# AN EXAMINATION OF CROSS-COMMUNITY AND CULTURAL FACTORS RELATED TO OBESITY IN SOUTH AND EAST LOS ANGELES

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# Abstract

The number of obese and overweight individuals in the United States has reached epidemic proportions and Los Angeles County is one of the epicenters for this public health crisis. Over 50% of the county s adult population is overweight or obese and 40% of children in the county are either obese or at-risk of becoming obese. East LA, which is predominantly Latino, and South LA, a community with a mix of African-American and Latino residents, have among the highest rates of adult and child obesity in the County. Among other risk factors, poor nutrition and a sedentary lifestyle have been linked to obesity. While policy makers, researchers, and providers are mobilizing to create strategies to address this epidemic, identifying the socio-cultural and environmental factors that contribute to obesity in individual communities is a critical first step, especially understanding how food and activity play a role within families and communities. This study presents findings from 44 semi-structured interviews conducted with key leaders in East and South LA. These interviews explore the socio-cultural contexts of food and physical activity, barriers to healthy eating and activity, access to healthy food choices, and informational gaps related to obesity. The results highlight the pivotal role that food plays within families and in linking families to their social networks, how food fits into local formal and informal economies, and the role food plays in the relationships between caretakers and children. Respondents discussed the conflicts between culturally-defined perceptions of beauty/body image and health and food, identified how poverty and structural characteristics of the community relate to healthy eating and living and reported how their economic, cultural, and physical environments challenge integrating physical activity into their lifestyle. Respondents shared ideas for interventions that consider these communities unique socio-cultural and structural characteristics. Cross-community and cultural differences and similarities will be presented.

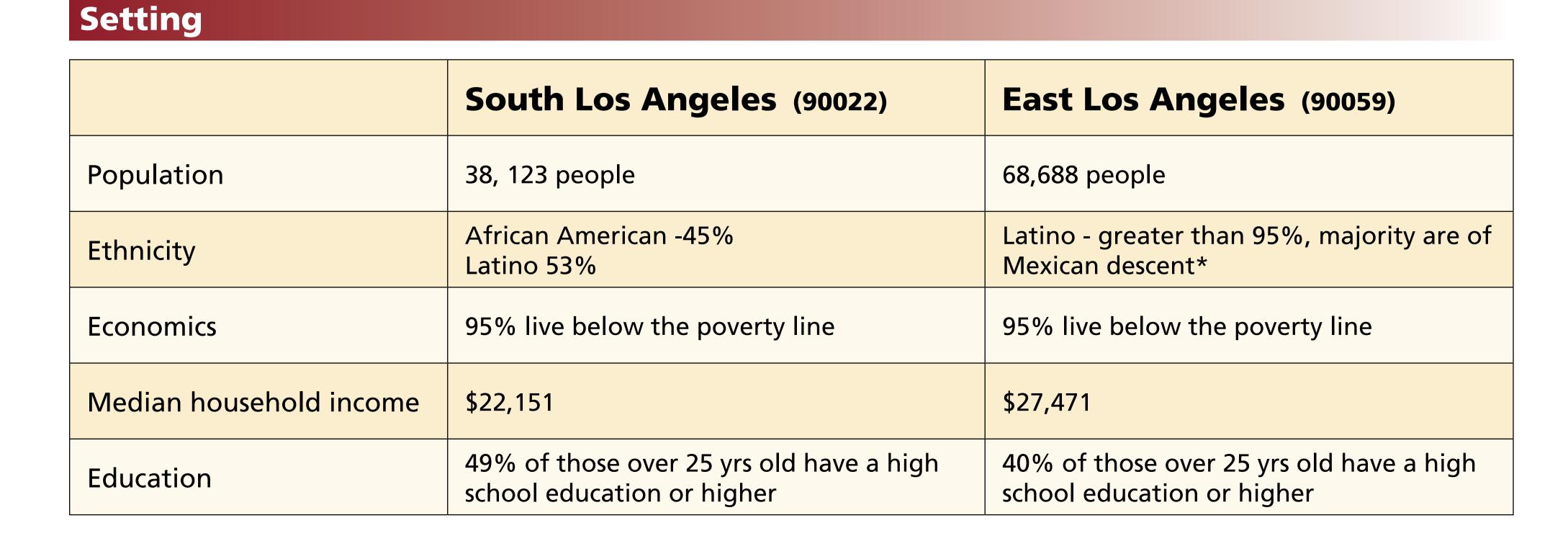
# Methods

# Background

- Phase I of community needs assessment designed to inform the development of communitylevel obesity and diabetes prevention program in East and South Los Angeles communities (i.e., in and around 90022 and 90059 zip codes, respectively).
- In and around 90022 and 90059 zip codes,
   Needs Assessment Data Collection Activities:
- In depth, individual interviews with community leaders (Key Informants)
- In depth, individual interviews with community residents
- Observational data collection of parks and food venues
- Secondary analysis of population-based data related to obesity (ie. school-level BMI screening), diabetes, food outlets, parks, social and economic data, schools

