



FOOD FOR ALL:

INCLUSIVE NEIGHBORHOOD FOOD PLANNING IN NORTH AUSTIN

Prepared by: the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs; Policy Research Project Co-Directed by Erin C. Lentz, Ph.D. and Raj Patel, Ph.D. for the City of Austin, Office of Sustainability as part of the American Planning Association's Plan4Health Grant Funding.

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- Laura Dierenfield, City of Austin
- Lyle Durbin, Central Texas Sustainability Indicators Project
- Sandra Evans, The University of Texas at Austin
- Zsuzsi Fodor, Vancouver Food Policy Council
- Gabriel D. Grantham, The University of Texas at Austin
- Meredith Gray, City of Austin
- Sherri Greenberg, The University of Texas at Austin
- Monica Guzman, Restore Rundberg
- Lisa Hinely, North Lamar/Georgian Acres Neighborhood Team
- Mary Jo Hernandez, Restore Rundberg
- Braden Latham-Jones, The Office of Council Member Greg Casar
- Ashley LeMaistre, City of Austin
- Tiffany Lieu, City of Austin
- Eva Marroquin, Independent Community Organizer
- Esther Martin, Asian American Resource Center
- Edwin Marty, City of Austin
- Sharon Mays, North Austin YMCA Community Garden
- Ivonne Natal, City of Austin
- Daniela Núñez, Georgian Acres Neighborhood Association
- Matthew P. Rabbitt, USDA Economic Research Service
- Asilee Parkinson-Barhi, The University of Texas at Austin
- Aida Prazak, Restore Rundberg
- Moira Porter, Central Texas Sustainability Indicators Project
- Jill Ramirez, Latino Healthcare Forum
- Amanda Rohlich, City of Austin
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policy research project participants

University of Texas, Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs

Graduate Student Consultants:

Daniela M. De Urioste, B.A. (History, Political Science), Texas A&M University-Kingsville

Nicole Fillion, B.A. (History), Providence College

Kelly Grajeda, B.A. (Art History), Trinity University

Syedah Aroob Iqbal, MGPS (Global Policy Studies), The University of Texas at Austin; B.Sc. (Economics), Lahore University of Management Sciences

Corrina Jacobs, B.A. (Psychology, Art History), Tufts University

Katherine Martin, B.A. (International Relations and Global Studies), The University of Texas at Austin

Siyi Mi, B.Eng. (Renewable Energy), Xi'an Jiaotong University

Faye Miller, B.A. (Anthropology, Middle Eastern Studies), University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Alexandra Noble, MGPS (Global Policy Studies), The University of Texas at Austin; B.A. (History, Asian Studies), St. Mary's College of Maryland

Sidney Davis Pan, MPAff (Public Affairs), The University of Texas at Austin; B.A. (Theater and Dance), The University of Texas at Austin

Abby Pfeiffer, B.A. (Economics), Bard College

Selva Swetha, MGPS (Global Policy Studies), The University of Texas at Austin; B.Sc. (Accounting and Finance), University of Warwick

Lauren Toppenberg, B.S. (Psychology, Spanish), Tulane University

Chris Tracy, B.A. (Philosophy), Trinity University

Patricia Zavala, B.A. (Global Studies), University of California, Santa Barbara

Project Co-Directors:

Erin C. Lentz, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs

Raj Patel, Ph.D., Senior Research Associate, Unit for the Humanities at Rhodes University (UHURU); Research Professor, Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs

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foreword

In April 2015, the City of Austin, Office of Sustainability published the first *State of the Food System* report, which illustrated key data about Growing, Selling, Eating, and Recovering food locally. The report provided a snapshot of Austin's food system with interesting and, in some instances, alarming statistics about the challenges related to food and health. While Austin's 30-year comprehensive plan, *Imagine Austin*, provides a general vision for a sustainable food system, the report pointed to the need for specific priorities, strategies, and actions that would expedite efforts towards these visionary goals.

Making Austin's food system more sustainable offers many benefits to the community – job creation, a strong local economy, improved public health, and fewer impacts to transportation systems and mobility. And when food system planning is conducted at the neighborhood scale rather than using a city-wide or regional focus, individuals are empowered to participate in solutions, additional capacity that is appropriate for the community can be identified, and the assets that already exist in the community can be leveraged to their full advantage.

With this neighborhood-based approach in mind, the City of Austin applied for and was awarded a grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention through the American Planning Association's Plan4Heath program to address physical activity and access to healthy food in the North Central Austin area. Working in parallel, the Austin Transportation Department and the Office of Sustainability developed an active transportation encouragement program and conducted Neighborhood Food System Planning with community members and key stakeholder groups. This pilot effort set out to inform how the City of Austin might expand the Neighborhood Food System Planning process city-wide.

The Neighborhood Food System Planning process has proven to be a valuable learning experience. Staff from the Office of Sustainability have built strong working relationships within the community and a deeper understanding of neighborhood-based efforts to improve health. Some of these include Austin Independent School District's Kellogg Grant to facilitate better communication with parents; Latino Health Care Forum's Community Health Improvement Plan; and the training and work of Community Health Workers who are uniquely positioned to provide culturally and linguistically appropriate health services navigation to their peers.

foreword *(continued)*

The issues highlighted across all of these efforts circle around similar themes--lack of options and limited access to nutritious foods, education, transportation, public safety, and healthcare—and a strong need for organizations to align efforts in a manner that goes beyond a transactional delivery of services and toward transformational change. Over the course of this work, a variety of planning efforts that shape community growth were encountered including Neighborhood Plans, Small Area Planning, the Community Health Improvement Plan, the Sidewalk Master Plan, the Capital Metro Service Plan 2020, Quarter Cent Fund Planning, and others. In most cases, access to healthy food was not a specific criteria for informing these discussions; however, recognizing that access to healthy food is essential to the well-being of the community, it is critical to integrate food access as a component in each of these important planning processes.

Access to nutritious, affordable, culturally appropriate foods for all should be within reach for a community as prosperous and innovative as Austin. It will require a systems approach that considers factors such as the ready availability of affordable housing, health care and employment opportunities that provide living wages, balanced with neighborhood-based solutions that community members can embrace. Addressing these challenges will allow every Austin family to enjoy the foods that nourish them. Achieving a sustainable food system benefits everyone!



Edwin Marty
Food Policy Manager
Office of Sustainability, City of Austin



Amanda Rohlich
Environmental Program Coordinator
Office of Sustainability, City of Austin



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executive summary

No family should have to struggle to put food on the table, yet with a rate of 17%, more Texan households fight food insecurity than the national average of 15.8%. The City of Austin fares worse, and this report uncovers rates higher than had previously been feared. Our research finds that 25% of households were food insecure in the City of Austin at the end of 2015, at a time of record growth for the City.

Nationally available data points to some of Austin's food access challenges. The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) shows a patchwork of city neighborhoods as 'food deserts' – low income census tracts over a mile from a supermarket. The view from above is important, but it can't be the only basis for understanding, and ending, hunger in Austin. After all, food is bought and sold even in food deserts.

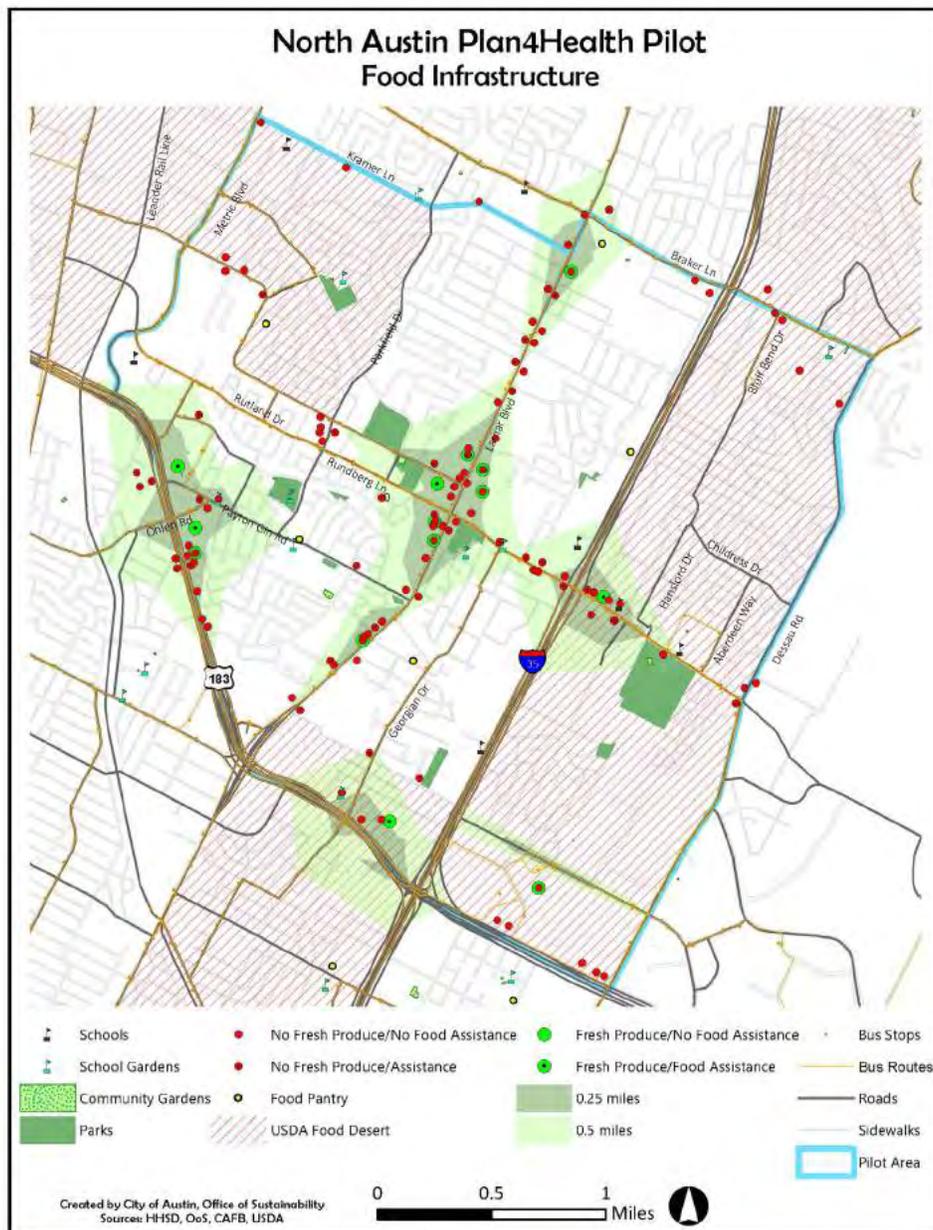


Figure: USDA Food deserts in North Central Austin, and the food retailers in and around those deserts. The designation of "food desert" can be misleading. Many respondents outside an official "food desert" experience challenges accessing food, for reasons such as safety concerns or a lack of adequate transportation.

executive summary *(continued)*

In this report, our fifteen graduate students at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin together with the City of Austin's Office of Sustainability and a range of other stakeholders, looked at the food system in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area. They found that even households residing outside food desert areas suffered from infrastructural constraints. It's hard to access good food if you have no transport, no bus network, and no sidewalks to get to the store. It's even harder when safety is a concern.

These insights and others emerged from a series of interviews and focus groups with retailers, residents and experts. We asked about the strengths and assets in the neighborhood – not just the challenges. By listening to their concerns, we were able to learn a great deal that matters to planners and elected officials – as this word cloud suggests.



Figure: Word cloud from focus group respondents indicates that numerous assets and concerns intersect with food, including schools, health, and transportation.

executive summary *(continued)*

Everyone is keen to eat healthily, even if there's quite a lot of confusion about what that means. Small retailers are receptive to stocking more fruits and vegetables, but are wary about high costs and low profit margins. **Residents were concerned that they were being treated like second class citizens – with unsafe food from other parts of town ending up in the poor part of town.** Schools emerged as a central point of contact between residents and the City – presenting a great opportunity for change. And overwhelmingly, residents struggle to eat healthily because the city has become so unaffordable.

None of these challenges can be solved with a simple solution. That one in four Austinites fight food insecurity points to the need for a more supportive food system, one that can nourish people in their homes, at work and at play. The infrastructure of that system is logistical, but also social, economic, and political. It encompasses the full range of city departments, civil society, nonprofits, for-profits, and residents. To address the challenges facing Austin's most vulnerable populations is to address poverty, inequality of income and opportunity, and weak infrastructure, health services and social services. It will mean breaching the silos that can characterize municipal planning. But it will also require direction from a force that is often absent from urban food system plans: the voices of residents.

After analyzing our findings of the challenges faced by, and assets available to, members of the North Central Austin/Rundberg area, we developed a set of policy interventions that could improve the local food system. We conducted a validation survey in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area to understand whether our findings and recommendations reflected the broader community's assessment. Residents reported challenges in four key areas:

- *Access to appropriate information:* Many residents wanted more, and more culturally appropriate, information about what constitutes healthy, affordable food, where to find it, and how to prepare it.
- *Availability:* It is often hard to find good quality, healthy foods in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area. Many residents felt that the food sold in their part of town compared unfavorably with that sold elsewhere. Small retailers indicated limited refrigeration and energy costs as barriers to stocking fresh fruits and vegetables.
- *Accessibility:* Large parts of our survey area fall outside the USDA's definition of a 'food desert.' Yet residents are unable to access these food sources due to a lack of public transportation, lack of safe sidewalks, or concerns about crime.
- *Affordability:* Repeatedly, we found that residents are keen to consume healthy food, but are unable to afford it given competing financial pressures, such as rent, and the inadequacy of safety net supports.

From these findings, our policy recommendations to the City fall under the overarching categories of: (1) increasing the dissemination of culturally appropriate information about healthy food, (2) increasing the availability of healthy, quality food through existing resources, (3) increasing accessibility by developing sidewalks, transportation, and support for the elderly, and (4) increasing affordability for residents through expanding Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Woman Infant and Children (WIC) benefits and other programs. Some specific policy recommendations include:

executive summary *(continued)*

- Provide information about food, and specifically about SNAP/WIC benefits and enrollment, in a wider variety of languages;
- Develop physical and electronic hubs to disseminate information about healthy foods;
- Monitor healthy corner store initiatives to identify whether, and under which contexts, supporting retailers in overcoming barriers to stocking fresh fruits and vegetables is an effective way to expand availability for consumers;
- Ensure higher food quality and safety through more frequent inspections;
- Assist small retailers in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area to enroll to accept SNAP/WIC; Implement a Double Dollar SNAP/WIC program at food retailers;
- Require a food impact analysis for all new transportation projects;
- Improve and maintain transportation infrastructure including busses, sidewalks, and lighting;
- Expand senior transportation programs;
- Increase public safety measures in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area;
- Advocate for an increase in SNAP/WIC benefits by raising the qualifying threshold;
- Advocate for community improvement projects such as parks and recreation facilities; and
- Advocate for a higher citywide income and affordable housing.

These recommendations will require the City to act across its many departments to meet community priorities. These priorities, identified through community-based planning methods, do not always conform neatly either to any particular departmental mandate or, indeed, to the exact priorities of donors or the private sector. Yet we believe the community-based planning methods are not optional but are, in fact, necessary for building strong connections between the City and the communities it serves.

We are grateful to our students, funders, the City, and most of all the residents of Austin for sharing their analysis and insight into the problems and possibilities of inclusive food system planning. We submit this report not as the final statement of findings or recommendations from the North Central Austin/Rundberg area, but one that we hope will be a step in a process that brings to residents of Austin, and of Central Texas, a food system that ensures justice and sustainability for all.

Erin Lentz and Raj Patel
Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, June 2016

“The challenge of [Austin’s] urban renaissance is no longer how to attract population growth, or how to attract capital investment, rather, our challenge is bridging the divide between those who benefit from our boom and those who are being left behind.”

- Greg Casar, District 4 Council Member¹



introduction

When he spoke of Austin’s urban renaissance, Council Member Casar was speaking to the challenges of equipping the local workforce with the skills necessary to enjoy the benefits of Austin’s high-skill job growth. The challenge of inequality is one that also characterizes Austin’s food system. Food access is entangled with a number of other major challenges in Austin including transportation, infrastructure, public health, housing, poverty, and more. Austin’s history of inequality continues, and is markedly present in North-Central Austin. With rates of food insecurity in Travis County ranging between 18% and 25% and obesity rates at 21.3%, respectively, and growing,² the City of Austin has been making concerted efforts to meet these challenges.

CM Casar's North-Central Austin district includes the area bounded by Braker Lane to the North, Metric Boulevard to the West, 183 to the South, and Dessau Road to the East, an area centered on Rundberg Lane. This area includes parts of the following Neighborhood Planning Areas: North Austin Civic Association, North Lamar, Windsor Hills, and Heritage Hills. The City and organizations in the area have undertaken several initiatives to improve the overall quality of life in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area.* Among these are: the Austin Police Department's Restore Rundberg, a neighborhood revitalization project to reduce crime and increase safety; the Latino Healthcare Forum's associated Health and Wellness Initiative; the Austin Independent School District's Outreach Project funding by the Kellogg Foundation; and the Neighborhood Enhancement Team (directed by the City of Austin's Code Compliance). The first project to address the ties between food and other crucial municipal issues in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area is the Plan4Health neighborhood planning grant, a collaboration between the American Planning Association, the City's Office of Sustainability, and the City's Departments of Transportation and Health. This grant encourages the development of active forms of transportation to assist in improving access to healthy food. Under this grant, Edwin Marty, Food Policy Manager in the City's Office of Sustainability, identified the need for a food system planning process that both recognizes the diversity of communities within Austin and that develops policies that directly address the needs of specific neighborhoods.

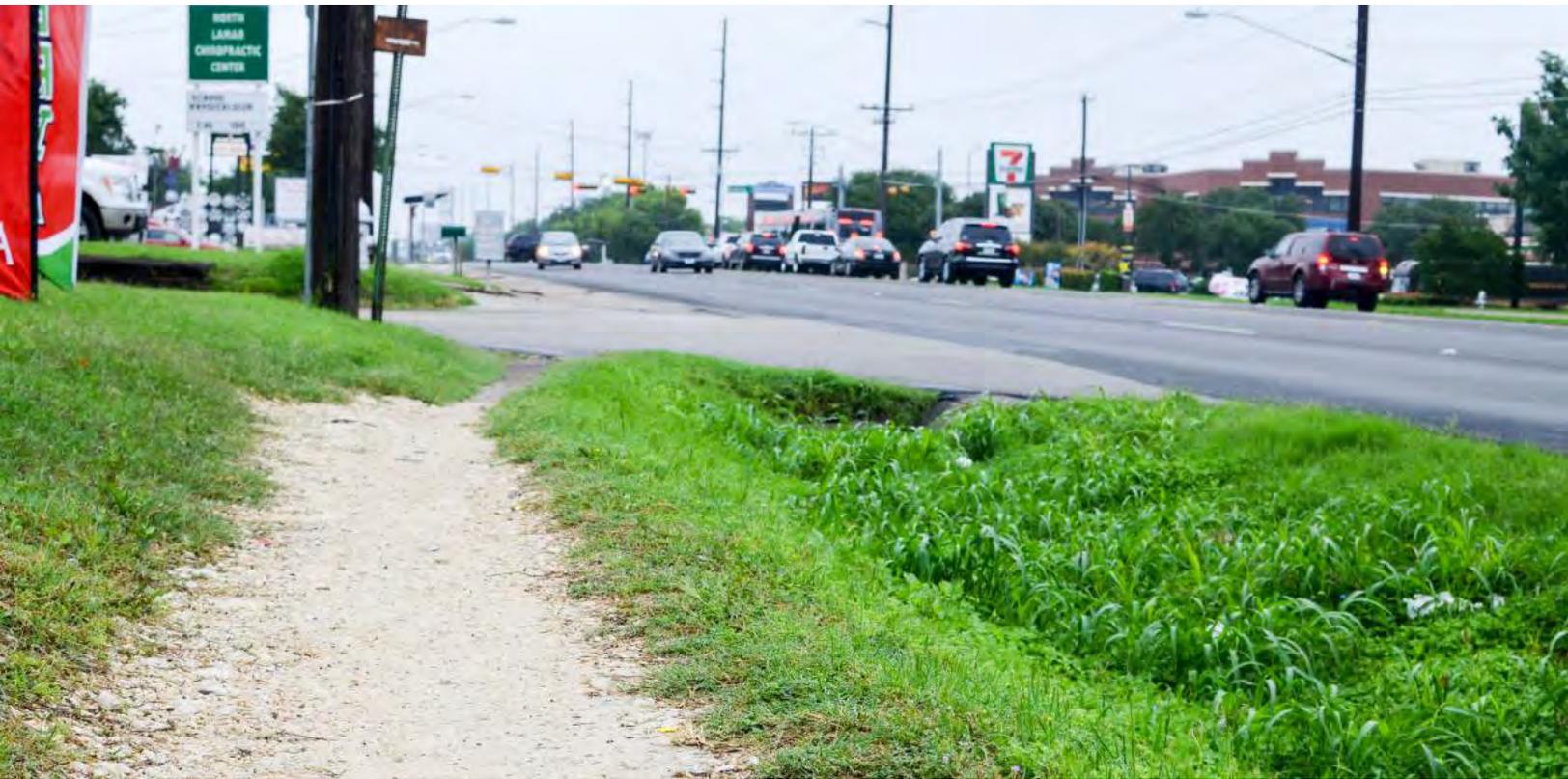
To support the Food Policy Manager with the portion of the Plan4Health grant devoted to healthy food access, and to subsequently address the layered challenges of inequity, Professors Erin Lentz and Raj Patel of the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs developed a graduate student-led policy research project (PRP) entitled, "Food for All: A PRP for Inclusive Food Policy in Austin." The research team considered three specific sectors of food systems. First, we examined aspects of food production including urban farming, community and school gardens, and fruit and vegetable production in rural and metropolitan areas; second, we studied the role of food retailers including supermarkets, grocery stores, corner stores, farmers markets, and other food vendors in the local food system; third and finally, we analyzed food access, including the physical and economic ability of consumers to obtain safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food in their homes, schools, and workplaces. Informed by outcomes from previous projects and our analysis of the North Central Austin/Rundberg community and its food system, we identified opportunities for associated policy interventions. Further information about food systems, best practices in food planning, and food system planning in Austin is available in Appendix A.

