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NATIONAL COUNCIL OF LA RAZA

Sin Provecho

Latinos and Food Insecurity



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SIN PROVECHO: LATINOS AND FOOD INSECURITY

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SIN PROVECHO: **LATINOS AND FOOD INSECURITY**

An examination of the effectiveness of federal food assistance programs in allaying hunger and food insecurity in the Latino community

By Jennifer Ng'andu and Emilia M. Leal Gianfortoni

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

"Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food..." According to the *U.S. Action Plan on Food Security*, this is the measure to which the U.S. government holds itself accountable in addressing food insecurity in the nation. The U.S. should be commended for making a strong commitment to ensuring that everyone in the nation has enough nutritious food to sustain their households and to reach their full potential. Unfortunately, each day millions of Americans face hunger and food insecurity, limiting their ability to attain a sufficient standard of living.

Latinos, who represent the fastest-growing population in the U.S., suffer from alarmingly high rates of food insecurity. Nearly one in five Latinos (19.6%) faces food insecurity each year, which compromises their health and well-being. If the trends of food insecurity within the Latino community persist, the impact of insufficient nutrition will greatly increase the risk that the next generation will become even less healthy.

One of the most important ways the U.S. is addressing domestic food insecurity is by ensuring a strong safety net to provide resources for families to obtain nutritious foods in times of great need. Federal food assistance programs are essential in the fight to eliminate food insecurity and the resulting consequences stemming from malnourishment and obesity. Further, the nation benefits a great deal when families have food security, as diseases arising from nutrition deficiencies are prevented, health care costs are lowered, and the education outcomes of children improve. Yet, numerous barriers prevent Latinos from accessing food assistance programs and, thus, gaining one set of resources that would help them achieve food security.

This paper identifies a number of areas that contribute to high rates of food insecurity among Latinos and the policy measures that would strengthen the assistance networks and ensure food security for Latinos and all Americans.

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KEY FACTS

- **Latinos experience numerous economic barriers, leaving them without adequate resources to purchase food.** Despite high participation in the workforce, Latinos' incomes and net worth are much lower than non-Hispanic Whites, and thus they are more likely to face poverty (21.8% are in poverty), a great contributor to food insecurity.
- **Many food retailers that serve predominately Latino communities are inaccessible or do not have a full range of affordable food products that make it possible for Latino families to have complete and nutritious diets.** For instance, one study found that areas with predominantly Hispanic communities had 38% less fresh fruit and vegetable retailers than areas with smaller Hispanic populations.
- **Eligible Latinos are missing out on the benefits of food assistance programs.** Data suggest that more than three million eligible Hispanic families are not participating in the Food Stamp Program. In addition, while 20.5% of the National School Lunch Program participants are Hispanic, there are many barriers that prevent other eligible children from participating. Lack of available culturally- and linguistically-appropriate information and confusion about eligibility rules are among the common reasons Latinos do not currently participate at higher levels.
- **Many lawfully-present immigrants are restricted from accessing food stamps.** Due to laws passed in 1996, numerous legal immigrants have been deterred from participating in the Food Stamp Program. Participation among eligible noncitizen households is very low, at only 42.4%. Moreover, U.S. citizen children who are fully eligible for the program are affected by the fear and confusion that has resulted from program restrictions. These children are far less likely to participate in the Food Stamp Program than citizen children in households where a parent or caretaker is also a citizen (51.5% and 81.5%, respectively).
- **For food insecure households who receive food assistance, the potential to improve health outcomes and nutrition through government food and nutrition programs is significant.** Recent data issued by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) show a sizeable increase in food security among Latinos, due in part to greater food stamp access restored to immigrant families in 2002. Furthermore, those who participate in food assistance programs show greater nutritional intake, medical savings, and enhanced health status. Studies have even indicated a lower obesity rate among food assistance participants, a disease disproportionately affecting Latinos.

The achievements of federal food assistance programs are broad and have greatly contributed to reductions in food insecurity and enhanced nutrition among Latinos; however, there is still more that can be done to strengthen the nation's food safety net to ensure that Latinos, and all families, have the resources necessary to establish long-lasting, healthy eating patterns. In particular, to combat nutrition deficiencies within Latino communities, the next step should be

to strengthen federal food assistance programs and increase participation of Latinos by carrying out the following key recommendations:

INCREASING PARTICIPATION IN FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

- Conduct outreach and enrollment programs through community-based organizations, in order to build understanding about available food assistance programs.
- Eliminate the remaining food stamp restrictions on lawfully-present immigrants.
- Provide increased training to agency staff about eligibility laws and the rights of immigrants to access federal food assistance, especially food stamps.
- Increase the accessibility of culturally- and linguistically-appropriate materials that allow persons to understand eligibility rules and be better informed about programs. Facilitate the availability of language services throughout the enrollment process.
- Make nutritious foods more accessible by increasing the ability of local merchants, including farmers markets, to accept federal food assistance, such as food stamps and WIC.
- Ensure that the Food Stamp Program structure remains intact, so that it can accommodate those who need assistance in times of emergency, as well as sustain those who experience longer periods of food insecurity.

STRENGTHENING FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

- Remove language barriers during the application process and ensure that those persons denied benefits due to language have the mechanisms to contest faulty denials of benefits.

Food insecurity: Limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.

Low food security: Households who reduce the quality, variety, and desirability of their diets, but the quantity of food intake and normal eating patterns are not substantially disrupted.

Very low food security: Eating patterns of one or more household members are disrupted and food intake is reduced because the household lacks money and other resources for food.

Food insecurity with hunger: Households in which one or more people are hungry at times during the year because they cannot afford enough food. Refers to the uneasy or painful sensation caused by lack of food.

Recently, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) eliminated the use of the terminology “food insecure with hunger,” citing the lack of continuous food insecurity within households. However, many U.S. families still continue to endure pain and negative health outcomes as a result of inadequate food resources, and the elimination of the term “hunger” will only make the health consequences and other problems caused by food insecurity less apparent and, thus, more difficult to eradicate. The National Council of La Raza (NCLR) will use this terminology throughout this document and in its continued efforts to ensure that Latinos and all Americans never have to suffer from the effects of hunger.

Source: Nord, Mark, Margaret Andrews, and Steven Carlson, *Household Food Security in the United States, 2005*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Food and Nutrition Service, November 2006.

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- Review food assistance programs with set standards on a regular basis to guarantee that foods are not only nutritious, but culturally appropriate, allowing families to make the most of their benefit.
- Increase the maximum food stamp benefits to levels that will allow a household to have a complete and nutritious diet.
- Improve data collection to gain a comprehensive picture of why Latinos and noncitizen populations experience lower rates of participation within food assistance programs, such as the National School Lunch Program and the Food Stamp Program.

INTRODUCTION

Food insecurity is a problem that many Americans face each day. A loss of income due to factors such as illness, unemployment, underemployment, and death of or separation from a spouse can strike a household at any time and shake the financial security that ensures adequate nutrition. The unexpected devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina, the most significant natural disaster in the U.S. in recent times, made it apparent that in a matter of moments a person's ability to provide for oneself and one's family can be stripped away, even if only for a limited time.

The U.S. has a network of nutrition and food assistance programs to aid Americans in times of emergency or in instances when households have trouble making ends meet – preventing food deprivation that ultimately leads to hunger. For a great number, these programs have been successful in ensuring that families have adequate food to meet their nutrition needs and that limited budgets can be extended for expenditures that will help sustain their households.

Despite major advances in addressing food insecurity in this country, more than 35 million individuals (12.1% of all Americans), including 12.4 million children, do not have sufficient food resources.¹ Among these families and individuals, Latinos* – the largest racial and ethnic minority group in the nation – face a disproportionately high rate of hunger and food insecurity; nearly one in five (19.6%) Hispanics in the U.S. struggles to put food on the family table.²

Latinos are a strong and growing presence in the U.S., and population projections estimate that they will make up approximately one-quarter of the population by 2050.³ It is clear that the well-being of the largest and fastest-growing minority in the U.S. will have a significant influence on the well-being of the nation as a whole. Yet, a high rate of food insecurity in the Latino community has a profound impact on their health, threatening educational attainment, economic mobility, and pursuit of the American Dream.

