

Hunger and Poverty in the Hispanic Community

by Deirdre Martinez

In the absence of comprehensive data on nutritional status in the United States, hunger trends can be understood in the context of poverty trends. These trends reveal that Hispanics, one of the nation's most diverse and fastest-growing populations, are disproportionately poor and are therefore likely to suffer from malnutrition. (The U.S. Census Bureau uses the term "Hispanic" to identify persons of Mexican-American, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, and other Hispanic descent. Here, it is used interchangeably with "Latino".)

The 1990 census counted 22.4 million Hispanics, an increase of 53 percent over 1980. Immigration and natural increase are expected to make Latinos the largest ethnic minority in the United States early in the next century.

More than one in every four Hispanic families in the United States – including almost two in five Hispanic children – are poor. Poverty among Hispanic families is rising for a variety of reasons – undereducation, concentration in low-paying jobs, early childbearing, and the impact of recession. Data from the 1990 Census show that

- Hispanic families are more likely to be poor than non-Hispanic families. One-quarter of Hispanic families were poor, compared to 9.5 percent of non-Hispanic families.
- Married couple Hispanic families have a higher poverty rate than their white or black counterparts. Almost one in four Hispanic married-couple families was poor (23.5 percent), compared to 12.4 percent of black and 7.7 percent of white married-couple families.
- Hispanic female-headed families face a high risk of being poor. Almost half (48.3 percent) of Hispanic families in poverty were maintained by females without a husband present, compared to 31.7 percent of non-Hispanic poor families.
- While the poverty rate for all children remains high, Hispanic children are especially likely to be poor. Almost two-fifths (38.4 percent) of Hispanic children were living in poverty, compared to less than one in five non-Hispanic children (18.3 percent).

Homeless and the National Anti-Hunger Coalition. Its founding conference received financial and institutional support from the United Church of Christ.

The National Welfare Rights Union, made up of welfare recipients, stresses that recipients must speak on their own behalf, rather than through representatives or advocates. The union also seeks increased benefit levels, so that anti-poverty programs actually lift people out of poverty.

The National Union of the Homeless, which employs and organizes homeless people, has recruited support from labor unions, religious groups, city officials, technicians, and media specialists to acquire housing projects and other initiatives to provide homeless people with both shelter and respectful treatment. The union has created model facilities and pressured local governments to free up funds and housing for homeless people to operate, renovate, and maintain.

The Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), a Washington-based research and advocacy group, helped establish the National Anti-Hunger Coalition in 1979. The coalition is a grassroots organization of low-income people and their advocates. For many years, FRAC contributed staff time and other resources to the coalition, and it continues to support UOPN with staff and information.

Recently, the National Organization for Women (NOW) has begun working with and providing support to UOPN and its constituent organizations. This has resulted from NOW's desire for its own agenda to better reflect the interests of poor and working-class women as well as women of color. NOW has committed financial and in-kind contributions to UOPN.

Dilemmas of Building Mutual Trust

Gary Cook, of the Presbyterian Hunger Program, has noted that suspicions often accompany efforts to link grassroots and national advocacy organizations

Suspicious go on with the community-based folks thinking the advocacy folks are just playing with poverty and the advocacy folks look at community-based groups as having unrealistic expectations of the political process¹

Building coalitions and true collaboration generally require a conscious values change – away from the business-as-usual method of top-down directing and organizing, to a commitment to self-determination with and without. Many organizations that are committed to such an approach have been known to slip away from their insights, goals, and commitments to the self-determination of low-income people. Such slips often accompany other changes in staff, directors and/or boards, and shifting priorities of funders. A strategy for building coalitions requires open confrontation and evaluation of chauvinisms and assuring the greatest level of democracy possible – with all the fears and risks this entails.

There are numerous effective guides to organizing adaptable to local political and economic realities.² Alliances and coalitions against hunger and poverty pair people and/or organizations who need services with those who can provide resources and services. Resources include “connections,” cash, people, time and in-kind services. Great pains must be taken to make sure that leadership is encouraged, supported, and heeded from among poor and hungry people themselves.

Poverty levels vary among Hispanic subgroups (See table 1, p.55.) Other factors suggest the presence of hunger in the Hispanic community. With a median age of 26.2 years, Hispanics are 7.6 years younger than non-Hispanics. Of the Hispanic population in poverty, 47.7 percent are less than eighteen years old, compared to 38.3 percent of the low-income, non-Hispanic population. At a time in their lives when nutritional demands are greatest, many Hispanic children who are unable to obtain a nutritionally-balanced diet are at risk of being malnourished.

