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African Americans' Views on Access to Healthy Foods: What a Farmers' Market Provides

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African Americans' Views on Access to Healthy Foods: What a Farmers' Market Provides

Abstract

The study reported here assessed African Americans' perceptions of a local farmers' market and access to healthy produce in their community. The majority of respondents were satisfied with several dimensions of the farmers' market, including location, cleanliness, variety, price, and quality of produce. Comparing the farmers' market to the local stores in terms of access to fresh produce, about twice the number of residents was satisfied with the farmers' market than with the local stores. This study has implications for Extension in terms of promoting farmers' markets in low-income minority communities.

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Introduction

Access to Fresh Produce in Working Class and Low-Income Neighborhoods

Individuals living in low-income communities face many barriers in accessing fresh produce, such as lack of adequate transportation and high fresh food prices. Furthermore, low-income Latino and African-American neighborhoods have a fewer number of supermarkets that are easily accessible to them compared with higher income neighborhoods (Morland, Wing, Diez Roux, & Poole, 2002). According to the above-cited scholars, fruit and vegetable intake increases for each additional supermarket available in one's neighborhood. Individuals in low-income communities find it easier to purchase low-cost, readily available, highly appetizing foods full of fats and sugars over the more high-cost, nutrient dense foods, which often results in unhealthy diets (Lu, Samuels, & Haung, 2002).

What Farmers' Markets Provide

The number of farmers' markets in this country has steadily increased over the last 10 years (1994-2004) (United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2002, 2004) as farmers' markets are becoming increasingly popular in urban neighborhoods. This popularity is not restricted to middle and upper class communities, but it also occurs in working class neighborhoods, as consumers opt for fresh fruits and vegetables at reasonable prices. According to previous Extension studies, individuals buy produce from farmers' markets because of the high-quality fresh produce (Abel, Thomson, & Maretzki, 1999; Govindasamy, Italia, & Adelaja, 2002; Brown, 2002). By promoting farmers' markets, Extension has played a critical role in their expansion.

Little research has been conducted to examine the impact of farmers' markets on urban, low-income, minority communities. The study reported here aimed to remedy this through an examination of perspectives on access to healthy foods from African American consumers of an urban farmers' market. This article also provides recommendations for Extension professionals based on the study's findings.

Project Background

With support from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, the Chicago Food System Collaborative (CFSC), a consortium of community-based organizations, universities, and technical assistance providers who serve low-income communities, was formed with the purpose of facilitating the creation of food choices for residents in an African-American working class community. One of the projects of the CFSC was to examine the impact of the farmers' market in this community.

At the time that this study was being conducted, Block (2004) introduced the results of a study conducted in this community, reporting that there were more liquor stores than supermarkets available in this area. Block also indicated that the available food in the community was sold, for the most part, at high prices by small stores with a limited selection of poor-quality food with low nutritional content.

Participants and Setting

The community in which the study was conducted had a population of 117, 527 people, and 90% of these residents were African American. The average family size was 3.77, the median household income was \$34,000, and 27,852 individuals lived below the poverty level (City of Chicago, 2000; U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). The farmers' market was located in the parking lot of a grammar school in this working class African American community. Five farmers participated throughout the summer.

Methods

Procedure and Instruments

To examine the impact of the farmers' market, researchers used a survey research strategy. The survey measured the benefits, costs, and satisfaction that farmers and consumers experienced through participation in the farmers' market. To examine how prevalent the problem of access to fresh foods was, we also examined the impact of the farmers' market in a nearby comparable community. This project began in the third year of the farmers' market.

The selection of shopper respondents was done by convenience, and as many shoppers as possible were approached. This was facilitated by the fact that, at any given time, there were about a dozen shoppers at the market. The survey was about four pages long, had 25 questions, and took about 10 minutes to complete. As shoppers were ready to leave the market (indicated by a customer holding shopping bags in hand and walking in the direction of either of the two exits), the interviewer approached the shopper, introduced herself, explained the purpose of the survey, and asked for his or her participation in the survey.

To ensure that people did not respond more than twice, the interviewer asked the resident if he or she had already, on a different day, completed the survey. If the resident said "yes," the researchers stated that his or her participation was appreciated and then moved to the next person exiting the market. Additionally, an individual was asked to complete the survey if he or she had never completed the survey before and was willing to participate. It is plausible, then, to assume that a few individuals may have chosen to complete the survey more than once.

The farmers' survey was three pages long, included 19 questions, and took about 6 minutes to complete. Survey questions measured the satisfaction, benefits, revenue, and costs of participating in the farmers' market on a particular day.

Once the surveys were completed, descriptive analysis was conducted. Results from the study were made available to the community through the project's newsletter, *Good Food*.

