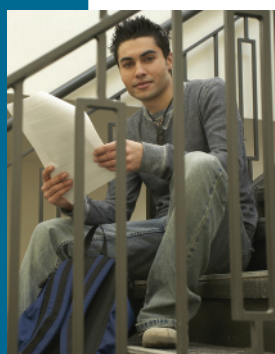


LATINO IMMIGRANTS: Food AND Housing Insecurity

Fastest-Growing Minority: Latino Immigrants in Iowa and the United States



Latinos¹ comprise 12.5 percent of the U.S. population and 2.8 percent of all Iowans. In 2000, 35 percent of the foreign born population in Iowa was of Latino origin with 27 percent born in Mexico. Three-fourths of the new Latino immigrants in Iowa come from five Mexican states: Michoacán, Jalisco, Gaunajuato, San Luis Potosí, and Guerrero

Commonly, Latino immigrants come to Iowa seeking employment to escape poor economic conditions in their own countries. Frequently, they are recruited as wage laborers by meat packing companies or come to Iowa as a result of a recommendation from a family member or close friend. Limited resources, lack of legal documentation, reduced social networks, and language barriers put their well-being in jeopardy. In addition, the typical Latino immigrant arrives with few or no financial resources, no credit history, and a mistrust of financial institutions. As a result, they often struggle with acquiring food and housing. A survey conducted by the Iowa Women, Infants, and Children program in 2003 found that 41 percent of Spanish speaking respondents (n=374) were food insecure.² Latino immigrants frequently turn to family and close friends for help (e.g., money, child care, transportation, knowledge of community resources) to meet these basic needs and maintain connections with relatives in their country of origin via phone and annual visits back home for additional support.

Food insecurity and poverty

In 2005, 11 percent of U.S. households were food insecure at some time during the previous year (20 percent of these households were headed by a Latino person) and 13 percent of households experienced poverty. Food insecurity is linked with unemployment, high housing and utility costs, poverty, lack of education, mental health problems, substance abuse, and high transportation, childcare, and health care costs.

¹ *Latino* refers to those who trace their ancestry to Latin America. *Hispanic* refers to those who come from Spanish speaking countries.

² Food insecurity is defined as limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable food in socially acceptable ways.

Housing

Poor rural families face more severe housing deprivation relative to those in urban areas. The age and condition of the housing stock and the limited number of rental units in rural areas affects non-white and Latino rural households more than their white counterparts. In Iowa, the large influx of Latino immigrants has increased the housing shortage in small and mid-size communities. Landlords often take advantage of

Latino immigrants are the fastest growing minority group in Iowa. The Latino population (including immigrants and U.S. citizens) is rapidly growing in all parts of the nation. The term Latino refers to those who trace their ancestry to Latin America. Hispanic refers to those who come from Spanish-speaking countries.

new Latino immigrants who lack a credit history and have limited financial resources by charging more for housing that may not meet minimum health and safety standards.

Barriers to affordable housing influence not only the capacity of a family to meet its basic needs for shelter, but they also limit the amount of money available for food. Nutrition and health risks have been linked to housing-related energy costs. A 2003 study found that families reduced their expenditures on food in response to cold weather. Other research indicates that low-income families use food subsidies to partially meet their food needs, yet they continue to be burdened by having to spend a large share of their budget for housing.

Rural Iowa Latino study

To understand issues that Latino immigrant families in Iowa face and to learn about the strategies they use to meet their food and housing needs, researchers at Iowa State University with the assistance of county-based extension staff and other community partners collaborated on a study entitled *Examining the well-being of rural Latino immigrant families*. This project examined in depth the lives of 31 Latino immigrant families in two rural Iowa counties, Buena Vista and Tama. Study

Iowa State University Extension presents this policy brief

- to increase understanding about the status of food and housing insecurity among Iowa families, and
- to suggest specific action steps to help Iowa families and communities become more secure.

participants were predominantly Mexican mothers who had immigrated to the United States within the last 15 years, had children 12 years of age or younger, had incomes at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty line, and had not completed high school. Two interviews were conducted with each mother over a two-year period. Mothers were asked to share information and experiences related to their ability to feed and provide shelter for their families, care for and parent their children, and access community resources and other social supports. Information related to the health and employment status of family members, and the household's income also was collected.