# Key Informant (KI) Interviews

- Criteria for selection of Key Informants
   Represent key community sectors (schools, policy, parks and recreation, business,
- law enforcement, health and social services, community advocacy)
- Long-term tenure living and/or working in the targeted community
- Regarded as a respected leader, either as a natural community leader or one
- playing an official leadership role
- Knowledge of the community and its residents
- Named by others through the team's relationship-building activation
- Passion and commitment to community issues
- Ability to speak to the issues of interest
- Key interview domains:
- Geographic, social, informational, resource and political boundaries
- Perceived community strengths and key resources
- Perceptions of issues related to obesity, overweight and diabetes in the targeted
- communities, including barriers to healthy food choices and physical activity
   Decision making related to food purchased and consumed by families
- Challenges faced related to food security, physical activity and healthy lifestyles
- Suggestions of strategies to overcome these challenges
- KI identified using snow-ball referrals from contacts in the community
- Is to 2 hour individual interviews conducted in-person
- All interviews audio-taped
- KI received \$50 in compensation



# **Selected Perceptions of Community**

East Los Angeles

- There are many churches, which are seen as the cornerstone of the community.
- Parks are a center of activity.
  This area is regarded as overcrowded and populated by moderate to very low-income families who have been in US over a wide range of years.
- Key informants described as nearly all Latino, and nearly all of Mexican heritage, though representing all parts of Mexico.
  The growth in numbers of new immigrants creates challenges to addressing community issues as some of the needs and characteristics
- of immigrant families vary considerably relative to families who have lived in the U.S. longer, often for generations.

# Strengths

- The residents themselves are the community's greatest strength with strong values in family and faith.
   The business, faith communities, and political leaders are seen as responsive to community needs and play an active role in community
- The business, faith communities, and political leaders are seen as responsive to conduct development and addressing community issues.
- While the people are of lower SES, Key Informants characterized residents as very hard working and on their way to living the American dream.

# South Los Angeles

- The South Los Angeles area is one that has great historical significance and is always going through changes. "This community is renowned, which is atypical of a poor community, such as this."
- Four housing projects dot the area
- Gang activity in this area is quite active.
- Most described the community as impoverished comprised primarily of Latino and African American residents.
- Most Latinos in this area are more recent immigrants from Mexico and Central America.
  The descriptors that several used to describe their communities include poverty, low literacy, disenfranchised, violent, and a
- high percentage of men with experience with incarceration.
- Tension exists between the African American and Latino communities as they vie for the same social services and program funding.
   The community is struggling and in transition, especially with the growing wave of Latino residents in this community that was once primarily African American.

## Strengths

- Several respondents viewed South LA's rich cultural history and many generations of families still residing in the area, as a key strength.
- It was characterized as a tight-knit community in which everyone knows each other.
   Several regarded the churches in the area as a focal point of support. As one respondent noted, "I think they [the churches] outnumber the liquor stores."

# **Obesity and Overweight**

# East Los Angeles

- Most acknowledged that obesity and overweight children are serious problems in their community.
- Many felt that once a child becomes an adolescent the problems associated with overweight and obesity are compounded by social isolation and low self-esteem.

... they have low self-esteem, they become poor students. They are not going to ask questions. And maybe a lot of times, too, they react with anger. You make fun of me, I'm going to punch you, I'm the big kid...that's like a consequence of the way they feel about themselves. And they snap.

# • Diet is poor regardless of weight

...the diet is very poor...even on the slim kids...I notice that they just don't eat. When I talk to them they say, oh, I skipped lunch. Oh, I had a slice of pizza...that's how they keep their weight down, not necessarily [because they're] eating only vegetables and fruit.

# **South Los Angeles**

• Respondents in South LA...regard overweight and obesity as a problem for youth and adults alike.

