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Latino Participation in Food Assistance Programs: A Study Conducted for Project Bread

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The **CENTER** *for* **SOCIAL POLICY**

Latino Participation in Food Assistance Programs

A STUDY CONDUCTED FOR PROJECT BREAD

March 2007

By Anny Rivera-Ottenberger, Ph.D. *and* Elaine Werby, MSW



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Executive Summary

The underutilization of food stamps by eligible households has been and continues to be of concern by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Particular attention has been drawn to the need for reaching low-income Hispanics with nutrition assistance. The USDA reported that in the United States more than 4 million, or about half of Latinos eligible for food stamps missed those benefits in 2005, and only 42% of eligible non-citizens participated (CBPP 2007:1).

Studies conducted by the USDA and other independent research centers have identified some barriers to Latino participation in nutrition programs nationally, such as language, citizenship status, limited education and stigmatization (Barret, 2006; Barlett et al, 2004; USDA, 2007; Cunningham et al, 2006; Zedlewski et al, 2004). Latinos share some of these barriers to access with other poor citizens, while other barriers speak of distinctive national, ethnic or cultural features.

The concern regarding low participation rates by Latino families in need is mirrored in Massachusetts, where official estimates indicate that only 51% of eligible Latinos used those benefits in 2005 (USDA, 2007). The underutilization of public benefits is worrisome in light of the economic vulnerability of a significant part of Massachusetts Latinos: state figures indicate a poverty rate of 28.5% for Latino families in 2000, compared to 4.6% for white and 18.3% for black families. In the Boston PMSA, the poverty rate for the Latino population is 20% compared to 8.4% of the total population. Consistent with these high poverty levels, a statewide survey found that about 37% of Latino households in the sample were food insecure in 2005, underscoring the need for higher participation in the food stamp program.

In its continual efforts to promote greater utilization of the food stamp program and concerned with a low enrollment of eligible Latino families, Project Bread asked the Center for Social Policy (CSP) at the University of Massachusetts Boston to explore and identify attitudes toward public benefits, and in particular the food stamp program, among the diverse Latino population in the greater Boston area. The Massachusetts case study aims at mapping these obstacles attending to the peculiar nature of the Latino residents in Boston, who have grown increasingly

diverse both in their national and ethnic composition with the settlement of new Latinos of Central and South American origin, who have joined long-established Puerto Rican and Dominican populations since the 1990s (Uriarte et al, 2003). The study draws upon two sources: the expertise of community service and official agencies, gathered by a series of in-depth interviews, and a review of the literature about Latino participation in other US locations, geared to illuminate the potential obstacles to access public nutrition programs. This exploratory study addressed the following questions:

- What is known about Latino' attitude toward public benefits in general? Are there attitudinal differences among Latino sub-populations regarding the use of these benefits?
- Are food programs viewed differently than other benefits? Are there differences in attitude and use among the various food programs? Do these differences vary by sub-populations?
- To what extent does a culturally familiar environment influence the decision to participate in a public benefit?
- To what extent do the following factors impinge on participation: knowledge of the programs and eligibility policies, fear of government, English proficiency, legal status, and stigmatization?

Highlights of Facts and Findings

Latinos are impacted by two broad areas of public policy simultaneously –immigration and welfare policy- that combine to create particular hurdles in finding out and seeking out access to food stamps. A steep drop of Latino utilization of public benefits including nutrition programs followed the welfare and the illegal immigration reforms of the mid-nineties (FRAC, 2006b; Cordero et al, 2007). Although participation rates have increased in the 2000s, the migratory phenomena that accompany the Latino experience in the US have placed peculiar challenges for poor Latino families. The following are worth highlighting:

Immigration policy is frequently a source of fear towards the state, which transfers into a diffuse and generalized distrust of most public agencies. This generalized and vague distrust of public agencies is expressed in various attitudes and strategies regarding food benefits, as shown below. In Massachusetts, two public actions toward immigrants have heightened fear and distrust. First, the recent and dramatic New Bedford incident in which undocumented workers were rounded up and sent out of state for deportation hearings have underscored the “not welcome” message and the fear of deportation. This incident leaving small children without care as their mothers were taken away heightened the already existing fear of government and deportation. Second, the public vote that denied non-citizen children of undocumented immigrants the benefit of in-state tuition at Massachusetts higher education institutions. Among the sources of fear, these are frequently mentioned:

- **Fear that applying for food benefits even when entitled would endanger their application for citizenship as they may then be considered a public charge is a perception shared by many.** As one worker put it, *“immigrants are scared even to leave the house and go to work, so the fear to look for services is great.”*
- **Fear that the process of application may uncover the migration status of a family member** and trigger the intervention of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service.
- **Many poor Latinos fear that asking for food assistance may trigger investigation of the family for child neglect.** This fear is particularly strong among those who have had previous and more sustained interaction with state agencies.
- **Fear and distrust may be reinforced by previous experience of government in the country of origin or from the treatment of the poor in this country.** *“Some people come from areas with repressive and corrupt governments and so are fearful of any government,”* a worker explained.

There may be diverse notions of rights, entitlements, and expectations among the sub-national groups. Central Americans and some South Americans feel they have to “pay their dues,” and be thankful for being accepted into this country. There is an expectation that life here will be hard. Shame due to the stigma associated with poverty may be more prevalent in those Latino groups that have a strong attachment to work as the “right way” to provide for their family needs.

Staff of some Latino service or advocacy agencies to some extent share a similar distrust of government with their clients. Although making clients aware of the official policy that applying to public programs will not endanger their immigration status or trigger the intervention of other agencies, their own experience with state bureaucracies makes them cautious in advising clients. Policy changes, the pervasive anti-immigrant feeling and the possibility that individual state employees may violate policy and disclose information are cited as supporting their caution.

Mixed status families, or families that combine several migratory status –for example, citizen children and legal or undocumented resident parents, for example, are becoming a common type among Latinos. In 2005 there were 6.6 million families with unauthorized members, comprising over 14 million people (Passel, 2006). A mixed status family poses specific challenges to access benefits due to fear that the process of application may uncover the status of any of its members, making it difficult to produce the required legal documents, and reducing the amount of available benefits for the family. Therefore, a mixed family may find that the potential benefits are not worth the risks and troubles involved in the application process.

Translation of official Food Stamp documents will not address the significant barriers to participation faced by many Boston Latinos. Barriers to participation in the food stamp program that affect all poor (complex application, documentation requirements, low benefit rates, and negative attitude of workers) are exacerbated by factors that uniquely affect the Latino population. Language and educational barriers impede access, making the complicated

application process onerous. This problem is particularly acute for those who are illiterate or functionally illiterate in both Spanish and English, making translated documents of little value. Several agencies suggested that **building community networks and networks among agencies and grassroots organizations are the key path to building trust, good communication and improved access.**

The stigmatization factor associated with food stamp benefits may have a stronger impact on the male providers in the Latino family. Given the gender roles, opposition of the males in the family may effectively block access to benefits.

Latino-serving agencies cite a need for better connections among them and with other agencies that provide for basic needs, such as Project Bread. As one staff said, *“I have never seen a display of Project Bread in our community ...it would be great to count on Project Bread to inform the community on how to cover their nutrition needs.”* These connections might facilitate immediate and more effective outreach to Latinos, according to some respondents.

WIC and the free or reduced fee school-lunch programs are viewed more favorably than the food stamp program. This view may be held because these programs are seen as health programs rather than government assistance or because enrollment does not entail interaction with the welfare department. This view warrants further investigation.

Recommendations

Improved communication with Latino residents and Latino-serving agencies is critically needed to correct and increase understanding of the food stamp program and the advocacy role of Project Bread. The following recommendations for the second phase of this study follow:

- 1) Building Bridges with Latino Serving Agencies.** Project Bread should invite a group of leading Latino-serving agencies to join them in a roundtable, facilitated, discussion on

improving the food stamp participation among their clients.

- 2) **Hearing the Voices.** Project Bread should plan to hold a series of focus groups with Latino residents of the Boston area, organized to the extent possible around national groups, to hear their experience with the food stamp program and to elicit their ideas on communicating with their communities.
- 3) **Refocusing the Benefit.** Project Bread should explore ways to have food stamps be seen, like WIC, as a health and nutrition program (acting positively, taking care of one's family) rather than a welfare program (failure, or dependency). These efforts may need creative approaches to unconventional challenges. For example, Project Bread's current "eradication of hunger" program may run counter to cultural views among sub-national groups who view hunger as eroding the pride of hard-working families, or an indictment of their capacity to care for their members, especially their children. A special effort may be needed to generate a positive view of nutrition programs as deserved rights, and to reach fathers and caretakers so they embrace these programs as a needed help for their families, and not as an erosion of their provider role.

These proposed phases of research will produce findings to help Project Bread and partner organizations plan for significant improvement in outreach to the Latino population and in increased access to the Food Stamp program for this population.

