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Little in a Land of Plenty: Food Insecurity Among Latinos in the U.S.

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INTRODUCTION

Food insecurity is defined as the “limited or uncertain availability or acquisition of nutritionally adequate foods through a socially acceptable manner.”¹ In the U.S., food insecurity is disproportionately high among Latino households compared to non-Latino Whites.² Latino immigrants and seasonal farmworkers may experience rates of food insecurity that are three times the national average.³ Despite this high prevalence, there is limited available research that characterizes the effects of food insecurity among Latinos in the U.S. Although several qualitative studies have attempted to explore this issue in detail,³⁻⁸ the results of these studies have not been compared with each other to determine if there are similarities between them. Such comparisons may reveal consistent, significant effects of food insecurity that help to explain food behaviors and practices among food insecure Latinos. Trends among the results of these studies may also aid in the creation of culturally appropriate food insecurity measurement tools,⁵ particularly for smaller subgroups, such as immigrants and seasonal farmworkers, who may be undetected by national surveys.³ The purpose of this literature review is to determine if there are common themes among the results of qualitative food insecurity studies of Latinos in the U.S.

METHODS

Initial Electronic Literature Search

An electronic literature search was conducted through the PubMed database. The key words used were “Hispanic,” “Latino,” “Latina,” “food,” “insecurity,” and “security.” The search was limited to articles published prior to 2010. Multiple searches involving various combinations of the key words produced approximately 30 articles.

Criteria for Selecting Articles for the Present Review

The following criteria were used in selecting the articles for review;

- 1) The study sample should be drawn from Latinos residing in the U.S.
- 2) The study outcomes presented are in reference to food insecurity and should address the effects of food insecurity.
- 3) At least one section of the study’s results should be based on a qualitative methodology. Only qualitative studies were included for analysis due to the objectives of this review and the ability of qualitative research to address the complex interactions between physical, psychological and social factors in multifaceted problems.⁹ Furthermore, qualitative analyses, when compared to quantitative approaches, may consider phenomena through various perspectives and provide explanations for these phenomena in greater depth.⁹ For studies in which both quantitative and qualitative data are presented, only the qualitative data was considered.

Studies Collected for the Present Review

The filtering process described above resulted in a total of six studies (Table 1). The results of these studies were analyzed and findings regarding the experiences, effects, or manifestations of food insecurity were inductively coded into themes.

RESULTS

Description of the Sample

The six studies reviewed in this article drew their participants from a wide variety of settings in four different states in the U.S. (Table 1). The majority of participants within each study were immigrants and female (Table 2). Two of the six studies limited their participants to migrants and seasonal farmworkers,^{3,4} and three of the remaining four limited their participants to mothers or those who were pregnant.⁵⁻⁷

Common Themes among the Results

A review of all six studies (Table 3) revealed that themes among the results can be grouped according to six main categories; (a) food availability, (b) types of food consumed, (c) households with offspring, (d) emotional well-being, (e) sources of food and (f) economic strategies. These themes were chosen due to the frequency with which they appeared in the articles. The results of the theme analyses were as follows;

a. Food Availability

A common theme among three of the reviewed studies^{3,4,8} is the cyclic pattern of food access and deprivation that results from food insecurity. These studies suggest that the duration and severity of these periods are influenced by the income available for food purchases,⁴ corresponding pay cycles and competing, non-food related bills (such as insurance and rent).³ Two studies^{3,4} found that cyclic food availability for migrants and seasonal farmworkers who perform field and construction work is affected by seasonal changes. For these workers, winter (specifically, the period between November and April)^{3,8} or changes in crop seasons bring the highest prevalence of food insecurity due to fewer employment opportunities and increased prices of certain food commodities. This problem is compounded by the inability of these workers to perform other types of work, as they often lack training for other jobs.⁸

b. Types of Food Consumed

Five of the reviewed studies⁴⁻⁸ found that food insecurity produces significant limitations on the types of food consumed. For food insecure households, fruits and vegetables are typically unavailable due to high costs.^{4,6,7,8} As a result, periods of economic deprivation may produce a reliance on low-cost, staple foods, such as tortillas,⁶ corn, beans, and lentils.⁸ In preparation for future periods of food insecurity, foods which have a better yield (higher quantity for lower price, more filling) and do not spoil during the cold season (canned or dried foods) may be

bought during times of higher income, such as summer.⁴ Cost was cited most frequently as an influence on food choice,^{4,8} although cultural preference and area of residence are significant influences as well.⁵

