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The Effects of Food Insecurity on Child Development: A Focus on Hispanic and Latino Children Living in the U.S.

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Executive Summary

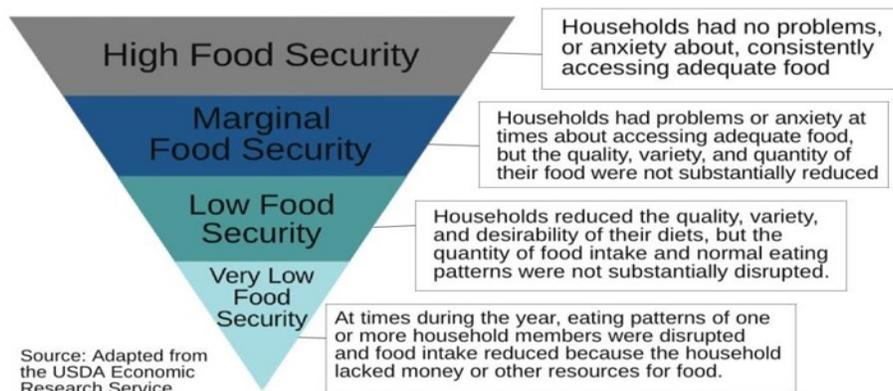
- The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food security as “having consistent, dependable access to enough food for active, healthy living.”¹
- Some causes of food insecurity include poverty, under/unemployment, lack of affordable housing, systemic racism and racial discrimination.²
- Latino children are the fastest-growing child population in the U.S.³ and are more likely to be food insecure, live in a low-income household, and live in poverty compared to White children.⁴
- The first three years of life are the most critical for brain and central nervous system development.⁵ A weak foundation for learning, behavior, and health are consequences of an altered and weakened brain architecture due to stress and nutritional deficiencies seen through food insecurity.⁵

- Federal nutrition programs aimed to alleviate child food insecurity ensure that children have access to meals and snacks in a variety of settings.

Background

In the United States, most households are food secure. The USDA has defined four ranges of food security listed in Figure 1.¹ Hunger is related to food insecurity, although distinct, and is a consequence of inadequate intake used to refer to the physiological response of discomfort, while food insecurity refers to a person having reliable access and resources to obtain food.

Figure 1: Ranges of Food Security



Source: What is food insecurity in America? Hunger and Health. <http://hungerandhealth.feedingamerica.org/understand-food-insecurity/>.

Prevalence of Food Insecurity in the United States In 2020:

- 14.8 percent of households with children were food insecure.¹
- 7.6 percent of children and adults were food insecure, or about 2.9 million households.¹
- Very low food security in children was prevalent in 0.8 percent of households with children.¹

In comparison to statistics of food insecurity in 2009, the numbers from 2020 are significantly lower. At the peak of the Great Recession in 2009, 21.3 percent of households with children were

Throughout this brief, the terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” will be used depending on the source where the information was obtained.

The opinions expressed in this paper are solely those of the author and do not represent or reflect those of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute (CHCI).

The social determinants of health (SDOH), defined as “the conditions in the environment where people are born, live, learn, work, play, worship, and age that affect a wide range of health, functioning, and quality-of-life outcomes and risks” can substantially impact a person’s access to nutritious foods.¹²

food insecure.¹ When broken down into the characteristics of who is most food insecure,¹ Black and Hispanic households with children face the highest rates of food insecurity. Food insecurity is more prevalent in principal cities and rural areas than in suburbs, and higher among certain household characteristics such as female-headed households and households with an income below 185 percent of the poverty line.¹ It is also important to acknowledge that food insecurity is episodic,^{1,6} meaning that it occurs at irregular intervals throughout the year. Households with food insecurity are usually food insecure on average seven months out of the year.^{1,6}

Hispanic and Latino Children in the U.S.

Hispanic or Latino children under the age of 18 make up 25.7 percent of the U.S. child population according to the 2020 Census data.⁷ In 2019, 38 percent of children under the age of 18 lived in low-income households in the U.S.⁸ Of those households, 53 percent were Latino children compared to 26 percent of White children. Among children with immigrant parents, 45 percent or 8.1 million children, lived in low-income households, while 35 percent of children with parents born in the U.S. lived in low-income households.⁸ Food insecurity risk and its health ramifications may also be exacerbated by migration,⁹ as parental immigration status and duration of residence also affects child health status. This in turn influences future economic opportunities

and access to health care and public assistance programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).¹⁰ Higher levels of food insecurity, lower participation in SNAP, and lower SNAP benefit amounts per household member can be seen for children of noncitizens.¹⁰ Being directly excluded from nutrition assistance because of citizenship or residency requirements or undocumented status and indirectly by fear also immediately puts families at greater risk of being food insecure.⁹ Even though citizen children may qualify for assistance, noncitizen parents may not enroll for nutrition assistance due to fear of being penalized for using public benefits when applying for a green card.

Influencing Factors

Food insecurity is influenced by several factors including but not limited to race, ethnicity, income, employment status, and disability.¹¹ Households with children who have unemployed parents have higher rates of food insecurity than those with parents that are employed.¹¹ Racial and ethnic disparities are also more prevalent in Black and Hispanic households. Black and Hispanic household rates of food insecurity (21.7 percent and 17.2 percent, respectively) are significantly higher than the national average of 10.5 percent.¹¹ These disparities exist because of a combination of factors including systemic racism, racial discrimination, built environmental factors, and economic instability among other factors, that further contribute to food insecurity among communities of color. The social

determinants of health (SDOH), defined as “the conditions in the environment where people are born, live, learn, work, play, worship, and age that affect a wide range of health, functioning, and quality-of-life outcomes and risks” can substantially impact a person’s access to nutritious foods.¹² Education and employment opportunities limited by racial discrimination affect an individual economically, potentially leading to food insecurity.¹³ Higher incarceration rates among Black and Hispanic individuals also contributes to food insecurity.¹³ Restrictions on public benefits programs for previously incarcerated individuals and limited opportunities for employment also contribute to higher food insecurity rates.¹³ The clear economic disadvantage and wealth gap communities of color face perpetuates higher food insecurity rates.

Relationship of Food Insecurity to Poverty

Poverty and food insecurity are closely related since enough financial resources and access to nutritious food is needed to be food secure.⁴ Food insecurity can also affect people living above the poverty guidelines as most nutrition assistance programs have eligibility requirements based on income, and if a household is above a certain percentage of the federal poverty level they can be denied assistance. Unfortunately, sometimes families are faced with having to choose between other expenses such as housing or other utilities over food. Trade-offs occur when adults trade food quality for quantity as a way to prevent children from the physical

Studies show that food insecure children obtain lower language comprehension,²³ reading,⁴ and math scores.^{4, 24} This can set children back and increase their likelihood of having to repeat a grade^{4, 24} making them more likely to drop out of high school.^{4, 20}

sensation of hunger, which often results in food that lacks nutrients.¹⁴ Ultra processed foods that contain high amounts of added sugars, sodium, saturated fat, and calories are cheaper to buy and can curb hunger in the short-term, but in the long run lead to various chronic diseases.

How Does Food Insecurity Affect Hispanic/Latino Children?

Mental Health

Nutrition is essential for optimal development from infancy through adolescence. Food insecurity can negatively impact and have irreversible consequences on a growing child as seen by the multitude of mental health consequences in children associated with food insecurity. The psychological aspect of food insecurity is the most prevalent cited in the literature with many studies finding the same deleterious effects starting from a very young age. Children are aware of their food situation, meaning that it is clear to them their family struggles to obtain nutritious foods, affecting them psychologically.¹⁵ The pattern of unpredictable meals takes a toll on both the caregivers and children's mental health leading to high anxiety and stress.¹⁵⁻¹⁷ Children who are food insecure are more likely to present with dysthymia, mood, anxiety, behavior, stress, depression, suicidal ideation, and substance use disorders than children who are food secure.^{4, 15, 18-20} Early experiences with food insecurity have also been shown to lead to adolescent depression and anxiety.²⁰ Among Hispanic adolescents, 22 percent

have depressive symptoms, which is the highest among any minority group apart from Native Americans.²¹ Having both one of the highest rates of food insecurity and depressive symptoms among groups, Hispanic children have compounding effects that hinder a positive mental health status. When coupled together, food insecurity and acculturative stress have a detrimental influence on Hispanic/Latino youth's mental health as they are positively associated with depression and anxiety.⁹ In a study, food insecure children had higher odds of having a mental disorder with functional impairment compared to food secure children, and children with very low food security had higher odds of a mental disorder with severe impairment.²² Impairments were considered as having difficulty in concentration, emotions, behavior, or getting along with others.²²