This document reports on nine months of our research, data collection, and analysis that address food-related challenges in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area and provides recommendations for positive, community-driven change. We hope our process and recommendations might help other areas in developing planning processes that help to address inequity and increase access to healthy food for all.

*We are using the term "North Central Austin/Rundberg area" to describe this area. Several area residents indicated that "Rundberg," as used in other projects, was created by officials and non-community members for grant purposes and is not used by residents.

chapter 1

Food For All in the North Central Austin/Rundberg Area



overview

Our research is focused on the North Central Austin/Rundberg area of Austin. This North Central Austin community is one of the city's most ethnically diverse areas and is home to important community centers for several different ethnic and immigrant groups such as the North Austin Muslim Center, Vietnamese American Community of Austin, Multicultural Refugee Coalition, and the Asian American Resource Center. It also houses a large population of refugees and is one of the lowest-income areas in Austin.³

Indicator	Austin	78758	78753	Target Area	Racial Composition				
					Austin	78758	78753	Target Area	
Median Income	55,216	44,476	39,228	34,369					
% Below Poverty Line	19	23	28	31.5	White	48.7%	21.2%	31.5%	18.6%
Population	864,218	45,134	53,994	56,507	Hispanic	34.8%	60.2%	49.0%	66.5%
Median Age	31.8	30.3	30.4	28.8	Black/African-American	7.5%	11.2%	9.9%	10.6%
					Asian	6.5%	6.0%	7.5%	2.9%
					Other	2.5%	2.4%	2.1%	1.5%

Table 1.1 Demographics of Austin and the North Central Austin/Rundberg area.⁴

An interdepartmental City of Austin team received a Plan4Health grant from the American Planning Association and selected a priority area that aligned with other community projects, including Restore Rundberg and the Latino Healthcare Forum’s Community Health Assessment, primarily located in the zip codes 78753 and 78758, bounded by Braker to the North, Metric to the West, 183 to the South and Dessau to the East. Together, these two zip codes house almost one-eighth of the city’s population. As seen in Table 1.1, the median income in the area is much lower than that of Austin as a whole, and a much larger proportion of residents fall below the poverty line. The area is also much more ethnically diverse than the city as a whole with the majority of the population being Hispanic. The large number of immigrants in the area comprises about one-third of the area’s population.⁵ Many of these residents are refugees and/or are not U.S. citizens.⁶

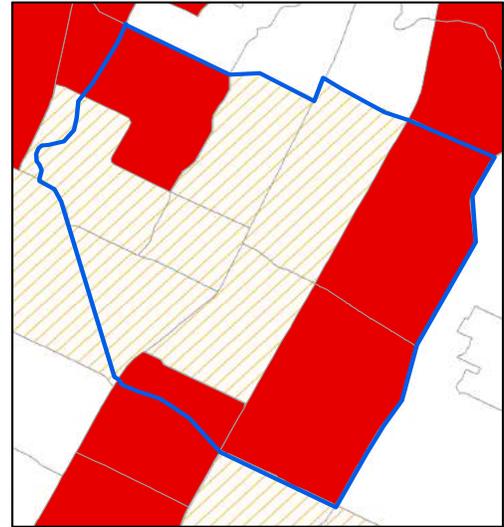
There is a link between food and long-term health and wellbeing,⁷ and we see this with the many food-related health issues Austin residents face. As of 2015, 36.5% of the Travis County population is overweight and 21.3% is obese.⁸ The Latino Healthcare Forum researched the health of the North Central Austin/Rundberg community in 2015. During the organization’s three month period of information gathering, the area’s public clinics made a total of 891 obesity diagnoses, 45% of which were in children.⁹

More broadly, in Central Texas, those with a lower income have a lower self-reported health status.¹⁰ A 2012 study found that 85% of individuals with income over \$85,000 reported feeling in *excellent* or *very good* health, compared to only 20% of lower-income individuals.¹¹

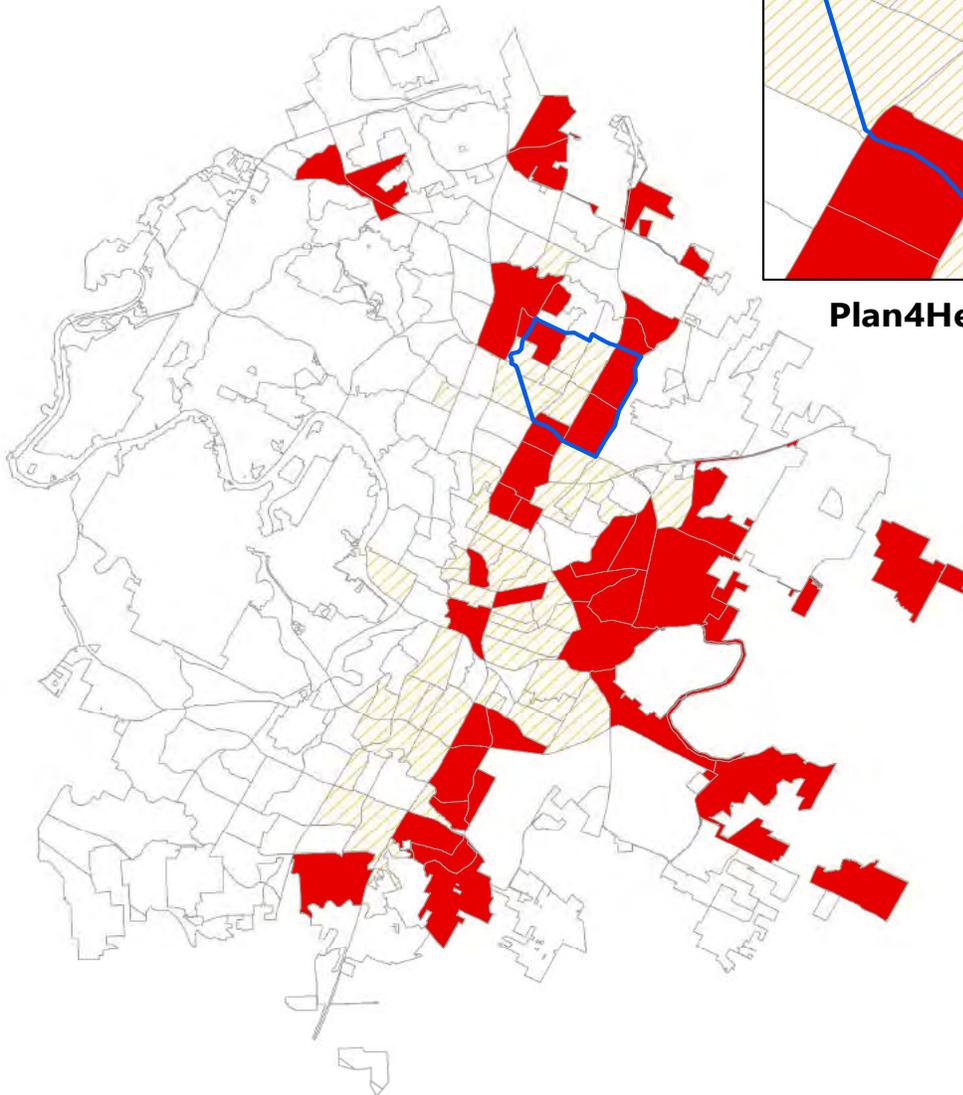
In the North Central Austin/Rundberg area, the Latino Healthcare Forum found that only 36% of people self-reported being in *good* health.¹² The Restore Rundberg project aimed to curb the high rates of reported crime in the area by developing innovative crime solutions and complementary social services.¹³ In 2012, the North Central Austin/Rundberg area was the site of 13% of the city’s violent crimes. Since the introduction of the program, this share has decreased by 1.27%, and reported levels of property crime have also dropped.¹⁴

USDA Food Deserts

The USDA standard measure of a food desert in an urban area is low income and low access at more than 1 mile from a grocery store. There are 217,684 people living in food deserts in the City of Austin and 427,224 people living more than 1/2 mile away from a grocery store.



Plan4Health Pilot Area



Map Created by Sarah Stein-Lobovits
Office of Sustainability

Data: USDA and 2010 Census



0 2 4 8 Miles

-  Low Income and Low Access at 1 mile
-  Low Income and Low Access at 1/2 Mile
-  Census Tracts
-  Plan4Health Pilot Area

Figure 1.1 Food Deserts in Austin

food insecurity, food deserts, and healthy food access

The USDA defines a food desert as “a low-income census tract where a substantial number or share of residents has low access to a supermarket or large grocery store.”¹⁵ In Figure 1.1 the red shaded areas represent food deserts by USDA standards, however, the orange-lined areas also designate low-income and low access communities, though at a less extreme measure.

Figure 1.2 goes beyond the USDA definition, – adding qualitative information as well as including food retail smaller than 5,000 sq. ft., and exhibits all food resources in the area, including those that sell fresh fruits and vegetables. The shaded areas indicate available sidewalks located up to half a mile from vendors of healthy, fresh foods. Sidewalks currently serve only a portion of the community, and many residents cannot access healthy food stores due to nonexistent sidewalks. These maps demonstrate the unavailability and lack of access to fresh foods within the North Central Austin/Rundberg area.

Food insecurity is the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or the limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods. In the United States, food insecurity affects African Americans and Hispanics at a much higher rate than whites or other races.¹⁶ Furthermore, unmarried individuals, women, and households with children are much more likely to be affected by food insecurity.¹⁷

US 2014	US 2013	Texas 2014	Capital Area Food Bank Service Area 2013	Austin 2015
14.0%	15.8%	17.6%	17.9%	25%

Table 1.2 Food insecurity in the U.S.¹⁸

Texas has the seventh highest food insecurity rate, and the second highest number of food insecure individuals in the United States.¹⁹ With a food insecurity rate of 17.6%, over one in six people (4.6 million people) are affected by food insecurity in the state as a whole.²⁰ This is notably higher than the national average of 15.8%. According to Feeding America, Travis County’s food insecurity rate was even higher at 17.9% in 2013.²¹ Our study was able to update these figures through the Central Texas Sustainability Indicators Project at the RGK Center at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs. Our new independently validated data suggests that at the end of 2015, the city-wide food insecurity rate was 25%.²²

North Austin Resources Map

Plan4Health Pilot Area

Food Infrastructure



	Pilot Area		Fresh Produce/No Food Assistance		No Fresh Produce/No Food Assistance		Food Pantry
	0.25 miles		Fresh Produce/Food Assistance		No Fresh Produce/Assistance		Roads
	0.5 miles						

Created by City of Austin, Office of Sustainability
Sources: HHSD, OoS, CAFB

0 0.5 1 Miles

Figure 1.2 Food Resources in the North Central Austin/Rundberg Area

Unfortunately, we do not have data on the demographics of food insecurity in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area specifically, though it is likely to be higher than the city average. The best demographic measure of food insecurity is the breakdown of people accessing the Capital Area Food Bank. The Capital Area Food Bank, which serves Travis County and 21 surrounding counties, provides food for an estimated 329,000 of the 477,000 food insecure people within that area.²³

Age		Education	
0 to 5	9.3%		
6 to 17	24.8%	Less than HS	29.5%
18 to 29	17.1%	HS Diploma	31.8%
30 to 49	23.5%	GED	13.5%
50 to 59	15.9%	License, Certificate	
60 to 64	3.5%	or Degree beyond HS	7.7%
64+	5.9%	Some College or	
Race/Ethnicity		2 year degree	13.9%
White	31.1%	4 year College degree+	3.5%
Black/African American	26.7%		
Hispanic/Latino	38.8%		
Other	5.4%		

Table 1.3 Capital Area Food Bank client statistics²⁴

The people who use the Capital Area Food Bank are primarily members of vulnerable populations. Over one-third of all Food Bank clients are children. Minorities are also overrepresented, comprising just under 70% of all clients. Nearly 75% of people using the Food Bank have no more than a high school degree or equivalent, and 85% make \$20,000 or less per year. People close to or below the federal poverty line are much more likely to use the Food Bank's services than those with income 150% or more above the poverty line, which constitute only 6.5% of the Food Bank's clientele.²⁵

What emerges from this pattern is that younger people, the less educated, the poor, and minorities are much more likely than other groups to suffer from food insecurity. We expect to see a higher proportion of food insecure individuals in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area since 75% of our target area shares these characteristics.

the north central austin/rundberg area's food system

The following sections identify key food resources in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area's food system. We break these down into food assets and food assistance programs. Each of these resources is analyzed in terms of the following: what resources are active within the North Central Austin/Rundberg area, what role each resource plays within the area's food system, how effective each resource has been in achieving its desired outcome, and how those outcomes have worked to foster inclusivity. In this way, these sections use existing research and past projects to evaluate whether these resources have hindered inclusivity in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area - a distinct principle of the Food for All approach.

While all food resources serve a specific purpose, their limitations keep the existing food system from resolving the more systemic challenges facing consumers around access to and knowledge about healthy foods.

food assets

Food assets include farmers markets, mobile markets, community gardens, and urban farms. These resources provide consumers with access to local, fresh, and healthy foods. Within the North Central Austin/Rundberg area, there are seven school gardens and two community gardens. There are no farmers markets or urban farms within the area.

Growing Food

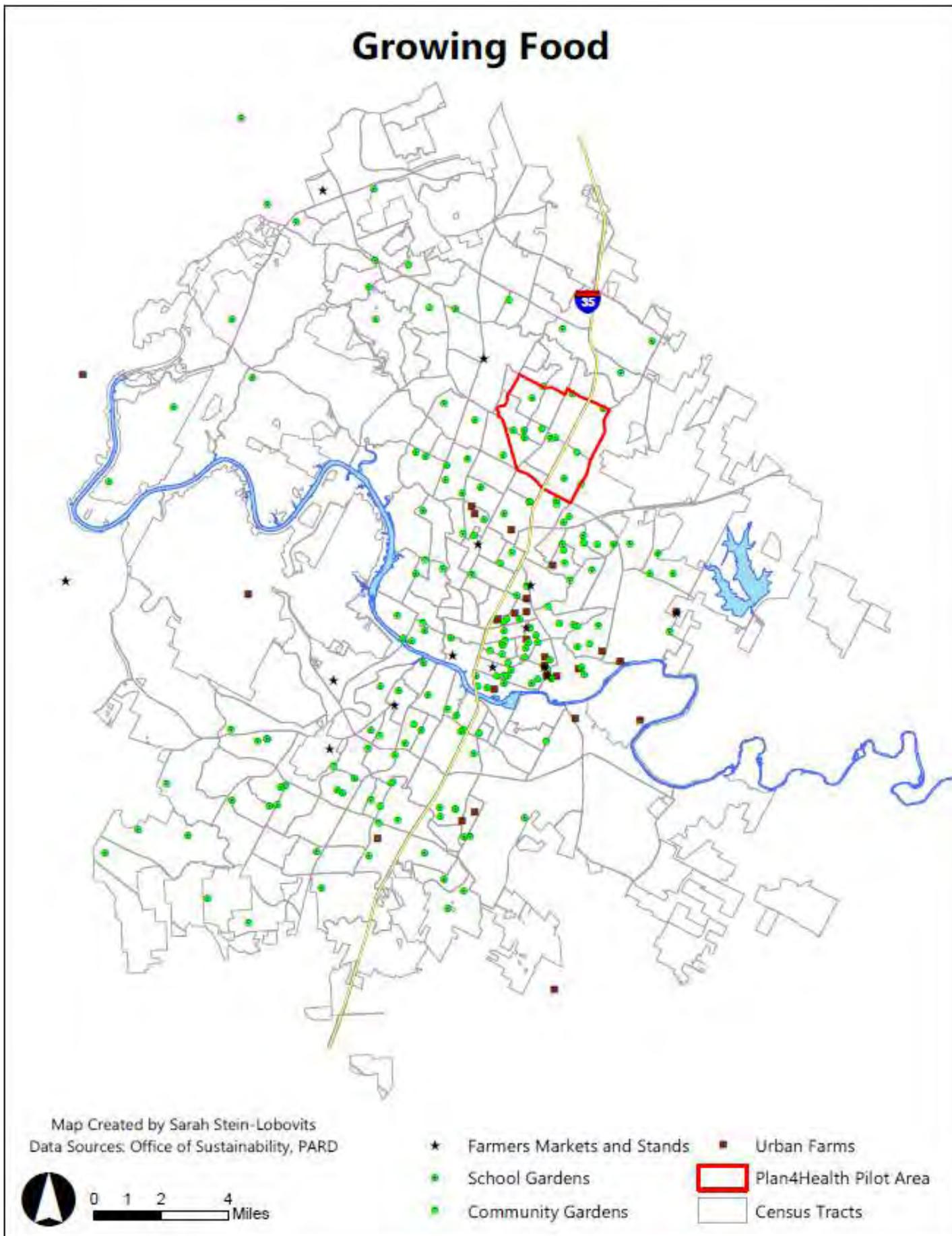


Figure 1.3 This map illustrates the distribution of various food assets within the City of Austin; the outlined area designates the Plan4Health pilot area in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area.

farmers markets and mobile markets

Farmers markets and mobile markets have each become increasingly popular retail venues. Across the United States, the number of farmers markets has increased 13% since 2008.²⁶ As seen in Figure 1.3, there are currently eight farmers markets and three farm stands in Austin. These retailers seek to achieve similar goals: they connect producers and consumers to encourage the sale of locally-produced foodstuffs and act as supplementary retailers.²⁷ Additionally, these markets facilitate an understanding of where food comes from and encourage the production and consumption of locally-sourced foods. These markets also positively influence healthy eating among their consumers.¹¹⁶ Some of Austin's farmers markets also manage programs that double the purchasing power of customers using food stamps.²⁹

Austin's farmers markets and food stands face challenges that have historically limited consumer use including limited operating hours, higher priced goods, lack of information about market operations, limited or no accommodation of food assistance benefits, and poor transportation options for residents. Moreover, the perceived difficulties of using food assistance benefits, when applicable, may also concern consumers who prefer to avoid the confusion, embarrassment, or anxiety associated with using food stamps at these locations.³⁰

The needs of farmers and low-income consumers differ entirely, further confounding these problems. For example, farmers markets in Austin primarily serve the

needs of farmers looking for additional retail opportunities, causing markets to be located in higher-income areas and to charge premium prices. Moreover, diverse and low-income communities like the North Central Austin/Rundberg area face unique challenges in establishing farmers markets relating to language barriers, culturally appropriate foods, and inclusive environments. Without the linguistic and cultural capacities necessary to accommodate diverse communities, farmers markets will have limited success appealing to those populations in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area.³¹

community gardens, school gardens, and urban farms

Resources for growing food provide the opportunity for community members to enhance gardening skills, serve as alternative sources for consumers with limited access to fresh food, positively influence eating patterns, and foster friendly environments for community members to socialize.³² The North Central Austin/Rundberg area houses nine community gardens. Seven of the gardens are located at schools, and two are at community centers, namely the Asian American Resource Center and the Gus Garcia Recreation Center. While many community members do take advantage of these resources, there are notable limitations to the ability of community gardens to actually provide healthy food, particularly for vulnerable populations. For example, the time-intensive nature of gardening means that months

of labor are put in before food is available and small plot sizes are unable to provide sufficient amounts of food to cover a family's nutritional needs.³³

Austin is home to 23 urban farms. However, none of these are located in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area, in part due to a lack of open land suitable for commercial farming. Despite the high number of urban farms, less than one percent of food consumed in Travis County is produced locally.³⁴ While these farms do contribute produce, meat, and eggs to farmers markets and many area restaurants, the premium cost of their products and inconvenient retail locations mean that these resources are not present in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area. This is an issue of concern to the Multicultural Refugee Center, which finds that community gardens help refugee populations grow plants from their home countries and build community in Austin.

food assistance resources

While there are a variety of food assets in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area, they are not always financially accessible. This is where food assistance programs step in to help individuals facing acute or systematic food insecurity. Food assistance programs include the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Women, Infants, Children (WIC) program, school food programs, food pantries, United Way emergency food assistance, and other non-governmental organizations like the Sustainable Food Center (SFC).



snap/wic

SNAP and WIC are federally-run food assistance programs, and their limitations nationwide are no different in Austin. These limitations include difficulties enrolling in these programs due to language and other barriers, a perceived stigma about utilizing food stamps, a strict income cutoff that prevents many food insecure people from receiving benefits, and the fact that benefits are often insufficient to support a healthy diet. National problems in accessing SNAP/WIC benefits can be exacerbated by language and cultural barriers in some communities. Over half of the people who use the Capital Area Food Bank are not enrolled in SNAP, but 80% of this group is eligible.³⁵ In Austin, only 57% of eligible participants are enrolled, leaving over \$169 million in benefits unclaimed.³⁶ According to one report, SNAP only covers approximately 50% of the average cost of a meal in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area.³⁷ SNAP benefits are frequently disproportionate to the quantity and quality of food needed program's recipients. The Capital Area Food Bank reports that SNAP benefits meant to support recipients for a full month only last one week for 28% of recipients, two weeks for 21% of recipients, and three weeks for 38% recipients. Only 12% of recipients report that their benefits are able to meet their needs for a full month.³⁸ Moreover, 70% of SNAP recipients report that their assistance is insufficient to maintain a healthy diet.³⁹

school food programs

Along with helping with SNAP and WIC enrollment, schools provide food for students regardless of ability to pay. In addition to a number of programs within charter and private schools, the Austin Independent School District (AISD) has a range of programs that support families and students with accessing food.