Latino Participation in Food Assistance Programs

Introduction

Concern with low participation rates of households eligible for the Food Stamp program is shared among many groups focusing on the social and health needs of the low income population. While strides have been made in improving these rates, still both nationally and here in Massachusetts too many families are still food insecure, or worse, still hungry. Project Bread, the leading statewide anti-hunger organization, allocates resources for research, programs, and activities to promote greater utilization of the food stamp and other food assistance programs.

Project Bread through its direct service program provides telephone and Internet information and assistance to potential applicants for food stamps, with these services available in both English and Spanish. Additionally, Project Bread provides funding for a health center program to offer direct assistance to families in applying for food stamps. These activities are only some of Project Bread's varied efforts in promoting food stamp program participation. In an effort to address this issue of underutilization, a 2002 report prepared by the Center for Social Policy (CSP) at the University of Massachusetts Boston for Project Bread examined some of the barriers families face in accessing and maintaining Food Stamp benefits (Kahan et al, 2002).

Still, a 2006 "Assessment of Hunger in Massachusetts 2005" conducted by RTI International for Project Bread found that the prevalence of food insecurity is higher than found three years earlier in the first Massachusetts Hunger Assessment. In March 2007 Project Bread submitted its "Plan to End Hunger in Massachusetts" to the state Legislature. The first strategy in this plan is "increasing access to underutilized federal nutrition programs, such as food stamps, school breakfast, after-school snack programs, and the summer food for low-income children and youth."

In its continual efforts to promote greater utilization of the food stamp program and concerned with a perceived low enrollment of eligible Latino families, Project Bread asked the Center for Social Policy (CSP) to explore and identify attitudes toward public benefits, and more particularly toward the Food Stamp Program, among the diverse Latino population in the Greater Boston area. This exploratory study addressed the following questions¹

- What is known about Latinos' attitude toward public benefits in general? Are there attitudinal differences among Latino sub-populations regarding the use of these benefits?
- To what extent does a culturally familiar environment influence the decision to participate in a public benefit?
- To what extent do the following factors impinge on participation: knowledge of the programs and the eligibility rules, fear of government, English proficiency, legal status, and/or stigmatization?
- Are food programs viewed differently than other benefits? Are there differences in attitude and use among the various food programs? Do these differences vary by sub-populations?

Methodology

The study was carried out between December 2006 and March 2007 as the first phase of an anticipated two-phase study. This first phase relied on two main methods: literature review and key informant interviews. Relevant literature on service use by Latino populations was analyzed to extrapolate the main findings to the situation of Latino residents of Greater Boston area. Project Bread provided CSP with a roster of key informants, including public officials, social service agency personnel, as well as some key Project Bread staff. The Gaston Institute of UMass Boston collaborated in identifying individuals in Latino agencies.

¹ See appendix B p.41 for the complete interview protocol.

Additional informants were identified through the “snowballing” method. In total, more than 26 individuals participated in interviews, some in a group setting. The majority of interviews were conducted in person. Most interviews were conducted in Spanish and were translated for analysis².

Some caveats about this methodology should be noted. Informant data represent the perceptions and inferences, based on experience, of service providers and others either familiar with or working with Latino populations. These data do not represent the opinions of Latino residents in the Greater Boston area. However, we believe they offer valuable insights on obstacles to the under-utilization of food stamps by Massachusetts Latinos.

Do Boston Latinos Go Hungry and Why?

The state of Massachusetts has undergone a sustained effort to improve the participation rate of its poor residents in the Food Stamp Program (FSP) Even though participation rates have improved in the state since 2002 when only 38% of eligible residents received food stamps, in 2003 Massachusetts was still among the 10 worst performers in terms of the rates of participation of eligible recipients of food stamps (FRAC, 2006b:10). The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) calculated the participation rate for eligible recipients in Massachusetts increased to 49% in 2004, but the participation rate for the working poor was only 36% for the same year (Cunningham et al, 2006). Estimates for the Boston area indicate that the 2004 general participation rate in the FSP was 55%, higher than the state rate for the year, 49% (FRAC, 2006b: 20).

Official statistics for food stamp utilization by Latino residents in Massachusetts placed the rate of utilization of eligible Hispanics at 51% in 2004 (FNS-USDA 2007). That year, Hispanic households in the Boston area accounted for 31% of food stamp recipients; black and white households accounted for 36% and 21 %, respectively (FRAC, 2006b: 18). These numbers,

² See appendix A for list of interviews.

however, do not account for the eligible Latino households in the Boston area whom, in spite of being eligible for nutrition benefits, did not obtain them.

Official projections of the rate of underutilization of food stamp benefits by Latinos in the Boston area are unavailable, but the national and state trends of Latino usage of food stamp benefits point to a systematic underutilization. A recent study by America's Second Harvest (A2H) confirmed the trend previously documented by the USDA and other research agencies: only 35% of emergency food recipient households – 3.8 million in all – participated in the Food Stamp Program between 2001 and 2004 (O'Brien et al, 2006: 14). The Latino population comprises about 17% of the population served by A2H network (Cohen, 2006:85). Use of food pantries was higher among Latino (3.9%) than among non-Hispanic Whites (2.7%) (Nord and Andrews, 2006:33), lending more supporting evidence of the under-utilization of governmental resources by Latinos. The National Council of la Raza reported that 23.2% of Latino households were at very low food secure level or food insecure level in 2005, as compared to 8.1% of non-Hispanic white households in the country (Ng'andu and Leal 2007),

These results regarding the sub- utilization of available benefits by Latinos are likely to hold for the Boston area, where the rate of poverty among Latinos makes them a particularly vulnerable population. Poverty rates for Latino families in Massachusetts reached 28.5% in 2000, as compared to 4.6% for white and 18.3% black families (Vasquez, 2003). In the Boston PMSA, the poverty rate for the Latino population in 2004 was 20% compared to 8.4% of the total population (Kala and Jones 2006: 5).

Consistent with these high poverty levels, a statewide survey found that about 37% of Latino households in the sample were food insecure in 2005 (RTI International 2006:8)

The socioeconomic vulnerability of the Latino population in Massachusetts is compounded by the high percentage of Latinos who face problems affording housing. Almost 90% of Latino

households in Massachusetts were renters in 2000, making Latinos the ethnic group with the lowest rate of homeownership. In 2000, over 60% of Latino renter households in Massachusetts were shelter poor, that is, they could not meet their “non-housing needs (including food) at some minimum level of adequacy after paying for housing” (Stone, 2006b: 11).

RENTER HOUSEHOLDS WITH AFFORDABILITY ISSUES IN MASSACHUSETTS AND BOSTON PMSA, 2000

	RENTER HOUSEHOLDS											
	Massachusetts without Boston						Boston PMSA					
	Shelter poor		30%+		50%+		Shelter poor		30%+		50%+	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Latino	33,500	66.4	23,700	47.1	13,000	25.7	24,500	55.4	19,700	44.5	10,700	24.1
Black	11,200	50.1	10,000	44.5	5,100	22.6	27,700	47.6	26,800	45.9	14,200	24.3
Asian-Am	6,000	48.4	5,000	40.8	2,900	23.6	15,100	44.3	16,100	47.3	9,100	26.8
White	106,500	34.8	112,000	36.6	54,100	17.7	113,900	28.4	160,300	39.9	75,100	18.7

Data source: Michael Stone, 2006b tables 5MB & 5NB, pp. 52-53.

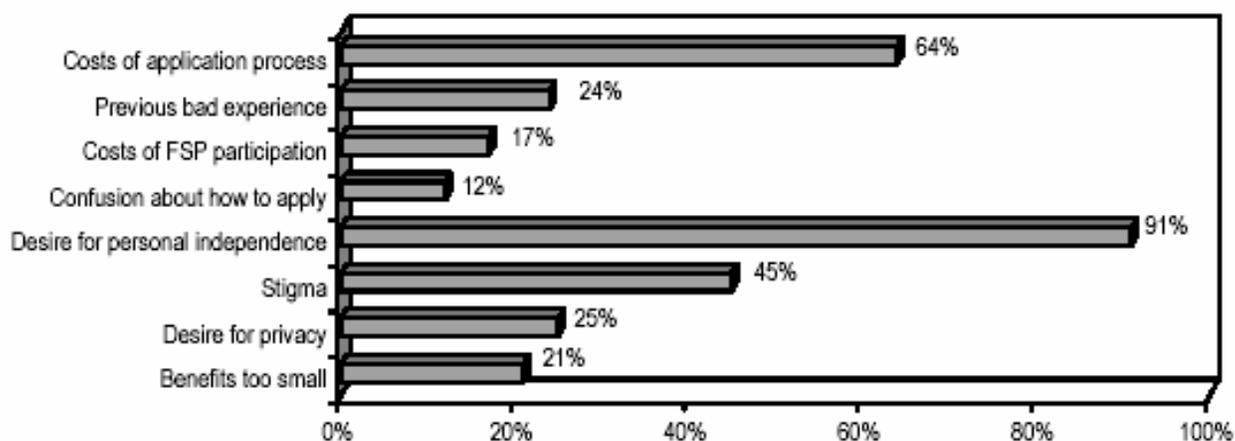
30%+: Paying 30% or more of income for housing

50%+: Paying 50% or more of income for housing

Renters were disproportionately Latina single parent families. In metro Boston the situation of Latino renters is slightly better, but still over 55% were shelter poor in 2000 (Stone, 2006b: 25)

In spite of demonstrated need, a number of factors impact on the Massachusetts Latino population and their access to the food stamp program. The underutilization of public benefits by Hispanics may be partly attributed to those deterrents to participation common among many low-income groups, such as the reluctance to become dependent on public assistance, the difficulty of the application process or that the benefits are not considered enough to offset the cost of applying, as illustrated below:

BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION



Extracted from: Bartlett, Burstein and Hamilton (2004)

In addition, and in despite of the benefits of participation, the FSP is to some extent “tainted” by its association with welfare³ offices where food stamps applicants must present their application and required documents. The poor reputation of welfare caseworkers and the lack of interpreters in many offices lead to an expectation of poor treatment and often discouragement to even applying. This is consistent with the latest studies regarding the reasons that families give for not participating in FSP (Bartlett et al, 2004; Kahan et al, 2002), but it may be particularly strong among Latino eligible recipients because of their “newcomer” status⁴.

