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Hepatitis A Rate Among California's Latino Children at Epidemic Level; Nearly Half of Children in State Are Latino

Latino children in California are nearly six times more likely to contract hepatitis A than non-Hispanic white children, according to a study by the UCLA Center for the Study of Latino Health and Culture.

The impact on California's children is significant because nearly half of the children in the state are Latino, and the number of Latino children is rising.

Hepatitis A is a contagious viral infection of the liver. It is spread by household or sexual contact with a person who is infected, or by eating contaminated food or drinking contaminated water. The recovery time averages 28 days, and the illness can be expensive to treat. If untreated, people with hepatitis A can suffer liver damage.

Hepatitis A is controllable by widespread, routine vaccination, but those vaccinations currently are not California policy. Latino children in a five-county Southern California area have an average hepatitis A infection rate of 36 per 100,000, which is 80 percent higher than 20 cases per 100,000, the rate at which the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends vaccinations.

According to the UCLA study, the benefits of vaccination, especially in areas with a large Latino population, would decrease public spending for treatment, decrease days of school lost by the children and reduce the risk of spreading the illness to non-Latino populations.

"It's hard to think of another major public health problem that can be so easily prevented among Latino children as hepatitis A," said David E. Hayes-Bautista, director of the center and principal author of the study.

The rate of hepatitis A among Latino children in California is at an epidemic level, and the number of Latino children is large, according to the UCLA study. In 2000 there were 3.5 million Latino children in the state, which is more than the entire populations of many states, including Oklahoma and Oregon. The 2.3 million children in the five Southern California counties analyzed in the study — Los Angeles, Orange, San Bernardino, Riverside and San Diego — outnumber the entire populations of the states of Utah, Nevada, New Mexico, Idaho, South Dakota and Alaska.

2-2-2 Hepatitis A

“Hepatitis among Latino children is not a small problem,” Hayes-Bautista said. “It represents a problem larger than the entire populations of most states with high hepatitis A rates.”

Nearly the majority of young children in California are Latino, and almost two-thirds of children from infants to the age of 4 in Los Angeles County are Latino. Statistics show that 61 percent of children in Los Angeles County are Latino, compared to non-Hispanic white at 18 percent, black at nearly 9 percent and Asian/Pacific Islander children at 8 percent.

The numbers of Latinos are expected to increase. Demographic projections from the California Department of Finance show that Latinos are expected to comprise 70 percent of all children under the age of 5 by 2010, and increase to 74 percent by 2020.

“The problem of hepatitis A is occurring in a population that is growing rapidly: Latino children in Southern California,” Hayes-Bautista said.

The high level of hepatitis A among Latino children may point to a risk that may be considered unique to California. Food handlers in Los Angeles are predominantly Latino. These food handlers tend to come from households with Latino children, who have disproportionately high rates of hepatitis A infection.

“The Centers for Disease Control reports that children often serve as a source of infection for others,” Hayes-Bautista said.

These Latino food-handlers often work in restaurants in higher-income, non-Latino areas of the county. This situation could pose a risk that a hepatitis A epidemic could quickly spread around the county.

Los Angeles County has the largest number of Latino children among the five Southern California counties. The hepatitis A rate among Los Angeles County’s 1.2 million Latino children is nearly 34 per 100,000, about six times higher than the rate of 6 for non-Hispanic whites, seven times as high as the rate of nearly 5 for blacks and 15 times as high as the rate of 2 for Asian/Pacific Islanders.

The highest rate of hepatitis A for children among the five counties is in Riverside County. Statistics show that 51 per 100,000 children under 14 there had hepatitis A, which is nearly seven times as high as the rate of more than 7 for non-Hispanic whites, nearly twice as high as the rate of 24 for blacks and more than four times as high as the rate of nearly 12 for Asian/Pacific Islanders.

In Orange County, nearly 38 per 100,000 Latino children had hepatitis A. That rate is nearly eight times as high as the rate of 4 for non-Hispanic whites and nearly 16 times as high as the rate of 2 for Asian/Pacific Islanders. (There were no reported cases for black children in Orange County during the 1996–2000 time period.)

