

[www.urban.org](http://www.urban.org)

**INSIDE THIS ISSUE**

- Hispanic families served by Feeding America have lower receipt of SNAP than white or black families, placing them at greater nutritional risk.
- Though SNAP participation among Hispanic FA families is low, WIC participation is higher, and Hispanic children receive meals at school about as often as children in other racial/ethnic groups.

# Low-Income Hispanic Children Need both Private and Public Food Assistance

Sheila R. Zedlewski and Michael Martinez-Schiferl

Emergency food assistance delivered through Feeding America (FA) pantries, kitchens, and shelters plays an important role in supplementing federal nutrition assistance programs. Many of the 14 million children in families that received some private food assistance in 2009 also received help from federal nutrition assistance programs: the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program, the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP), and some smaller programs such as the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and the Child and Adult Care Feeding Program (CACFP). This multifaceted food assistance safety net provides critical help to poor and near-poor families with children, especially during tough economic times.

This brief describes how the broader food safety net serves children in families receiving FA assistance, stressing its importance for Hispanic children. Each element of the safety net aims to improve nutritional outcomes for children and ultimately contribute to their positive cognitive and emotional development.<sup>1</sup> Private food assistance programs supplement the federal programs in several important ways. They provide food to families not eligible or not yet enrolled in federal assistance and help families that cannot get by on the government benefits alone. Many private food assistance outlets also educate low-

income families about the federal programs and help them with enrollment.

Data from the 2010 Hunger in America (HIA) survey show that children in Hispanic families served by FA receive less help from the federal nutrition safety net than white or black children.<sup>2</sup> Hispanic families with children age-eligible for WIC, NSLP, and SBP receive this help about as often as their black and white counterparts. On the other hand, Hispanic families that receive help through FA less often receive SNAP regardless of their children's ages. Lower rates of SNAP participation among Hispanic families at least to some extent reflect federal

**Children in Hispanic families served by Feeding America receive less help from the federal nutrition safety net than white or black children.**

**Table 1. Major Federal Nutrition Assistance Targeting Families with Children**

PROGRAM <sup>a</sup>	GENERAL ELIGIBILITY	BENEFIT	SIZE (CASELOAD/COST) <sup>b</sup>
<b>SNAP</b>	Households with gross income at or below 130 percent of the FPL and net income at or below 100 percent of the FPL with limited assets.	Electronic benefit card to purchase groceries sufficient to cover a "minimally adequate diet"; varies with household size and income. The 2008 maximum for four was \$542 per month.	6.4 million households with children per month (includes 13.5 million children); cost was about \$24.9 billion in 2008. <sup>c</sup>
<b>WIC</b>	Pregnant, breastfeeding, and postpartum women, infants, and children to age 5 with income below 185 percent of the FPL.	Checks, vouchers, or electronic benefit transfer cards to purchase specific items in food packages that vary by age of children and status of mother. Costs vary by state; average was \$43 per month in 2008.	8.7 million persons in average month; cost was \$6.2 billion in 2008.
<b>NSLP and SBP</b>	Lunch is available in nearly all public and many private schools and breakfast is available in most schools. Meals are free if family income is below 130 percent of the FPL, reduced price if income is below 185 percent.	Reimburses schools for meal costs.	NSLP: 31.0 million children participated for a total cost of \$9.3 billion in 2008.  SBP: 10.6 million children participated for a total cost of \$2.4 billion in 2008.
<b>Other</b>	The Child and Adult Care Food Program provides meals and snacks to children in certain nonresidential child care centers, family or group day care, after-school programs in low-income areas, and emergency shelters.  The Summer Food Service Program provides meals and snacks to low-income children in needy areas during summer break and when schools are closed for vacation.	Both programs reimburse costs of local providers.	CACF: 3.3 million, \$2.4 billion (including adult care) in 2008.  SFS: 2.1 million children, average, cost \$0.326 billion in 2008.

FPL=federal poverty level

NSLP=National School Lunch Program

SBP=School Breakfast Program

SNAP=Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

WIC=Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children

a. Program characteristics from USDA (2009a).

b. Unless otherwise noted, caseloads and costs are from the Annual Summary of Food and Nutrition Service Programs, data as of August 3, 2010, USDA.

c. SNAP costs for households with children are only available through federal fiscal year 2008 from USDA (2009b).

rules that limit eligibility for some immigrant members of these households. Lower receipt of SNAP, the cornerstone of the federal nutrition safety net, also means that low-income Hispanic families are at greater nutritional risk than families in other demographic groups.

