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Emergency Food Assistance Helps Many Low-Income Hispanic Children

Michael Martinez-Schiferl and Sheila R. Zedlewski

In 2009, nearly 1 in every 5 children in the United States lived in families that used emergency food assistance through Feeding America (FA, formerly America's Second Harvest), the nation's largest organization of emergency food providers. This represents more than 14 million children in 4.5 million households.^{1,2} Of children in families that used emergency food assistance of any type, 92 percent were assisted by food pantries; 6 percent, kitchens; and 1 percent, shelters.

Emergency food assistance is delivered through a national network of approximately 33,500 food pantries, 4,500 soup kitchens, and 3,600 emergency shelters (Mabli et al. 2010). Faith-based agencies affiliated with churches, mosques, synagogues, and other religious organizations operate approximately two-thirds of assistance centers, and private nonprofit organizations with no religious affiliation operate about one-third. Food distribution centers receive food through federal programs (such as Commodity Supplemental Food and The Emergency Food Assistance Program), as well as through private donations. Most of these centers rely on volunteers to deliver

food and often other services to low-income families.

This brief highlights the characteristics of children in families that use emergency food assistance, focusing especially on Hispanic children compared with other race and ethnic groups. The findings are based on responses to the 2010 Hunger in America (HIA) survey that completed in-person interviews with more than 61,000 clients served by the FA national network.³

Most children in families using food assistance are food insecure and poor. Higher shares of Hispanic and black children use emergency food assistance than white children, reflecting their higher rates of poverty

In 2009, 14 million children received emergency food assistance through Feeding America, the nation's largest organization of emergency food providers.

Table 1. Children in Families That Use Emergency Food Assistance by Race/Ethnicity

	RACE / ETHNICITY			
	Hispanic	Black	White	All
Children receiving emergency food assistance (thousands)	4,306	4,262	4,689	14,051
Children receiving emergency food assistance (%)	30.6	30.3	33.4	31.4
Of all U.S. children ^a	29.1	38.4	10.6	18.8
Of low-income children ^b	41.4	63.5	39.4	44.8
By characteristics				
Region (%)				
Northeast	12.5*	18.8	15.1	15.3
Midwest	10.1*	23.7	37.8*	24.7
South	35.2*	53.7*	34.7*	39.6
West	42.2*	3.8*	12.4*	20.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Citizenship (%)				
Children				
Citizen	75.2*	84.2	87.0*	82.2
Noncitizen ^c	12.5*	3.0*	0.8*	5.5
No answer	12.3	12.9	12.2	12.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Households ^d				
All citizens	26.6*	68.6*	72.2*	56.6
Some noncitizens ^e	53.5*	7.4*	3.7*	20.8
All noncitizens ^c	5.4*	0.8*	0.2*	2.2
No answer	14.6*	23.3	23.9*	20.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Feeding America 2010 Hunger in America (HIA) survey. Notes: The HIA records race/ethnicity for the respondent, not for each individual within a household. This study summarizes the results according to the survey respondent's race/ethnicity. Black refers to black non-Hispanics and white refers to white non-Hispanics. The table does not separately show results for the 5 percent of children in families reporting other races. The results omit 0.8 percent missing race/ethnicity. Annual estimates are derived from monthly estimates and assume that the annual demographic characteristics of emergency food assistance recipients are identical to their monthly characteristics. a. Population figures were taken from Nord, Andrews, and

Carlson (2009) and adjusted by Census estimated population growth of 0.865 percent between 2008 and 2009. b. 2008 estimates for low-income children were tabulated using the March 2009 CPS supplement adjusted by Census estimated population growth of 0.865 percent between 2008 and 2009. Percent excludes children receiving food assistance whose families were not low income. c. Includes documented, refugee, and undocumented residents. d. Weighted by children in household. e. Excludes households consisting of all noncitizens. *Statistically significant difference from its complement (e.g., Hispanic versus non-Hispanic) at .10.

and deep poverty. Hispanic households that use emergency food assistance tend to have more members than other racial and ethnic groups, a factor that places additional pressure on food budgets. The majority of families that tap into the emergency food assistance network also receive help from federal nutrition assistance programs. Hispanic families, however, are less likely than others to get help from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the nation's largest federal food assistance program. Hispanic families more often include noncitizens who may be ineligible for SNAP. Their lower participation also may reflect confusion about rules governing citizens and immigrants or less awareness of the program.