Latinas have a high rate of teenage pregnancy. Recent National Council of La Raza (NCLR) research found that Latina teens aged fifteen to nineteen are twice as likely to become parents as white teens. In 1989, about one Latina teen in ten gave birth, compared with fewer than one in twenty white adolescent females. Teenage mothers often are poorly informed about the importance of health and nutrition habits during pregnancy. One in three Hispanics lacks health insurance, compared to about one of every seven people in the general population. As a result, pregnant adolescents are vulnerable to a variety of complications, including miscarriages, babies born with birth defects, and in some Hispanic subgroups, low birthweight babies. In addition, because these mothers are teenagers, they lack adequate education and employment opportunities, they also lack parenting and other skills, which contribute to poor socioeconomic status.

Hispanics are highly urbanized. Fifty-two percent live in central cities, compared to 22.4 percent of white non-Hispanics and 56.9 percent of black non-Hispanics. Many urban food shoppers do not have access to reasonably-priced supermarkets. Higher prices, limited choices, poor quality, and a larger proportion of highly-processed foods in small neighborhood stores increase the likelihood of poor or unbalanced diets. Neither poor urban consumers nor taxpayers get the greatest value from food stamps used in these circumstances.¹

Hispanic migrant and seasonal farmworkers – tens of thousands of workers and their families – have limited access to health care. Health-care providers say that many have never had formal health care, have suffered years of neglect, and do not have a proper understanding of the role of medicine in acute, chronic, and preventive care. Similarly, as for other new immigrants, language barriers, reliance on traditional medicine, and fear of government and other officials contribute to lack of preventive care and poor understanding of nutritional needs.

Hispanics are the most undereducated major racial/ethnic group in the United States. This can contribute to poor understanding of proper nutrition and probably reduces knowledge about services and programs. The Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) notes, however, that poor people lack stoves and refrigerators more often than nutritional knowledge.

In 1991, 1.3 million, or 14.1 percent, of all households receiving food stamps were headed by Hispanics. Similarly, 1.3 million Hispanics participated in the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), accounting for 23.7 percent of the total population served. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Congressional Budget Office estimate that only 66 percent of individuals and 60 percent of households eligible for food stamps participate. USDA estimates that WIC will serve only about 60 percent of those eligible in 1993.

In 1990, the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation conducted a survey in six communities in California's Central Valley, as part of the nationwide Community Childhood Hunger Identification Project (CCHIP), sponsored by FRAC. More than three-fourths (76 percent) of the families surveyed were Hispanic. The results show that

- More than one-third of the families faced severe hunger, 36 percent reported serious problems getting enough food, 98 percent of hungry families ran out of money for food for an average of seven days per month,
- Nearly sixty-six thousand school-age children in the four-county area were hungry,
- Two-thirds of the families faced food shortages and 68 percent reported at least one instance in the previous year when they did not have enough food to eat or money to buy it,
- The average household spent 44 percent of its income on shelter, one-third of the hungry households spent more than half their total income on shelter,
- The average household size was 5.4 persons, while the average household income was \$12,500 per year, and
- The participation rates in federal food programs were: food stamps – 48 percent, WIC – 19 percent, School Lunch (free/reduced price) – 92 percent, School Breakfast (free/reduced price) – 57 percent, Commodities – 31 percent, Emergency Food – 36 percent.

Successful coalitions usually grow out of broad agreement on values, vision, and mission, though members may often differ on tactical and policy questions. Accepting that survival is contingent on meeting people's basic needs with dignity as a matter of right is a value that must underlie an anti-hunger movement.

Coalitions of Collective Self-Interest

Across the United States, there are organizations with demonstrated successes in coalition building of this sort:

- The Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) has campaigned to get banks to reinvest in local communities. ACORN has also taken over abandoned housing in an effort to press government at all levels to deal with the affordable housing crisis. In Chicago, for example, ACORN has seventeen groups and over five thousand members in low-income African American neighborhoods. In addition to pressing for banks to reinvest in credit-starved neighborhoods, Chicago ACORN has worked on housing, utilities, sexual assault, toxic chemicals, and public education.
- The Justice for Janitors campaign is built on collaboration between ACORN and the Service Employees International Union, an affiliate of the AFL-CIO that organizes low-wage workers. Many unorganized janitors are immigrants who are often subject to exploitation because of their lack of legal status.
- Citizen Action is another national organization with local and regional chapters that organize low-income people around issues which concern them. In western New York, Citizen Action's emphasis is

primarily on access to health care. In Buffalo, the organization has sought to organize a multiracial association to improve the quantity and quality of affordable housing.

