



# Food Insecurity Among Hispanic Children and Families in Texas

## Introduction

All children and families should have the opportunity to live a long, healthy, and productive life. However, too many children lack critical building blocks for good health, including consistent access to affordable, nutritious food. Food insecurity affects 35 million Americans, including 10.7 million children,<sup>1</sup> and is an especially urgent issue as the COVID-19 pandemic and related economic crisis and job loss continue.

## Common Terms and Latino Status

- **Household food insecurity:**  
A household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food. Latino children are more likely to live in a food insecure household than White children (17% and 10.7%, respectively).<sup>2</sup>
- **Household poverty:**  
Household income is below 100% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), or \$26,200 for a family of four in 2020.<sup>3</sup> Nearly one in four Latino children lives in poverty, compared to about one in 10 White children.<sup>4</sup>
- **Low-income household:**  
Household income is below 200% of the FPL, or \$52,400 for a family of four.<sup>5</sup> More than half (53%) of Latino children live in a low-income household compared to 26% of White children.<sup>6</sup>

Latinos\* have contributed to the nation's economy for generations yet historically are more likely than the general population to experience food insecurity. COVID-related stressors are exacerbating the situation. Prior to COVID-19, 17% of Hispanic children lived in a food-insecure household compared to 10.7% of non-Hispanic White children.<sup>7</sup> Since the pandemic began, an estimated 47% of Hispanic households with children have reported being food insecure, the highest percentage reported for all racial and ethnic groups.<sup>8</sup> The pandemic has also led to a rise in Latino unemployment, from 4% before COVID-19 to a spike of 18.9% in April 2020, and most recently to 8.8% in October 2020.<sup>9</sup> Nearly three out of five Hispanic households report a loss of income since the pandemic started.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, increased immigration-related fears have grown as well due to anti-immigrant policies—including the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's public charge rule—which have heightened a chilling effect and caused confusion for Latinos regarding access to federal nutrition programs, leading many families to forgo benefits for which their children are eligible.<sup>11</sup> These factors have pushed Latino household budgets to the limit, making it harder to purchase nutritious food regularly. The number of Hispanic households with children reporting not having enough food in the past week has steadily increased since the start of the pandemic, topping out at 21% in the middle of June 2020.<sup>12</sup> Without consistent nutritious meals, existing disparities are likely to worsen: Hispanics are more likely than non-Hispanic Whites to develop chronic health conditions, including obesity and diabetes, which places them at greater risk of becoming severely ill or dying from COVID-19.<sup>13</sup>

Key federal nutrition programs—including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—help to alleviate poverty and provide resources for children and families to access healthy food. New programs created to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 on child hunger, such as the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) program, also play a critical role in helping to fill meal gaps, especially in light of school closures nationwide. Yet, food insecurity remains a challenge and is especially pressing in states such as Texas, where the second-largest Latino population in the nation, behind California, resides. This brief examines the nutrition landscape that Hispanic children face in Texas to help identify how state policymakers can invest in programs that improve access to nutritious food for all children, including Hispanics, in the state.<sup>†</sup>

## Prior to COVID-19, Hispanic Children in Texas Were More Likely to Live in Low-Income, Food-Insecure Households and Experience Health Consequences.

Currently, 11.5 million Latinos live in Texas and account for nearly half (49%) of all children in the state.<sup>14</sup> More than four million Texans are food insecure, including 1.6 million children.<sup>15</sup> Before the COVID-19 crisis, Hispanic children in Texas were more likely than Texas children overall to be in vulnerable financial situations and to experience food insecurity.<sup>16</sup>

- More than one in four (26%) of Hispanic children were living in poverty, compared to 8% of non-Hispanic White children in the state.<sup>17</sup>

\* The terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race. This document may also refer to this population as "Latinx" to represent the diversity of gender identities and expressions that are present in the community.

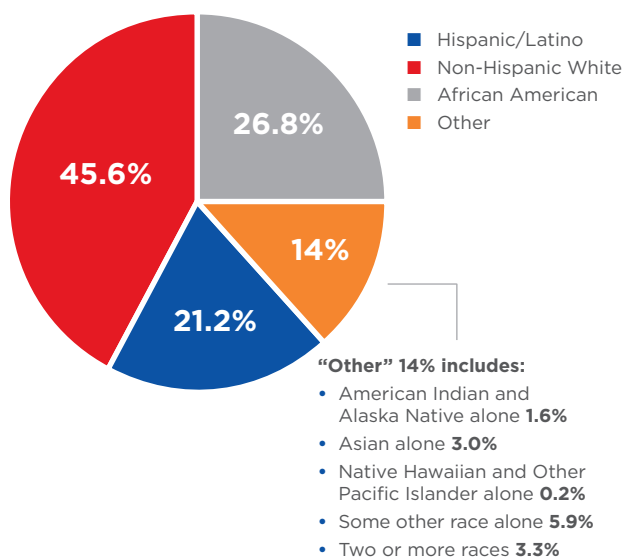
† The data in this brief come from the most recent and complete data sets available. As such, data points and comparison years may vary.