3-3-3 Hepatitis A

Latino children in San Diego County had a hepatitis A rate of about 37 per 100,000, the statistics show. The rate is nearly five times as high as the rates of nearly 7 for non-Hispanic whites and blacks and more than 10 times as high as the rate of 3 for Asian/Pacific Islanders.

In San Bernardino County, Latino children had a hepatitis A rate of 36 per 100,000. The rate is more than three times higher than the rate of nearly 10 for non-Hispanic whites and blacks, and nearly five times as high as the rate of nearly 8 for Asian/Pacific Islanders.

“We find this news disturbing yet familiar as one of many health issues facing the Latino community,” said Margaret Juarez, president of the California Latino Medical Association. “The research and education undertaken by the Center for the Study of Latino Health and Culture is critical for the health and well-being of Latinos.”

Because of debates in the 1990s about immigration and its role in the state’s growing population, some people are under the impression that many Latino children are immigrants. Statistics show almost 89 percent of Latino children in Los Angeles are U.S.-born. The high hepatitis A rate is not an immigration issue, but a problem for citizens of California, according to the UCLA study.

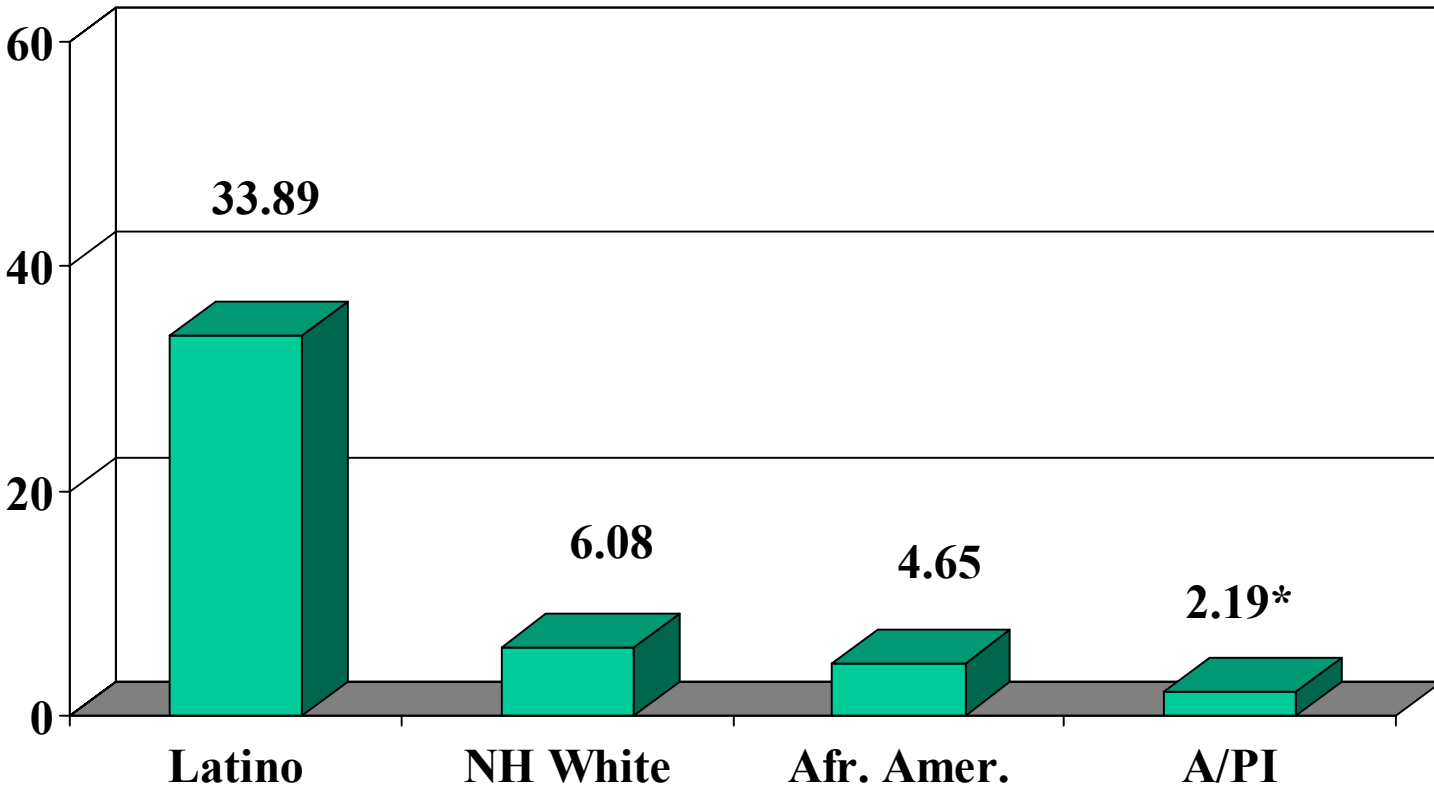
“Hepatitis A in Latino children is a domestic issue, involving young U.S. citizens, and it requires a domestic solution,” Hayes-Bautista said.