• Perceptions about what constitutes a healthy individual or [what] makes an individual obese are very much related to people's concepts

of illness. So if you were skinny, you were almost looked down upon. All the years of my growing up, I didn't weigh 100 lbs 'til I was 21. And so I was always thought to be sickly, puny and pitiful and all those other kind of things. And girls who were more well endowed were looked upon as healthy.

 Some felt that people are not concerned about obesity until it becomes a clear medical problem like diabetes, hypertension, sleep apnea and asthma.

Well, once they get sick...Then people are concerned about it. But when you look at teenagers and young people and you see a 10-year-old who is 100 lbs or something like that, a 15-year-0ld who weighs 150 lbs, that is not perceived as a medical emergency that we need to be doing something right now.

- Often times, however, parents do not understand and ignore that certain medical conditions are associated with obesity. ... I know that the population is aware that being overweight is a problem,... what [never] ceases to amaze me [is] how the parents will come in and they have a five year old that's a hundred and fifty pounds. And, they will say everything else is a problem except for the weight. Like a runny nose for one day is more important than the weight issue. And in fact some of the parents will be very upset when you address the issue because they say that's not what I came in for. They don't perceive it as a problem...the asthma is related to the obesity. The chest pain's related to the obesity. They're coming in asking for PE excuses related to the obesity, that type of thing. The inability, the snoring, the inability to not sleep... when you start looking at the different complaints, their legs hurt, the knees are hurting, the back is hurting. All those physical complaints can be related to their being overweight. And we're talking about not two pounds, we're talking about thirty, forty, fifty pounds.
- Others felt that pointing out someone's weight is socially unacceptable, especially when those individuals are elders who are the emotional and economic backbone of the family. In my community, and I'm talking about Hispanic and Blacks, I don't think people look at it, because it's something you don't want to say, because that's my big Momma. That's insulting...It's like, but I'm not going to tell big Momma that she's fat. You know, big Momma's Momma was fat, and big Momma's sister is bigger than she is. And I just think that.... you just kind of don't bring it up...I mean, I just think it's a, it's a don't cross the line kind of a thing. You understand what I'm saying?

# • Several linked obesity with lower quality of life and social-economic difficulties.

I think if you lived...some place upper middle class, it would have an impact on you. But in this area, it would have less of an impact. You see, when we talk to women who are overweight and obviously having some behavior kind of problems, if a woman in Watts was to lose 20 lbs, what impact would it make on her life? If you're live in Nickerson Gardens and on welfare and got three or four kids and all that, you're not gonna be able to put on a slinky dress and go out to eat. Whereas, if you were thinking about going to some ball on Saturday night and need to lose 20 lbs, that would be your motivation because you're gonna dress up and look good and all of that. What would a motivation for a women, Saturday night, she gonna be at home still by herself with two kids and no money and all that kind of stuff.

# • Competing issues residents face

I think here, people tend to deal with that after the fact. Once again, if you have violence in your community, you have difficulty paying your bills, you're dealing with healthcare issues, something down the road tends to get put on the back burner. It's not you're most pressing issue.

- Respondents offered a variety of reasons for their community's children's struggle with weight: lack of motivation among youth and many
  sedentary alternatives to being physically active; many children are latch-key, and left to make food choices without supervision or direction.
- Some described the intensity of children's attraction to junk food, like Flamin' Hot Cheetos, "it's as if they put crack in them and it seems like they are especially sold in Black and Latino communities."

# Food

# East Los Angeles

All noted that there needs to be more healthy food options available at school, at home and in the community. Respondents identified money as the primary barrier to accessing healthy food choices, but noted many other barriers that are driven by culture, family dynamics, and the need for systems change. They spoke of limited access to supermarkets with food moderately priced. Many residents do not have transportation and rely on local small markets for food.

