

OLHA POLICY BRIEF • SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH

SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH in Latino Communities

*A Bipartisan Policy Agenda for the 119th Congress*

Social determinants of health are not natural conditions but the real-world results of policy decisions impacting whose problems deserve to be solved and how.

Research attributes most of the variation in population health to **social, economic, and environmental factors** rather than clinical care alone. Those factors trace to distinct political histories, such as immigration status, structural racism and language barriers compounding across care settings from cardiology to dentistry.

Public health emergencies such as Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico and the COVID-19 pandemic laid this bare, exposing policy-rooted vulnerabilities and health disparities Latino communities faced well before these events occurred. Even when working families try to climb out of poverty by pursuing education and training, the means-tested public benefits system **penalizes modest raises** rather than helping them move forward. This leaves middle class families with no financial safety net to handle a major medical emergency.

20.2%

OF HISPANIC HOUSEHOLDS WERE FOOD
INSECURE IN 2024 —
DOUBLE THE WHITE RATE

245,000

DEATHS A YEAR ATTRIBUTABLE TO LOW
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT ALONE

\$3,200

IN SNAP BENEFITS A FAMILY CAN LOSE
FROM JUST \$11 IN ADDITIONAL INCOME

SOCIAL DETERMINANTS AT PLAY

FOOD INSECURITY 2× the Rate

Hispanic households face food insecurity at twice the rate of White households, a key driver of diabetes, hypertension, and depression.

HOUSING INSTABILITY A Documented Driver

Housing stability, safety, and affordability are among the most well-documented predictors of health outcomes.

TRANSPORTATION BARRIERS Missed Care

Unreliable transportation is a leading cause of missed appointments, delayed screenings, and poor chronic disease management.

ECONOMIC PRECARIETY Benefits Cliffs

Abrupt loss of SNAP, Medicaid, or childcare assistance as earnings rise can leave a family worse off after a raise.

EDUCATIONAL ACCESS A Lifelong Determinant

Educational attainment remains among the strongest lifelong predictors of health, yet disparities compound across generations.

ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS Unequal Exposure

Latino communities are disproportionately exposed to fine-particulate pollution from industrial and power-generation sources.

POLITICAL DETERMINANTS Policy, Not Chance

SDOH trace back to decisions about power and resources — from the legacy of structural racism to Puerto Rico's unresolved citizenship status shaping a slow, unequal disaster response.

SDOH DATA GAP Screened, Then Dropped

Social risk factors are inconsistently captured in clinical records, leaving screening disconnected from services that could act on it.

POLICY PRIORITIES

Evidence-based solutions for the 119th Congress

THE PROBLEM	THE SOLUTIONS
FOOD SECURITY & NUTRITION - Hispanic households face food insecurity at more than twice the rate of White households (20.2% vs. 10.1%). - Rising food costs and reduced SNAP eligibility deepen hardship for working families.	♦ Protect and expand SNAP, WIC, and the Child Tax Credit; oppose further eligibility restrictions. ♦ Cover food-as-medicine and medically tailored meal programs as Medicaid benefits. ♦ Strengthen the Farm Bill's nutrition title and support community food banks and mobile markets.
HOUSING INSTABILITY - Latino renters face disproportionate eviction risk, overcrowding, and substandard conditions in high-cost markets. - Housing instability is one of the most well-documented drivers of poor health outcomes and avoidable spending.	♦ Fund housing assistance programs with embedded community health worker partnerships. ♦ Expand Medicaid eligibility for youth aging out of foster care through age 26. ♦ Support medical-legal partnerships addressing eviction, mold, lead, and pest hazards.
TRANSPORTATION ACCESS - Unreliable transportation is a leading cause of missed primary care visits and delayed cancer screenings. - Rural, border, and lower-density suburban Latino communities face the steepest access gaps.	♦ Fund ride-share voucher and clinic shuttle programs tied to Medicaid and Medicare. ♦ Require language-accessible senior and rural transportation options. ♦ Cover transportation as a health-related service under Medicaid Section 1115 waivers.
BENEFITS CLIFFS & ECONOMIC MOBILITY - Sharp eligibility cutoffs mean a modest raise can cost a family more in lost benefits than it gains in pay. - One documented case: a household earning \$29,930 stood to lose an entire \$3,200 annual SNAP benefit from just \$11 in additional income.	♦ Codify Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility for SNAP and extend graduated phase-outs to Medicaid and child care. ♦ Allow partial advance payment of the Earned Income Tax Credit to bridge cliff gaps. ♦ Fund benefits counseling and cliff-calculator tools within navigator and CHW programs.
SCREENING, DATA & COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKERS - Social risk factors are inconsistently captured in electronic health records, and screening rarely connects patients to services. - Community health workers are trusted, effective navigators but lack consistent Medicaid reimbursement pathways.	♦ Require universal SDOH screening linked to referral and follow-through, not “screen and drop.” ♦ Establish federal SDOH data standards for EHR capture and cross-sector interoperability. ♦ Fund a federal CHW grant program with standardized state certification for Medicaid reimbursement.
EDUCATION AS A HEALTH INVESTMENT - Educational attainment is among the strongest lifelong predictors of health, yet Latino students face persistent access gaps. - Under-resourced schools and college affordability barriers compound multigenerational health inequity.	♦ Fund school-based health centers, school nurses, and English Language Learner supports. ♦ Expand early childhood programs and childcare access at community colleges. ♦ Support affordable pathways to higher education, including community college bachelor's degrees.
ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH & BUILT ENVIRONMENT - Latino communities are disproportionately exposed to fine-particulate pollution from industrial & power-generation sources. - Community indices show Latino-majority cities carry significantly greater environmental and economic burden.	♦ Strengthen EPA enforcement of air and water standards in environmental justice communities. ♦ Fund urban greening, extreme-heat mitigation, and pedestrian safety infrastructure. ♦ Require community input before siting industrial facilities or data centers near residential areas.

The Organization for Latino Health Advocacy (OLHA) is a nonpartisan 501(c)(3) nonprofit dedicated to advancing health equity for medically underserved communities across the United States, grounded in Civically Engaged Research that centers community-defined priorities and lived experience (Chan et al., 2024; Kline & Krewson, 2026). Sources cited linked here: latinohealthadvocacy.org/policy-priorities-1.