### What Is in the Federal Food Safety Net?

The main federal programs that serve low-income children include SNAP, WIC, the NSLP, and the SBP (table 1). The maximum SNAP allotment is supposed to cover the cost of a minimally adequate diet for a household; WIC covers the special nutritional needs of pregnant, postpartum, and lactating women and their children younger than 5; and the NSLP and SBP subsidize the cost of lunch and breakfast in most American schools. In 2008, these programs provided about \$43 billion in assistance to families with children.<sup>3</sup> SNAP provided \$24.9 billion in benefits; WIC, \$6.2 billion; and the school nutrition programs, \$11.7 billion.

About 13.5 million children living in low-income households received SNAP benefits in an average month in 2008. Households with income at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty level (\$28,665 in 2010 for a family of three) and net income after deductions (for child care, excessive housing costs, and, in households with elderly or disabled members, medical care costs) at or below 100 percent of the FPL are eligible unless they have significant assets.<sup>4</sup>

The SNAP benefit varies depending on family income and size. For example, while the maximum benefit in 2008 for a household of four was \$542 per month, the average benefit for households with children was \$329.<sup>5</sup> Most families receive less than the maximum because they have some income. The SNAP benefit plus one-third of net income is expected to be enough for a family to afford a minimally adequate diet.

Almost 9 million individuals received benefits through WIC in an average month in 2008. Individuals in families with incomes below 185 percent of the FPL and with nutritional need certified by authorized public-health workers qualify for benefits. A WIC voucher allows recipients to purchase specialized food packages covering dairy, cereal, and other nutritional needs from certified vendors.

The NSLP benefited 31 million low-income children in 2008 and nearly 11 million children benefited from the SBP. While a smaller share of schools offers breakfast than lunch, participation is also lower in the SBP than in the NSLP. Lower participation is also attributed to the incompatibility between the timing and place of these meals (in the cafeteria before class) and bus and parents' work schedules. Stigma is also a factor as, unlike NSLP, the overwhelming majority of participating SBP children are low income.<sup>6</sup>

### Emergency Food Assistance Augments Other Assistance

Many families with children that receive emergency food through FA also benefit from these federal safety net programs. Since some federal nutrition assistance depends on children's ages, the amount of assistance families receive varies. Among all FA families with only young children (under age 5), 61 percent also received SNAP and 54 percent received WIC (table 2). The families of young Hispanic children received SNAP much less often than black and white children (39 percent compared with 65 and 74 percent, respectively). Hispanic families participated in WIC at the same rate as white families (59 and 61 percent, respectively) and at significantly higher rates than black families (40 percent). Also, almost one in three Hispanic families with only young children that used private food assistance did not receive help from any federal nutrition program.



While SNAP receipt remains relatively low among Hispanic families whose children are school age (5 and older), Hispanic children receive help from the school meal programs at about the same frequency as black and white children, and receipt of other child nutrition assistance (such as summer food service) is relatively high. Still, the low SNAP receipt among Hispanic families reduces their total food assistance compared with other racial/ethnic groups.

Similar patterns of benefit receipt occur for FA families with both young and school-age children. SNAP participation among Hispanic families is low, WIC participation is higher (especially compared with blacks), and Hispanic children receive meals at school about as often as children in other racial/ethnic groups. As would be expected, families with children in both age groups more frequently receive benefits from multiple federal programs (68 percent) than those with only young children (43 percent) or those with only school-age children (42 percent).

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

	RACE / ETHNICITY (%)			
	Hispanic	Black	White	All
<b>Families with all children under 5</b>				
SNAP <sup>a</sup>	38.5*	64.5	74.3*	60.8
WIC	59.1	39.7*	61.3*	54.1
School meals	12.8	16.4	8.7*	12.6
Other children's assistance <sup>b</sup>	11.9	26.7*	17.2	18.7
Multiple benefit receipt				
None	28.8*	20.4	14.2*	20.2
One only	36.1	43.3	32.1*	36.8
Multiple	35.1*	36.4	53.7*	43.0
<b>Families with all children over 5</b>				
SNAP <sup>a</sup>	40.9*	48.5	53.7	48.8
WIC	8.5*	4.2	3.8	5.1
School meals	76.5	68.1*	74.8	73.2
Other children's assistance <sup>b</sup>	29.0*	27.3*	17.0*	23.8
Multiple benefit receipt				
None	13.1*	22.0*	16.0	17.3
One only	52.7*	36.8*	37.5*	40.8
Multiple	34.2*	41.2	46.5*	41.9
<b>Families with children under and over 5</b>				
SNAP <sup>a</sup>	41.7*	66.4*	69.1*	57.7
WIC	56.4*	36.3*	52.5	50.2
School meals	74.1*	82.3*	78.9	78.0
Other children's assistance <sup>b</sup>	31.0*	34.7	23.0*	29.3
Multiple benefit receipt				
None	11.5*	7.2	7.4*	9.2
One only	29.1*	21.6	17.5*	23.0
Multiple	59.3*	71.1	75.1*	67.8

