The prevalence of overweight and obesity among American children has risen dramatically over the past few decades, and these conditions have been shown to have serious physical and mental health consequences. These challenges disproportionately affect the Latino community, as 40% of all Latino children are overweight or obese.¹

There has been little research specifically on the implications of unhealthy weight on Latino children, but existing research on all children shows that overweight and obesity can negatively affect a child’s health and well-being into adulthood. The rapidly growing population of Hispanic children and persistently higher rates of overweight and obesity underscore the urgency of addressing these conditions to ensure that Latino children achieve and maintain good health.

Without proper interventions, overweight or obese Latino children are likely to become obese adults.

• Research shows that overweight children are more than twice as likely as children of normal weight to become overweight adults.²³
• Hispanic children are most likely among all racial and ethnic groups becoming overweight adults.³
• However, interventions can be highly effective in reducing obesity and improving health outcomes among children and adolescents.⁴⁵

Overweight and obese children and youth are more likely to develop preventable health conditions.⁶

• Metabolic syndrome—consisting of high blood pressure, high blood sugar, and unhealthy cholesterol levels—is the major medical condition related to childhood obesity.⁷ This syndrome also increases the threat of coronary artery disease, stroke, and type 2 diabetes.
• Children who are consistently overweight from childhood to adulthood are over five times more likely to develop type 2 diabetes and nearly three times more likely to develop high blood pressure, compared to normal-weight children.⁸
• In a national study of 10- to 17-year-olds (19% were Latino), overweight/obese children and adolescents were found to be at greater risk for a number of indicators that suggest poorer health status, including use of prescription drugs, emergency room visits, and emotional/behavioral problems (see Figure 1).⁹

Obese children and adolescents are more likely to experience emotional, social, and academic problems relative to their peers.

• A study of fifth-graders (47% were Latino) in three metropolitan areas found that obese children reported lower scores for emotional well-being, social relations, self-esteem, and body image.¹⁰
• A large-scale study (10% were Hispanic) found that obese children are at increased risk for mental health conditions such as depression (41% more likely), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (29% more likely), and “internal behavior problems” where a child is withdrawn or feels worthless, inferior, sad, or depressed (59% more likely), compared to their nonobese peers.¹¹
• The same study determined that obese children have a greater chance of experiencing problems in school such as repeating a grade (57% more likely), missing three or more school days (39% more likely), or having a learning disability (57% more likely).¹²

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¹ This profile was authored by Minerva Delgado, Consultant to the Health Policy Project in NCLR’s Office of Research, Advocacy, and Legislation (ORAL), with substantive input and oversight from Samantha Vargas Poppe, Associate Director, Policy Analysis Center, and Steven Lopez, Manager, Health Policy Project. It is an update of a document originally released in 2010 and authored by Kara D. Ryan. NCLR is the largest national Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States. This brief was funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The findings and conclusions presented are those of the author and NCLR alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of our funders. Permission to copy, disseminate, or otherwise use information from this paper is granted, provided that appropriate credit is given to NCLR.

² The terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race. Unless otherwise noted, estimates in this document do not include the 3.7 million residents of Puerto Rico. Comparison data for non-Hispanic Whites and non-Hispanic Blacks are identified respectively as “Whites” and “Blacks.”
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More research is needed to fully understand the effects of overweight and obesity on Latino children. Nonetheless, existing research suggests that these children will suffer physical, social, and emotional ailments that affect their long-term development, productivity, and quality of life. Early interventions to prevent and mitigate unhealthy weight have been shown to reduce the incidence of obesity among children, making them critical to the health of Latino children.

Figure 1
Selected Health Indicators for Children Ages 10–17 by Weight Status, 2005–2009

Endnotes
7 Elizabeth R. Pulgaron, “Childhood Obesity.” This report also describes other co-morbidities not covered in this profile such as asthma, liver disease, and sleep apnea.
8 Markus Juonala et al., “Childhood Adiposity.”
12 Ibid.