Children in Families Using Assistance

In 2009, FA served the families of more than 14 out of the 74 million children under the age of 18 in the United States (19 percent). While the racial/ethnic distribution of children using emergency food assistance is even—31 percent Hispanic, 30 percent black, 33 percent white—much larger shares of children from the total Hispanic and black populations receive assistance (table 1). For example, 29 percent of Hispanic and 38 percent of black children received some assistance in 2009, compared with only about 11 percent of white children.

The differences in food assistance use by race partly reflect differences in income across these groups. In 2008, for example, the poverty rate for Hispanic children was 30 percent, compared with 34 percent for black and 10 percent for white children.⁴ Ninety-seven percent of families with children (not shown) using food assistance are low income (defined as below 200 percent of the federal poverty level). Comparing the numbers of children receiving emergency food assistance with the numbers of children in low-income families

suggests that about 4 in 10 low-income Hispanic and white children and more than 6 in 10 black low-income children receive some emergency food assistance.

While the emergency food assistance network operates across the country, Hispanic children using this assistance more often live in the West and the South than other regions. Black children in contrast more often live in the South than other regions.

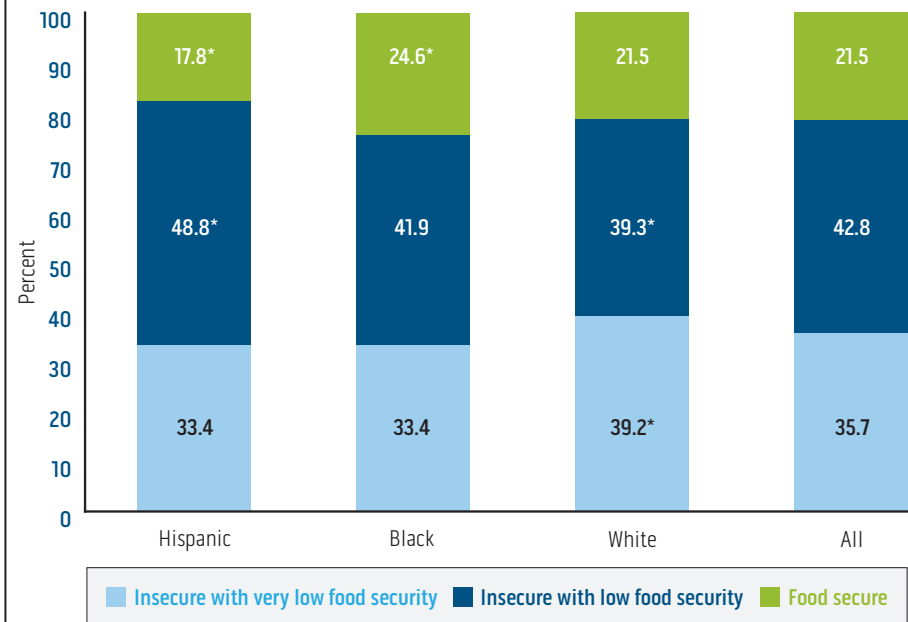
Citizenship status also varies dramatically across the race/ethnicity groups. Food pantries and other emergency nutrition programs may offer the only assistance for low-income immigrant families, which may not be eligible for federal or state assistance. While the HIA survey does not ask families about their formal immigration status, it does ask about members' citizenship status. Over 1 in 10 children in Hispanic families accessing emergency food assistance are not citizens (table 1). While only 5 percent of Hispanic households reported that no members were citizens, over half reported having at least one noncitizen member. Note that because of the higher rate of missing data for citizenship status, table 1 shows the distribution including missing observations.

