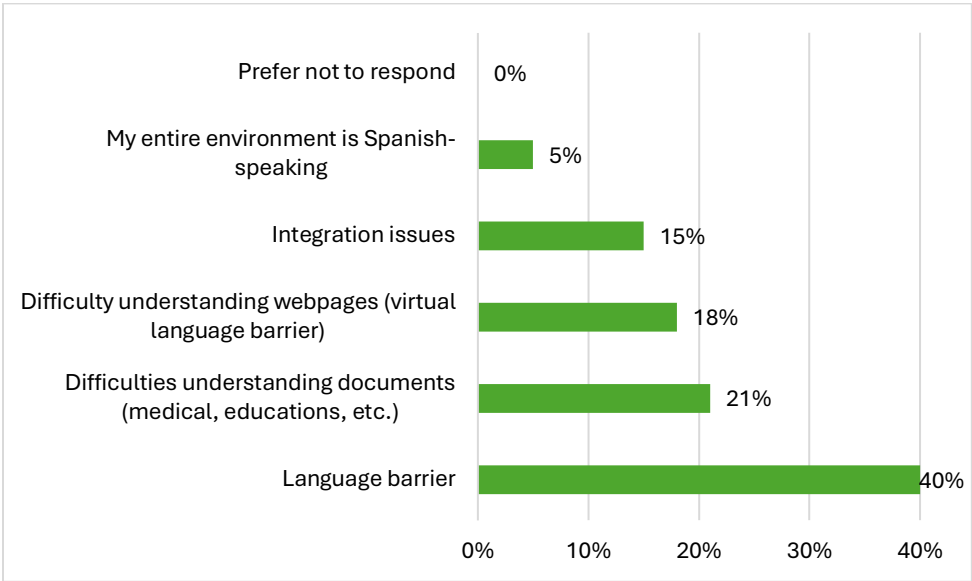


Figure 8: Language Challenges Faced by the Latino Community

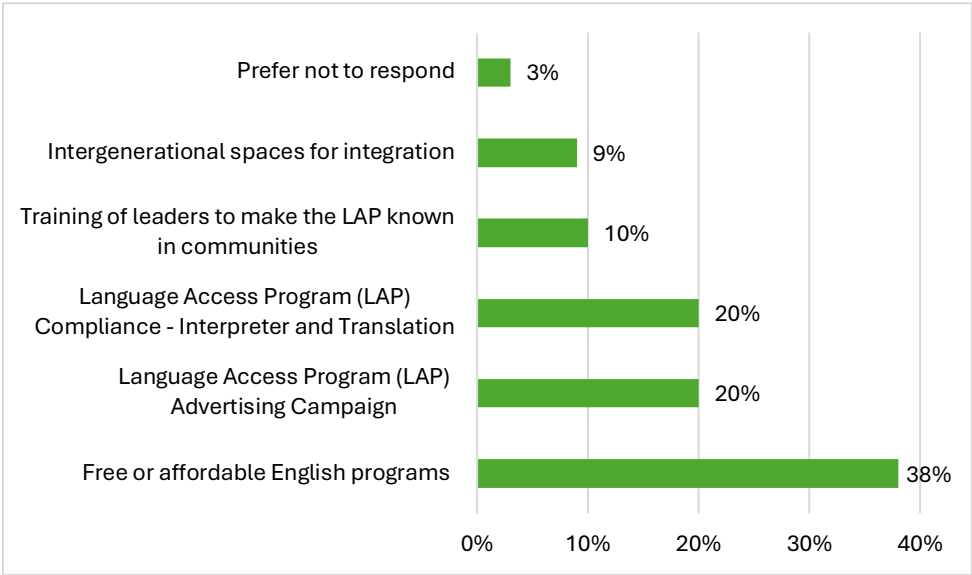


Figure 7: Language Solutions Proposed by the Latino Community

Expanding English Class Availability for Working Adults. For many migrants, working multiple jobs is an essential part of obtaining their citizenship while providing for their families. With limited schedules, it can be difficult for non-English speaking migrants and children of migrants to access English learning opportunities.

Short-Term: Launch pilot classes during afternoons, evenings, and weekends in partnership with trusted institutions like Briya, local libraries, and houses of worship. Partner with major employers and unions to provide English classes at job sites during lunch breaks or shift transitions.

Long-Term: Provide ESL night classes in safe zones and public libraries and expand virtual and self-paced course offerings to accommodate diverse schedules. Provide internet access support for students without reliable home or mobile connectivity.

