



Not Enough Food on the Dinner Table: A Look into Food Insecurity among Hispanics/Latinos Living in Rural Communities in the United States*

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The position paper was made possible through a grant from Knorr®. UnidosUS and Knorr believe that wholesome, nutritious food should be accessible and affordable to all, regardless of where they live. Knorr's funding support to UnidosUS aims to generate a more comprehensive understanding of the lives and needs of Latinos in rural communities via a robust research approach that included Focus Groups Discussions (FGDs) and In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) with community members and community leaders from across the country.

As Knorr continues to fulfill its commitment to increase access and promote healthy eating habits, it is important to bring visibility to the needs of families in food-insecure communities, particularly among Hispanics/Latinos. This research offers a deeper understanding of these challenges and proposes solutions in improving access to food and nutrition security.

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* The terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout our materials 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. Our materials may also refer to this population as "Latinx" to represent the diversity of gender identities and expressions that are present in the community.

Abstract

Background: Over 38 million people in the United States (U.S.) were living in food-insecure households in 2020. Food insecurity is defined as having inconsistent access to adequate food at some point in the year due to lack of resources for food. Hispanic/Latino households made up 17% of households affected. For Latinos living in rural communities, the multi-level barriers to accessing healthy foods are exacerbated due to both geographic location and limited availability of resources, putting them at greater risk for food insecurity and hunger.

Purpose: This report compiles findings from a needs assessment conducted by UnidosUS and the California State University Long Beach, Center for Latino Community Health Evaluation and Leadership Training. It examines food insecurity among Latinos living in rural communities to inform policymakers and other stakeholders of the programmatic and policy opportunities that exist to improve food access, promote healthier lifestyles, and reduce disease burden and health care costs among underserved populations.

Methods: A mixed-methods **needs assessment** was conducted from February to March 2022, including a literature review, socio-demographic surveys, focus groups with Latino adults living in rural areas, and in-depth interviews with UnidosUS Affiliates and other leaders of community-based organizations (CBOs).

Results: The literature review confirmed key areas of focus including the prevalence and context of food insecurity; personal, community, and policy barriers to accessing healthful food options; and gaps in resources for Latinos in rural communities. A total of 16 community members and 23 community leaders participated in the conversations, representing five different states across the United States. Community leaders represented seven CBOs and various employment positions (e.g., Director of Health Education, Community Health Worker, and Caseworker).

- **The mean age of community members was 40** (ranging from 15 to 58 years of age)
- the **majority were female** (87%)
- **self-identified as being born in Mexico** (94%), and
- **married** (75%)

Approximately 75% of community members agreed that the statement **“I’ve worried that food would run out before having enough money to buy more”** was either always or sometimes true.

The qualitative analyses resulted in **11 themes** encompassing different factors associated with food insecurity and hunger among Latinos living in rural communities:

1. Food access
2. Cultural influences
3. Family influences
4. Nutrition and health knowledge
5. COVID-19 impact
6. Existing nutrition education programming
7. Access to and enrollment in federal assistance programs
8. Need for tailored nutrition programming
9. Virtual nutrition education programming
10. Strategies to increase food security
11. Latino cultural wealth



Conclusions: Opportunities to address food insecurity among Latinos living in rural areas exist at the individual, community, organizational, and policy levels. Our programmatic and policy recommendations are in direct alignment with the recent White House Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health.

Three programmatic recommendations include:

1. Strengthening nutrition education considering and respecting the context of Latinos living in rural communities
2. Enhancing nutrition-related programming to improve engagement
3. Offering other options to receive nutrition education (such as through video-conferencing platforms) to address disparities related to access

Four policy recommendations include:

1. Improving food security and food access for all Latinos
2. Increasing access and enrollment to federal nutrition assistance programs
3. Expanding food access and addressing barriers due to the built environment
4. Raising funding allocation to improve food security outcomes

Implementation of the proposed programmatic and policy recommendations has the potential to improve access to healthful food options, which in turn can improve dietary patterns and prevent the onset of obesity and other chronic conditions among Latinos in rural communities.