Food Security

Food security measures whether people have access to enough food for an active, healthy life. A family is food insecure if they experience "limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways" and they have very low food security if they are unable to get enough food to eat (Bickel et al. 2000).

Of the 14 million children in families that received emergency food assistance during 2009, 78 percent (11 million) lived in food-insecure households, including 36 percent (5 million) in households with very low food

Figure 1. Children in Families That Use Emergency Food Assistance: Food Security by Race/Ethnicity



Source: Feeding America 2010 Hunger in America survey.

* Statistically significant difference from its complement (e.g., Hispanic versus non-Hispanic) at .10.

security.⁵ Hispanic children receiving assistance were the most likely to live in food-insecure households (82 percent). White children in families tapping into the food assistance network had significantly higher rates of very low food security with hunger than other children (figure 1).

High rates of food insecurity help explain families' frequent use of emergency food assistance. Nearly 3 in 10 Hispanic and white children lived in families that got help once a month during 2009, compared with about 1 in 4 black children (table 2). Another 46 percent of Hispanic children lived in families that received help from 2 to 11 months during the year; 25 percent received food assistance only once during the year.

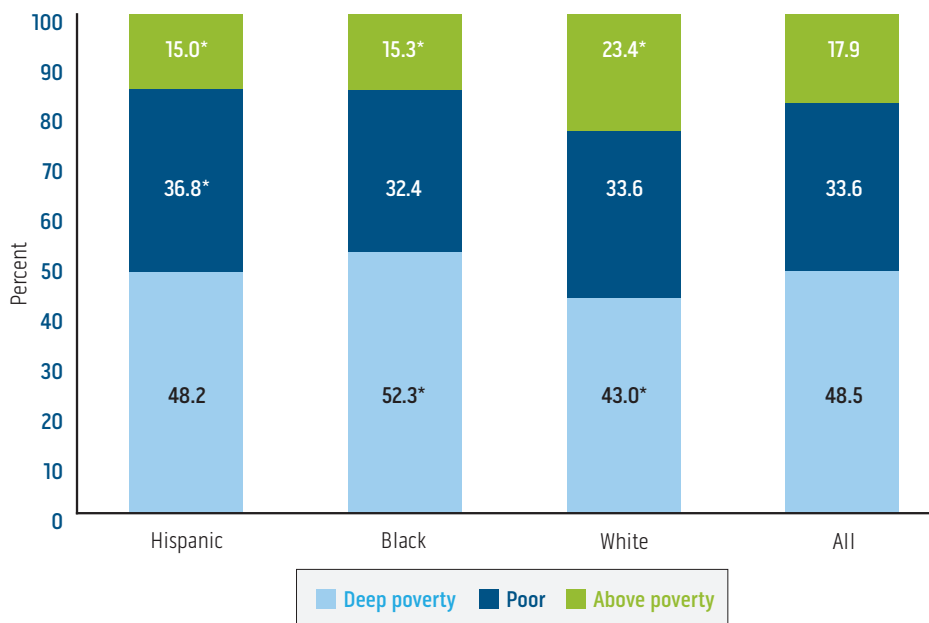
Table 2. Children in Families That Use Emergency Food Assistance: Duration of Use by Race/Ethnicity

Months	RACE / ETHNICITY (%)			
	Hispanic	Black	White	All
12	29.1	25.4*	29.1	27.9
6–11	13.5*	21.0	20.3	18.6
2–5	32.5	28.3*	32.8	31.2
1	24.9*	25.3	17.7*	22.3

Source: Feeding America 2010 Hunger in America survey.

*Statistically significant difference from its complement (e.g., Hispanic versus non-Hispanic) at .10.

