

**THE ABILITY OF THE FOOD STAMPS PROGRAM TO IMPROVE FOOD SECURITY
AND NUTRITIONAL STATUS FOR LATINO FAMILIES AND CHILDREN**

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Representative Baca and Members of the Committee, thank you for providing me with the opportunity to testify today. I am Janet Murguía, President and CEO of the National Council of La Raza (NCLR). NCLR is a private, nonprofit, nonpartisan organization established in 1968 to reduce poverty and discrimination and improve opportunities for this nation's Hispanics.¹ As the largest national Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States, NCLR serves all Hispanic subgroups in all regions of the country and reaches millions each year through its network of nearly 300 affiliated community-based organizations.

Over the past decade, NCLR has focused on improving the health status of Latinos to enable them to meet their full ability to pursue education and economic prospects. Given the high incidence of nutrition-related diseases affecting Latinos, NCLR works to increase Latino families' access to affordable and healthy foods. For example, nearly all immigrants were severely restricted from food stamps in 1996, and NCLR campaigned to restore eligibility to many legal immigrant households during the reauthorization of the 2002 Farm Bill. In December 2006, in an ongoing effort to bring more attention to food insecurity within the broader Latino community, NCLR released a research report entitled *Sin Provecho: Latinos and Food Insecurity*. The report profiled the impact of food insecurity and hunger among Latinos and the effectiveness of federal food assistance programs in improving nutritional status.

Background

The last decennial Census reported that from 1990 to 2000, the Latino community grew by almost 60%. Currently, there are more than 42 million Latinos in the U.S., constituting 14% of the total U.S. population.¹ While data show that the general U.S. population is aging, Latinos remain a relatively young group, with a median age just under 27 years old, compared to a median age of 36 years for the U.S. population.² Further, more than one in three (34%) Latinos is a child.

In addition, Latinos are a significant and growing part of the U.S. economy and maintain the highest labor force participation rate in the U.S. compared to their peers.³ At the same time, incomes for Latinos continue to lag behind those of their counterparts. The typical weekly earnings of Hispanics who work full time (\$489) are significantly lower than those of Blacks (\$569) and only two-thirds of what Whites earn (\$702).⁴ In 2005, more than one in five (21.8%) Latinos was poor, facing numerous threats to well-being.⁵ Latino families with children also are at high risk of experiencing poverty (24.4%). Insufficient economic resources are the most common reason for families being forced to make difficult choices about household expenses; food is often one of the first necessities to be compromised.

Given that Latinos are a relatively young and growing population, it is vitally important to invest in the appropriate supports to ensure that families can gain food security. Inadequate nutrition can deeply disrupt a person's life, be detrimental to a child's development, and ultimately leaves people ill-prepared for future opportunities in education, work, and many other aspects of their lives.

¹ 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.

The Effect of Food Insecurity in the Latino Community

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Hispanic household food insecurity rate (17.9%) is twice as high as the rate for non-Hispanic White households (8.2%), the most food secure.⁶ In addition, Latino households with children have even higher rates of food insecurity; 21.6% of these households experience food insecurity compared to 11.8% of similar White households. Because of the dearth of resources in many Latino households, their ability to make food purchases is restricted. While the typical non-Hispanic White U.S. household spends \$45 per person each week for food, Hispanic households spend 25% less, just \$33 weekly per person.⁷ Furthermore, food insecure Hispanic households typically do not spend enough to meet the minimum thresholds of the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP), the “bare bones” food plan designed by the USDA as a guide for families during food deficit emergencies.⁸

A survey in the *Journal of Nutrition* found that some of the consequences of food insecurity include “hunger pangs, fatigue, lack of concentration at school, low work capacity, stress, disrupted household dynamics, and distorted means of food acquisition and management.”⁹ Respondents to the survey reported “depression, increased need for health care, and decreased participation in social activities.”¹⁰

Families will go to great lengths to keep their children from going hungry, which is why it is so alarming that many Latino children do not have adequate resources for a nutritious diet. Food insecure children are twice as likely to be in fair or poor health.¹¹ Further, a survey of parents of low-income, young Latino children who are food insecure found that they are two times more likely to note developmental concerns, including risks of developmental delays or disabilities, than households with children who have adequate resources for food.¹² Even small cognitive changes can have lasting impacts on a child’s education. Even when a child experiences even mild levels of food insecurity, data suggest that school performance and social skills are comprised.¹³

There is also mounting evidence that the overweight and obesity trends in the United States are due, in part, to high levels of food insecurity.¹⁴ The coping mechanisms associated with inadequate food resources – such as overeating when food is available, compromising the quality of food in order to consume higher quantities, and even skipping meals, which causes metabolic shifts – can result in a higher propensity for weight gain. While food insecurity persists in the Latino community, there is also a rising trend of obesity. One recent study found that among Latino preschoolers – children in the critical stages of growth – nearly one-quarter (24.4%) were identified as obese.¹⁵

Food insecurity also has a broader impact on society. The increased risk for and severity of sickness and disease that results from food insecurity can create a demand for more physician time, extensive levels of treatment, and greater rates of hospitalization – all of which require more money and resources. The health care costs associated with increased illness due to food insecurity not only fall on individuals who suffer from these effects, but ultimately add strain to the entire health care system.