Introduction

With a population of over 331 million,¹ the United States had over 38 million people experiencing food insecurity in 2020, demonstrating the severity of the issue, which worsened after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.² Food insecurity is defined as having inconsistent access to adequate food at some point in the year due to a lack of resources for food.³ Of those affected, Latino households living in the United States made up 17% of the food-insecure households in 2020,⁴ with evidence demonstrating that prevalence rates increase based on household types, placing Latinos experiencing poverty, living in single-parent households, and living in rural areas at increased risk for food insecurity.⁵

Rural areas are defined as having low population density and vast undeveloped land.⁶ Based on 2020 Census population data, 24% of rural Americans are people of color, with a 3.5% increase between 2010 and 2020. The distribution of people of color varies by geographic region and is comprised of Black, Latino, and Indigenous people across the counties. The latest available data show that among Latinos living in rural communities, about three-fourths are of Mexican origin. Rural Latino communities often work on the farms that grow the nation's food, yet their living circumstances and geographic locations create barriers to accessing healthy foods and perpetuate a cycle of food insecurity for them. People living in rural communities are often impacted by limited employment opportunities, long working hours, and social isolation.⁷ In rural areas, it is common to have to travel long distances to reach low-cost options for healthy food.⁸ As an alternative food source, Latino rural communities rely on food vendors such as mobile food trucks and flea markets.⁹ Further, the COVID-19 pandemic created financial instability due to loss of work hours, wages, and employment that resulted in increased vulnerability for food insecurity among Latinos in rural communities.

To combat food and nutrition insecurity, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) offers numerous programs; however, not all persons living in the United States have equal access to these programs. Federal nutrition assistance programs that are aimed at helping families obtain the food they need often present multiple barriers to access. Latinos living in rural areas across the nation face obstacles that the general U.S. population does not. For example, a barrier to access includes a lack of knowledge of eligibility requirements for nutrition assistance programs. This barrier is especially prevalent among families with mixed immigration statuses who may not know they can apply for benefits to feed eligible children or family members. Fear of the now-obsolete Public Charge rule, which deemed an undocumented individual who received public benefits to be ineligible to become a lawful permanent resident, lingers in the community.¹⁰ Further, applications require documentation

such as consistent income on paystubs to determine eligibility, yet the types of employment that rural Latinos have often do not provide consistent payment, making it hard to qualify. Not having bilingual staff is also a significant barrier to accessing federal nutrition programs in some communities across the country, as some government agencies do not have the teams necessary to help the monolingual Spanish-speaking Latino rural community members apply for benefits.¹¹

Food insecurity results in negative health implications including stress, anxiety, and consumption of unhealthy foods, leading to higher risk for poor health and chronic diseases.¹² Given the impacts and the layers of barriers Latino rural populations face, there is a need to identify potential solutions at both the community and policy levels.

Methodology

A mixed-methods (quantitative + qualitative) needs assessment was conducted from February to March 2022 to assess food insecurity and lack of nutritious meals in rural Latino communities. The needs assessment included brief socio-demographic surveys, in-depth interviews, and focus groups with Latino community members living in rural areas and with UnidosUS Affiliates or non-Affiliate community leaders. Participants were recruited by staff at UnidosUS, a national Latino civil rights and advocacy organization, and its Affiliate community-based organizations. Efforts were made to have representation from rural or remote areas from various geographical locations in the United States and from different ethnic background groups within the Latino community through purposive sampling to include older adults, adults with children, and farm workers.