- Hispanic children in Texas were more likely to live in a low-income household than all other children (56% and 22%, respectively).<sup>18</sup>
- Hispanic children in Texas were more likely to experience food insecurity than other groups, with nearly one in three living in a food-insecure household.<sup>19</sup>
- Hispanic children in Texas were more likely to be overweight and obese and experience associated chronic conditions. More than 41% of Latino children in Texas ages 10–17 were reportedly obese or overweight, compared to 26% of White children.<sup>20</sup>

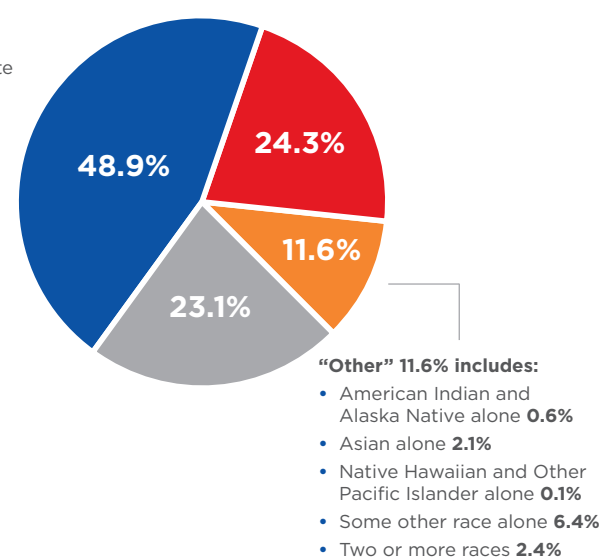
## Proven Nutrition Programs, such as SNAP, Are Critical in Reducing Food Insecurity and Improving Health for Latino Children in Texas.

The health and economic crises resulting from COVID-19 have reinforced the important role that federal nutrition programs, such as SNAP, play in providing access to nutritious food. SNAP is the largest federal nutrition program and provides food assistance to nearly 40 million low-income individuals.<sup>21</sup> The program is also the most effective poverty alleviator in the country. In 2017, SNAP lifted 595,371 Latino children out of poverty.<sup>22</sup> Texas's SNAP program is one of the largest in the nation, serving 3.4 million Texans.<sup>23</sup> While Texas Latinos have a higher labor force participation rate (65.9%) than all Texans (64.3%), SNAP remains critical for Latino families struggling to make ends meet.<sup>24</sup> Latinos account for nearly half (48.9%) of the more than one million SNAP-participating households in Texas.<sup>25</sup> Hispanic children represent nearly one in three (30%) of the 1.8 million children in Texas households who receive public benefits, including SNAP.<sup>26</sup>

**FIGURE 1.**  
**U.S. SNAP Household Participation**



**FIGURE 2.**  
**Texas SNAP Household Participation**



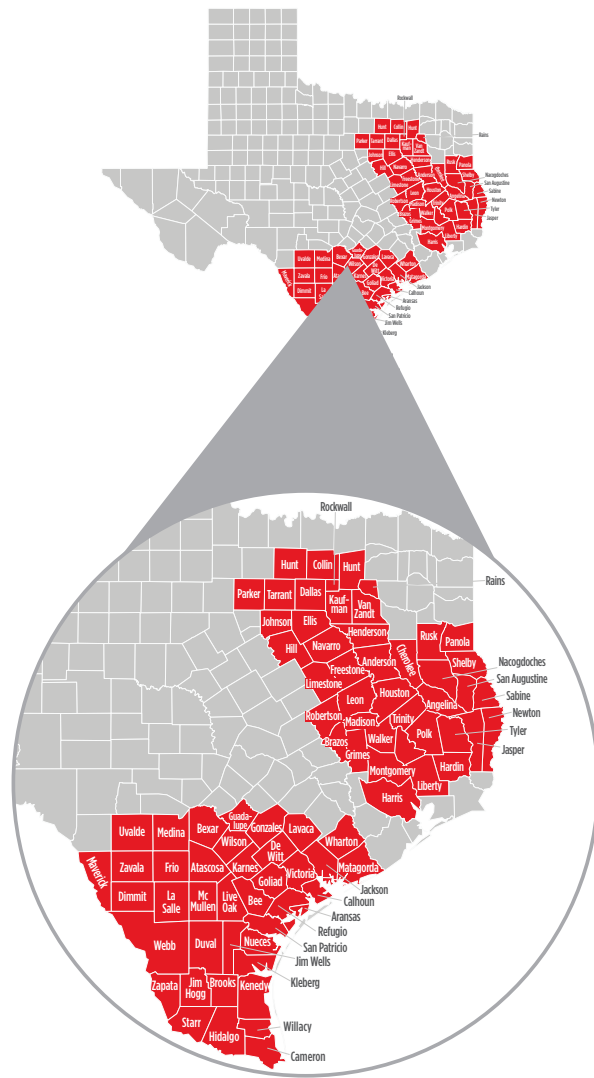
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2019 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates. [https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=SNAP&g=0100000US\\_0400000US48&tid=ACSST1Y2019.S2201&hidePreview=true](https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=SNAP&g=0100000US_0400000US48&tid=ACSST1Y2019.S2201&hidePreview=true)