The comparison farmers' market was in a nearby African American neighborhood. Shopper surveys were administered, using the same procedure and the same survey as was used at the target farmers' market. A comparison site was chosen to examine the extent of the problem of access to healthy foods.

Results

Shoppers

Participant Characteristics

In the target community, sixty-four respondents completed the consumer interview during the summer farmers' market season. Seventy-seven percent of the respondents were women, and 22% were men. The majority of respondents (58%) were 61 years old or older, 33% were between 41 and 60, and 10% were between 21 and 40 years old. Fifty percent of the respondents came from households with three or more people, 30% were from two-person households, and 20% were from one-person households. Most respondents resided in the target community (61%), 14% were from nearby adjacent areas and 25% were from other areas. Over three-fourths of the respondents used a car, and almost one-fourth walked or used public transportation. Half of the respondents visited the farmers' market once a week, one fifth were first-time visitors, and less than one third visited the market from one to three times a month.

Spending Patterns at the Farmers' Market

Respondents were asked about how much money they spent at the farmers' market on the day that they were interviewed. Seventy-three percent spent less than \$20, and 25% spent more than \$20. Thirteen respondents used senior discount coupons, 10 used farmers' market coupons, and three used a LINK card (food stamp card). Thirty-nine percent of the respondents stated that having access to the LINK card was important or very important to them; for 46% of the respondents, LINK was not applicable.

Best Attributes of the Farmers' Market

Respondents were asked to identify the things they liked best at the market and the type of produce they wanted to buy and to make suggestions for improving the farmers' market. According to the majority of shoppers, the top three things that they liked best about the farmers' market were the fresh produce, the reasonable prices, and the cleanliness of the market. Most shoppers attending the farmers' market were looking for vegetables (e.g., greens, okra) and fruits (e.g., apples, peaches, and plums). Respondents reported that, in order to improve the farmers' market, they would like to see more vendors and a greater variety of produce and other food products. Almost 100% of the respondents would recommend the farmers' market to a friend, and 95% would return to the market again.

Farmers' Market in Comparison to the Local Stores

Respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with certain aspects of the farmers' market as well as access to food in the community in general, through use of a five-point Likert scale from "Very Satisfied" to "Very Dissatisfied." According to Table 1, the majority of respondents were satisfied with several dimensions of the farmers' market, including location, cleanliness, variety, price, and quality of produce. Overall, 92% of respondents were satisfied with the farmers' market, while only 41% were satisfied with access to fresh produce at the local stores in the community. Similar data were reported for price, location, quality, and variety (Table 1).

Table 1.
Satisfaction with Access to Fresh Fruits and Vegetables

	Farmers' Market (n = 64)	Local Stores (n = 64)
Price	69%	34%
Location	89%	44%
Quality	88%	41%
Variety	69%	38%
Cleanliness	89%	n/a
Availability of organic produce	61%	30%

Overall satisfaction with access	92%	41%
Note: Percent ratings indicate satisfied or very satisfied		

Target Community Compared to Another Nearby Community

To examine the extent of the problem surrounding access to fresh produce in working class African American neighborhoods, data were gathered from a comparison community that had similar incomes, age distributions, education, and marital status patterns as the target community. Sixty-four shoppers in the comparison neighborhood completed the survey. The target community was designated as target site, in part, because the CFSC project staff was working with the farmers and the market organizers to increase the market's visibility in the community and was working with the residents to develop a community-owned grocery store. These efforts were not happening in the comparison community.

The majority of shoppers at the comparison farmers' market were satisfied with the market, especially its price, location, and quality. Overall, shoppers in the comparison community were dissatisfied with the local stores' prices, location, quality, and variety and availability of organic produce. Respondents were twice as satisfied with the farmers' market as they were with the local stores. These results are comparable to those from the target community, indicating, possibly, a widespread problem of access to fresh produce in urban working class African American neighborhoods.

Farmers

To assess the farmers' perspectives on the market, five farmers at the target community were interviewed. Farmers participating in the farmers' market were from a predominantly African American farming community located 2 hours away from the city. Farmers were asked to identify top-selling produce and the aspects of the market that they liked best and to make suggestions for improvement. According to the farmers, the top-selling produce included peas, okra, greens, beans, apples, and plums. The top three things they liked best about the farmers' market were the friendly people, the location, and the small size of the market. Farmers reported that, in order to improve the farmers' market, they would like to see an increase in shopper attendance, a tent covering to provide shade, and more marketing and publicity.

Conclusion

The study provided important data on African Americans' perceptions and satisfaction with a farmers' market and access to fresh foods in their overall community. The following conclusions are drawn.