These include: Family Resource Centers (FRCs), Breakfast in the Classroom (BIC), the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). FRCs provide campus-based support for families in AISD in a number of capacities including but not limited to signing up for government benefits programs.

SNAP benefits are frequently inadequate for the quantity and quality of food needed by the program's recipients.

BIC is a program that feeds students in their classrooms to promote participation in the free breakfast program and to reduce the stigma of receiving a free meal. NSLP is a federal program that offers assistance with meal program operations in schools across the country. CACFP is a federal program that provides reimbursement to schools that provide healthy meals and snacks to children. All of these programs operate in AISD.

AISD also promotes healthy eating habits and nutrition education through the Coordinated Approach To Child Health (CATCH) program. The CATCH program is a Coordinated School Health Program designed to promote physical activity and healthy food choices for elementary school students. CATCH provides schools with curriculum, family engagement tools, and nutrition guides. These programs help to address equity issues; AISD gives all students the same access to nutritious and healthy food, regardless of income.

non-governmental food assistance programs

There are also non-governmental organizations running food assistance programs that are important parts of the North Central Austin/Rundberg area's food system. One such organization is the Sustainable Food Center of Central Texas (SFC), which seeks to strengthen the local food system through a variety of initiatives as it ultimately works towards improving access to nutritious and affordable food. These initiatives include organic gardening support, programs for low-income consumers at farmers markets, cooking classes, and nutrition education. In conjunction with the City of Austin, the SFC manages the Double Dollars program, which matches up to twenty dollars for SNAP and WIC recipients at all SFC farmers markets. Additionally, SFC's The Happy Kitchen/La Cocina Alegre offers community-based, free cooking and nutrition education classes that equip and enhance individuals' skills related to preparing healthy, economical meals. Another organization with a strong presence in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area is the United Way. As seen in Figure 1.4, in 2015, the United Way received a disproportionately high number of calls for emergency food assistance in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area.

Food banks, food pantries, and the United Way emergency food assistance program are temporary solutions to acute cases of food insecurity. Yet, we found that for those using these programs in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area, food insecurity is a severe and prolonged problem. For example,

60.8% of Capital Area Food Bank's clients use their services on a regular basis .⁴⁰

The frequent use of emergency food assistance highlights the existence of systemic flaws within the current food system.

These systemic flaws have created a nationwide gap filled by philanthropic donations dispersed by non-governmental emergency food assistance providers, including the United Way.⁴¹

Emergency food providers rely on donated goods to serve their clientele and are not meant to provide long-term solutions. They, therefore, cannot support residents suffering from food insecurity in long-term, stable, effective, and culturally appropriate ways.⁴² Furthermore, the government's long-term reliance on philanthropic actors to fill gaps between government assistance programs and individuals' needs further delays addressing underlying causes of hunger, like high rates of poverty and limited economic opportunities.⁴³

The types of food people eat are directly connected to their long-term well-being and health, which has significant implications for the types of food available at emergency food assistance locations.⁴⁴ Due to the nature of emergency food assistance, food assistance locations require dry and nonperishable donations and are unable to accept donations that include healthy, perishable food options, such as fruits and vegetables.⁴⁵ For people who face a systematic inability to afford food, such as seniors and the disabled, a reliance on temporary assistance programs may lead to health issues in the long-term.

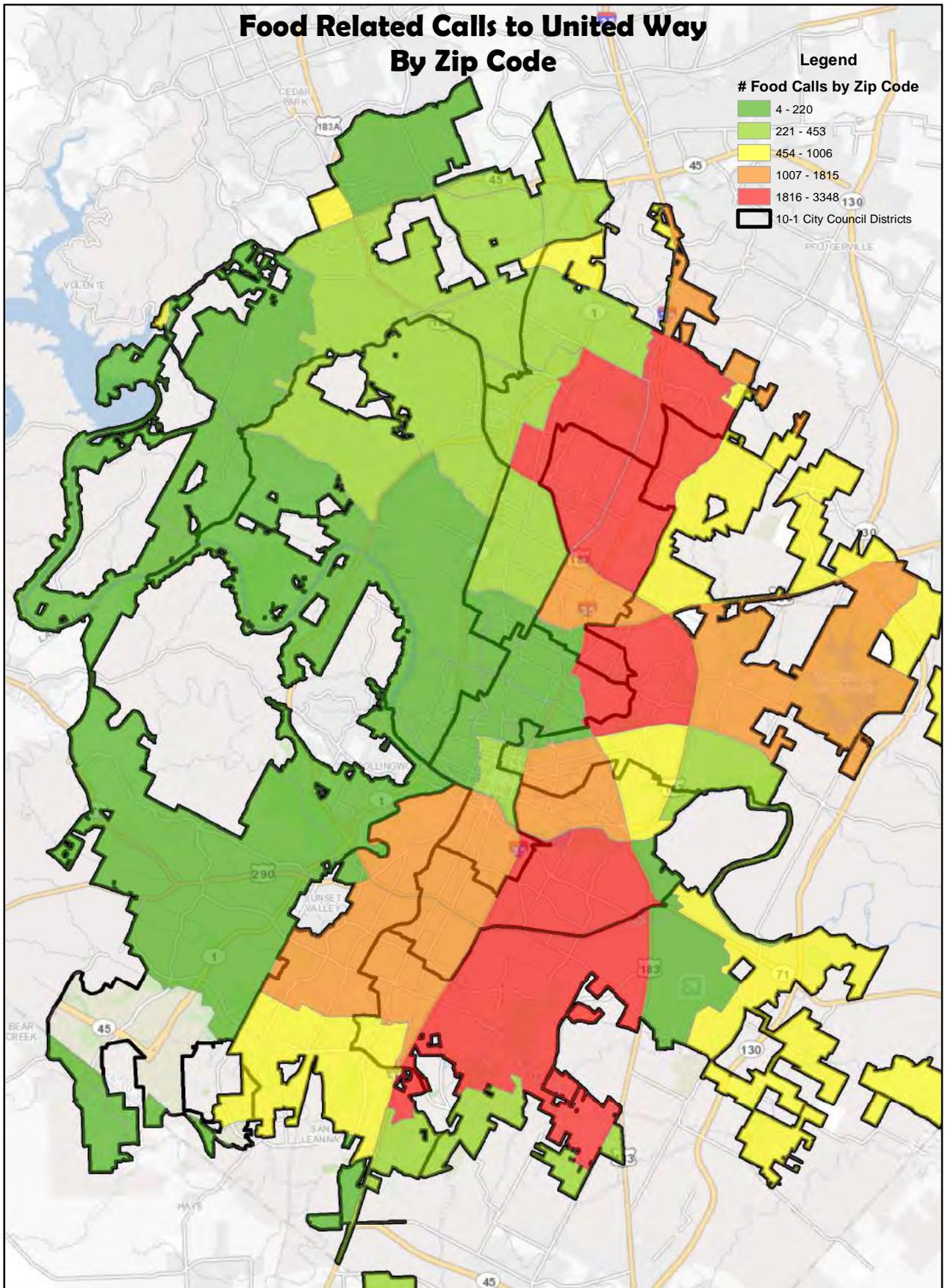


Figure 1.4 United Way Food Assistance Calls

food for all approach

Our research project piloted the development of inclusive neighborhood food system planning, inclusive in the sense both of reaching a wide range of people, and in capturing a range of factors that affect their experience eating healthy food. Planning at the neighborhood level allows the community to take a proactive and collaborative role in the planning process. More information on best practices is available in Appendix A. Drawing on established best practices, we followed an asset-based project approach. This approach is focused on engaging directly with residents, retailers, and community leaders to develop a positively-framed set of policy interventions that address barriers to accessing healthy food. Framing our discussions around 'what is great about your community' rather than 'what is wrong with it' helped us to identify key assets in the community – churches, families, and community groups – and to better understand the challenges faced by the area's residents. Our research process was organized as follows:

- **Conduct a comprehensive analysis** - The research team collected and compiled preliminary data and information on various resources and constraints in regards to the food system in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area. The basic assessment outlined the general conditions of the area's population, needs, and food system and established a baseline from which to construct a solid and inclusive community food system. We described information from this assessment above.
- **Survey area food retailers** - In order to understand the assets and needs of food retail outlets, the research team created a survey and gathered qualitative and quantitative data from food retailers in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area. These results will help the City recognize the barriers for retailers to provide healthy food. We discuss our findings in Chapter 2.
- **Lead focus groups** - The research team conducted and facilitated focus group participants and tabling events to hear the voices and perspectives of community members, including those of different races, ages, backgrounds, and educational levels. Analyzing the voices of the focus groups will allow us to understand the impact of food insecurity, affordability, quality, accessibility, and cultural acceptability on the community. We discuss our findings in Chapter 3.
- **Interview community leaders** - The research team conducted one-on-one interviews with key community members to deepen our understanding and gain practical perspectives of food access to healthy food in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area. We used this information to recognize food assets and obstacles, to learn about responsibilities of the City and of the community, and to ensure our approach satisfies the needs of the community. We discuss our findings in Chapter 3.

■ **Present policy recommendations and solicit community feedback** - The research team analyzed data obtained through the retailer surveys, focus group sessions, and one-on-one interviews to develop policy recommendations. We also shared our findings and policy recommendations with community members to solicit feedback on and validation of our findings and recommendations. Finally, we developed a companion process evaluation document describing our research process in detail, explaining our challenges, and providing suggestions for other research teams who intend to engage in similar neighborhood-level food system planning. We discuss our recommendations and validation exercise in Chapter 4. The process evaluation document is available separately. More information about the community response back process is available in Appendix B.

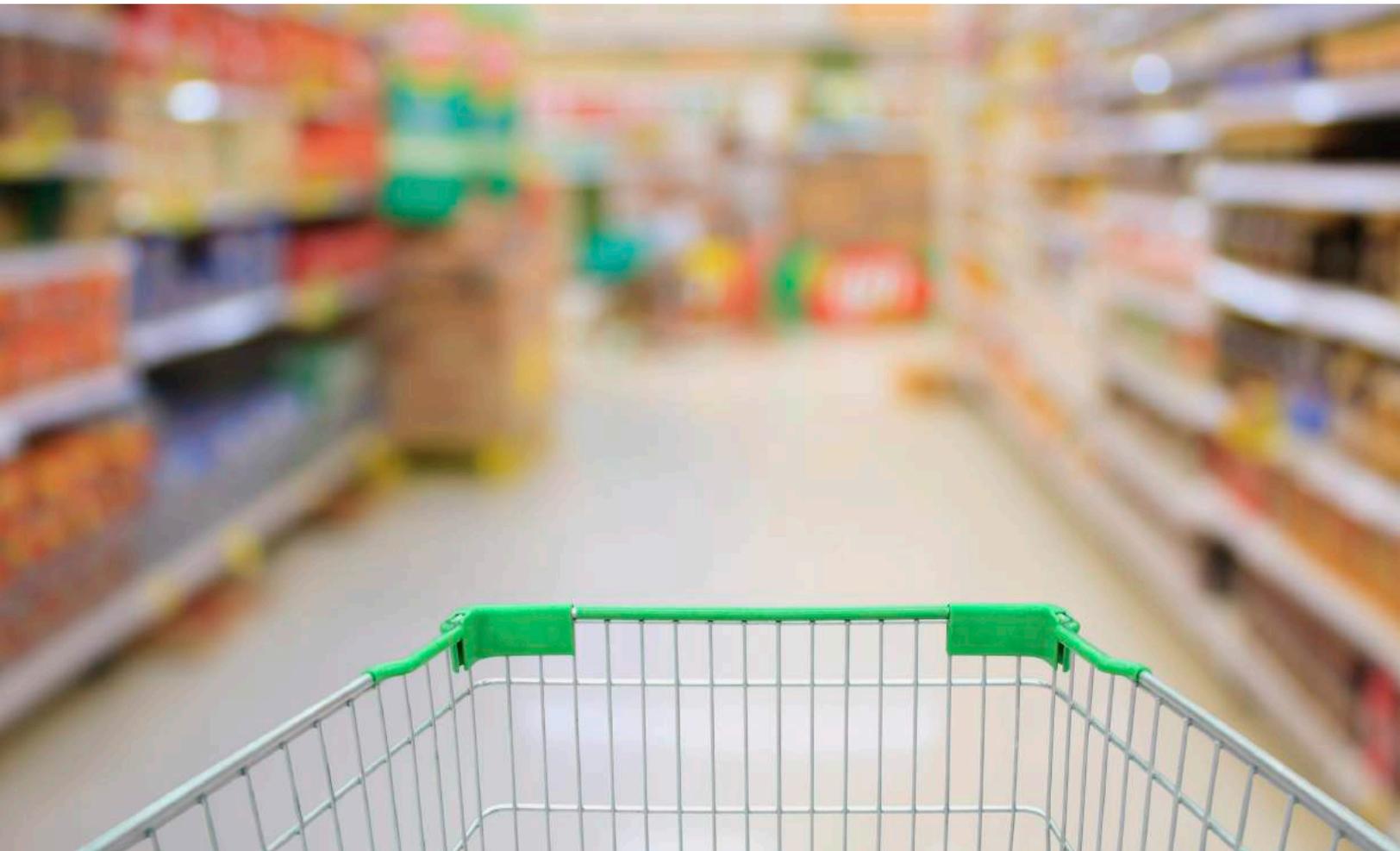
Resource and time constraints imposed a number of limitations to our process. Although we aimed to be inclusive, we could not be comprehensive. We focused on those most negatively impacted by the existing food system. Even with this narrower goal, we faced significant barriers in language and access. Children were not interviewed, in large part because to meet the University of Texas human subjects requirements for research would have exceeded our time and resource constraints. Time constraints prevented us from interviewing as broad a cross-section of the population in focus groups or in one-on-one settings as we would have hoped. In addition, we concentrated on Spanish and English language forums, despite a large number of residents who are monolingual or comfortable in dozens of languages other than the two most widely spoken ones. Further, although fast food and restaurants are a significant part of the daily process of food provisioning for many residents, resources only allowed us to address food retailers. These are significant gaps, and ones we would encourage future research to address.

Notwithstanding the many limitations, our research illuminated a number of challenges that the residents of the North Central Austin/Rundberg area face. These challenges include the lack of sidewalks, poor lighting, limited security, financial constraints, and absent resources. In turn, these underlying issues have inhibited the ability of the community to access healthy foods, resulting in a steady increase in diet-related diseases. These deficiencies are ones that can be found in existing neighborhood plans, and ones that our inclusive research point to as urgent failings of the current planning process.

In Chapters 2 and 3, we discuss our research process and present our findings for retailers and community members, respectively. In Chapter 4, we end the report with a number of policy recommendations to improve access to healthy foods in the ways that address community wants and needs. We hope to provide a deeper illustration of how a community-based approach can offer an array of policy solutions that respond directly to the true barriers to healthy food access faced by the community.

chapter 2

Retailers' Perspectives



introduction

Food retailers are important assets in food systems. Despite high rates of food insecurity there are over one hundred food retailers in 20 square miles in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area. Understanding the needs of food retailers is vital to creating a just and healthy food system for all. In order to capture the complexity and diversity of food retailers in the area, the research team created the food retailer survey.

The survey was also used to assist the City in identifying the barriers food retailers face, as integral parts of the community themselves, when providing healthy foods, and ultimately in making healthy food more accessible to members of the community. The main findings from the retailer survey are as follows:

- We find the most significant constraints to stocking fresh fruits and vegetables are operational and logistical issues (limited storage space, refrigeration) and perceived low consumer demand by retailers, in that order.
- The SNAP/WIC registration process for retailers takes too long, and the application requirements are difficult to understand, making it a challenge for retailers to apply.
- Retailers in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area recognize that their customers are interested in healthy food, contrary to the common misconception that low-income consumers are not concerned about healthy eating. Customers tend to request items such as granola bars and smoothies, rather than fresh fruits and vegetables, which indicates that while they are interested in eating healthily, there are varying perceptions about what constitutes as healthy food.

survey background

The research team developed the food retailer survey in an attempt to cover the plethora of issues that impact food retailers in local food systems. Tailored to the North Central Austin/Rundberg area's food landscape, the survey delves into the general store and product characteristics, current retailer supply chains, retailer barriers to stocking healthy foods, SNAP/WIC and constraints to their acceptance by retailers, and support provided by the City of Austin to food retailers.

When developing the food retailer survey, the research team had two main objectives. First, the team felt it was important to investigate the difficulties around food assistance programs. The research team incorporated elements about guidelines for accepting SNAP and WIC in food retail establishments.⁴⁶

Second, we drew upon previous surveys that have investigated food-related retail topics to understand retailers' abilities and constraints to providing healthy foods. For instance, Abaraca and Ramachandran (2004), in structured interviews with local grocery store managers, analyze store purchases as a community indicator for nutrition along the U.S.-Mexico border.⁴⁷ Morland and Filomena (2007) surveyed food stores in Brooklyn, New York, to evaluate the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables.⁴⁸

The surveys in these studies are observational in nature and use a checklist to provide an overview of food environments and to identify the food items present in a store, as well as the quantity, quality, and price of these items. While observational checklist surveys offer an important window into the food retail landscape and are often the easiest and most economical type of survey to implement, they fail to capture the finer issues related to food retail management.

In order to help capture this missing food retailer perspective, the research team focused on existing studies about food retailers themselves and their ability to provide healthy foods. While this body of literature is much less developed than research on food environments more broadly, the research team was able to identify several reoccurring themes that food retailers face: a lack of financial, structural, and human resources to provide healthy foods; the low profitability of stocking healthy food in the face of low consumer demand; economic and logistic issues with supply and distribution; and, as mentioned above, issues around food assistance programs. The following subsections outline the studies from which the first three themes were drawn.

lack of resources

In the majority of studies that examined food retail management, food retailers indicated that the lack of resources needed to provide healthy food had a large influence on their stocking practices. Food retailers identified insufficient and outdated refrigeration equipment either in their stores or to transport foods from the suppliers to the retail stores as the most common resource barrier,⁴⁹ followed by the lack of knowledge and expertise in handling and marketing perishable food items,⁵⁰ and a lack of time to deal with the logistics involved in providing fresh produce.⁵¹

low consumer demand and profitability

Several food retailers perceived low consumer demand for healthy food at their stores.⁵² Some indicated that consumers simply would not buy fruits and vegetables from their stores, pointing to slow turnover when they did stock produce,⁵³ while others perceived that their consumers did not know enough about nutrition to buy healthy food over other options.⁵⁴ In almost every case, food retailers were concerned about how low demand for healthy food would impact their profits if they were to stock produce, citing small margins and high overheads⁵⁵ as well as food waste and loss of revenue as produce expired before being sold.⁵⁶

supply and distribution issues

Our research indicated that food suppliers and distributors have a significant influence on food retailers' decisions on stocking healthy food in their stores. Many supply and distribution issues deter food retailers, particularly small corner and convenience stores, from stocking healthy foods. These issues include a lack of knowledge about the suppliers who provide healthy food options and a hesitancy to change their current ordering procedures.⁵⁷ Additionally, food retailers cite the inability to meet minimum requirements for wholesale discounts, delivery services, and shelf space to place the items as added barriers to providing healthy food in their stores.⁵⁸

survey design

The research team developed the retailer survey based on this previous research and surveys that address a variety of food-related topics, such as food deserts and determinants of food costs, in an attempt to cover the plethora of issues that impact food systems. Tailored to be relevant to the North Central Austin/Rundberg area's food landscape, the food retailer survey addresses the following food retailer topics: demographic and logistical retailer background, current retailer supply chains, retailer barriers to stocking healthy foods, consumer demand constraints, SNAP/WIC, and support provided by the City of Austin to food retailers.

survey methodology

The population of all food retailers in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area served as the sample frame (i.e., the list of all those from which a sample would be drawn). This list of retailers was based on the Austin-Travis Food Enterprise Permits 2014 data. This includes food retailers where people shop for food, but does not include restaurants, liquor stores, or emergency food services, such as food pantries, soup kitchens, and shelters. Based on the 2012 North American Industry Classification System (NAICS), the Office of Sustainability then classified the stores into three categories: supermarket and other grocery stores, convenience stores, and specialty stores. From this population of 64 stores, the research team drew a random sample of 54 stores, proportionally stratified by store type, to ensure that the three types were adequately represented in our sample.

Store Type	Population	Sample	Surveyed
Supermarket and other Grocery Stores (except Convenience Stores)	13	11	5
Convenience stores (including those at gas stations)	39	33	9
Specialty Stores	12	10	5
	64	54	19

Table 2.1 Breakdown of Population and Sample by Store Type

Upon encountering reluctance by some retailers to participate in a formal survey, we adopted a more in-depth, conversational approach of semi-structured interviews. Three of the 19 completed surveys above were from these interviews.

Once the stores were sampled, the research team began conducting the food retailer surveys in the fall of 2015. Team members brought copies of the food retailer survey or interview questions, as well as required assent forms, to each retail store. After completion of the survey or interview, the team input the data into the Food for All database and secured all paper copies of the survey or interview answers.

challenges

survey design

A challenge in designing the food retailer survey was the lack of literature and survey tools that study the management side of food retail, as explained earlier.⁵⁹ These studies focus on the products retailers stock and the availability and prices of these products while failing to adequately capture the barriers and constraints that food retailers face when trying to provide healthy foods in their stores. Further, these studies tend to focus on small to medium-sized food retail stores and offer no guidance on possible barriers and constraints for large supermarkets, which play a large role in food access in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area. Further, some survey questions, relying on Likert scales, which allowed retailers to answer questions on a scale, were complicated. The wording of the question and the scales went through a number of iterations throughout the survey piloting process before arriving at their final state, which may be reflected in the survey results. While this considerably improved the respondents' ease of understanding these questions, there was still some onus on the interviewer to be clear when asking the questions.

retailer participation

The research team also encountered many challenges when implementing the food retailer survey. Team members frequently had difficulties scheduling interview times with store managers at small- and medium-sized stores, who were only available at certain times or whose numerous responsibilities kept them from keeping appointments.