The Food Stamp Program Provides Resources for Improved Nutrition

The Food Stamp Program has demonstrated great success in helping households to become more food secure and continues to be an important income supplement for families experiencing hardship. While overall prevalence of food insecurity with hunger is higher among food stamp participants than in nonparticipant households, food security rates among participants have increased at higher rates compared to those of nonparticipants.¹⁶

In addition, the educational benefits of participating in this program contribute to families achieving a higher level of nutrition. Food Stamp Program participants are more likely than low-income nonparticipants to lack confidence about their knowledge of good dietary practices and the quality of their diet. However, they benefit from nutrition education, which promotes consumption of healthier foods, a balanced diet, and physical activity. The results can be seen in the healthier choices they make in grocery stores.¹⁷ Further, the education of adult participants is likely to have lasting impact on the younger family members, encouraging children to make healthy choices in and outside of the household. 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, data show 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 the Food Stamp Program from 1999 to 2002 were less likely to be overweight and were able to keep their weight relatively steady compared to nonparticipants.¹⁸

Although food security is heightened for families who receive food stamps, the benefit amount that is currently allotted does not allow most families to meet their full nutrition needs. 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.¹⁹ Further, more than eight in ten (84%) families participating in the Food Stamp Program have food stamp allotments that will not last more than three weeks.²⁰

Latino Participation in the Food Stamp Program

Latinos are missing out on many of the Food Stamp Program's benefits because their rates of participation are 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% of eligibles participated, compared to the participation rates of non-Hispanic Whites (57.7%) and non-Hispanic Blacks (73.1%). These data suggest that at least three million eligible Hispanic-headed households are not participating in the Food Stamp Program.²¹

Latinos continue to face a number of barriers that hinder their opportunity to participate in the program. In addition to the general administrative challenges that families face when trying to access the Food Stamp Program, Latinos encounter numerous deterrents that influence their willingness and ability to seek food assistance services. These barriers include a lack of culturally- and linguistically-appropriate outreach and information, decreased accessibility to food stamp offices, confusion regarding eligibility, and fear of reporting.

Further, although food stamp access was partially restored to immigrants in 2002, many who have arrived after August 22, 1996 face a series of complex rules. The restrictions expressly bar

the majority of adult immigrants from accessing the program simply due to their legal immigrant status for the first five years that they live in the U.S. While legal immigrant children and citizen children are fully eligible for food stamp benefits, many children in noncitizen families are being left behind due to these restrictions. The USDA reports that only half of eligible citizen children (51.5%) in noncitizen-headed households participate in the Food Stamp Program, far below the participation rate of all eligible children (81.5%).²² With the exception of a small boost in participation rates after restorations were enacted in 2003, the gaps in participation for citizen children living in immigrant households have been largely consistent.

Farm Bill Reauthorization: Strengthening the Food Stamp Program

Although the Food Stamp Program plays a vital role in reducing hunger, improvements to the program would greatly help to diminish food insecurity. In particular, NCLR believes that the following policies are key to ensuring that low-income Latinos have a greater opportunity to achieve food security:

- *Restore full access to the Food Stamp Program for legal immigrants.* The 2002 Farm Bill ensured that many more lawfully-present immigrants were able to access the program and achieve greater food security. We can build upon this success by restoring access to the many immigrant households who remain ineligible. The Food Stamp Program should eliminate the complexity of these rules by ensuring equitable treatment of all lawfully-present immigrants. Taking this step will not only restore equity for lawfully-present immigrants, but also ensure that eligible family members, mainly children, will also seek participation in the program.
- *Increase outreach resources to improve enrollment of eligible Latinos.* NCLR recommends the establishment of targeted community-based outreach and enrollment programs that could be piloted in the Latino community. Latinos' participation in the Food Stamp Program remains low; only half (52.5%) of eligible Latinos receive assistance through the program. The USDA has been involved in outreach efforts; however, confusion and fear related to eligibility, distrust of and unfamiliarity with government systems, language barriers, and lower awareness of available resources all play a role in low participation. Latinos need to play a greater role at the community level, ensuring that those eligible are connected to the program. A proven successful practice of disseminating health-related materials in the Latino community is the use of lay health educators (*promotores de salud*), who often serve as a connector between Latinos and social service programs. Similarly, creating culturally- and linguistically-appropriate materials and programs for federal food assistance programs could be helpful in connecting eligible food insecure families to essential resources from federal agencies. NCLR recommends that the Farm Bill establish pilot programs that enable community-based organizations carry out outreach and enrollment activities.
- *Maintain entitlement structure of the Food Stamp Program.* Food stamps should be available to all families who are need-eligible. Food stamps have been very successful in alleviating food insecurity as they are able to adjust – expanding and contracting – to ensure that families can immediately access food. Restrictions that limit the capacity of the program, for instance, by capping enrollment or block granting the program, would be