Note: Totals exceed 100% due to rounding and self-identification into more than one category. There is a significant difference in "Other" race/ethnicity category between USDA and Census data. This is due, in large part, to the fact that disclosure of race/ethnicity is not required for SNAP enrollment. Any participant who leaves this field blank or answers multiple races is included in the "Other" category in the USDA data set. Consequently, the USDA's racial and ethnic data often have a significant share—up to 70%—of participants categorized as "Other."

## Food Insecurity Is Especially High in Regions with Large Hispanic Populations.

Texas has some of the highest rates of food insecurity in the nation, especially in regions where a significant share of Latinos resides:

- **Dallas County** is home to more than one million Latinos. More than half (52%) of the 710,653 children who live in Dallas County are Hispanic. Dallas County has one of the highest numbers of food-insecure children in the nation (145,120). About one in five children in Dallas County is food insecure.
- **Harris County** is home to more than two million Latinos. More than half (52%) of children in Harris County are Hispanic. Harris County has the second-largest number of food-insecure children in the nation (360,630). Nearly one in four children in Harris County is food insecure.
- **South Texas**—which includes Cameron, Hidalgo, Webb, and Zavala Counties—is overwhelmingly Latino. Nearly 84% of its 2.4 million residents are Hispanic. One in four children in South Texas is food insecure. The predominantly Hispanic Zavala County (94%) has the state's highest child food insecurity rate (39.7%).



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## Many Texas Hispanics Continue to Experience Barriers to SNAP Participation.

SNAP enrollment has declined for various reasons, leaving too many children in Texas without a stable source of food. Latino children and families face multiple systemic and structural barriers to SNAP participation, including eligibility restrictions, high poverty rates, limited language access services, and inadequate community outreach about the program. These barriers may explain why an estimated four million Latinos nationwide who are eligible for SNAP do not participate in the program, including many who live in Texas.<sup>27</sup>

Concerns related to immigration status also present a notable barrier to Latino enrollment in SNAP. Recent immigration enforcement and administrative actions contributed to a 10% decrease in eligible SNAP enrollment and a concurrent increase in child food insecurity among immigrant families.<sup>28</sup> While the vast majority of Hispanic children in Texas are citizens (95%), nearly half (49%) live in mixed-status households (i.e., with at least one noncitizen parent).<sup>29</sup> Between 2015 and 2019, SNAP

participation in Texas dropped by 13% due largely to the public charge rule's chilling effect.<sup>30</sup> These barriers contribute significantly to leaving Hispanic children in the United States, including Texas, particularly vulnerable to food insecurity, leading to poor health outcomes.<sup>31</sup>

