

Developing a policy research agenda for healthy food access in rural communities: A transdisciplinary concept mapping approach

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Background and Project Purpose: Rural communities have high rates of nutrition-related disease and obesity, and face unique barriers to accessing healthy, affordable foods. Food access research often focuses on urban communities. Policy and environmental change approaches would benefit from additional research that examines rural contexts. In 2011, participants of the CDC-funded Nutrition and Obesity Policy Research and Evaluation Network Rural Food Access Working Group (RFAWG) formed to conduct collaborative transdisciplinary policy research, beginning with the development of a concept map for rural access to healthy food to identify policy research priorities.

Methods: Online participatory concept mapping processes with a sample of 200 rural food access researchers and practitioners from around the United States.

Concepts relevant to rural food access that emerged:

- Farm workers
- “Grow your own”
- Farm land and practices
- Consumer knowledge and skills
- Agricultural pathways
- Local food systems*
- Healthy food retail availability and accessibility* (*Transportation concerns were cross-cutting)
- Food and nutrition support services*
- Policy and policymaking
- Data and perceptions
- Food producer and entrepreneur supports
- Healthy food in institutions
- Price and community economic development

Contextual considerations (e.g., population migration) and value in finding solutions unique to rural communities that build on existing strengths were also highlighted.

Policy research priorities based on study findings:

Priority	Description	Potential Partners
1. Retail availability and shopping patterns	Rural communities have various retail options (e.g., mass retailers, dollar stores, corner stores, grocery stores, informal food economies). How do options influence consumer shopping habits?	consumer sciences, rural stores, agronomy, local governments and communities
2. Food and nutrition support service adaptations	To gain understanding about barriers and facilitators for service use and implementation in rural areas, inform needed adaptations, and conduct translational activities	health departments, food assistance programs, economists, community development
3. Food production and distribution capacity	Rural communities used to grow their own food and now do to a lesser extent. What capacity do rural communities have and need for their own food production, and how can this be fostered?	food system experts, agricultural extension, community college, funders
4. Economic development and viability and consumer purchasing power	How can economic development efforts, potentially through food producers and entrepreneurs, influence consumer purchasing power and behaviors? How do various food safety regulations affect these processes?	economists, public health academics, agriculture extension, planners communities

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RFAWG Website: <http://www.nopren.org/workinggroups/ruralfoodaccess.html>