Source: Feeding America 2010 Hunger in America 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 charac-

teristics of emergency food assistance recipients are identical to their monthly characteristics.  
 a. For the purpose of this table, SNAP receipt is tabulated as the proportion receiving SNAP now or at any time during the past 12 months.  
 b. Includes benefits from the Summer Food Service Program and the Child and Adult Care Feeding Program.  
 \* Statistically significant difference from its complement (e.g., Hispanic versus non-Hispanic) at .10.

**Feeding America Families' Experience with SNAP**

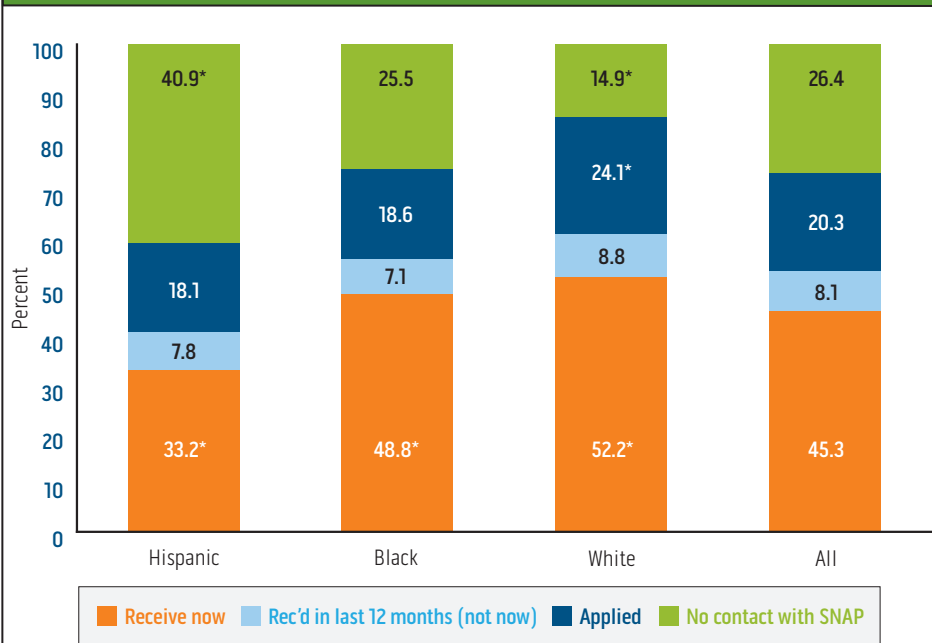
Given the low SNAP participation among Hispanic FA client families, it is important to examine their experiences with the program. As shown earlier, SNAP provides the core nutrition assistance for families and reduces food insecurity among low-income families. Benefits from WIC and school programs, while important, target specific nutritional needs.

The HIA survey asked families about their contact with SNAP and, among those that never applied for benefits, why they did not apply. Among families in the FA sample, 41 percent of Hispanic families reported no contact with SNAP, compared with 26 percent of black and 15 percent of white families (figure 1). Another 18 percent of Hispanic families reported that while they did not receive SNAP now, they had applied for benefits.

Hispanic families with no SNAP contact often reported concerns over citizenship and inconvenience as reasons (table 3). About 59 percent of Hispanic households receiving emergency food assistance have at least one noncitizen member.<sup>7</sup> While some immigrant adults are not eligible due to a five-year residency requirement, immigrant children do not face the same waiting period. Also, all children born in the United States are eligible. (Undocumented adults and children are both excluded.) Many families do not realize that they may apply for benefits even if only the children are eligible. Other eligible immigrants do not apply because of concerns they will be designated a “public charge,” threatening their and other family members’ immigration status (Fremstad 2004).

Hispanic families also more often cite inconvenience as a reason for not applying. The HIA survey reported higher rates of employment among Hispanic FA client families relative to other race/ethnicity groups.<sup>8</sup> It

**Figure 1. Families with Children That Receive Emergency Food Assistance: Contact with SNAP**



Source: Feeding America 2010 Hunger in America Survey.

