Securing adequate, nutritious food is essential for healthy human life. Unfortunately, one in five children in the United States lives in households that suffer from food insecurity. Especially under the current economic recession, understanding food insecurity is a pressing issue.
How do we define food security? According to USDA, “food security” is defined as having access at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life. “Food insecurity” is defined as being uncertain of having, or unable to acquire, enough food for all household members because they had insufficient money and other resources for food.

- Low food security
- Very low food security (Food insecurity with hunger)
In 2007, over 13 million of US households, which is 11% of total population, did not have access to enough food. As you can see in this figure, 7% experienced low food security and 4% experienced very low food security.
Food insecurity varies by race and ethnicity. The left graph shows food insecurity status by race. Compared to White non-Hispanic population, racial/ethnic minorities experienced higher rate of food insecurity.

The right graph shows food insecurity status by income. It clearly shows the poorer families are, the more food insecure they are. About 38% of families under 100% of poverty threshold experienced food insecurity.
Geographic location matters, too. Rural areas are experiencing the exponential growth of the Latino immigrant population. This phenomenon is sometimes called as “Latinization of rural America”. Although there are many agricultural industries in rural area, rural low-income families suffer more food insecurity than urban population. In rural areas, there are fewer supermarkets, fewer food items in stores, higher costs of food, limited choice of transportation, fewer assistance, and fewer job opportunities. All these factors increase the likelihood of food insecurity in rural areas.
In our study, we examined food security of low-income Latino families in rural America. The purpose of our study was to understand why some Latino immigrant families are successful in meeting their food needs, while others are either inconsistently successful or continually unsuccessful, even though their incomes may be similar.

We wanted to gain a in-depth understanding of the issue instead of examining specific variables, and so, employed a case study strategy. By examining overall life experience of these families, we intend to provide “experiential knowledge” to the audience.
The sample of our study came from Rural Families Speak project. We chose Latino immigrant families in Iowa and Oregon who were interviewed at three different waves. Among 35 qualifying families, 10 cases were selected.
The ten cases were selected by food secure status and income level. First, families were identified as being ‘consistently food secure’ if they were food secure at all three waves. Families were identified as ‘consistently food insecure’ if they were food insecure at all three waves. The remaining families, those that moved in and out food security across the three waves, were identified as ‘fragile.’

From each category, we selected families with different income-to-poverty ratios so that we can maximize variability in their financial situations.
Based on our in-depth examination of each case, we found that, regardless of food security status, all families were struggling to make ends meet. I would like to share one comment.

However, we also identified some significant factors which contributed to different food security status. Among many factors listed on this slide, I would like to discuss a few factors. One noteworthy factor was health status. We found that food insecure families experienced many health problems, but consistently food secure families did not report health problems. They seemed to have easy access to health care because health insurance was provided by employers, or because they had legal immigration status, at least for children. Having good health appeared as one of the key factors to achieve food security.

Another significant difference between food secure and food insecure families is the characteristics of social support. Generally, Latino families have strong connection with family members regardless their food security status. But what we found was food insecure families provided financial or instrumental support to family members, instead of receiving support. I would like to share one comment.

Final factor that I would like to talk about is community atmosphere. Interestingly, all OR mothers expressed unfriendly atmosphere in their community, but not IA mothers.
Fragile Food Security
Kesare (IA mother with 2 children)

I have a little money, but it’s only enough to either buy food or pay the bills. I have to pay the bills and not buy food or buy food and don’t pay the bills...The bills are more important because if you don’t pay they shut off the electricity.

This comment clearly shows a common struggle all families face.
Alexia was a OR mother who lived in a trailer house with her husband, two children, two brother-in-laws, and her own brother (total of 7 household members).

We still send them money every month. It is our responsibility any way...I try to make things last even if I have to mix rice and beans so that I can send them a little because they don’t have money to go to the doctor if they need it.
One OR mother talked about a food bank in her community. She said,

The other OR mother also said,

But we did not see any comments like these from IA mothers.
So, what did we learn from these mothers’ comments?
First, food security is embedded in multiple layers of contexts such as individual, family, social support and communities. Second, access to health care interacts with food security. Particularly important factor is to have legal status because it significantly increases the access to public assistance. And finally, creating culturally sensitive atmosphere in community is important for Latino families to reach out the assistance they truly need.
Questions? Comments?