Forty-five percent (14 of 31) of the Latino immigrant families were food insecure. Almost all of the households reported using some form of social support (money, food, transportation) from family, friends, or church or community agencies to help them acquire food. Food insecure households frequently reported accessing financial and multiple forms of other support (shared housing, child care, transportation, help paying bills, etc.) from family members. Food secure families reported a higher level of knowledge of community resources and money management skills than food insecure families. A higher percent of food secure families (70.6 percent, 12 of 17) received WIC assistance compared to families who were food insecure (64.3 percent, 9 of 14). When it came to knowing how to manage finances, 88.2 percent (15 of 17) of food secure respondents and 50 percent (7 of 14) of food insecure respondents knew how to make a family budget. Families reported quickly paying back money they borrowed. *"I've borrowed money ... to pay the rent ... to pay for many things ... I borrowed from friends ... when I started working I started to pay back."*

Nearly all families indicated they had lived with relatives when they first arrived in the United States. The birth of a new baby and the arrival of new family members prompted families to look for new affordable places to live. Finding affordable housing was reported by all households to be difficult. *"Before living there I lived with my sister ... (I moved) because an uncle who had just arrived from Mexico came to work here and then we left my sister's place and we moved to the apartment ... we left because the rent was too high and it only had two bedrooms."*

Families reported downsizing—moving frequently to secure housing that was less expensive and as a result smaller and sometimes of poorer quality. In relating this type of experience, a respondent said *"I think we're too big a family (for the current housing unit) ... seven family members ... and this apartment is too small ... and we're here because it's what we can afford ... not because we're fine*

here ... we're not fine here." Though we can only conjecture regarding motives, one might argue that reducing housing costs is part of an overall strategy families have to stretch limited resources to meet their many needs. A mother relates *"we have enough to pay the rent because we know we have to ... but on the week we have to pay it is obvious that then we don't have enough for other things ..."*

The desire for home ownership is strong among Latino immigrants, even though few families in this study were likely to receive housing, energy, or fuel assistance. The study revealed that 58.8 percent (10 of 17) of food secure families were homeowners compared with only 14.3 percent (2 of 14) of food insecure families. More than one third (38.7 percent, 12 of 31) of the total study participants were homeowners, owning trailers or houses that needed repairs. One woman says the family *"bought this place and made improvements. It was cheap, we made only three payments. ... It had no electricity ... no water ... no utilities ... it was only really two (rooms) only ... He made the bathroom ... the kitchen ... another two rooms ... little by little."* Food insecure families were less likely to have knowledge of getting help with heating bills (64.3 percent, 9 of 14) compared to food secure families (70.6 percent, 12 of 17). However, food insecure families were more likely to know how to apply for (28.6 percent, 4 of 14) and locate temporary housing (35.7 percent, 5 of 14) compared to food secure families (23.5 percent, 4 of 17; and 23.5 percent, 4 of 17).

Implications

Food insecurity and access to affordable, safe, and quality housing are areas of major concern that affect the well-being of families with low incomes. Many of the mothers in the Iowa rural Latino immigrant study reported having "fair" or "poor" health. Limited access to safe and nutritious food is a determinant of health and nutritional status and has been associated with developmental and other chronic problems. Similarly, the link between substandard housing and poor health has been corroborated; the presence of lead, radon, and allergens, for example, threatens health.

For Latino immigrant families food insecurity and housing are of greater concern than the general population due to being ineligible to participate in safety net programs such as Food Assistance and Section 8 Housing, their lack of knowledge of such programs, their limited employability, their diminished social network, and the cultural divide they experience when they first come to the United States.

Support from family, friends, and community organizations is essential for Latino immigrant families to survive and thrive when they settle in new communities. Promoting

interdependence (the existence of mutual support, cooperation, and interaction among families and the communities they live in) may be a goal that is as desirable as the goal for them to achieve self-sufficiency. Outreach is extremely important to help families learn how to navigate the array of community resources and identify which resources will best meet their needs. In order to attain food and housing security, many Latino immigrant families would benefit from educational programs that help them learn how to manage their economic resources, and that connect them to food resources.

Policies that build upon the strengths of Latino immigrant families and are sensitive to the unique issues they experience can be of great help as well. It is important to protect the well-being of Latino immigrants as they fill employee shortages in Iowa. These families contribute to Iowa's economy and enrich Iowa's culture, and their children will help to shape Iowa's future.

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File: Family Life 9