



Ethnic Food Access and Barriers

LaVonna B. Lewis and David C. Sloane

USC Sol Price School of Public Policy



USC Price

Sol Price School of Public Policy
Sol Price Center for Social Innovation

Social Innovation Policy Brief
© 2016 University of Southern California
Sol Price Center for Social Innovation

For Further Information:

Sol Price Center for Social Innovation
635 Downey Way, Suite 207
University of Southern California
Los Angeles, California 90089-3331
socialinnovation.usc.edu

Ethnic Food Access and Barriers

LaVonna B. Lewis and David C. Sloane

USC Sol Price School of Public Policy

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Low-income enclaves with large immigrant populations can enjoy a higher level of food security than other poor communities in the United States, thanks largely to the fresh fruits and vegetables available at ethnic and farmers markets. But food systems in these areas remain fragile, and local institutions have a role to play in seeing that they are not compromised.

Those are the conclusions drawn from a multi-year study of food security in City Heights, a multi-ethnic community in San Diego where researchers from the University of Southern California's Sol Price School of Public Policy conducted focus groups to learn residents' perceptions of the availability of healthy foods in their community.

Participants in the seven focus groups, which were conducted in 2014–2015, included recent immigrants (less than a decade) and long-term residents, and represented a variety of groups — black, white, Latino, Vietnamese, Somali, and Burmese.

Contrary to the expectations of a panel of experts from local food-service organizations, focus-group members generally agreed they could easily shop for healthy foods in City Heights. However, language and low incomes are potential barriers to healthy eating that cannot be ignored.





WHERE THEY SHOP

Focus-group participants were asked whether they shopped at supermarkets, ethnic markets, hybrid ethnic markets (which offer more than one ethnic food), convenience stores, liquor stores, or farmers' markets. Supermarkets were the most popular choice, followed by ethnic markets, farmers' markets, and hybrid ethnic markets. The results suggest the important role ethnic and farmers' markets play in supplementing supermarkets for low-income residents.

Researchers then did an audit of the cost and availability of food at the various types of markets in City Heights. The audit revealed that ethnic markets provide easy access to a wide range of vegetables and fruits and that, although their cost can be higher than at supermarkets, prices weren't enough higher to deter shoppers.

“The results suggest the important role ethnic and farmers’ markets play in supplementing supermarkets for low-income residents.”

Almost 80 percent of participants said they sometimes walk to a market to get groceries. None said they avoided walking to a store because of safety concerns, although they were conscious of a market's location and the time of day as those factors relate to safety. In addition, safety was more often linked to traffic than to concerns about crime.

WHERE THEY EAT

The research showed a general awareness that eating at home is usually healthier than dining out. Three-quarters of participants ate at least 12 of their 21 weekly meals at home, and they reported experimenting with healthier ingredients and cooking methods to make the food they prepare healthier. Few said they buy prepared foods.

Results showed no over-reliance on fast food when eating out, but the restaurants most commonly named were fast-food and/or franchised restaurants. There was broad agreement that few restaurants in City Heights serve healthy food.

The biggest area of concern across all ethnic groups was parents' perceptions of the quality of food served at schools, where the menus are dominated by pizza, burgers, and other items considered unhealthy. Some participants reported that their children do not eat school meals because they do not taste good.

CONCERNS

Overall, focus-group participants had a positive view of the City Heights food system and felt they have good access to food markets that provide high-quality fresh vegetables and fruits within reasonably short walking or driving distances. This relatively easy access to fresh food allows them to cook at home and avoid an over-reliance on prepared foods or restaurant meals.

Still, concern about the lack of quality school food and worries about pricing were prevalent. Although community members exhibited broad support for ethnic and farmers' markets, many in City Heights travel outside of the neighborhood to Sam's Club or Costco to supplement their needs. The loss of a single food market — especially one of the ethnic markets — would severely compromise the food system in City Heights.

Other gaps in food systems in immigrant enclaves are:

- **LANGUAGE.** Most food labels and nutrition information are in English. Without being able to read ingredient and nutrition labeling, non-English-speaking immigrants are susceptible to the aggressive marketing of nutritionally poor foods. In a *Nutrition and Dietetics* study immigrants from non-English-speaking countries are shown to be at greater risk of developing chronic disease.
- **INCOME.** Research published in the *Journal of Hunger and Environmental Nutrition* showed that low-income or unemployed immigrants in the U.S. often began buying and consuming more soda, milk, and meat, which, because of cheaper prices than in their homeland, seem like a better value than fresh fruits and vegetables.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **FOOD IN SCHOOLS.** Concerns about the food served in schools is widespread enough that it could present an opportunity for engagement and greater investment with public school districts receptive to working with outside organizations to improve school meals.
- **ETHNIC FOOD ACCESS.** City Heights should integrate ethnic food options into its local

“The biggest area of concern across all ethnic groups was the quality of food served at schools, where the menus are dominated by pizza, burgers, and other items considered unhealthy.”