- The majority of community residents felt that they were underserved by local stores, since the stores lack fresh, healthy, and organic produce at affordable prices.
- Residents were more satisfied, overall, with the access to fresh fruits and vegetables provided by the summer farmers' market than they were with the access, quality, variety, and prices of products available to them year round through local stores. The same results were replicated at a nearby community.
- The majority of consumers at the farmers' market consisted of females between the ages of 40 and 75.
- Consumers at the market spent about \$10 to \$20 each week.

Farmers' markets are a venue for residents in working class communities to access fresh and healthy produce; however, this is not a year-round option. Thus, year-round options for the provision of fresh foods need to be explored. These might include community co-ops, farmers' supplying of year-round products to local mom and pop stores, an extension of the duration of the farmers' market, or business incentives for large chain stores to relocate in working class neighborhoods.

The role of Extension is essential in supporting these initiatives. For instance, in middle and upper class neighborhoods, farmers' markets are likely to begin in mid May and end in early November. In urban working class neighborhoods, markets are likely to begin in mid July and end in early October, which was the case in the communities described in this paper. In addition, working class neighborhoods are more likely to attract low-income farmers who might lack the government support necessary to maintain a more sophisticated farming enterprise. Furthermore, because farmers' markets in middle and upper income neighborhoods have become a popular trend, 20 to 50 farmers may be present at these markets. The number coming to low-income areas is few. Extension experts may play a role in expanding farmers' markets in working class neighborhoods,

given that this may be one of the few ways in which residents will be able to access fresh produce.

Future initiatives to increase access to fresh produce should not only include market coupons and transportation to the market, but they should also include a support system for the farmers. Conrey, Frongillo, Dollahite, & Griffin (2003) found that viability of the farmers' market increased when a program hired a part-time coordinator to be in charge of the farmers' market promotion activity, community capacity building, support and technical assistance to farmers, and educational materials dissemination.

Extension Recommendations

Extension can play a key role in expanding farmers' markets in low-income minority communities in which the access to fresh produce is limited. The following recommendations might be useful to Extension professionals working with farmers' markets.

1. Tailor the Market to the Needs of the Community Regarding the Products Offered

It was observed that shoppers would wait in line before the farmers' market opened so that they could buy popular produce items. These items included greens, Swiss chard, and black-eyed peas. People are more apt to buy items that they need and want, and this encourages them to continue patronizing the farmers' market.

2. Support Minority Farmers Who Want to Enter Minority Markets

Participants in this study were happy to see African American farmers at the farmers' market. Farmers came from a low-income farming community and were eager to enter the city markets. For further entry into these markets, farmers might benefit from agricultural technical assistance and consultation with Extension professionals.

3. Increase Number of Vendors and Shoppers

The low number of farmers and/or shoppers creates a vicious cycle, as farmers do not want to attend if there are only a few shoppers, and shoppers do not want to come back to the market if there are only a few vendors. Therefore, cash incentives based upon attendance, waivers of insurance fees and table fees, or subsidized rates can encourage greater participation at working class, low-income farmers' markets.

Extension professionals can play a role in publicizing the market, encouraging farmers to participate in low-income communities, as well as encouraging shopper attendance by disseminating information about farmers' markets in working class communities. In the study reported here, some of the farmers were fortunate enough to leave the market with no produce left, especially those farmers who sold greens. However, after 11 a.m., shopper attendance dwindled. To encourage shopper turnout, the farmers' market had special market days and events. On one of the special market days, a press conference was held, and the lieutenant governor of the state came to the market to promote the farmers and to buy local foods.

4. Encourage Coupon Use

Coupons from the senior farmers' market program and WIC program are important for residents on a fixed income, especially for seniors and families with young children. One critical concern for farmers is the length of time necessary for coupon reimbursement. For farmers on a fixed income, this in itself might be a deterrent not to participate in a farmers' market. This issue needs to be addressed in order to attract farmers from a broad income spectrum and draw in shoppers from working class and low-income communities.

In addition, Extension professionals may need to examine more closely how to actively promote farmers' markets in minority communities, which may be accomplished through means such as increasing advertising (Anderson et al, 2001; Balsam, Webber, & Oehlke, 1994). Offering coupons is a possible promotion, but it also has disadvantages, such as the delays in reimbursement, that must be considered.

5. Obtain Support from the City, State, Outside Funders, and the Community

Obtaining community support for the market is critical for its sustainability. In this case, the local school allowed the farmers' market in the school parking lot. In addition, some community organizations, churches, and schools were active in handing out information about the farmers' market. However, to ensure success wide support from the city and local business might be necessary. Farmers in this community often complained about the low attendance at the market, and residents also mentioned the lack of support coming from the city. Extension experts may play a role in expanding the importance of farmers' market at the city, state, and local levels.

Acknowledgment

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