

Salud America!

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Research
Network to Prevent Obesity Among Latino Children

ISSUE BRIEF

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Better Food in the Neighborhood & Latino Kids

Introduction

Many Latino families do not have access to healthy affordable foods. In Latino neighborhoods, convenience stores (or small grocers like *bodegas*) and fast-food restaurants are widespread, but supermarkets and farmers' markets, which can offer affordable fresh fruits and vegetables, whole-grain products, low-fat milk, and other healthy options, are scarce. Unhealthy diets can contribute to obesity.

However, a variety of policy initiatives may improve the food environment and economy in underserved communities. Healthy food financing initiatives (HFFIs) include tax credits, zoning incentives, funding, technical assistance, or equipment to spur supermarkets and farmers' markets to locate in underserved areas. In addition, several government financing initiatives encourage corner stores to expand their offerings of healthy affordable foods. Other financing initiatives include food subsidies to expand demand and purchasing power for healthy foods by low-income consumers.

The Evidence

Latino communities often have less access to healthy affordable foods.

- Latino neighborhoods have one-third as many supermarkets as non-Latino ones.
- *Bodegas* offer limited or expensive selections of low-fat dairy or meat products.
- One study found that Latino students were more likely to attend schools in close proximity to fast-food restaurants and convenience, snack, or liquor stores.
- Another study found that an average of five mobile food vendors, such as *paleteros* (ice cream pushcart vendors) were within a quarter-mile walk of schools.

Access to supermarkets in Latino communities is linked to lower obesity rates.

- Greater accessibility to supermarkets is consistently linked to a lower body mass index (BMI) and decreased rates of overweight/obesity.
- One study observed that, as the number of chain supermarkets increased in Latino neighborhoods, body weight outcomes improved among adolescents.

Food retail and financing initiatives improve access to and sales of healthy foods in Latino communities and increase communities' economic vitality.

- A New York City initiative recruited *bodegas* to increase their offerings of low-fat milk and produce, yielding increases in sales of low-fat milk and fruits/vegetables.
- Other initiatives helped corner store owners collaborate and buy supplies from the same local wholesalers and farmers to improve their buying power, thereby increasing fresh produce sales.



ABOUT THIS ISSUE BRIEF

This issue brief is based on a research review prepared by Margie Patlak, M.S., MargiePatlak.com, and Amelie G. Ramirez, Dr.P.H., and Kipling J. Gallion, M.A., University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio. The full research review, which includes citations, is available at www.salud-america.org.

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- Initiatives to increase the number of farmers' markets in Latino communities have reported increased local sales of healthy produce, benefiting farmers and residents.

Incentives for retailers and consumers can increase consumption of and availability of healthy food by participants in federal food assistance programs.

- Latinos comprise 41 percent of Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and 15 percent of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participants.
- After governmental revisions of WIC food packages to offer healthier foods, studies reported improved availability, variety, and sales of healthy foods sold, and increased consumption of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat milk by children. In one area, the supply of healthy foods increased by 39 percent.
- Programs and farmers' markets allowing SNAP recipients to use part of their benefits to buy fresh produce with Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards increases purchase of these foods.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Conclusions

- Initiatives that introduce supermarkets or farmers' markets in Latino and underserved communities or foster the expansion of healthy food offerings in corner stores can improve access to and purchase of healthier foods.
- Financial subsidies that reduce the costs of healthy foods for underserved consumers stimulate greater purchases of these foods and may help expand the number of retailers located in lower-income communities.

Policy Implications

- Zoning, land-use planning, and community development efforts should synergistically encourage more supermarkets, farmers' markets or other sources of affordable healthy foods to operate in lower-income and Latino communities.
- Legal, technical and financial support should be given to increase the number of supermarkets or farmers' markets in underserved communities or expand healthy food offerings in corner stores. These incentives can be grants or loans, tax credits, refrigeration for fresh fruits and vegetables, free publicity and marketing advice, or linkages to wholesale distributors.
- The national HFFI program should continue funding initiatives at the state and local levels.
- Financial and logistical support, including reimbursement for wireless or electronic technologies, should be given to farmers' markets vendors to enable them to accept EBT purchases and increase the share of farmers' markets that serve Latinos.
- Financial incentives should be given to WIC or SNAP participants to encourage greater purchases of healthy foods.
- Demonstration projects should incorporate evaluation programs to assess the extent to which and under what circumstances greater access to affordable healthy foods in underserved communities translates into healthier diets for its residents.