



# Institute Notes

## Hunger and Poverty Among Latino Immigrant Children

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In 2000, Latinos became the largest ethnic minority in the United States. Today, 16.3 percent of the U.S. population is Latino—more than 50 million people. The growing Latino presence is increasingly evident in schools, communities, and workplaces.

Moreover, more than half of the U.S. population growth since 2000 has been among Latinos, due partly to immigration and partly to a higher birthrate. Thus, a higher percentage of U.S. children than of the total U.S. population is Latino: 22 percent. This percentage is expected to increase because the Latino population is younger than the U.S. average.<sup>1</sup> Children who are U.S. citizens but have at least one parent who is an immigrant are now the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. population.<sup>2</sup>

The size and youthfulness of this community give it great potential to make significant contributions to the economic and social future of our country. But we need to find solutions to the problems threatening the well-being of Latino children, including barriers to accessing safety-net programs that could improve their nutrition and health and help compensate for some of the remaining difficulties.

A range of factors—for example, family structure, generational status, citizenship, and income—affect whether children participate in programs for which they are eligible.



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### Hunger

In the United States, children are more likely than adults to live in families that struggle to put food on the table—nearly one in every four children in the United States, according to

the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Latino children are even more likely to be at risk of hunger. In 2009, the last full year for which we have data, nearly 35 percent lived in such families.<sup>3</sup>

Table 1: Food Insecurity, 2009 data		
	General Population	Latinos
<b>Households</b>	14.7% 17.4 million	26.9% 3.6 million
<b>All Individuals</b>	16.6% 50.2 million	29.7% 13.7 million
<b>Children Under 18</b>	23.2% 17.2 million	34.9% 5.3 million

Source: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/ERR108/ERR108.pdf>

In this report, **children** are those under the age of 18. **Children of immigrants** include those under 18 who were either born outside the United States (first-generation immigrants), or were born in the United States and thus are U.S. citizens, but live with at least one foreign-born parent (second-generation immigrants). **Latino children** include all Latinos under 18, no matter when their families arrived in the United States.

Unless otherwise stated, comparisons among ethnic groups compare Hispanics to all non-Hispanics without regard to race.

## Poverty

Poverty rates increased for all U.S. racial and ethnic groups during the recession, but people of color experience more poverty. The latest available data, from 2009, show that more than one in four Latinos lived below the poverty line.<sup>4</sup>

According to the Urban Institute, “immigrant children live in families with median incomes 20 percent lower than the family incomes of children of natives.”<sup>5</sup> About a third of all Latino children live in poverty, which has serious implications for their health and well-being. For example, Latino children suffer disproportionately from obesity and diabetes,<sup>6</sup> asthma,<sup>7</sup> and hypertension.

	General Population	Latinos
<b>Individuals</b>	14.3% 43.6 million	25.3% 12.4 million
<b>Children under 18</b>	20.7% 15.5 million	33.1% 5.6 million

*Source: [http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/cpstables/032010/pov/new01\\_100.htm](http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/cpstables/032010/pov/new01_100.htm)*

## Status/Composition of Latino Families

Nearly all of the 16 million Latino children in the United States are U.S. citizens: 92 percent. But 58 percent of Latino children live in families with at least one foreign-born parent. Because such a high percentage of Latino children are first-generation or second-generation immigrants, the number of “mixed-status” families, meaning those with at least one unauthorized or illegal parent,<sup>8</sup> has been on the increase. Currently, nearly 10 percent of *all* U.S. families with children are mixed-status families.

	Number (000s)	Percent
<b>All Latino Children</b>	16,002	100
U.S.-born Latino children with U.S.-born parents	6,763	42
Latino children in immigrant families	9,239	58

Data from National Council of La Raza 2010 document titled: America’s Future: Latino Child Well-Being in Numbers and Trends Research Report. [Original Source: Population Reference Bureau calculation from “ACS Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) 2008 1-Year,” [http://factfinder.census.gov/home/en/acs\\_pums\\_2008\\_1yr.html](http://factfinder.census.gov/home/en/acs_pums_2008_1yr.html) (accessed September 2009)]

## Implications of Having Unauthorized Parents

In mixed-status families, psychological burdens such as anxiety are common. “Unlike other children in this country, the children of unauthorized immigrants live with the fear that their parents might be arrested, detained, or deported,” states an Urban Institute study.<sup>9</sup> Immigration enforcement campaigns that apprehend parents and begin deportation proceedings against them can tear families apart and leave children in limbo.

