

## Qualitative Research

# *Pulga* (Flea Market) Contributions to the Retail Food Environment of *Colonias* in the South Texas Border Region

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**ABSTRACT**

Accounts of the retail food environment have been limited by research that focused on supermarkets, grocery stores, and restaurants as the principal food sources for consumers. Little is known about alternative retail food sources, especially in rural and underserved areas such as the *colonias* along the South Texas border with Mexico. Many *colonias* are located near *pulgas* (flea markets). This is the first study to examine this alternative food source for *colonia* residents. This study's purpose is to provide preliminary data on food availability in this unstudied element of the retail food environment. Five *pulgas* were identified for study by local informants. Two separate teams of two *promotores* (indigenous community health workers) conducted observations, wrote field notes, and surveyed vendors in each *pulga*. Traditional foods, prepared foods, and fresh fruits and vegetables were available in the observed *pulgas*. Traditional foods included

staples, meal items, and snacks and sweets. Prepared foods were available in small stands run by independent operators, and each *pulga* had permanent restaurants that served prepared foods. A large variety of fresh fruits and vegetables were also available. An emphasis on supermarkets and grocery stores will provide an incomplete account of the retail food environment. Further studies should attempt to provide a more complete account by identifying alternative retail sources used by local residents. One such alternative retail food source, the *pulga*, provides a range of traditional food stuffs, prepared food items, and fruits and vegetables that complement conventionally studied aspects of the retail food environment.

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The consumption of healthy foods such as fruits and vegetables and foods low in fat and sugar plays a role in the prevention and management of a number of chronic diseases (1,2). The retail food environment impacts healthy food intake. Accessibility, defined as proximity to supermarkets or grocery stores, has been associated with higher intake of fruits and vegetables (3-7). Food-availability studies examine the variability of food among stores within a retail food environment (8-10). Although little is known about the availability of healthy food in rural areas (9-12), residing or shopping in an area with a wide variety of fruits and vegetables has been positively associated with greater fruit and vegetable intake (3,5,7,9,13).

Traditionally studied retail food environment components include supercenters, supermarkets, grocery stores, and fast-food and full-service restaurants (8,11,14). The scope of this research has been expanded to consider the accessibility and availability of food items in nontraditional components of the retail food environment, including dollar stores, mass merchandisers (8-10,15), and farmers' markets (16,17).

One relatively unstudied rural food environment is the one shared by Mexican origin residents of *colonias* in South Texas (14). *Colonias* are defined by the Texas Office of the Attorney General as "substandard housing developments, often found along the Texas-Mexico border, where many residents lack basic services such as drinking water, sewage treatment, and paved roads" (18). Ward's seminal study describes *colonias* as informal low-income communities of trailers and self-built housing located in extrajurisdictional areas (19). Many *colonias* are located near *pulgas*. Observations from interviews

and earlier studies, including a recent community assessment of *colonias* in South Texas, identified the importance to *colonia* residents of *pulgas* as a food source (20,21). This study is the first to describe this alternative food source for *colonias* by cataloging the foods available from vendors operating within *pulgas*.

## METHODS

### Setting

This study was conducted in five *pulgas* located near clusters of *colonias* in the Alton, Mercedes, and San Carlos areas of Hidalgo County, South Texas. Hidalgo County has a 2005 poverty rate of 43.6%; one of the 10 poorest counties in the United States (22). Percentages of adults with diabetes in South Texas are higher than the rest of the United States and the percentage of Hispanics with diabetes is higher in South Texas than in the rest of Texas. The prevalence of obesity is higher in South Texas than in the rest of Texas and nationally (23). The Mexican origin residents of this area are among the most difficult to reach and disadvantaged communities in the United States (24). Hidalgo County suffers from persistent poverty defined by the US Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service as 20% of the county below the poverty line across the last 30 years, here measured from the 1970 Census (25). Of the approximately 1,524 *colonias* and 400,000 *colonia* residents in Texas, 60% of the *colonias* are estimated to be in Hidalgo County (19). Ward describes the population of *colonias* in South Texas as largely composed of American citizens of Mexican origin (19). According to 2000 data, the towns of Alton, San Carlos, and Mercedes were 97.9%, 97.1%, and 90% Hispanic or Latino, respectively, which differs from the national estimate of 12.5%. The percentages of families below the poverty line in the 2000 US Census were 38.7%, 60%, and 30.4% respectively, for the same towns. These estimates also differed from the national estimate of 9.2% (26).