Language Access in Legal Services. Current legal services in DC and the greater DMV fail to properly accommodate Spanish-speaking residents, particularly in immigrant communities. This results in limited understanding of legal rights, miscommunication during proceedings, and decreased participation in legal processes.

Short-Term: Mandate that all District-funded legal service providers ensure the availability of certified Spanish interpreters at **all** stages of service delivery, including intake, consultation, and court proceedings. With the help of community-based nonprofits, require public posting of language access policies in community centers in both English and Spanish. Enforce compliance through funding conditions.

Medium-Term: Establish a citywide initiative to increase the number of Spanish-speaking legal staff through targeted funding, recruitment incentives, and language capacity benchmarks. Expand mobile and community-based legal services in high-need Spanish-speaking neighborhoods to ensure consistent and direct access.

Education

Education access for Latino migrants in DC has played a crucial role in hindering integration and upward mobility due to socioeconomic, systemic, and institutional challenges. Our survey found that the educational constraints faced by the Latino community consisted of the lack of knowledge on local government aid for school (7%), lack of knowledge on high education resources (about 18%), time constraints (about 16%), language barriers (about 24%), and financial hardships (31%).

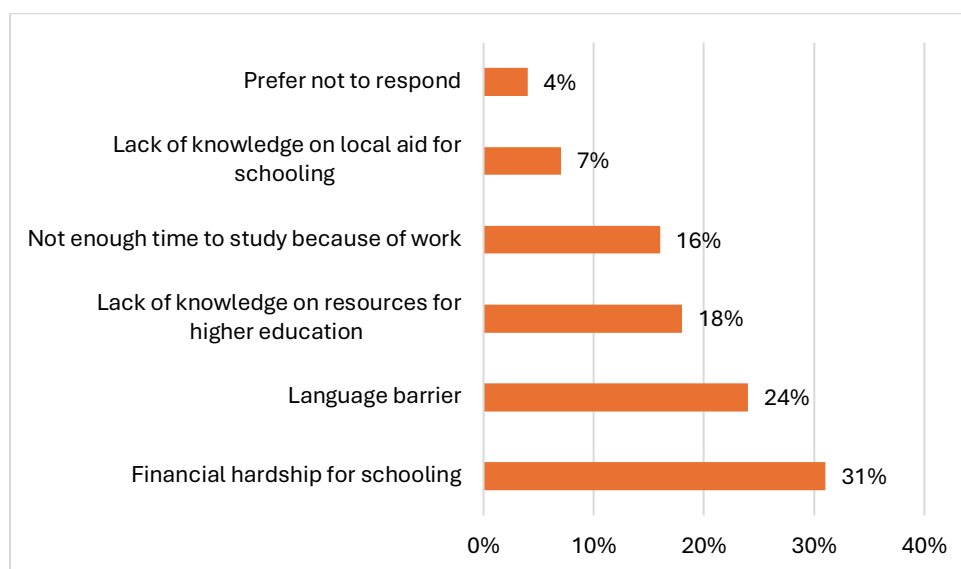


Figure 10: Education Challenges Faced by the Latino Community

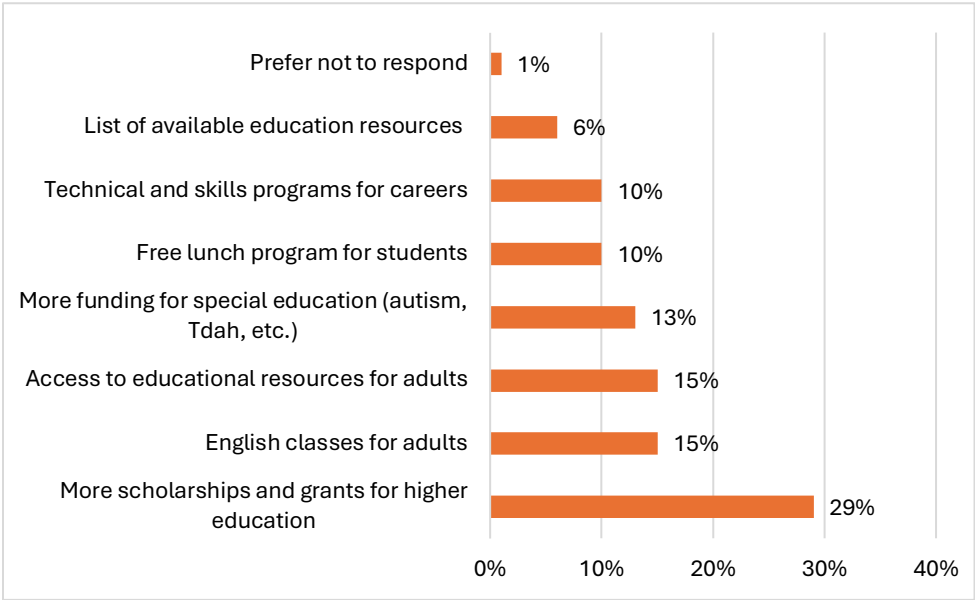


Figure 11: Education Solutions Proposed by the Latino Community

From these results, the most salient obstacles identified by those surveyed are:

