



# Examining the Feasibility of Healthy Minimum Stocking Standards for Small Food Stores

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## ARTICLE INFORMATION

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective** In response to recent national efforts to increase the availability of healthy food in small stores, we sought to understand the extent to which small food stores could implement the newly published Healthy Small Store Minimum Stocking Recommendations and reflect on the new US Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service's final rule for stocking of staple foods for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program–approved retailers.

**Design** We collected qualitative and quantitative data from 57 small stores in four states (Arizona, Delaware, Minnesota, and North Carolina) that accepted Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program but not Special Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for Women, Infants, and Children benefits. Data from semistructured, in-depth interviews with managers/owners were transcribed, coded, and analyzed. We collected quantitative store inventory data onsite and later performed descriptive analyses.

**Results** Store interviews revealed a reluctant willingness to stock healthy food and meet new recommendations. No stores met recommended fruit and vegetable stocking, although 79% carried at least one qualifying fruit and 74% carried at least one qualifying vegetable. Few stores met requirements for other food categories (ie, whole grains and low-fat dairy) with the exception of lean proteins, where stores carrying nuts or nut butter were more likely to meet the protein recommendation. Water and 100% juice were widely available and 68% met basic healthy beverage criteria.

**Conclusions** In contrast to the inventory observed, most owners believed store stock met basic recommendations. Further, findings indicate that small stores are capable of stocking healthy products; however, technical and infrastructure support, as well as incentives, would facilitate shifts from staple to healthier staple foods. Retailers may need support to understand healthier product criteria and to drive consumer demand for new products.

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EFFORTS TO INCREASE THE CONSUMPTION OF healthier foods and decrease consumption of calorically dense, nutrient-poor foods have resulted in a careful examination of which communities have access to healthy foods, how foods are marketed in stores, and how stores vary by community and store size across the United States.<sup>1-3</sup> Results show that community access to affordable, nutritious foods can vary dramatically depending on demographic and socioeconomic context and ZIP code, creating a basis for disparities in health.<sup>4,5</sup>

At the same time, approaches to increase the amount of healthful purchases made with Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) dollars have been a key focus of federal policy.<sup>6</sup> On average, SNAP provides \$126.83/mo in food assistance to more than 43 million Americans living below 130% of the federal poverty level.<sup>7</sup> Health advocates have expressed concern that product eligibility includes items like sugar-sweetened carbonated beverages, candy, and chips at a

time when beneficiaries are also at highest risk for disease.<sup>8</sup> Earlier this year as revisions to the program were under consideration, experts called for an overhaul of the program to restrict consumer purchases to healthy staple foods, and in so doing better align the program with the 2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans. At the retailer level, efforts to require a healthier in-store environment, including requirements to stock a greater variety of healthier foods were proposed, and ultimately an increased requirement for minimum stock of staple foods, although not necessarily healthier staple foods, was included in the final rule.<sup>9</sup>

Efforts to improve the availability of healthier foods in stores is an issue relevant to recent SNAP retailer eligibility requirements. This builds on work completed by numerous healthy small store programs that have been implemented widely across the United States. Such efforts generally identify, incorporate, and test the extent to which new products and healthy food marketing strategies increase sales of

targeted items.<sup>10–14</sup> The menu of new products typically have fewer calories, sodium, fat, or sugar and higher quantities of fiber than similar or popular products and in some cases policy requiring a specific mix of healthy foods to be available in small food stores has been implemented.<sup>15,16</sup>

