

ISSUE 12: NUTRITION ISSUES AND TRENDS AMONG CHILDREN OF IMMIGRANTS*

To fully understand issues affecting child nutrition in the Latino[†] community, it is important to examine trends among children living in immigrant families. While most (93%) Hispanic children in this country are U.S. citizens, a significant number of those children live with family members who have different immigration statuses.¹ These families are more likely than families composed entirely of citizens to have low incomes and experience other factors that put them at risk of food insecurity and hunger.² The complex nature of mixed immigration status affects Latino families' access to resources that can boost child nutrition outcomes.

Defining Mixed-Status Families

A "mixed-status family" refers to a family whose members include people with different immigration statuses (including U.S. citizen, lawful permanent resident, deferred action recipient, and unauthorized immigrant). A typical mixed-status family would include one or more unauthorized immigrant parents living with their U.S.-born citizen children.

Children living in immigrant or mixed-status families are more likely than children in U.S.-born citizen families to be food insecure or hungry.

- One study estimates that 18.8% of infants of foreign-born parents were food insecure, compared to 11.3% of infants in U.S.-born citizen families.³
- Food security improves as parents obtain U.S. citizenship. Among children with foreign-born parents, infants living with at least one noncitizen parent were twice as likely as infants living with naturalized citizen parents to be food insecure and hungry.⁴
- Food insecurity is likely to be even higher among families whose income varies by month or season. One study of Latino migrant and seasonal farmworkers in North Carolina found that nearly two-thirds (63.8%) of families interviewed and nearly one-third (32%) of preschool-age children were food insecure. Of the food insecure families, about one-third (34.7%) reported that they also experienced hunger.⁵

Trends show that the risk of childhood obesity among Latino children increases with family acculturation.

- Children born in Mexico (29.3%) have a lower likelihood of being overweight than children born in Mexico but raised in the U.S. (43.2%) and children of Mexican descent born in the U.S. (48.8%).⁶

- U.S.-born children with one or both immigrant parents are 55% more likely than White children in native-born families to be overweight or obese.⁷

Barriers keep many immigrant families from accessing resources that help them provide their children with consistent, healthy meals.

- Limited English proficiency may decrease immigrant parents' ability to access nutrition resources for their children. Children of limited-English-proficient immigrant parents are more than twice as likely (21.2%) as children of English-proficient immigrant parents (10.3%) to live with food insecurity.⁸ Moreover, infants of limited-English-proficient immigrant parents are more likely to live with hunger.⁹
- Federal child nutrition programs that are less restrictive with regard to immigration status, such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), have proven more effective at reaching children in immigrant families.¹⁰
- Complex program requirements and fear of immigration enforcement often prevent mixed-status families from accessing programs on behalf of eligible children.^{11,12} Researchers have found that among children eligible for free meals through NSLP, children living in native-born families are more likely to be enrolled than children in immigrant families.¹³

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† 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. Furthermore, 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 will be identified respectively as "Whites" and "Blacks."

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While most Hispanic children are U.S. citizens, their nutritional well-being is influenced by the immigration status of their families. Improving nutrition outcomes for children living in immigrant families is critical to combating Latino child hunger, obesity, and food insecurity.

Endnotes

- 1 Richard Fry and Jeffrey S. Passel, *Latino Children: A Majority Are U.S.-Born Offspring of Immigrants* (Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, May 2009).
- 2 In 2011, children with noncitizen parents were more than twice as likely (41.13%) as children with citizen parents (18.37%) to live in poverty. The Urban Institute, data from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series data sets drawn from the 2005–2011 American Community Survey.
- 3 Randy Capps et al., *Young Children in Immigrant Families Face Higher Risk of Food Insecurity* (Bethesda, MD: Child Trends, 2009).
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Kristen Borre, Luke Ertle, and Mariaelisa Graff, “Working to Eat: Vulnerability, Food Insecurity, and Obesity among Migrant and Seasonal Farmworker Families,” *American Journal of Industrial Medicine* 53 (2010): 443–462.
- 6 Maria A. Hernandez-Valero et al., “Higher Risk for Obesity Among Mexican-American and Mexican Immigrant Children and Adolescents than Among Peers in Mexico,” *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health* 14 (2012): 517–522.
- 7 Gopal K. Singh, Michael D. Kogan, and Stella M. Yu, “Disparities in Obesity and Overweight Prevalence Among U.S. Immigrant Children and Adolescents by Generational Status,” *Journal of Community Health* 34, no. 4 (2009): 271–281.
- 8 Randy Capps et al., *Young Children in Immigrant Families*.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Tracy Veriker et al., *Effects of Immigration on WIC and NSLP Caseloads* (Urban Institute, 2010).
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Daniel M. Geller et al., *National Survey of WIC Participants II, Volume 1: Participant Characteristics (Final Report)*. U.S. Department of Agriculture. Alexandria, VA, 2012.
- 13 Ibid.