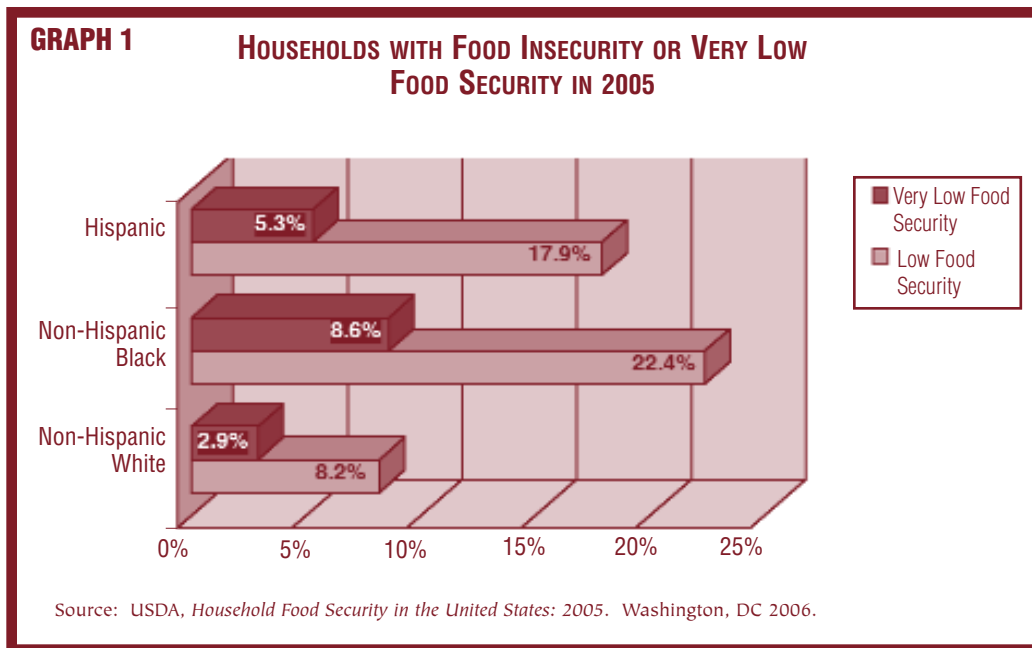
* The terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to identify persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race.

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This paper examines food insecurity in the Latino community, the social determinants that diminish access to adequate food resources and provoke hunger, and the impact of food deficiencies on the health of Latinos. Further, it explores the effectiveness of current policies designed to improve food security for families through federal food assistance programs.

HUNGER AND FOOD INSECURITY: A NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

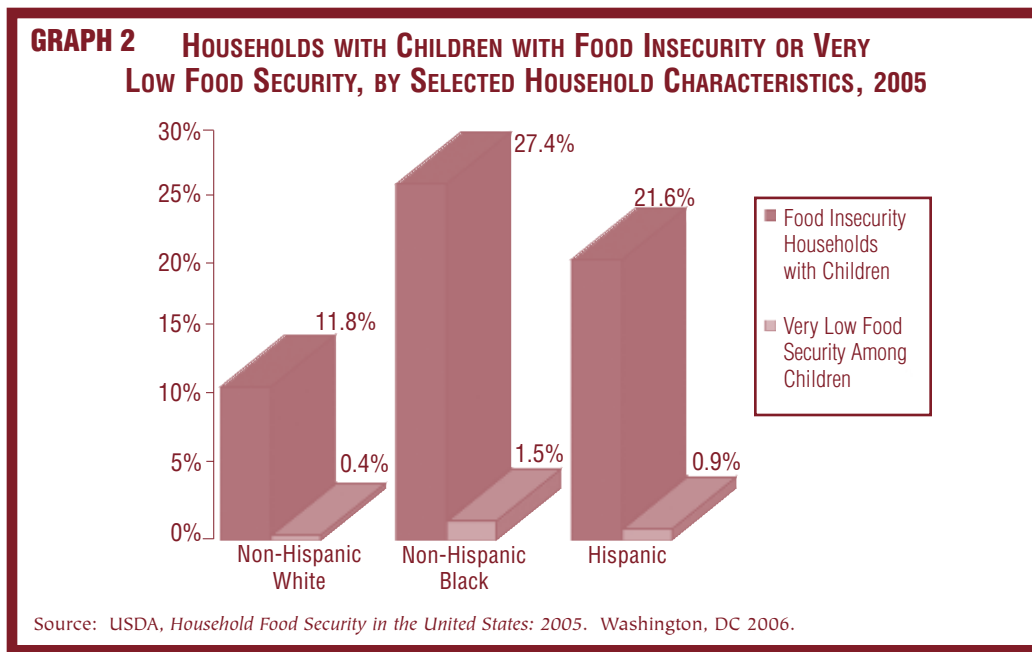
In a nation with such vast resources, it is hard to imagine that there are still families who experience difficulties building the financial stability that ensures their ability to adequately provide nutritious foods for their families. Yet, more than 12.6 million households, or 11.0% of the country's families, experienced food insecurity in 2005. Further, Latinos have a greater propensity than other groups for food insecurity, representing more than one in six American households that experience food insecurity. Hispanic households experience food insecurity at a significantly higher rate (17.9%) than the national average (11%). Furthermore, the Hispanic household food insecurity rate is twice as high as the rate for non-Hispanic White households (8.2%), the most food secure.⁴



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Moreover, it is often the households with growing children who have the hardest time meeting the food needs of their families. A 2005 analysis conducted by the Economic Policy Institute cited that 29.7% of all families in the United States with one to three children under the age of 12 did not earn enough to afford basic necessities such as food, housing, health care, and child care, even during a period of national prosperity.⁵

Hispanic households with children have a higher rate of food insecurity (21.6%) compared to non-Hispanic White households with children (11.8%). Even more disturbing, Hispanic households with children experience higher rates of very low food security, impacting two times as many Latino households as non-Hispanic White households (.9% and .4%, among children respectively), meaning that they face recurrent mental and physical anguish as a result of inadequate food resources and have a stronger likelihood of becoming malnourished.⁶

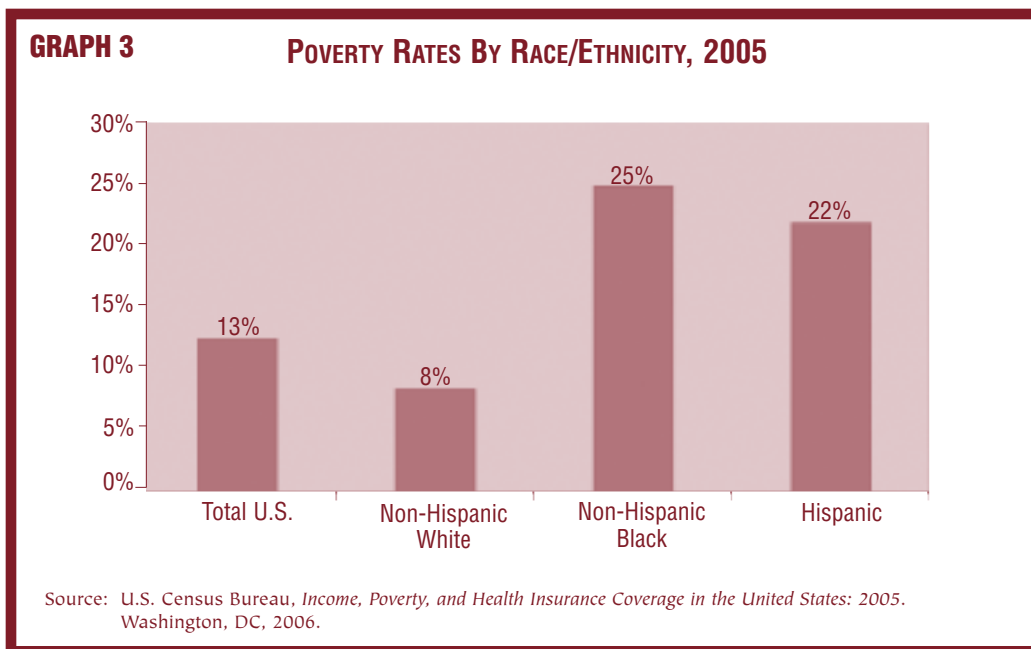


SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS FACTOR INTO LATINO FOOD INSECURITY

Hunger and food insecurity affect Latinos of all backgrounds. However, data indicate that factors such as household income, poverty level, and immigration status play a strong role in the prevalence of hunger and food insecurity in the Hispanic community.

