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Research report

Mobile and home-based vendors' contributions to the retail food environment in rural South Texas Mexican-origin settlements

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ABSTRACT

A growing concern with high rates of obesity and overweight among immigrant minority populations in the US has focused attention on the availability and accessibility to healthy foods in such communities. Small-scale vending in rural, impoverished and underserved areas, however, is generally overlooked; yet, this type of informal activity and source for food is particularly important in such environs, or "food deserts," where traditional forms of work and mainstream food outlets are limited or even absent. This exploratory study investigates two types of small-scale food vending that take place in rural *colonias*, or Mexican-origin settlements along the South Texas border with Mexico: mobile and home-based. Using a convenience sample of 23 vendors who live and work in Texas *colonias*, this study identifies the characteristics associated with mobile and home-based food vendors and their businesses and its contributions to the rural food environment. Findings reveal that mobile and home-based vending provides a variety of food and beverage options to *colonia* residents, and suggests that home-based vendors contribute a greater assortment of food options, including some healthier food items, than mobile food vendors, which offer and sell a limited range of products. Findings may contribute to the development of innovative policy solutions and interventions aimed at increasing healthy food options or reducing health disparities in immigrant communities.

Introduction

The 1248 mile South Texas-Mexico border region is one of the fasted growing areas of the United States. Of the 400,000 people who live in counties along the border, the percent of Latinos exceeds 86%, the majority of whom are US-born (64%) and of Mexican-origin (Census Bureau, State, 2012; Sharkey, Dean, & Johnson, 2011). A demand for low cost housing in this area has resulted in the development of more than 2294 *colonias* along the South Texas-Mexico border. *Colonias* consist of unincorporated, rural Mexican-origin settlements that often lack basic infrastructure, such as paved roads, street lights, and running water (Sharkey et al., 2011; State, 2012). The colonias of South Texas are located in a region with a higher than national-level prevalence of obesity and related chronic diseases such as diabetes (Institute for Health Promotion Research, 2010). Hidalgo County, where the *colonias* in this study were located, is the location of more than 70% of Texas *colonias*. Hidalgo is a persistent poverty county and among the 10 poorest US counties (Fronczek, 2005). The 2010 Census described the population of Hidalgo County as 89.8% Hispanic or Latino, with 34.8% of families below poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). These *colonias* are located in areas with high rates of food insecurity (Sharkey et al., 2011), poor access to grocery stores and supermarkets (Sharkey, Horel, Han, & Huber, 2009), and poor health-related quality of life (Mier et al., 2008). The retail food environment is implicated in this relationship, as researchers observe the availability of and access to healthy food at a reasonable price, "a prerequisite for adopting a healthful diet," is constrained in such communities (Azuma, Gilliland, Vallianatos, & Gottlieb, 2010) (p.1), especially in the functionally rural *colonias* of South Texas (Sharkey et al., 2011, 2009). The greater cost (Dunn, Sharkey, Lotade-Manje, Bouhlal, & Nayga, 2011; Morris, Neuhauser, & Campbell, 1992; Smith & Morton, 2009), more limited variety (Kaufman, 1999), and lower perceived quality (Dean & Sharkey, 2011) of food in rural than urban settings, and a paucity of public transportation (Sharkey, Horel, & Dean, 2010; Smith & Morton, 2009), are factors that contribute to poor food access for rural populations.

Research on the retail food environment has traditionally examined such venues as supercenters, supermarkets, grocery stores and fast-food and full service restaurants (Creel, Sharkey, McIntosh, Anding, & Huber, 2008; Sharkey & Horel, 2008; Sharkey et al., 2009), and non-traditional sites such as dollar stores (Block & Kouba, 2006; Creel et al., 2008), convenience stores (Block & Kouba, 2006; Bustillos, Sharkey, Anding, & McIntosh, 2009; Creel