Figure 2. Children in Families That Use Emergency Food Assistance: Poverty Status by Race/Ethnicity



Source: Feeding America 2010 Hunger in America survey.

*Statistically significant difference from its complement (e.g., Hispanic versus non-Hispanic) at .10.

Most Getting Help Are Poor

As shown in figure 2, the vast majority (82 percent) of children in families that received emergency food assistance in 2009 lived in poverty, including nearly one-half that lived in deep poverty (below 50 percent of the federal poverty level). Children in Hispanic and white families were less likely to live in deep poverty than black children (48 and 43 percent, respectively, compared with 52 percent). Higher rates of deep poverty among black children could help to explain their more frequent use of emergency food assistance, as discussed earlier.

Family Size and Work Status

Family composition also differs by race and ethnicity for families receiving food assistance. Among all children in families with assistance, 29 percent lived with only one adult present, 46 percent with two adults, and 25 percent with three or more adults (table 3).⁶ Hispanic children lived with more adults than either black or white children. Twenty-eight percent of Hispanic children using food assistance lived with three or more adults in 2009. In contrast, black children more often lived with only one adult (42 percent compared with 21 percent for Hispanics).

Households that used food assistance tended to be large.⁷ Six in 10 had three or more children. Size could help explain the need for food assistance since it takes more income to feed and support larger households. The number of children in families that received assistance also varied across racial and ethnic groups. About two-thirds of Hispanic households using emergency food assistance had 3 or more children compared with about 6 in 10 black and just over half of white households.

The number of working adults also helps explain differences in families' food assistance use. On average, 48 percent of families that turned to food pantries and other emergency

Table 3. Children in Families That Use Emergency Food Assistance: Household Characteristics by Race/Ethnicity

	RACE / ETHNICITY (%)			
	Hispanic	Black	White	All
Number of adults				
1	21.3*	41.8*	24.8*	29.1
2	50.6*	36.0*	52.1*	46.2
3+	28.1*	22.2	23.1	24.7
Number of working adults				
0	36.9*	60.3*	48.6	48.1
1	48.3*	27.3*	38.4	38.4
2+	14.8	12.4	13.0	13.5
Number of children				
1	10.3*	14.1	16.3*	13.7
2	23.2*	26.3	30.0*	26.2
3+	66.6*	59.5	53.7*	60.0

Source: Feeding America 2010 Hunger in America survey.

Notes: Excludes households without any adults whose respondent's age is either missing or was not given.

Survey data do not allow for the identification of subfamilies within the household.

* Statistically significant difference from its complement (e.g., Hispanic versus non-Hispanic) at .10.

assistance had no working adults in 2009. Hispanic families more often had working adults than other race groups (63 percent compared with 40 percent for blacks and 51 percent for whites). Despite Hispanic families having more workers, their larger household sizes mean that it takes more income to move the family out of poverty and out of danger of food insecurity.

Most Also Receive Federal Nutrition Assistance

Families that turn to the emergency food assistance network often get federal nutrition help as well. The SNAP program, the largest food assistance program in the United States, aims to provide families with incomes below 130 percent of the federal poverty level with

enough assistance to cover the costs of a minimally adequate diet (Nord, Andrews, and Carlson 2009). SNAP eligibility rules exclude all unauthorized immigrants and usually legal immigrant adults who have been living in the United States fewer than five years.⁸ While state rules differ, SNAP eligibility also usually requires passing an asset test. Other programs such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), National School Lunch and School Breakfast, and Summer Food Service target different populations and are more broadly available (see brief 2 in this series for details).

Nearly 9 in 10 children in households receiving emergency food assistance in 2009 also received some other type of federal food

High rates of food insecurity help explain families' frequent use of emergency food assistance. Nearly 3 in 10 Hispanic and white children lived in families that got help once a month during 2009, compared with about 1 in 4 black children.

