



FAMILY: THE VITAL CELL OF SOCIETY

Summary: San Juan Diego Institute understands the family as the first and privileged place of human development. The role of the family is central to the long-term health of any society. The family today faces many challenges that require prudent support and assistance, especially Latino families. San Juan Diego Institute researches and supports models of family assistance that empowers parents to be the first provider and educator for their children.

- We work with partners that:
 - 1) Build healthy and lasting marriages
 - 2) Empower parents as primary educators
 - 3) Support families in crisis
 - 4) Train pastors and community leaders
 - 5) Creating opportunities for Financial Security
 - 6) Support 2 Gen approaches to social empowerment

The Current Issue: The family is the central departure point for human development. We come from a family, and are supported by a community that for most people includes those related to them either through ancestry, marriage, or friendship. To say that parents, grandparents, and a stable network of relatives provide children with the preferred opportunity for growth and development should not be a controversial statement. The privileged role of "la familia" is a celebrated and perhaps the most recognizable component of Latino culture. While family structure may include a variety of configurations and may also succeed or lack at meeting the needs of their children, it is by far the most consistent and normative of human experiences. As a society we aspire to support the highest ideals built into the family: love, responsibility, identity, faith, forgiveness, grit, a sense of place, the development of talent etc. while simultaneously trying to make up for when families fail to provide them. Sadly, many families today are broken, separated and strained for a host of economic and social reasons, and the stability and generational support typically provided by families is weakened or disrupted. While programs committed to individual empowerment grow, programs to support the family unit lessen. As a society we often prefer to deal with the symptoms of weakened family life, rather than strengthen families and prepare the next generation for the self-less love needed to make a gift of oneself to their family and community.

Prudent Response: We believe that the Latino understanding of family is a powerful asset to the United States. Supporting Latino families in ways that build up and value the dignity and mission of the family are integral to creating lasting change. A review of the current data as well as our direct experience working with families, churches, non-profit service agencies, and international NGO's indicate five areas of focus to improve support and strengthen family life.

- **1) Building healthy and lasting marriages** - Off all the compelling data for intervention for a host of societal needs, the prevention of many of these needs begin with stable home environments. It is not a political or religious argument, to state that families are the principal cell, or starting point of any society. Current culture wars aside, stable families are the most effective means to prevent poverty, future criminal activity,¹ and negative mental health and educational outcomes for Latino children.² While no means exclusive, nor perfect, the family is the preferred place to raise children. Supporting couples before, and during marriage and assisting couples create economic stability, and form strong stable marriages has demonstrable long-term benefits for families and the broader community.

- **2) Empowering parents as primary educators** - Children learn how to walk, talk, emotionally relate to the world around them, and a host of other basic necessary human skills from their parents, grandparents and those closest to them. In most settings the parents play the most direct formative role in the life of their children. Their impact continues far beyond the start of school, and myriad studies demonstrate the continued impact and influence of parents on student learning outcomes and character traits. Parents, due to the unique roles and responsibilities in the life of their children, ought to be the driving force behind education, even when they share some of these privileges with schools and other educational systems. Empowering parents as primary educators so they are active in their children's education and not simply passive recipients prevents parents from losing their voice or being excluded from the educational decisions made for their children.

- **3) Supporting families in Crisis** - Families often need help to achieve their mission. Financial instability, sickness, family separation, job changes etc. create significant burdens that many families, especially if removed from their extended support system, cannot handle on their own. Many families are one paycheck away from implications that can cascade into more serious and far-reaching problems.³ Providing services for these families in crisis is a critical safety net that is most often provided by non-profits. When possible, these services should be focused on

¹ <https://www.fatherhood.org/championing-fatherhood/the-father-absence-crisis-infographic>.

² Lisa Strohschein, 'Parental Divorce and Child Mental Health Trajectories', Journal of Marriage and Family 67, no. 5 (2005): 1286-1300, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2005.00217.x>.

³ One Crisis Away: Rethinking Housing Stability for Arizonans on the Margins, (Morrison Institute, 2020).

retaining and strengthening the family unit, as opposed to dealing with the symptoms as they impact individuals. Furthermore, support that keeps intact and honors the agency of the parents is preferred, over models that simply provide temporary assistance.

- **4) Training pastors and community leaders** - Latino families hold on to faith convictions that are deeply held and integrated into family life. A recent Barna poll revealed that while most pastors identify marriage and family life as critical areas to engage and support, less than 28% provide any substantial marriage ministries or services to support couples.⁴ A study from Communio found a similar trend of providing a lot of reactionary services but few preventive services to serve families as they enter into marriage, raising children and beyond.⁵ Economic issues related to equitable opportunities for work and housing, along with social inequities related to education and health care, are often understood and felt by Church and community leaders, however few feel empowered to organize for change, or advance solutions within their communities. The history of Black churches support of congregants and parishioners for social and economic change is a model that can provide inspiration and structure to Latino pastors and community leaders. Careful attention to empower leaders while understanding and appreciating their faith, and the value of their tradition is critical for healthy engagement. SJDI works with pastors and other religious and non-religious community leaders to help them support and advocate for their families.
- **5) Creating opportunities for Financial Security** - Financial stability comes from good jobs, healthy spending habits and stable living environments. In addition to the tremendous amount of data available regarding education, job training, job security and upward mobility from Census Data and the Bureau of Labor Statistics, affordable housing and access to quality banking are additional issues that warrant prudent action. SJDI focuses on supporting organizations that provide pathways for stable employment, home ownership and equitable access to credit as a tool for economic advancement.
- **6) Supporting 2 Gen approaches to Social Empowerment** - Related to all of the above we believe that any programs that only address symptoms without simultaneously addressing root causes, are missing an opportunity. Addressing root cause requires a long view and significant resources with the goal of transformative and systematic change. While many crisis require immediate action, these actions are not exclusive to developing processes and advocating for policies that address the roots of many issues families face. Two Generation "2Gen"

⁴ <https://communio.org/facts/>

⁵ Ibid Communio Barna Webinar for Evangelical and Mainline Church Leaders <https://vimeo.com/325909585>

approaches empower parents to be the change agents in their families trajectory. SJDJ believes that providing support to both parents and children, when possible, is always preferred.