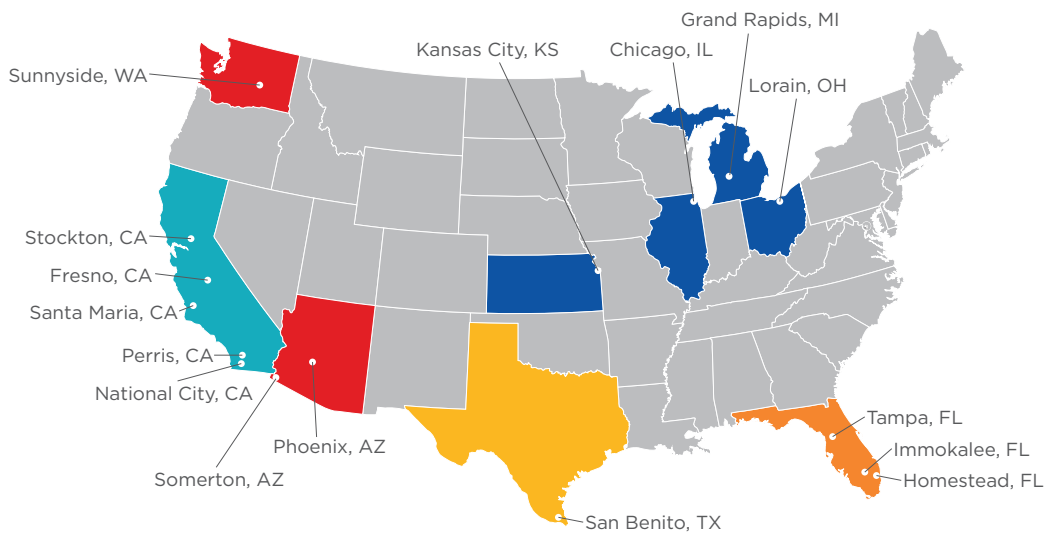
The socio-demographic surveys were developed in English and Spanish and were administered using Qualtrics, an online survey tool. Community members were asked to complete a 22-item survey to collect demographic information and gain insight into grocery shopping habits, knowledge of federal nutrition assistance programs, participation in nutrition classes, and to assess food security. Community leaders were asked to complete a 15-question survey to obtain data regarding age, gender, education, race and ethnicity, birth place, and information on the programs and services provided by their organization. Semi-structured IDIs and FGDs were conducted separately with Latino community members and with community leaders to hear and understand the different perspectives from both groups. The IDIs and FGDs were conducted via Zoom at convenient times for participants and considered time zone differences. Bilingual/bicultural research staff led the discussions using a semi-structured guide. The IDIs, conducted in English, lasted between 30–60 minutes, while FGDs were conducted in Spanish and lasted approximately 90 minutes. Due to audio and video recordings of the IDIs and FGDs, participants were given an alias to maintain anonymity. FGD participants received a \$100 gift card as compensation for their time.

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim using Microsoft Word Transcribe and crosschecked by a research team member for accuracy. An iterative, multi-step approach was utilized throughout the data analysis process.¹³ Initial codes were developed using the interview/focus group guide, literature review, and notes from the initial read of the data. Three members of the research team coded one set of transcripts, met to discuss codes, generated new codes, and modified existing ones before moving on to the rest of the transcripts. The coders met regularly to discuss and cross-validate codes and discuss emerging themes in an iterative process for consensus. Transcripts were coded in Dedoose.¹⁴ After coding was completed, the research team met to discuss and develop themes based on initial code assignments and interpretation of data.

Problem Definition

Of the community members surveyed, 75% agreed to some extent with the statement **“In the last 12 months, I’ve worried that food would run out before having enough money to buy more.”** Community members and leaders agreed that Latinos living in rural communities often purchase food items based on cost, and that due to the high costs of fresh, healthy foods, they are often left with limited options that result in purchasing less healthful foods. Community leaders added that although there are support services available, foods available at food pantries are often mostly energy-dense, packaged products. The COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted food security among Latinos living in rural areas, as it led to reduced work hours and loss of wages and employment that destabilized their finances. Financial hardships due to COVID-19 pushed some to apply to federal assistance programs that would help them access food, yet barriers to the programs left many households without enough food on the dinner table.

IDIs and FGDs Geographical Reach



Results

A total of 16 community members and 23 community leaders participated in key discussions, representing five different states across the United States. The mean age of community members was 40 (ranging from 15 to 58 years of age); the majority were female (87%), self-identified as being born in Mexico (94%), and married (75%). Engaging Latino community members living in rural communities and community leaders delivering services in rural communities resulted in the identification of multi-level and complex systems that contribute to food insecurity as well as potential solutions to address food access and gaps in resources to improve the well-being of this vulnerable population. Survey data supported literature review findings in quantifying the gravity of food insecurity and contributors among Latinos living in rural communities. Findings from the community members survey indicate approximately 75% agreed with the statement **“In the last 12 months, I’ve worried that food would run out before having enough money to buy more.”** Similarly, the majority (62%) agreed with the statement **“In general, the food we bought was not sufficient, and we did not have enough money to buy more.”** These findings highlight the need for rural Latino communities to receive support from state and federal agencies, as well as the need for increasing outreach and access to federal assistance programs and changes in policies that prevent participation.

Findings from the IDIs and FGDs resulted in eleven (11) themes encompassing factors that exacerbate food insecurity that must be examined to effectively address food access among Latinos living in rural communities.

1. **Food access** was a major contributing theme. Community members discussed barriers related to availability of foods due to their geographic location, limited number of and distance to grocery stores, and reduced availability of fresh food at local convenience stores and food trucks.

"Sometimes you don't know when you are going to buy fresh products, especially in the area where I live."

— **Community member**

Community leaders discussed the gravity of food shortages in rural communities, availability of food options in the fields, and constrained access to healthy meals. Community members shared that they purchase food based on cost; however, due to the high costs of fresh foods, they have limited options resulting in purchasing less healthy foods. Community leaders also disclosed that the legal status of Latinos in rural communities makes them vulnerable to food insecurity due to employment in "the lowest paid profession," farm and agricultural work.

"They spend a lot of time in the field. Food trucks do not sell very healthy food, usually panesitos, papitas, sodas (bread, chips, soda). That for me, is food insecurity because I know that that's junk food. They're not filling themselves with the type of nutrients they need for the type of labor they perform."

— **Community leader**

2. **Cultural influences** were evident in the discussion as community members and leaders agreed on the importance of cultural influence in terms of food access and meals prepared in the home. Community members' discussions focused primarily on the influence cultural foods have on their eating habits. Community leaders highlighted the importance of acknowledging different cultural influences in the development of nutrition education programs as not all Latinos hold the same practices in terms of food preferences.

"Teaching them how they can make it (recipes) healthier or use substitutions so that it still feels like they're sticking to their culture, but with a little more nutritional value."

— **Community leader**

3. **Family influences** encompassed intergenerational preferences for foods and meals. Community members discussed that children influence what they make at home, as they need to ensure their children will eat what they prepare, which can lead to unhealthy meals. Community leaders discussed the differences in food preferences between foreign-born, first-generation, and second-generation Latinos in the United States, with foreign-born and first-generation Latinos described to consume more cultural foods, while younger and second-generation Latinos lean toward different foods.

4. **Nutrition and health knowledge** influences were discussed by community members and community leaders. Community members focused primarily on the positive and "eye-opening" aspects of nutrition and health knowledge and how they influence food choices and perceptions of risk related to health conditions. Community leaders

focused on the impact of nutrition and health knowledge on participant behaviors and motivation to make healthier lifestyle choices.



5. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the community's social stability, the need to seek out support services, and the ability of organizations to support their staff and communities. Community members shared the negative impact on their socioeconomic stability and the need to seek out support services. For their part, community leaders provided an impactful insight into the toll that the pandemic took on their organizations, their programming, their staff, and the need to respond to community needs in different ways, including learning new technology, arranging for food delivery, and shifting policies to ensure the health and safety of their staff on the frontlines.

6. Access and enrollment in federal assistance programs were important factors. Community leaders described the community's lack of knowledge of eligibility, fear due to undocumented status, the complex and lengthy Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) application process, stigma, and discrimination as barriers to enrollment. Community members substantiated the challenges noted by community leaders and further added strict eligibility criteria as a barrier to accessing federal assistance programs.



of community members were **NOT** aware that using SNAP would not have an impact on their own or their family's immigration status.

"I think that sometimes when asking for those services, sometimes people get intimidated, or intimidated by the requirements, but also sometimes because of the [legal] status we have here, and we think that it will affect us with time; and things like that sometimes intimidate people today from seeking those services because of the information they require."

