

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF LA RAZA

Food Stamps: Nutrition for America's Families



A PROFILE OF LATINOS AND THE FOOD STAMP PROGRAM

High rates of workforce participation have not prevented many Latinos from escaping economic hardship. Latinos continue to experience significant rates of poverty (21.9%), often leaving working families without adequate resources to meet daily needs.¹ Once income is taken out of a family's budget for nondiscretionary household needs, such as rent, utilities, and healthcare, what is left for food can be insufficient to satisfy proper nutrition. While the typical U.S. household in 2004 spent \$40 per person each week for food, Hispanic households spent almost 20% less, a median of only \$32.50.² Latinos have extremely high rates of food insecurity; approximately 22% cannot access enough food to meet dietary needs.³ Thus, the Food Stamp Program (FSP), the largest food assistance program in the U.S., is vital to Latino families' ability to combat hunger within the home. The FSP is especially important for Latino families because it is designed to help low-income individuals purchase food in order to have a nutritious diet.

POSITIVE OUTCOMES FOR FOOD STAMP PARTICIPANTS

The FSP plays a key role in mitigating hunger and improving the nutrition status of participating families, the effect of which is seen in better health care outcomes.

Food stamps provide increased access to nutritious foods. The USDA has shown that the FSP increases and facilitates nutrient availability for participating households, allowing them to more readily make nutritiously sound food choices in their diets and improve their overall health and wellness.⁴ Further, through nutrition education programs, the FSP helps participating families make healthy food choices by promoting consumption of more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy products. The knowledge of how to best combine a healthy diet and daily physical activity is an important tool for many households who experience time constraints and a limited budget in assisting them to best meet the needs of their families.

For individuals and heads of households, the FSP not only provides resources to improve spending on food, but the program helps to educate participants about the best eating habits and nutritional practices. The benefits of this education are clearly demonstrated in more careful shopping practices and greater purchases of vegetables, fruits, grain products, and meat or meat alternatives, which account for most of the money value of foods used by households who receive food stamps.⁵

Similarly, studies show harmful effects on families whose food stamp benefits are cut, leaving a particularly detrimental impact on young children's health. Children make up approximately 50% of FSP participants, demonstrating the crucial need for the program to continue to reach food-insecure families.⁶ Consequently, the odds of children being in fair or poor health increase by 20% for food insecure families who don't participate in the FSP over those families who receive Food Stamp benefits.⁷

Further, while it is difficult to establish a direct causal relationship between participation and health outcomes, there are indicators that food assistance is making a positive impact in the lives of many food stamp recipients. In fact, although overweight and obesity have been increasing in the U.S. population overall, women who participated in the FSP 1999-2002, were less likely to be overweight, keeping their weight relatively steady compared to nonrecipients.⁸

LATINO FOOD STAMP PROGRAM PARTICIPATION

Although the Latino community continues to gain many benefits from the Food Stamp Program, they continue to access it at much lower rates than many other racial and ethnic groups. During 2003, of



the 7.9 million eligible Latinos, only 3.7 million participated in the FSP, resulting in a participation rate of less than half (47%), rising just a few percentage points to 51% in 2004.⁹ This rate persists in being the lowest participation rate by far compared to non-Hispanic Blacks and Whites (73% and 58% respectively).¹⁰ There are a variety of barriers Latinos face that contribute to their low participation rates in the Food Stamp Program including restrictions on immigrants, cultural and linguistic barriers, inaccessible food stamp offices and staff, stigma, confusion about eligibility, and fear.

Latinos make up the largest part of the immigrant community in the United States, 53.3% of the foreign-born population is from Latin America, and thus the barriers concerning immigrant restrictions to safety net programs affect Latinos in significant numbers.¹¹ A major shift in policy in 2002 has helped to make food stamps more accessible for Latinos and other immigrant communities. The Farm Security and Rural Investment Act (FSRIA PL 107-171) restored access to food stamps for immigrants. The new provisions reversed excessive restrictions that had previously disqualified nearly all immigrants from the FSP in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PL 104-193). In addition, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) launched a major outreach campaign to enroll newly eligible immigrants into the Food Stamp Program by creating linguistically-appropriate materials and conducting outreach to national organizations serving immigrant communities. In just one year, the participation of noncitizen, eligible persons increased from 39% to 47%, demonstrating that the simplified 2002 Farm Bill eligibility rules and FNS's expanded outreach were critical steps for ensuring that more immigrants were able to gain access to food stamps.¹² Further, additional success is demonstrated by the double-digit increase in participation by citizen children living with noncitizen heads of households, an important development since many Latino households are composed of members with varying immigration and citizenship statuses, or are of "mixed status."

The 2002 immigrant food stamp restorations made significant advances in improving food security for Latinos and other immigrants, yet there are many households that still struggle to purchase full and nutritious meals for their families. This gap in coverage for many Latino and immigrant families suggests that although the Food Stamp Program plays a decisive role in mitigating hunger and providing nutrition, future legislation, such as the 2007 reauthorization of the Farm Bill, offers key opportunities to make improvements to the program that would notably help to further diminish food insecurity. Just as the 2002 restorations raised the participation rate of citizen children living in noncitizen households by double digits between fiscal year (FY) 2001 and FY 2004, further restorations in the benefits for legal immigrants in the 2007 reauthorization have the potential to make great strides in improving access to nutrition and reducing hunger. In addition, with continued enhancement in the outreach and enrollment campaigns, such as community-focused linguistically- and culturally-appropriate outreach the Food Stamp Program would continue to be a cornerstone of nutrition for the U.S.

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