When households do not have sufficient income or resources to meet all basic needs, families make difficult choices about their budgets. Since food spending is more discretionary than other household costs, families often cut back on food expenditures first.\(^1\) Rising food and energy costs and wage stagnation exacerbate these pressures. Hispanics\(^1\) have lower median incomes and larger average household sizes than non-Hispanics and are particularly at risk of food insecurity.\(^1\)

**Latinos spend a greater share of annual income on food than Whites.**

- In 2012, Latinos’ average household income after taxes was $47,580, compared to $68,742 for non-Hispanic Whites, and the average number of people per household was higher among Latinos (3.3) than among Whites (2.3).\(^2\)

- Hispanic and non-Hispanic households spend similar amounts on food per year on average—$6,570 for Hispanic households and $6,924 for White households in 2012.\(^3\)

- In 2012, lower incomes and higher number of household members resulted in food spending representing a greater share of Latino household expenditures (15.5%) than that of Whites (12.6%).\(^4\)

### DEFINING THE THRIFTY FOOD PLAN

The Thrifty Food Plan\(^\S\) (TFP)—developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture—serves as a national standard for a nutritious, minimal-cost diet. It represents a set of “market baskets” of food that people in specific age and gender categories can consume at home to maintain a healthy diet that also meets current dietary standards, taking into account the food consumption patterns of U.S. households. It is used as the basis for maximum Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program allotments. In 2013, the TFP recommended spending $6,634.80 per year to purchase food for a family of four, two adults and two preschool children.

---

*This profile was authored by Minerva Delgado, Consultant to the Health Policy Project in NCLR’s Office of Research, Advocacy, and Legislation (ORAL), with substantive input, direction, and oversight from Samantha Vargas Poppe, Associate Director, Policy Analysis Center, and Steven Lopez, Manager, Health Policy Project. It is an update of a document originally released in 2010 and authored by Kara D. Ryan. NCLR is the largest national Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States. This brief was funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The findings and conclusions presented are those of the author and NCLR alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of our funders. Permission to copy, disseminate, or otherwise use information from this paper is granted, provided that appropriate credit is given to NCLR.

† 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. Comparison data for non-Hispanic Whites and non-Hispanic Blacks will be identified respectively as “Whites” and “Blacks.”


§ The Thrifty Food Plan is widely criticized as inadequate for a minimal cost, nutritious diet. For more information, see Food Research and Action Center, *Replacing the Thrifty Food Plan in Order to Provide Adequate Allotments for SNAP Beneficiaries* (Washington, DC: Food and Research Action Center), http://frac.org/pdf/thrifty_food_plan_2012.pdf (accessed August 2014). Their criticism of the Thrifty Food Plan includes its impractical lists of food, lack of variety as recommended in the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, unrealistic assumptions of food availability and affordability, unrealistic assumption of adequate and affordable transportation, underestimation of food waste, and overlooking of special dietary needs.
Latino children are at increased risk of food insecurity due to their reliance on food stamps and the high cost of food. In 2013, median food spending for food-secure Hispanic households was only slightly higher (5%) than the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan—the standard for the lowest-cost diet that meets basic nutritional guidelines. Food-secure White households spent about 24% above the cost of the TFP on food.\(^5\)

In food-insecure households, Hispanics’ weekly median spending on food was 11% less than the cost of the TFP. Food-insecure White households’ weekly median food spending was about 4% less than the TFP guideline.\(^6\) See Figure 1 for weekly household food spending relative to the TFP by race/ethnicity.

Increasing costs of both food and household utilities can reduce Latino families’ food budgets and increase the risk of food insecurity.

- The cost of food has risen approximately 20% between 2006 and 2012 compared to 14% for all consumer goods.\(^7\)

- Rising energy costs also force low-income families to make difficult decisions about heating (or cooling) their households and putting food on the table, a dilemma referred to as “heat or eat.”\(^8\) From 2006 to 2014, overall household spending for fuel and utilities increased by 27%.\(^9\)

- According to a study by Children’s HealthWatch, Latino children whose families had difficulty paying for energy costs were two to three times more likely to be food insecure than Latino children living in energy-secure families.\(^10\)

Food spending is a significant factor influencing the dietary health and well-being of Latino children. Although Hispanic families are spending proportionally more than non-Hispanic families on food, many still struggle to meet the nutritional needs of all household members.

Endnotes

3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
6. Ibid.