When the team attempted to contact major retailers, these stores cited corporate policies that prohibited managers and employees from speaking to the research team or completing surveys on behalf of the company.

However, it could be argued that these retailers offer the biggest selections of produce in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area, and also accept SNAP/WIC. Thus, the survey's central questions around constraints to stocking produce and accepting SNAP/WIC may not be the most applicable to these stores, and their lack of participation is not a limitation.

We met a similar lack of participation by food retailers whose stores are a part of the Greater Austin Merchant Association (GAMA). Three of the four convenience stores that declined to participate in our survey were members of GAMA and cited that they would require permission from GAMA to participate. In eight stores, store managers were reluctant to take the survey without approval from their supervisors/owners, and contacting the owners proved to be a challenge. GAMA subsequently confirmed that their members were free to participate in the survey, and in future iterations of this exercise, we would encourage partnership early on with such associations to secure higher response rates.

results

store characteristics

Below is a summary of some descriptive characteristics of the surveyed sample. The sample includes the 16 surveys as well as the three interviews. The share of each store type in the sample is similar to the constitution of the population.

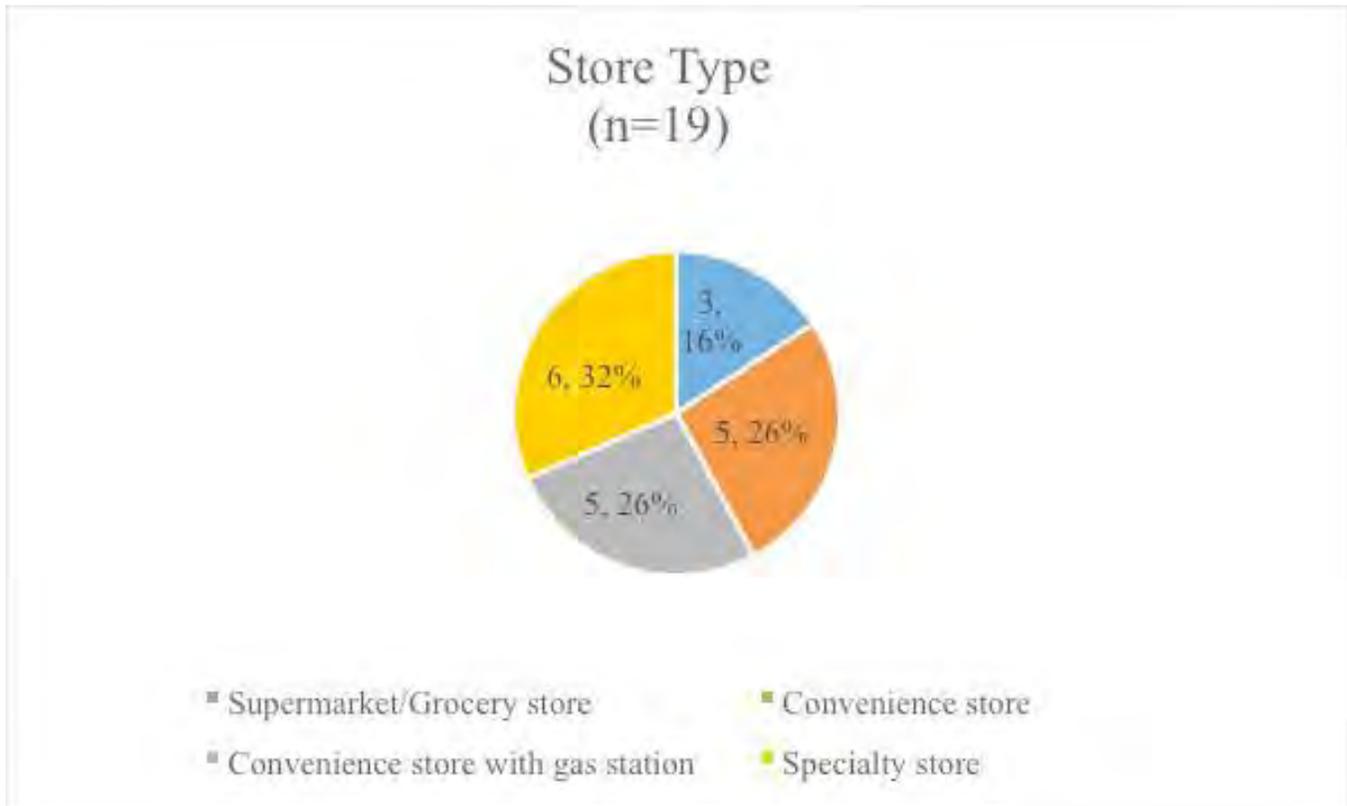


Figure 2.1 Breakdown of Sample by Store Type

frequently purchased items

The most frequently purchased items are broken down by store type below.

A. Convenience Stores

See Figure 2.2

B. Speciality Stores (n=5)

At specialty stores, bakery products, rice, lentils, produce, meat, dairy, and beer were the most frequently purchased products.

C. Supermarkets & Grocery Stores (n=3)

Supermarkets and grocery stores reported milk, fruit, cheese, meat, and phone cards as frequently bought.

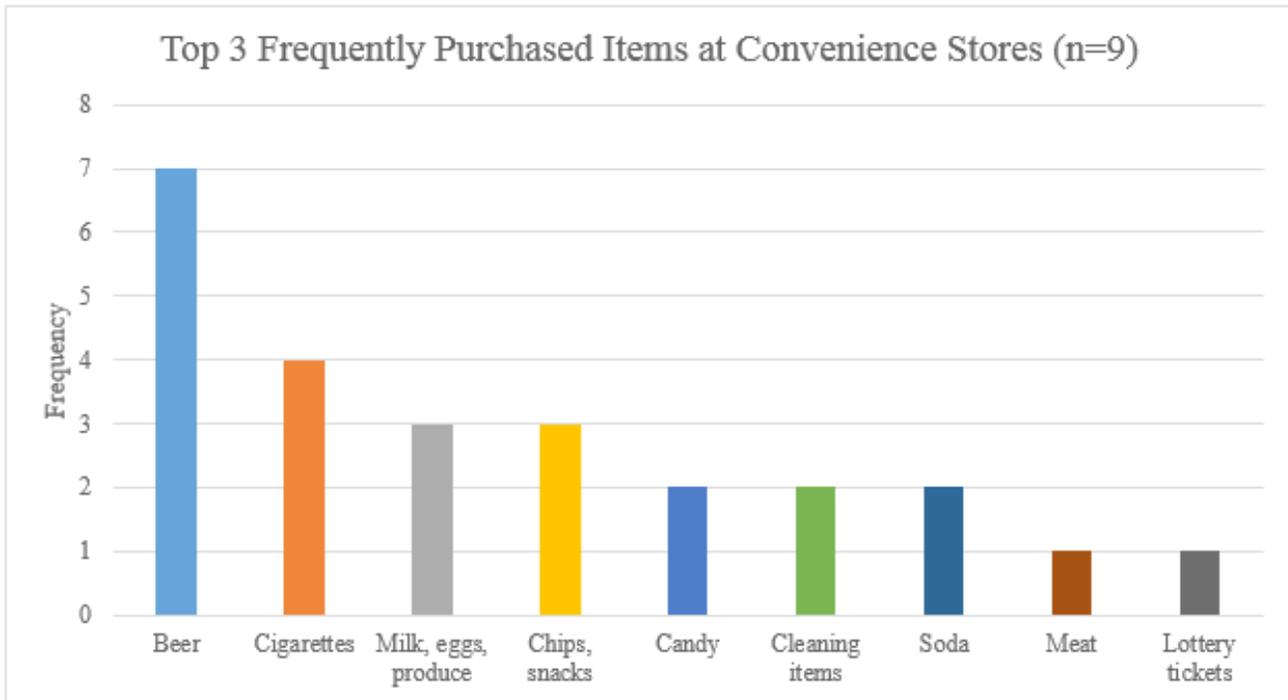


Figure 2.2 Breakdown of Sample by Store Type

store locations and access

Over 75% of the stores in the sample were situated within two blocks of a bus stop. All seven supermarkets/grocery stores, and the convenience stores that did not have an accompanying gas station, were within two blocks of a bus stop. However, the location of a bus stop cannot be taken as indicative of ease of access without considering factors such as the routes each bus stop services, the frequency of buses, and travel time. These constraints are more fully explored in Chapter 3.

what do people think constitute “healthy foods”?

At the outset, for the purpose of this study, the research team defined healthy retail food items to include fruits and vegetables (fresh or frozen) and used that definition on the retailer survey itself. However, retailers (and potentially customers) had a different perception of what constitutes healthy, expanding the definition to include processed, sugar-laden items such as nutrition bars and fruit juices.

The graph below shows the retailers’ rating of their respective store on the availability of healthy food versus the floor space dedicated to fruits and vegetables.

Retailers' Perceptions of Healthy Foods

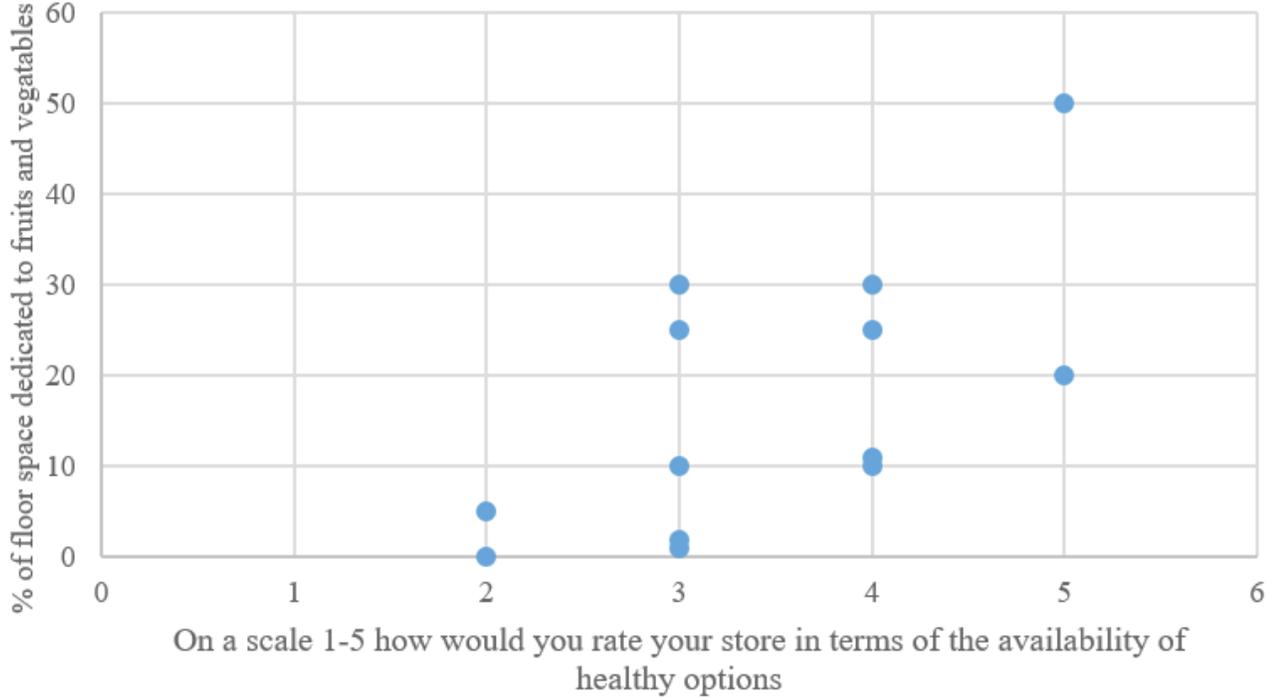


Figure 2.3 Retailers' Perceptions of Healthy Foods

The horizontal x-axis is the individual retailer's self-reported score for the availability of healthy foods in the store on a five-point scale. The vertical y-axis is also a self-reported measure of the percent of floor space in the store dedicated to fruits and vegetables. That five retailers had less than 10% of their floor space dedicated to fruits and vegetables, yet rated their store as being either a three or four, may be indicative of a discordance between the retailer's perception of what is healthy and what receives high scores on the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA's) Healthy Eating Index, the current federal standard for nutritional quality.⁶⁰

Customer habits and preferences also reinforce this difference in perception. At first glance, there appears to be customer demand for healthy foods. This is an interesting finding that challenges popular perception. Price, taste, and convenience are generally thought of as barriers to buying healthy food, and lower income families are thought to accord lower priority to health as a motive for food purchase.⁶¹ However, retailers report that their customers have an intent to adopt healthier food habits: when asked how often in the last 12 months customers had requested that retailers stock some healthy item in their store, 60% of the retailers responded either *sometimes* or *often*.

Have your customers requested health food items in the last 12 months? (n=15)

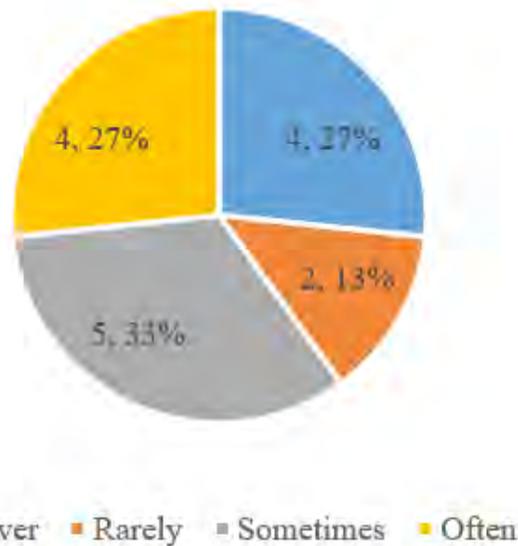


Figure 2.4 Health as a Reason for Food Purchase

However, on examining what the most requested items were, it is evident that what customers define as healthy does not align with the definition established for this project. The most requested items were protein bars, healthy snacks, juices, and health drinks. The fact that these processed, sugary foods are seen as “healthy foods” may also be reflective of how healthy the items currently stocked in the store are. While these items may not conform to USDA Dietary Guidelines, in a store with predominantly unhealthy items, these may seem relatively healthier to the customer, given his or her existing set of choices at the store.

Retailers reported that there had also been requests for pre-cut fruits, organic, sugar-free items, certain vegetables, and meat from grass-fed animals. This, again, challenges the idea of those with low income not wanting to make healthy food choices.



why don't retailers stock more fruit and vegetables?

We first present the constraints reported by stores where less than 30% floor space is dedicated to fruits and vegetables. These stores identified logistical/operational constraints as the biggest constraints. Fruits and vegetables are perishable and require specialized storage facilities, which half of the sampled retailers currently lack. The lack of consumer demand was reported as the second biggest constraint. Those who either *strongly agreed* or *agreed* that the statement was a constraint have been counted in the numbers below.

■ Logistical/Operational Constraints

- Limited storage space and/or refrigeration equipment (50% or 5/10)
- Short shelf life: Fruits and vegetables are perishable (88% or 8/9)

■ Low Consumer Demand

- People do not prefer fruits and vegetables (60% or 6/10)
- Customers do not expect to purchase fruits and vegetables from my store (30% or 3/10)

The low consumer demand reported (people do not prefer fruits and vegetables) may seem directly contradictory to the demand for healthy foods discussed in the previous sub-section. However, this may only further highlight the discordance in the perception of what constitutes healthy foods. While this section deals with fruits and vegetables in particular, in the earlier section retailers were asked, more generally, about healthy foods as they

interpreted it. Retailers report a demand for “healthy foods”, but not necessarily for fruits and vegetables.

The overall results are produced in the graph below. These are across the whole sample of all retailers, including those who currently dedicate over 30% floor-space for fruits and vegetables.



Figure 2.5 Barriers to stocking more fruits and vegetables

Additionally, one retailer made a telling comment about why people do not prefer fruits and vegetables, and do not expect to purchase them at his store. He said that most of the customers at his convenience store were looking for quick and easy access to food. *“They are construction workers, blue-collar workers, pressed for time, looking to grab a quick snack. The area has a lot of quick and easy options – there are lots of fast food restaurants.”* Within the various economic and time constraints they face, customers may look to make healthy food choices, and these may not correspond to USDA’s Dietary Guidelines or Healthy Eating Index.⁶²

Further, we examined variation in responses for *consumers do not expect to purchase fruits and vegetables from my store* by whether the store was located within a five minute walking distance of H-E-B. The presence of a large supermarket offering produce at more competitive rates may deter customers from purchasing produce at other stores nearby. However, our concern was not indicated as a major constraint. Even among stores close to H-E-B (36% of the sample, or seven stores), only 28% reported it as a constraint.

what prevents retailers from accepting food assistance programs?

All the stores surveyed were aware of SNAP and WIC, and 90% of the stores accepted at least one of the two. All 17 retailers who accept SNAP/WIC agreed that doing so was beneficial to them. They acknowledged that their stores serve low-income groups, and these programs brought their stores additional revenue. They estimated that between 10-40% of their total sales revenue is attributable to SNAP/WIC.

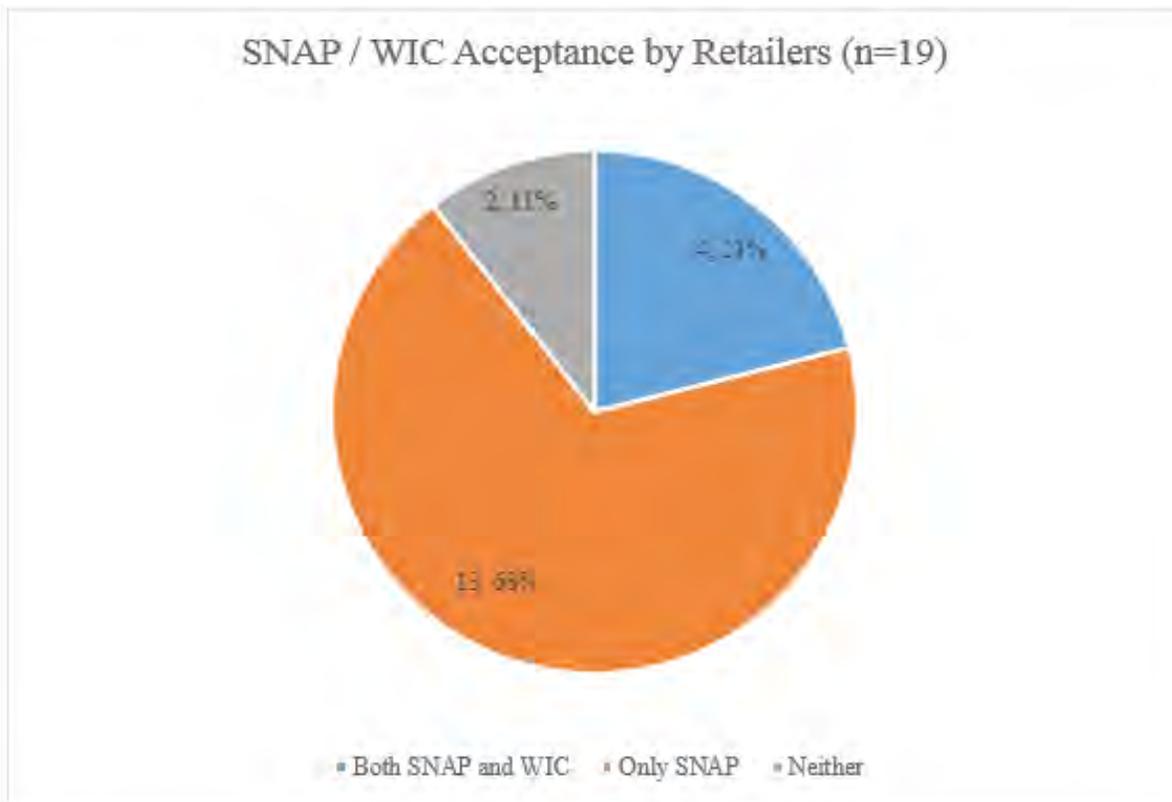


Figure 2.6 SNAP/WIC acceptance among retailers

When asked about why they did not accept WIC, some retailers explained they had few products that would meet WIC requirements. These retailers operated convenience stores that do not stock fresh produce or infant food. Moreover, two of these stores stated that they have not had any customers looking to use WIC at their store. While SNAP acceptance may present an obvious business case for the retailers by virtue of the sheer number of customers, WIC may be a less clear choice.

We surveyed all retailers, regardless of their SNAP/WIC adoption status, on what they perceived were the constraints to accepting food assistance programs. However, the responses were starkly different between those who accepted and those who did not.

The responses of those who accept either SNAP or WIC (or both) are produced in the graph below. The lengthy registration process and difficulty in understanding the requirements are the biggest barriers to adopting SNAP/WIC.

Given that the stores registered to accept SNAP/WIC at various points in time (from as long as over 15 years ago to as recently as one year ago), the question of whether the perceptions of the older retailers may be outdated may arise. However, there is no pattern in the data based on years of SNAP/WIC acceptance.