Community member

7. Existing nutrition education programming strategies were discussed. Community leaders shared effective strategies to reach underserved rural communities, such as working with community health workers, offering education programs in Spanish, and incorporating culturally relevant foods and cooking demonstrations. Community leaders also shared barriers to effective programming including limited funding, resources, and staffing in CBOs serving Latinos.

8. **Need for tailored nutrition programming** was discussed by community members and leaders, such as the importance of culturally relevant programming inclusive of traditional foods. The discussion around tailored programming focused on cultural norms and accessibility of certain foods based on geographic location to ensure that programming is well received and that community members feel it is designed for them.

“I think hiring the right staff is crucial. Somebody who will take the time and the effort and who’s dedicated. I love people who are passionate, so someone who’s passionate about the community is going to put a lot of effort into studying or doing research or finding out how to best serve this community that they’re around.”

Community leader

9. **Virtual nutrition education programming as a feasible strategy to provide access to nutrition knowledge** was discussed in length due to the COVID-19 pandemic needs during 2020-2021 shelter-in-place restrictions implemented in different areas across the country. While there was not a clear preference for virtual programming, online nutrition education is a feasible strategy to provide access to nutrition knowledge to those who may have issues with transportation, childcare, or not enough time to commute to educational classes after work. Community members varied in their preference for virtual versus in-person nutrition education. Similarly, community leaders recognized the pros and cons of offering online programming acknowledging that online classes require additional support for participants.

10. **Strategies to increase food security** by redesigning and supporting a robust infrastructure in food distribution and access. Community members recommended more engagement with churches and other organizations that can provide access to food pantries. Additionally, they noted the need for more grocery stores with lower food prices and a reduction in the availability of fast-food restaurants in their communities. Community leaders emphasized the importance of strengthening and building a robust infrastructure for existing pantries with adequate refrigeration, storage, and volunteers. They also acknowledged churches as an important resource to support food access among Latino communities.

Other recommendations by community leaders included:

- a. **Conducting a needs assessment** prior to developing programs to understand the needs of the local community.
 - b. **Increasing cultural and linguistic humility of staff** working in government offices and programs.
11. **Latino cultural wealth** was included as a novel theme due to the insight garnered from community members. Latino cultural wealth is described as the observed social capital, resiliency, and positiveness that Latinos possess despite challenges and barriers to food security. Community members demonstrated a positive outlook and were modest in describing hardships, instead focusing on their assets and blessings.

“Well, one says to themselves, at least with these groceries we’ll make it through this week, and for next week, we’ll see what we can do.”

Community member

Proposed Solutions

Solutions to effectively improve food access and health among Latinos in rural areas include both programmatic and policy recommendations.

The three major programmatic recommendations include:

1. Strengthening nutrition education considering and respecting the context of Latinos living in rural communities.
2. Improving nutrition-related programming to increase engagement.
3. Offering other options to receive nutrition education (such as through video-conferencing platforms) to address disparities related to access.

First, to help strengthen nutrition education it is important that community-based organizations have enough resources to incorporate culturally relevant foods specific to each community, taking into consideration preferences, availability, and cost of foods. Also, community-based organizations should address the impact of mental health on food choices and overall health. Including discussions on mental health may increase awareness of the relationship between mental health status and proper nutrition. Lastly, there is a need to provide information on federal nutrition assistance programs, which includes eligibility criteria and debunking myths to access and enrollment. In order to strengthen nutrition-related programming, organizations should offer cooking demonstrations that teach participants how to incorporate healthier alternatives or new produce into existing Latino foods. There is also a need to provide educational materials (e.g., handouts, measuring cups) so that participants can actively engage during programming. In addition, participants should receive a list of local resources and monetary incentives that consider family size and the high cost of foods. Ultimately, it is recommended to offer a box of food with ingredients needed to cook the recipes provided or used during cooking demonstrations to encourage and facilitate participants doing it on their own. Third, to address disparities related to access, it is suggested to offer virtual options for nutrition education. However, it is essential to train participants on how to use video-conferencing platforms to increase their confidence and online participation. Additionally, there is a need to offer technical assistance to participants during online classes. When providing virtual classes, community organizations need to make sure the content and materials are specific to online delivery to ensure audience engagement.