A January 2009 report by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security estimated that more than 100,000 parents with U.S. citizen children had been deported over the previous decade—which in all likelihood is a significant underestimate, because when parents are arrested, they often do not disclose that they have children in the United States for fear of losing custody.<sup>10</sup>



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How long a person charged with being in the country illegally is detained depends on his or her ability to qualify for an immigration bond, which allows the accused to be released while preparing for a court appearance. But few people qualify for such bonds. Everyone else has two options: voluntary deportation, or detention while waiting for a court date. In some states, such as Arizona, the latter can take eight months or longer.

There is little empirical evidence on what happens to children when their parents are detained, but the limited research available suggests that family separation, whether short-term or long-term, carries serious consequences for citizen children. If both parents are under arrest and there is no one else to care for the children, children may be detained alongside their parents while the adults wait for their court proceedings. If only one parent is incarcerated, then the other begins an often-difficult life as a single parent.

In other cases, children go to live with extended family members, but relatives often have their own children to look after, jobs, and other responsibilities. In still other cases,

parents decide to take their children with them to their own country of citizenship—removing U.S. citizen children from their familiar social, cultural, and linguistic environments.

Any contact with state or federal agencies poses a risk of being identified as an unauthorized immigrant. Thus, fear of deportation often makes parents reluctant to seek information and apply for services that their children might qualify for, such as health insurance coverage and nutrition assistance.<sup>11</sup>

Although nearly six in 10 children living with unauthorized parents are citizens by birth, their status as the dependents of unauthorized residents thwarts progress toward integration with the wider society during their crucial formative years.<sup>12</sup> The cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic barriers facing parents may limit children’s access to educational and social programs and their progress in school. Although most immigrant parents value education highly, language barriers can keep them from advocating for their children or helping them with homework, inadvertently closing off educational opportunities. As of 2008, 60 percent of all immigrant children had at least one parent with limited proficiency in English.<sup>13</sup>

Unauthorized parents’ employment opportunities are limited at best because they are in the country without permission to work. Lack of English proficiency and/or

a high school or college education in their first language exacerbate the situation for many. Thus, it often proves very difficult for families to work their way out of poverty.

Although a higher percentage of children from immigrant families than from other families live with two parents, and a higher percentage live with at least one parent who works full-time,<sup>14</sup> immigrant families are often strained by the long hours parents spend at work. Work schedules may prevent parents from spending much time with their children. In addition to compensating for their generally lower wages, immigrant parents also must often work more hours because their families are larger than the U.S. average. (About two-thirds of immigrant children who receive nutrition assistance live in a household with three or more children). Parents have less time to cook nutritious meals, and foods high in sugar and fat are less expensive. It’s also harder for working parents to verify that children are eating their meals rather than lots of snacks.

Children’s participation in nutrition programs and other safety nets they may qualify for depends on several factors, such as the family’s size, income, and immigration status. As mentioned earlier, children of unauthorized immigrants generally have a more difficult time accessing nutrition assistance programs than other children due to parents’ fears of being arrested and/or deported. Parents may also have misconceptions about the programs and lack the English skills needed to communicate with social service agencies and complete applications for assistance.

There is a common misperception that Latino immigrants “take American jobs.” But efforts to get native-born Americans to fill vacancies in job categories where most workers are immigrants have been ineffective, even in times of recession and high unemployment. The evidence shows, moreover, that immigrant labor represents a net gain to the economy.<sup>15</sup>

Despite immigrant parents’ high rates of employment, many cannot provide for all their families’ needs. Recent studies show that foreign-born workers are more likely than native-born workers to be paid low wages and less likely to receive employer-provided benefits.<sup>16</sup> In 2009, the median weekly wage of Latinos was nearly \$250 less than that of whites.<sup>17</sup> Latinos also lost their jobs more frequently during the latest recession.<sup>18</sup>

