

Social Cohesion in Latin America: *Implications for the United States*

Inequities, such as income inequality, health care access, and other social determinants of health, are experienced by vulnerable and other populations both in the United States and in Latin America. Social cohesion is an element being successfully woven into programming to prevent inequities on various levels.

In partnership with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the UCLA Blum Center on Poverty and Health in Latin America is exploring how social cohesion becomes prevalent in a community to improve inequities and, in turn, improve health outcomes for all populations.

What Is Social Cohesion?

In plain terms, social cohesion is the connectedness and solidarity among groups in a society. But, dig a little deeper and you will find that social cohesion is a well-defined concept that is at the cornerstone of healthy communities where: strong social bonds exist; conflict management processes are in place; and all forms of social conflict (income/wealth inequality, racial/ethnic tensions, disparities in political participation and other forms of polarization) are minimal or non-existent.

Social Cohesion Research Design and Concepts

The UCLA Blum Center will conduct preliminary research to compile data that can be analyzed to extract meaningful social cohesion principles, strategies, and programming. We will examine efforts being conducted in Latin America to determine best practices that may be replicable in the United States and communities around the world.

Our results will be useful for the RWJF Culture of Health Initiative designed to foster optimum health throughout US regions, cities, towns and neighborhoods. Specifically, we aim to:

1. Identify social cohesion interventions in Latin America
2. Describe components and processes of social cohesion interventions
3. Understand how and why social cohesion interventions have evolved
4. Provide key recommendations for promoting social cohesion in the United States

Methods

We are using a case study research design to investigate three social cohesion interventions from Latin America. We will use a combination of published and other literature as well as stakeholder interviews to expand information gleaned from each case study. Data will be analyzed using grounded theory methodology.

Criteria for selecting the case studies for this project include:

1. Alignment with our definition of social cohesion
2. Programming and policy focus on social cohesion
3. Evaluation component
4. Current or recent (past 3-5 years)
5. Contextual relevance to the U.S.

Case Studies

Based on criteria for selection, these three social cohesion interventions will be studied in-depth with site visits, stakeholder interviews and review of evaluation findings:

- **Social Cohesion Laboratory I Mexico-EU**, a project funded by the European External Action Service and the Government of Mexico, Chiapas, Mexico, 2011-2014. This project aimed to strengthen social cohesion in Mexico, through a strategy of multilevel and multisector interventions to facilitate the provision of better access and improved quality of basic public services and improving quality, from the point of view of promoting social cohesion, of social sector programs.
- **Social Cohesion Laboratory II Mexico-EU**, a project funded by the European External Action Service and the Government of Mexico, Oaxaca and San Luis Potosi, Mexico, 2015-ongoing. This project is meant to strengthen social cohesion in Mexico by promoting structural reforms that will reduce inequalities in access to public services, employment, justice, security, and human rights.
- **Integration: Integrated Urban Development**, a project of the European Commission-funded social cohesion initiative, URB-AL III. This project took place over 7 different sites in Europe and Latin America (Germany, Mexico, Brazil, Colombia, and Ecuador) from 2009-2013. The project sought to strengthen levels of social and territorial cohesion by creating more sustainable inner urban development.

Expected Results

By the end of this one-year research project, we will produce reports and develop recommendations that can be used in the United States and abroad to assist the development of initiatives incorporating social cohesion principles and strategies.

Specifically, we will:

1. Produce a report on approaches to operationalizing social cohesion in Latin America and Europe.
2. Provide recommendations for promoting social cohesion in the United States.

The report will feature a review of the field of social cohesion. It will include a comprehensive scan of the various definitions, as well as metrics that have been used to measure social cohesion. It will also feature a discussion of the general trends that have led social cohesion to become a policy and development priority in many areas of Europe and Latin America. This will help to explain why social cohesion projects and initiatives have evolved in various regions. Furthermore, with the inclusion of three case studies from Latin America, the report will provide information on the components and processes at the various levels of social cohesion interventions. With information gleaned from background research, three case studies, and supplementary interviews with key researchers and organizations, the report will also feature recommendations on how to best catalyze the field of social cohesion in the United States.

Project Team

Michael Rodríguez, MD, MPH, principal investigator and director, UCLA Blum Center on Poverty and Health in Latin America; professor, UCLA Geffen School of Medicine

Ronald Brooks, PhD, co-principal investigator, assistant professor, Department of Family Medicine, UCLA David Geffen School of Medicine

David Eisenman, MD, MSHS, co-investigator, professor at the UCLA David Geffen School of Medicine and the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health and associate natural scientist at the RAND Corporation

Expert Advisory Panel

An interdisciplinary expert advisory panel provides guidance on project elements, including methods and implications for the United States. This panel, comprising experts on social cohesion, provides critical feedback on research methodology, guidance on report documents and development of recommendations on applying social cohesion strategies in the United States.

Nancy Adler, PhD, the Lisa and John Pritzker professor of Psychology, Departments of Psychiatry and Pediatrics at UCSF.

Margarita Algeria, PhD, professor of Psychology, Department of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School.

Mabel Berezin, PhD, professor, Cornell University Department of Sociology.

Kathleen A. Cagney, MPP, PhD, associate professor in the Departments of Sociology & Health Studies University of Chicago.

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Ichiro Kawachi, MBChB, PhD, John L. Loeb and Frances Lehman Loeb professor of Social Epidemiology and chair of the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences at the Harvard School of Public Health .

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Questions on Social Cohesion in Latin America?

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Funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation