

Eating Well (When You Can): Food Security Among Stateside Puerto Ricans

RESEARCH BRIEF

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Food security among Puerto Rican households is low. Food security is defined as having “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life” (1). Conversely, food insecurity implies limited or uncertain access to healthy foods (1).

This economic and social condition has been associated with poor health outcomes, including chronic-diet related conditions, as well as decreases in mental health—conditions that also affect the stateside Puerto Rican community in a disproportionate manner. This brief presents trends and a research overview of the food security situation among stateside Puerto Ricans. The aim of this brief is to increase community awareness to help mitigate disparities in access to healthy foods, which can then translate into improved health and social outcomes among stateside Puerto Ricans.



TRENDS IN FOOD SECURITY

The percentage of food secure Puerto Rican households has consistently been the lowest, even when compared to Hispanics overall. Figure 1 presents trends in food security among different racial/ethnic groups in the US, from 2005 through 2014. The figure displays CPS-FSS data grouped across three year groups, denoting the situation before, during and after the Great Recession of 2008, providing a picture of how these different groups were affected by the changing economic circumstances, as well as the latest data point (2014). As expected, there was an overall decline in the percentage of food secure households between 2005-07 and 2008-10. While there are hints of recovery for most groups, the level of food security among Puerto Ricans has remained virtually unchanged after 2010 (Fig. 1). The disparity is greatest when Puerto Ricans are compared to White Non-Hispanic homes. While 81% of White Non-Hispanic homes were classified as food secure, this was the case for only 52% of Puerto Rican homes.¹

Methodological Box: Measuring Food Security

Food security is monitored on a yearly basis using the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement (CPS-FSS), though the Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM). The questionnaire consists of questions assessing the food security situation in the home for the past 12 months. It starts with questions assessing worry that food would run out, continuing with items of increased severity, such as not eating for an entire day due to lack of access to food. The HFSSM yields a 4-level categorical variable, classifying households as either having high food security (households that had no problems or anxiety about access to adequate food), marginal food security (households that had problems at times or anxiety about accessing adequate food, but the quality, variety and quantity of the food intake was not affected), low food security (households that reduced the quality and desirability of their diets, but not the quantity was not substantially disrupted), or very low food security (households that had some disruption in eating patterns, included reduced intake) (1).

Research among stateside Puerto Ricans has found that food security is inversely associated with unemployment and female headed households (2). At the same time, food insecurity has been associated with adverse physical and mental health outcomes, including stress (3) and lower cognitive performance (4).

According to analysis of the 2014 CPS-FSS data analysis, a small percentage of US households was classified as having very low food security. However, a disaggregation of these data by race and ethnicity shows disparities across groups, as well as the much higher percentages of Puerto Rican households in this category (11%) — double the overall US percentage (5%). As Figure 2 shows, this gap has persisted.

Figure 1. Percentage of Households Classified as Food Secure, by Race and Ethnicity (2005–2014)

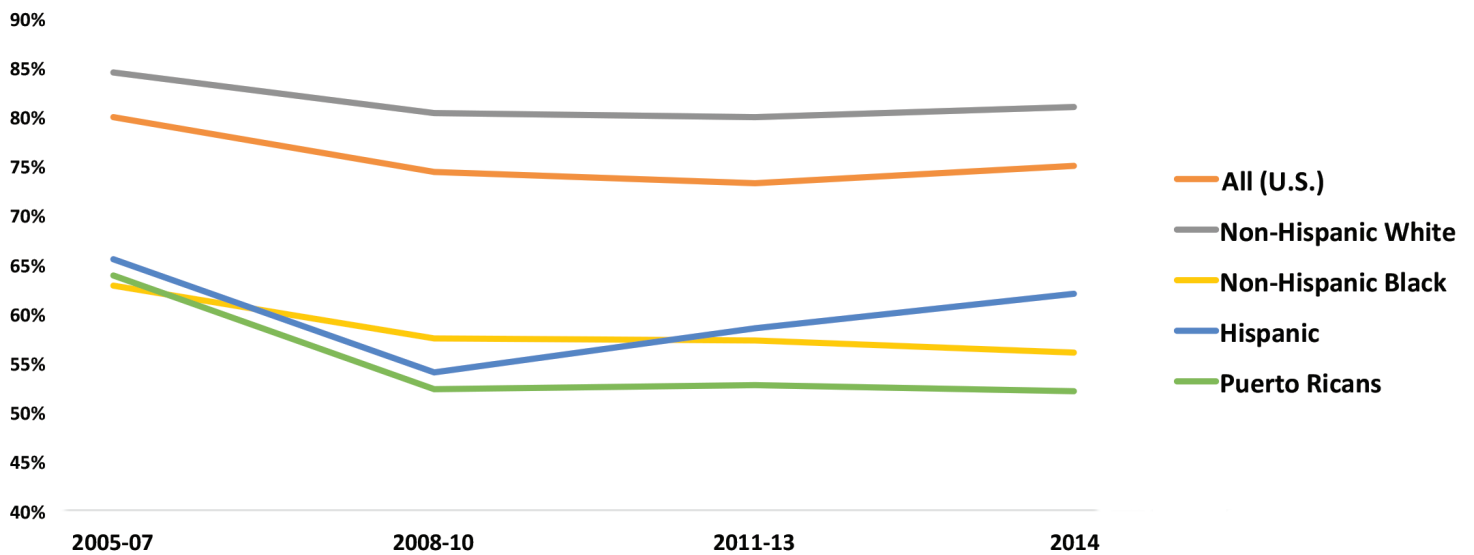
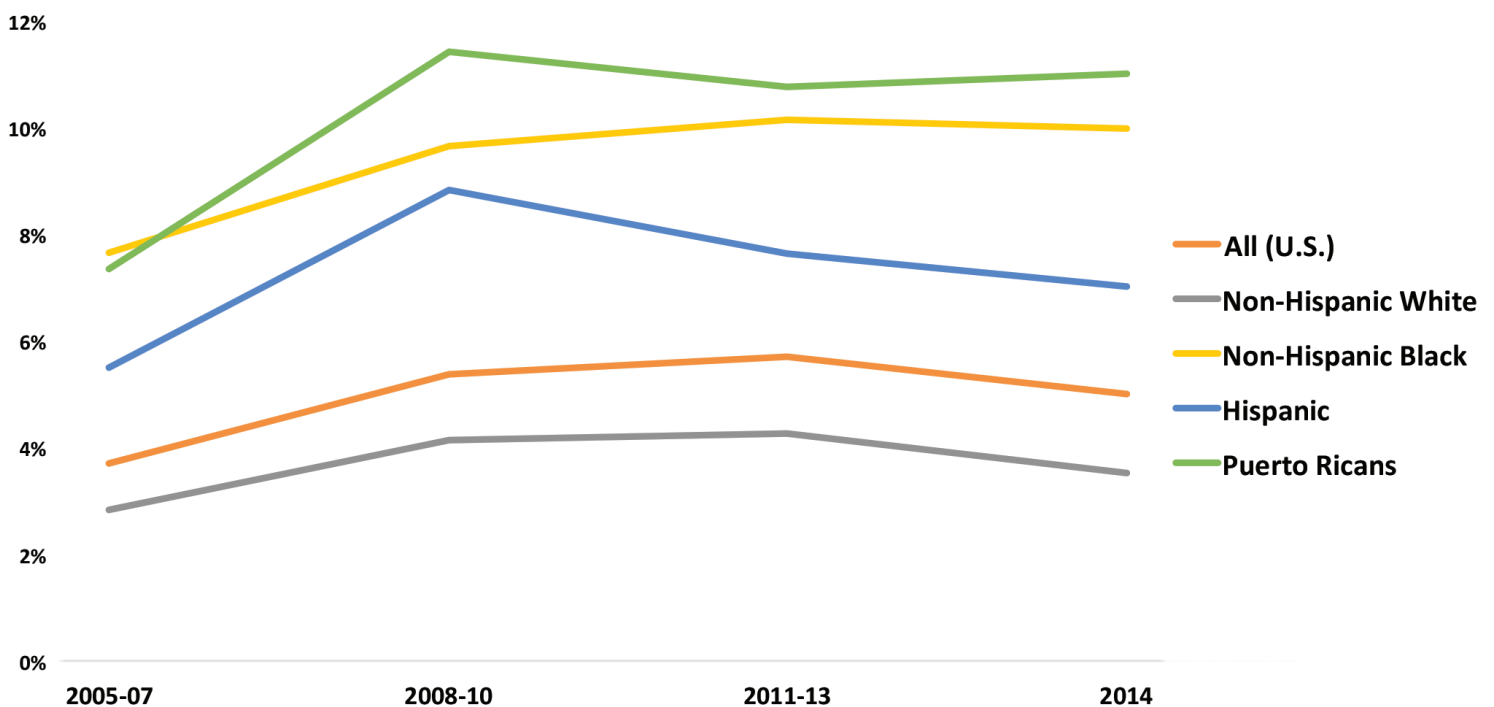


Figure 2. Percentage of Households Classified as Very Low Food Security, by Race and Ethnicity (2005–2014)



FOOD SECURITY AND DIET QUALITY

While diminished food security is associated with scarcity and hunger, there is an established connection between food insecurity and obesity (5). Among stateside Puerto Ricans, studies have found that those living in food insecure situations tended to have lower overall diet quality, including consuming less plant-based foods, which was also associated with poor blood sugar control (6). This association is important, especially when combined with the high prevalence of obesity and diet-related chronic conditions in this community. A study in the Bronx, NY found that Puerto Ricans in this borough have the highest rates of obesity (46.8%) (7), higher than the estimated average prevalence among Hispanics (42%) (8). Moreover, Puerto Ricans also have the highest rates of diabetes diagnosis (11.2%, in 2010), compared to the Hispanic average (9.3%) and other ethnic groups (9).

The paradoxical relationship between food insecurity and health issues commonly associated with over-eating is best explained by taking a closer look at the food insecurity experience. Studies often describe this experience as a managed

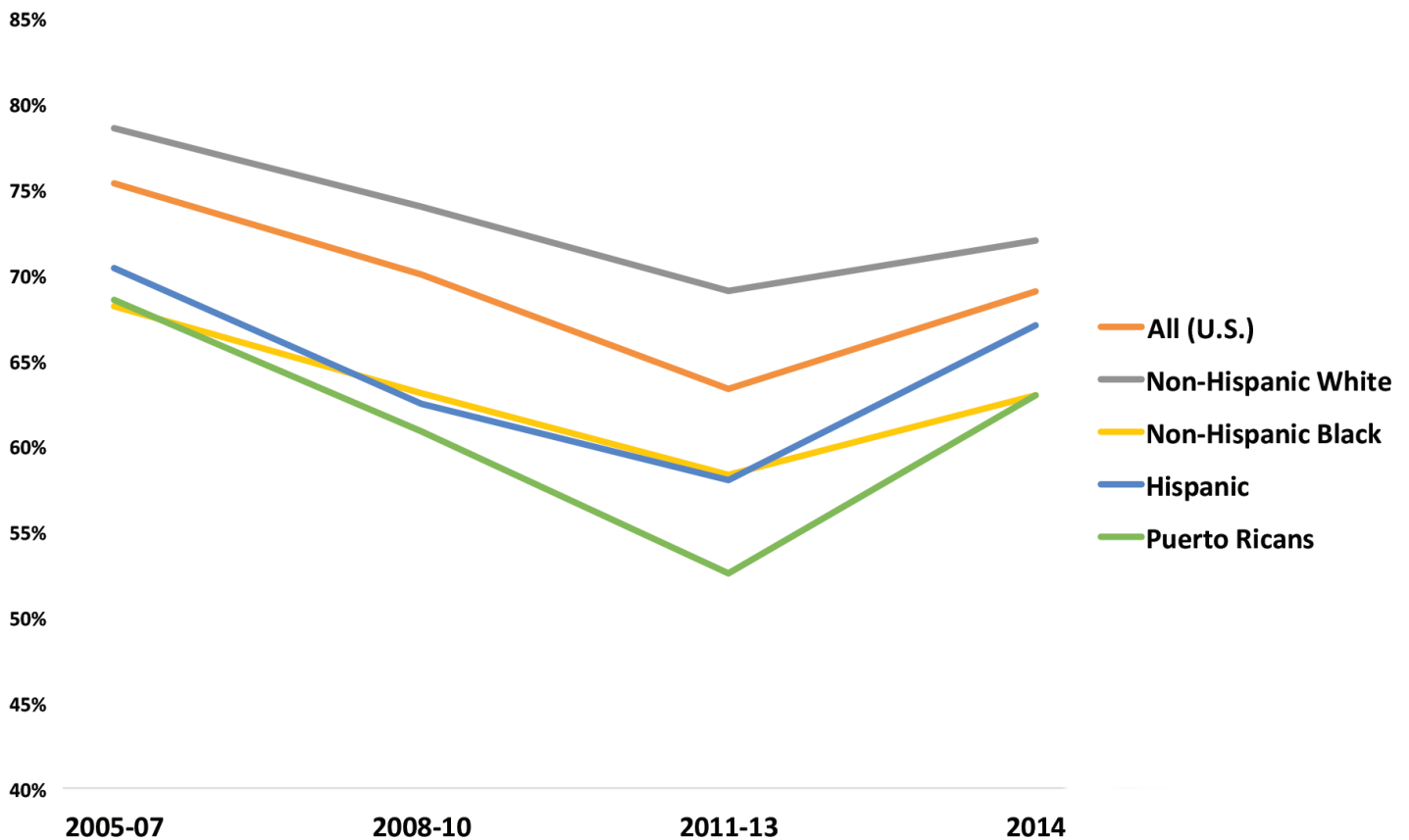
process, of increasing severity (10). When households start worrying about foods running low, they may opt for lower quality (cheaper) foods, often high in calories. Figure 3 captures self-reported access to balanced meals.²

Consistent with food security trends (Figure 1), a lower percentage of Puerto Rican homes were classified as having access to balanced meals. However, across all ethnic groups, there seem to be improvements from 2011-13 to 2014, with Puerto Ricans closing the gap with Black Non-Hispanic, but still much lower than Hispanics overall (Figure 3).

ADDRESSING FOOD INSECURITY AMONG STATESIDE PUERTO RICANS

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) was established to ameliorate the food security situation in the United States. Almost half of the households (48%) included in the 2014 CPS-FSS sample reported participating in the SNAP program. A study in Hartford, CT, an area with a high concentration of Puerto Ricans, showed that households that were able to make food assistance

Figure 3. Percentage of Households Classified as Having Access to “Balanced Meals”, by Race and Ethnicity (2005–2014)



last for the entire month were at a lower risk of food insecurity (11), underscoring the importance of household resource management. Another study in the same community highlighted the role of social networks, where attending Latino events and churches was strongly associated with food security (2). However, more research is still needed on how to best address this situation among stateside Puerto Rican households.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

More work is needed to increase opportunities for “eating well” for stateside Puerto Rican communities. The

present analysis documented inequities in food security and access to balanced meals in this community. These disparities are often masked in national level analyses where Puerto Ricans are grouped in the Hispanic category. Existing research point to potential ways to address this situation, by promoting management of household resources and strong social networks in the community, providing an initial roadmap for community interventions and public policy. At the same time, more work is needed to further contextualize and understand the Puerto Rican experience, including sociocultural, political and historical factors linked to the present food security and nutritional situation.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Statistical analysis conducted by the Center for Puerto Rican Studies may vary for official, national statistics provided by the USDA Economic Research Service.

² Access to balanced meals was measured using the following item from the HFSSM: “We couldn’t afford to eat balanced meals. Was that often, sometimes, or never true for you in the last 12 months?” Households that responded “often true” or “sometimes true” were classified as not having access to balanced meals, while those that responded that this was “never true” were classified as having access.

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