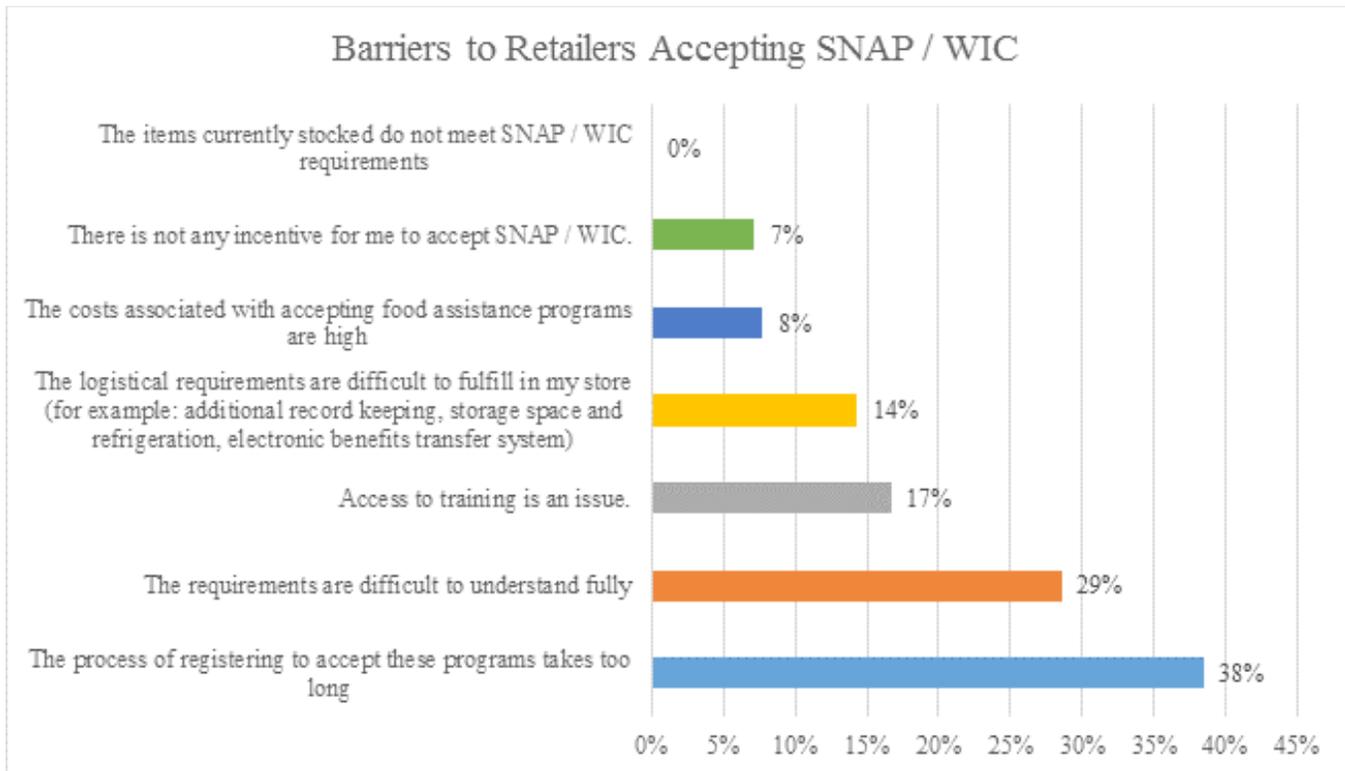


Figure 2.7 Barriers to SNAP/WIC acceptance among retailers

It must also be noted that none of the above are respondents who *strongly agreed*. All of them only agreed that the above were barriers.

The responses of the two retailers who do not accept either present a slightly different picture. While both retailers strongly agreed that the lengthy registration process and difficulty in understanding the requirements were barriers, they also *strongly agreed* that the following were barriers:

- *The logistical requirements are difficult to fulfill.*
- *There is no incentive to accept SNAP/WIC.*

This suggests the need for further awareness on the benefits of SNAP/WIC, and the need to debunk the myth that logistical requirements take a toll on resource-crunched stores. One convenience store manager elaborated that the logistics of record keeping and managing the electronic benefits transfer system are very simple. It is a one-time process, which requires little upkeep.

We should note that both these stores are specialty grocery stores offering ethnic foods. One retailer indicated that language is sometimes a barrier in communicating with customers.

In addition to the lack of readily accessible information on how to enroll to accept SNAP, store management may further face language barriers. For instance, the SNAP website (<http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/retailers-0>) could prove difficult to navigate for non-native English speakers. Even if the application form itself may be available in another language, getting to that page may not be straightforward.

no major supply-side distribution constraints

Unlike our findings from the literature review, stores in our sample did not report any major supply-side constraints. Generally, stores were not tied to a single supplier and were not affected by “minimum order” quantity requirements. One supermarket reported receiving short-term credit from its suppliers. The others paid up front, but a lack of business credit was not reported as a problem.

suggestions on how the city of austin can assist retailers

When asked, “*What can the City of Austin do to support the sales of more healthy food items?*” many retailers were uncertain. Four retailers spoke of programs targeted at changing customer preferences towards healthy foods:

- One suggested that the City can fund equipment to carry more healthy food items. *“When starting, there should be an incentive for write-offs because the largest hurdle is the amount of lost cost and the high price of healthy food items.”* He noted that if he buys apples, *“H-E-B is able to buy hundreds more and sell them at a cheaper price.”*
- Another spoke of initiatives for the store and vendor to work together to identify demand for healthy options, and also suggested offering free samples of healthy foods to customers.

Other retailers’ suggestions included:

- Requiring the suppliers to package fruits and vegetables in smaller amounts in order to reduce wastage. *“Through loading, unloading, and the inventory process, we lose some because they are not packaged. Also, staff members touch the vegetables while handling, which is not very hygienic.”*
- *“Stop regulating. Austin has higher regulations than any other city. The energy costs are very high.”*

Two retailers also expressed disillusionment with the City:

■ *"Nothing. They don't do anything."*

■ Another storeowner said he had many problems with the City of Austin. "It is difficult to stay in business because simple things become complicated with the Health Department." He said that foreign standards for food are different than American standards, and it makes it difficult to provide certain foods for his customers. In addition, he argued that if food is approved at ports to come into the US, then it should be okay to have those foods in his shop.

The richness of comments from qualitative semi-structured interviews points to the need for the city to engage in these kinds of exercises in addition to broader statistical surveys to find and address challenges in the retail landscape.

conclusion

At a broader level, understanding the constraints that retailers face is but one aspect in creating an inclusive food system. Food policy cannot be dissociated from other factors such as health, and income, and local infrastructure. The retailer side of the story merely addresses food availability, but food access depends on adequate resources including income, access to benefits and food entitlements, and the local transportation infrastructure. A key finding, however, is that there is demand for 'healthy' food even if there is considerable confusion about what constitutes healthy food. This is a finding consonant with our focus group discussions, reviewed in the next chapter.

chapter 3

Focus Group & One-on-One Interview Analysis



WHAT'S ON YOUR *Plate?*

JOIN THE **FOOD CONVERSATION**

introduction

Part of the research team's commitment to inclusive research was to identify ways to hear the voices of North Central Austin/Rundberg residents whose experiences have not historically formed a part of city food planning processes. The team developed two strategies: one based on focus groups, and one building on those focus groups with key informant interviews.

In developing the discussion framework for focus groups, the team used an asset-based approach. By beginning discussions with 'what is great about your community' rather than 'what is wrong with it,' we learned about solutions that people would like to see. The focus groups allowed us to gain an understanding of the local food system from the perspectives of the people living in the community, to appreciate the strengths of the existing food system, and to understand the difficulties that area residents face daily in accessing the food they want.

In addition, we complemented our understanding of food access in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area with interviews. We conducted one-on-one interviews with key community members who are familiar with the residents of the North Central Austin/Rundberg area and the challenges they face. They, too, pointed to key assets in the community – churches, families, and community groups. They helped us to confirm, challenge, and broaden our understanding of the data collected during the focus groups. Broadly, the main findings from our focus groups and one-on-one interviews are as follows:

- Residents want healthy foods but are unable to afford them for a variety of reasons.
- There are numerous barriers to access for food assistance programs, including language barriers.
- Produce and other healthy foods available in the area are perceived to be of poor quality and/or are not culturally appropriate.
- Transportation and safety are major barriers to physically accessing healthy foods.

methodologies

focus groups

The City of Austin led an effort to identify and map food retailers and resources during the summer of 2015 and developed connections with several community organizations in the process. By working with community organizations, including the YMCA, the Multicultural Refugee Coalition Center, Gus Garcia Recreation Center, the IDEA Public School, and the Goodwill Excel Center, it was more straightforward to organize and coordinate focus groups. We also approached the Walnut Creek Library and the area’s Austin Independent School District Family Resource Centers because they serve as community resources for information on food, employment, and other general assistance. Each of these organizations hosted a focus group and invited their constituents to participate.

In order to achieve our goal of inclusivity, the research team and these partner organizations made a concerted effort to reach out to the area’s many communities. In all, we held ten focus groups with a total of 93 participants representing different community groups. The focus groups started with an asset mapping activity. Participants reflected on the assets and resources they often utilize in their community and represented those in a map of their neighborhood. Following the exercise, the facilitators allowed the conversations to develop organically, guided by broader themes including decision-making priorities around food purchases and how improvements can be made to the existing food infrastructure and assistance options in the community.

one-on-one interviews

The research team worked with the City and the Office of Sustainability to identify key community contacts who could confirm, challenge, and broaden the quantity and quality of the data collected by the focus groups. We spoke with many of the same people who assisted us in organizing our focus groups. We chose these individuals intentionally because they were able to provide insight into life in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area for populations that we did not directly reach or could help validate findings for focus group populations most negatively impacted by the food system.

Name:	Title:	Interview Date:	Method:
Mary Jo Hernandez	Restore Rundberg Health Representative	2/9/2016	In-person
Daniela Nuñez	Co-Vice President of Georgian Acres Neighborhood Association	2/15/2016	Phone
Joseph de Leon	Steering Committee Member for Gus Garcia Community Garden	2/5/2016	In-person
Anneliese Tanner	Director of AISD Nutrition and Food Services	2/3/2016	In-person
Jill Ramirez	CEO of the Latino Healthcare Forum	2/11/2016	In-person
Julie Weeks	Director of Austin Voices in Family Resource Center	2/4/2016	In-person
Esther Martin	Executive Director Asian American Resource Center	2/5/2016	Phone

Figure 3.1 List of the interviewees, his or her title, date of interview, and method of interviewing

Through hour-long interviews either in person or over the phone, the research team asked each key contact about their overall thoughts about the North Central Austin/Rundberg area. The research team wanted to identify assets and deficits for each population served by the key community contact. We asked each contact to use his or her professional and personal perspective to identify obstacles faced by the community. We were specifically interested in hearing both insights that may not be so obvious to outsiders and solutions that would, and would not, be helpful in the target area. This line of questioning gave each person the flexibility to speak to his or her personal and professional experience.

analysis of focus group discussions

The focus groups followed an asset-based approach. The research team wanted to learn how the participants perceived and engaged with the various assets in their community. An asset mapping exercise at the start of all focus groups provided insight into how participants viewed their community and what places they frequented and liked or disliked. The analysis of the maps drawn by the participants also provided information about how food featured in their lives. While the local H-E-B supermarket was included on almost every map, there were some differences. Hispanic/Latino participants at the IDEA Public School referenced markets providing Mexican food like La Michoacana and La Hacienda. Participants at the Walnut Creek Library focus group, who included homeless and near homeless individuals, tended to mention fast food places like McDonald's, Whataburger, Sonic, etc. Although names and locations were not identified on the maps, food pantries in general also emerged as an important asset among participants of focus groups at Goodwill Excel Center.

In general, at any given venue, participants tended to value assets close to that venue. For example, participants at the Multicultural Refugee Coalition spoke very highly of its community garden. We learned that in many cases, refugees living in Austin are familiar with and enjoy farming. They value amenities like community gardens and access to land for farming. This asset mapping offered the opportunity for a deeper appreciation of how different parts of the community related differently to their food system. This recognition is an important dividend from this inclusive process in understanding the varied preferences of the community.



findings

Our focus group analysis yielded the word cloud above. To help parse the context and meanings of our discussions, we needed analytical tools. We reviewed the 2009 Report to Congress by the United States Department of Agriculture, which provided the existing literature for community food assessments within the United States and summarizes the measures of food access used by the different studies.⁶³ The Small Markets and Community Food Assessment in the San Francisco Bay Area⁶⁴ provides the most comprehensive definition of ‘Community Food Security,’ and we adapted that definition to provide an overview of food security in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area.

We define food access as policies, processes, or programs that create the conditions for the following food security attributes to be met:

- **Affordability** - the economic ability of the people living in the community to procure healthy food;
- **Food Assistance** - government or non-profit resources that improve the ability of people to obtain food;
- **Nutritional Adequacy** - the ability of the people to procure food they consider nutritious;
- **Quality** - the desirability of food procured by the people, not including nutritional quality;
- **Cultural Acceptability** - the ability of a particular group in a community to procure food specific to their needs as a cultural group; and
- **Accessibility** - the ability of the people of the community to conveniently and securely access food retail stores with healthy food.

The major themes that appeared under these food security attributes during the 10 focus group discussions and seven interviews were:

Food Security Attributes	Important Themes
Affordability	Poverty Barriers other than price, such as storage capacity at home
Assistance Programs	Unequal access Barriers to use Positive impacts
Nutritional Adequacy	Fruits and vegetables Organic food Knowledge limitations
Quality	Cleanliness Expiration date of food items
Cultural Acceptability	Variety Friendly / welcoming store environment Labeling
Accessibility	Transport Security Time constraints

affordability

key findings

- North Central Austin/Rundberg residents want healthy and organic food, but these options are too expensive for the majority of our participants.
- Stagnant wages and lack of access to higher paying jobs further impact affordability of healthy food.

We found affordability to be the most important determinant of what food the participants buy and from where. We heard several times that residents desire healthy foods, but individuals and families struggle to get them because of high prices, low purchasing power, and low wages. One contact reported that vulnerable populations such as the elderly, disabled, refugee, and undocumented immigrants are at a higher risk of being unable to pay for healthy food. Contributing factors include mobility, given limited public transportation in the area, low-paying jobs, high housing costs, and insufficient government benefits. Vulnerable populations struggle to support themselves and their families on low-income, restrictive food budgets.

One of our community contacts, Mary Jo Hernandez, reported,

"People don't have enough money to buy healthy food, it's very expensive to buy fresh fruits and vegetables. ...We had one patient who ate 20 tortillas a day, it was cheap and he liked tortillas. When we tried to find something that was affordable, basically it came down to onions. I would try to think what this person could possibly buy, there was bananas, which maybe are not the greatest but bananas, onions, maybe cabbage, and apples. I mean, what was affordable?"

All focus group participants cited prices as a major part of purchasing decisions. For those who were homeless, affordability was the highest and usually the only priority. People generally considered Whole Foods to be expensive, and though the participants said they would like to buy organic food to avoid hormones and antibiotics in their food, many agreed that organic food is not affordable.

Esther Chan Martin explained,

"I think there's a huge disparity in how these populations are accessing healthy foods. So they're not going to go to Whole Foods. They can't afford anything at Central Market unless it's heavily discounted, or if it's one item. The transportation doesn't allow them to go to those places, because they tend to be more central, or centralized I would say, and not close to where they live just because of the whole segregated neighborhood system we have here in Austin."

There are a significant number of households with undocumented members in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area. Affordability is a very important consideration for those making less than minimum wage under the table. Jill Ramirez explained,

"We met some parents who get paid four dollars an hour under the table because they're undocumented so they're like 'ok, with four dollars I can buy a big loaf of bread, I can buy beans, I can buy rice. I don't have money to buy an apple which is organic, for four dollars'... It was just economically, everything just kind affected the affordability at homes, transportations if they decide drive outside of their area to go buy food 'I don't have money for gas, I don't have money to spend in the bus' so it was everything economically."

Stagnant wages and lack of access to higher paying jobs force individuals to make trade-offs in their daily lives and make healthy food unaffordable for the participants.

Julie Weeks spoke about her elderly disabled family member struggling to purchase healthy foods because of her small food budget:

"I will say though [about] having a family member who is elderly and disabled: I know that she's on fixed income. It's like \$800 and something a month. And she has all kinds of health care issues, and when it comes down to her food budget she only qualified for ten dollars on SNAP. And what does she eat? Ramen noodles. ... she is incredibly undernourished, and malnourished in terms of not getting good nutrition, and she's diabetic. And her go-to is ramen noodles."

Both our focus group participants and our community contacts focused on the high price of healthy foods, especially at stores other than the supermarkets. Julie Weeks reported,

"...we have our fair share of the 7-11 corner stores, the Sunrise mini-marts, the gas station food marts. Of course those are going to be high-priced not healthy options. Having said that, the healthy options are very expensive. You can get fruits, vegetables, sandwiches, healthy food, but it's costly."

Discounts and better information resources help make the food more affordable to the participants. Several participants mentioned H-E-B's "combo-loco" coupons and discounts as being helpful. Similarly, many participants mentioned that they use mobile phone applications as a tool for securing discounted or free food from restaurants and retailers.

Multiple participants mentioned inequities between North and South Austin, citing less expensive stores in South Austin and schools in South Austin that provide better information to parents.

Finally, in at least one focus group, concerns of the near-homeless and those on severely restricted income pointed to a challenge in eating healthy food. It is hard to store fresh food in a refrigerator if it is uncertain that the electricity, or the home itself, will be there in the coming weeks. Worries about electricity cut-offs or repeated mobility from one home to another over the course of weeks meant that some participants preferred non-perishable food.



food assistance

key findings

- Many food banks and church pantries required identification at the time of our focus groups, limiting the ability of people in the community to access their services. Since completing our research we learned that partners of the Capital Area Food Bank are not allowed to require identification. The CAFB is working to address this issue.
- While emergency food services, such as food banks, exist in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area, not all individuals can equally access resources.
- Community centers and schools are important sources of information around entitlements, and potentially nutritional information; they also allow access to healthy food through community and school gardens.
- Those who are able to access food assistance resources are sometimes better able to afford and get healthy foods, though the lack of healthy options at pantries remains a challenge.
- Residents lack adequate nutritional information and education, and would like assistance in accessing these resources.

Focus group participants generally were aware of and used a broad range of food assistance programs, including emergency food services, food stamps, and community and school resources. While SNAP/food stamps and similar government programs often provide families and individuals with necessary support to prevent them from starving, it may not be enough support to eat healthily. For Julie Weeks' elderly relative on a fixed income, her ability to sustain herself was limited to purchasing relatively high calorie but low nutrient food given a low amount of benefits.

While SNAP and WIC are utilized resources, difficulties in the enrollment process pose problems for residents in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area. This is especially true for families and individuals who do not speak English. Changing enrollment policies also pose challenges to families who may not know about new rules. Lack of information and support in appropriate languages create significant obstacles to access otherwise beneficial services. Julie Weeks reported on the importance of a Family Resource Center at Burnet Middle School:

"...last week Burnet had seven appointments for SNAP enrollment. Because now SNAP is still on a six month eligibility cycle, but Medicaid's gone to a year. So you've got all these people that used to apply for their Medicaid and SNAP in the same enrollment cycle, and now it's off, because they have to re-enroll for SNAP in the middle of their Medicaid."

Focus group participants discussed SNAP and WIC in focus groups, often with mixed reviews. Some participants felt that they were easy to obtain and straightforward to use while others felt the process had too many layers and expressed an interest in training on how to use their benefits. Access to these benefits and employment were often brought up at the same time. Several participants mentioned that they have to be careful not take on too many hours at work to make sure they do not lose their benefits. They also noted that it is more difficult to qualify if one is self-employed. Individuals spoke positively about using their benefits at farmers markets because of the Double Dollars Program.

Of the emergency food services, churches and food pantries were mentioned most frequently. However, participants mentioned that the requirement to show identification barred many participants from using the food pantries or church resources. Further, Julie Weeks explained that some food pantries are only accessible by social workers.

"...the one that's like gold to us is the Faith Food Pantry ... but they are not accessible to clients, or to families directly. They provide the food to the social service provider who then delivers the food ... so if we need food for a family we call at 11:00 am. And we give the number of adults and number of children in the family ... then before 1:00 pm the social worker has to go down there and pick up the food."

Our community contacts also explained that most food pantries in the area were only open for limited hours and only on weekdays.

In addition to barriers to use, the participants mentioned that the food items provided at the food pantries are not necessarily healthy and providing pre-packaged bags of food items leads to food waste.

The availability of healthier food options at food pantries and the ability to choose the food from the available options would improve the amount of nutrition gained and reduce food waste.

For information about emergency food services, participants were aware of and generally valued the information services at 211 and 311. The participants also made suggestions about how to improve the information outreach to people in need for emergency food assistance. The participants suggested using radio (particularly Hispanic radio stations) and mobile phone applications for greater information outreach. As noted earlier, individuals, particularly from the homeless community, are already using mobile applications to stay informed about which restaurants are giving away food and when. Mobile applications can therefore serve as an easy way to allow people to gather information about food resources available in their area.

Some schools, such as Burnet Middle School, have Family Resource Centers. These centers were developed by the Austin Independent School District to provide information on housing, employment, access to healthcare, social connections, and education.

The majority of parent participants said they receive most of their information about nutrition and resources for their children from the schools, while participants that do not have children mentioned community centers as a primary resource. The YMCA, Gus Garcia Recreation Center, and the Multicultural Refugee Coalition community gardens were spoken of highly because they provide further access to nutritious food.



Community Gardens

Key community contacts reported that community gardens might not be a means to provide accessible food for residents because of time, cost, language barriers, and labor-intensive work. Residents must be willing to put in months of work, including planting, watering, weeding and eventually harvesting, to be able to produce food from an often small garden plot. Along with paying a fee to access the garden plot, families must give up time to work the land. People may work long hours or multiple jobs; community gardens add additional time requirements to their days. Joseph de Leon reported that it would make more sense for an individual or family to buy food instead of growing produce, given the cost and delay between planting and harvesting food. Joseph de Leon explained,

"I mean if you don't have the passion to grow your own food... you'd have to really, really feel like you're forced to grow your own food, and it takes a long time I mean three months on average; you have to have the ability to sustain yourself for three months waiting for... and this are small plots, you can supplement some meals on occasion but you're not going to eat out of these garden plots."

Additional support from organizations or the City of Austin to subsidize community gardens may help lower-income families take part in community gardening programs.

Community gardens also need continuous maintenance. Julie Weeks reports,

"A lot of schools have community gardening programs...Webb has had gardens at different points. There's nothing growing in it, but they got the plots. I know Sustainable Food Center has partnered with schools... they do the farm to school partnerships, you know about all that, to try to get healthy food and local food into schools... I'm just not sure that they end up producing anything that benefits anybody... I'm like what isn't working? It's always these great ideas, but it's like what actually is feasible for the community, and what do they want?"