detrimental. The entitlement structure allows the program to more effectively reach food insecure individuals and families in times of recession or when need increases unexpectedly.

- *Increase the food stamp benefit.* The value of food stamp benefits has declined over time for all participants. The minimum and maximum benefit level must be adjusted to reflect the fair cost of nutritious foods. The Thrifty Food Plan, which affords most families just one dollar per person for each meal, should be the *minimum* benefit for families. Otherwise, many of the poorest families will continue to find themselves cutting corners, often sacrificing the quality of food and nutritional content in order to stave off hunger.

Conclusion

Food insecurity is a real risk to Latino children's future prosperity and well-being, but it can be overcome by strengthening the food assistance network in the United States. During the reauthorization of the Farm Bill this year, there is an the opportunity to ensure that the Food Stamps program is more accessible for Latino families by simplifying laws related to legal immigrant eligibility and ensuring that families can navigate the enrollment process. Finally, the Food Stamp Program should provide practical levels of financial support needed for healthy food purchasing.

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² U.S. Census Bureau, *Race and Hispanic Origin in 2004*. Available online at: <http://www.census.gov/population/pop-profile/dynamic/RACEHO.pdf>

³ U.S. Census Bureau, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "The Employment Situation: January 2007," February 2, 2007. Available online at: <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/empsit.pdf>

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Usual Weekly Earnings of Wage and Salary Workers: Fourth Quarter 2006," January 19, 2007. Available online at: <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/wkyeng.nr0.htm>

⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2005*, August 2006. Available online at: <http://www.census.gov/prod/2006pubs/p60-231.pdf>

⁶ 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.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Hamlin, Anne-Marie, Jean-Pierre Habichit, and Micheline Beadry, "Food Insecurity: Consequences for the Household and Broader Social Implications," *Journal of Nutrition*, Vol. 129, 1999, pp. 525-528.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Cook, John T., Deborah, Carol Berkowitz, et al., "Food Insecurity is Associated with Adverse Health Outcomes Among Human Infants and Toddlers," *Journal of Nutrition*, Vol. 124, 2004: pp. 1432-1438.

¹² Children's Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Project (C-SNAP), *The Impact of Food Insecurity on the Development of Young Low-Income Black and Latino Children*. Prepared for the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies Health Policy Institute. Washington, DC: May 2006.

¹³ Jyoti, Diana F., Edward A. Frongillo, and Sonya J. Jones "Food Insecurity Affects School Children's Academic Performance, Weight Gain, and Social Skills" *Journal of Nutrition*, Vol. 125, 2005 pp. 2831-2839.

¹⁴ Ng'andu, Jennifer and Emilia Gianfortoni, *Sin Provecho: Latinos and Food Insecurity*. Washington, DC: National Council of La Raza, December 2006.

¹⁵ Kimbro, Rachel Tobert, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, and Sara McLanahan, "Racial and Ethnic Differentials in Overweight and Obesity Among 3-Year Old Children," *American Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 97, No. 2, 2007, pp. 298-304.

¹⁶ Wilde, Parke E., "Measuring the Effect of Food Stamps on Food Insecurity and Hunger: Research and Policy Considerations," *Journal of Nutrition*, Vol. 137, 2007, pp. 307-310.

¹⁷ *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2005*, August 2006, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ Ploeg, Michele Ver, Lisa Mancino, and Biing-Hwan Lin, *Food Stamps and Obesity: Ironic Twist or Complex Puzzle?* Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, February 2006.

¹⁹ Children's Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Project (C-SNAP), *The Real Cost of a Healthy Diet*. Boston, MA: Boston Medical Center, August 2005.

²⁰ Wilson, Deanna, *Hunger and Food Insecurity in the United States*. Boston, MA: Children's Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Project (C-SNAP), Boston Medical Center, March 2005.

²¹ United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, *Food Stamp Program Participation Rates: 2004*. Washington, DC: June 2006.

²² *Ibid.*