The study was funded by GlaxoSmithKline, which manufactures a vaccine available to prevent hepatitis A infection.

ACIP Identified States with Average Annual Hepatitis A Infection Rates Equal to, or Greater than, 20 per 100,000

State	Rate (per 100,000)
Arizona	48
Alaska	45
Oregon	40
New Mexico	40
Utah	33
Washington	30
Oklahoma	24
South Dakota	24
Idaho	21
Nevada	21
California	20

Hepatitis A Cases per 100,000 for Children Age 0-14, Los Angeles County, CA 1996-2000

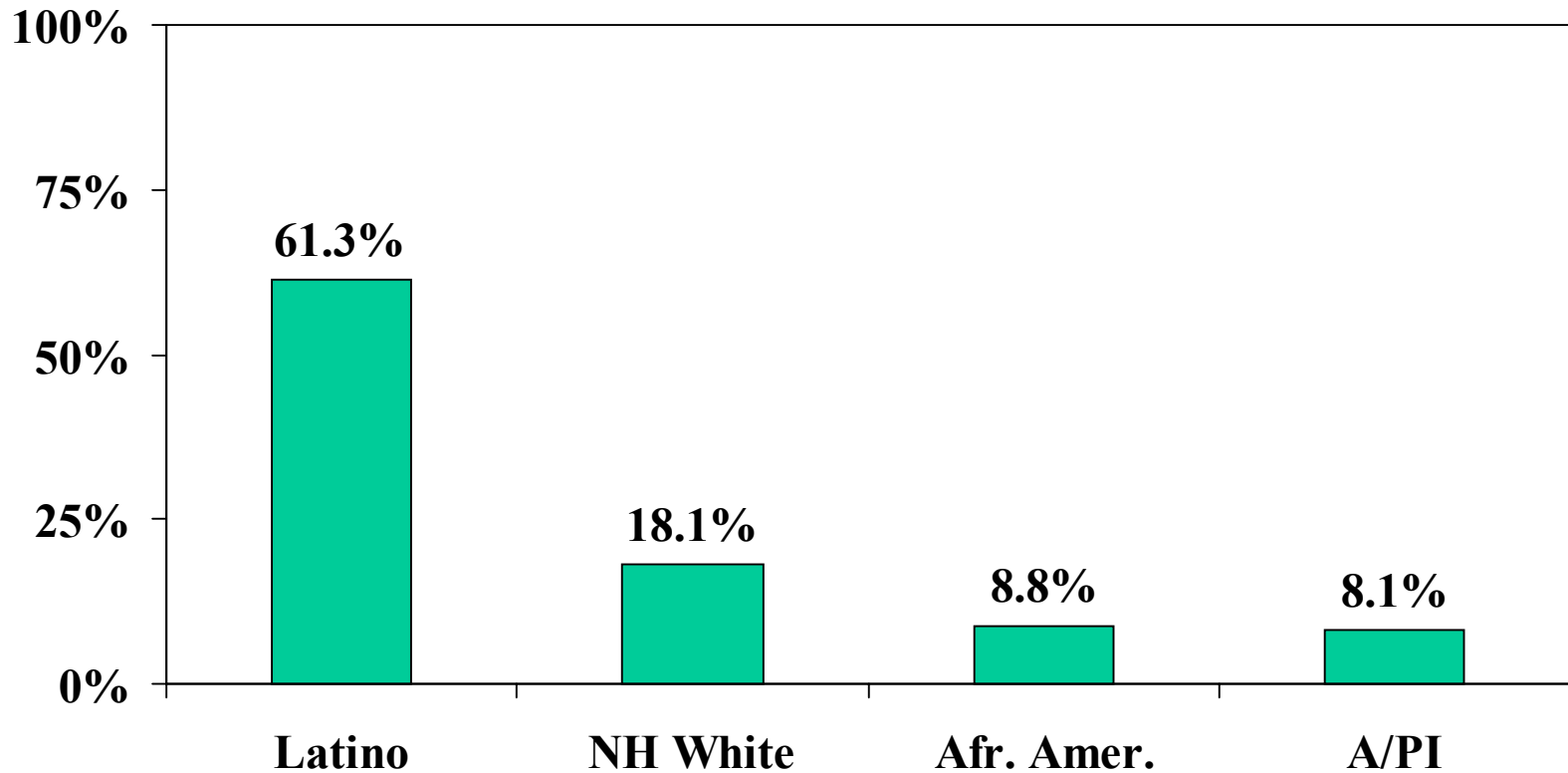


Note: Native Americans/Alaska Natives were not included due to insufficient cases.

Source: California Department of Health Services

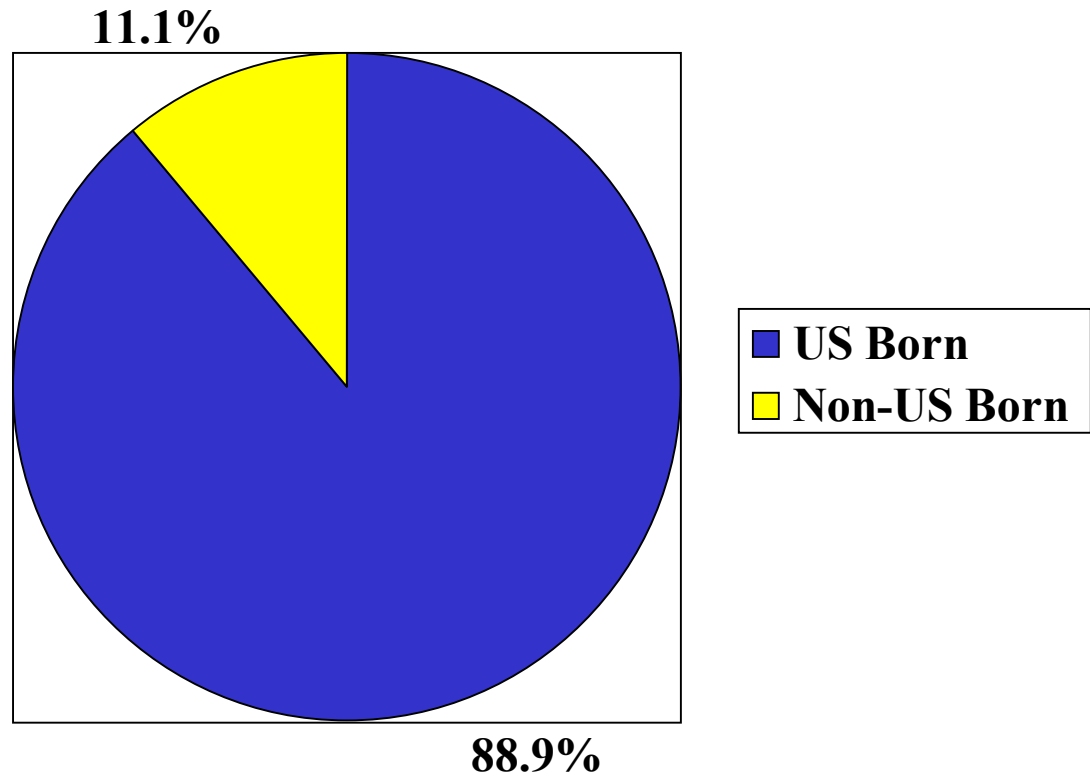
*Indicates less than 30 cases, may not have sufficient robustness