Financial Barriers to Higher Education. Many Latino families lack access to informational tools and counseling to navigate the costs of higher education. Financial insecurity, lack of early guidance, and additional burdens (e.g., disabilities, caregiving roles) hinder students’ ability to plan and persist through college.

(before 11/12th grade) about college affordability, scholarship opportunities, and FAFSA. Offer workshops on financial planning, AP course benefits, and school/work-life balance.

Long-Term: Develop mentorship and college access programs through community and recreation centers focused on scholarship opportunities, college applications, and financial planning for both high school students and adults seeking higher education.

Language Barriers to Education. Those with specialized educational backgrounds often face language barriers and obstacles to accessing career-specific guidance. The difference in accreditation standards in the United States limits their ability to use their degrees and experience from their home countries.

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Short-Term: Offer accessible free English Classes, in-person and/or online, to help support individuals in language development. Connect individuals with counselors within their fields who can provide referrals and immediate support tailored to their needs.

Long-Term: Establish a centralized resource center using a “clearing house” model to offer individualized career guidance, bilingual materials, and connections to field-specific resources (e.g., for bilingual nurses). Collaborate with professionals in specialized roles to ensure accurate, trusted information and promote long-term independence.

Time Constraints. Latino families, prospective students, and parents face significant time pressures to engage in educational activities while balancing work schedules, personal time, and family responsibilities.

Short-Term: Host *Time Management* and *Wellness Workshops* (e.g., Parent Cafés) led by social workers to help students and parents create better support systems and integrate organizational strategies.

Long-Term: Institutionalize *Parent Cafés* and integrate wellness education (e.g., counseling, therapy, resource navigation) into school curricula. Establish Spanish-English liaison roles within schools to connect families with resources and create consistent touchpoints that foster student-family-school engagement and support to find balance.

Enrollment Barriers Due to Documentation. Community members face obstacles in enrolling in school due to burdensome documentation requirements to acquire a US government-issued ID, as proof of local residency and identification.

Short-Term: Hold trainings for undocumented migrants on how to obtain necessary documents, including DC Real IDs, using alternative forms like passports and other documents. Partner with community organizations to assist families in preparing documentation for enrollment.

Long-Term: Implement an alternative way to verify DC residency. Allow schools to issue student/family ID cards to ease enrollment and access to services.

Expanding Educational Access for Adults. Non-traditional prospective students reported a lack of knowledge on how to pursue higher education, validate previous educational diplomas, and obtain a GED. Considering the barriers, it requires a comprehensive approach to address educational accessibility gaps and limited access to available resources.

Short-Term: Organize program fairs and target outreach (including vocal outreach) to inform adult residents about educational opportunities. Offer short-term or foundational courses, including high school equivalency and basic literacy.

Long-Term: Assign dedicated staff to support adult learners through the enrollment process. Design inclusive curricula with multiple learning levels and styles to accommodate varied educational backgrounds and cognitive needs.

Transportation

5 percent of respondents (n=131) identified transportation as a major concern, more specifically, high metro fares, transit safety, and accessibility issues. The charts below show the percentage of respondents who addressed each issue individually, along with potential solutions.