LATINOS EXPERIENCE A HIGHER LEVEL OF ECONOMIC INSTABILITY

The socioeconomic profile of the Latino population in the United States is varied; however, there is a significant proportion of Latinos who struggle for financial security. Studies show that there is a sizable wealth gap in the U.S.; the median net worth of Hispanic households in 2002 was \$7,932, compared to \$88,651 for White households.⁷ Poverty, low wages, and difficulties obtaining housing and health care create economic barriers that make it difficult for Latinos to build net worth and financial security, eventually affecting their ability to provide themselves and their families with basic necessities such as food. The *U.S. Action Plan on Food Security* notes that the “most important cause of chronic food insecurity is poverty.”⁸ Both Latinos and non-Hispanic Blacks (21.8% and 24.9%, respectively) are roughly three times as likely as non-Hispanic Whites (8.3%) to live below the poverty level.⁹



While Hispanics have the highest level of participation in the U.S. workforce compared to other groups (68.8% of the Hispanic population 16 years old and over is in the labor force), they are more likely than their Black or White counterparts to earn low incomes and face poverty.¹⁰ According to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the median weekly earnings – wage and salary – of full-time Hispanic workers in 2005 was \$471, significantly below that of their White and Black counterparts (\$672 and \$520, respectively).¹¹ Furthermore,

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Hispanic full-time workers are considerably more likely to be poor than their non-Hispanic White and non-Hispanic Black counterparts (6.5% compared to 1.7% and 4.4%, respectively).¹²

Hispanics are more susceptible to poverty in part because they are more likely to be concentrated in low-wage jobs that tend to be less stable and experience spells of unemployment at rates higher than their White counterparts. Hispanics in the labor force are more likely to be periodically unemployed (5.3% of Hispanic high school graduates are unemployed) compared to non-Hispanic Whites (3.3%).¹³ The combination of higher periodic high unemployment rates and low wages often creates insurmountable barriers to economic stability, further perpetuating food insecurity in the Latino community.

In addition, as is often the case with low-income families, steady employment does not guarantee sufficient income to cover basic household expenses, including food. America's Second Harvest, a charitable hunger relief organization with a network of more than 200 member food banks and food-rescue organizations, conducted a profile of the incidence and nature of hunger and food insecurity among its network throughout the U.S. Within its sites, approximately four million clients receive emergency food assistance each week; 36% of those households include at least one employed adult. Similarly, its findings show that approximately one in four low-income families with one full-time, full-year worker was food insecure and housing insecure.¹⁴

While household income and poverty are significant contributing factors to food insecurity and hunger in the Latino community, Hispanic households face additional burdens that undermine their economic stability. Because certain household budgetary items are not discretionary, e.g., rent, housing, and utilities, and Latinos tend to have less expendable income, they may forgo buying sufficient amounts of food and negotiate nutrition content of the food for their families.¹⁵ In 2001, more than two in five (41.8%) Hispanic households paid too much for housing compared to 29.7% of families nationally. On average, 36% of Hispanic households' annual expenditures go to housing.¹⁶ Much of the overspending on housing among Latino households is a result of limited access to homeownership opportunities, the primary wealth-building tool for American families. The Latino homeownership rate is lower than that of non-Hispanic Blacks, and the homeownership gap between non-Hispanic Whites and Latinos is wider than 28 percentage points.¹⁷ This gap further hinders the ability of Latino homeowners to accumulate net wealth and build a secure financial future, and adds to Latino households' economic burden.

When faced with these economic disparities – a high poverty rate, low wages, high housing expenditures, and difficulties building net worth – it is no surprise that Hispanic individuals and households are forced to compromise their access to sufficient food.

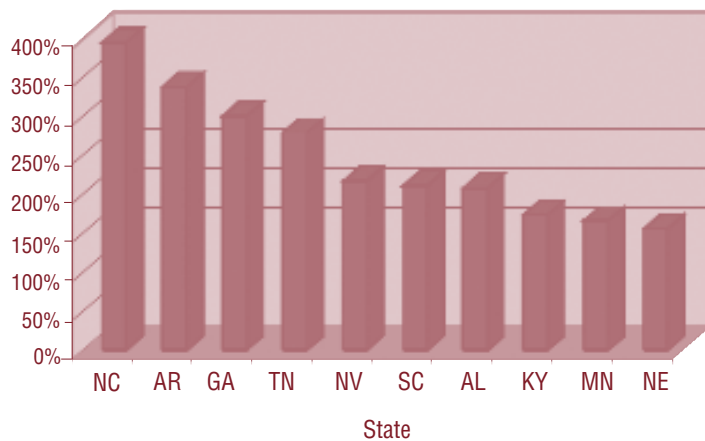
LATINOS' ABILITY TO ACCESS NUTRITIOUS FOODS IS HAMPERED BY GEOGRAPHIC BARRIERS

According to the USDA, households are more likely to be hungry or food insecure if they live in states in the West and South, which is home to more than three-quarters of the Hispanic population.¹⁸ In California, where approximately one-third (32%) of the population is Hispanic, a study was conducted by the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research which found that 32.7% of all Hispanic households were food insecure.¹⁹

It is important to note that while states such as California, Texas, Florida, Arizona, and New Mexico continue to be home to a large share of the nation's Hispanics, in recent years other areas of the country have experienced significant increases in their Latino population, particularly in the Southeast and Midwest. Latinos in these areas experience great difficulties in combating hunger and food insecurity as they are not yet traditionally considered when examining geographic barriers to accessing nutritious food. States registering unusually high and rapid growth in their Hispanic populations between 1990 and 2000 include North Carolina (393.9%), Arkansas (337.0%), and Georgia (299.6%).²⁰ Many Hispanic immigrants live in rural areas and face particular challenges to food security, such as lack of transportation, an infrastructure that does not provide access to food resources, lower wages in jobs, and sporadic employment.

GRAPH 4

PERCENT CHANGE IN LATINO POPULATION GROWTH BETWEEN 1990 AND 2000, SELECTED STATES



Source: National Council of La Raza (NCLR), *Latino Population Profiles by States: States with the Largest Latino Growth (1990-2000)*. Washington, DC: 2005.

In emerging Latino communities, a considerable number of new Latino immigrants are migrant workers, often farmworkers. Due to the transient nature of farmwork and low wages typical of migrant jobs, food insecurity is prevalent. A study of food security among Latino migrant and

seasonal farmworkers in North Carolina concluded that more than 47% could not afford enough food for their families, and a significant portion of farmworkers used drastic coping mechanisms such as cutting the size of the family meal, skipping a meal, or not eating for an entire day to stretch their food budget.²¹ It is disturbing that some of those who are most involved in providing food for the nation – helping to plant and harvest agricultural products each year – are highly susceptible to hunger.

Additionally, the USDA notes that food insecurity is more common in central city households, where nearly half (45.6%) of all Hispanics live.²² In Los Angeles County alone in 2004, 62% of those living in lower-income, food insecure households were Latinos, followed by Whites (18%), African Americans (12%), and Asian/Pacific Islanders (9%).²³ In many urban communities, the food resources in close proximity to Latino and other low-income neighborhoods may be insufficient in providing food security for families. A study of food retailers in the New York boroughs of Manhattan and the Bronx found that the most prominent food retailers were grocery stores and noted a dearth of supermarkets. The lack of larger retailers, which often have the most nutritious and affordable foods, was exacerbated in low-income neighborhoods. Furthermore, areas with predominantly Hispanic communities had 38% less fresh fruit and vegetable retailers than areas with smaller Hispanic communities.²⁴ Often, smaller-sized retail merchants lack the capacity to carry foods that would improve the quality of diets. Even when merchants do offer nutritious products, the high cost of living in urban areas often puts sufficient food resources out of reach for food insecure families.