Language presented another barrier for access to community gardens. Joseph de Leon stated that many non-English speakers were deterred from gardening because some community gardens are "English-speaking gardens." As a result, signs and documents relevant to the community garden are only in English. Providing information in different languages makes those projects accessible to more people as well as spaces where minority community members may feel welcome.

nutritional adequacy

key findings

- More healthy food options at fast food restaurants will make healthy food more conveniently accessible.
- Farmers markets are desirable but currently they are at inconvenient locations and times.
- Advertising is a concern.

Convenience and availability of nutritious food were among the top three to five priorities across focus groups, with the exception of those representing the homeless population who feel that nutrition is a luxury. Participants mentioned that fast food is often the most convenient and affordable food option. Our community contacts echoed this sentiment. Joseph de Leon stated,

“There’s a lot of processed food in there, the quality of the products is not really the best so I know that a lot of my neighbors rely on the convenience foods and just stuff that they can buy in a restaurant, fast food or otherwise.”

Participants would like to see options like fruit and vegetable smoothies at fast food restaurants.

Additionally, some participants mentioned their preference for more organic foods, often because they do not feel comfortable with the use of hormones, antibiotics, and fertilizers in the food they are feeding to their children. However, the premium price of organic food is a significant barrier, particularly to those who are making just enough to be ineligible for food assistance benefits.

“If you know you’re hungry, you’re not going to care about nutrients, none of that really.” - Focus Group Participant

Farmers markets came up often as a good place to procure nutritious and organic food, but participants felt that they were at inconvenient times and were not easily accessible. When possible, some participants take the bus to the farmers market at the Triangle in Central Austin. This market is set up to accept SNAP and the Double Dollars program. However, the market only runs on Wednesdays, which is inconvenient for many.

Advertising of unhealthy junk food was labeled as a negative outside influence. Some felt that the saturation of advertising for chips, sodas, and other junk food prompted people to buy that food. This influence was especially felt with children, who beg for junk food from their families who then give in. It may be important to advocate for the regulation of junk food advertising to children and for the expansion of advertising healthy food to children and families.

Esther Chan Martin said,

"If we want our future, and children definitely do copy what their parents do, and I'm trying to do that with my daughter, model healthy eating, deliver healthy food, right? ...I'm the one purchasing those things. I have that control now. She's young enough I can kind of force her to eat whatever that's healthy. And I keep her on that track. And yes, there's only so much I can do as a parent. But when she goes to school, and she sees other kids and they give her other options."

Participants were frustrated with a lack of knowledge about what is healthy and how to prepare healthy foods. Community contacts expressed concern that Rundberg residents lacked enough base nutritional knowledge to make healthy decisions even when healthy food was available. This missing nutritional education piece could prevent individuals and families from being able to eat healthy food and learning to cook healthier foods. For interviewees, this lack of knowledge presents a serious barrier to improving overall health in North Central Austin/Rundberg. Some participants mentioned using local resources like Happy Kitchen/Cocina Alegre, which are regular cooking classes held by the Sustainable Food Center, or other resources like cooking channels and YouTube. They mentioned getting information from the Goodwill Excel Center, radio stations, bus stops, caseworkers, and schools.

Mary Jo Hernandez explained,

"I mean, you have to... educate the people because... if you don't know what to do with vegetables and you've never seen them before, they're not going to buy them and take them home when you don't have any time, you know? That's hard for any of us to cook something new. Like you said, we haven't done it. You want somebody to show you how to do it, taste it and see if it's good, and then go buy it, take it home and make it and that's how it works. I just think education is something major; it plays a major role in that."

“One thing I’d like to add is basically how to build a pantry at home, so people can as a habit start having food where if there is some kind of emergency, you know, we lose power in this city, there are no trucks, there is no water pumping.”

- Focus Group Participant

“I would like to know more. I have a little boy, a four-year-old. I would like to learn more things to help him, to give him, to feed him, like ways to pack in his lunches, ways, you know, what can I do for snack time, you know, breakfast time. What are healthy ways to, you know, things to teach him what things are good to eat, and stuff like that.”

- Focus Group Participant

quality

key findings

- There is a need for increased oversight from the City of Austin over retailers for consistency in standards of quality.
- Produce and fresh food in Rundberg was often reported as being low quality or rotten compared to food in other neighborhoods in Austin.
- Residents purchase cheaper food despite quality complaints because of affordability issues.

Participants considered freshness and taste as major predictors of the quality of food and a determinant of what food they wanted to purchase. For example, a number of participants mentioned that they did not like the taste of frozen food and did not like to buy food that is close to the expiration date. Overall, our community contacts reported that the low quality of fresh produce at grocery stores in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area is an equity issue and a reflection of the injustices in the food system. Esther Chan Martin discussed one store’s produce:

“All the produce was almost half rotted, and there’d be flies around it. That really angered me when I saw that, that people may want to purchase healthy things, but then the quality is terrible.”

More specifically, participants mentioned significant concerns with the quality of meat available at H-E-B and El Rancho. In their experience, the meat was low quality and in some cases, made them or their children ill. They preferred their food to last long after purchase and mentioned that food at Sam’s, which is located outside of the North Central Austin/Rundberg area, typically lasted longer than food at other places. They also wanted to see better labeling of expiration dates to ensure that food close to expiry is not pushed for sale. Conversely, participants were happy with the deli section at H-E-B. They felt that meat cut in their presence was fresh and a preferable purchase.

In addition to concerns about availability of quality food, overall store cleanliness was mentioned as a concern related to long transportation times and excessive freezing of food. Several participants felt that it would be valuable for health inspectors to not only arrive at stores unannounced, but undercover as well, to understand the day-to-day shortcomings in several stores.

cultural acceptability

key findings

- Participants desired a greater variety of produce and labeling of produce in relevant languages.
- Participants had a strong preference for fresh meat and produce.
- A lack of culturally appropriate foods at schools, community centers, and emergency food providers limit the populations who are able to take advantage of these resources.

“If I want to give healthy food to my family, I can’t do it because the broccoli is rotten and I won’t buy that. They sell that kind of stuff and if someone really needs it, he’s going to buy it because he has no other option.” - Focus Group Participant

The key community contacts reinforced our understanding of the North Central Austin/Rundberg area’s cultural diversity. Daniela Nuñez stated, “I think that what is great about Rundberg is the diversity, there’s a lot of different types of restaurants, lots of different types of food that you don’t find anywhere in Austin and different varieties.” North Central Austin/Rundberg residents want to be able to purchase food to fit their cultural eating practices. A friendly, welcoming, and culturally appropriate environment came up often as an important reason for people to decide where to shop for healthy foods.

Jill Ramirez stated,

“There’s ‘the fruit lady’ and she comes along every day... she sets up paletas, she has fruit cups and she used to be really heavy, she’s lost a lot of weight and she’s selling her fruit cups all around here. People are saying ‘if we could have more of that...’ they want to be healthy.”

Joseph de Leon located a hub in the target area frequented by residents that has a convenience store, food trucks, a frutería, and a small flea market.

In addition to feeling comfortable and welcomed, many participants, particularly women, talked about a desire for familiarity with the food they are purchasing. Esther Chan Martin stated, "Asian Americans have grown up eating food from their native countries... they tend to look for markets, and restaurants, and places that offer that." Participants felt that there was a lack of variety in produce, and some culturally relevant produce items like spinach were less available as compared to less relevant counterparts such as iceberg lettuce. An Asian American participant in a focus group mentioned that he would like H-E-B to focus on other ethnicities in his community in addition to the Hispanic population.

Key contacts reported individuals and families experiencing language barriers at grocery stores, community gardens, schools, community resources, and social services. Anneliese Tanner stated, "I think something a little more unique to the Rundberg area is just sort of the diversity and I think about, 'How do we communicate to the families in their language? So they can really understand, so that they're comfortable.'" Joseph de Leon echoed this point. "You see the faces coming through here, there are a lot of Asian people, there are a lot of people of Indian or South Asian descent, Spanish speakers." As mentioned earlier, most services can be found in both Spanish and English. Other languages, however, are much less likely to be represented. Key contacts reported individuals and families who speak Spanish, Vietnamese, Arabic, Mandarin, Burmese, and French struggling to access food when it was not provided in their native language.

Another Asian American participant mentioned that improved labeling would be helpful. For example, he does not eat pork, but where he shops, beef is kept with pork and is not labeled clearly enough for him to know the difference.

Labeling needs to extend beyond translation to include processing. For example, many Muslims eat halal meat, which needs to be processed in a very specific way. Outside of specific halal markets, Muslim residents may find difficulty in accessing halal food in large chain stores.

When asked about locally-sourced food, participants considered it good, but expensive. Participants were less concerned about the food being locally-sourced than they were about freshness of meat and produce. However, they associated locally-sourced meat with freshness because it does not have to be frozen for long periods of time for distribution. For participants, the ability to pick their own fresh seafood or have meat cut to order at a butcher department was important.

Our interviews with key contacts often touched on the cultural appropriateness of the food in area schools. Anneliese Tanner reports that students request culturally appropriate foods, such as Vietnamese or Mediterranean food, but it is difficult to make culturally acceptable food that is also compliant with the USDA's strict requirements. For example, there may be difficulties in adapting culturally relevant food to requirements such as food having to be 100% whole grain. Esther Chan Martin explained,

"The issue with Asian American communities specifically is that we have certain dietary needs and concerns as well as some religious restrictions that prevent us from participating in the main meal plan, which does not provide a protein that's other than meat."

Anneliese Tanner spoke about the disconnect between having free and reduced lunch applications in different languages but not providing culturally appropriate foods associated with these cultures:

"We have our free application available in Vietnamese, but we have no Vietnamese food on our menu; to me that doesn't make sense. The same thing with Mediterranean or Arabic and cultural foods; we have our applications available in Arabic but we don't have any foods that reflect those cultures on our menu either and to sort of confirm whether the students would like that or not in middle and high school as part of our survey on December we asked two questions: one 'what foods would you like to have?' and 'would you be interested in global dishes on the menu?' and we gave some examples; we had requests for falafel and for gyro and for more authentic Mexican foods."



accessibility

key findings

- The public transportation system is inconvenient for grocery shopping due to long wait times. Lack of sidewalks makes walking or cycling highly dangerous.
- Better street lighting and increased police presence can increase security and, in turn, feelings of safety in the area.
- Time is a major barrier to accessing healthy foods.

Convenience and availability were major determinants for participants deciding where to shop; participants generally preferred going to the stores closest to them. Participants mentioned that they would be willing to purchase meat and produce if they were available at convenience stores and said that farmers markets are not convenient, with the closest one about four miles away at the Triangle. Meanwhile, the fast food places are much closer and more accessible. Many individuals expressed that needing to visit multiple stores to buy everything they need is time-consuming and inconvenient. Participants with cars or someone to carpool with complained about limited parking at the H-E-B on North Lamar Boulevard.

The lack of sidewalks along the major roads in the area makes walking dangerous. Esther Chan Martin reports,

"Sidewalk mobility issues are really, really dangerous in this region, and they need to fix that... Because a lot of this area is not walkable safely, and there's a lot of really heavy traffic, and people drive way too fast. I know, because I just experienced it this morning [I was almost] run over. And you don't feel safe walking around here. And same thing with Lamar. I mean those sidewalks are crafted with barely any space for you to walk, and so I think we got to fix that."

She continued, *"It's really ironic that this is Rundberg and this is Middle Fiskville, and this is what the sidewalk is, is the main entrance so people have to walk there; right over here where there is nobody walking, there's a beautiful sidewalk, I don't know how that happens, where is the disconnect that happens where this stretch is the most leveled, perfect sidewalk you've ever seen but right where people need it, it's nothing but a death trap; that's frustrating."*

Focus group participants recommended a pedestrian bridge and said that, currently, many of the main streets in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area such as Lamar Boulevard, Braker Lane, Ohlen Road, and US Highway 183 are unsafe for pedestrians.

Participants also said that they would like to take public transportation or ride a bike, but carrying shopping bags and the absence of any protected bike lanes make these options difficult and unsafe. Our community contacts reported concerns of heavy traffic, limited lighting, and missing or destroyed sidewalks throughout the North Central Austin/Rundberg area. Mary Jo Hernandez referenced a client who said,

"I ride the bus. I have two kids. There's no sidewalk and it's so hard to get in and out if you don't have transportation. It's just so hard."

Contacts reported that public transportation in the target area does not equally serve residents on both sides of I-35. Therefore, residents who live on different parts of I-35, or in housing complexes around I-35, may not be able to access public transportation services like other residents in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area.

The focus group participants who use public transportation for grocery shopping complained that late buses and long commutes often cause food to go bad. One participant mentioned that it takes her 1 hour 15 minutes to get to the grocery store, and multiple participants said that if they miss a bus, they have to wait 45 minutes for the next bus. Some participants also considered the bus service expensive. The participants at one focus group mentioned that they would welcome bicycle classes for their children.

Participants mentioned the lack of security near the bus stops as a primary reason to not use public transportation. Participants have seen gang members behind the H-E-B and near schools where there are no surveillance cameras. Several individuals witnessed drug sales, prostitution, and theft at the bus stops and also expressed concerns about loitering inebriated people. Some participants are also wary of the homeless population living close to Walmart. One participant pointed out that the presence of liquor stores negatively impacts the security in the area.

Some participants identified a decrease in police patrols and wanted both greater police presence and better general maintenance in the area. The desire for more policing was not a universally expressed opinion. Some participants were concerned about police patrols checking on immigration status and documentation. A lack of proper street lighting came up often as a link to the increased security concerns in the area. Many participants feel safer going to the H-E-B and Walmart in Round Rock, and, when they do shop within their community, they feel more comfortable going with others.

Key community contacts reported time as a significant barrier to accessing healthy food in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area. Contacts commented on the fact that, even after purchasing healthy foods, it was time consuming for individuals and families to prepare healthy food, particularly those working long hours and/or multiple jobs. As Mary Jo Hernandez explained,

“There’s a problem with not having enough time to buy it and prepare it because people are working multiple jobs. And then, there’s a lack of knowledge about what is healthy and how to even prepare it if you had it.”

Additional community resources, such as schools or food banks, can help families and individuals save on

“If it didn’t take too long to get where you need to go, we would all use the bus.”

- Focus Group Participant

time in accessing healthy food. If a needy individual is able to access food at a place he or she already goes, such as their child’s school, a church, or other community center, they would save the time needed to buy food and could then spend more time preparing that food. Anneliese Tanner remarked, “If you don’t have time to go to the grocery store then you won’t get the food. But, all the parents come to get their kids and so making things convenient is important.”

limitations

Although several findings emerged that were novel to the food planning process, we faced limitations in achieving a fully inclusive process. The demographic information collected during focus groups was limited to broad categories of race/ethnicity. This restricted our ability to analyze the data at a truly representative level. For example, the category ‘Asian’ incorporated several different community groups in our target area, including individuals from China, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. These community members have different food habits and want access to different food resources, which were not represented in our results. In addition, the demographic surveys did not ask questions about homelessness, income, employment status, or immigration status. These data would have provided additional depth to our analysis.

In addition, the quantity and quality of the data was limited by time constraints. Focus groups were restricted to an hour and a half, and each participant

had a limited time to speak to allow all members of the group to participate. The natural tendency of some people to speak more than others also limited the ability of each participant to share ideas. Language was also a limitation. Dozens of languages are spoken in the area and the research team did not have the language capacity to communicate with all language groups.

Though our focus group sample population was fairly representative of the target area population, certain groups were underrepresented. Table 3.2 below shows that the white population, individuals between 56 and 64 years old, individuals with college or higher education, and males were underrepresented in our sample as compared to the target population. However, the interviews with our key community contacts do serve to fill some of these holes. For example, Anneliese Tanner spoke extensively about the area’s schools and what resources they offer to children and families.

Under-Represented Groups	North Central Austin/ Rundberg Population %	Study Sample %
White Population	26.8%	10%
56 to 64 Years Old	7%	3.2%
Individuals with College or Higher Education	16.5%	5%
Males	54.7%	27%

Table 3.2 Underrepresented populations in our focus groups

The research team faced some challenges when choosing the 13 key community contacts for our one-on-one interviews. The City provided the research team with an extensive list of potential contacts, and it was difficult to choose the right community contact to address areas where we felt the focus group results may have been lacking. Our goal was for each interviewee to have distinct knowledge and experiences that were different from the other interviewees. We only spoke to seven people due to time constraints, and while these individuals were representatives in their communities, they did not necessarily represent all voices within the community. Due to our inability to interview the remaining five identified community contacts, the research team was unable to deepen our analysis of certain populations such as the homeless, Muslim, African American, disabled, and elderly populations.

A limitation of our interviews was that only one of our key community contacts identified as a male. The research team did not identify this as a serious concern given that interviewees worked with or represented both men and women in their professional capacities; however, interviewing additional males could have deepened our analysis. Finally, poor sound quality in the recordings of our interviews led to missed conversation and misunderstood words in the transcriptions. As an expected part of research, members of the research team used field notes from the interviews to fill these gaps. We address suggestions for improving upon this process in our companion process evaluation document.

chapter 4

policy recommendations and conclusions



toward an inclusive food system

Food is a central part of daily life. A supportive food system can nourish people in their homes, at work, and at play. The infrastructure of that system is logistical, but also social, economic, and political. It encompasses the full range of city departments, civil society, non-governmental organizations, for-profit businesses, and residents. The City's *Imagine Austin* plan points to many ways that food matters in Austin's future. But it is in the specifics that the City's grand vision will become reality, and this will require uncommon coordination.

We have categorized our research and the feedback received from North Central Austin/Rundberg area residents into four categories. These categories represent opportunities to develop more inclusive food infrastructure: appropriate information, availability, accessibility, and affordability. Many of our findings fall outside of a narrowly defined understanding of the food system as a cycle of production and consumption. This reflects the fact that food is necessary and personal, touching on all parts of people's lives. It is unsurprising, therefore, that associated policies need to cross boundaries, too.

appropriate information

Our findings from the food retailer surveys, focus groups, and community leader interviews indicate that access to actionable information about healthy, affordable food is a challenge for many in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area. The following recommendations aim to increase the quality and availability of information about healthy food, and to ensure that the information provided is culturally appropriate, accurate, and accessible for all of the North Central Austin/Rundberg area residents.

develop central hubs for information dissemination

One way to address the information gap is by engaging with trusted and comprehensive community hubs to disseminate information about food resources. Specifically, the City has an opportunity to leverage the area's extensive network of community resources, including school groups, faith-based organizations, community centers, and radio stations to provide spaces for information sharing. In addition to these resources, the City should also expand its technology-based efforts, like 211 and 311, to include mobile applications in multiple languages.

facilitate information sharing through creative partnerships

Focus group participants discussed their concern about the lack of adequate nutritional information and education when purchasing food. They are keen for assistance in accessing this information. The City of Austin can facilitate partnerships in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area to help fill this information gap. Some examples of partnerships include:

- A partnership with Travis County and Texas State Health and Human Services Departments to host SNAP/WIC enrollment drives for retailers. These events can be opportunities for the City to dispel the misinformation that accepting SNAP/WIC is expensive and involves onerous compliance issues for food retailers.
- City support of a partnership between H-E-B (or other retailers) and the Sustainable Food Center to promote healthy foods and nutritional education through in-store cooking demonstrations and healthy "combo-loco" product bundles that make purchasing and preparing healthy meals easier and more affordable.

- A partnership that encourages food retailers to adopt simpler nutritional labeling than the federally mandated nutrition facts such as the traffic-light labeling initiatives – green for healthy, yellow for ‘in moderation’, and red for ‘rarely’ – that have proven successful elsewhere.⁶⁵ Residents also sought labels in more languages to ensure that more people are able to understand the health implications of the foods they purchase.

more information about nutrition, emergency food services, and government assistance programs in culturally appropriate languages

Many residents lack adequate information about their welfare eligibility and find it difficult to access these resources. Feeding Texas estimates that only 57% of residents who are eligible for SNAP and WIC are enrolled, leaving over \$169 million in unused federal and state benefits.⁶⁶ The City can assist by including informational flyers in monthly utility bill statements, by hosting enrollment fairs, and by creating City online portal links to SNAP/WIC applications in languages other than English and Spanish.

availability

A reoccurring challenge reported by focus group participants and retailers was the availability of good quality, healthy foods in the Rundberg area’s existing food retail landscape. The policy recommendations below attempt to address ways in which the City can enhance existing food infrastructure to make healthy foods more readily available.

increase support for smaller markets with healthy food in the Rundberg area (e.g. ethnic markets, frutería, mobile markets, farm stands, etc.)

Minority-owned and community-led small businesses have the potential to reach broader populations. The City of Austin should increase its support for smaller markets. Increasing the number and geographic distribution of these markets can address residents’ time constraints if they are closer to where they live and work. Together with increased educational and nutritional resources, these markets can positively affect long-term health outcomes and contribute to the City’s *Imagine Austin* goals.⁶⁷

provide incentives for retailers to expand refrigeration and storage infrastructure for fresh fruits and vegetables

The majority of food retailers responded that logistical and operational concerns were the biggest barriers to meeting demand. One barrier many small retailers reported was high refrigeration and storage costs associated with stocking fresh produce. More at My Store, Austin’s healthy corner store initiative, is in its pilot phase. Assuming its success, expanding support, for example through funding the subsidization of refrigeration, could also increase the accessibility of healthy foods.

Other cities have successfully implemented similar policies around healthy corner stores.⁶⁸ Subsidized improvements to store infrastructure are valuable incentives for food retailers to become more proactive in providing healthy food in their stores. Food hubs are also worth further examination, as they can link local farming communities to local retailers.⁶⁹ In the case of Austin, the City could partner with neighboring counties to maximize the social benefits of such an approach.