- Street food vendors are ubiquitous and play a significant role in the informal food economy in ELA. While many sell fresh fruits, many vendors target young people after school and sell foods with high fat and sodium content.
   ...the amount of people, the vendors, that sell food. If you think about the economics for [the] poor, undocumented...they are making a living selling food, that's their livelihood. So, the day we take out every vending machine, they [vendors] actually will be happy because all the kids are going to run to those little carts, they're welcome, it's the black market.
- Many believe that large food venues and grocery stores are unlikely to put their stores in areas that are impoverished. ...the big stores don't come into neighborhoods like ours...it took ten years to get that mini mall, to get people like Quiznos or Coffee Bean to come into our community because of the perception we have as a community, whether it is we don't spend money or there is too much danger or too much theft for [it] to be worth their while or that they are never going to see a profit.
- Many families in ELA must rely on public transportation and grocery stores that offer healthy food choices are often far from their homes and
  often rely on local stores that are significantly more expensive with few healthy food choices.
  ...Ralphs is still the closest for some and that's still another five to seven miles, so you have this little Mom and Pop shop where they can charge
  whatever they want and I've looked at the produce and it's not that great and very high in price.
- Food is seen to represent a social glue, a parenting tool and incentive to participate in community activities
   Everything we do is based around food, how do I get my kids to cooperate, how do I get my parents to show up for something...reunions, the
   church events.
- Offering food and sometimes large portions of food is regarded as a sign of respect and a demonstration of your generosity and wealth.
   Accepting food offered to you is also a sign of respect.

...I'm Mexican and you go to somebody's house they give you food and you gotta eat it, you can't say no because...they serve you food and there's your plate, it's overwhelming but if they give you less they think you think they are cheap, right? So, you overflow the plate to think it's a way of showing how much they care for you so, [this is] a big part in this culture.

It's a status symbol to eat, especially at fast food restaurants.

 There were also differences between immigrants and those who have lived in the U.S. for several generations about the role food plays in the economic security of a family. One key informant states,
 I think first generation and immigrants think 'Well, at least we have food...we might not have much, but we certainly know how to eat.' Whereas, second and third generation are like "we have the money to get [on a] diet"... Immigrants, it's not as available. And also a lot of people in developing countries, people will correlate obesity with success. Because if you're fat then somehow you're getting fat and that means that your refrigerator isn't empty.

### **South Los Angeles**

Most Key Informants noted that the high cost of healthy food choices represents a barrier to access to these foods. So a lot of it, I think, is cultural. A lot of it is economic. You can get foods with lower nutritional value, you can get more of it at a lower price. The healthier the food is, the more it seems to cost....fresh vegetables will cost you, as opposed to frozen vegetables! If you want things without a lot of sugar, salt or fat, it's gonna cost you more. So even if you're aware of the health benefits of eating a more balanced diet, you may not be able to afford it. And I think culture and economics are the main reasons you may have and I'm guessing, you'll have a higher rate of obesity.

- Money and access to affordable healthy food options create significant obstacles for changing eating patterns. There are few affordable supermarkets in the area and many families, especially those without transportation, buy low quality food from the local small markets and liquor stores.
- New immigrants in this community were seen as not having high rates of obesity because they were more active in their home countries.
   However, with time, these same individuals also fall into the trap of buying TVs and placing them in their children's bedrooms where children end up eating their meals.
- Many regarded food eating patterns as learned behavior, passed through family role modeling
   I think people buy what they know...when they look at generations, you know, what did their mama use to cook, what did they used to have?

   What do they know how to cook?

# **Physical Activity**

### East Los Angeles and South Los Angeles

Both communities shared many of the same concerns and challenges about physical activity.

- Many organizations in these communities struggled to find sufficient funds to consistently offer physical activities programs. With the funding that they do have, they organize physical activities in low-income housing units, offer activity specific camps, offer nutrition classes, daycare and develop activities that will be utilized by seniors, youth, and families.
- Challenges individuals in this community face are paying gym dues, especially if you have a family, not knowing how to develop an exercise
  program targeting individual needs, and deportation. Other reasons include:

### Lack of personal space in the home

I think the main challenge is the lack of personal space in the home. Like I said, some families live out of one bedroom…and there are issues with kids on how they play. So sometimes not to have problems, they keep them inside.

No time

It's hard to incorporate activities like that in your daily activities...if you work eight hours a day and when you come home and you have to cook, clean and all of it, you don't have time. By the time you get through cooking and sit down and have dinner with your family it's already seven-thirty. Then you got to go put a load of laundry in. You got to run and take the kids to the mall, or you have to kids to the grocery store...And a lot of parents, you know, they work. And they come in and they be tired, and the first thing, they say I'm going to do it tomorrow. But tomorrow is never promised to you. So you can't put off today for tomorrow. You have to try to do a little of everything, you know, today.

#### Hair maintenance

One respondent noted that some African American women and girls are disinclined to participate in intense physical activity because it will mess up their hair, which often takes a lot of effort to maintain.