Thus, while Latinos continue to make major contributions to the U.S. workforce, settling in new communities and integrating into the fabric of American society, their growing presence in both rural and urban communities puts them at a disadvantage in achieving food security. In rural areas, erratic work opportunities and lack of mobility contribute to the inability of Latinos to ensure adequate food for their families, and in urban areas, where food may be more readily available, healthy foods may be scarce and unaffordable.

FOOD INSECURITY IS PREVALENT IN IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES

While the majority of Latinos (60%) are native-born U.S. citizens, they make up nearly half (47.5%) of the foreign-born population in the United States.²⁵ In addition, a significant number of Latinos have parents and other family members who are foreign-born and consequently are affected by immigrant-related issues and barriers.²⁶ Those who are foreign-born are more likely to have low socioeconomic status and lower wages, and experience poverty.

Due to higher rates of economic insecurity, immigrants experience significant barriers to basic resources such as housing, health care, and food. Barriers affecting immigrant food security often extend to the native-born members of the household, who tend to be children. Of 6.6 million undocumented families (78% of whom are from Latin America), 23% (1.5 million) have only U.S. citizen children, 11% have only noncitizen children, and 7% have both citizen

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and noncitizen children.²⁷ The 2002 *National Survey of America's Families* (NSAF) found that hardship is greater for children of immigrants than for children of U.S. natives in three areas of basic need: food, housing, and health care. The survey reported that nationwide, 39.2% of all children of immigrants live in families who worry about or encounter difficulties in affording food, compared to 27% of children of native parents.²⁸

There are a number of reasons to explain why Hispanic immigrant workers face a shockingly high rate of hunger and food insecurity; however, a major reason is that many food insecure immigrants cannot access certain federal assistance, even if they meet the income and asset eligibility thresholds required to access such programs. Prior to 1996, low-income, legal noncitizens were generally eligible for food assistance programs that their tax dollars support at the same level as citizens. However, passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 cut nearly one million legal immigrants from eligibility for the federal Food Stamp Program (FSP), as well as other means-tested programs such as Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). In fact, about 40% of the savings as a result of PRWORA was achieved by denying benefits to legal immigrants, including children and elderly and disabled individuals.²⁹ USDA data show that participation by noncitizens in the Food Stamp Program declined by 64% between 1996 and 2000, compared to a 30% decline in food stamp participation by all individuals.³⁰ Further, participation rates continue to be low. The disproportionate decline of noncitizen participation was partially explained by continued eligibility bars for certain immigrants, extensive confusion over the changes in eligibility rules, mixed messages, fear about participation and its possible impact on immigration status, and challenges with language access and program usability.³¹ A report conducted by Physicians for Human Rights highlights a high prevalence of hunger and food insecurity among legal immigrants, particularly in California, Texas, and Illinois, in part as a result of the cuts to the federal Food Stamp Program – affecting 1.6 million immigrants and citizens.³² In 2002, a significant portion of food stamp benefits were restored (See Text Box, Immigrant Food Stamp Restorations) to noncitizen families; however, immigrant participation has still been hampered by multiple changes in eligibility laws since 1996.

Citizen children of immigrants have also been deeply impacted by immigrant provisions in the law and confusion regarding eligibility, and have dropped from the program in droves. The participation rate for eligible citizen children living in households with noncitizen adults is alarmingly low (51.5%) compared to the participation rate of children overall (81.5%).³³ Many parents believe that their immigration status could be endangered, or that they could be subject to deportation, if they enroll their citizen children in food assistance programs. Community-based organizations (CBOs) report that parents would sooner suffer from hunger and food insecurity – cutting or skipping meals to feed their children – rather than open themselves to the possibility of deportation and separation from their families. For instance,

many legal immigrants believe that their use of FSP will jeopardize their ability to obtain permanent legal residency or citizenship and thus will forgo applying for much-needed food stamps. Further, current laws make immigrants' sponsors liable for an immigrant's use of federal "means-tested" assistance programs, deterring immigrants from applying for programs for which they are eligible, because of fear of harm or penalization of close relatives.

THE IMPACT OF HUNGER AND FOOD INSECURITY ON HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Food insecurity is inextricably linked to negative health outcomes that can affect one's overall well-being. Individuals struggling with hunger or food insecurity endure the physical, psychological, and cognitive consequences of hunger. A study published in the *Journal of Nutrition* examined the experience of households suffering from food insecurity and identified some of its consequences, including "hunger pangs, fatigue, lack of concentration at school, low work capacity, stress, disrupted household dynamics, and distorted means of food acquisition and management."³⁴ Respondents to the survey reported "depression, increased need for health care, and decreased participation in social activities."³⁵

Food insecurity alone results in poorer quality diets, compromised physical and mental health, and lower educational outcomes, especially for children. In addition, hunger has been found to increase anxiety and chronic illness and to contribute to abnormal growth and depression. An increased risk for and severity of sickness and disease contribute to poor health status, more physician time, more treatments, and more hospitalization – all of which require more

HUNGER AND OBESITY: CAN THEY BE LINKED?

As food insecurity and hunger in the United States continue to affect a large number of Americans, rates of obesity are also climbing and affecting a disproportionate number of Latinos. While obesity may seem to be a separate, opposite issue from food insecurity and hunger, the two are interrelated.

According to the American Obesity Association, approximately 127 million adults (or 64.5% of all adults in the U.S.) are overweight.* Furthermore, obesity – having a Body Mass Index (BMI) of 30 or more – is a growing problem among all groups regardless of age, gender, race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. However, the epidemic is clearly affecting some groups at higher and faster rates than others. Between 1991 and 2000, the greatest increase in obesity occurred among 18- to 29-year-olds, those living in the South, and Hispanics, particularly Mexican Americans.** In 2000, 73.4% of Mexican Americans were overweight, compared to 69.6% of non-Hispanic Blacks and 62.3% of non-Hispanic Whites.*** The 2005 *National Health Interview Survey* from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that at least one in every four Hispanic adults living in the United States is obese.**** Obesity rates generally tend to follow a socioeconomic slope and have a greater affect on people with limited resources, racial-ethnic minorities, and the poor. Likewise, an increased risk of hunger is associated with lack of access to adequate housing and other basic resources, and is disproportionately present in ethnic minorities.

* American Obesity Association, *Fast Facts*, Available online at: <http://www.obesity.org>. Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey," 2002.

** The majority of national data measuring prevalence of overweight and obesity in the Latino population are collected on the Mexican American community, the largest subgroup of Latinos in the United States. While these data can be used to roughly note trends in the Latino community, they do not reflect the full diversity of the Latino population in the United States.

*** *Fast Facts*, *op. cit.*

**** Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *The 2005 National Health Survey*. Washington, DC: 2006.

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HUNGER AND OBESITY

Continued from Page 9

There are a variety of factors associated with being overweight including genetic predisposition, diminished physical activity, and greater reliance on higher-calorie and higher-fat foods.* Strategies to cope with food insecurities can include reliance on high-fat, high-calorie, convenient, and cheap foods, all of which increase the risk of poor food choices for several reasons, including:

- ◆ *Making the most of available resources:* Food insecure families may consume lower-cost foods with relatively high levels of calories per dollar to avoid hunger when they lack the money or other resources – such as food stamps – to purchase a healthy, balanced diet.**
- ◆ *Substituting quality for quantity:* Households often reduce spending on food by varying the quality or types of food they consume before they reduce the quantity, therefore feeling full regardless of whether or not the meal was nutritious.***
- ◆ *Overeating when food is available:* Cycles of food availability in people's diets can cause them to eat more when food is available; over time, this cycle does not provide consistent or proper nutrition and can result in weight gain.****

Consequences of obesity include such risk factors as low self-esteem and depression, type 2 diabetes, pulmonary complications such as asthma and sleep apnea, hypertension, cardiovascular disease and related conditions, some cancers, and arthritis. Type 2 diabetes is typically seen in adults aged 40 or older, but there is an alarming trend of increased risk for children due to rising rates of childhood obesity. Thus, diagnosis, complications, and treatment need to be reexamined and adjusted to accommodate differences in the manifestation of the disease in children.

* *Childhood Hunger, Childhood Obesity: An examination of the paradox.* Boston, MA: Center on Hunger and Poverty, Tufts University, October, 1999.

** Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) and Center on Hunger and Poverty, *The Paradox of Hunger and Obesity in America.* July 2003. Available online at: <http://www.centeronhunger.org/pdf/hungerandobesity.pdf>

*** *Ibid.*

**** *Ibid.*

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money and resources. The health care costs associated with increased illness due to food insecurity and hunger not only fall on individuals who suffer from the effects of food insecurity, but ultimately add strain to the entire health care system.

Additionally, the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) cites evidence that food insecurity and hunger in children create direct costs to low-income school districts due to the negative cognitive impacts of undernutrition. Not only are there negative cognitive impacts of poor nutrition, which can be the result of both hunger and obesity, but studies have found that being undernourished or overweight may increase absences from school. Absenteeism is directly related to academic performance, and its increase also translates into reduced state funding for schools, which must meet attendance performance measures. For low-income school districts, the effects of reduced state funding only exacerbates difficulties in providing such services as proper school lunches and special programs for children who suffer academically or behaviorally because of nutrition-related conditions.³⁶ It is inevitable that the multiple consequences of food insecurity affecting the largest and fastest-growing minority in the U.S. will have a significant influence on the well-being of the nation as a whole.

THREE MAJOR FEDERAL FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS: THEIR ROLE IN COMBATING HUNGER

In general, hunger and food insecurity are a result of an absence of affordable and healthy food options for families with limited resources. Federally-funded nutrition programs and emergency food services are the primary safety net for food insecure families in

the U.S., providing them with resources that help them gain access to more nutritious foods. While there are a number of programs that have been created to provide increased access to food, three major federal nutrition programs – the Food Stamp Program (FSP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) – are often the primary programs that enable Latino families to supplement their existing food dollars.

FOOD STAMP PROGRAM (FSP)

The Food Stamp Program is the largest food assistance program in the country. In 2004, the program reached 23.8 million persons, or almost one in ten American households.³⁷ Over a decade the FSP showed great success in helping households to be more food secure. As of 2004, 50.6% of participants in the program over a 30-day period became food secure.³⁸ The program has been shown to decrease the amount of hunger in the U.S., particularly among those with low incomes, reaching more low-income families in a year than Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or any other public assistance program. In fact, while many low-income families may have access to additional financial assistance and work supports, these programs are often insufficient to lift a family above poverty and reduce risk for food insecurity. For example, according to the Children's Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Project, a family of three who is receiving the maximum TANF benefit will only have an income equal to roughly 36% of the poverty level. However, those families who receive a combination of food stamps and other assistance programs which supplement utility and housing expenses more readily are able to meet their household budgets.³⁹

HUNGER AND OBESITY

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The costs for health complications due to obesity are high. The CDC estimates that direct health costs due to obesity alone in 1995 were \$52 billion and up to \$75 billion in 2003. "Annual hospital costs related to overweight and obesity more than tripled over two decades, rising to \$127 million during the 1997-1999 period."^{*}

Food prices and availability and income inescapably affect food choices, dietary habits, and diet quality. Food insecurity therefore has the likely potential to be linked to the epidemic of overweight and obesity in the U.S. Because there are less affordable options in grocery stores for food insecure families to purchase healthy foods, many families with limited resources purchase and eat foods with less nutrition and higher calories. It has been shown that there is an inverse relation between energy-dense (high calorie) foods – such as those composed of refined grains, added sugars, and fats – and foods representing the lowest-cost option to the consumer.^{**} In addition, the lack of access to adequate housing contributes to many poor urban families typically living in neighborhoods where outdoor physical activities are unsafe or inaccessible. A large majority of the Latino population lives in urban areas; only 8.7% of the Hispanic population lives in non-metropolitan areas. Thus, the lack of places to engage in physical activity, combined with less nutritious food options, can be a significant contributor to weight gain and overall poor health among the population.^{***}

Hunger and obesity may have different biological consequences, but they often stem from the same causes. Lack of adequate resources for sufficient nutritious food is a contributor to both hunger and obesity.

* Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Facts about Obesity in the United States*. Available online at: <http://www.cdc.gov/PDF/FactsAboutObesityintheUnitedStates.pdf>

** Drewnowski, Adam and S. E. Specter, "Poverty and obesity: The role of energy density and energy costs," *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, Vol. 79, 2004, pp. 6-16.

*** U.S. Census Bureau, *March 2002 Current Population Survey*. Available online at: <http://www.census.gov/cps/>

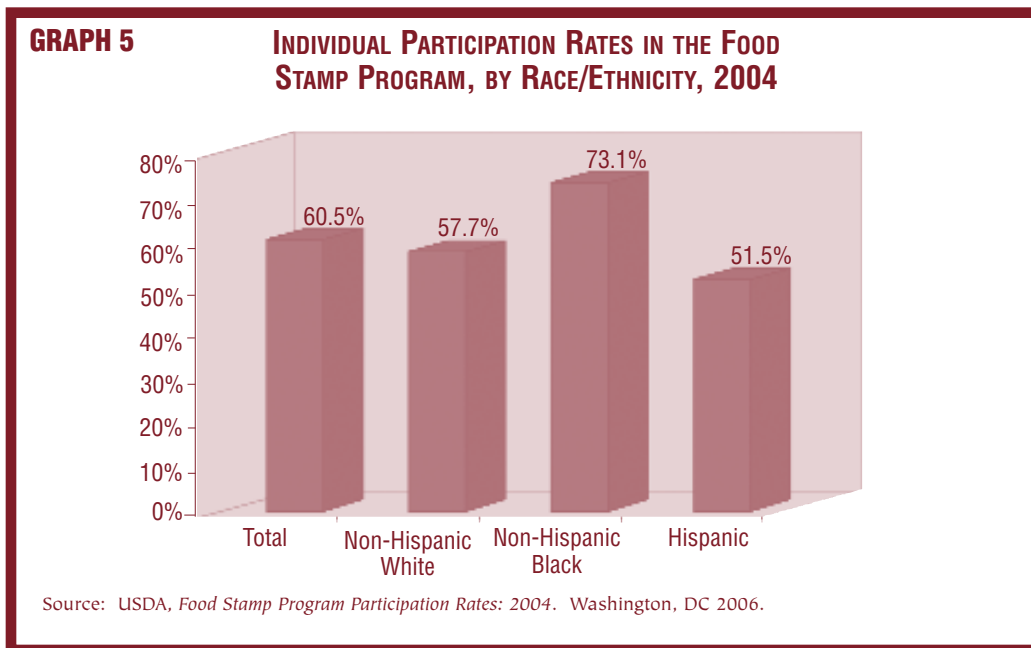
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In addition to helping families become more food secure, FSP makes significant contributions in improving household nutritional status. For example, the use of food stamps increases household food spending more than does an equal cash benefit, giving recipients greater options in the kind and quality of foods they are able to purchase for their families.⁴⁰ Furthermore, studies have found that FSP participants are more likely than low-income nonparticipants to lack confidence about their knowledge of good dietary practices and the quality of their diets, and they benefit from FSP nutrition education which promotes consumption of more “fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy products, daily physical activity, and energy balance.” The results of this education can be seen in the healthier choices that food stamp participants make in grocery stores.⁴¹ Although it is difficult to establish a direct causal relationship between participation and health outcomes because of the added effects of the program on reducing poverty and improving socioeconomic status, it is at least possible to see that participants are able to make more deliberate choices that maximize the nutrition content of their food. In fact, despite rising obesity rates throughout the country for the population overall, women who participated in FSP from 1999 to 2002 were less likely to be overweight and were able to keep their weight relatively steady compared to nonparticipants.⁴²

While the benefits of food stamps are clear, Latinos are missing out on many of the program's benefits because their rates of participation are much lower than those of their White and Black counterparts. Although more than eight million Hispanics were eligible for the Food Stamp Program in 2004, only 51.5% participated, compared to the participation rates of non-Hispanic Whites (57.7%) and non-Hispanic Blacks (73.1%).⁴³ These data suggest that more than three million eligible Hispanic-headed households are not participating in the Food Stamp Program. (See Graph 5)

Latinos continue to face a number of barriers that hinder their opportunity to participate in the program, as demonstrated by their low participation rates. In addition to the general administrative challenges that food stamp participants face and a lack of awareness of the program, Latinos encounter numerous deterrents that influence their willingness and ability to seek food assistance services, such as a lack of culturally- and linguistically-appropriate outreach and information, decreased accessibility to food stamp offices, confusion regarding eligibility, and fear.

