ISSUE 5: LINKS BETWEEN FOOD INSECURITY AND LATINO CHILD OBESITY*

There is evidence that household food insecurity—the condition when families do not have enough resources for everyone in the household to eat full and nutritious meals—is related to a heightened risk of overweight and obesity. Hispanic† children experience high rates of both food insecurity and obesity, which puts the Latino community at disproportionately high risk of resulting poorer health outcomes.

WHY DO FOOD INSECURITY AND OBESITY CO-EXIST?

Food-insecure and low-income people are especially vulnerable to obesity due to the additional risk factors associated with poverty, including:

- Limited resources
- Lack of access to healthy, affordable foods
- Fewer opportunities for physical activity
- Cycles of food deprivation and overeating
- High levels of stress
- Greater exposure to marketing of obesity-promoting products
- Limited access to health care


Several studies have found links between child food insecurity, hunger, and increased risk for overweight or obesity.¹

- A national study of about 10,000 children (29% were Mexican American‡) found that the prevalence of obesity was higher among food-insecure children. The likelihood of a child aged 6–11 being obese was 81% higher if the child was food insecure as opposed to food secure.²

- Another national analysis found that infants and toddlers living in households experiencing food insecurity with hunger were 61% more likely to be overweight than young children in food-secure households.³

- A study of more than 28,000 children (31.6% were Hispanic) participating in the Massachusetts Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program showed that persistent household food insecurity was associated with 22% greater odds of childhood obesity. Hispanic children in this study had a 51% greater chance of being obese than White children.⁴

FOOD INSECURITY DEFINED

- **Food insecurity**: At times during the year, households with food insecurity are “uncertain of having, or unable to acquire, enough food for all household members because they had insufficient money and other recourses for food.”

- **Food insecurity with hunger**: These households are “food insecure to the extent that eating patterns of one or more household members were disrupted and their food intake reduced, at least some time during the year, because they could not afford enough food.”


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² 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. Unless otherwise noted, estimates in this document do not include the 3.7 million residents of Puerto Rico. Comparison data for non-Hispanic Whites and non-Hispanic Blacks are identified respectively as “Whites” and “Blacks.”

³ Many studies analyzing overweight and obesity in the Latino population collect data from the Mexican American community, the largest subgroup of Latinos in the United States. While these data can be used to note trends in the Latino community, they do not reflect the full diversity of the Latino population in the United States.
In times of food insecurity, when resources are low and families fear running out of food, children and families are likely to eat low-cost, high-calorie foods.

- Researchers have found that when there is insufficient money for healthy diets, families adopt a deliberate strategy to stretch the budget and purchase lower-cost foods that are energy-dense (i.e., high in calories) to stave off hunger.5
- Foods that have the most calories per dollar are often considered “empty calories” that lack important nutrients and contain added sugars and fats. According to one study, “Fats and oils, sugar, refined grains, potatoes, and beans represented some of the lowest-cost options and provided dietary energy at minimal cost.”6
- Researchers found that lower-calorie, perishable products such as fresh produce and lean meats provided less energy per dollar spent.7 For food-insecure families seeking enough food to ensure that no one is hungry, spending on low-calorie foods may feel too risky when the same dollar amount can buy high-calorie foods that seem to be more filling.

Family food insecurity and child hunger often occurs in cycles and can affect Latino health in a variety of ways.

- Research has found that children may be spared the initial effects of food insecurity by their parents, who skip meals themselves and reduce children’s food only when shortages become acute.8,9
- When food becomes available, family members may overcompensate by eating more.10 Researchers studying low-income Mexican American families have suggested that in households experiencing cyclical food insecurity, parents may be willing to allow their children to eat more snacks when resources for food are again available.11
- Cyclical food insecurity may also affect a person’s metabolism, increasing a person’s propensity to maintain or increase weight. Researchers hypothesize that, over time, periodic reductions in food intake may result in physiological changes whereby the body attempts to build energy reserves by storing more calories as fat.12

Latino children are already at elevated risk of both family food insecurity and overweight and obesity. Understanding the complex links between these concerns can help target interventions to improve Latino children’s nutritional outcomes.

Endnotes


6 A. Drewnowski and S.E. Specter, “Poverty and Obesity.”

7 Ibid.


10 Center on Hunger and Poverty and Food Research and Action Center, The Paradox of Hunger and Obesity.


12 Center on Hunger and Poverty and Food Research and Action Center, The Paradox of Hunger and Obesity.