³ The term, “welfare” is more commonly used by program applicants and participants than the formal Massachusetts agency name, Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance and is used here deliberately to reflect popular view.

⁴ The current proposal of the USDA to change the name of the program to Food and Nutrition Program may be recognition of the general poor image of food stamps.

The Impact of Welfare and Immigration Reforms on Latinos

Notwithstanding the above mentioned reasons, the utilization of FSP among Latinos has declined consistently since the 1996 welfare reform modified eligibility requirements and excluded immigrants and recent permanent residents from the program. The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA)⁵, or Welfare reform, and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act changed the rules for access to safety-net programs, increasing the requirements to access such benefits as Supplementary Security Income (SSI) Food Stamps, Transitional Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), housing benefits, and Medicaid⁶.

Along with confusion regarding the new rules, these changes were in part responsible for a dramatic fall in food stamp use. The USDA estimates that only 54% of eligible households participated in 1999-2001, down from 70% in 1994 (Zedlewski and Rader, 2004:3). Thirty-four percent of people receiving food stamps in 1994 dropped from the FSP rolls in 1999, stirring concerns that many eligible families were exposed to food insecurity (FRAC, 2006a:7).

In 1999 and 2000 USDA suggested a series of measures for improving access to benefits for low-income working families, including targeted outreach, extended office hours, on-site child care, and longer certification periods.⁷ Subsequent legislation eased eligibility requirements for the FSP (such as family assets) and some benefits were restored to legal immigrants, such as

⁵ PRWORA replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF).

⁶ Adults aged 18 to 49 can only receive benefits if they work or participate in work-related activities, except for those who suffer some kind of disability or incapacitation, pregnant women, and students. The Immigrant Responsibility Act withdrew benefits for legal immigrants arriving after August 1996 who lost eligibility for safety-net programs for the first five years after arrival to the US (Barrett, 2006: 7).

⁷ In the late 1990s, USDA required states to provide FSP participants with Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards by 2002, in order to curb the stigma associated with food stamp coupons. By 2003, 50 states had complied.

children, disabled and elderly, plus asylum grantees and refugees⁸.

These measures increased utilization of food stamps, but this increase seemed to lag among Hispanics. In states with significant Latino population—Arizona, California, Florida, Illinois, New York and Texas- Latino participation in FSP declined 22% between 1996 and 2002 (Cordero and Quiroga, 2007:) . Moreover, the percentage of eligible participants that use food stamps (-7%) has declined twice as fast as the percentage of eligible participants (-3%) between 1996 and 2002, suggesting “that there has been decreased food security and nutrition among poor Latino families and more reports of food related stresses.”(Cordero and Quiroga., 2007: 214). A current report of the National Council of la Raza claims that “data suggests that more than 3 million eligible Hispanic families are not participating in FS” and that participation among eligible non-citizen households is only 42.4% (Ng’andu and Leal 2007, p iv).

The impact of the combined effect of the 1996 reforms to welfare and immigration suggest that differences in immigration status are a significant factor determining FSP use among Latino residents in the US, taking into account that different national origin determines different eligibilities and access. For example, data show that the pace of growth in terms of food stamps utilization among eligible population was markedly different for families with children who were recent welfare recipients and those with no previous welfare experience. Families with welfare experience increased their participation rates markedly.⁹ In those families without previous

⁸ The Food Stamp Reauthorization Act of 2002 added \$6.4 billion in new funds for the FoodStamp Program and other nutrition programs over the next 10 years. The 2002 Farm Security and Rural Investment Act restored Food Stamps eligibility to foreign-born children who are legal residents, regardless their date of entry; disabled and elderly non-citizens, and legal residents who had lived in the US for over 5 years. Asylum grantees and refugees, or those who have been granted a stay of deportation are also deemed eligible for food stamps (Barrett, 2006: 7; FRAC, 2006a: 7-8).

⁹ Food stamp participation for families with children and a monthly income below 50% of the FPL rose from 49.6% in 1999 to 63.5% in 2002; for families with income between 50-100 of FPL, these percentages were 33.4% and

welfare experience “about 1 in 4 with monthly income below 50% of FPL and 1 in 7 with income between 50 and 100% of FPL participated in the FSP through the period.” Families without welfare experience account for almost 65% of families with children among the lowest income categories, suggesting that “poor families with children that have remained outside the cash welfare system generally do not receive food stamps.” (Zedlewski and Rader, 2004: 4-6). This finding –which is not confined to Latino families—can be interpreted as a sign of “welfare dependency” or as pointing towards the critical role that knowledge and communication play in facilitating access to benefits (Borjas, 1997). The data also show that new immigrants are less likely to participate in FSP. Refugees, although more likely than immigrants to receive food stamps, are less likely than residents to receive these benefits, and they tend to withdraw faster than other groups (Bollinger, 2003:40).

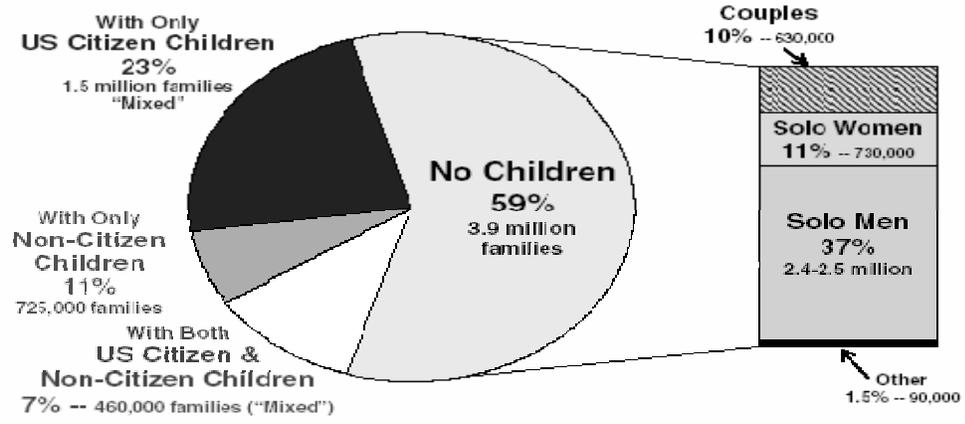
In sum, Latino participation in food stamp programs seems to be susceptible to a variety of factors sprouting from the particular immigration status of families, differences in national origin, and subtle differences in practices such as, for example, relying on community networks for collecting relevant information.

One feature related to immigrant status is likely to have a large impact on participation rates: the growth of “mixed families” with citizens and non-citizens, undocumented and documented members. National available data suggest that “mixed family status” has become a common feature among unauthorized migrants. In 2005, there were 6.6 million families with unauthorized members, amounting to 14.6 million persons.

51.8% respectively, for the same years (Zedlewski and Rader, 2004: 5, tables 1&2).

POPULATION

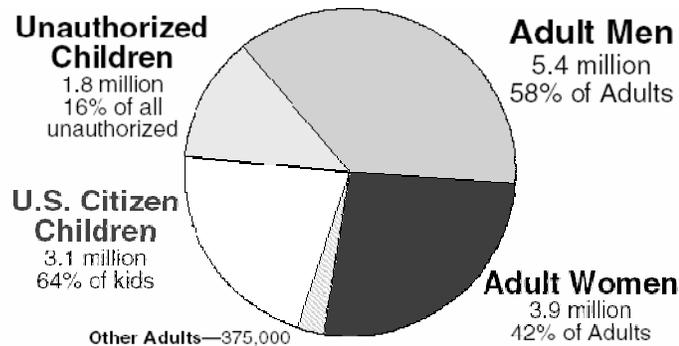
MIXED STATUS FAMILIES COMMON AMONG UNAUTHORIZED FAMILIES



Source: Passel, Jeffrey (2006)

Sixty-four percent of the children living in these families are U.S. citizens by birth, amounting to 3.1 million children (Passel, 2006: i-ii).