In particular, communities where the Latino population is new and often recently arrived face an especially difficult challenge. A study in North Carolina found that the negative perceptions of North Carolinians about newly-arrived immigrants result in fewer social services being provided to them. Despite an awareness of the recent Latino population growth in North Carolina, the director of a food bank noted a weak presence of Hispanics seeking emergency food assistance. The study found that although the Latino community is highly visible to emergency food providers, food assistance is not reaching food insecure families.⁴⁴



Further, while it is true that food security is strengthened in families who receive food stamps, the quantity of benefits that are currently available may not meet the full nutritional needs of families. Many households who receive food stamp benefits cannot purchase a full and nutritious meal for their families. For instance, a study carried out in Massachusetts found that families receiving the maximum food benefit would run significant budget deficits if purchasing the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP), an emergency food plan instituted by the USDA.⁴⁵ Further, many of the food items recommended in TFP were missing from local stores, making it much more difficult for families to obtain a full pantry of food that would meet their nutritional needs.

The inability of the Food Stamp Program to reach a significant number of eligible individuals and the insufficiency of food stamp allocations to cover most necessary food purchases suggest that although the Food Stamp Program plays a vital role in reducing hunger, improvements to the program would greatly help to diminish food insecurity.

SPECIAL SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION PROGRAM FOR WOMEN, INFANTS, AND CHILDREN (WIC)

WIC is a vitally important program in the Latino community because it is tailored to encourage healthy development in families with young children. Latinos have the fastest-growing child population, representing one in five (20%) children in the U.S. under the age of six, thus making investments in the healthy development of children a major priority.⁴⁶ The

IMMIGRANT FOOD STAMP RESTORATIONS IN THE 2002 FARM BILL

When the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (the “Farm Bill”) was enacted, new laws removed a number of barriers that had prevented legal immigrants from seeking assistance under the Food Stamp Program. The new provisions reversed excessive restrictions created under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (welfare reform) which disqualified nearly all immigrants from the Food Stamp Program. The new law made incremental restorations in eligibility to legal noncitizens who were disabled, adults residing in the U.S. for at least five years, and children under 18, regardless of their date of lawful entry.

The 2002 Farm Bill made major strides in restoring access to food stamps. The USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) has been on track to enroll approximately 400,000 legal immigrants into the program. According to the most recent data, noncitizen participation in the Food Stamp Program jumped by approximately 28% from fiscal year (FY) 2003 to FY 2004, when many of the new restorations had been implemented.* Further, participation was enhanced by outreach efforts initiated by FNS as the Farm Bill provisions were implemented. FNS launched a campaign to enroll newly-eligible immigrants into the Food Stamp Program, making linguistically-appropriate materials available in 26 languages and conducting outreach to national anti-hunger advocates with immigrant constituencies.

These efforts also had a profound impact on family members in immigrant households who were already eligible. After welfare reform was enacted, USDA observed a drop in the enrollment of eligible U.S. citizen children who reside in immigrant households; parents weren't enrolling their citizen children in the Food Stamp Program due to their confusion concerning the eligibility laws. The simplified Farm Bill eligibility rules and increased outreach ensured that more citizen children living with noncitizen heads of households gained access to food stamps. As a result, the participation of citizen children living in noncitizen households rose by double digits from FY 2001 to FY 2004.**

WIC program provides specialized food and nutrition assistance for low-income pregnant and postpartum women, infants, and children up to age five who demonstrate nutritional and medical risks due to food deficiencies. Further, many Latino families, like other American households, experience heavier financial constraints when children are young, thus making nutritious foods more difficult to obtain. More than one in four Hispanic households with children under six is living in poverty (28.8%).⁴⁷

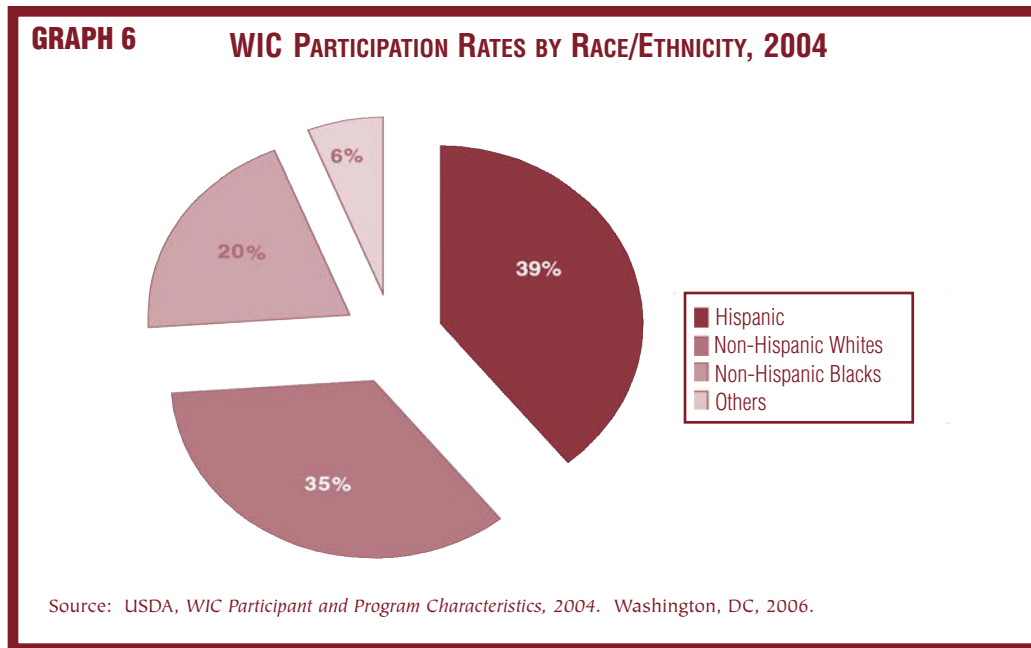
Since qualifying for the WIC program is exclusively based on income and nutritional risks, many Latinos find the enrollment process less intimidating than other food assistance programs. Latinos have very high participation in WIC; approximately four in ten (39.2%) participants are of Hispanic background.⁴⁸

These rates not only demonstrate the success of minimal enrollment and application barriers, they also reveal that the program is being administered in an effective manner.

Furthermore, in addition to providing vital food packages to recipients to supplement their diet, WIC also provides a variety of services, including nutrition counseling and health referrals, resulting in a comprehensive approach to eliminating food insecurity and improving nutrition and health outcomes among very high-risk communities. Thus, when individuals are at risk of health complications, due to dietary deficits or other problems, they are easily referred to accessible health resources. Often, WIC programs are located within health clinics and other community-based organizations that administer health care services and may have nutritionists – facilitating access to prenatal care for pregnant women and well-child visits for infants and children and helping to prevent complications from sickness and other health problems.

* United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, *Food Stamp Program Participation Rates: 2004*. Washington, DC: October 2006.

** *Ibid*; United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, *Trends in Food Stamp Participation Rates: 1999-2002*, September 2004.



WIC has proven to be one of the most successful federal food assistance programs at improving health outcomes. For instance, for every dollar spent on prenatal WIC, between \$1.77 and \$3.13 of Medicaid savings are achieved during just the first 60 days after birth. WIC has also been shown to improve diet, nutrient and vitamin intake, cognitive development and growth rates in children, and, most importantly, birth outcomes.⁴⁹

While WIC food packages clearly meet many of the nutrition needs of pregnant women, they do not completely reflect the diversity of the populations participating in the program. Such flexibility would help participants maximize the utility of the food package. Because there is a standard set of foods offered in the package, many communities may not be familiar with these foods. One of the most prominent demonstrations of the shortcomings of the current national WIC food package is that the only dairy products included are eggs, cheese, and milk, making it difficult for those who are lactose intolerant, a condition common among the majority of racial and ethnic minorities, including Latinos, to meet the recommended daily calcium intake.⁵⁰ After more than 30 years of an unchanging program, the USDA is currently reviewing WIC food packages. WIC would greatly benefit from modifications that would enhance the availability of culturally-appropriate foods and take into account special food needs of participants.

NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM (NSLP)

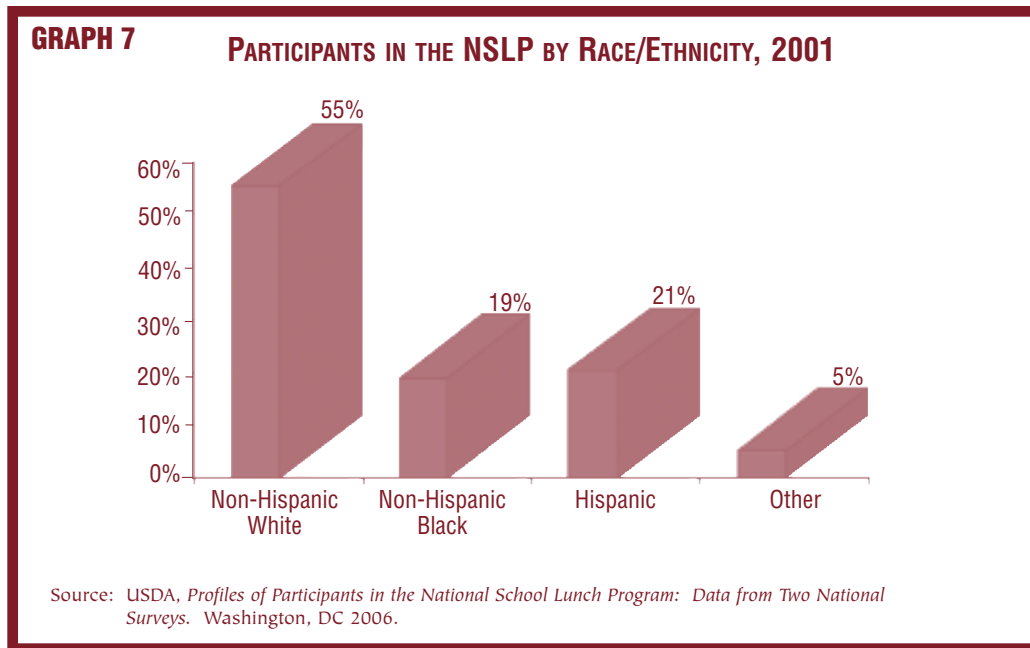
The National School Lunch Act of 1946 ensured the ability of schools to provide meals during the academic day as “a measure of national security, to safeguard the health and well-being of the nation’s children.”⁵¹ Any income-qualified child in a participating school can receive free or reduced-price meals through the program. About 28 million children receive a federally-subsidized school lunch every day, more than half of whom (16.5 million daily) are from low-income families.⁵²

Children participating in NSLP have been found to have overall superior nutritional intakes compared to all those who don’t participate, in part because the lunches provide one-third or more of the daily recommended levels of key nutrients.⁵³ Further, school lunches must meet federal nutrition standards and thus contain no more than 30% of calories from fat and less than 10% of calories from saturated fat. Participants consume more milk, vegetables, and grain products at lunch and fewer sweets and snack foods than nonparticipants.⁵⁴ Therefore, NSLP plays an important role in providing children with proper nutrition and helping to mitigate hunger. In addition, it has great potential for protecting them from nutrition-related health problems and excess weight gain. The potential benefits of NSLP have also been shown to include improved behavior, school performance, and overall cognitive development. Children who are properly nourished and not hungry are more able to actively participate in school activities. Moreover, being undernourished or overweight has been shown to increase absences from school – because of related health problems – which is directly related to academic performance.⁵⁵

Hispanic households with children have among the highest rates of food insecurity, at 21.6% compared to 11.8% of non-Hispanic Whites.⁵⁶ For families who struggle to provide sufficient and good-quality meals at home, federal food assistance programs such as NSLP assure parents that their children will receive the proper nutrition each day. Because Latino communities are at especially high risk of food insecurity, hunger, and inadequate nutrition, it is vital that they are able to access and take advantage of programs like NSLP. By offering free or reduced-price lunches to children of low-income families, NSLP plays a large role both in providing proper nutrition and in mitigating hunger. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, Latino families are not enrolled in the program at as high a rate as other groups or as commonly as one might think given their need; only half of eligible Hispanics are enrolled.⁵⁷ Data from the USDA show that, in 2001, 20.5% of all NSLP participants were Hispanic, while 19.1% were non-Hispanic Black and 55.2% were non-Hispanic White.⁵⁸

Recently, NSLP has improved access for one of the most food insecure communities in the nation – migrant children. While many of their families work in agricultural industries helping to sustain America’s dinner table (Latinos alone make up 83% of U.S. crop workers), the low wages and seasonal nature of migrant work often leave many of these families in danger of going hungry themselves.⁵⁹ Even though NSLP is available to migrant children, accessing

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benefits through the program can be especially difficult for these families as they very often move and change schools in the middle of a school year. The Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 (Child Nutrition Act) made all children participating in the Migrant Education Program (MEP) automatically eligible for the National School Lunch Program, thus removing a major barrier that migrant families face – having to reapply for school meal assistance each time their children transition to another school system.

However, there are still many eligible children who do not have access to NSLP, experiencing many of the same barriers that exist to other food assistance programs. Barriers to access include lack of availability of programs in certain schools or geographic areas; parents' lack of knowledge or misconceptions about the program, including information about eligibility; parents' inability to understand application forms due to language or low literacy; and stigma associated with participation in nutrition programs.⁶⁰ Many of these issues are especially true for Latino families as they experience language barriers, lower literacy rates, less means of accessing information, more stigma surrounding governmental programs, and insecurity and confusion about immigrant participation. For instance, about 5.5 million limited-English-proficient (LEP) students attend U.S. schools, and 80% of these students speak Spanish as their first language.⁶¹ The Child Nutrition Act of 2004 included key steps to improving access to NSLP for children often left out, more often Latino children. The Act addressed language, literacy, and cultural barriers, in part by discussing the translation of materials into other languages; reducing paperwork; making the application and verification process simpler, more streamlined, and more understandable; and making technological improvements to try to reduce stigma among children.

However, federal guidance on these new provisions in the law is lacking specific implementation criteria which would ensure the creation of linguistically-appropriate school enrollment documents and streamlined application processes, thus leaving many low-income LEP families without the means to efficiently access food for their children in times of need.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Federal assistance programs have made remarkable advancements, enabling more American families to gain access to nutritious meals, thereby avoiding hunger. According to the most recent data, the threat of food insecurity was eliminated for 4.1% of Hispanic individuals between 2004 and 2005.⁶² However, food insecurity rates among Latinos remain high, and federal assistance programs could be strengthened to better address the alarming rates of food insecurity within the Latino community. Below are some of the steps that policy-makers, communities, and advocates should take to ensure efficient use of the federal food assistance programs – improving Latino participation and maximizing the nutritional benefit for Latino communities.

ELIMINATION OF LEGAL BARRIERS

- **Improve Immigrant Access to Food Stamps.** Although the food stamp restorations in the 2002 Farm Bill ensured that more immigrants could achieve food security, there are still many immigrant households who cannot access food assistance. Congress has an opportunity in future reauthorizations of the Farm Bill to improve the access of immigrant households by undoing the 1996 welfare reform restrictions and allowing all lawfully-present immigrants to access food stamps. Taking such actions will improve the well-being of immigrants as well as their citizen family members, including children.
- **Train Persons Enrolling Immigrant Households into Food Assistance Programs in Eligibility Rules and Concerns.** Immigrants worry that their use of food assistance programs can put others in their family at risk or jeopardize their immigration status. Much of this fear is driven by misinformation during the application process which leads immigrants to believe that they or their family members are ineligible or will be determined a “public charge” for using such programs. Thus, the participation of those eligible for food stamps continues to be a paltry 42.4%.⁶³ Like other applicants, when immigrants seek assistance, it is imperative that paperwork and administrative burdens be minimized and that information about enrollment is clearly communicated. Thus, specialized training and information should be given to employees of food assistance offices which will help them gain an improved understanding of regulations regarding immigrant eligibility, and how program participation affects applicants’ immigration status. Further, fear and confusion often present among Latino and immigrant communities could

more easily be mitigated if agency staff were aware of immigrants' common concerns about participation in federal food assistance programs, so that they could alleviate fears of immigration consequences.