## COVID-19 Is Exacerbating Food Insecurity for Hispanic Children and Families in Texas.

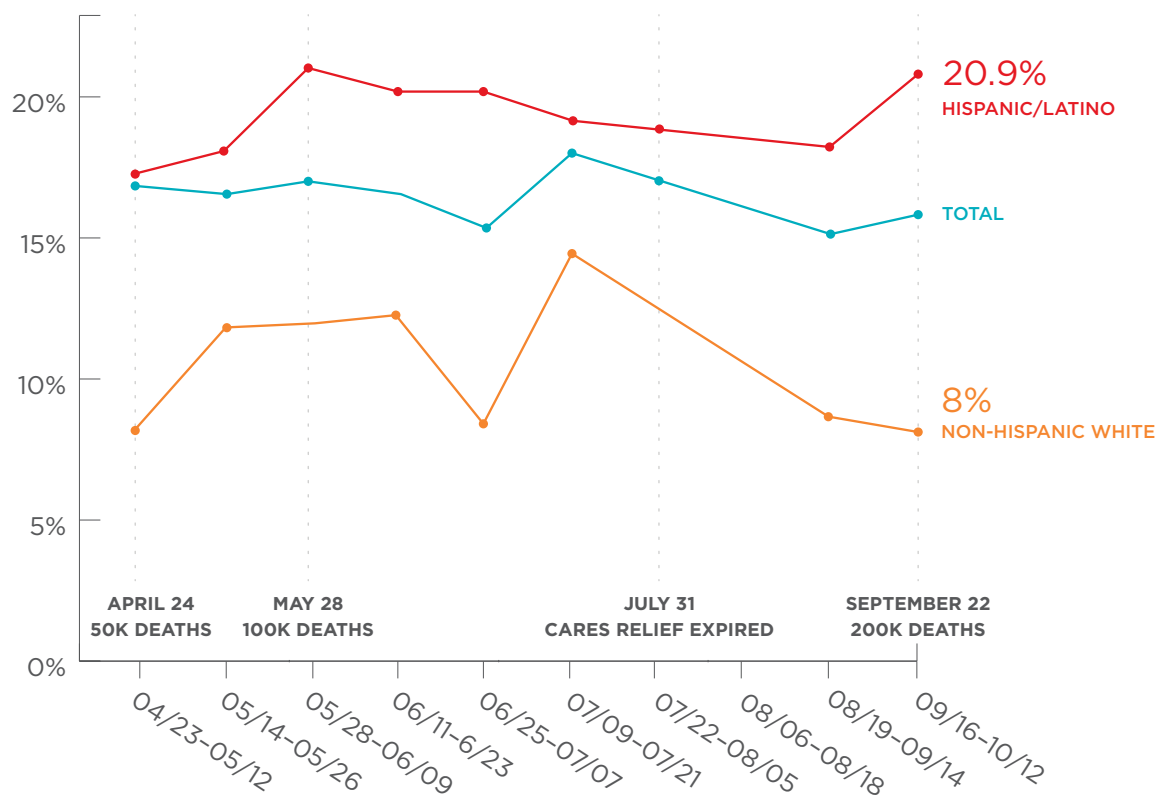
As COVID-19 spread throughout the nation, Latinos in Texas were already in a relatively vulnerable position from a health and economic perspective. Congress has taken important steps to address food insecurity in the wake of the pandemic through the creation of the P-EBT program under the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA). This program allows states the flexibility to support the nutrition of children who lost access to free or reduced-price school meals when schools closed nationwide. In Texas, the P-EBT program can benefit up to 3.6 million eligible children, or approximately 67% of children in participating schools.<sup>32</sup> This program has been extended through September 2021.

### Still, food insecurity remains especially high for Hispanic children in the state.

- More than half of Hispanic adults in Texas (57.3%) report that they or someone in their household experienced a loss of employment income since March 2020, compared to 41.1% of non-Hispanic White adults.<sup>33</sup>
- More than 60% of Hispanic adults in Texas are concerned about being unable to keep up with basic expenses, such as food, because of layoffs or pay cuts due to the pandemic.<sup>34</sup>
- About 65% of Latinos in Texas are concerned that their children or those of close family members will have trouble accessing free or reduced-price school meals.<sup>35</sup>
- Latino children in Texas are more than twice as likely as other children to have experienced food insecurity during the pandemic. In mid-October, 20.9% of Latino households with children reported that their household sometimes or often did not have enough food to eat in the past seven days, while 8% of non-Hispanic White households did not have enough food.<sup>36</sup>

**FIGURE 3.**

### Texas Households with Children Who Do Not Have Enough Food to Eat



Source: Population Reference Bureau analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for UnidosUS, "By the Numbers: Latinos in the Time of Coronavirus," <https://www.unidosus.org/campaigns/coronavirus-covid-19/Latino-COVID-19-Dashboard>.



## Policymakers Must Invest in Alleviating Persistent Hunger

The importance of nutrition assistance has never been more apparent. Many Latinos in Texas are on the frontlines of the pandemic in essential jobs, but structural inequities make them more likely to need nutrition assistance programs to keep healthy food on the table. When that assistance is not available, Hispanic families face a significant threat to their health and well-being—hunger. Congress passed temporary interventions to help mitigate the economic effects of the pandemic, including P-EBT. But the persistent need for food assistance among Hispanic families in Texas will not end when the COVID-19-related crisis ends.

State policymakers must step up not only to address the urgent needs of families now, but also to bolster future benefits by taking immediate action to remove barriers and increase participation in federal nutrition programs, such as SNAP. Investments today to strengthen

and protect nutrition assistance programs will help ensure that millions of children, including Latinos, have access to a basic human need and an opportunity for a bright, healthy, and productive future.

## About Us

UnidosUS, previously known as NCLR (National Council of La Raza), is the nation's largest Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization. Through its unique combination of expert research, advocacy, programs, and an Affiliate Network of nearly 300 community-based organizations across the United States and Puerto Rico, UnidosUS simultaneously challenges the social, economic, and political barriers that affect Latinos at the national and local levels.

For more than 50 years, UnidosUS has united communities and different groups seeking common ground through collaboration, and that share a desire to make our country stronger. For more information on UnidosUS, visit [www.unidosus.org](http://www.unidosus.org) or follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Twitter](#).



## Endnotes

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