Rethinking "the Food Environment" in Low-Income Neighborhoods to Prioritize Policies for Healthy Cities

Parke Troutman, Hugo Salgado, Naomi Billups, Adrienne Gilleran, Thomas R. Coleman, Wilma J. Wooten

BACKGROUND

Food environments influence dietary habits in complex ways. It is commonly understood that the types of food available affect what people eat. Research — focusing particularly on quantitative assessments of "food deserts" and "food swamps" — shows that residents in neighborhoods with the most limited food options struggle to eat well.

Improving residents' food environments should then improve their health. Operationalizing that to inform local-level policy decisions, however, can be challenging.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

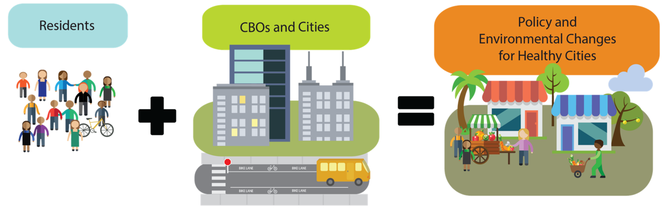
- Describe the limitations of the concept of "the food environment," both conceptually and as a practical tool in improving residents' food choices.
- Identify alternatives to quantitative assessments for discussing residents' interactions with food environments.
- Describe San Diego County's *Healthy Cities, Healthy Residents* (HCHR) project.

METHODS

The County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency *Healthy Cities, Healthy Residents* project funded three community-based organizations (CBOs) with experience mobilizing low-income residents in three different cities. Each of the CBOs assembled a community coalition to prioritize and advance policies to improve the local food environment (as well as active transportation) and to create a place-making project like a community garden.

The process of prioritizing policies began with analyzing the municipal codes and general plans of each city to find gaps and opportunities. The next step was to conduct assessments to quantify the physical food environment of the neighborhoods that the CBOs served. As part of the process of preparing coalitions for doing food environment assessments, CBOs conducted activities to spur discussion about residents' experiences with food.

ABOUT THE HEALTHY CITIES, HEALTHY RESIDENTS MODEL



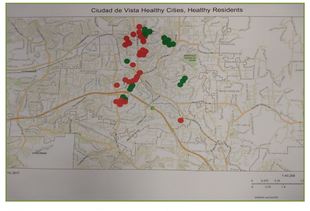
Healthy Cities, Healthy Residents aims to improve public health through community engagement. It evolved out of the Resident Leadership Academy (RLA) program, which, since 2010, has introduced hundreds of residents throughout the county to the foundations of civic participation. HCHR takes this model a step further by providing support for CBOs for three years to allow for much more sustained engagement than could be achieved through an RLA alone.

In partnership with the County of San Diego, there are three CBOs participating in the HCHR model: (1) the International Rescue Committee in El Cajon, (2) the Environmental Health Coalition in National City, and (3) Vista Community Clinic in Vista. Recent developments include:

- In El Cajon, refugees in the downtown area had access to high-quality ethnic markets, but suffered from high rents and high unemployment. Their coalition moved to food-oriented development as a way to build community and create economic opportunities.
- In National City, CBO staff, City staff, residents, and the coalition all valued a hands-on, entrepreneurial approach that stressed local growing and local retail.
- The Vista coalition saw little need for municipal policy change and began developing a neighborhood food plan focusing on families, businesses, and schools.

DISCUSSIONS ABOUT FOOD

While preparing to do quantitative assessments, coalitions developed techniques, such as the below examples, to structure conversations about food among residents. The discussions generated by these techniques called into question the usefulness of framing policy priorities in terms of the food environment:



Maps — Residents marked on a map of the city where they shopped for groceries. It quickly showed that residents shop outside of their immediate neighborhood, even when closer stores were more convenient and the residents didn't drive.

Walks and slideshows of local landmarks — These activities showed how differently people reacted to the same sights and places. There was often not a consensus on what was a community asset or liability.

Videos — By showing short documentary clips and advertisements, participants were able to discuss topics that could have been hard to broach, like the role of family in eating decisions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Healthy Cities, Healthy Residents is a program of *Live Well San Diego*: Healthy Works and supports *Live Well San Diego*, the County of San Diego's vision for a region that is Building Better Health, Living Safely, and Thriving.

RESULTS

More than quantitative assessments, what proved most useful to coalitions in prioritizing policies was the activities that encouraged dialogue about residents' varied lived experiences and passions.

The concept of "the food environment," which stresses what is visible to outsiders, proved too narrow to help coalitions identify policies for their cities. It downplays that:

- Residents' interactions with physical environments are highly impacted by income.
- The emphasis on the food environment oversimplifies food decisions, ignoring influences such as culture, personal identities, and trauma.
- A critical element of people's food environments are other people, such as friends, coworkers, and neighbors.

LESSONS LEARNED

The idea of a unified food environment conflates two (interrelated) issues that advocates need to distinguish: food insecurity and the social acceptance of hyperpalatable highly processed foods. Calling these out as separate is useful:

- It frames policy decisions in terms of residents' understanding of their challenges. They know, for instance, that their rent is too high.
- It facilitates better pinpointing of the causes of problems (such as racism, market mechanisms, cultural norms, and housing construction lagging behind population growth).
- The kinds of policy, systems, and environmental changes required in response are different.
  - Food insecurity calls for improving economic security.
  - Highly processed foods call for changes in norms.

While quantitative food assessments may be useful later, like when engaging policymakers, initially teasing out the drivers of residents' issues builds more momentum toward identifying robust local-level policy priorities.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Parke Troutman, PhD
Planning and Policy Development Specialist
County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency
Public Health Services
Parke.Troutman@sdcounty.ca.gov

11/11/18