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**U.S. JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM FAILS HISPANIC YOUTH**

**Washington DC** – [*The National Council of La Raza (NCLR), the largest national Latino civil rights organization, commends Building Blocks for Youth Initiative for issuing “¿Dónde Está la Justicia?” A Call to Action on Behalf of the Latino and Latina Youth in the U.S. juvenile justice system,” the first report to study the difficulties faced by Latino/a youth in the U.S. juvenile justice system.*]

Although it comes as no surprise to NCLR that Latino/a youth are overrepresented in the U.S. juvenile justice system, *¿Dónde Está la Justicia?* is the first report to shed light on the disparate treatment faced by Latino/a youth in this system. This report outlines the additional barriers that Latino/a youth encounter in a system that not only fails to help them reform but all too often helps to destroy them.

*¿Dónde Está la Justicia?* finds that the lack of adequate bilingual services and a dearth of bilingual, culturally competent staff place Latino/a youth at a significant disadvantage upon entering the juvenile justice system. The lack of bilingual counsel and interpreters, for example, makes it very difficult for youth and their parents to fully comprehend the system and its procedures and, in essence, what is happening to them. Moreover, Latino/a youth are too often misunderstood by everyone in the system from judges to staff in juvenile facilities and, as a result, often receive much harsher treatment than other juvenile offenders.

Second, the report finds that the undercounting and underreporting of Latino/a youth in the system is a significant problem. Data are not collected uniformly, and nor are they disaggregated by race and ethnicity, making it extremely difficult to know the real number of Latinos in the system. In addition, the system does not provide uniform definitions for the terms Latino and Hispanic, which further exacerbates the inability to obtain an accurate count of Latino/a youth in the juvenile justice system. In effect, the data collection problems in the juvenile justice system make Latino/a youth invisible to the system, and thus the problems they face virtually impossible to address.

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Third, the report notes that the juvenile justice system is not equipped to address the unique conditions of some Latino/a youth who come into contact with the system for violating immigration laws. The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) detains and incarcerates Latino/a youth, sometimes indefinitely, under punitive conditions even though they have not been charged with any crime other than being in the United States without the proper documentation. Oftentimes the youth find themselves incarcerated alongside delinquent youth or with adults. Other times, the youth are deported, thus resulting in permanent separation from their families.

NCLR urges public officials, policy-makers, and the juvenile justice system to heed the findings of this report and work to ameliorate this national crisis that affects the lives of youth and their families. Specifically, NCLR is calling for mandatory data collection that can be disaggregated by race and ethnicity; an increase in the number of bilingual and culturally competent staff to ensure that better services are provided to the Latino/a youth in the system; elimination of discriminatory practices like racial profiling that contribute to the unfair treatment of Latino/a youth; and appropriation of the necessary funds to implement the recommendations of this report.

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