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et al., 2008; Sharkey et al., 2010), farmers markets (Conrey, Frongillo, Dollahite, & Griffin, 2003; Herman, Harrison, & Jenks, 2006) and *pulgas* or flea markets (Dean, Sharkey, Johnson, & Valdez, 2011; Dean, Sharkey, & St John, 2011). In rural areas, economic restructuring and the consolidation of the retail industry has led to a decline of supermarkets and large grocery stores (Blanchard & Matthews, 2007), or a "distancing out" of rural populations from traditional food outlets (Blanchard & Matthews, 2007; Wright Morton & Blanchard, 2007). In the absence of larger retail food outlets, residents' reliance on non-traditional outlets, which tend to stock a limited supply and variety of healthy food at higher prices, increases (Crowley, Lichter, & Qian, 2006; Giusti, 2011; Sharkey et al., 2009). These areas of limited food access, or what some researchers label "food deserts," typify most of the non-metropolitan counties in Texas (Blanchard & Lyson, 2002; Blanchard & Matthews, 2007; Dean, Johnson, & Sharkey, in press). In Mexican-origin communities in particular, the excess supply of low-skilled labor and the demand for alternative sources of food are two aspects of the social context that are associated with a rise in two forms of microenterprise: mobile- and home-based food vending (Rochín, Saenz, Hampton, & Calo, 1998). Mobile- and home-based food vending activities differ with respect to the location of food preparation and distribution. Mobile food vendors generally prepare and/or sell food items and beverages in the street or other public places using a push-cart, bicycle or van (see Fig. 1), whereas home-based food vendors prepare and sell food items out of the house (see Fig. 2).

Fig. 1. Mobile food vendor with customers.

Fig. 2. Home-based small store.

Research on microenterprise, specifically mobile- or home-based food vending, has focused on urban areas of immigrant and minority settlement and concentration (Light, 2004; Menjivar, 2002; Morales and Kettles, 2009; Odoms-Young, Zenk, & Mason, 2009; Portes & Sassen-Koob, 1987; Portes & Sassen-Koob, 1994; Raijman, 2001; Tester, Yen, & Laraia, 2010; Zlolniski, 2006). This research is multifaceted and includes investigations of the structural forces that condition its emergence (Light, 2004; Portes, 1994; Portes & Sassen-Koob, 1987; Raijman, 2001; Zlolniski, 2006), its impact on obesity and other health related concerns (Cummins, 2006; Morales and Kettles, 2009; Odoms-Young et al., 2009; Raijman, 2001; Tester et al., 2010), its contributions to the retail food environment (Cummins, 2006; Morales and Kettles, 2009; Odoms-Young et al., 2009; Raijman, 2001; Tester et al., 2010), and on-going debates regarding the extent to which such activity is or should be regulated (Diller, 2011; Morales and Kettles, 2009). These studies acknowledge the potential contributions of non-traditional food outlets to the retail food environment and appreciate the likely impacts of such outlets on immigrant and minority health disparities. Fewer studies have actually examined such outlets or revealed what types of food items are available for purchase (potential access) (Dean, Sharkey, & St John, 2011; Grigsby-Toussaint, Zenk, Odoms-Young, Ruggiero, & Moise, 2010), or are purchased by consumers (realized access) (Sharkey et al., 2011). This limited research suggests that alternative food outlets condition community members' potential and realized access to food, thereby contributing significantly to the retail food environment. For example, Tester and colleagues (2010) revealed that mobile food vending near schools contributed significantly to the after-school snacking habits of Mexican-origin children. While most mobile food vendors offered for purchase items that were calorie dense and nutrient-poor, 30% of the items sold were nutritious fruits and vegetables (Tester et al., 2010).

Although limited in number and scope, studies of mobile food vending in rural areas of immigrant and minority settlement suggest the activity is ever-present where families and children reside and similar to that in urban settings, with respect to providing access to healthy and less healthy food items in underserved areas (Dean, 2011; Dean, Sharkey, Johnson, et al., 2011; Rochín et al., 1998; Sharkey, Dean, & Johnson, in press). For example, a recent community assessment of Texas *colonias* in the study communities found 52% of 610 households reported the use of alternative food outlets, with the majority (60%) purchasing food from mobile food vendors (Sharkey et al., in press). The most popular item purchased was ice cream, in line with the urban food environment study conducted by Tester and colleagues (2010). A significant portion of the rural consumer population also purchased *elotes* (corn on the cob or kernels in a cup) from mobile food vendors, the same as urban dwellers (Tester et al., 2010). The development of microenterprise in rural areas of high Mexican-origin concentration is not surprising, as group members, on average, possess low human capital (education and work experience) and poor proficiency in the English language; maintain traditional gender roles, which negatively affect women's labor market participation and integration disproportionately; and among foreign-born immigrants, are often undocumented (Valdez, 2006). These factors alone or in combination inhibit Mexican-origin men and especially women from formal employment and instead prompt them to work informally (Raijman, 2001; Ramirez & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2009; Valenzuela, 2003). Among *colonia* residents in California, for example, Rochín and colleagues (1998) found that food vending provided an alternative to formal work for *colonia* residents who faced high unemployment (Rochín et al., 1998). Taken as a whole, the early evidence to date suggests that alternative food outlets, and small scale vending in particular, thrive in concentrated areas of Mexican-origin settlement and contribute markedly to the food