The availability of meat differed widely among participants between studies. One study⁵ found that a meal of rice, beans and meat was healthy, satisfying and affordable among food insecure, pregnant Latinas. Participants among three other studies, however, stated that meat was inaccessible due to high costs.^{4,6,8} Farmworkers in a rural environment have used wild game and fish in order to supplement their diet with meat.³

c. Households with Offspring

The predominant theme among households with offspring is the desire of the parents to protect their children from food insecurity,^{3-6,8} even at the expense of their own food consumption during periods of food shortage. In order to accomplish this, migrants and seasonal farmworkers may stay in the fields all day or eat with other family and friends to ensure an adequate amount of food for their children.³ Decisions about food allocation are particularly difficult among pregnant Latinas, who are torn between feeding their children or themselves (and their unborn baby) during periods of food deprivation.⁵ Among Latina immigrant mothers, one study⁶ found that half of the participants expressed a desire to give their children more food, better quality foods, or foods they could not obtain in Mexico. Such feelings may reflect the parents' past experiences with food insecurity⁶ or the belief that children are more vulnerable than adults to the effects of food shortages and will get sick without a good diet.³

d. Emotional Well-Being

The significant and adverse psychological effects which result from food insecurity among Latinos in the U.S. is a primary theme in four of the studies reviewed.^{4-6,8} Food insecurity is characterized by constant worry and stress. For Latino immigrants, emotions often fluctuate between accommodation (having less and seeking help) and empowerment (ability to care for oneself).⁴ The bi-national experience of the immigrant may lead to loneliness, home-sickness, embarrassment of being food insecure or guilt due to the inability to send money home.⁴ These feelings, coupled with a lack of residency documents, may prevent them from applying for government food assistance.⁴ Among a sample of Latino adults in California, asking for help among welfare institutions was described as a "sad and anguished" condition which is often accompanied by conflict among the families involved.⁸

e. Sources of Food

The available options for alternative sources of food, in the absence of sufficient income, were explored in each of the six studies. Food insecure Latinos may seek assistance from local churches, private food pantries,⁴ or food distribution programs operated by social service organizations.³ Although one study³ found that few farmworkers cited government food programs as a source of food, some Latina mothers have attributed the knowledge of purchasing cheaper, healthy foods to the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC).⁷ Finally, the use of home gardens was cited in two studies^{4,6} as a way of supplementing the diet with homegrown vegetables.

f. Economic strategies

A primary theme among five of the studies^{3-5,7,8} is the employment of economic strategies to ensure adequate funds for the purchase of food commodities. This may include seeking stores with lower prices, being attentive to food sales and traveling to multiple locations for the best deals.⁷ Food may also be bought on credit and repayed at a later time with food stamps,⁵ or informal borrowing arrangements and loans may be made with friends, employers or other family members.^{3,4,8}

DISCUSSION

This analysis of qualitative food insecurity studies among Latinos in the U.S. demonstrates that the results of these studies can be grouped into common themes (Table 3). These themes suggest that food availability occurs in a cyclic pattern based on income and employment. Fruits, vegetables and meats are typically too expensive for purchase, which leads to a reliance on staple foods, such as tortillas, corn and beans. Food insecurity produces significant stress and worry, and may lead to loneliness and guilt among immigrants. Parents express a strong desire to protect household offspring from the effects of food insecurity, even at the expense of their own food consumption. During periods of insufficient income, food insecure Latinos may obtain food from local churches, food pantries, social services or personal gardens. Finally, these themes suggest that economic strategies used to overcome food insecurity include seeking stores with lower prices and using food stamps or loans to pay for food.