UNAUTHORIZED FAMILIES: MIXED COMPOSITION



Source: Passel, Jeffrey (2006)

Though members of these families, such as children born in the US, are eligible for public benefits, the caretakers may be reluctant to use them because of fear of revealing the immigration

status of those undocumented members, or because of the perception that asking for public benefits may endanger the chances of those family members hoping to acquire American citizenship in the future.

Currently, one-fifth of all children in the United States are children of immigrants, and children of immigrants experience poverty levels two to three times higher than do non-Hispanic white children (Van Hook and Balistreri, 2004:4). The USDA reported that in 2005, 7.2% of food stamp participants, or almost 1, 8 million, were children living with non-citizens (Barret, 2006: 22)¹⁰. Therefore, both families that comprise citizens and legal residents, and those that comprise citizens and undocumented migrants, may be deterred from applying for food programs.

Boston Latino Population¹¹

The above discussion of mixed immigration status is particularly relevant for the Latino population in Boston which is becoming more diverse both in terms of national groups and immigration status. The Latino population in Massachusetts is growing in large part because of the settlement of Latinos of diverse national origin (Shea and Jones, 2006). Primarily since the 1990s, these new residents –mainly Central and South Americans—have joined the historically large Puerto Rican and Dominican populations (Uriarte et al. 2003: 61-64).

¹⁰ The USDA states that in 2005, 4.9% of the households with children participating of FSP had citizen children living with a participant non-citizen adult, while 9.5% of the households with children participating of FSP had citizen children living with a non-participant non-citizen adult (Barret, 2006: 56).

¹¹ This section is based on the study on the Boston Latino population conducted by the Mauricio Gaston Institute for Latino Public Policy and Community Development, UMass Boston, (Uriarte, Miren et al, 2003).

NATIONAL ORIGIN OF THE LATINO POPULATION (%)

	Massachusetts	Boston PMSA
TOTAL LATINO POPULATION	478,929	214,447
Puerto Rican	45.7	26.3
Dominican	15.6	13.9
Guatemalan	6.5	10.4
Salvadoran	6.0	11.3
Colombian	5.8	9.2
Mexican	3.9	4.6
Other Central American	5.0	9.0
Other South American	4.7	6.0
Other Hispanic or Latino	10.8	14.0

Source: Kala & Jones, 2006: 3.

The Latino population statewide is largely immigrant and it is overwhelmingly immigrant in the Boston area. More than 42% of Latino Boston residents are immigrants; over 70% of Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Colombians in Massachusetts are recent migrants (Uriarte et al., 2003:20). The influx of new immigrants to the Boston area has resulted in an array of Latino residents with very diverse national origins. Puerto Ricans are the largest Latino group in the city, but they represent a quarter of all Latino residents in Boston PMSA. By contrast, Puerto Ricans represent almost 46% of all Latino population in the state (Kala & Jones, 2006:3).

While Puerto Ricans are US citizens, Dominicans, Guatemalans, Hondurans, Mexican, Salvadorans, Colombians and other South Americans, have an array of immigration statuses, ranging from citizens (naturalized or by birth), legal residents, undocumented migrants or subject

to a protected status.¹²

MASSACHUSETTS CITIES AND TOWNS AND BOSTON NEIGHBORHOODS WITH THE LARGEST CONCENTRATIONS OF GUATEMALANS, HONDURANS, SALVADORANS, AND COLOMBIANS, 2000

Guatemalan		Honduran		Salvadoran		Colombian	
Massachusetts Cities and Towns							
MA Total = 11,437		MA Total = 5125		MA Total = 15,900		MA Total=12,788	
City/ Town	%	City/ Town	%	City/ Town	%	City/ Town	%
Boston	22.3	Boston	35.6	Boston	33.5	Boston	31.8
Lynn	12.6	Chelsea	30.9	Chelsea	17.1	Lowell	9.1
Chelsea	10.3	Somerville	2.0	Somerville	13.1	Chelsea	5.2
Boston Neighborhoods							
Boston Total = 2,554		Boston Total = 1,822		Boston Total = 5,333		Boston Total = 4,065	
Neighborhood	%	Neighborhood	%	Neighborhood	%	Neighborhood	%
Allston/Brighton	27.2	Roxbury	22.5	East Boston	74.5	East Boston	52.0
East Boston	22.2	So Dorchester	19.9	Allston/Brighton	8.6	Roxbury	27.2

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000 Summary File 3 Sample Data

Extracted from: Uriarte et al., 2003: 4

Although the newer migrants show a higher rate of labor force participation than the general population in the state, all Latino groups displayed high poverty rates. However, newer Latino migrants displayed poverty rates which hovered between 16% and 26% in 2000. While these poverty rates largely surpass the poverty rates for Massachusetts (9.2%) or for Boston PMSA (8.4%), they are lower than the poverty rates of older Latino settlers, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans, 38% and 30% respectively (Uriarte et al., 2003:30). However, 16% of Colombians, 28% of Hondurans, 36 % of Guatemalans and 45% of Salvadorans had not completed the 9th grade in 2000 (Uriarte et al, 2003:34).

¹² Salvadorans and Hondurans enjoy Temporary Protected Status (TPS) while Salvadorans and Guatemalans are covered by the Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act (NACARA) TPS does not imply citizenship, but authorization to reside and to work in the USA, and the protection needs to be extended and renewed at regular intervals. NACARA suspends the deportation of citizens of countries which the US granted asylum at a certain moment, and that were in the country undocumented. Both status grant temporary protection from deportation and the possibility to work, but the road to a stable migration status is uncertain.

This description supports the perception that Boston area Latinos face specific barriers to participation in FSP, which go beyond those that affect all poor families in need: lack of information, limited educational and cultural resources, stigmatization, fear of mistreatment or avoidance of bureaucratic red tape. The mixed status of families suggests an obstacle related to the immigration status and the expectation that applying for benefits may endanger the residency of the family or some of its members in the US. A language barrier is an added factor that may deter participation, particularly in first generation settlers, even though this is a deterrent for participation in all Latino groups, including US citizens such as Puerto Ricans.

Newer groups, in addition, show very low educational levels, a factor known to deter participation in public programs. In addition, the relatively recent arrival of an important segment of these Latinos may indicate community networks in different stages of maturation that can impact capacity to intermeditate with social service agencies and authorities. In other words, social capital may be unequally distributed among different Latino communities in Boston.

Latino groups that are not affected by the barriers of citizenship, such as Puerto Ricans, or that have more established networks and “know how” of public benefits (such as Puerto Ricans and Dominicans) are by no means free of obstacles to access them. Language barriers, stigmatization, and poor previous interactions with welfare agencies are still factors that weigh negatively over their potential access. Results from the ongoing Massachusetts Hispanic Elders Study (MAHES) show that “among elderly Dominicans in the MAHES study, 83% were eligible (for the Food Commodity Program) yet just 9% participated. Among non-Hispanic whites, fewer than 50% of households were eligible, yet this group had the highest participation rate (14%).” (Falcón, Bermúdez and Tucker 1997:57). The same study reported that while 2% non-

Hispanic white elderly in the sample reported being food insecure, the rate was much higher for elderly Puerto Ricans (8.1%) and Dominicans (7.5%) (ibid: 58).

The Voice of Community Agencies

The preliminary findings based on the review of current literature confirm the sub- utilization of food security resources by Boston Latinos. The resources underutilized are, fundamentally, food stamps. The overall perception is that other public programs, such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, WIC, and subsidized school lunch and breakfast, reach the targeted population at higher rates than food stamps. Summer Food Service Program's participation is also perceived as relatively low¹³. Community based and charitable programs aimed at insuring the availability of food for the poor, such as food pantries and community kitchens, are also perceived as posing lower barriers for Latino access.

The Migration Divide

Our key informants coincided in identifying the general climate that had put Latinos at the center of the migration controversy as one of the central factors underlying the reluctance of some qualified Latinos to resort to public agencies for securing food. This climate sends migrants and Latinos in general, two contradictory messages: a welcoming one that offers help and another that defines Latinos as a public nuisance, at best.

¹³ Distinctions in eligibility thresholds and the primary focus and purpose among the various food assistance and nutrition programs tend to single out and align the food stamp program more closely with welfare than the other programs. Women, Infants and Children Nutrition (WIC) program services are available to income eligible citizens and non-citizens at medical or nutritional risk. The emphasis is on health and nutrition. School breakfast and school lunch programs at low-cost or free are available to income eligible immigrant children, with an emphasis on nutrition and healthy eating. The setting in which applicants apply for and receive these benefits (health clinics for WIC and public schools) appears to have less stigma than the view of welfare offices.

“The message the government is sending by increasing security measures in the frontier or when (former governor) Romney denies higher education to migrant youth, is that migrants are illegal aliens who are not welcomed.”

“The problem is definitely not the migrant. The problem is the environment full of subtle and not so subtle messages that they are not welcome.”

“We want clean offices, retail stores with organized displays, packages that arrive on time, luxurious hotel rooms, and we are not able to give a slice of bread to the migrant worker who makes it happen!”