"Well, I remember that I was present, that they were saying that sodas contain a lot of sugar, and it was something that I didn't know and it was something that did impact me because, well, it is a lot of sugar. Well, it made me think a bit about what I am drinking. And at my age, well, I said, no, this is going to lead me to get diabetes too."

Community member

"They use the names of the fruits and vegetable that we don't even recognize, you know, we have to go and Google to understand what it is, so, I think that every program, you know, has to be... developed, adapted to be more endemic to their community. That represents, that speaks the same language. In the border we have a very particular language that we use only in the border "Los Fronterizos" you know."

Community leader

There is also a substantial and urgent need for policies that target the challenges faced by Latinos in rural communities.

The four major policy recommendations include:

1. Improving food security and food access for all Latinos.
2. Increasing access and enrollment to federal nutrition assistance programs.
3. Expanding food access and addressing barriers due to the built environment.
4. Strengthening funding allocation to improve food security outcomes.

First, policies must focus on improving food access and affordability in rural areas. The lack of food retailers in rural areas serves as a significant challenge in advancing food security among rural Latinos. To increase the availability of grocery stores offering affordable and quality fresh produce, federal and state governments should increase financial and technical support to assist rural retailers in stocking a variety of nutritious food. Congress and the USDA should continue their efforts to expand online purchasing options for SNAP and the Special Nutrition Assistance Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) to further increase the accessibility of food. The cost of food, particularly nutritious foods such as fresh produce, is also widely cited as a critical barrier to food access. Congress and USDA must work together to ensure that benefit amounts for federal nutrition programs sufficiently meet households' needs. Additionally, investments in produce prescription programs and medically tailored meals should be made to increase access to low- to no-cost fresh produce for individuals with (or at risk of developing) diet-related health conditions. Non-federal investments should be increased to expand nutrition assistance for undocumented immigrants in local communities. Policies to secure enrollment of all food-insecure children, regardless of immigration status, for receiving nutrition assistance should be implemented as well.

Second, policies must be directed at improving access to and enrollment in federal nutrition programs for immigrant and rural communities. During the Trump Administration, access to and interest in federal nutrition programs declined among Latinos, potentially as a result of the administration's anti-immigrant family policies, such as the Public Charge rule. The Biden Administration has taken steps to reverse the Public Charge rule, yet confusion surrounding the rule continues to prevent Latinos, particularly those in families with mixed immigration statuses, from enrolling in food assistance programs. The current administration must invest in efforts to reduce confusion around immigrant eligibility and the Public Charge rule to increase participation in nutrition assistance programs. In addition, eligibility criteria for federal nutrition assistance programs should be expanded to include noncitizens. For example, barriers to immigrant enrollment in SNAP, such as the five-year bar—a barrier that makes millions of noncitizens ineligible for federal public benefits—should be rescinded by Congress. Furthermore, eligibility criteria should include an increased income range to account for inflation and the cost of living in rural communities. Given the gap between Latinos eligible for SNAP and those enrolled, there is also a significant need for USDA to invest in targeted outreach and enrollment assistance for food insecurity programs that are culturally responsive and linguistically appropriate for ethnically diverse communities in rural areas. Current resources and efforts to enroll low-income Americans in nutrition assistance programs lack culturally relevant Spanish-language resources. Similarly, local federal agency staff who are responsible for administering food assistance programs should be trained in cross-cultural communication and should collaborate with local community-based organizations to better serve the community. In addition, the process of enrollment in government programs must be

streamlined. Lengthy paperwork and burdensome documentation requirements must be reduced in the application for programs like SNAP. Finally, policies that are in effect during the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency (PHE), which provide the option for remote interviews and digital signatures, should be made permanent. This change would enable Latinos in rural areas, for whom transportation, employment, or childcare are barriers to in-person interviews, the opportunity to enroll in federal nutrition programs.