Composition of Child Population under 5 years, Los Angeles County, CA 2000



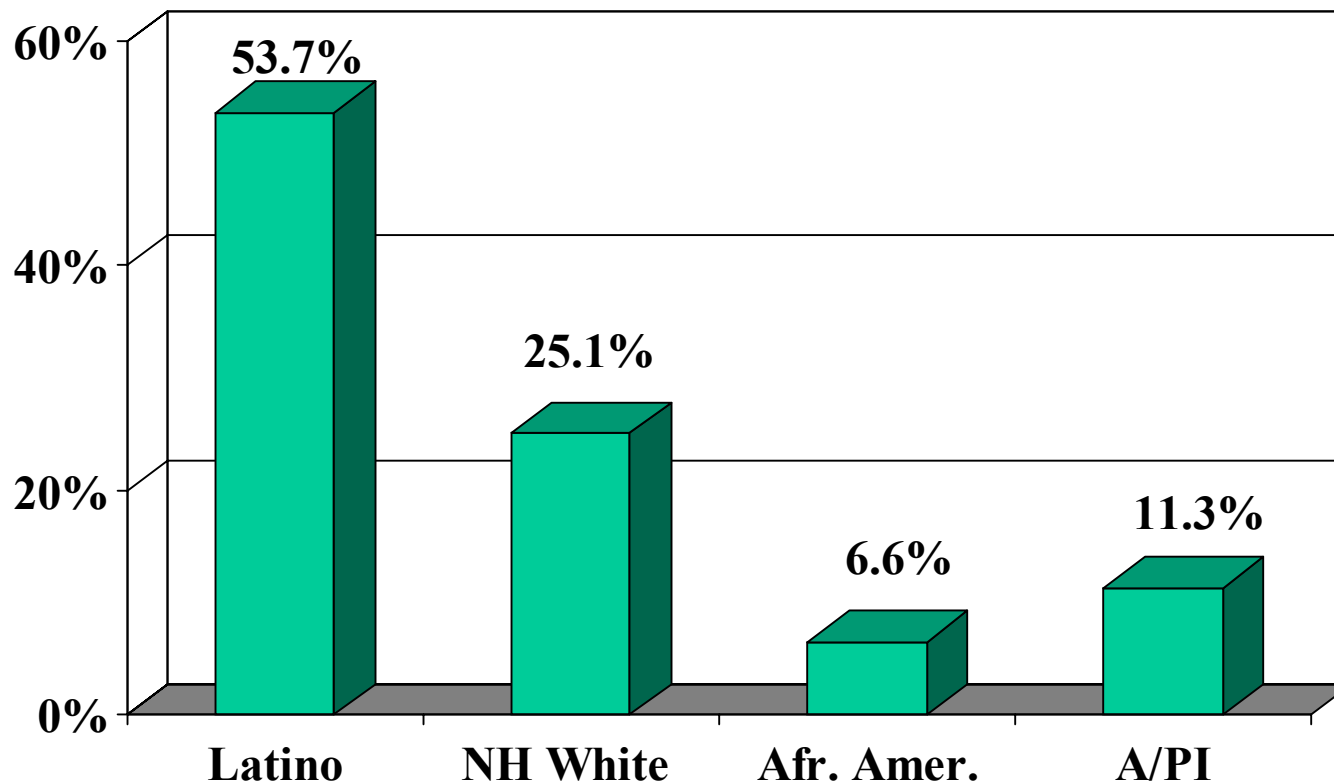
Source: California Department of Finance

Nativity of Latino Children Age 0-14, Los Angeles County, CA 1996-2000



Source: Current Population Survey, March Supplement, 1996-2000 Average

Percent of Food-Handlers by Ethnicity, Los Angeles County, CA 2000



Source: Current Population Survey Public Basic Monthly