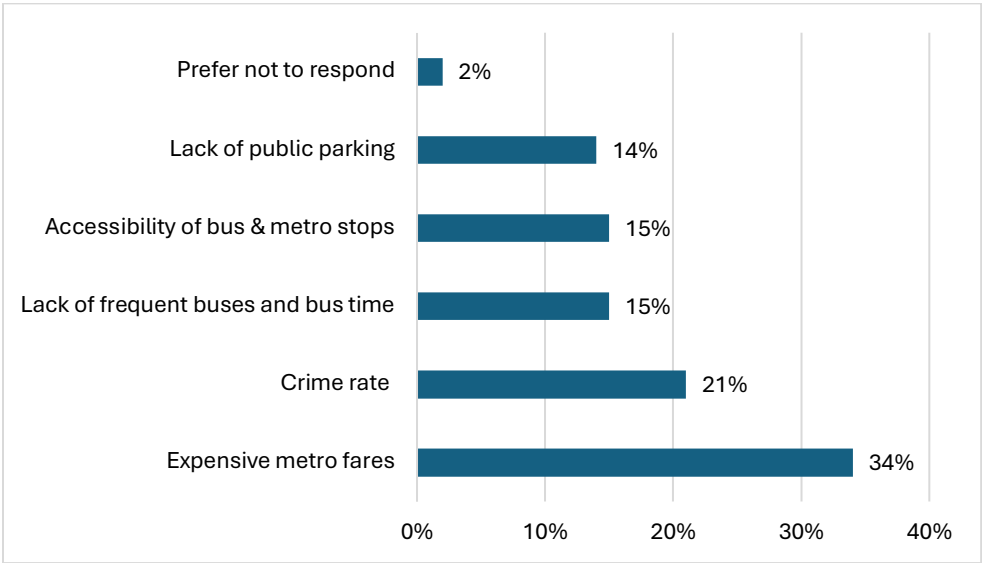


Figure 12: Transportation Challenges Faced by the Latino Community

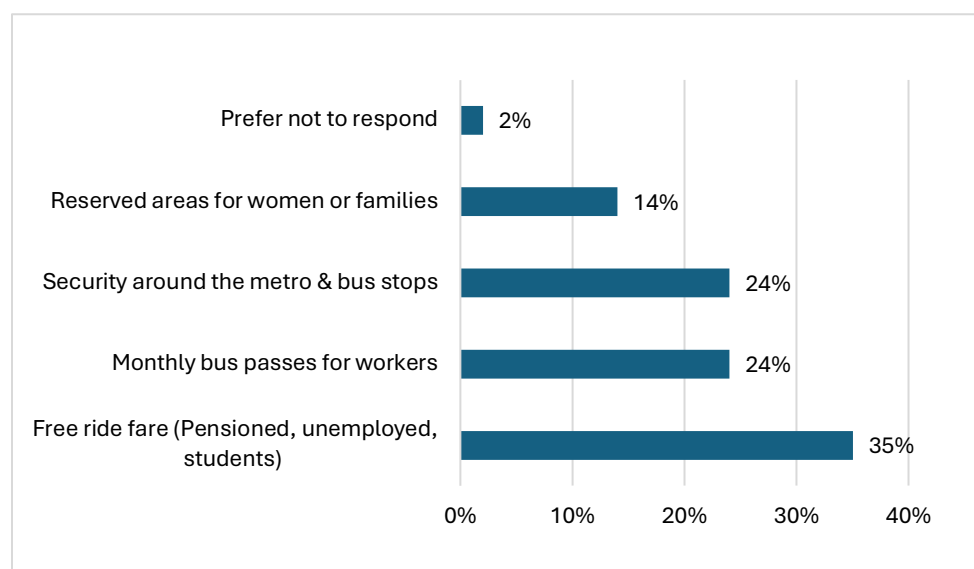


Figure 13: Transportation Solutions Proposed by the Latino Community

During the FCLDC, three major issues were addressed: public transportation prices, safety, and accessibility. Below are the findings of this forum.

Prices and Rates. 34 percent of survey participants reported that transportation costs are expensive, particularly as expenses accumulate. Additionally, limited awareness of the stakeholders (DC, MD, VA, FED GOV) involved in transportation pricing raises concerns about whether fare reductions are feasible.

Short-Term: Expanding community members' understanding of how transportation works in the DC area. Establish a network of organizations to ensure community voices are included in transportation policy and planning.

Long-Term: Request a reduction in rates and prices.

Safety in Transit. 21 percent of respondents voiced concerns about safety while using public transportation. For many, the fear of experiencing or witnessing violence creates stress for users and contributes to a sense of unease.

Short-Term: Create a cross-organizational coordinating committee to provide a voice to the transportation administration. Enhance the use of security cameras to monitor stations and surrounding areas more effectively.

Long-Term: Make it easy to report security incidents that occur on public transport and make the reports public.

Transportation Accessibility. 15 percent of participants expressed concerns about the accessibility of public transportation for elders and disabled users, particularly regarding the location of bus and metro stops and the infrequency of bus services in certain areas. It is important to note that Metrobus routes in the DC area have recently changed after 50 years of service; there are now more options for buses in and out of DC into surrounding areas in MD and VA.