Third, there is a need for policies to address the challenges associated with the built environment of rural areas. Given the transportation barriers and geographic isolation in rural communities, the option for remote interviews and digital signatures for SNAP enrollment should be made permanent after the current PHE. In addition, government funding must be allocated to make transportation more accessible to rural Latinos and close food access gaps. Congress should provide funding that would facilitate free public transportation via car rideshare, bus, or subway to food retailers, including grocery stores, farmers' markets, and food pantries. Funding should also be invested in improving the walkability of rural neighborhoods to promote access to local grocery stores and food services (i.e., safe sidewalks and crosswalks). Furthermore, funding should be allocated to improve infrastructure to facilitate increased access to public transportation with more bus stops and expanded bus routes linking directly to food services. Additionally, the federal government must invest in low-cost devices, internet access, and digital literacy education in rural communities to enable increased access to resources and nutrition education.

Lastly, funding should be allocated to improve food security with direct input from community stakeholders working within Latino rural communities on food access and food insecurity. Adequate and continuous funding should be made available through grants to sufficiently staff and capacitate organizations to effectively reach communities and meet their needs. A long-term, sustainable funding source should be developed to make advancements in programs and resources focused on addressing food security in rural areas.

"The truth, I had never used federal assistance, barely now with COVID, because my husband's work decreased a lot. We found ourselves in need to request help, but it's the first time."

Community member

"With our mixed-status families... we talk to them about how certain things are not a public charge and it's ok for them to apply... like SNAP and other things, but there's still that push back. So, there's what they're hearing from us versus what they're hearing maybe from their lawyer... and what they're hearing from their community. So, there's always that resistance, and we try to educate."

Community leader

Benefits to Addressing Food Insecurity Among Latinos in Rural Communities

Addressing food insecurity can have immediate and long-lasting health benefits. Access to healthful food options can improve dietary patterns and prevent the onset of obesity and other chronic conditions among Latinos in rural communities. Based on the research findings, evidence suggests that food assistance programs have a beneficial impact on food security; however, there are many other factors that need to be taken into consideration when addressing food access among Latinos living in rural areas in the United States. For example, some of the community members discussed issues related to ineligibility for federal programs. As a result, they instead accessed emergency food sources, food pantries, church-sponsored services, and community agencies. Although many of these local services and providers may serve as a solution to addressing food insecurity, it is important to consider the context and culture of the communities that are being served. Findings highlight the importance of cultural influence in terms of food access and meals prepared in the home. It is equally important to provide culturally relevant educational resources such as pamphlets, and recipes that not only address the needs of the Latino population, but also address the regional and socioeconomic needs. To better serve the Latino community, the staff employed by these organizations should preferably reflect the community linguistically and culturally, or they should be trained in cultural humility and be culturally responsive in order to effectively serve local communities. Addressing the barriers to eligibility and food access and the implementation of effective strategies to serve Latinos in rural communities will curb food insecurity and increase access to healthful foods and the nutrition knowledge needed to make healthier choices. In turn, these factors can address Latino health disparities related to food insecurity and disease.

Food insecurity is associated with adverse health outcomes and higher rates of chronic diseases (e.g., diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease).¹⁵ Those who experience food insecurity tend to have greater health care utilization and significantly higher annual health care expenditures compared to those who are not food-insecure. In turn, chronic conditions are also associated with higher health care spending. Since Latinos are the largest growing racial/ethnic minority in the United States and are greatly impacted by food insecurity, addressing food insecurity can help reduce the burden of chronic diseases and thus improve health outcomes and prevention. Food insecurity interventions and policies have the potential to improve health by providing better dietary quality and improving both mental health as well as medication adherence, thus allowing for more health maintenance and the delay and/or better management of chronic diseases.¹⁶ In addition, finding solutions for food insecurity can potentially lead to net overall health system and care savings.¹⁷

Summary

Latinos living in rural communities across the United States are at high risk for food insecurity due to the multi-level barriers to accessing healthy foods that are exacerbated due to geographic location and limited availability of resources. During the COVID-19 pandemic, loss of wages, employment, and overall shortages in access and services made Latinos even more vulnerable, especially considering variable immigration statuses and associated barriers. Therefore, there is a need to address food insecurity through a person-centered lens considering the individual, community, social, economic, and policy context in which Latinos living in rural communities reside.