- The Rural Coalition is composed of a diverse range of organizations concerned about rural America, including small and minority farmers, Native Americans farmworkers, rural housing activists, and national advocacy groups. The coalition has a long history of recruiting an ethnically diverse board of rural activists and building programs and initiatives responsive to their needs and vision.
- The Tennessee Hunger Coalition has a board that is controlled by low-income people. The coalition has mounted successful grassroots legislative campaigns to make school breakfast more widely available to children in the state.
- African American welfare mothers in the Orlando, Florida, area established Single Mothers in a Learning Environment (SMILE) in 1983. It seeks to empower low-income women to make them independent of the welfare system. Projects include developing employment-related skills, voter registration, and short-term efforts to improve public assistance programs.
- Black Workers for Justice, based in North Carolina, seeks to organize working poor people in the southeastern United States to "challenge injustices such as poverty, hunger, [and] exploitation, and to bring about a better quality of life."
- On the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, the Lakota Fund's Circle Banking Project provides small groups of poor people credit for microenterprises. The project, modelled on the Grameen Bank in

As NCLR and other research have shown, Hispanics are likely to be under-represented in federal programs, including preschool programs such as Head Start, as well as in the Job Training Partnership Act program. Although no separate estimate of the eligible Hispanic population served by WIC and food stamps has been made, these findings suggest that Hispanics are likely to be a considerable part of the unserved eligible population. Factors contributing to low Hispanic participation in these programs include

- *Lack of community-based services*. Often, Hispanics cannot obtain services or apply for assistance within or near their own neighborhoods. Lack of transportation, lack of evening hours to make services accessible to the working poor, and a fear of seeking services outside their community often discourage eligible Hispanics from obtaining services.
- *Inadequate outreach to the Hispanic population*. Many government programs lack bicultural, bilingual staff. Failure to do active community outreach through the Spanish-language media or visits to community agencies and churches also limits Hispanic community awareness of entitlements, and other available services.
- *Hispanics often rely on other family members for assistance instead of government programs*. This family-centered care does not provide nutrition education and may create a burden on other family members, who may themselves be socioeconomically disadvantaged.

To supplement federal anti-poverty and anti-hunger efforts, Latinos often rely on community-based organizations (CBOs). As trusted and recognized institutions, CBOs are in a position to provide outreach, education, and service. Some are affiliated with NCLR, the nation's largest constituency-based Hispanic organization. Its 150 community affiliates provide services to more than two million people annually in thirty-seven states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico.

For example, El Concilio de Madera, an NCLR affiliate in Madera, California, provides affordable, walk-in medical services to low-income residents. Health education staff have found that the little health education available locally is largely targeted to specific lifestyles, diseases, or conditions. They have also found that inadequate nutrition and ignorance about nutrition and its

relationship to health maintenance are major factors in many of the illnesses experienced by Madera Family Health Center patients in nearly all of the life cycles. Staff provide nutritional counselling for children and adolescents and for nutrition- and diet-related diseases such as hypertension, diabetes, and obesity.

Another NCLR affiliate is NAF Multicultural Human Development Corporation (NAF), offering health services to farmworkers in coordination with the Nebraska Department of Health, Nebraska Chapter of the National Hemophilia Foundation, and United Migrant Opportunity Services, Inc. Programs include health-care access, Hispanic hemophilia outreach, migrant health, HIV/AIDS education and prevention, health promotion, and immunization outreach. NAF facilitates access to WIC, maternal and child health care, and family planning by providing translation, transportation, and information.

CBOs have demonstrated their ability to improve the lives of Hispanic families. This ability should be fostered and strengthened. Failure to do so can have serious consequences for Hispanics and for the school and work force population of which they constitute a significant part.

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Bangladesh, offers loans without collateral and depends on peer pressure to assure pay back.