Despite advances, the field lacks any common definition of a healthy small store. As a result, guidelines across programs have led to a patchwork of regulatory standards and certification systems across the country. In response, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Healthy Eating Research program convened an expert panel in 2015 and 2016 to develop evidence-based recommendations for minimum stocking levels and marketing strategies for small retail food stores, resulting in Healthy Small Store Minimum Stocking Recommendations.<sup>17</sup> The panel's goal was to develop stocking levels that would be feasible and would make a meaningful contribution to healthy food access in communities. It identified two minimum stocking levels (basic and preferred) for healthful foods and beverages in small retail food stores. The recommended levels were structured around the 2015 Dietary Guidelines for Americans<sup>18</sup> and built on food categories used by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) in SNAP minimum stocking rules for staple foods in participating stores. The healthier food categories identified in the recommendations include fruits and vegetables, low- and nonfat dairy, including fortified soy beverages, whole-grain-rich foods, and lean meat/protein, plus an additional category for healthy beverages. Panel guidelines included specific recommendations for quantities, portion sizes, and nutritional content of items stocked as well as marketing guidelines.<sup>17</sup> The present study builds from these recommendations to test the feasibility of the new standards and to provide practical insight from retailers about implementation with a mixed-methods design.

The aims of this study were to understand the barriers and facilitators to implementation of newly proposed Healthy Small Store Minimum Stocking Recommendations among small stores, and compare current levels of store stock with recommendations among a sample of stores in four regions of the United States.

## METHODS

### Procedures, Study Setting, and Design

We approached 232 small retail food stores for participation. Of those, 74 were ineligible, 99 declined to participate, and 57 agreed to participate across the states of Delaware (n=14), Arizona (n=15), Minnesota (n=13), and North Carolina (n=15). Of the 99 that declined, 48 refused outright and provided no reason, and 32 were visited multiple times but the manager was not there to agree to participation and could not be reached, and 19 indicated they did not have time to participate. Demographic characteristics from the census tracts surrounding surveyed stores reveals stores serve communities where 27% of families live below the poverty line and 34% of residents are black, 34% are white, 7% identify as other, 4% are Asian, 24% are Hispanic, and 25% speak a language other than English. Stores were eligible in cases where they accepted SNAP but not Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) benefits; had three or fewer cash registers; were located in a census tract within a 20-mile radius of a partnering research institution; and in a tract where  $\geq 51\%$  of households had incomes below 200% of

## RESEARCH SNAPSHOT

**Research Question:** Are Healthy Small Store Minimum Stocking Recommendations Feasible?

**Key Findings:** Small stores accepting Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits carry a variety of staple products, although they fall short of meeting new healthy food guidelines. Seventy-nine percent of these carried at least one fruit and 74% carried at least one vegetable, although no stores met overall healthy stock for the category. Few stores met healthy food requirements for other food categories (ie, whole grain and low-fat dairy) with the exception of lean proteins, water, and 100% juice. Store interviews revealed a tentative willingness to stock healthy food alongside a need for technical assistance to ensure understanding of guidelines.

the federal poverty level. Stores accepting WIC were excluded from our sample because of pre-existing federal minimum stock requirements for healthy staple foods. We identified stores via the SNAP retailer locator website hosted by the USDA (<http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/retailerlocator>) and identified WIC retailer information from state lists and confirmed onsite. The number of cash registers was observed onsite to determine store eligibility. We obtained census tract household income data from the American Community Survey.<sup>19</sup> Further, stores were excluded in cases where they were currently participating in, or had participated in the past 3 years in any other small store–geared study or healthy stocking initiative or if they were identified as a dollar store or pharmacy. Store characteristics are provided in Table 1.

Store managers or owners of eligible stores (hereafter referred to as managers) were invited to participate initially with a letter and/or direct in-person contact. To participate, managers had to be aged 18 years or older, have owned or managed the store for a minimum of 1 year, and made a majority of the decisions about what products are stocked in the store. Managers were compensated \$25 for their time. The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the institutional review boards of the University of Delaware,

**Table 1.** Characteristics of participating stores across four states (Arizona, Delaware, Minnesota, and North Carolina) (n=57) in a study examining the feasibility of Healthy Small Store Minimum Stocking Recommendations

| Store characteristic | Result                                  |
|----------------------|---|
| <b>Store type</b>    | <i>n</i> (%)                            |
| Gas station          | 19 (33)                                 |
| Rural                | 16 (29)                                 |
| Suburban             | 8 (14)                                  |
| Urban                | 32 (57)                                 |
|                      | <i>mean</i> ± <i>standard deviation</i> |
| Aisles               | 4±2                                     |

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