The negative perception of migrants is linked to yet another deeply rooted prejudice: the poor who require assistance are viewed as a “public charge.” Counselors for the hotline operated by Project Bread reported getting frequent calls from citizens who want to protest the access to food benefits by migrants: *“These immigrants come and they can get whatever they want, and I can’t get anything, and I’m a citizen... People have in their minds that these ‘illegal’ immigrants are somehow committing crimes.”*

The regional USDA FNS office is well aware that the array of fears associated with the diverse migratory status of the Latino community is among the main causes why Boston Latinos underutilize food stamps. The majority of our interviewees, though, agreed that the impact of the negative public perception of migrants and of Latinos in particular, is the background behind Latinos’ **distrust of public agencies** which is a powerful deterrent for participation in public food assistance programs, especially food stamps.

Distrust of Public Agencies

Latinos fear that there would be an **exchange of information** between state agencies that may be detrimental for their personal or family wellbeing. There are two main sources of fear.

- *Disclosure of Migratory Status*

The perception that resorting to food assistance, although the family is entitled to these benefits, may affect their chances to remain in the United States.

Latino immigrants fear that applying for food benefits would endanger their application for citizenship because they may be considered a public charge.

Latino families with mixed immigration status, including undocumented immigrants, are concerned that the process of application may uncover this situation and trigger the intervention of Immigration officials.

“Immigrants are scared even to leave the house and go to work, so the fear to look for services is great. I have talked to many migrants that do not want to apply for FS because of the mistaken belief that they will forfeit their residency application because they believe they will become a public charge: ‘I do not want the country to see me as a load’.”

“Many migrants are legal, but they may be trying to bring new members of the family to the US, and they believe that if they apply for benefits their application will be denied. They don’t apply for anything, not even for health services.”

The national groups most affected by this factor are, naturally, recent immigrant groups who are not citizens, such as Central Americans (Salvadorans, Hondurans, Guatemalans and Nicaraguans) and South Americans (Colombians, Ecuadorians). Dominican immigrants, although having the same immigration status as Central and South Americans, seem to cope better than their above mentioned Latino counterparts, perhaps because Dominican immigration

is older and therefore there may be stronger community networks that facilitate sorting out the official information.

It is important to note that community agencies, in particular those that are themselves service or advocacy Latino agencies, tend not to dispel the fears of information exchange among public bureaucracies. Although they make the community aware of the official policy which asserts that applying to FSP, WIC, or other public programs will not endanger their immigration status or trigger the intervention of other agencies, their own experience with state bureaucracies makes them cautious to advise their clients to expose themselves to what they perceive as a potentially risky situation. Policy changes, the pervasive anti-immigrant feeling and the possibility that individual public employees may violate the policy and disclose information, are frequently cited as supporting this cautious approach.

“The policy within the FDA is not sharing information about immigration status. But there is a parallel universe here: the immigration department and what they do is not dictated by what the FDA does. Given the hostile environment which immigrants are living in, right this second, in this country, I’m in a very difficult position to encourage any of my clients to go ahead, not to worry, to sign up, knowing without a doubt in my mind that if the INS or the administration decide to change policy, that information can be used to target them.

Even without a policy change, the FDA is a gigantic organization, so unless you can give me a 100% guarantee that every single person that’s going to handle that information is going to comply with the rules, I cannot dispel the fear of my clients.”

“If people ask whether it is “safe” to apply, is difficult. We tell people the rules of the agency, but you truly don’t know what individuals in the staff might do, and I think that goes through a lot

of our callers' minds as well.”

The above citations are representative of the opinion of many direct service providers in Latino agencies, although some of our informants said they put special emphasis in convincing Latino clients that eligibility for food stamps or other nutrition programs cannot be consider as a public charge, and that they do not need to reveal their immigration status for other eligible members of their families to access food benefits.

“Latinos are still being told by some lawyers that they should not apply for food stamps if they are in the process of applying for citizenship, or in the process of legalizing or changing status in any ways. We try to tell them that food stamps do not create a public charge, but they're still hearing from lawyers that they should not apply.”

- ***Child Neglect***

There is a deep-seated fear among poor Latinos that asking for food assistance may trigger the investigation of the family for child neglect.

“We see this everyday and in everyone: Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Central Americans, citizens and non-citizens, all fear the same: the Department of Social Services. DSS is known as the “child robber” the agency that seizes kids. People face the predicament of asking for help to eat and risk losing their kids, or not applying and going hungry.”

This factor is said to be particularly strong among Latinos who are citizens (mostly Puerto Rican and Dominicans) and have had previous and more sustained interactions with state agencies. “Puerto Ricans are not affected by the migratory status, but they fear that the bureaucracy will seize their children.”

National Minorities and Migrants: Different Sense of Entitlements?

Citizens and residents of the United States may trust, distrust or even fear government agencies in varied degrees, depending on their experiences and socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity or citizenship. In the case of recent migrants, this perception may be molded by the particular perception of the state in their countries of origin.

“Other Latino groups are just distrusting of government because of their experience in the past with governments in the country that they have come from.”

“Some people come from areas with repressive and corrupt governments and so are fearful of any government.”

“It just amazes me how Russian immigrants are very aggressive about making sure that they get their rights. They have been taught what their rights are when they came here, and they are used to demand them to the state.”

Consistent with these experiences, recent migrants may have different views of their rights and entitlements. Some of our informants asserted that some Latino migrants consider that they “must pay their dues”, that is, to be thankful for being accepted into the US and not request any benefits, even if it means to experience hardships.

“There are those who feel that I should be thankful for what I have right now. Even though I’m having 2 and a half meals a day, that’s a lot compared to where I came from. These are the more recent immigrants.”

“Central Americans but some South Americans as well feel that they have to “pay their dues” for immigrating -- you’re going to

have it hard when you get here, and it is OK.”

“They have an ideology of what is to be a migrant. Migrants go to other country to work. Many people come from non-human working conditions, and accept gratefully the work they do; they do not expect to receive help with food or any other service.”

Diverse notions of rights and entitlements may be present not just in recent migrants, but in different ethnic national minorities, or gender or age groups. For instance, many informants mentioned that older people, in this case Puerto Rican elderly “*believe that food is earned by working, so they don’t feel they can ask for that benefit.*”

“Intuitively it seems that there is a whole re-education that we need to do around what we used to call in the 60s and the 70s “welfare rights”: these are your rights, these are your entitlements; today this is considered a negative word.”

Traditional Barriers from a Latino Perspective

Latinos share with other poor populations the barriers that are frequently mentioned in several studies: fear of mistreatment; complexity of the application process, stigmatization and perceived few benefits for the trouble of applying. These factors, however, are intensified by language barriers and the low educational level of a significant percentage of recent immigrants that put them at disadvantage when dealing with complex state bureaucracies. Cultural and particular historical experiences can also attach peculiar meaning to food benefits, becoming obstacles to participation.

Language and Educational Barriers

Insufficient knowledge of English is still a factor that deters Latinos from reaching resources to ensure adequate nutrition. Language barriers deter any Spanish dominant Latino from applying

for food benefits regardless of citizenship. Spanish speaking people may feel their command of English is insufficient to communicate and to gather information; others, who may be proficient in English, may feel ashamed of their accents and feel that native speakers may not understand them: “*They say: I don’t dare to go to that place because I don’t speak English*” even though they do speak basic English”, reported one Latino agency direct provider. Language matters in every step of the process, from using the phone for setting an initial interview, to understanding the application process itself.

Latino agency personnel emphasize that translation services available for Spanish-dominant Latinos are still lacking.

“You’d think with Spanish it would be relatively easy because this DTA office will have a large Spanish speaking population. But a few years ago, budget deficits in Massachusetts forced them to cut back staff and a lot of the bilingual staff was gone. They’re trying to build that up, but there is still a shortage of bilingual staff.”

One person, although acknowledging deficiencies in the translation services available at state agencies, downplayed the role of language as an obstacle for accessing food benefits.

“It’s not a language issue, efforts have been made to have bilingual staff, bilingual signs etc. A person’s literacy, it’s a non-issue, that’s bogus: that’s not what’s keeping them from going into the place. When people face a migration issue, they find the resources, no matter in what language.”

According to our informants, many immigrants, particularly from newer Central American groups, have very low levels of education, some being illiterate or functionally illiterate both in English and Spanish. This creates information problems that are not solved with the traditional

approach of translating information materials to the native language.

“Around 80% have not finished high school; most may have finished the 6th grade, that’s usually the highest. So understanding and knowing how to deal with the bureaucracy involved is a big leap. When you tell them to organize the last four paychecks in consecutive order and if you’re missing one in the middle, you know what? It’s not going to work.”

“Some clients are basically illiterate; we can’t mail them an application because they can’t tell us their address; or they show me a letter in Spanish that says, “You’ve been approved for \$256 in FS” and the letter is dated 7 months ago; or they got a card they threw away because they didn’t know what it is; or they get notice to re-certify months and they missed the deadline.”