- Kids 1st was established by low-income Hispanic community organizations in Monrovia, California. It seeks the involvement of parents in public school reorganization and quality education for all children, including poor, minority children.
- The Southwest Organizing Project has challenged national environmental organizations to examine how their programs and hiring practices have contradicted their "lip service" to environmental jus-

ice. This challenge resulted in funding problems for the project, but it has stuck by its principles and survived. The project has also fought for improved worker safety and health in the region's high-technology industries. Maria Chavez, a project activist from Albuquerque, New Mexico, who formerly worked in an electronics plant, says:

You get no safety lessons, no education. [We] want to change the laws so people can get educated. We don't want the companies to move, we need the jobs. We need to be educated before we go to these companies to work.

Many of these efforts have received funding or technical assistance from national organizations, certain foundations, and the religious community. The Campaign for Human Development, a program of the U.S. Catholic Conference, is a major source of funds for community-based and national anti-poverty projects. Protestant social justice and anti-hunger programs similarly fund such efforts. The Center for Community Change in Washington, D.C., the Midwest Academy in Chicago, the Industrial Areas Foundation (with groups around the country), and the Highlander Center in New Market, Tennessee, among other groups, train community organizers.

In the United States, poverty—and therefore vulnerability to hunger—is often related to race. The majority of poor people are white, but the poverty rate among members of racial minority groups is higher than that of whites. In 1991, the U.S. Census Bureau reported an overall poverty rate of 14.3 percent. For whites, the rate was 11.3 percent, for African Americans, 32.7 percent, and for Hispanics, 28.7 percent. Child

poverty rates were 21.1 percent overall, 16.1 percent for whites, 45.6 percent for African Americans, and 39.8 percent for Hispanics. Organizations which promote the rights and well-being of members of racial minority groups often work on hunger and poverty issues.

For example, the oldest, national African-American civil rights organization, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), established in 1909, is best known for its efforts to oppose racial discrimination in all facets of U.S. life. It has eighteen hundred local chapters and 400,000 members, and is active in litigation and public policy advocacy. In addition, the NAACP assists in the development of low-income housing and offers education and training, job referrals, and child care.

Similarly, the National Urban League, established in 1910, is a civil rights and social service organization which seeks to assist African Americans in achieving social and economic equality. Through 114 affiliates in thirty-four states, it provides assistance and empowers African-American communities in such areas as employment, housing, education, social welfare, AIDS education, and crime prevention. The organization also engages in research and advocacy activities. Its community-based programs around the country involve more than a million people each year.

Along with the efforts of national groups, there are tens of thousands of community-based low-income people's organizations. These include churches (often refuges from a troubled world), parent-teacher associations, and a wide variety of locally-initiated neighborhood improvement efforts.

Low-income people's organizations continue to need considerable support. As welfare rights activist Jean Dever told the May consultation, it is hard to think about

contacting your congressional representative when you do not have a phone and you cannot afford the stamp for a letter.

When other organizations provide funds, services, technical assistance, and training, they must not use this to exert control. Partnership is a matter of empowering grassroots groups to articulate their message as they define it.

Conclusion

Locally-determined grassroots efforts should feed into national strategies to end hunger. Only federal policies can achieve the redirection of resources needed to revitalize low-income communities. This coin has two sides: harmful federal policies, as in the 1980s, can overwhelm promising local efforts. Attempts to change federal legislation and policies seldom succeed in fostering lasting change without broad popular support. Thus, Tootie Welker, organizer for the Montana Alliance for Progressive Policy, argues that increased voter participation is the vehicle for obtaining real power.⁴ Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, academic experts on poor people's movements, add that achieving change often requires acts of protest as well.⁵

A successful movement to end hunger will adopt the strategies, risks, partnerships, and courage necessary to "do the right thing." That means working for the creation of jobs with decent wages for all who can work, secure incomes for all households to meet their needs, and, over the long term, a just society. ■

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Table 1

Poverty Among Hispanic Persons By Place of Origin (1990)

	All Families		Income Below Poverty Line				
	# Families	% of Hispanic Families	# Families	% Families	# Persons	% Persons	% Children
Total U.S. Population	66,322,000	.	7,098,000	11%	33,585,000	13%	21%
Total Hispanic Population	4,982,000	100%	1,244,000	25%	6,006,000	28%	38%
Mexican Origin	2,945,000	59%	736,000	25%	3,764,000	28%	36%
Puerto Rican Origin	626,000	13%	235,000	37%	966,000	41%	57%
Cuban Origin	335,000	7%	46,000	14%	178,000	17%	31%
Central and South American Origin	667,000	13%	148,000	22%	748,000	25%	35%
Other Hispanic Origin	408,000	8%	79,000	19%	350,000	21%	36%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau