



# Hispanic/Latino Youth Face Heightened Food Insecurity & Health Risks that May be Exacerbated by Public Charge Rule Changes

By Olivia Piontek & Stephanie Potochnick, Ph.D.

## Overview

Hispanic/Latino youth in the United States are twice as likely to experience food insecurity —food shortages that lead to severe health risks—than non-Hispanic white youth. There are several factors unique to Hispanic/Latino youth that increase their food insecurity risk: acculturative and economic stressors, exclusion from social safety-net supports due to citizenship or residency requirements, and the “chilling effects” of anti-immigrant policies that prevent immigrant households from accessing vital social supports. Although extensive research finds relationships between food insecurity and poor physical and mental health, research on the food insecurity health implications among Hispanic/Latino youth is sparse.

This brief, based on a recent publication in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* and current policy debates surrounding public charge rules, provides a first look at the socioeconomic and acculturative factors that improve or worsen Hispanic/Latino youth’s food insecurity risk and the health implications of this risk. Findings suggest that 42% of Hispanic/Latino youth and 33% of Hispanic/Latino children experience food insecurity, while 10% live in very low food secure households. Furthermore, factors that significantly influence the status of food insecurity in Hispanic/Latino households are acculturative and socioeconomic stress and weak family support systems.

Overall, food insecure Latino youth face greater health risks—higher BMIs, poorer diet quality, and higher levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms—than those living in food secure households. These health risks largely stem from co-occurring acculturative and socio-economic stressors that make Hispanic/Latino families vulnerable to food insecurity in the first place. Current public charge rules being considered by the Trump administration could worsen Hispanic/Latino families' food insecurity risk even more, with significant health implications for Hispanic/Latino youth.

## About the Study

*Research Objectives & Study Overview:* Using a unique, large-scale dataset of Latino populations in four major Latino settlement destinations—Bronx, Chicago, Miami, and San Diego—this study focused on Hispanic/Latino youth ages 8 - 16 years and addressed the following research objectives:

1. How acculturation factors, socioeconomic stressors, and family/social supports contributed to Latino/a youth's food insecurity risk and severity;
2. How food insecurity influenced the health of Latino/a youth using four different health indicators-- BMI, depression, anxiety, and diet quality;
3. If the health implications of food insecurity differed across key Hispanic/Latino youth subgroups: males vs. females; low vs. higher-income; U.S. vs. foreign-born, and low vs. high acculturative stress levels.

*Data:* This study used data from the Hispanic Community Children's Health/Study of Latino Youth, collected from 2012 – 2014 at in-person clinic visits, where both parents and children were interviewed in Spanish and English. The dataset is particularly unique because it gathered information about the Hispanic experience in the U.S. by investigating background, acculturation experiences, food insecurity, and in-depth health information.

*Health Outcome Measures:* This research focused on four health outcomes:

- **BMI**--measured using height and weight;
- **Healthy Eating Index 2010**--measures whether dietary patterns are compliant with the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans;
- **Depression**—measured using the Children's Depression Inventory scale, which captures symptoms related to depression;
- **Anxiety**—measured using the Multi-Dimensional Anxiety Scale for Children, which captures symptoms related to anxiety.

*Food Insecurity Outcome Measures:* Following the standard 18-item USDA Food Security Survey Module coding, the paper identifies 4 indicators of food insecurity that capture the severity of household food insecurity (worried/concerned vs. actual hunger) and who in the household is impacted (any child and/or adult vs. any child specifically):

- **Household food insecure**--Anyone in household worried/concerned about the availability of adequate nutrition
- **Household very low food security**—Anyone in household experiencing hunger due to inadequate nutrition
- **Child food insecure**—Any child specifically worried/concerned about the availability of adequate nutrition
- **Child very low food security**—Any child specifically experiencing hunger due to food scarcity

*Explanatory Measures:* This paper examined a comprehensive set of factors likely to influence food insecurity risk and its health implications:

- **Demographics**—sex, age, location, and country of heritage
- **Acculturation Factors**--parent nativity, parent's language preference, and parent/child acculturative stress
- **Economic Stressors**—scale based on parents experiencing any of the following hardships in the last month: lack of phone service, eviction, inability to pay rent/mortgage, inability to pay utilities
- **Family and Social Support**—12-item General Functioning Scale assessing communication and understanding; 4-item Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support assessing child friendship

*Methods:* This study utilized bivariate and multivariate regression techniques commonly used in public health research to identify correlational relationships.

## **Key Findings**

*Food Insecurity of Hispanic/Latino Youth:* Hispanic/Latino youths experience food insecurity rates higher than the national average.

- Over 40% experienced household food insecurity meaning that they were worried/concerned about food scarcity.
- 33% experienced child food insecurity, which is double the national average for all U.S. households
- 10% lived in very-low food security households where either an adult or child experienced hunger.
- 3% lived in households where children experienced hunger.

*Correlates of Food Insecurity:* Although there were no differences in food insecurity by sex, age, and Hispanic/Latino background, every measure of food insecurity was impacted by acculturative and socioeconomic stress and weak family supports.

- Food insecure Hispanic/Latino youth lived in households with higher levels of parent and child acculturative stress; youth with foreign-born or Spanish speaking parents had the greatest odds of food insecurity or very low household food security, respectively.
- Hispanic/Latino youth experiencing food insecurity were more likely to live in households with limited socioeconomic resources and higher levels of socioeconomic stress, including neighborhood disorder (crime, neighborhood decay, foreclosure), than their food secure peers.
- Strong family functioning was negatively correlated with food insecurity. Thus, strong family support serves as a protector against food insecurity.

*Health Outcomes:* Hispanic/Latino youths experience significant health disadvantages, including high rates of obesity, mental health challenges, and low diet quality. Results suggest that household food insecurity, especially when it is severe, may be associated with these disadvantages.

- Overall, Hispanic/Latino youth in low to severe food insecure houses are more likely to be depressed, obese, and report higher BMIs than their food secure peers.
- Most of these health correlates, however, were explained by co-occurring economic and acculturation stressors. Once these factors were controlled for in the model, there was no direct association between food insecurity and health.
- However, the direct association between food insecurity and health persisted for the following Hispanic/Latino youth sub-group: older Hispanic/Latino youth with low-income, U.S.-born parents. Thus, these Hispanic/Latino youth, in particular, face significant health risk associated with food insecurity. This is in part because older siblings in food secure households often sacrifice their own nutritional needs for their younger siblings.

## Lessons for Missouri & Current Debates Surrounding Proposed Public Charge Rule Changes

**Overview of Public Charge Debate:** The results of this study inform current debates surrounding public charge rules, which shape immigrants' access to public benefits: Latino youth already face severe food insecurity and health risks that could worsen if access to vital public benefits are restricted even further.

The Trump administration is currently seeking to revise the public charge rule, which influences immigrant eligibility for public benefits. Though public charge rules have had a long history in the U.S. (originating as early as 1882), proposed rule changes—if passed—would be the first to exclude immigrants from vital non-cash benefits, such as food stamps.

**Current Public Charge Rule.** The public charge rule asserts that immigrants applying for legal or permanent residence in the United States may be considered inadmissible if they are deemed likely to become a “public charge,” or an individual who is dependent upon government resources. Recognizing the necessity of social safety nets available to immigrants, public charge laws have historically excluded food stamps, non-cash TANF benefits (i.e. childcare, job training, and transportation assistance), emergency assistance and emergency disaster relief, public health insurance, and rental assistance from inadmissibility determinations.

**Proposed Changes:** In October 2018, the Trump administration proposed modifications to the current law by expanding the list of publicly-funded social programs that immigration officers could consider as a public charge. In addition to the expanded list of social programs, certain personal characteristics could weigh negatively in an eligibility determination. The proposal expands inadmissibility determinations to include the following resources and personal characteristics:<sup>1</sup>

- Non-cash safety-net programs
  - Supplemental Assistance for Needy Families
  - Medicaid
  - Housing assistance programs (i.e. Section 8 Housing Assistance)
  - Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP)
- Personal characteristics
  - Household income below 125% of the federal poverty level
  - No high school diploma
  - Certain qualifying medical conditions
  - Private insurance status
  - English proficiency

**Consequences of Public Charge Expansion:** Estimates suggest that at least two in three lawful permanent residents that have been in the U.S. for five years have one or more of these characteristics.<sup>2</sup> These proposed changes could have enormous impacts not only on immigrants' decisions to use safety-net services, but also on the mental and physical health of immigrant families and their children. Forgoing the use of publicly-funded programs could significantly impact immigrants' access to affordable food, housing, and medical services.

**Consequences for Missouri's Immigrant Population:** Missouri is home to a sizeable and growing population of immigrants whose well-being would be threatened by the proposed Public Charge Rule changes. In 2015, over 4% of Missouri's residents were immigrants. And, many of Missouri's immigrants already face significant economic and acculturation stressors that make them vulnerable to food insecurity and poor health (see Table 1). Proposed changes to the public charge rule could worsen these stressors.

<sup>1</sup> Publ, E., Quimm, E., & Kinoshita, S. (2018). *An overview of public charge*. Immigrant Legal Resource Center. Retrieved from: [https://www.ilrc.org/sites/default/files/resources/overview\\_of\\_public\\_charge-20181214.pdf](https://www.ilrc.org/sites/default/files/resources/overview_of_public_charge-20181214.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Cosic, D., Johnson, R., & Pyati, A. (2018). “Public charge” could lead to fewer immigrants—and taxpayers—contributing to the US economy. *Urban Wire*. Urban Institute. Retrieved from: [www.urban.org](http://www.urban.org)

Table 1. Economic and Acculturative Stressors of Missouri’s Immigrant Population<sup>3</sup>

	Missouri		United States	
	<i>Foreign-Born</i>	<i>U.S.-Born</i>	<i>Foreign-Born</i>	<i>U.S.-Born</i>
Foreign Born—Total	4.2%	----	13.7%	----
Latino Origin	25.8%	3.2%	44.3%	13.9%
High Poverty (100% or below FPL)	17.5%	13.2%	15.3%	13.1%
Low Education (High-School Degree or less)	42.3%	41%	50.2%	36.8%
Limited English Proficiency	38.2%	0.6%	47.9%	1.8%
No Health Insurance Coverage	20.5%	8.6%	19.8%	7.0%

Thus, given Missouri’s sizeable immigrant population—25.8% of which is of Latino origin—public charge rule changes could have significant impacts on the ability of Missouri immigrants to access vital social and health services that ensure they become healthy, productive Missouri citizens.

### About the Policy Brief Authors

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### Study Citation

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<sup>3</sup> Migration Policy Institute. (2018). State immigration data profile: Missouri, demographics and social. Retrieved from: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/data/state-profiles/state/demographics/MO>