### Household Size and Economic Hardship

Many Latino families live in poor or low-income neighborhoods. While 2010 Census Bureau data showing the impact of the latest recession is not yet available, 2000 data indicate that 35 percent of Latino children lived in high-poverty neighborhoods, compared to 7 percent of white children. The rise in unemployment from 2007-2010 led to



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a larger decline in the Latino homeownership rate than in the homeownership rate among whites.<sup>19</sup> Latinos also faced higher foreclosure rates on loans issued between 2005 and 2008.<sup>20</sup>

It is not uncommon for Latino households to include three generations—so taking in extended family members or friends facing foreclosure or unemployment, as many families have, could create crowded conditions. The financial and psychological stress on working adults increases as they try to meet the needs of their own family and help support new members of the household, all with literally less room to maneuver.

Latino children are significantly more likely than black or white children to live in crowded households: nearly 30 percent of all Latino children receiving food assistance lived with three or more adults, while, as mentioned earlier, 67 percent lived in households with three or more children.<sup>21</sup>

Latino families must often resort to emergency food assistance to survive. In 2009, for example, 30 percent of all Latino families received help from Feeding America, the nation’s largest network of food banks.<sup>22</sup>

### Safety Net Programs

Children of immigrant mothers actually have a healthier start in life. Compared to children of U.S.-born mothers, they are more likely to live in a two-parent family, be born at a healthy weight, and be breastfed. They are also less likely to have a mother who is depressed.<sup>23</sup>

But building on these initial advantages depends on continuous access to health care and good nutrition. A major obstacle to providing this access is parents’ lack of economic opportunity. A greater share of immigrant children than non-immigrant children live in families with low incomes

(56 percent compared to 40 percent).<sup>24</sup> Another barrier is immigrant parents’ limited access to safety-net programs. Parents in mixed-status households are often unclear about the eligibility rules that apply to their children who are U.S. citizens. The laws themselves limit access—all unauthorized immigrants, and legal immigrants who arrived in the United States less than five years ago, are ineligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly food stamps) and TANF.<sup>25</sup>

Some low-income Latino families participate in SNAP, but a large number do not. According to USDA, more than one-quarter of eligible people who do not participate in the program live in Latino-headed households.<sup>26</sup> In 2006, just over half of the Latino households who qualified for SNAP participated in the program, while data from 2011 show the participation of eligible Latino children as only 44 percent.

Among immigrant families, low participation can also be attributed to the lack of social integration of immigrants into their surrounding communities. Misconceptions about programs arise more frequently when parents obtain their information from neighbors, with whom they feel comfortable, rather than from social service providers themselves. Common misconceptions that result in lower program participation include the idea that SNAP benefits must be repaid and the belief that participation in safety-net programs influences the processing of one’s application to become a U.S. citizen.

### Children’s Health Insurance

Compared to other ethnic groups, Latinos had the highest share of uninsured individuals in 2009—nearly a third.<sup>28</sup> This is partly because many Latinos work in low-wage jobs that do not offer health insurance. According to the Pew Hispanic

Rank	State	State Population	Latino Population	% of total state pop. 2009	SNAP Participation Rates (%), 2011	
					Immigrant children	All eligible people
	United States	307,007,000	48,419,000	16	44	66
1	California	36,962,000	13,681,000	37	42	48
2	Texas	24,782,000	9,148,000	37	47	55
3	Florida	18,538,000	3,992,000	22	38	57
4	New York	19,541,000	3,274,000	17	54	61
5	Arizona	6,596,000	2,032,000	31	49	61

Sources: Population: <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2011/tables/11s0019.pdf>. SNAP participation: [http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text\\_1002.pdf](http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_1002.pdf)

Center, one in six Americans without health insurance are unauthorized immigrants and their children—more than three times their representation in the population.<sup>29</sup>

Nearly three times as many immigrant children as natives lack access to a source of health care. Immigrant children are also more likely to have only fair or poor health.<sup>30</sup> One result of less adequate access to health care is that children of Latino immigrants are at higher risk for a range of health and developmental problems, including physical challenges and weaker cognitive and socio-emotional skills. Health issues undercut children’s ability to arrive at school ready to learn and be productive. Moreover, some developmental problems can affect individuals into adulthood, preventing them from fully accessing economic opportunities and thereby perpetuating a cycle of poverty.

### Available Resources for Children

While the children of Latino immigrants face significant obstacles, some safety-net programs and other resources are available to help maintain their health and well-being.

States have a great deal of flexibility in establishing eligibility rules for state-funded programs that substitute for TANF, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and/or Medicaid. Some immigrant families who would not meet the stringent documentation and qualifications standards for federal safety-net programs are able to qualify for the state substitute programs.

States also fund other programs, such as early childhood education. To date, 16 states (California, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nebraska, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Texas, Virginia, and Washington) have stepped up and created state-funded programs to meet the healthcare needs of immigrant children.

The main providers of medical care for this group of children are community clinics or health centers. Although some children of immigrants participate in the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), a larger number do not because parents do not know about the program or, in the case of unauthorized immigrants, believe that their children do not qualify because they themselves do not have legal status. Latino children appear to have a significantly lower rate of participation (60 percent) than all other groups.<sup>31</sup> Additional outreach is needed in order to increase enrollment among eligible immigrant families.

The Migrant Health Center program, funded by the Health Resources and Services Administration, supports health centers in delivering “comprehensive, high quality, culturally-competent preventive and primary health services to migrant and seasonal farm workers and their families with a particular focus on the occupational health and safety needs of this population.”<sup>32</sup> In 2009, health centers served



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approximately 865,000 migrant and seasonal farm workers and their families.

The children of migrant farm workers may also qualify for the Migrant Educational Program, which operates in all 50 states. Its purpose is to ensure both that migrant children receive appropriate educational services for their special needs and that they have opportunities to take higher-level courses and meet state academic achievement standards along with other students.<sup>33</sup>

Another resource is churches, still among the most visible and dynamic institutions in the Latino community. They provide social services and offer information about how to access government social services as well as nurture the community’s cultural and civic values and behaviors. Churches also inspire and organize community involvement.