### Sample, Survey, and Data Collection

Five *pulgas* were identified for study through consultation with community informants, including project-affiliated *promotores*, as popular among *colonia* residents near Alton, Mercedes, and San Carlos, TX. *Pulgas* are private facilities and their owners or operators were approached by *promotores* for permission to collect data from vendors. One *pulga* owner refused to allow a survey of vendors in their *pulga* and gave no reason for this refusal. Within the *pulgas*, vendors rent tables and booths to sell produce and other items, including clothing, shoes, music, and household goods. Vendors within participating *pulgas* were sampled if food items for sale were observed. Of 217 vendors approached by *promotores*, 141 vendors among the four remaining *pulgas* completed a survey, with a response rate of 65.0%. Some vendors were too busy making sales to participate. Food vendors in Texas are regulated and monitored by the county health departments. Individuals who sell food items prepared off-site must operate from a licensed foodservice operation. *Promotores* had to assure some vendors that they did not work for the health department, and some vendors may not have par-

ticipated because of their concerns about this authority. The *promotores* also suggested that many vendors might be fearful of engaging with individuals who could represent the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

The survey was adapted from a previous Spanish-language instrument designed to study mobile food vendors in *colonias* (21). It included items to capture foods sold, other food characteristics, and vendors' demographic characteristics. A literature review on popular foods in the region, discussions with *promotores* and other local residents, and site visits augmented the lists of food items on the survey. The instrument was not tested for reliability against pre-existing instruments as no such instrument exists; however, the instrument does have face validity based on pretesting and revision with community experts.

The *promotores* involved in this project were all local residents and native speakers of Spanish with proven skills at outreach among the resident population of local *colonias*. The *promotores* participated in 1 day of training that included recruiting consenting participants, administering the survey, conducting observations, and writing field notes. Research teams approached the owner or manager of the *pulga*, presented an information sheet available in English and Spanish describing the study's purpose, and requested permission to conduct the study on *pulga* grounds. To capture the widest variety of vendors, *pulgas* were visited twice, once on a weekday and once on a weekend day. Within each *pulga*, each team of researchers approached a vendor, described the study purpose, asked the vendor to review the information sheet, offered a \$5 participation incentive, and administered a vendor survey, or accepted a refusal. Some *pulga* vendors sold on both days, but were only surveyed once. In addition to administering surveys, *promotores* took photographs and observational notes. Results from this observational data are reported elsewhere (27). Procedures and instruments used in this study were approved by the Texas A&M University Institutional Review Board.

### Survey Instrument

Sociodemographic characteristics included sex, age, years of education completed, national origin, and whether the vendor resided in a *colonia*. Business characteristics included number of years as a *pulga* vendor, one-way distance from vendor's residence to *pulga*, percentage of household income derived from *pulga* sales, employment status as a *pulga* vendor (full-time or not), family participation, and whether vendors marketed at more than one *pulga*.

Food items marketed included *taqueria*/tacos, *tamales*, *menudo* (tripe soup), hot dogs, *nieves* (ice cream), *raspas* (snow cones), *elotes* (corn with cheese, mayonnaise and chile), *churros* (sugary fried dough), *frutas/verduras* (fruits and vegetables), *frutas y aguas frescas/refrescos Mexicanos* (fruit waters, and Mexican and American soft drinks), *animales granjas-chivos, vacas, marranos, aves*, etc. (farm animals, eg, goats, cattle, pigs, and poultry), *carnitas* or *chicharrones de puerco* (roasted pork and deep fried pork skin), and an "other" category. Other responses were combined with the initial categories to create categorical variables for fruits and vegetables; *taquerias*; pre-

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