Small Food Stores in Rural Communities: Challenges and Insights

Courtney Pinard
Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition

Leah Carpenter
Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition

Teresa Smith
Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition

Amy Yaroch
Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition

See next page for additional authors

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Presenter Information
Courtney Pinard, Leah Carpenter, Teresa Smith, and Amy Yaroch

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Small Food Stores in Rural Communities

Courtney Pinard, PhD
Leah Carpenter, MPH
Teresa Smith, MS

Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition
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Study Overview

- Literature Review (50 papers)
- Store-Owner Interviews (15 urban, 15 rural) + modified NEMS-S
- Content Expert Interviews (N=18)
- Review of existing measures
- Development of Toolkit
30-40% of studies have some emphasis on rural areas.

Many (~70%) studies are descriptive/observational, with most utilizing secondary data.

Need for greater variety in measurement and more valid/reliable tools.

Need more experimental and longitudinal studies.
Literature Review – Rural Store Specific Findings

• Secondary data sources may not capture small stores in rural areas → ground truthing with observations
• Corner stores described sometimes as the only source for food within hundreds of miles
• Limited availability and perceived costs of healthful food influences purchasing behaviors

Creel et al., 2008; Gustafson et al., 2012; McGee et al., 2011; Sharkey et al., 2009; 2013
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Stores Targeted

- Small stores with 2 or fewer cash registers
- In a rural area with limited food access – no other store for at least 10 miles
- Stores identify as small grocery, market or convenience stores, some attached to gas station
Interviews with store-owners:
• Describe their store, role in the community, interactions and descriptions of customers
• Details about operations and current practices, opportunities for change
• Reasons motivating practices (i.e., layout, signage, deliveries)
• Feasibility and attitudes toward future healthy initiatives

Modified NEMS-S:
• Conducted in stores throughout Omaha previously
• Consider unique components of healthy access within urban and rural areas of Nebraska
Where are these stores?
Not interested in promoting healthy foods: “I don't care whether it’s all healthful or not, just so you can sit down and have the basics for a good family meal.”

Cost and customer demand: “I would like to see more fruit items...say, a basket of bananas. Especially in the summer, because I think especially travelers would like to see oranges, apples, bananas, something that they could just grab --they would rather do that than a snack cake.”

Customer request: “Probably request would be the highest [influence on what the store stocks].”
Rural Stores are Stocking Healthy Already

• NEMS-S assessment
  – Observational measure that assesses availability of healthy foods across 5 categories (low-fat dairy, whole grains, fruit, vegetable, lean meats)

- Access to all five food categories: 13 stores
- Access to three out of five categories: 1 store
- Access to no healthy food categories: 1 store
Store Owner Interviews

Preliminary Results – Perceptions of Superstores

• Superstores are a barrier:
  – “People always say that superstores are so cheap but if they would go around and look or shop, our prices are comparable.”
  – “They are putting in one store after another and getting the same government funding that we couldn't qualify for.”

• Customers’ willingness to drive several miles to large discount stores:
  – “They think they can drive 70 miles, go to a superstore and buy $100 groceries, and think they're saving money. It ain't true, but they'll do it and it’s a mindset you just cannot knock out of 'em.”
Customer’s willingness to drive

- "Um, when gas prices are high it helps, people stay in town and they shop local, when gas is down they’ll drive .... And the same people that don’t have the loyalty that drive out of town also complain when they do come in here that they don’t have everything that they need, and you try to explain to them that if you get more volume you could afford that."
Store Owner Interviews

Preliminary Results - Meat

• Meat - revenue and reputation: “The word of mouth has really...increased our meat sales, they will run to Scottsbluff to Wal-Mart and buy everything except meat and they will come home and buy meat.”
Businesses are moving out of rural communities: “I think it’s going to get worse. We have three more businesses moving off Main Street [the same street as this store is located].”

"Used to be full-carts when I worked here in high school and now it’s pretty much just fill-in."