“The government and people concerned with hunger still need more work to correctly educate the community to obtain services. They may have flyers in the offices or mail them, but a real campaign to raise consciousness is missing. Poor Latinos do not like reading; most do not have access to internet.”

Language and low educational levels tend to force people to rely on their immediate networks of communication that may or may not be connected to community actors or other sources with correct information.

“Word-of mouth can provide distorted information, such as that to apply for these services will endanger your immigration status; some believe that their children, who are citizens, will have to pay back by serving in the army. Or that they have to pay back the money when they become older.”

Therefore, language and educational barriers act as deterrents to accessing benefits in several ways. First, by restricting the access of non-native speakers to official sources of information makes more acute the disinformation and misinformation about public benefits that most poor communities' experience. Second, it forces poor Latinos to rely on intermediate agents – members of the community, community agencies, churches, or social services' bilingual staff – to gather the information needed, increasing the time and effort to access the benefits. Finally, it places the potential applicant in a position of greater vulnerability in the application process limiting opportunities of acquiring information or advocating for self. Direct contact with DTA staff can be a positive or negative experience, as is well known.

“I have encountered people in human services that are rude, not friendly. Nobody wants to go to ask for help ... you feel humiliated enough just going there. That is why that people prefer to go with an advocate.”

“There are people in the DTA who are wonderful and who really want to give people benefits and who would work with them; but just as many people (if not more) who don't seem to have that positive attitude”

“Welfare offices are intimidating places, where people will not tend to start in their quest to find help. This is not unique to immigrants, goes for any of us. If you have a problem you're not going to walk into City Hall and start looking around. So, why do we expect particularly poor communities and poor working families to walk into these big, sterile, intimidating places?”

Shame, A Persistent Problem... ¡Yo no soy un muerto de hambre¹⁴!

Stigmatization and shame are common feelings across the spectrum of recipients of public services, and poor Latinos are not an exception. These feelings are said to be stronger among recent migrants of Central and South American origin, while people of Caribbean origin “*tend to not have as much stigmatization when looking for services, because many of them have already had experience with programs that have those services in place.*”

“No matter which way you cut this it will be perceived by the public as a handout, it’s a subsidy. I mean technically that’s what it is and it will be perceived like that always.”

“Central Americans tend to feel they shouldn’t be asking for assistance because they need to provide, there’s no shame to having little. They don’t even consider themselves needy.”

The stigma associated with poverty may be stronger in those Latino groups that have a strong attachment to work as the “right” way to provide for their family needs, in particular older Latinos from every national origin. Gender roles that designate the male(s) in the family as main provider may also intensify their sense of stigmatization.

For people who come from societies with less developed social security systems, the idea of food benefits as a rightful entitlement may be a strange concept, as pointed out before. Moreover, in some Latin American countries the expression “*Muerto de hambre*” denotes a desperate situation, and is usually employed in a demeaning way. In this sense, the historical American experience of “fighting against hunger” as an expression of social justice may be difficult to grasp for national minorities who did not participate in it.

¹⁴ Literally, “I am not dying of hunger”.

Complexity of the Application Process

In spite of several efforts to simplify the application process, it is still a challenging task that frequently requires the mediation of advocates. Our informants coincided in identifying gathering the supporting documentation as a daunting challenge to potential Latino recipients of public benefits: “*Gathering the documentation that is required is a cumbersome process. For some of them it just seems overwhelming.*”

Moreover, non-traditional living arrangements, such as renting from a non-authorized landlord or paying child-care to non-certified providers, limit the capacity of families to produce the required documentation.

“People are afraid of asking for letters. For example if someone is taking care of their child, they need a letter stating the amount. The person writing that letter may not want to do it because it’s almost likely she’s working and not paying taxes...”

“In areas like East Boston, something as simple as getting a letter from a landlord is very difficult because the landlord may be renting illegal apartments, they have people in the basement that shouldn’t be there, so you ask for a letter to document the rent that you’re paying in cash, and you can’t get it.”

“And then asking their bosses for a letter: I better not bother the boss. It’s not even worth applying to the service: I’d rather keep my job.”

Reliance on informal child care or living arrangements may be common among the working poor, but our informants believe that these arrangements may be even more common among Boston Latinos, given the precarious conditions of recent migrants and the high cost of living in the city.

Low Cost-Benefit Ratio

Another well known deterrent to participation is the cost-benefit balance, that is, whether the benefits received are “worth the trouble.” In the case of Latino families, the amount of benefits may be reduced because of their “mixed status” and, as pointed above, and from the difficulties that they face in documenting expenses from informal arrangements.

“Only those in the family who are eligible can get food benefits. There are more members in the family, and the money is also being used on them, but they’re not eligible. This is really unfortunate. I’ve definitely had many poor families who have not been happy with the amount”

“Sometimes they have someone taking care of their kids, and they’re paying. That is a deduction that can be taken from their income for the purposes of FS, but only if they can get a letter from that person... Things like this reduce the amount that they would be eligible for because they don’t have all the documents that they would need to deduct those expenses.”

It was also mentioned that small benefit amounts, which are not enough to cover food expenses for the whole month, are conducive to malnutrition. Families have to “stretch” the money, and tend to choose low-quality, high calorie food which cost less than high quality foods.

“Real juice costs \$4.00; cereal, \$5.00 a box, and tomatoes, \$3.99 a pound. So when faced with that, what are you going to choose? Definitely whatever you can get the most of for the least amount of money. You can go to Burger King and get a hamburger and a soda for three dollars. What are you going to get at the grocery store for three dollars?”

Direct service providers do refer people to other resources such as food pantries, when they are not eligible for food stamps, or as a supplementary food source. The unanimous opinion is that pantries are accessible, although they offer a restricted choice in national or *ethnic* foods which is less appealing to Latino clients, for whom “food is a cultural issue.”

Although the majority of the participants praised the school lunch and breakfast programs, there are indications that a significant part of Latino youth population may be going both “hungry and malnourished.”

“We have an after school programs; we see families. There is much more hunger than we are aware of, there is certainly very poor nutrition. The kids that come here at 3:30, have not eaten the entire day. They do not eat breakfast, and sometimes no lunch. Why? They do not like the food. Half of them bring potato chips and soda; they look in the refrigerator (we do provide some food in our after school program and they throw away most of it). They do not eat fruit, they do not eat sandwiches; they will drink the juice and whatever is sweet. Kids are both hungry and malnourished.”

Summer school programs are also considered as working well, although our informants were aware that their coverage of the targeted population is low. However, this is perceived more as a voluntary “selection bias”.

“They do like the idea. What they do in some families, if the mom is not working, is going to the park and getting a free meal at the park, that’s the summer meals program. So that’s definitely a little more fun because they go, and they get food, and they’re at the park. And the school breakfast and school lunches that a lot of the families are taking advantage of ,you’ll hear every once in a while, that the kids don’t like the food at school so they’re coming home anyways so some of the kids eat in all day.”

WIC receives general praise; it is considered a well-working program, with few access barriers and successful in terms of coping with the stigma by focusing on nutrition and child wellbeing.

Machismo

The dominant position of the male provider in the household was also identified as a deterrent to participation, should the male partner refuse to request food resources. The loss of pride related to the gender-dictated role makes many Latinos reluctant to ask for benefits that they consider as proof that they “cannot provide for their family.” Power differentials make it difficult for the mother, even willing, to override the father’s opposition.

“Usually you’re doing a lot of convincing with fathers. The mom wants to apply. We need the documents from the dad to apply but he says “No! I can provide for my family, I don’t need any help.”

“When you get a dad involved, or boyfriend, there can be issues. The mom cannot just apply by herself and her child. He’s providing as well so his income needs to be counted.”

“Men feel dependent; ashamed, they do not want to appear as taking handouts.”

“The mothers, the women’s perspective, see the kids that need food. The husbands, who sometimes are the wage earners, are more nervous about applying. Sometimes women come in, fill out the application and ask not to send it because they need to check with their husbands. We don’t see them again.”

This factor is said to affect all Latino national groups, but to be particularly marked among Central Americans: “*women also seem less educated, and men take advantage.*” One worrisome factor related to the difficulties for Latinas to access benefits were frequent mention of domestic violence. Abusive relations make it difficult for women to defy a man and apply for benefits, but

the requisite for him declaring his income becomes almost insurmountable if the woman decides to leave.

“When women are in an abusive relationship and they do decide to get out, DTA tells them “you have to get child support” and they are scared for their life! And they have to obtain these services... most of them do not earn enough to survive.”

Basic Needs and the Role of Community Agencies

Another factor that impacts participation is cutbacks in funding for services experienced by community-based organizations. Community agencies report a change in the orientation of poverty-alleviating policies from addressing basic needs to investing into capabilities to lift people out of poverty.

“There is a move away from the basic provisions such as shelter; now they try to provide people with education, economic literacy; cognitive and emotional preparation for school. Those things are great, but we still have the need for the basics: food, shelter and a safe haven. They are moving towards self-sufficiency, this ‘pull yourself up your bootstrap mentality’, we want to move you away from the government or other caretakers, and you’ll have to do it for yourself. They are shifting away from supporting services. I buy that, but we still need the basics.”