Ethnic Food Access and Barriers

markets, with special focus on Vietnamese, Somali, and Mexican food. Without access to the ethnic foods in their homelands, new immigrants risk transitioning to nutrient-poor American diets. The cost of treating diseases caused by poor nutrition is higher than the cost of providing local access to ethnic foods.

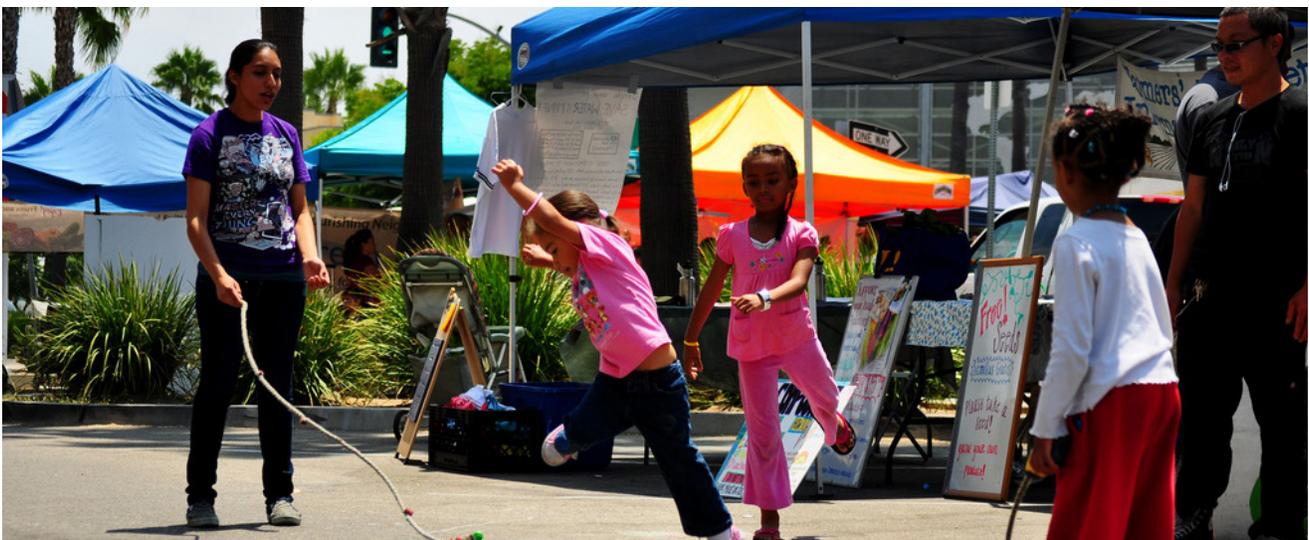
- **NUTRITION EDUCATION.** City Heights and similar communities should create nutrition education groups in which immigrants learn from dietitians who speak their native language. Such groups have been shown to create a sense of community and educate

the immigrant group on nutritious diets and consumption of healthy food.

- **FOOD VOUCHERS.** Nutrition education programs supplemented with food vouchers can remove income barriers to healthy eating. In a two-year study at Harborview Medical Center, education and vouchers showed significant success in helping immigrants move from unhealthy to healthy diets.

Conclusion

Access to ethnic foods at supermarkets and both ethnic and farmers' markets is vital to immigrants being able to sustain the healthy diets they were accustomed to in their homelands. In City Heights and other jurisdictions that are able to ensure this access, immigrants will be empowered to continue their religious and cultural traditions and avoid falling into unhealthy diet habits that lead to costly chronic diseases.



REFERENCES

1. Elizabeth House, John Coveney, Mariastella Pulvirenti, George Tsourtos, Paul Aylward, Julie Henderson, and Paul Ward, (2014). Perceptions of Food Risk and Trust in Non-English Speaking Greek and Vietnamese Immigrants in South Australia, *Nutrition & Dietetics*.
2. Dharod, Jigna M., Huaibo Xin, Sharon D. Morrison, Andrew Young, and Maura Nsonwu. “Lifestyle and Food-Related Challenges Refugee Groups Face Upon Resettlement: Do We Have to Move Beyond Job and Language Training Programs?” Taylor & Francis. *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*, 19 June 2013
3. Maryam Khojastech and Samina Raja, (2016). Agents of Change: How Immigrant-Run Food Retailers Improve Food Environments, *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*.
4. LaVonna B. Lewis and David C. Sloane, (2015). EFFECT: Ethnic Food Focus Engagement and Community Ties in City Heights, final report.
5. LaVonna B. Lewis, Lark Galloway-Gilliam, Gwendolyn Flynn, Jonathan Nomachi, LC Keener, and David C. Sloane, (2011). Transforming the Urban Food Desert from the Grassroots Up: A Model for Community Change, *Journal of Family and Community Health*.



Photo Credits:

Front cover – dishes: Myo Myo Aye, Aja Project San Diego
All other photos: José R. Díaz, Price Philanthropies



USC Price

Sol Price School of Public Policy
Sol Price Center for Social Innovation