Communities are aging: “Older people are dying. And if there's one parent left, the kids are moving in...It used to be that kids would come home and let the parents basically stay and pass away in their home town. “
Taxes and government spending contribute to disparities among small towns and big cities: “Omaha and Lincoln still get the majority of all taxes collected.”

Uncertainty for store future: “[The store] was closed for 7 months I think it was. I had sold my own store and retired...but people here started calling me and asking me if I would try to save their store.”
Store Owner Interviews
Preliminary Results - Community

• **Community relationships:** When asked about what contributes to the success of her store, an employee said it was because her store was “community minded.”

• **Store serves as community hub:** Store focus on offering ready-to-eat items and general household products (store is responsible for catering to all needs of the community)


Distribution Challenges: “[The distributors] hate coming up this way which is exactly why five years ago they came in and said, "Well we will still deliver here, but we're charging 5% more for everything you buy."...They just said point-blank, "We want to shift our operations. We want the bulk of our operations because that's a bigger population area...And with [distributor] now, they will not take new stores. The minute I dropped my membership to join, there was no going back. I will never be able to become a member again unless I get up to the $50,000 a week plateau. So. Basically it was "We're cuttin' ties" and that bridge is burned."
Distribution Challenges: "My bread distribution is out of Alliance and they used to come three times a week and now they only come twice. So I have some definite supply issues there... I’m not saying their service is bad, I mean they still do the best they can but, just not having them here every week, it always, we always seem to be short on something."
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5. Development of Toolkit
Content Expert Interview

Methods

• Participants

– 18 experts from across the country
  • Researchers and health promotion professionals that focus on: food access, nutrition, obesity prevention, policy, healthy food retail

*Interviews asked experts to describe:*  
• Their work, which retail venues, rural vs. urban  
• The role that corner stores play in the communities they serve  
• Measurement tools used  
• Best practices and challenges
Where are these Content Experts?
Content Expert Interview
Preliminary Results Specific to Rural

• In many communities the corner store is more heavily utilized (vs. urban)
  – 4X more likely to have food access vs urban
  – Stores willing and able to serve greater variety (consumer demand)
  – Challenge with large box store competitors
  – One expert found that 20% of rural family’s SNAP dollars are spent at small stores

In rural areas, they are critical because that's really the only game in town. It is difficult to blindly go in and document what's there because they will keep things in a back room or under the counter for special customers and those tend to be healthy things.
Content Expert Interview

Preliminary Results Specific to Rural

• Small stores hard to identify in commercial databases because of tax code
  – Gas stations (many are corporately owned)
  – Individually owned small stores have lower access to foods in bulk, yet have more opportunity to be creative
  – Many corner stores consider themselves to be small grocery store → need more research to see how consumers view the stores
  – Establish criteria for categories? ≥ 5 registers, 10 employees = grocery store
Content Expert Interview

Preliminary Results Specific to Rural

• Small stores in rural areas may be a place where people can connect (social capital)
  – Rural corners stores serve more like a general store, a place where people can meet
  – Prepared foods could be emphasized more in these stores
    • E.g., crock pot of pulled pork sandwich for lunch

• Different shopping patterns for rural consumers
  – Buying in bulk from larger stores
  – Transportation challenges (group shopping)
  – More shelf stable products, lower capacity for fresh items
  – Difficult for smaller stores with limited storage capacity
Content Expert Interview

Preliminary Results Specific to Rural

- Distribution
- Consistency in measurement for comparisons
- Building consumer demand for healthier
- Establishing rapport with stores and communities
- Understand shopping patterns – shift to local

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Thank You

- Amy Yaroch, PhD
- Marcella Miller
- Hollyanne Fricke
Questions and Discussion?

Courtney Pinard, PhD
Research Scientist
Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition
8401 West Dodge Road
Omaha, NE 68114
Phone: 402-559-5500
Fax: 402-559-7302

cpinard@centerfornutrition.org
www.centerfornutrition.org