“Latino agencies have settled into a group of services and the whole poverty dimension I think has been lost. Anti-poverty agencies –that is an issue. United Way used to fund shelters, food pantries: basic needs. Since they have been shifting their emphasis, they have actually stopped funding these agencies.. This had a very chilling effect on basic needs.”

Agencies are working today under difficult conditions with tighter budgets, more accountability to funders, and increased demand for services. This has meant that in many agencies there are fewer staff available to “hand-hold, walk” and support applicants through the complicated food stamp application process.

New requirements from funding sources have had a dramatic impact on community-based Latino agencies, which find them struggling to change their structure to adapt to the new requirements.

“We used to work in what you can call an open grassroots organization, or a settlement house structure where you have access to very simple goods and spend your money, and you get cash flow from different funders. Now the governance have changed and there is much strict regulations on who is actually allowed to distribute certain benefits and how much capacity and spending you need to have in order to offer that kind of service. When I look at RFP, proposals for grants, I realize that we often do not fit the model of what they are looking for.”

“From a manager’s perspective, what I see is that the governance changed. To be able to apply for, and distribute benefits, agencies need a huge infrastructure, oversight and funds to build the capacity to provide that service.”

“If the local United Way is de-funding services shelters, who is going to do it? These are expensive services, but are not “sexy” services. The donors want to invest in programs that show positive outcomes, and for many basic needs the outcome is the consumption of those services. So the sector of basic needs get de-funded. And the way UW goes, so go the Foundations. Any of these food pantries I imagine are run by volunteers, small churches, and they may had done little outreach.”

This move away from basic needs provision has reduced the sources of intermediation that vulnerable populations can use. Many informants mentioned the restrictions that community agencies experience to intermediate food resources from public sources. In the past, some agencies were able to distribute food coupons for local grocery stores. This practice is no longer possible. In some interviewees' opinion, this reduces access to some food resources, because community-based agencies enjoy the trust of Latinos.

“We are serving around 100 or 175 families per year. We can work well with these families, because we have enough direct contact, we spend a lot of time in their homes and in the benefits office with them. So it just makes sense that this type of small agencies, even if it doesn't produce the numbers that the funders are looking for, have the consistency and the scale... There are pockets in the neighborhoods that the health centers cannot reach, and that we can provide. I don't think that we can run a food pantry, but we can run a program to distribute food coupons.”

The intermediating role of the agencies is said to have been affected by loss of funding for networking among them to better serve their clients.

“There used to be Title XX, a federal fund for information and referral services. Several organizations share these networks, so the agency I worked for had a Spanish multi service referral service. Federal funds were cut for these programs somewhere around the 1980s, but United Way maintained its funding until little less than a decade ago... This is a service that donors are not attracted to. These days the concept is that you are responsible for your care and that is totally up to you.”

Providers are concerned that, unless there are measures taken to address basic needs and to

reinforce the role of community agencies in this endeavor, a growing number of people may fall into poverty.

“I am concerned about the increase of poverty in general, and about Latinos in particular with the diminishing availability of services. I really think that there is going to be a surge of poverty. As we see the sub-prime lending market foreclosing properties, a lot of these people are Latino. Where are they going to go? This is a time when basic services are needed. In terms of communication with trusted sources, the Church is a valuable resource.”

Non-Latino service providers emphasized the key role played by Latino agencies in reaching and serving the Latino poor.

“I think that Latino agencies are the best in terms of reaching their population. Other agencies who are working with Latino folks should try to copy their practices, because they are the best.”

Latino agencies emphasized the need to establish a better connection among themselves, who are the “foot soldiers of community welfare” and agencies that provide for basic needs, such as Project Bread.

“I have never seen a display of Project Bread in our community (Roxbury/Dorchester). We do frequent outreach, sometimes in public spaces, and it would be great to count on Project Bread to inform the community on how to cover their nutrition needs.”

Conclusions

Latino families in Massachusetts are generally poor and are having a hard time making ends meet, paying high shelter costs, draining resources for food. Clearly food stamps are a very important benefit for these families, and efforts are needed to insure their accessibility to this benefit.

Though there are factors beyond the control of Project Bread and other advocates that could improve the utilization of food stamps and other food assistance programs by Latinos and other groups, our findings underscore the importance of continual advocacy by Project Bread and others for needed changes in the food stamp program.

Among such changes are: increased benefit amounts; improvement in the application process, including simplification of language and reduction in required documentation; availability of application forms and assistance in filling them out at a variety of health and social service agencies, and finally less frequent income change verification requirements. For the Latino population in particular, these changes will be critically important because Latinos also face the barriers of immigration status, language, and culture.

However, even with the constraints in the program as it is presently constructed, Project Bread still can work toward increasing Latino participation in the food stamp program.

Study Phase Two

Based on the findings of this first phase of this study, the design for the second phase is a two-prong approach to gaining further information, insights and ideas from two populations: 1) executive staff of a sample of Latino-serving agencies, and 2) Latino residents themselves. The overall research questions for this second phase are:

1. Can some of the barriers to participation be overcome? If so, which barriers and how

can this be done?

2. Can the benefits of the food stamp program be framed as incentives to increased participation? How should the message be framed and what are the best communication outlets for it?
3. Are the cultural differences among sub-Latino populations significant enough to merit targeted marketing and outreach?
4. To what extent will Latino-serving agencies be able and willing to take on a more pro-active role in encouraging and supporting greater participation in the Food Stamp Program?

Recommendations

The following activities are recommended to respond to these research questions.

1) Building Bridges with Latino Serving Agencies

Project Bread should initiate an outreach effort to the Latino-Serving agencies in the area. Some of these agencies receive funding from Project Bread; however despite this, there appears to be a perception of alienation. In response to this, Project Bread should invite a group of leading Latino-serving agencies to join them in a roundtable facilitated discussion on improving the food stamp participation rate among their eligible clients. Designating this effort a roundtable discussion rather than a focus group is meant to convey engagement in a problem-solving partnership rather than information-seeking that a focus group implies. Discussion topics include:

- i. mission and programs of Project Bread and participating agencies,
- ii. shared knowledge and understanding of the benefits and barriers in the food stamp program,
- iii. ideas on how best to frame the message of the benefit of the program in a culturally and linguistically appropriate manner,
- iv. roles for partners in any agreed-upon collaborative effort.

2) Hearing the Voices

Building on the collaboration with some Latino-serving agencies forged through the roundtable discussion, Project Bread should plan to hold a series of focus groups with Latino residents of the Boston area organized to the extent possible around national groups: one with people from South America; two or more focus groups with immigrants from Central America; and one with Caribbean immigrants. All focus groups should be held in the community setting familiar and acceptable to these populations.

The purpose of these focus groups will be to hear directly from this diverse Latino population its experiences with public food and nutrition programs, including food stamps, school breakfast and school lunch, and WIC. Protocol questions would be framed to elicit participants' experience in how they learned about the programs, ease or difficulty with the application processes, and their views of the barriers and benefits of each program. Another purpose of the focus groups will be to solicit participants' suggestions and ideas on communicating information about these food assistance programs to their community.

3) Refocusing the Benefit

Project Bread should explore ways to have food stamps seen more, like WIC, as a health and nutrition program (acting positively, taking care of one's family) rather than a welfare program (failure or dependency). These efforts may need creative approaches to unconventional challenges. For example, Project Bread's current eradication of hunger program may run counter to cultural views among sub-national groups who view hunger as eroding the pride of hard-working families, or an indictment on their capacity to care for their members, especially children. A special effort may be needed to generate a positive view of nutrition programs as deserved rights, and to reach fathers and caretakers so they embrace these programs as needed help for their families, and not as an erosion of their provider role.

These efforts can produce findings that will assist Project Bread and other advocates to increasing food security for Latinos in the Boston area. In turn, the resulting actions may serve

as models for fostering Latino participation in the food stamp program in other states that face similar challenges.