Several of the consistent themes in this study are supported by quantitative studies. One cross-sectional study¹⁰ found that Latino children in households with greater food insecurity have significantly less consumption of fruits and vegetables. This low consumption of fruits and vegetables, in addition to a reliance on a limited variety of foods (including Mexican staples), was also found among low-income, Latino families in a cross-sectional survey.¹¹ Finally, a cross-sectional survey confirmed the prevalence of anxiety and worry among food insecure, low income Latino immigrants, and also found that 50% of respondents use food pantries or churches as alternative sources of food during periods of low income.¹²

There are significant limitations in the reviewed studies which warrant cautious interpretation of their findings. For example, one study⁷ did not incorporate a formal measurement of food insecurity status into the study methods, despite addressing food insecurity among the results. Non-random sampling in three of the studies^{3,4,7} may have led to a selection bias, although two of these studies^{3,4} cited an absence of the necessary survey techniques (i.e. census) needed for accurate sampling of their target population. A selection bias may also have occurred due to the various incentives offered for participation between these studies, which included a gift certificate,^{6,8} booklets and hats³ and unspecified incentives.⁵ Furthermore, the restriction of study participants to a specific gender⁴⁻⁶ or country of origin⁶ (Table 3) in certain studies may significantly limit the external validity of the results.

The findings presented in this review are also subject to limitations. Inherent differences between focus groups and in-depth interviews may limit cross-comparisons of their results. Comparisons between participants from different regions may also limit the generalization of the findings presented here, as variations in resources, employment opportunities and sociopolitical support may significantly influence the experience of food insecurity among the participants.

Finally, the themes presented in this review represent the interpretation of the author and may differ between researchers.

CONCLUSION

The results of qualitative food insecurity studies among Latinos in the U.S. demonstrate common themes that explain the principal manifestations of food insecurity. Further research is needed to determine if these themes are externally valid. Future qualitative studies should employ males, non-immigrants and different sampling regions for comparison with the present results. The findings presented here may be used towards the construction of quantitative surveys of food insecurity which determine the prevalence of these effects nationwide and among different ethnic groups. Ultimately, such data may be utilized for the identification of food insecure households and the appropriate distribution of resources to these households.

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Table 1. Summary of qualitative studies of food insecurity among Latinos in the U.S.

Author	Study Type	Data Collection Type, Number and Characteristics of subjects	Setting	Source of Participants
Hromi-Fiedler et al. (2009)	Phen.	Focus groups: 14 pregnant and postpartum low-income Latinas	Hartford, Connecticut	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maternal/Infant Service Program • Community Programs • Area Homeless Shelters • Street Outreach
Kuyper et al. (2006)	Phen.	Focus groups: 22 low-income, Latina mothers.	Solano and San Joaquin Counties, California	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Head Start • Local food pantries • Health fairs • Cooperative Extension Nutrition Programs
Lindsay et al. (2009)	Phen.	Focus groups: 31 low-income, immigrant Latina mothers (Phase I) In-depth Interviews: 20 low-income, immigrant Latina mothers (Phase II)	Greater Boston urban metropolitan area	Boston Area community clinics
Melgar-Quinonez et al. (2003)	Phen.	Focus Groups: 30 adults of Latin-American descent	Solano and San Joaquin Counties, California	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family Service Offices • Support Programs for Preschoolers • Migrant Workers Camp
Quandt et al. (2004)	Phen.	Structured Interviews: 25 Latino migrant and seasonal farmworkers	Five-county area of Central North Carolina	22 sites, including; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Farm labor camps • Trailer parks • Individual dwellings • Churches • Laundromats • Migrant Head Start Programs
Quandt et al. (2006)	Ethn./ Phen.	In-depth Interviews: 76 Latino migrant and seasonal farmworkers	Multiple counties in North Carolina	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Site-based, farmworker community • Contacts of lay health promoters

Phen = Phenomenologic, Ethn. = Ethnographic

Table 2. Select sociodemographic variables of participants in qualitative studies of food insecurity among Latinos in the U.S.