Additionally, the City should further investigate the energy costs associated with stocking produce for small retailers to determine if such costs are, in fact, a drain on resources for store owners. If so, the City should explore subsidizing energy costs for small food retailers who make fresh fruits and vegetables available at their stores.

ensure higher food quality and safety

The City can take action on residents’ concerns over the quality and cleanliness of food available at grocery stores in their neighborhoods. The City should engage in more oversight of retail stores’ standards of quality and cleanliness, including the freshness of meat and produce. This effort should also include more undercover health inspections – something that North Austin residents believe will increase confidence in the City’s health certification process. The City can also encourage transparency and address perceptions of food safety in its inspections and evaluations process by requiring “grades” to be visibly posted.

accessibility

Focus group participants reported transportation and safety as significant barriers to accessing healthy food. Large parts of the North Central Austin/Rundberg area do not fall within the USDA's definition of a 'food desert,' meaning that while residents may have low-incomes, they reside within a mile of a medium or large grocery store; healthy food is technically available. Yet, if they are unable to access these food sources, due to a lack of public transportation, lack of safe sidewalks, or concerns about crime, the availability of healthy food is unimportant. The following policy recommendations address physical barriers to healthy food access and urge the City to formally consider the link between transportation and food systems.

improve and maintain transportation infrastructure including buses, sidewalks and lighting to allow for secure walking and cycling



There are multiple aspects of transportation that impede the accessibility of healthy food. Buses are often infrequent or late and have limited routes. Sidewalks and street lighting are inadequate for pedestrian safety. The City should continue to make improvements to public transportation by ensuring that buses run on schedule and more frequently. Residents reported this as a particular concern in Austin's summer heat.

The City should improve infrastructure in the area, including sidewalks and lighting, to allow safe walking and cycling. The U.S. Census shows that the majority of cyclists are low-income, and a comprehensive cycling system geared towards this majority would have a disproportionately beneficial impact for them.⁷⁰ In 2009, The City of Austin Public Works Department created a Sidewalk Master Plan, and a 2016 update is in draft form. Roads and areas frequently mentioned as problems by focus group participants are listed as either priority or high priority in the Plan.⁷¹ The pending 2016 update has set a 10-year target to improve 50 miles of sidewalks in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area. We urge the Public Works Department to share with community members its construction designs, plans, and timelines, and incorporate feedback to promote accountability for the plan.

require a food impact analysis for all new transportation expansion projects

Transportation and food are inextricably linked. Consideration of food access in transportation planning has great potential to benefit local residents and retailers. By considering the location of food outlets when planning transportation infrastructure and bus routes, planners have the opportunity to benefit residents and stores. Further, transportation assistance programs, such as additional bus routes or shuttle services that increase transit options to grocery retail can “generate \$545,700 to \$1,514,700 a year in revenues if 20% of households without cars used the service for weekly shopping” across the City.⁷² With adequate transit, an urban store could operate with reduced parking requirements and save significantly on land costs.⁷³

The 2011 King County Food Access Guide⁷⁴ recommends the following be considered in any potential impact analyses:

- Base transit accessibility plans on both routes and time of day in relation to store access, and give priority to areas where public transportation is most depended upon.
- Establish a walkability standard for access to retailers with fresh produce.
- Set standards for proximity between transit-oriented development and food retail options.



expand senior and disabled transportation program to include low-income residents who do not have readily available access to public or private transportation

A shuttle service or grocery delivery program for elderly populations would also improve access greatly. In Chelsea, Michigan, the Chelsea Area Transportation System (CATS) provides 'on demand' shuttle service to bring senior citizens to the Chelsea Farmers Market on Saturday mornings.⁷⁵ Hartford, Connecticut implemented two innovative solutions to expand access to healthy food for low-income residents and senior citizens. The L-Tower Avenue bus route was designed as a part of the Jobs Access program to link individuals living in the North End with jobs, shopping, and medical services. In one year, bus ridership doubled, and 33% of riders cited grocery shopping as their primary reason for utilizing the route.⁷⁶ In addition, the Hartford Food System, a non-governmental organization dedicated to finding long-term solutions for access to affordable and healthy food in Hartford, has a strategic partnership with a grocery store to provide phone order grocery service. The service is free for recipients and is funded by The North Central Area Agency on Aging, local businesses, and churches.⁷⁷

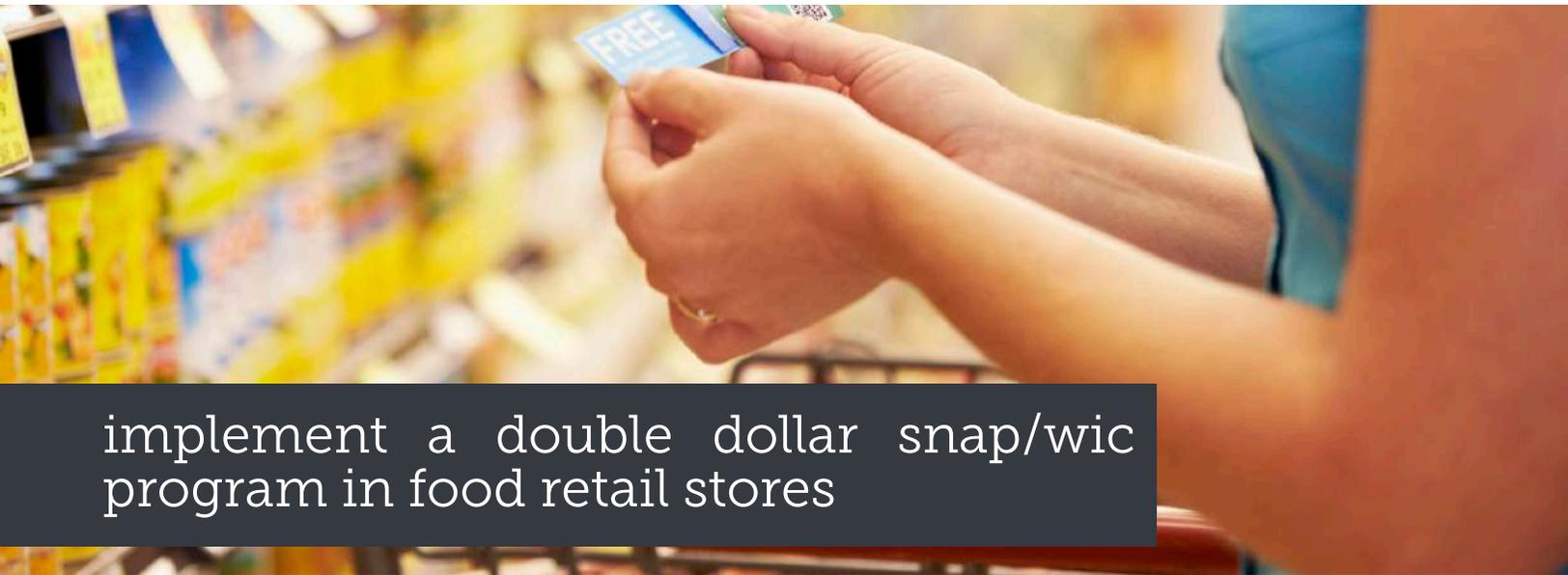
The City of Austin has a history of providing a "grocery bus" line for low-income residents in East Austin.⁷⁸ Capital Metro's Route 208: East Austin Circulator began in 1996 in order to connect residents of East Austin to two major community grocery stores. Since its inception, the route has become one of the agency's most utilized ridership services. Now called Route 320: St. Johns, it has evolved beyond its original design to serve a variety of schools, healthcare facilities, libraries, museums, employment sites, housing developments, and other local destinations, in addition to serving a number of grocery stores along the way. Such a bus route in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area would help expand access to healthy food.

increase public safety measures in the rundberg area

The Restore Rundberg initiative, a neighborhood revitalization project seeking to reduce crime and increase safety, increased police presence in the area. The program focuses on community engagement and increasing residents' confidence in law enforcement. Funding for this project expires in September 2016. Until additional funding sources are identified, community members suggested that the police prioritize bus stops and parks, as these locations are often unavoidable when traveling to stores in the area without a car.

affordability

A major finding from focus group discussions and our one-on-one interviews was that participants desire healthy food but consider it unaffordable. Local non-governmental organizations such as the Sustainable Food Center have set examples for how to provide affordable food to low-income households. The City of Austin can build on the success of proven models to expand affordable food programs. Addressing wealth disparities and raising incomes to reduce food insecurity is a difficult task, but the City needs to commit to this goal if it is to end the food insecurity of many of its residents.



implement a double dollar snap/wic program in food retail stores

The Sustainable Food Center currently sponsors a Double Dollars program that doubles the dollar amount that families can spend on fruits and vegetables at SFC Farmers Markets when they use their food benefits cards. The Double Dollars Program accepts benefits such as the SNAP, WIC, and Farmers Markets Nutrition Program (FMNP) and matches up to \$20 in benefits that are spent on fruits and vegetables.

Many families who would not ordinarily be able to afford the cost of fruits and vegetables at farmers markets are now able to purchase local and healthy food because of this program, which is the first of its kind in Texas. The City of Austin should consider expanding this program to include all food retailers by applying for support from the USDA's Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive (FINI) Grant Program, which offers funding to increase the purchase of fresh fruits and vegetables.

ensure small retailers in the rundberg area accept snap/wic and participate in the double dollar program

Many Rundberg residents access food through small retailers, markets, and convenience stores. The City of Austin should work with a network of small retailers such as the Greater Austin Merchants Association (GAMA) to expand the Double Dollars program to corner stores that are more common and accessible than grocery stores. The more prevalent the Double Dollar program becomes through the City's implementation, the more retailers will become familiar with the program and be willing to accept it. If the City of Austin can receive federal funding to expand the program, it could partner with the Sustainable Food Center to develop an implementation strategy and pilot the program in the Rundberg area.

validation

To ensure confidence in the findings above, we distributed a survey to North Central Austin/ Rundberg area residents, in which we asked residents to rank their most pressing challenges and their most sought-after policy recommendations. The surveys were distributed both on paper and via an online survey and were conducted in person at a soccer match at the Gus Garcia Recreation Center and an immigration workshop at Lanier High School. In the first round of analysis, 177 residents shared their responses. Our team compared the data between languages (English and Spanish) and between digital and paper surveys.

We found that issues around money, time, information, transportation, and language were repeatedly noted in written responses to survey questions. Concerns around safety while using transportation and about the prevalence of homeless people were not as pronounced in the broader validation process as they had been in focus group meetings, although focus group participants were among those surveyed in the validation exercise.

Affordable housing was a central concern. Respondents asked for programs and changes that would improve the Rundberg area's infrastructure and community. Another theme was a community-wide desire to create a livable neighborhood. Respondents asked for public parks, art, and places for people to congregate. They also asked for more events to bring community members together such as block parties and classes to help create a feeling of community. One respondent raised the idea that the North Central Austin/Rundberg neighborhood is, in fact, a fictitious community created in order to secure a grant. However, requests and desires for community building activities, both in physical spaces and between people, suggest a desire to create a community centered around improving the area.

There were some differences between those who took the survey online and those who took it at an event or through the school district on a paper survey. Overall, the biggest challenge reported was: *"It's a struggle to eat healthily given my budget or schedule."* Among Spanish-speaking and paper survey respondents, however, the top concern was: *"It's hard to find reliable information about healthy food or cooking on a budget."* There were also some differences between residents' top policy choice. Across all surveyed individuals, the top ranked recommendation was for more small markets with healthy food. The call for better sidewalks, lighting, and buses finished a very close second. Among Spanish-speaking and paper survey respondents, the primary concern was for more affordable housing. Among online respondents, it was for better sidewalks, lighting, and buses (see Appendix B for a comprehensive discussion of the report-back process and findings).

These differences point once again to the need for an inclusive approach. We have found that the economic, cultural, and social diversity of the area demands a variety of avenues to engage with and support that diversity. Overall, the validation process gives us confidence that the findings and recommendations in this report reflect the priorities of the North Central Austin/Rundberg area's residents.

further conclusions and big ideas

The inclusive research process generated a range of questions and issues that fall outside the usual definitions of food policy, but point to ways we believe City policymakers might advocate for change at the state and federal levels.

People with incomes hovering at the qualifying level for food and other government assistance programs face a difficult decision. Should they work as much as possible and risk losing much-needed assistance, or should they limit their income in order to qualify for government support?

increase snap/wic benefits by raising the qualifying threshold and quantity of benefits

The research team recognizes that government assistance programs, including SNAP and WIC, are set by the federal government. However, as the cost of living in Austin and other Texas cities continues to rise, we believe it is important for the City to consider local solutions and ways to influence state and federal legislators to change these policies. The 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act temporarily loosened qualification criteria for SNAP/WIC benefits. With the expiration of those benefits, many have experienced hardship. This compounds the low purchasing power of SNAP benefits, 80% of which are redeemed within two weeks of receipt.⁷⁹ In addition, healthy food is generally more expensive in the United States than unhealthy food.⁸⁰ People with incomes hovering at the qualifying level for food and other government assistance programs face a difficult decision. Should they work as much as possible and risk losing much-needed assistance, or should they limit their income in order to qualify for government support? Residents of the North Central Austin/Rundberg area who were struggling to make ends meet reported wrestling with this question.

advocate for higher citywide income

San Francisco, Seattle, and Los Angeles have passed ordinances to increase the minimum wage to \$15/hour. In addition to city-level support for a higher minimum wage, California and New York have engaged in the conversation at the state level. Although the State of Texas has expressly prohibited municipalities from raising the minimum wage for all citizens, the City of Austin raised the minimum wage for city employees to \$13/hour (for all 13,000 employees). A minimum wage increase is not the only possible solution. Experiments with a basic income grant in international cities such as Utrecht, Lausanne and, soon, Vancouver offer examples that might serve as inspiration for how cities can foster inclusivity. The research team recommends that the City of Austin explore innovative solutions to alleviate some of the most persistent causes of poverty and food insecurity - stagnant wages, an inadequate safety net, and a lack of access to higher paying jobs.

integrate food, equity, and public health initiatives

There is widespread confusion around what constitutes healthy food. Creative policy around this will need to both make healthy food available – particularly to children – and facilitate the education of the public about their options. Some creative policies in Brazil point to the gains that can be achieved by linking agricultural and education policy.⁸¹ Austin's current initiatives around becoming a Model Healthy City, particularly at a time of increased concern about inequality, offer an opportunity to breach silos around health, poverty, and food in ways that can be similarly creative.

final thoughts

Many of the policies above fall beyond the scope of traditional food policy planning. This is to be expected; the food system is never experienced exclusively along the axis of the absence or presence of food. It is woven through the lives of North Central Austin/Rundberg residents as they go to school or work, as they play with or care for one another, and as they learn and build community. This speaks to our inclusive approach, which was intended to be more open to these kinds of experiences than traditional food policy analysis.

Although our approach was inclusive, it was not comprehensive. There is much that we were not able to include in our analysis. Although restaurant and fast food purchases are an important part of the food system in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area, we were not able to give them the investigative or analytical treatment they warrant. Similarly, we were unable to undertake an analysis of the environmental, health, sustainability, labor, or other impacts of the food system in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area. The policy conclusions above were also subject to limited validation – resource constraints did not permit a fuller exploration of the acceptability, viability, or benefits of particular policy approaches. In part, this document is a step towards informing that wider process, particularly as the City's Office of Sustainability deliberates over its future food planning process.

The resources spent on inclusive research, through developing deeper ties with local community groups and leaders, facilitated deeper ties between the City's Office of Sustainability and the North Central Austin/Rundberg area. These relationships will be important in the future validation of the report's results and, more importantly, in the development of policy based on this report. We submit this report not as the final statement of findings or recommendations from the North Central Austin/Rundberg area, but one that we hope will be the first step in a process that brings to residents of Austin, and of Central Texas, a food system that ensures justice and sustainability for all.

appendices

Appendix A

An Overview of Food System Planning in Austin

Food Systems and Planning

A food system is an integrated network that includes the production, processing, distribution, consumption, and waste management of food—everything that happens with food, from where and how it is grown, to how it is ultimately disposed, along with the expectations and norms that accompany the process of growing, consuming and disposing of that food. A functioning food system not only feeds the community, but also has positive impacts on health, economic development, the environment, and neighborhood revitalization. Food systems face many challenges, including hunger and food insecurity, the loss of farmland surrounding cities, water pollution, poor waste management, and health problems related to inadequate diets.⁸²

The research team examined cities throughout North America that have addressed these challenges by incorporating food systems into their city planning.⁸³ Austin has sought to integrate the multiple sectors of its food system in order to create and maintain a sustainable system where healthy food can be produced and purchased locally. Austin’s *State of the Food System Report* addressed the need to develop this integration.⁸⁴ The City’s Office of Sustainability released the report in April 2015 to provide a snapshot of the food system at that point in time, and to create a common framework for future actions. The Report linked the increasing food-related health and equity issues in Austin to its ultimate goal for the food system: “For Austin to be a thriving, equitable, and ecologically resilient community, it must have a healthy and just local food system.”⁸⁵

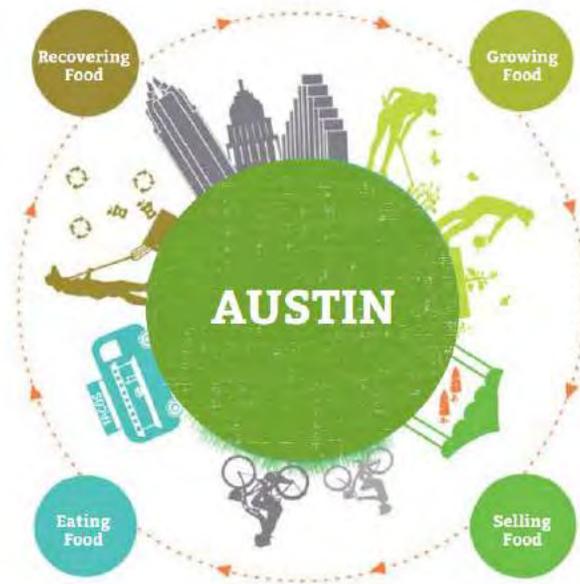


Figure A.1 Office of Sustainability’s graphic representation of a sustainable food system⁸⁶

Cities in the United States such as San Francisco, Seattle, Portland, and Baltimore, as well as the Canadian cities of Vancouver, Toronto, Ottawa, and Victoria have all developed city plans specifically around food systems. Each has adopted different strategies to address similar issues around inequity. The research team chose to examine these cities' approaches to food planning because they included the voices of community members during the planning process and/or presented inclusive approaches specifically addressing the needs of the community. Although innovations and obstacles vary due to distinct municipal goals, demographics, and food resources, analyzing and learning from other cities' food system plans has helped expand our understanding of the planning process and its impacts.⁸⁷

We identified best practices and challenges that may contribute to a successful community-based food system specifically stemming from the cities' policies relating to their planning processes, food production, food retail, and food access. By examining food action plans developed by other cities, we can contextually address what has been done in Austin thus far, and how the City can then effectively address the challenges around improving the food system in Austin.

Developing a Food Action Plan

There are several tools that a local government can use to address food-related issues and plan a food system. Some cities address food issues through their comprehensive city plans. A comprehensive plan is a long-range policy document that covers the entire city and addresses a broad range of planning topics.⁸⁸ Comprehensive plans focus on a city's land use, urban design, and zoning regulations rather than directly on food systems. However, these plans ultimately influence the food production on farmland, food processing procedures, food distribution networks, and food retailing diversity around a city.⁸⁹

Today, many cities are creating food action plans, which are distinct from comprehensive city plans, directly address problems related to food, and create new programs to develop food systems within their cities.⁹⁰ A food action plan often focuses on available resources or opportunities within the community, identifies specific goals and tasks, and then outlines steps to achieve its goals. It may target one or more aspects of the food system, as designated by the individual city.⁹¹ The primary actors in the food action planning process are local governments in partnership with non-governmental organizations, community leaders, and other stakeholders. We looked at several cities' plans to identify best practices and challenges to inform our analysis of the food system and food planning in Austin.

Best Practices in Food Planning

The Cities of Seattle and Vancouver both incorporated inclusive approaches to identifying food system priorities that we sought to emulate in Austin.

In 2012, the City of Seattle's Office of Sustainability and Environment, in partnership with the Seattle Food Interdepartmental Team, launched the *Seattle Food Action Plan*. Seattle made a healthy food system a priority because of rising obesity and diet-related diseases, accelerating health care expenses, growing economic inequality, and rising food insecurity, especially among vulnerable populations. Seattle developed an inclusive plan by soliciting input from community members to

ensure the plan reflected the community's priorities.⁹² Seattle held listening sessions with city residents and convened meetings with community members and organizations working on food issues.⁹³ Participants were asked to select the areas where they wanted to see change, such as access to healthy food, opportunities to grow food on public land, support for small businesses, and access to food education. Seattle planners regarded this community feedback as important in setting the goals of the action plan.⁹⁴

The City of Vancouver, in partnership with the Vancouver Food Policy Council and 16 community organizations, is working towards creating a just and sustainable food system. In 2013, Vancouver created *What Feeds Us: Vancouver Food Strategy*, a systematic plan to enhance the environmental, economic, social, and nutritional wellbeing of the city and its residents. Unlike plans in most other cities, Vancouver's food action plan addresses food-related problems at the neighborhood level, rather than citywide. Because of strong connections to the network of stakeholders, Vancouver set goals based on community input derived from broad public events and community consultation.⁹⁵ In addition, Vancouver identified gaps, prioritized actions, and operated at site-specific, neighborhood, and citywide scales to support and enhance the city's food assets.⁹⁶ This collaborative approach effectively increased the availability of city and neighborhood food assets such as community gardens, local food hubs, and farmers markets through promoting neighborhood food networks, assisting in establishing new farmers markets, creating community food markets and mobile green grocers, and establishing a healthy corner store program.⁹⁷

Challenges

Key stakeholder interviews with those involved in food system planning in the Pacific Northwest revealed tensions not covered in the official literature. In particular, there are profound challenges in adopting a neighborhood planning process. Reaching everyone within a community is difficult, and while expansive advertising helped to promote knowledge among an English-speaking audience that a planning process was underway, some have suggested that the resulting community engagement was superficial, usually monolingual, sporadic, and unsatisfactory. The plans that derived from these engagements were, therefore, not as representative as their origin story might have suggested. Neighborhood planning is hard, and plans based on it are only as good as the processes used to develop them.