# Keck Diabetes Prevention Initiative

#### Environment

An environment that [has] buildings covered with graffiti, dirty sidewalks, and fast-moving cars contribute[s] to not feeling safe... outside.

And you know, if you're going to exercise outside you want the streets to be clean, you don't want to be tripping over needles, condoms, and stuff like that..

#### Safety

I mean people are afraid of the gangs I think. There's a lighting issue, there's a police issue. You know, not enough patrolling. There's drugs that people are afraid of...And not that we have a lot, but there's drive-bys. So a lot of it is safety issues.

....there's no access to a gyms around here. There's no 24-Hour Fitness, there's no YMCA, there's no health center. No fitness center around here. Just a park. And the park, you know, is a place where people talk about jumping somebody or getting jumped or people have gotten shot before.

# **Body image and the Media**

#### **East Los Angeles**

Several Key Informants felt that media messages need to acknowledge the full array of body types, emphasize health and wellness over being thin, and promote gradual weight loss over extreme diet plans.

You know the images that they see in the media, like the White girls...being thin and things like that. And we have curves. Real women have curves. And that was a good thing, that was a positive thing for them to say, you know, I'm all right. Jennifer Lopez and her big butt has done a lot for us, so it's okay [to] have a big butt...Well everybody wants big lips, you know, and they're getting collagen. Well, we have it...our body shapes are unique to us and there's nothing we can do about it...no matter how much we diet some things are never going to go out... So, I think...a lot of work on self-esteem. And that it's not about size...but feeling well. So it's more about wellness really, than just ...a perfect weight.

• Some spoke about the community culture that accepts overweight individuals, because they "feel comfortable in their own skin."

#### South Los Angeles

#### Messages should be aware and utilizing other standards of fitness/beauty to promote healthy lifestyles,

Let's see, well overweight is something we're afflicted with. I think 80 percent of us, or at least in [my] mind, we're always on a diet! And I think there's a lot of awareness about being overweight because of the TV ads of all these quick diet things. And so I think it's always oppressive. There's always a reminder of how overweight we are. And not necessarily reminders that sometimes that [it] is our natural weight and sometimes it's heredity, it's whatever else it is. That it's not gonna' happen no matter how many diets you go on. And I think we need more messages like that. That it's okay to be a little overweight or whatever.

Health messages should not be promoting products for profit,

TV has a great influence on it. But those commercials, just goodness... when obesity is addressed on commercial media, it's done by agencies who's got something to sell. And that makes it sort of negated. Obesity is addressed going and coming in the food industry and the fitness centers and all, but it's just for the purpose of selling something. It's not designed to make a person respect themselves. It's designed to combat what I got. And that's when it looses its credibility with the listener. I mean it doesn't make any impression.

# Intervention Ideas

In both communities, some small-scale efforts are already being made to address obesity and overweight through at- and after-school programs, and programs offered in housing projects, parks and churches. Nearly all respondents acknowledged that far more comprehensive strategies need to be employed to tackle this issue. What follows is a selected list of their intervention ideas:

#### East Los Angeles

- To reach people in this community, approaches must be personal
- Activities must be family oriented, involve parents and extended families
- Need to give people time and take a "step-by-step" approach to educating people to make changes as fundamental as eating and physical activity
- Engage the community in the solution, "what they want done and how we should approach things."
   Education and information related to food, its nutritional value and how to budget and stretch your money.
- Involve community leaders in mobilizing the community around this issue and identify a well-respected leader to lead the campaign against diabetes and obesity
- Create year-round opportunities for free or low-cost physical activities.
- Address the cultural underpinnings of food and physical activity

#### South Los Angeles

- <sup>•</sup> Education and information needs to be available throughout the community
- Schools and after-school programs in parks should be key outlets for information
- Utilize popular media
- Churches can play a significant role in providing information and education,
- offering safer places for exercise and activities after school and on weekends
- Neighborhood councils should take this issue on as a priority
   Build gyms and other outlets for oversize that are within class
- Build gyms and other outlets for exercise that are within close proximity to residents
   Use of neighborhood watch groups and parks to create safer exercise outlets.

# Suggestions for promoting physical activity in both communities

- Create more parks,
- Have childcare available,
- Solicit private sector support to sponsor camps,
   Croate walking paths and shared at the sector support to sponsor camps.
- Create walking paths and skate parks
  Apply for funding and solicit schools to hold classes on the grounds
- Community organization should work with state and federal partners to optimize the utilization and creation of open space