Based on the suggested policy recommendations, food insecurity can be viewed as a problem that can be partially ameliorated through systematic policy initiatives. In addition to focusing on food assistance programs, some of the major recommendations include increasing access and providing services to undocumented individuals, as well as addressing other major issues related to the built environment. Looking beyond food assistance programs and addressing the built environment of those communities living in rural U.S. areas, such as improving the availability of grocery stores and the reach of the transportation system, can be an effective solution for food insecurity.

Strengthening capacity at community-based organizations is a major recommendation. For example, allocating more funding to CBOs is crucial to increase access to programming and support for Latinos in rural communities. Further, there is a need for technical assistance to CBOs to increase their capacity to apply for various funding opportunities and meet community needs. Also, CBOs need resources to offer adequate nutrition training to staff implementing nutrition education and training to increase skills for planning and implementing effective virtual programming for Latinos. Another key recommendation is to strengthen cross-sector collaborations by establishing trusting relationships between local state agencies, the private sector, and community-based organizations. Improved communication strategies would permit effective dialogue and improved outcomes at the city level.

Overall, results support the notion that efforts to address food insecurity would benefit from a multifaceted approach that acknowledges the importance of the individual, community, organizational, and policy levels to address the challenges and barriers to food access among Latinos living in rural areas.

Call to Action

The recently published [Biden-Harris Administration National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health](#) provides national recommendations to address the challenges outlined in this paper and commits the federal government to shift the country's food, nutrition, and health policies. The recommendations from community leaders and community members highlighted in this position paper directly overlap with the strategies outlined in the blueprint to end hunger by 2030. As part of the White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health, hosted for the first time in over 50 years and

where the White House national strategy was released, by 2030, UnidosUS commits to doubling the reach of the Comprando Rico y Sano (Buying Healthy and Flavorful Foods) program, through the expansion of the program to 25 additional community-based organizations across the United States and Puerto Rico—training 1,880 new community health workers (*promotores de salud*), providing nutrition education to 84,000 more people, and facilitating SNAP and WIC enrollment for roughly 230,000 more members of the Latino Community.¹⁸ We hope this results in adequate funding and resources allocated for programming led by community-based organizations. Community organizations should be equipped with sufficient resources as they have experience addressing Latinos, are trusted messengers, and can redesign and implement culturally responsive programs to ensure effectiveness in outreach and engagement. Given the many barriers to food access due to geographic isolation, there is a need to ensure Latinos living in rural communities have linguistically appropriate support to apply and access federal assistance program benefits. Additionally, policies at the local, state, and federal levels should be examined to ensure that food assistance programs and support for community-based organizations are adequately funded and relevant to those with temporary employment, in mixed-status families, and who are English learners. Furthermore, barriers to rural Latino enrollment in food assistance programs must be reduced through changes in policy and practice at key levels.

Limitations

As with most studies, the design of the current study is subject to limitations. Community members that participated in the needs assessment are primarily of Mexican-origin. Although Latinos in rural communities are predominantly of Mexican-origin, the findings should not be generalized to other Latino background groups. Nonetheless, the results from the focus groups represent community members' and organization leaders' perspectives across five different states and rural areas in the United States.

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About UnidosUS

UnidosUS is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that serves as the nation's largest Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization. Since 1968, we have challenged the social, economic, and political barriers that affect Latinos through our unique combination of expert research, advocacy, programs, and an [Affiliate Network](#) of nearly 300 community-based organizations across the United States and Puerto Rico. We believe in an America where economic, political, and social progress is a reality for all Latinos, and we collaborate across communities to achieve it. For more information on UnidosUS, visit www.unidosus.org or follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Twitter](#).



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UnidosUS Health works to improve Latinos' well-being and access to timely, equitable, and quality health care. We advance health equity by building healthy, equitable, and resilient communities, addressing the social determinants of health, and cultivating leaders in health through data and community-driven initiatives and programs at the local, regional, and national levels.

For more information on UnidosUS, visit [unidosus.org](https://www.unidosus.org) or follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Twitter](#).

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Endnotes

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