

FILLING IN THE FOOD SECURITY GAPS: EXAMINING THE FARMERS' MARKET SYSTEM IN NORWALK, CONNECTICUT

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BACKGROUND

THE FARMERS' MARKET SYSTEM IN NORWALK, CONNECTICUT

In Norwalk, Connecticut, several small farmers' markets are held each summer.¹ However, the Norwalk Health Department and various community partners suspect that Norwalk's current farmers' market system is not helpful to Norwalkers due to fragmentation, limited promotion, and some markets being more successful than others.² Therefore, the system may not be reaching its full potential.¹ The Norwalk Health Department is hoping to gather data surrounding this issue and would like to fill in these food security gaps, especially for those with normally limited access to healthy foods, as soon as possible.¹

POLICY ISSUES INVOLVED

- The Norwalk Health Department does not manage the Norwalk farmers' market system.
- It is unclear who the Norwalk farmers are, where the markets are at, and who runs the markets.
- There are other, possibly more feasible ways, of decreasing food insecurity in Norwalk than reconstructing the farmers' market system.

CHRONIC DISEASE IN NORWALK, CONNECTICUT: A PUBLIC HEALTH PRIORITY

The reported prevalence of adult obesity in Norwalk (22%) was lower than that of the state (26%), but significantly higher than the surrounding towns (11%).² However, 38% of Norwalk respondents identified as overweight, as did 36% in the towns surrounding Norwalk, and 36% at the state level.² The 2016 CHNA found chronic disease/obesity to be the primary health priority for the Greater Norwalk Region.² Therefore, recreational facilities, parks, walkable communities, and nutritious food sources were all identified as important "for leading healthier lives and promoting prevention" in this region.² Farmers' markets fall under providing nutritious food sources to the community and could be a potential solution in mitigating Norwalk's chronic disease/obesity dilemma.

OBJECTIVES

- Collect relevant data to develop a list of barriers and facilitators to the success of farmers' markets
- Identify strengths and weaknesses of the Norwalk farmers' market system
- Assess availability and ease of access to local, state, and federal food assistance from the perspective of both consumers and farmers
- Provide the Norwalk Health Department with novel data to allow them to better develop interventions aimed at addressing food insecurity within the community

METHODS

We used qualitative methodology to interview relevant stakeholders (n=22) which include Norwalk community members (n=12), Connecticut farmers (n=5), and region market managers (n=5). Distinct semi-structured interview guides were developed for each set of stakeholders. Community members were asked questions relevant to 1) past farmers' market attendance, 2) knowledge of Norwalk farmers' markets, 3) food shopping habits, and 4) preferences related to willingness to attend farmers' markets. Farmers were asked questions relevant to 1) facilitators and barriers to farmers' market participation, and 2) logistics of vending at farmers' markets. Market managers were asked questions relevant to 1) facilitators and barriers to the success of farmers' markets, 2) potential solutions to logistical problems in created and sustaining a farmers' market, and 3) best practices for increasing farmers' market attendance.

KEY FINDINGS

- There is competition occurring between farmers' markets and supermarkets for selling organic produce.
- Farmers' markets should have a variety of vendors selling a variety of produce.
- Bringing in clientele to the markets requires advertising and entertainment.
- Serving low-income populations at the farmers' market setting through food assistance programs seems straightforward for market managers and farmers but could be improved for consumers.



LIMITATIONS

The main limitation of this study was the scope and number of stakeholders interviewed. Difficulties with recruitment led to a smaller sample size than originally desired. Reasons for this include a desire to interview a representative sample of the Norwalk population but a lack of resources to do so. This led to most community member interviews being done at a single location and therefore, the sample is not representative of the Norwalk population. Recruitment of farmers was also more difficult than anticipated, as well as identification and recruitment of market managers.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions: Facilitators of successful farmers' markets include a variety of vendors and a variety of produce, weekend market hours or at least hours later on in the day, collaboration of markets to determine who will have a market when, significant advertising through various platforms, entertainment at the markets, reasonable prices that will allow farmers to make a profit but that are not too costly for consumers, and making food assistance programs straightforward for all stakeholders involved. Barriers would be the opposite of these facilitators.

Recommendations: With these results, the Norwalk Health Department should understand that restructuring the Norwalk farmers' market system will take time and resources. First, a body that oversees and facilitates the coordination of these markets in order to advertise the markets appropriately, form a relationship between the markets and the Department of Agriculture, bring more farmers to the markets, and make SNAP/WIC facilitation easier for community members should be instated. Something to consider is how much to rely on the farmers' market system versus the supermarkets and other grocery stores to fill in this food security gap.

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REFERENCES

1. Norwalk Health Department. **Community Health Project Proposal Document**. 2017.
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