

Farmers' Markets and the Local Food Environment: Identifying Perceived Accessibility Barriers for SNAP Consumers Receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) in an Urban Oklahoma Community

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To examine barriers to farmers' market (FM) use by Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) consumers receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.

Design: Focus groups.

Setting: An urban community in Oklahoma.

Participants: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program beneficiaries receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (n = 64 across 8 focus groups).

Phenomenon of Interest: Perceptions about FM foods and barriers to FM use.

Analysis: Transcript-based content analysis using the 5 dimensions of access framework.

Results: Few participants ate fresh produce regularly and most appreciated the convenience of shopping at a supermarket. Farmers' markets were not perceived as available or accommodating to shopping needs and affordability and acceptability concerns were expressed. Few were aware of FMs that accepted SNAP. Emerging themes suggested residential segregation and cultural barriers to FM use.

Conclusions and Implications: Farmers' market managers, community nutritionists, and researchers should develop interventions that correct common misperceptions about FM products, minimize access barriers, and increase awareness of SNAP payment options. Residential segregation and cultural barriers may have a role in FM use and should be explored further.

Key Words: farmers' markets, food supply, food assistance, public assistance, low income, fruit, vegetable, shopping, food environment (*J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2015;47:127-133.)

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INTRODUCTION

Low-access food environments limit consumer opportunities to purchase nutrient-dense foods, which may contribute to nutrition-related health disparities.¹ Consumer perceptions about the number of local food retailers and the quality of foods they provide may predict dietary quality more reliably than objective mea-

asures,^{2,3} which suggests that attitudes and beliefs about the local food environment have an important role in eating behaviors. Farmers' markets (FMs) provide a venue for farmers to sell locally grown produce and, increasingly, meats, eggs, and dairy products directly to consumers. Although these foods are lacking in low-access, low-income communities, FM patrons tend to be affluent, college

educated, married, and identify as white.⁴⁻⁶ Increasing access to FMs for low-income and minority consumers can link people in poverty with affordable produce⁷ while supporting the economic stability of small local farms. In an effort to sell low-income consumers their products, FMs increasingly offer electronic benefits transfer (EBT) machines to process Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) benefits; however, EBT use at some FMs remains underwhelming.⁸

Much research has explored barriers and facilitators to FM use by SNAP and WIC consumers.⁸⁻¹⁰ One subgroup neglected by existing research is the SNAP population receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Nationally, the TANF program provides cash benefits to over 1.7 million low-income households per

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year, including over 1 million adults and 3 million children, three-quarters of whom are minorities.¹¹ These families are often headed by single women with limited education who are unemployed and generally income-eligible for SNAP.¹¹ These participant demographics present multiple risk factors for poor intake of fruit and vegetables (F/V)^{12,13} and limited FM use.⁴⁻⁶ A thorough examination of modifiable barriers to FM use for this at-risk population could support development of targeted interventions to improve FM access.

Barriers to FM use can be explored through 5 dimensions of access: local availability; accessibility as measured by transportation and other related costs; affordability, including direct and indirect costs; accommodation by FMs to meet consumer needs; and venue and product acceptability by the target audience so it meets their social values and norms.^{2,14} Differential patterns in FM use across socioeconomic classes may be further understood through the diffusion of innovations theory, which recognizes how new ideas, products, and social practices are accepted by groups at different rates.¹⁵ Whether a particular audience accepts a new behavior or product depends on its characteristics, such as compatibility with the lives of the people, complexity of the service, and relative advantage over other options.¹⁵

This study's purpose was to determine whether low-income SNAP consumers receiving TANF in Tulsa, OK identified FMs as part of their local food environment, what barriers existed to FM use, and whether FM produce offered a relative advantage over store-bought F/Vs for these low-income consumers. The researchers considered this target population high-priority because eating behaviors begin in early childhood¹⁶ and low household income is associated with poor F/V intake in Oklahoma,¹⁷ which nationally ranks 44th in overall health and even lower for F/V intake.¹⁷

METHODS

Study Design

In 2009, the Oklahoma Department of Human Services purchased 1 EBT

machine for Oklahoma's largest FM, the Cherry Street Farmers' Market (CSFM). Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program transactions totaled only 0.01% of all sales the first year, motivating farmers from the board of directors to seek collaboration with the study authors to investigate reasons for low SNAP redemption.

Cherry Street Farmers' Market operates in Tulsa, Oklahoma's second largest city. It is situated in a low-income midtown census tract but it is located within a shopping district frequented by middle-income consumers.¹⁸ The midtown area separates the more affluent south Tulsa from the economically disadvantaged north side of town.¹⁸ North Tulsa is primarily composed of low-income, low-access census tracts¹⁸ with only 2 grocery stores nearby. The dividing line between midtown and north Tulsa is marked by a large interstate highway and the market is located approximately 2.5 miles south of this dividing line.

Because the authors found no published data exploring FM perceptions and access barriers specific to the SNAP-TANF population, they used focus group discussions for this formative research to elicit potential reasons for low SNAP participation rates by this population.

Participants and Recruitment

Using a purposive sampling strategy and a single-category focus group design,¹⁹ the researchers recruited participants from the TANF population who received SNAP benefits. The researchers started with 4 focus groups, each allowing 5–10 participants.¹⁹ Additional groups were conducted until both researchers agreed data saturation was achieved.¹⁹ Focus group sessions were held immediately after TANF orientation classes at 2 Oklahoma Department of Human Services offices located 2 and 5 miles from the CSFM between July and September, 2010. Participants gave written informed consent before each focus group discussion and received \$20 cash compensation. The University of Oklahoma Institutional Review Board approved this study.

Focus Group Discussions

Before each focus group, participants completed demographic questionnaires asking about their zip code, age, household composition, and transportation. In addition, participants completed a self-administered written dietary recall created by the registered dietitian researcher who provided guidance during this activity. Participants specified all food items and beverages consumed in the previous 24 hours, including portions, preparation methods, estimated time, and location. These recalls were used as another information source to triangulate data²⁰ from the focus group discussions about reported F/V eating behaviors, preferences, and access during transcript content analysis.

The researchers used a semi-structured interview guide to provide flexibility during each discussion. Interview questions were designed with input from the community partner to understand participants' preference for and use of foods available at the CSFM, as well as F/V use in household meals. Researchers asked about participant knowledge of products available at FMs as well as their past use and experiences as patrons of any FM, including CSFM. Midway through each focus group, the researchers provided CSFM's location and hours of operation, and asked what would motivate participants to visit CSFM. Finally, participants were asked to identify ideal locations for FMs. After each hour-long session, the researchers debriefed to identify important discussion points and areas needing more clarification in future groups.

Each session had a designated moderator and note taker.¹⁹ All focus groups were audio recorded and conducted by the researchers, who had previous training and experience moderating focus groups as well as 40 years' combined direct practice and research experience working with low-income populations. The researchers were the same gender as most participants; however, both researchers self-identify as white and middle-class.

Data Analysis

Discussions were transcribed verbatim. To guide transcript-based content

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