Cognitive Development

The cognitive impairments resulting from food insecurity have the potential to be the most destructive to young children since they are the most vulnerable to stressors. A weak foundation for learning, behavior, and health are consequences of an altered and weakened brain architecture due to stress and nutritional deficiencies.⁵ This explains why problems associated with linguistic, cognitive, and socioemotional skills are found in children who endure early adverse experiences, which includes food insecurity.⁵ During the prenatal period iron, folate, and overall nutrition are vital for the developing fetus as inadequate in-

take can result in birth defects and fetal growth retardation.⁴ When it comes to Latino children, there is a link between food insecure Latino children and developmental delays.³ Low-income Latino children who are food insecure are at higher risk of a developmental delay compared to low-income food secure Latino children.³ An altered brain architecture due to inadequate nutrition consequently makes it much more difficult for a child to reach their full potential.⁴

School Readiness and Long-Term Consequences

Food insecurity during childhood has long-term repercussions beginning with school and educational attainment. Studies show that food insecure children obtain lower language comprehension,²³ reading,⁴ and math scores.^{4, 24} This can set children back and increase their likelihood of having to repeat a grade^{4, 24} making them more likely to drop out of high school.^{4, 20}

In 2019:

- The status dropout rate for Hispanic students was 7.7 percent, significantly higher than the average status dropout rate of 5.1 percent²⁵
- The status dropout rate of U.S. born Hispanic students was 5.9 percent²⁵
- The status dropout rate of foreign born Hispanic students was 16.7 percent²⁵
- Nationally, the total U.S. born status dropout rate was 4.7 per-

cent and the foreign born status dropout rate was 9.5 percent.²⁵

These statistics show a clear disproportionate rate of status dropouts among Hispanic students, and even more so between U.S. born and foreign born students. The same circumstances that drive dropout rates can also drive food insecurity rates. Food insecurity, poverty, and dropout rates are inextricably connected, and therefore Hispanic children are the ones who experience compounding effects. Lower academic outcomes and lower educational attainment directly translates to a reduced earning capacity and lifetime earnings.⁴ Lower educational attainment and behavior problems can be a risk for delinquent behavior exacerbated by food insecurity,²⁶ and as previously mentioned, Black and Hispanic individuals have one of the highest incarceration rates.¹³

In the long run, food insecurity is detrimental to a child's success later on in life in which Hispanic children are already at a disadvantage due to systematic exclusion and institutional oppression. Adults who are not mentally, emotionally, physically, educationally, or socially prepared to be in the workforce hold lower paying jobs that reduce their earning capacity and their chances to escape economic hardships.^{4,27} The cycle of poverty is used to explain how poverty can present barriers across generations or in other words, one person's earning capacity can impact the next generations human capital accumulation, including education, skills, and health.⁴ Both poverty and food insecurity are social determinants of health, so a greater emphasis on alleviating the disparities associated with both can make a meaningful impact in communities of color.²⁷

Federal Nutrition Assistance Programs

Child nutrition programs are vital in combating child food insecurity. The programs, which are administered by the USDA, are currently being revised by Congress through Child Nutrition Reauthorization (CNR). Child Nutrition Reauthorization amends the permanent statutes that authorize these programs to improve, modernize, and strengthen them. Some of the programs include the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), the School Breakfast Program (SBP), and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). Additionally, the next Farm Bill is expected to be reauthorized in 2023 which covers SNAP and other nutrition assistance programs. Consistent evidence shows improved health outcomes and dietary quality as a result of participation in these programs.

Conclusion

To conclude, there is sufficient consistency in the literature regarding the negative outcomes of food insecurity in children such as poor mental health; cognitive impairments; social, emotional, and behavioral problems; and low educational attainment. These negative outcomes are magnified when looking specifically at Hispanic and Latino children, as the findings clearly demonstrate the disparity for Hispanic and Latino children being food secure. The need to fund the federal nutrition assistance programs is clear since these programs can directly counteract child food insecurity. Continuing to make efforts in strengthening the child nutrition programs, including school meal programs, through CNR will allow for more children to receive quali-

ty nutrition. Indirectly, the social, environmental, and economic reasons behind food insecurity need to be addressed so that food and health are not compromised. Protecting children from the effects of food insecurity is imperative for the success of future generations and the productivity of the country.

Endnotes

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