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

is possible that Hispanic families more often than others find SNAP inconvenient because they are more likely to be working,<sup>9</sup> as many SNAP offices are open only during regular work hours.

On the other hand, Hispanic families reported concerns about ineligibility due to income or assets less often than families in other race groups. Over 40 percent of other families attribute their lack of contact with SNAP to concerns about income or assets, compared with only 15 percent of Hispanic families.

Among families that do receive SNAP benefits, a concern remains about why they still seek help from the private emergency food assistance network. SNAP, when combined with a family's own income, is designed to cover the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan,

about \$4.50 per person per day in 2008. The difficulty of feeding a family for this little has been highlighted through campaigns challenging political leaders and newscasters to try it themselves.<sup>10</sup>

The HIA survey asks families how long their SNAP benefits lasted as one indicator of adequacy. The vast majority (over 80 percent) reported that their SNAP benefits did not last the entire month (table 4). On average, families said that benefits lasted 2.7 weeks, and Hispanic families reported that this assistance only lasted 2.5 weeks. This result may simply indicate that families first use up their SNAP benefit before augmenting with their own resources. However, these families reliance on emergency food assistance indicates that the SNAP benefit combined with their own resources was not sufficient.

The broad use of food banks and pantries among low-income families with children confirms that enhancements in the federal nutrition safety net are needed.

Policymakers need to recognize the important role that emergency food assistance plays in the lives of low-income children.



**Table 3. Feeding America Client Families with No SNAP Contact: Reasons Did Not Apply for SNAP**

Reason (%)	RACE / ETHNICITY			
	Hispanic	Black	White	All
<b>Ineligibility</b>				
Income or assets	14.8*	40.1*	43.3*	28.4
Citizenship status	24.2*	6.4*	0.6*	14.0
Low benefit amount	1.8	3.1	2.9	2.3
<b>Inconvenience</b>	<b>16.3*</b>	<b>9.8</b>	<b>8.8*</b>	<b>12.5</b>
<b>No need</b>	<b>8.9</b>	<b>6.2*</b>	<b>21.8*</b>	<b>10.7</b>
<b>Social stigma</b>	<b>4.0</b>	<b>3.7</b>	<b>9.0*</b>	<b>4.9</b>
<b>Other<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>23.5</b>	<b>24.7</b>	<b>23.8</b>	<b>24.1</b>
<b>Total children (000)</b>	<b>1,725</b>	<b>1,020</b>	<b>682</b>	<b>3,577</b>

Source: Feeding America 2010 Hunger in America survey.

a. "Other" includes 6.9, 11.6, and 8.4 percent of Hispanic, black, and white families, respectively, that reported they plan to apply. No other reasons were supplied.

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

**Table 4. Families with Children That Receive EFA and SNAP: How Long Clients Say SNAP Benefits Last**

	RACE / ETHNICITY			
	Hispanic	Black	White	All
<b>Weeks SNAP benefits lasted (%)</b>				
1 or less	10.0	14.7*	10.2	11.5
2–3	73.8*	65.5*	70.2	69.4
4 or more	16.1	19.8*	19.6	19.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>99.9</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Average weeks</b>	<b>2.5*</b>	<b>2.6</b>	<b>2.7*</b>	<b>2.7</b>
<b>Median weeks</b>	<b>2.0</b>	<b>3.0</b>	<b>3.0</b>	<b>3.0</b>
<b>Total children (000)</b>	<b>1,414</b>	<b>2,077</b>	<b>2,389</b>	<b>6,274</b>

Source: Feeding America 2010 Hunger in America survey.

EFA = emergency food assistance

Notes: "Other" was excluded from the calculation of average and median for how long SNAP benefits usually last. For the purposes of averaging, those who reported more than 4 weeks were coded as 5 weeks.

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

### Summary and Implications

Families that use emergency food assistance often also get help from federal nutrition programs. Hispanic families, however, less often receive help through SNAP, the mainstay of federal nutrition assistance, than families of other racial/ethnic groups. Hispanic families frequently do receive benefits through WIC and school-based programs that target nutrition for children.

The child nutrition programs are due to be reauthorized this year. Proposed improvements, include extending the Afterschool Meal Program to all 50 states, increasing direct certification for school meals,<sup>11</sup> and enhancing school meal nutritional quality. Proposals also would allow states to certify children for WIC eligibility for up to one year (currently the limit is six months) and would ensure that more children have proper nutrition during their critical development years.

