

ISSUE 4: THE FOOD ENVIRONMENT AND LATINOS' ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOOD*

Latino[†] children have high rates of overweight and obesity, and are consequently more likely to develop largely preventable diseases such as diabetes.¹ Several factors that extend beyond the child or family influence these outcomes. For example, a growing body of research shows that the food environment—the availability of nutritious food at affordable prices in the local neighborhood—significantly affects people’s health.² As such, it is important to understand how communities shape decisions concerning healthy lifestyles. This profile examines how the food environment and access to healthy food affects Hispanic families.

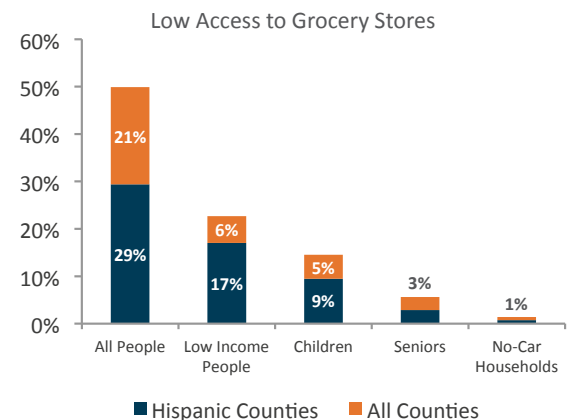
Hispanic families are more likely to live in areas where access to healthy, affordable food is limited or nonexistent.

- Counties with large Hispanic populations have a greater proportion of people identified as having low access to grocery stores (29%) compared to other counties (21%). This holds especially true for children and residents who are low-income (see Figure 1).³
- More than 10% of Hispanics report difficulty in accessing affordable fresh fruit and vegetables, which was the highest rate of all racial/ethnic groups in a national survey. The survey also showed that access to fresh produce was linked with health: challenges to access were four times greater among those reporting poor health than people reporting excellent health (20% vs. 5%).⁴

Food stores in Latino communities tend to offer less healthy options and can negatively affect health.

- Research shows that larger chain supermarkets tend to carry more healthy food items such as produce at lower prices, whereas smaller convenience stores tend to carry less fresh produce and more calorie-rich and nutrient-poor snack foods. Therefore, the availability of convenience stores in a neighborhood typically does not compensate for the lack of supermarket offerings of beneficial food.⁵
- Hispanic neighborhoods have almost one-third fewer chain supermarkets, particularly in nonurban areas, and more convenience stores than non-Hispanic neighborhoods.⁶
- Better access to chain supermarkets has been shown to be associated with in lower adolescent BMI and frequency of overweight, whereas greater access to convenience stores has been shown to be associated with higher BMI and frequency of overweight.⁷

Figure 1:
Percent of People with Low Access to Grocery Stores, 2010



Source: NCLR calculation using U.S. Department of Agriculture, “Food Environment Atlas.” Washington, DC, 2010, <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-environment-atlas.aspx> (accessed August 2014).

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† 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. Furthermore, unless otherwise noted, estimates in this document do not include the 3.7 million residents of Puerto Rico.

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For many Latino families, transportation is a continuing obstacle to obtaining healthy food.

- In 2011, 11.3% of Hispanic households had no access to a vehicle compared to a rate of 8.2% for all households in the United States.⁸ Therefore, these families are more dependent on public transportation than other racial and ethnic groups.
- In general, reliance on public transit limits the frequency of trips to purchase food as well as the quantity of food that can be transported, which poses a particular problem for perishable items.⁹
- In rural areas accessing food is even more difficult because public transportation systems in these areas tend to be limited.¹⁰ The U.S. Department of Agriculture identifies the lack of transportation infrastructure as the foremost barrier to food access in rural areas and small towns.¹¹

For too many Hispanic families, the food environment does not support healthy food choices. As this field of inquiry continues to grow, more research is needed to fully understand the effects of the food environment on Latino health and well-being.

Endnotes

- 1 Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, *Overweight and Obesity Among Latino Youths* (Princeton, NJ: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2010), <http://www.rwjf.org/en/library/research/2011/12/addressing-nutrition--overweight-and-obesity-among-latino-youth.html> (accessed August 2014).
- 2 Sarah Treuhaft and Allison Karpyn, *The Grocery Gap: Who Has Access to Healthy Food and Why It Matters* (Policy Link and The Food Trust, 2010), http://thefoodtrust.org/uploads/media_items/grocerygap.original.pdf. (accessed August 2014).
- 3 NCLR calculation using U.S. Department of Agriculture, "Food Environment Atlas," <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-environment-atlas.aspx> (accessed August 2014). "Low access to grocery stores" is defined as the number of people in a county living more than one mile from a supermarket or large grocery store if in an urban area, or more than 10 miles from a supermarket or large grocery store if in a rural area. "Supermarket or large grocery store" is defined as a food store selling all major categories of food and having annual sales of at least \$2 million. "Hispanic counties" are defined as counties where 70% or more the population is of Hispanic origin based on 2010 U.S. Census.
- 4 Food Research and Action Center, *A Half-Empty Plate: Fruit and Vegetable Affordability and Access Challenges in America* (Washington, DC: Food Research and Action Center, 2011), http://frac.org/pdf/half_empty_plate_dec2011.pdf (accessed August 2014).
- 5 JN Bodor et al., "Disparities in food access: Does aggregate availability of key foods from other stores offset the relative lack of supermarkets in African-American neighborhoods?," *Prev. Med.* 51, no. 1 (2010), <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20403377> (accessed August 2014).
- 6 Lisa M. Powell et al., "Food Store Availability and Neighborhood Characteristics in the United States," *Preventive Medicine* 44 (2007): 189–195.
- 7 Lisa M. Powell et al., "Associations Between Access to Food Stores and Adolescent Body Mass Index," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 33, no. 4, supplement 1 (October 2007): S301–S307.
- 8 U.S. Census Bureau, "2011 American Housing Survey," <http://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/ahs/data/2011/h150-11.html> (accessed August 2014).
- 9 Leslie Mikkelsen and Sana Chehimi, *The Links Between the Neighborhood Food Environment and Childhood Nutrition* (Princeton, NJ: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2007).
- 10 *The Grocery Gap: Who Has Access to Healthy Food and Why It Matters* (Policy Link and The Food Trust, 2013), http://thefoodtrust.org/uploads/media_items/access-to-healthy-food.original.pdf (accessed August 2014).
- 11 Michele Ver Ploeg et al, *Access to Affordable and Nutritious Food: Measuring and Understanding Food Deserts and Their Consequences*, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. Washington, DC, June 2009.