INCREASED COMMUNITY OUTREACH, INVOLVEMENT, AND EDUCATION

- **Conduct Outreach and Education Through Trusted Organizations.** Latinos need to play a greater role at the community level, participating in the outreach efforts of the USDA, in order for their needs and concerns to be properly and effectively met. Even though the USDA has carried out tremendous outreach efforts to date, Latinos, especially those newly arrived, often hold a distrust of government agencies. Thus, some outreach efforts may be more effectively carried out by organizations established within communities, acting as a liaison between individuals and agencies and creating a conduit of trust. One of the most successful practices of disseminating health-related materials in the Latino community is the use of community-based health workers (*promotores de salud*), who help educate members of the community about important health issues. Similar practices of creating culturally- and linguistically-appropriate outreach for federal assistance food programs could help to connect eligible food insecure families to important resources and strengthen ties to federal agencies. Further, such outreach projects could also be complemented with culturally-competent nutrition education and counseling, similar to programs under WIC, thus continuing to ensure that families participating in food assistance programs receive the maximum nutritional benefit.
- **Increase Availability of Linguistically- and Culturally-Appropriate Materials.** The USDA should also work with community-based organizations in greater efforts to provide language services to limited-English-proficient persons who are eligible for federally-funded nutrition programs or emergency food services. Actions should be taken to ensure that there are written translations of the information and applications, staff available to answer questions in the necessary language, and open dialogue about the program – how to apply and how beneficial it can be. While many organizations are already involved in outreach efforts on other health care and nutrition issues, the community may not be aware of their existence because news of them is not posted in areas that are accessible or highly visible to the Latino population. Moreover, many of the services provided (oral and written) are often not culturally or linguistically appropriate. To improve food resources for school-aged children, additional steps are recommended to improve the availability of information for LEP persons in the National School Lunch Program. Many eligible LEP children are left by the wayside during the school lunch enrollment process. The provision of language services and translated documents for LEP

children and families would make a clear difference in ensuring that more children could readily be enrolled, thereby improving daily nutrition and enhancing their opportunities for success in school and having healthy childhoods. Pertinent information and outreach must be made in a culturally-appropriate manner in order for these families to access important nutrition programs for their children. By fully implementing the requirements under the Child Nutrition Act of 2004, ensuring language services through the entire application process, low-literate and limited-English-proficient families will be more likely to enroll in NSLP, be able to understand and fully comply with the verification processes and, in the end, benefit from nutrition education outreach efforts.

ADDRESSING CULTURAL COMPETENCY WITHIN FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

- **Improve Opportunities to Purchase Healthy Foods.** The USDA should work with local merchants to provide access to affordable and healthy foods, for instance, studying effective ways to expand the acceptance of the Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) – which allocates food stamp benefits through a process similar to the debit card – at farmers markets and local retailers. Increased ability to use EBT at community-based markets would allow many individuals to have access to fresh, healthy, and affordable food choices, creating more options for Latinos and other communities with otherwise limited access to retail markets to meet their dietary needs. Further, allowing those receiving food assistance to participate in widely-available food markets assists in erasing the stigma of using food stamps. The use of the EBT card for food stamp purchases in traditional stores has been widely successful at eradicating the stigma associated with food stamp use. In addition, it has made administrative procedures easier for traditional stores, allowing more of them to encourage participants in food assistance programs to shop at their stores. Facilitating the use of food assistance dollars at local merchants often increases the availability of culturally-appropriate foods, as these merchants are often rooted in the communities. In urban areas, where community stores may not have the infrastructure to offer healthy, affordable foods, the USDA can help to increase the capacity of these merchants. Seed grants for purchasing refrigeration equipment and other supplies will help these stores grow to meet the nutrition needs of their community in a culturally-competent setting, if such stores commit to making their food products available to those receiving food assistance and increasing the nutritional content of their stock by diversifying their product.
- **Ensure that Food Assistance Programs Reflect Diverse Populations.** WIC and NSLP both maintain nutrition standards that, in particular, help children achieve greater food security. Many of the requirements of these programs ensure greater nutrition;

however, if foods do not reflect the diversity of the groups who are participating, it is unlikely that participants will take full advantage of these programs. The USDA should ensure that WIC and NSLP take into account foods that are common in racial and ethnic communities, helping families to meet their dietary needs while incorporating culturally-appropriate, nutritious foods. In line with the current review of the WIC program, WIC food packages and NSLP food standards should undergo regular review to ensure that they reflect the cultural needs of the participants, in addition to meeting nutritional concerns. Furthermore, they should take steps to override administrative barriers that would hinder participants from substituting an adequate food that could be more naturally incorporated into their diets. By providing more culturally-appropriate options, participants are more likely to develop eating standards that are consistent with current dietary recommendations and which they will use throughout their lifetime.

- **Ensure Adequate Language Resources.** Executive Order 13166 reinforced federal agencies' responsibility under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to provide sufficient language-assistance services for participants in federal programs. Despite these federal regulations, Latinos continue to face undue language and access barriers to federally-funded nutrition programs. Ensuring language access during the application and recertification processes would encourage higher participation in programs by members of the Latino community who have householders who are limited English proficient. These efforts should be supported by hiring bilingual staff at the federal level and encouraging employees to undergo cultural competency and language training. Further, the USDA should provide mechanisms to ensure that those who have been denied access to food assistance due to language barriers have a venue to challenge denial of benefits based on language discrimination.

RESEARCH

- **Improve Data Collection.** Research informs understanding of issues and helps to develop purposeful and comprehensive solutions. While there is existing material regarding food insecurity for Latinos, immigrants, and migrant workers, there is little research available on the extent, effects, and root causes of high hunger rates specifically in the Latino community. More research needs to be funded and properly developed documenting the level and status of Hispanic nutrition throughout the U.S., and of various subgroups of Latinos. In particular, the USDA should consistently collect race/ethnicity data regarding eligibility for, participation in, and effectiveness of the USDA's Food Stamp Program, WIC, and Child Nutrition Programs. In areas where participation of eligible households is low, further research should be conducted to determine the underlying factors preventing families from participating in programs, including the effects of stigma within these programs.

KEEPING FOOD STAMPS STRONG

- **Ensure that Food Stamps Reach All Who Need Them.** The Food Stamp Program remains strong in fighting food insecurity because it is designed to provide resources based primarily on an individual's need. It expands or contracts to ensure that those who are in need can readily access food. The Food Stamp Program should continue to maintain a structure in which all those eligible based on income and assets have access to the program. Any restriction limiting the capacity of the program, such as limitations on administrative dollars or block granting of the program, would be highly detrimental to its ability to reach food insecure individuals and would leave behind those most vulnerable to experiencing enrollment barriers, including Latinos.
- **Increase the Food Stamp Benefit.** While FSP does an excellent job of buffering hunger and food insecurity, there are many families who still do not have enough resources to buy a fully nutritious diet based on the current funds provided for each household. Currently, the average participant receives less than one dollar per meal over a 30-day period, an amount which is impossible for sustaining a household. Thus, many families must find ways to cut corners, often sacrificing nutritional content in order to stave off hunger. Rather than using the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) as the approximate designation for the maximum benefit for participants, the TFP should be the minimum benefit provided to participants to ensure their ability to have a complete and nutritious diet.⁶⁴

CONCLUSION

Hunger and food insecurity are serious issues which are too often hidden and insufficiently addressed, despite the existence of government programs with a strong track record of effectiveness in alleviating these problems and improving the health and well-being of low-income Americans. Hispanic Americans, the nation's largest ethnic minority and the fastest-growing group in the country, are disproportionately affected by hunger and food insecurity and are less likely to participate in food assistance and more likely to face eligibility barriers for programs designed to address these problems.

These are challenges that have well-tested and accessible solutions. It is within the nation's reach to ensure that no family experiences hunger or food insecurity. Essential to achieving this goal is a willingness to understand the depth of the problem, and the political will to ensure that the policies and programs related to the nation's nutritional safety nets are fully inclusive. The recommendations above outline immediate steps which should be taken to make significant improvements in eradicating food insecurity in the U.S., particularly in the Latino community.

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