Table 4. Children in Families That Use Emergency Food Assistance: Food Assistance Type by Race/Ethnicity

	RACE / ETHNICITY (%)			
	Hispanic	Black	White	All
No other food assistance	11.5	15.0	9.7*	12.0
SNAP only	5.1	7.7*	5.8	6.0
Other only	47.5*	29.1*	29.3*	34.7
SNAP and other	35.9*	48.2	55.2*	47.3

Source: Feeding America 2010 Hunger in America survey.

Notes: Other food assistance includes WIC, school breakfast and lunch, and after-school snack programs. Households with missing or d/refused responses for the SNAP participation question were excluded.

assistance, including the 53 percent who received SNAP (table 4). Hispanic children were the least likely to be in families that received SNAP in the past year (41 percent). Their receiving SNAP less frequently could reflect the rules excluding some immigrants. Though all except undocumented children are eligible for benefits regardless of other household members' immigration status, households lacking citizenship often avoid SNAP and other welfare programs, fearing that enrollment could adversely affect their immigration status in the United States (National Council of La Raza, undated). However, a larger-than-average share of Hispanic children received some other type of food assistance targeted toward children and broadly available for low-income families, such as breakfast and lunch at their schools.

Summary

With more than 14 million children in the United States receiving some emergency food assistance in 2009, the Feeding America network of emergency food providers clearly improved the well-being of low-income children. Nearly half of the children assisted lived in deep poverty and more than one-third

experienced very low food security. Hispanic and black children particularly benefited, with significantly higher shares tapping emergency food assistance, reflecting the greater need among these groups when compared with white children.

The majority of families using emergency food assistance also accessed federal nutrition assistance programs. Over half received SNAP, and many also received help from a nutrition assistance program targeted toward children. While Hispanic families received SNAP less often, they did frequently get help from programs such as school nutrition and WIC.

The high levels of food insecurity and poverty among families using emergency food assistance demonstrate the extreme need found in 2009, when the unemployment rate exceeded 10 percent, the highest in over 25 years.⁹ Moreover, Hispanics and blacks have experienced disproportionately high rates of unemployment and underemployment during the downturn, increasing the strains on their family budgets (Hipple 2010). The U.S. emergency food assistance network plays an important role in meeting families' needs, especially during tough economic times. ■



Notes

1. Throughout this brief we use *family* and *household* interchangeably. The Hunger in America survey asks about all members living together in a household whether related or not. It is not possible to sort out family units within households precisely.
2. Estimates throughout this brief reflect annual estimates using methods outlined in chapter 4 and appendix A of the Hunger in America 2010 National Report and assume that the annual demographic characteristics of emergency food assistance recipients are the same as their monthly characteristics.
3. See Mabli et al. (2010) for complete survey findings and survey documentation.
4. U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement (2009) “POV03. People in Families with Related Children under 18 by Family Structure, Age, Sex, Iterated by Income-to-Poverty Ratio and Race,” http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/cpstables/032009/pov/new03_100.htm.
5. These numbers compare well with those of tables 1A and 1B of the USDA report “Household Food Security in the United States, 2008” (Nord, Andrews, and Carlson 2009).
6. Since the survey instrument does not allow for the identification of subfamilies within the household, it is not possible to identify parents precisely. We use the number of adults in the household as a proxy.
7. Note that the count of children includes all individuals under 18 in the household and may be children of multiple families that live in one household.
8. Four states (California, Nebraska, New York, and Wisconsin) provide benefits to some immigrants who do not meet the regular SNAP eligibility requirements (Food and Nutrition Service 2010).
9. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010, “Labor Force Statistics (Current Population Survey—CPS),” Seasonally Adjusted Unemployment Rate, <http://data.bls.gov/> (downloaded August 8, 2010).

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The Income and Benefits Policy Center studies how public policy influences the behavior and economic well-being of families, particularly the disabled, the elderly, and those with low incomes. Scholars look at income support, social insurance, tax, child-support, and employee-benefit programs.

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