Short-Term: Expanding users' knowledge of alternative and updated transportation methods, including MetroAccess and Metro Lift. Additionally, establishing a network of organizations to ensure community voices are included could facilitate changes to bus routes and planning.

Long-Term: Advocate to expand transportation regulations to include and enforce assistance for elderly and disabled public transit users.

Legal Services

Finally, the longer version of the survey that informed this report revealed concerns outside of the main themes, particularly legal support. Access to legal support remains one of the largest components of justice, yet for many Latino and immigrant communities in Washington, DC, that access remains unequal. Collectively, these measures aim to establish a legal infrastructure that is functionally accessible and structurally responsive to the specific barriers faced by Latinos and immigrant populations. Below is the data collected that informs us of these solutions.

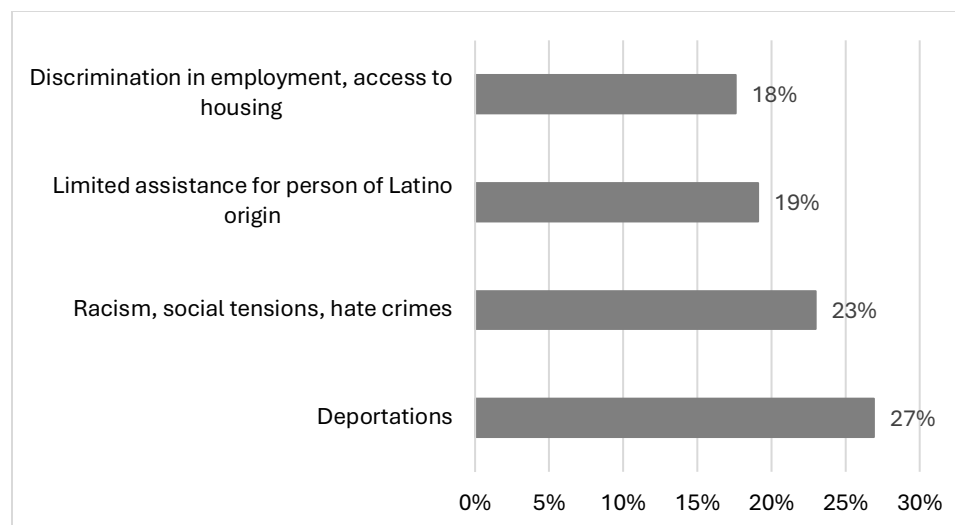


Figure 14: Immigration and Legal Concerns Among Latinos in the Community

Increased Access to Legal Counseling & Expanded Protections for Latino Communities. Many Latino residents and other marginalized groups in DC are unaware that the “bias-motivated” incidents they experience legally qualify as hate crimes under current law (Bias-Related Crime Act of 1989 (D.C. Official Code § 22-3700 et. seq.)). The issue is not just an absence of legal protection, but the lack of awareness and understanding of those protections (identified as the primary concern by 47% of our participants).

Short-Term: Launch a multilingual public education campaign to increase awareness of existing anti-discrimination laws, hate crime definitions, and legal protections under the DC Code. Materials should be distributed in Spanish and other relevant languages through community centers, schools, churches, and local media channels.

Medium-Term: Establish a sustained legal outreach program in collaboration with community-based organizations to deliver in-person legal education workshops in identified Latino communities. Focus areas should include understanding bias-related crime statutes, how to report incidents, and what legal recourse exists. All programming must be bilingual and culturally responsive to ensure accessibility and engagement.

Affordable Legal Services for Immigrants and Their Children. Many immigrant community members struggle to afford legal

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representation, leaving them vulnerable during immigration processes. Without access to trustworthy legal counsel, individuals are more likely to rely on inaccurate advice or represent themselves entirely. The same is true for their children. As a result, this lack of access undermines due process and increases the risk of family separation, deportation, and long-term instability.

Short-Term: Facilitate collaboration between the Mayor's Office and local community-based organizations to engage immigration law firms in offering low-cost consultations and volunteer legal assistance. Regularly host pro bono legal clinics focused on common immigration issues such as asylum claims, family petitions, and work authorization.

Medium-Term: Establish a publicly funded Immigration Legal Defense Fund to cover attorney fees for migrants and their children who cannot afford legal representation. Prioritize cases involving unaccompanied minors, deportation proceedings, and survivors of violence. Distribute funds through vetted nonprofit legal service providers and require reporting on case outcomes to evaluate impact and inform future funding decisions.