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### Additional Information

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## Endnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> The percentage of U.S. children who are Latino is expected to rise to 33 percent by 2035. Today, more than a third of Latinos are younger than 18, and almost half are younger than 25. National Council of La Raza. 2010. "America's Future: Latino Child Well-Being in Numbers and Trends Research Report." [http://www.nclr.org/images/uploads/publications/AMERICAS\\_FUTURE\\_Latino\\_Child\\_Well-Being\\_in\\_Numbers\\_and\\_Trends.pdf](http://www.nclr.org/images/uploads/publications/AMERICAS_FUTURE_Latino_Child_Well-Being_in_Numbers_and_Trends.pdf)
- <sup>2</sup> Matthews Hannah, Ewen Danielle. August 2010. "Early Education Programs and Children of Immigrants: Learning Each Other's Language." <http://www.urban.org/uploadedpdf/412205-early-education.pdf>
- <sup>3</sup> National Council of La Raza. 2010. "Profiles of Latino Health: A Closer Look at Latino Child Nutrition." [http://www.nclr.org/images/uploads/pages/Jan12\\_Profiles\\_Issue\\_6.pdf](http://www.nclr.org/images/uploads/pages/Jan12_Profiles_Issue_6.pdf)
- <sup>4</sup> The poverty rate for Latinos as a group was 25.3 percent. Weller Christian, Fields Jarun, Agbede Folayemi. January 2011. "The State of Communities of Color in the U.S. Economy." [http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2011/01/pdf/comm\\_of\\_color.pdf](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2011/01/pdf/comm_of_color.pdf)
- <sup>5</sup> The Urban Institute. November 2010. "Children of Immigrants: Economic Well-being." <http://www.urban.org/uploadedpdf/412270-children-of-immigrants-economic.pdf>
- <sup>6</sup> National Council of La Raza. "America's Future," Op. Cit.
- <sup>7</sup> Center for Disease Control and Prevention. "National Health Interview Survey: Vital and Health Statistics." [http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr\\_10/sr10\\_247.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr_10/sr10_247.pdf)
- <sup>8</sup> Bread for the World uses the terms "unauthorized" and "illegal" interchangeably to refer to immigrants without legal authorization to be in the United States.
- <sup>9</sup> Urban Institute. February 2010. "Facing our Future: Children in the Aftermath of Immigration Enforcement." [http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/412020\\_FacingOurFuture\\_final.pdf](http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/412020_FacingOurFuture_final.pdf)
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>11</sup> The Urban Institute, "Children of Immigrants: Economic Well-being," Op. Cit.
- <sup>12</sup> Pew Hispanic Center. April 2009. "A Portrait of Unauthorized Immigrants in the United States." <http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/107.pdf>
- <sup>13</sup> The Urban Institute. May 2006. "Children of Immigrants: Family and Parental Characteristics." <http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/412132-children-of-immigrants.pdf>
- <sup>14</sup> National Center for Children in Poverty. March 2011. "SNAP Take-up Among Immigrant Families with Children." [http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text\\_1002.pdf](http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_1002.pdf)
- <sup>15</sup> See the Institute Notes blog, "Lazy Americans." <http://notes.bread.org/2011/05/lazy-americans.html>
- <sup>16</sup> The Latino unemployment rate rose 6.1 percentage points while the unemployment rate among whites rose 4.4 percentage points. Urban Institute. June 2005. "A Profile of Low-Income Working Immigrant Families." [http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/311206\\_B-67.pdf](http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/311206_B-67.pdf)
- <sup>17</sup> Median weekly earnings were \$532 for Latinos and \$774 for whites.
- <sup>18</sup> The Latino unemployment rate rose 6.1 percentage points while the unemployment rate among whites rose 4.4 percentage points.
- <sup>19</sup> Homeownership decreased from 48.5 percent to 47 percent for Latinos and from 74.9 percent to 74.7 percent for whites. Weller Christian, Op. Cit.
- <sup>20</sup> Latinos faced higher foreclosure rates on loans issued between 2005 and 2008: 7.7 percent, compared to 4.5 percent among whites and 4.6 percent for Asian Americans. Ibid.
- <sup>21</sup> Feeding America. 2009. "When the Pantry is Bare: Emergency Food Assistance and Hispanic Children: Executive Summary." <http://feedingamerica.org/our-network/the-studies/~media/Files/research/ExecutiveSummaryHispanicBriefs.ashx?.pdf>
- <sup>22</sup> This is despite the fact that 63 percent of Latino households that received emergency food assistance included working adults, compared to 51 percent of white households and 40 percent of black households. Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Children's Health Watch Policy Action Brief. October 2010. "Children of Immigrants: Healthy Beginnings Derailed by Food Insecurity." [http://www.childrenshealthwatch.org/upload/resource/childrenimmigrants\\_brief\\_oct10.pdf](http://www.childrenshealthwatch.org/upload/resource/childrenimmigrants_brief_oct10.pdf)
- <sup>24</sup> Urban Institute. 2004. "The health and well-being of young children of immigrants." [http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/311139\\_Childrenimmigrants.pdf](http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/311139_Childrenimmigrants.pdf)
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> USDA. November 2010. "Reaching Low-Income Hispanics With Nutrition Assistance." <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cga/factsheets/reaching.htm>
- <sup>27</sup> Children's Health Watch Policy Action Brief. Op. Cit.
- <sup>28</sup> The data show that 32.4 percent of Latinos lack health insurance. Weller Christian, Op. Cit.
- <sup>29</sup> Pew Hispanic Center, "A Portrait of Unauthorized Immigrants in the United States," Op. Cit.
- <sup>30</sup> The data indicate that 8 percent of immigrant children lack a source of health care, compared to 3 percent of U.S.-born children. Urban Institute, "The health and well-being of young children of immigrants," Op. Cit.
- <sup>31</sup> The Urban Institute. February 2007. "Coverage Patterns among SCHIP-Eligible Children and Their Parents." <http://www.allhealth.org/briefingmaterials/HealthPatternsamongSCHIP-EligibleChildren-548.pdf>
- <sup>32</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. "The Health Center Program: Special Populations." <http://bphc.hrsa.gov/about/specialpopulations/index.html>
- <sup>33</sup> U.S. Department of Education. November 2009. "Migrant Education—Basic State Formula Grants." <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/mep/index.html>



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