

Rural Seniors Have Fewer Options for Healthy Diets

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Eating well is a critical component in a healthy lifestyle. A balanced diet can help prevent or ease chronic conditions such as heart disease, high cholesterol or blood pressure, or obesity. For seniors, who suffer more chronic conditions, diet can be an important (and less expensive) way to manage their health. However, choosing the right foods is only one part of eating well. Having access to quality foods at affordable prices is an often overlooked second component to a healthy diet. Much has been written about low-income urban neighborhoods where the closest grocery store is a 7-11, or McDonalds. Yet rural residents also face limited choices. Local grocery stores have been increasingly forced out of business, leaving residents to drive long distances to a supermarket with a wide range of fresh fruits and vegetables.



As Joseph Sharkey, Scott Horel, and Cassandra Johnson report in their recent study, seniors in rural communities find that getting to a well-stocked and affordable grocery store is frequently a challenge. About one-half of residents in a six-county central Texas area had to drive more than ten miles to supermarket, and six in ten of those surveyed said there were too few grocery stores in their town. As a result, very few of the seniors were getting their daily recommended servings of fruits and vegetables, and six in ten were eating at fast food restaurants at least once a week.

Rural Seniors Must Drive Farther for Groceries

Driving more than ten miles to a supermarket or grocery store, as many seniors in this study did, is considered by national standards to be living in a “food desert.” Ten miles is also much farther than seniors in urban areas report driving. In this study, the researchers



Going the Distance?

In the neighborhoods with the largest concentration of seniors, the average distance to a supermarket was 14 miles. The nearest center offering senior meals was 9 miles.

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For many seniors, convenience stores are often the only food store available in some rural towns today. Not surprisingly, convenience stores had the least variety and often no available fruits or vegetables.

find, the more seniors in a population, the greater the distance to a supermarket. In the neighborhoods with the largest concentration of seniors, the average

Supermarkets offered the greatest variety. Although seniors often were nearer to smaller grocery stores, it was supermarkets where they could find more variety of fresh fruits and vegetables.



Eat Your Fruits and Vegetables—If You Can

It is hard to miss the calls by health experts to eat green leafy vegetables and fresh fruit, particularly as the country continues to gain weight and suffer its consequences (see the brief by Duffy et al. in this series for more on obesity). Yet admonishments may be fall flat if there are no nearby grocery stores with a variety of produce and higher-quality foods.

As noted, fully six in ten seniors in the authors' study said there were too few grocery stores in their community, and eight in ten said the prices were too high. (One-third of the seniors were living in poverty, which likely contributes to the latter response). About three in ten said the variety and freshness of food was poor. Indeed, only a minority were within one mile of a good selection of fruits and vegetables, according to respondents. Perhaps this is why so few (only 14 percent) consumed the recommended daily intake of fruits, and even

Too Few

Only 14 percent of seniors consumed the recommended daily intake of fruits, and even fewer, only 4 percent, ate several servings of vegetables daily.

fewer, only 4 percent, ate several servings of vegetables daily. Those seniors who were poor and had to travel farther to a supermarket or grocery store were the least likely to get the daily recommended allowances of fruits and vegetables.

Neighborhood Access to Produce

When individuals have access to supermarkets or grocery stores with fresh produce and a variety of products, eating well is just that much easier. Beyond the personal benefits of a diet rich in variety are the societal benefits of lowered health care costs. Obesity, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and other health issues are all tied, in part, to diet, and the costs of treating these diseases weigh heavy on the nation's fiscal fitness. In this study, three-fourths of those interviewed had either hypertension, diabetes, heart disease, or they were obese. Four in ten reported two of these conditions. As life expectancy increases along with the share of older adults with

chronic diseases, the burden of these health conditions, the functional decline, and diminished independence place added strain on individuals, families, and communities.

Policy Options

On the whole, seniors in rural areas face higher-than-average chronic conditions, less access to health support, greater isolation, and as this study shows, more limited access to sound nutrition. One step in improving the health of seniors in rural areas, then, is to increase the access to a greater variety of healthy foods. Even the best cooks can do only so much week after week with a head of iceberg lettuce, carrots, and aging potatoes that are the typical produce options in many small grocery stores in rural America.

Support Local Grocery Stores

The association the study finds between a higher share of seniors and fewer nearby grocery stores suggests that an aging



population may be taking its toll on local grocery stores in the six-county study area. As grocery stores fade, replaced by supercenters located nearer larger towns and cities, seniors must drive farther to get their groceries. Therefore, supporting local grocery stores can both support local communities and promote better health and independence among seniors. The Independent Grocers Association could advocate for more reasonable wholesale prices and distribution networks, and promote other innovations that can keep local grocers competitive. Encouraging families to shop locally will also support local grocers.

Tap Into Rural Programs to Bolster Community Supports

Short of building additional grocery stores, smaller rural communities can build the community supports, such as senior meal centers, food pantries, community gardens, and local farmer's markets, that can improve the quality of available food.



Community efforts to preserve and can food is also an option. The U.S. Department of Agriculture offers Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program that targets rural food deserts, or areas with high poverty rates or food insufficiency. The Brazos Valley Council of Governments could also work to foster innovations and community options tailored to the local communities in the seven-county area.



Increase Transportation Options

Short of increasing the number of local grocery stores, improving access to transportation for elderly rural residents can help them get to the more distant supermarkets and supercenters. Cooperative ride-share programs, or other a public-

private transportation programs funded through the Rural Transit Assistance Program could be developed. Community and government planning agencies should consider distance to grocery stores as an important indicator of accessible transportation in its local planning efforts.

Easy access to an affordable, healthy diet is too often overlooked in health, transportation, and other economic development plans for rural areas. As many rural areas continue to age, the issue will become only more pressing.

About the Study

The authors used data from the 2006-2007 Brazos Valley Food Environment Project, an additional survey of 645 seniors on their perceived access to food stores, and Census 2000 data. The Brazos Valley Food Environment Project assessed the availability and variety of fresh and processed fruits and vegetables in all 185 food stores in six rural counties in the Brazos Valley in Texas. The food stores ranged in size from mom-and-pop stores to supermarkets, and included dollar stores, convenience stores, and pharmacies as well as the regular grocery stores and supermarkets. The survey asked seniors about the adequacy of food resources in their community, including the variety of food available, how far they had to drive for groceries, and the price of food. The survey also assessed the respondents' diet.

The Brazos Valley is a seven-county region in Central Texas that is largely rural, with one urban county, Brazos County, home to Texas

A&M University. The study spanned six of the seven counties. The five most populated towns in the study area ranged from roughly 3,000 to 6,000 people, with one town of about 12,000 people. On average, seniors composed one-fifth of the neighborhood populations.

This brief was released as part of the Research Innovation and Development in Economics grants program from the Economic Research Service, USDA. The full research report, more briefs in this series, and other resources are available at <http://srdc.msstate.edu/opportunities/ridge/>

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