The broad use of food banks and pantries among low-income families with children confirms that enhancements in the federal nutrition safety net are needed. Policymakers need to recognize the important role that emergency food assistance plays in the lives of low-income children. Even when families receive SNAP, they often turn to food pantries because the SNAP allotment combined with their own resources is not sufficient. The emergency food assistance system takes on even greater importance for low-income Hispanic families since they less often receive SNAP benefits, the cornerstone of the federal nutrition safety net. ■

## Notes

1. Studies document the negative effects of hunger on children's health and mental health; see Cook and Jeng (2009) for a review. The effects of the federal food assistance programs on food security have been evaluated in numerous studies; see U.S. GAO (2010) for a recent summary.
2. 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.
3. The latest data showing SNAP costs for households with children represent fiscal year 2008, and we use 2008 financial data for the other programs for consistency. The 2009 financial data show higher costs for WIC and the NSLP and SBP programs and will no doubt show higher costs for SNAP, since we already know that case-loads increased during 2009.
4. Asset tests for households with children vary considerably by state and some households qualify for SNAP under categorical eligibility rules that waive these tests.
5. The latest data available breaking out households with children represent fiscal year 2008. The current maximum benefit for a household of four is \$668 due to the 2009 American Recovery and Reconciliation Act (ARRA) temporary increase.
6. See Bartfeld et al. (2009) for a review of this literature and their examination of the determinants of participation in the SBP among third-grade public school students.
7. See Martinez-Schiferl and Zedlewski (2010).
8. Martinez-Schiferl and Zedlewski (2010).
9. Brief 1 in the series showed that the HIA survey reported higher rates of employment among Hispanic FA client families relative to other race/ethnicity groups (Martinez-Schiferl and Zedlewski 2010).

10. See SNAP benefit adequacy, <http://www.frac.org>, for documentation of these campaigns.
11. *Direct certification* refers to certification of eligibility based on receipt of benefits from some other program. Under this provision (currently limited to SNAP and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), families do not have to complete a second application to enroll in school meals. Extending direct certification to Medicaid will connect more children with school meal programs.

## References

- Bartfeld, Judi, Myoung Kim, Jeong Hee Ruy, and Hong-Min Ahn. 2009. "The School Breakfast Program: Participation and Impacts." Report submitted to the Economic Research Service. Madison: University of Wisconsin.
- Cook, John, and Karen Jeng. 2009. *Child Food Insecurity: The Economic Impact on Our Nation*. Chicago: Feeding America.
- Fremstad, Shawn. 2004. "The Applicability of Public Charge Rules to Legal Immigrants Who Are Eligible for Public Benefits." Washington, DC: The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.
- Martinez-Schiferl, Michael, and Sheila Zedlewski. 2010. "Emergency Food Assistance Helps Many Low-Income Hispanic Children." Food Assistance Brief 1. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.
- U.S. Department of Agriculture. 2009a. *Annual Summary of Food and Nutrition Service Programs*. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/annual.htm>.
- . 2009b. *Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2008*. SNAP-09-CHAR. Alexandria, VA: Food and Nutrition Service.
- U.S. Government Accountability Office. 2010. *Domestic Food Assistance, Complex System Benefits Millions, but Additional Efforts Could Address Potential Inefficiency and Overlap among Smaller Programs*. GAO-10-346. Washington, DC: GAO.

## Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Feeding America for funding this research. Also, Rob Santos at the Urban Institute, Elaine Waxman at Feeding America, John Cook at Boston University School of Medicine, Craig Gundersen at the University of Illinois, and Jennifer Ngandu at the National Council of LaRaza all provided helpful comments on an earlier draft. Nonetheless, the authors are responsible for the content and the views expressed represent those of the authors and not the funders nor the Urban Institute or its trustees.

URBAN INSTITUTE  
2100 M Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20037-1231

return service requested

Nonprofit Org.  
**U.S. Postage PAID**  
Easton, MD  
Permit No. 8098

## About the Authors

Sheila R. Zedlewski is the director of the Urban Institute's Income and Benefits Policy Center.

Michael Martinez-Schiferl is a research associate with the Income and Benefits Policy Center at the Urban Institute.

## Feeding Low Income Children

[www.urban.org/center/ibp/](http://www.urban.org/center/ibp/)

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.

Copyright © October 2010

The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Permission is granted for reproduction of this document, with attribution to the Urban Institute.

URBAN INSTITUTE  
2100 M Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20037-1231  
(202) 833-7200  
[paffairs@urban.org](mailto:paffairs@urban.org)  
[www.urban.org](http://www.urban.org)