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Appendix A: List of Interviews

Unless otherwise named, the 26 interviewees included clergy, executive directors and staff of the following community agencies

- **The Joint Committee for Children Health Care in Everett**
- **La Alianza Hispana –Roxbury**
- **Latino Family Counseling Center**
- **Centro Latino Chelsea**
- **Senator Jarrett Barrios**
- **Project Bread**
- **Centro Presente, Cambridge**
- **Eddie Ortega USDA, Boston***
- **Food For Families Program, Massachusetts General Hospital, Chelsea**
- **Hispanic Office for Evaluation and Planning-HOPE**
- **Casa Myrna Vazquez, Inc.**
- **East Boston Ecumenical Center (EBECC) ***
- **Marco Torres, City of Boston Neighborhood Services Latino Coordinator***
- **Chelsea Human Service Collaborative, TRICAP***
- **Holy Family Parish, Dorchester ***
- **Immaculate Conception, Everett***
- **Mary Kassler, Executive Director WIC***

** Phone interview.*

Appendix B: Latino Participation in Food Assistance Programs Interview Protocol

1. Which is your perception of the utilization of food resources (Food stamps, school programs, WIC, food pantries) by the Latino community? Are they underutilized? On what facts/observations do you base your opinion?
2. What do you believe are the reasons why qualified Latino recipients are underutilizing (a) FSP (b) School programs (c) WIC (d) Community sources such as food pantries?
3. In comparison with African American or White non-Latino food program clients, do you think that there are specific factors which lead to underutilization by Latinos? Which are these factors? Which are the factors that they share with these other groups?
4. Please comment if and how the following factors may affect the Latino participation:
 - a. Language and cultural difficulties
 - b. Education/literacy
 - c. Immigration status –fear of uncovering
 - d. Stigmatization
 - e. Difficulty of application process
 - f. Physical/geographical barriers
 - g. Little benefit for the trouble
 - h. Uncomfortable with public assistance system/offices
5. Are different Latino national groups using food programs in specific ways? Are there specific barriers for (a) PR (b) Dominicans (c) Salvadoran (d) Guatemalan (e) Nicaraguan (f) Mexican and other CA (g) Colombians and other SA
6. What is the role of community information networks –formal or informal-- regarding willingness to apply to FP?

Appendix C: USDA Reaching Latinos: One example



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Food and
Nutrition
Service

December 2006

REACHING LOW-INCOME HISPANICS WITH NUTRITION ASSISTANCE

Federal Nutrition Assistance Facts

Hispanic families add to the vibrant diversity of US society and contribute significantly to our cultural melting pot. In 2004, one of seven people in the United States was of Hispanic origin. About 34 percent were under 18 years of age. Latino families are much more likely to live in poverty and experience food insecurity than white non-Hispanic households.

USDA nutrition assistance programs offer a variety of ways for low-income Hispanic families to meet basic needs:

- **The Food Stamp Program helps low-income households supplement their food purchases to obtain a more nutritionally adequate diet.** The Nation's largest nutrition assistance program, it delivered benefits to 26.7 million persons each month in fiscal year (FY) 2006, at a total cost of nearly \$33 billion. About 19 percent of all food stamp participants were Hispanic in 2006.
- **The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) provides a combination of food assistance, nutrition education, and easier access to health care for pregnant, breastfeeding, and postpartum women, infants, and children up to the age of five years.** Eligible persons must be financially needy and at nutritional risk. WIC benefits usually take the form of vouchers or checks that may be redeemed for specific food types. In FY 2006, USDA spent nearly \$5.1 billion to serve about 8.2 million WIC participants. Hispanics represent the largest racial/ethnic group in the WIC Program. In 2004, about 39 percent of those enrolled in WIC were of Hispanic origin. Approximately 3/4 of the Hispanic infants born in the United States participate in WIC.
- **The Child Nutrition Programs provide cash reimbursement and commodity support for meals served to children in schools, child care facilities, and summer recreation settings.** Programs include the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs, the Child and Adult Care Food Program, the Summer Food Service Program, and the Special Milk Program. The general purpose of these programs is to help ensure the health and well being of all the Nation's children. In FY 2006, more than \$12.8 billion in cash and commodities were provided. These resources resulted in meals for approximately 32.9 million children on an average day during the school year and more than 3.3 million during the summer months.

USDA also administers a variety of other nutrition assistance programs that provide meals, food packages, or vouchers redeemable for food. These include the **Emergency Food Assistance Program** serving those who use soup kitchens and food pantries and the **Commodity Supplemental Food Program** providing food packages to low-income seniors, infants, young children, and pregnant, breastfeeding, and other postpartum women. While not targeted specifically to Hispanic persons with low incomes, these programs are a part of the overall safety net to ensure healthy diets for everyone in America. About 16 percent of the participants in the Commodity Supplemental Food Program were Hispanic in 2006.

Although many low-income Latinos participate in USDA's nutrition assistance programs, a large number do not. In 2004, about 5 out of 10 people in food stamp eligible households with a Hispanic head participated in the program. People in Hispanic-headed households represent a



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large proportion – about one-quarter – of all food stamp eligible persons who do not participate. The bottom line is that while 11.0 percent of all US households were food insecure at some time during 2005, the prevalence of food insecurity among Hispanic families was nearly 18 percent.

USDA is making a concerted effort to address barriers to program participation among eligible Hispanics, including immigrants. The effort covers a broad range of activities:

- **Restoring Food Stamp Eligibility for Many Legal Immigrants.** We are working with States to implement the restoration of food stamp eligibility to many legal immigrants – a critical step in restoring fairness and equity for legal immigrants to the United States. Over 150,000 legal immigrants were added to the Food Stamp Program caseload in 2003 immediately after the provisions were implemented. When fully implemented, food stamp benefits should reach an additional 400,000 low-income immigrants.
- **Targeting Outreach to the Hispanic Community.** The agency has reached out to underserved groups to raise awareness of the Food Stamp Program, including significant efforts to reach the Spanish-speaking population. These include:
 - A national media campaign to promote the nutrition benefits of the Food Stamp Program and educate non-participating eligible people, including radio advertisements in English and Spanish, is now in its second year. Advertising carries the Food Stamp Program's national toll free number and/or State-specific toll free information numbers.
 - A web-based pre-screening tool in English and Spanish. Individuals using the pre-screening tool receive estimates of their food stamp eligibility and benefit amounts. This tool is online at <http://www.foodstamps-step1.usda.gov>. A national toll free number offering listen to recorded information about the Food Stamp Program in Spanish or English. Callers may order informational materials in Spanish or English.
 - Educational posters and flyers in English and Spanish which may be ordered for use in local outreach campaigns, along with a photo library, including pictures of Hispanic individuals and families, that can be used in promotional and informational materials. These resources are available at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/info.htm>.
 - A Hispanic outreach plan, now under development, to better reach and educate the Hispanic audience about the nutrition benefits of the FSP. A small Hispanic owned business is working closely with our national media campaign contractor to prepare a 3-year outreach plan to complement our existing national efforts by identifying community activities to reach potentially eligible Hispanic households.
 - A national Food Stamp Outreach Coalition to bring together national and local organizations working with low-income audiences. Coalition members share effective outreach strategies to educate eligible, non-participating, low-income Hispanic people about the benefits of the Food Stamp Program.
 - Participation Grants for projects that look at ways that State partnerships can promote participation, and make the application and intake process more user-friendly, and Outreach Grants for small organizations to study the effectiveness of strategies to inform eligible low-income people about the program. FY2006 grantees plan to do outreach to Hispanic families.
- **Partnering with Mexico.** USDA and the government of Mexico have entered into a partnership to help educate eligible Mexican nationals living in the United States about available nutrition assistance. Mexico will help disseminate this information through its embassy and network of 45 consular offices.

- **Making Program Application Easier for Non-English Speakers.** While the Food Stamp Program currently offers a number of informational and promotional materials in Spanish for potential applicants and retailers, USDA is expanding the number and types of products available in Spanish and other languages. States with web sites must post their applications on the Internet in the same languages they currently use for paper applications. The school meal programs also make applications for free and reduced-price meals available in Spanish.
- **Promoting Healthy Food Choices in Ways that Are Understandable and Culturally Relevant.** As USDA tackles the nationwide problem of poor eating habits and the health consequences, appealing materials are being developed at an appropriate reading level in Spanish, along with examples that reflect the food preferences and consumption patterns of the low-income Hispanic population.

Nutrition Education Reaching Hispanics

- **Spanish-Language *Dietary Guidelines* and *MiPirámide*:** Both the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* and the popular <http://www.MyPyramid.gov> website are available to the public in Spanish-language editions, to make it easier for Hispanics and other Spanish-speaking Americans to find nutrition information vital to good health, and personalize that information to their own lifestyle.
- **Nutrition Education for Low-Literacy and Spanish-Language Groups:** USDA is developing a comprehensive *Dietary Guidelines* nutrition education program to reach low-literacy and Spanish-language populations. The project is designed to help food stamp recipients and other groups served by USDA to overcome their barriers to healthy nutrition as outlined in the DGAs. The interventions target mothers of children ages 2 to 18. The materials will be made available in 2007.
- **Eat Smart. Play Hard.™** materials are available in Spanish. The materials promote healthy eating and physical activity using activity sheets, bookmarks, posters, and brochures. The posters and activity sheets are bilingual: Spanish on one side and English on the other. The brochures and bookmarks are in Spanish only. The materials can be viewed and downloaded from links on the following web page: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/eatsmartplayhard/Collection/main.html>; and can be ordered from http://www.fns.usda.gov/eatsmartplayhard/Collection/Files/powerpac-order_spanish.pdf.
- **The Food Stamp Nutrition Connection (FSNC)** is an online resource system designed to facilitate communication and resource sharing among Food Stamp Nutrition Education (FSNE) providers. Nutrition education materials written in Spanish are available on the FSNC website, <http://www.nal.usda.gov/foodstamp>.

These initiatives should ensure that Hispanic households and other immigrant groups take advantage of the help available when they need some help to become self-sufficient. After all, the United States values its diversity and will not leave its newest residents to fall behind.