Study	Gender Distribution	Average Age	Country of Origin	Average Length of Residency in US
Hromi-Fiedler et al. (09)	100% female	23	63.4% Puerto Rico 36.6% United States	12.6 years
Kuyper et al. (06)	100% female	32.5	100% Mexico	7.5 years
Lindsay et al. (09)	100% female	32	47% Central America 33% Dominican Republic	9 years
Melgar-Quinonez et al. (02)	93.3% female 6.7% male	*	86.7% Mexico 10% United States 3.3% Nicaragua	*
Quandt et al. (04)	80% female [‡] 97.9% male [#]	*	96.1% Mexico	6 years [‡] 14 months [#]
Quandt et al. (06)				
Study #1	80% female	28	94.5% Mexico 5.5% United States	6 years
Study #2	100% female	28	98% Mexico 2.0% United States	7 years
Study #3	100% female	27	92.9% Mexico 3.6% United States 0.9% Other	3 years

*Data Not Provided

[‡]Households with children

[#]Households without children

Table 3. Theme categories and common themes among the results of qualitative studies of food insecurity among Latinos in the U.S.

Study	Theme Category	Common Themes
Hromi-Fiedler et al. (09)	Food Types Food Sources Households with offspring	Rice, beans and meat form basis of diet. Food provided by shelter residence. 1) Desire to spare children from FI, 2) Food allocation dilemma between parent/unborn baby and children, 3) Parents cut down/skip meals for sake of children.
	Emotional well-being Economic Strategies	Stress, worry from FI (compounded by presence of children). 1) Buy food on credit at small, local stores, 2) Plan ahead 3) Cut down on/skip meals, 4) Purchase inexpensive, less healthy foods, 5) Seek stores with lowest prices
Kuyper et al. (06)	Food Types	Fruits, vegetables and meat are often too expensive for purchase. Beans, rice and tortillas form basis of diet.
	Food Sources Households with offspring Emotional well-being	Self-raised gardens. Desire to give children greater quantity/quality of foods. 1) Anxiety from FI, 2) Past psychological experiences with FI affect current feeding patterns.
Lindsay et al. (09)	Food Types	1) Fruits, vegetables and meat are often too expensive for purchase, 2) Limited by accessibility to grocery stores/transportation
	Food Sources Households with offspring Economic Strategies	Supermarkets Lack of social support and social networks for immigrants 1) Seek/travel to stores with lowest prices, 2) Purchase cheaper foods
Melgar-Quinonez et al. (02)	Food availability Food Types	Cyclic and based on income/employment/seasons 1) Fruits, vegetables and meats are often too expensive for purchase, 2) Corn and beans are the basis of the diet.
	Food Sources Households with offspring Emotional well-being Economic Strategies	Use of food banks and assistance programs. Feeding of children is a priority. 1) Constant worry from FI, 2) Seeking welfare is a sad condition. 1) Purchase cheaper foods with a better yield 2) Seek help from programs, relatives and friends.
Quandt et al. (04)	Food Availability	1) Cyclic and based on income/employment/seasons, 2) Competition w/ other bills
	Food Types Food Sources Households with offspring Economic Strategies	Diet supplemented with wild game and fish Use of church food pantries and distribution programs. 1) Desire to spare children from FI 1) Seek stores with lowest prices, 2) Informal borrowing arrangements, 3) Seek help from friends, family, employers, 4) Save money
Quandt et al. (06)	Food Availability	1) Cyclic and based on income/employment, 2) Limited by transportation
	Food Types Food Sources Households with offspring Emotional well-being Economic Strategies	Fruits, vegetables and meats are often too expensive for purchase. 1) Self-raised gardens, 2) Help from families, pantries, social services Desire to give children greater quantity/quality of foods. 1) Stress, worry from FI, 2) Binational experience produces embarrassment, loneliness, homesickness, fear of applying for help 1) Purchase fewer expensive/unnecessary foods, 2) Use low-cost substitutions, 3) Buy canned/dried foods to store, 4) Save/borrow money

FI = Food Insecurity