

## *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.

## 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.
- 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.

**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.

- 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.