A healthy and local food system benefits everyone. However, engaging in a participatory process requires an investment of time and effort. Even if a plan is created inclusively, conflicts will inevitably arise between incompatible priorities such as urban farming and residential land use or between large-scale retailers and community-based food resources, which may jeopardize effective implementation of food system policies. This is especially true when considered in the context of sustainable food planning. Sustainable planning often includes goals such as producing and consuming local food and reducing food waste, which can complicate food planning and be at odds with more pressing equity concerns. Residents who have difficulty accessing healthy food, or even food in general, on a regular basis will likely be concerned first with whether they can access food before they are able to entertain an interest in its origins. This is an inherent tension in food system development that planners must continually work to address.

Even if the neighborhood planning process is perfect, challenges remain. In the planning process, city planners are faced with trade-offs between creating a holistic food system plan using a "top-down"

approach that is applicable across the city and a “bottom-up” approach that incorporates individuals’ ideas through a more collaborative process. To plan effectively, city governments need useful reflections and feedback from local residents, but must focus on the larger picture of the food system as well, which can lead to tension.⁹⁸ Residents prefer a participatory process to help them manage change in their neighborhoods. To both acknowledge and balance the numerous voices and concerns of the community with larger, overarching municipal goals is a challenge for city governments. Merging the individual and the collective is integral to ensuring that plans are feasible and effective for all stakeholders.⁹⁹

Food Planning in Austin

Inequity in Austin’s planning history begins with the City’s original 1928 plan, segregating the city. Denied services in the west of the City, people of color were pushed to the east, where there were fewer facilities and services. In the 1970s, the City of Austin developed the *Austin Tomorrow Comprehensive Plan*, which identified priorities like an expansive parks system and robust environmental protections, balancing these interests with the needs of the growing population. In 2008, the City of Austin adopted the *Austin Tomorrow Comprehensive Plan Interim Update*, the first update to the City’s comprehensive planning goals since the original *Austin Tomorrow* was adopted in 1979. The 2008 *Update* primarily removed obsolete policies from *Austin Tomorrow* and inserted policies adopted in the three decades between the two plans.¹⁰⁰ As explained in a memo from the planning department to City Council, “The concept [of the *Update*] was to compile the growth and development related planning initiatives undertaken since the [1979] plan’s adoption and to use those as sources to complete an update of the plan.”¹⁰¹ This update reflected food-related objectives such as discouraging the development of areas with high agricultural or environmental value and improving access to community gardens.¹⁰²

In 2012, the City adopted the *Imagine Austin Comprehensive Plan* to address Austin’s rapid growth and urbanization and to plan future development. *Imagine Austin* offers guidance on various aspects of community development including housing, land use, transportation, the economy, health, city facilities, and environmental resources and touches on many food system policies such as farmland, urban agriculture, community gardens, and food businesses.¹⁰³ The Plan aims to create accountability and facilitate implementation of Austin’s vision for a “complete community.”¹⁰⁴ Access to healthy food is a component of Priority Program 7: Creating a Healthy Austin. *Imagine Austin* serves as more of a visionary document than an action plan. Specifics about how, where, and which initiatives or policies should be prioritized were not fully explored. Although the Plan mentions sustainable food systems 25 times, *Imagine Austin* does not necessarily address complex, underlying issues like equity in food access and different cultural needs. While *Imagine Austin’s* Healthy Austin goals promote an increase in local food production and preserving prime farmland, for example, these aren’t necessarily balanced with the need to increase affordable housing and preserve an affordable community.

The City identified the need for a strengthened food system and a more coordinated effort to address some of these tensions. The City’s Sustainable Food Policy Board made a recommendation to hire a food policy manager to coordinate the various efforts around food being made by over eighteen different City departments. Edwin Marty was hired in 2014 as the first City Food Policy Manager. In 2015, the Office of Sustainability released the *State of the Food System Report*. This report sketches out an overview of Austin’s food system incorporating production, distribution, consumption, and food recovery keeping as many nutrients out of the landfill as possible.¹⁰⁵ To expand the accessibility of

healthy and local food to all Austin neighborhoods, especially low-income communities, the City is exploring community-based approaches. The City is working to develop strategies and tactics at the neighborhood scale as part of a multi-layered series of actions around healthy food planning. The Food for All effort is designed to inform that process.

Food Production

Researchers have advocated for food systems that allow people to grow and buy locally produced food, arguing that doing so will reduce food miles, support local farmers, preserve farmland, and benefit the local economy.¹⁰⁶ Locally produced food can open access to fresh and healthy food for residents and can be a source of pride for a city or community. Many food system plans focus on policies that encourage local food production.

Best Practices

In some cities, community gardens and urban agriculture are more than just sources of food production - they can also be community assets or sources for sustainable small business development. Both New York City¹⁰⁷ and Vancouver¹⁰⁸ manage programs that promote community gardens and urban farming, which increase the amount of locally produced food and community engagement.

New York City is working to expand local agricultural production through GrowNYC's New Farmer Development Project, which identifies, educates, and supports farmers who establish small agricultural businesses. The project initially targeted aspiring immigrant farmers and has since been extended to all local farmers in the NYC region.¹⁰⁹ Under the guidance of GrowNYC, 42 farmers have established new farms throughout the city.¹¹⁰ The city also manages a technical assistance project called FARMroots, which was founded to expand this program. Under FARMroots, the Beginning Farmer Program provides financial and technical incentives as well as training for farmers familiar with agricultural production who seek to establish their own sustainable farms. These farmers effectively reach low-income customers by selling healthy products at farmers markets and through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) arrangements around low-income neighborhoods.¹¹¹

The City of Vancouver views urban agriculture as an important part of their food system. Their 97 community gardens are considered not just land, but also powerful community food assets.¹¹² The Britannia Urban Garden Project is a good example of a production-based approach to promote community engagement and to increase the availability of healthy, local produce. In partnership with schools, the project educates students and community members about healthy food choices, connects participants to the land and the food, and advances the links between schools, community centers, and the wider community.¹¹³ The project is currently focused on building new gardens, composting, and planting fruit trees with students. The City of Vancouver currently funds the needed materials, and the school develops the food-growing curriculum for grade 8-10 classes.¹¹⁴ So far, many participating students indicate they are learning not only how to garden, but also how a garden can unite the school and the community.¹¹⁵ In addition, the project initiates food and gardening workshops that teach community residents healthy cooking techniques and eating habits through community centers.

Challenges

Despite the successes of local food production projects in some cities, the expansion of housing, transportation, and commercial development fueled by urban population growth continually reduces the available farmland near cities.¹¹⁶ Austin faces the same challenges; in 2015, the City's annual population growth rate reached 2.9%.¹¹⁷ The tensions between urban sprawl and farmland conversion are well documented.¹¹⁸ The justification for pursuing policies to protect the rural landscape is to combat the negative impacts of urban sprawl, such as disruption of the agricultural economy and environmental degradation. However, there is also public concern that these policies restrict the land available for residential development and exacerbate the shortage of affordable housing.¹¹⁹ Under farmland preservation policies, investors and developers have to pay higher prices if they wish to build on farmland. As a result, housing cost increases eventually fall heavily on the community residents. In promoting an equitable food system, city governments must address these tensions and attempt to balance these potentially conflicting goals.

Food Production in Austin

Austin has made a focused effort to increase local food production. The City's Parks and Recreation Department manages the Sustainable Urban Agriculture and Community Garden Program, which was launched in 2009.¹²⁰ This program facilitates the process of building community gardens and sustainable urban agriculture on City-owned land through gardening education, permitting, and endorsement plans. Endorsement plans encourage community leaders and groups to build community gardens on City-owned land committed to growing non-commercial produce and require non-governmental organizations to endorse each community garden.¹²¹ The plans specify the responsibilities of the City, community, and non-governmental organizations, list city property management requirements, and introduce guidelines for application procedures and garden operations.

Another initiative is the Neighborhood Partnering Program, offering cost-sharing opportunities for community improvement projects.¹²² The program supports transforming City-owned land into community garden spaces. These programs have led to thirteen new community gardens and five new senior gardens serving retiring and senior communities on City-owned land.¹²³ However, a lack of available technical assistance, insufficient financial resources, personal time constraints, and prohibitive costs of permits limit participation in community gardens. Austin's food production will be discussed further later in this report.

Food Retail

Retailers are a crucial part of any food system. Residents with greater access to supermarkets or other food stores selling healthy food in their neighborhoods consume more fresh produce.¹²⁴ Many researchers and policymakers emphasize supermarkets as a pillar of food access because they are the most reliable sources of a wide variety of nutritious and affordable food.¹²⁵ However, the discussion has recently turned to other food retailing opportunities such as healthy corner stores and farmers markets, which may provide additional, more convenient opportunities for residents to purchase healthy food.¹²⁶

By assessing food retail conditions, the City can identify the barriers owners and operators face, create strategies to stimulate food retail development, and expand access to healthy food in areas where

access is limited. A strategic approach to food retailing will not only benefit residents who shop in the community, but will also help store owners boost economic growth and enhance operational efficiency.

Best Practices

Arguably, bringing healthy food to small retailers is more efficient than building more supermarkets as it increases walkability.¹²⁷ Low-income populations often live in areas where there are comparatively more convenience stores and fewer chain-supermarkets.¹²⁸ Seattle, Baltimore, New York, and Toronto all developed new strategies to bridge the gap in grocery stores in low-income communities by supporting the provision of healthy food at convenience stores, smaller grocery stores, or even virtual supermarkets.

The City of Baltimore developed the Food Desert Retail Strategy as part of their plan to expand healthy food access.¹²⁹ In this strategy, Baltimore reinforced the roles of supermarkets as “key resources for healthy food” and small grocery stores and corner stores as “potential targets for future interventions and supermarket alternatives”.¹³⁰ Key approaches include attracting and retaining supermarkets through offering financial incentives such as funds for workplace development and energy costs, improving other grocery retail options like the small food stores located around neighborhoods, promoting healthy food availability in the public market setting, and developing a transportation strategy to increase accessibility. The Baltimore City Health Department created the Virtual Supermarket Program to enable local residents to purchase groceries online and pick them up without registration or delivery fees.¹³¹ Baltimore further promoted the Virtual Supermarket Program through the Neighborhood Food Advocates Program, which provides on-site assistance with online ordering for residents living in food deserts.¹³² The Virtual Supermarket Program is also the first online grocery program in the country to accept SNAP benefits.¹³³

In New York City, the Food Retail Expansion to Support Health (FRESH) program was created to provide financial and zoning incentives to grocery store operators from communities that have a shortage of nutritious and affordable fresh food.¹³⁴ Nine new grocery stores have been established in underserved areas through the FRESH program.¹³⁵ To bring fresh and locally produced food to corner stores, GrowNYC and Red Jacket Orchards launched the Fresh Bodegas Program in 2010, which has now expanded to 11 stores in Central Brooklyn.¹³⁶ The program equips local bodegas and corner stores with infrastructure, such as refrigeration units, to sell fresh produce, helps store owners improve food displays and layouts, and provides marketing materials and technical training.¹³⁷

The City of Toronto initiated a Healthy Corner Store Project to make fresh and healthy food accessible in more neighborhoods and simultaneously support the local economy.¹³⁸ Where there is a lack of affordable supermarkets in Toronto, there is an abundance of convenience stores in many neighborhoods. These existing food retail spaces are utilized to bridge the gap between residents and healthy food. Toronto encourages convenience store owners to sell fresh produce such as fruits and vegetables through meetings and follow-up visits. Project staff held two focus groups to let the community determine what healthy food is and conducted detailed surveys with hundreds of community residents to ensure that changes in local convenience stores would meet the community's needs.¹³⁹ The project proved effective in two pilot convenience stores.¹⁴⁰ Toronto hopes to develop a toolkit to facilitate the profitable transformation of similar corner stores across the city.¹⁴¹

Challenges

Despite these success stories, selling healthy food at small grocery stores and corner stores is difficult. One important problem relates to whether customers can physically access these stores as transportation has long been a barrier to affordable and healthy food. Studies have endorsed expanding physical access to healthy food by offering alternative means of transportation.¹⁴² Some researchers, however, argued that transportation barriers to food markets should be tackled by examining and improving existing transportation routes and schedules.¹⁴³ Community groups and retailers can launch programs such as mobile markets, grocery shuttles, and grocery delivery services to improve access instead.

Challenges also include difficulty in identifying corner stores using existing resources such as SNAP/WIC lists, language and cultural barriers, the lack of availability and interest in training, and the inconsistent ownership of corner stores.¹⁴⁴ Corner store owners shoulder more burden due to complicated permitting procedures. They also face high levels of risk in introducing new products, which might cause them to lose regular customers or money on unsold merchandise. Though a program to promote healthy produce works in some pilot corner stores, it still requires extra efforts to scale to a city-level. Cities are in need of criteria for evaluating potential store conversion and an easy-to-follow plan that owners are more likely to accept. Understanding the operational and managerial barriers store owners face is important to improving healthy store options. Finally, there is currently little evidence showing that increasing the availability of fresh food in neighborhoods struggling with poverty leads to significant improvements in nutritional outcomes.¹⁴⁵

Food Retail in Austin

The City of Austin supports not only large-scale retailers such as supermarkets and grocery stores, but also smaller vendors such as farmers markets, school farm stands, mobile markets, and specialty markets. The City highlighted the sale of healthy food from farms and small businesses in the *State of the Food System Report* (2015) because these vendors have increasingly important roles in satisfying customer demand for local food. In 2009, the Environmental Health Services Division of the Austin/Travis County Health and Human Services Department collaborated with farmers market representatives to improve the existing permitting system.¹⁴⁶ In 2013, the City adopted three new types of permits that simplified and streamlined the process, enabling more local farmers to sell at farmers markets.¹⁴⁷ The City also adopted strategies to encourage convenience stores to stock healthier foods. In one qualitative study with Southeast Austin's low-income residents, ethnically diverse participants claimed convenience stores had very limited and low-quality food products.¹⁴⁸ On average, residents of underserved communities instead indicated a preference for a new supermarket.¹⁴⁹ Farmers markets were considered beneficial alternatives, but participants complained about the high price of produce, inconvenient locations, and limited operating times.¹⁵⁰

Food Access

The accessibility of healthy food is about more than just the physical location of stores with healthy options. While it is important to consider whether customers can physically access the stores, planners tend to consider access as a transportation-related issue. However, even when stores that sell healthy food are present, better community health does not necessarily follow. Many families struggle to afford the food they need due to systematic economic inequalities such as stagnant wages and a lack

of employment opportunities. Both the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program offer economic benefits to low-income individuals and families to diminish hunger and improve general health of participants by offering financial support for food purchases. These programs are helpful but do not necessarily address the many obstacles families face. It is important for any city's food system plan to look at food assistance programs and other ways to boost the ability of residents to purchase healthy options.

Best Practices

We examined best practices in cities related to improving assistance for people who cannot access healthy food, particularly Seattle and Vancouver, which initiated community-supported food programs to expand the ability of residents to access and purchase healthy food.

The City of Seattle uses its resources to support consumer purchasing power through a Farm-to-Table program designed to integrate locally produced food in programs serving children and older adults.¹⁵¹ It helps communities and agencies to make healthy food affordable and accessible by introducing new purchase options such as buying fresh produce from farms, building community skills and knowledge, and developing low-cost shared purchasing models.¹⁵² A progress report indicated a 45% increase in healthy food purchases from local farmers in area early learning centers.¹⁵³ Another important program is Fresh Bucks, which makes healthy food more affordable to low-income households by doubling federal food assistance benefits at Seattle farmers markets. About 90% of the 2,600 participants said they had more fruits and vegetables thanks to the Fresh Bucks program, especially the SNAP and WIC users.¹⁵⁴

The City of Vancouver supports smaller community food markets known as pocket markets to serve those facing food insecurity by providing an opportunity to buy fresh and nutritious food.¹⁵⁵ For instance, the South Vancouver Neighborhood Food Network Mobile Pocket Market ensures food access for community members. Vancouver purchases fresh produce from farmers or wholesalers and then sells it to vulnerable populations at a discounted rate.¹⁵⁶ The Pocket Market Coupon Program offers grants and funds for low-income neighborhoods where residents can buy Pocket Market Coupons at the beginning of the month and redeem them for fresh produce at certain pocket markets within 30 days.¹⁵⁷

Challenges

Although there are exciting examples of cities enacting policies to increase healthy food purchasing power, most low-income and food insecure families rely on federal programs with implementation protocols that vary by state. While SNAP and WIC play important roles in combating hunger, each program faces limitations that further constrain their respective goals. There are application barriers to these programs such as the lack of translated forms in languages other than Spanish and English and the strict income eligibility cutoff, which impacts those with unsteady work hours. These barriers mean that not all people eligible for enrollment actually participate in SNAP or WIC. Only about 59% of food insecure households in the United States participate in these programs, meaning there is a gap between the number of people eligible to utilize this assistance and the number enrolled to claim these benefits.¹⁵⁸ Additionally, long-term use of food stamps may actually increase the risk for obesity.¹⁵⁹ It is unclear that food assistance programs improve access to nutritious food; they may alleviate hunger but do not necessarily address the root causes of food insecurity or educate about healthy eating.¹⁶⁰

Food Access in Austin

The City of Austin seeks to ensure residents have access to nutritious meals, especially populations that suffer higher levels of food insecurity. The Austin/Travis County Health and Human Services Department offers healthcare assessments through the Community Health Assessment and Community Health Improvement Plan. The Plan identified four priorities that the community and other stakeholders should work on, including building an environment for greater access to healthy food.¹⁶¹ The City also promotes the availability of healthy food through SNAP and WIC. Yet the food assistance programs only cover some of the city's food insecure households and cannot guarantee stable and sufficient access to healthy food for all low-income groups in Austin.¹⁶² Feeding America estimates that in Travis County, "62% are eligible for SNAP, 4% may be eligible for government programs such as the child nutrition program or WIC, and 34% are not eligible for nutrition programs which means that about one-third of all food insecure individuals in Travis County must rely on charitable response as their only safety net option during times of hunger."¹⁶³ Further research should analyze the gaps in population and underserved geographic areas, examine what obstacles prevent participation, and what strategies could overcome these obstacles.

In Texas, the SNAP enrollment process was updated in 2011 to more efficiently process applications.¹⁶⁴ Yet, in the Austin area, we see a similar gap as the national one between those eligible and those enrolled in federal food assistance programs. Over half of the people who use the Capital Area Food Bank are not enrolled in SNAP, but 80% of this group is eligible.¹⁶⁵ In Austin, only 57% of eligible participants are enrolled, leaving over \$167 million in benefits unclaimed.¹⁶⁶

Conclusion

The City of Austin now has an opportunity to participate in the national conversation around improving food system planning. By looking at what other cities have done to address issues related to food insecurity and by looking closely at the food system in Austin, the City can take a strategic approach toward reducing inequities in food access in Austin and become a model for other cities facing similar challenges.



LYNDON B. JOHNSON SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

P.O. BOX Y • Austin, Texas 78713-8925 • (512) 471-3200 • Fax (512) 471-3810

November 3, 2015

To Whom It May Concern:

We write to introduce our Lyndon Baines Johnson School of Public Affairs Policy Research Project for 2015, which involves a survey of retailers in Rundberg. We are working with the Office of Sustainability in the City of Austin to develop processes for a food policy for all of Austin's residents. This year, we are conducting research in Rundberg, and hope you'll be able to join many other large and small retailers in helping us to understand how food is bought and sold in your community.

As a retailer in Austin, you are a key part of Austin's food landscape. We would like to identify ways to make healthy food more accessible to Rundberg residents. We would like to learn about the barriers to providing healthy foods that retailers, like you, may face.

This study will take approximately 30 minutes of your time. Your privacy is very important to us and the data you provide will remain confidential. If you agree to be in this study, our LBJ graduate students will provide you with more detailed information on the study, ask for your assent and then interview you.

Although we aren't able to offer any compensation for participating in this study many retailers like you have seen the value in sharing some information to help policy makers shape the food environment in Rundberg so that residents can eat more healthy food.

If, during or after your participation, you'd like to know more, please do contact us. Our details are below. Lastly, thank you for joining many other retailers in Rundberg in our Food for All Research Project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Erin Lentz".

Erin Lentz PhD
Assistant Professor
Lyndon B Johnson School of Public Affairs
(512) 232-8353
erinlentz@utexas.edu

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Raj Patel".

Raj Patel PhD
Research Professor
Lyndon B Johnson School of Public Affairs
rajpatel@utexas.edu

Appendix B: Methodology for Community Report Back and Feedback

Motivation for Community Report Back and Research Feedback

Aware that researchers often do not follow up with the community after their research is over, we engaged in a community report back and feedback process. This process had two objectives. First, we aimed to be accountable to the community by sharing with them lessons learned during our research. Second, we aimed to validate those findings and to identify whether key findings were missing from our earlier work. We discuss our approach below.

Accountability to the Community

The research team's first objective for the community report back process is to be accountable to the community that we intend to serve. The research team is committed to having a positive impact on the community and believes the best way to achieve this is by being accountable.

The following principles guided our understanding of what it means to be accountable to the community.

Avoid the Negative Impacts of Town-Gown Disparities

Universities have a history of having strained relationships with the towns in which they are situated. *Town-gown* refers to the relationship between people of the town and the university (gown) students, as well as others who make up the academic institution. Before we, the student research team, conducted research in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area, we learned of the inequities that exist between the community members and the students. As graduate students and two professors, we have power and privileges which are not equal to the community members we set out to serve. This disparity was a constant consideration throughout the research process and we made efforts to mitigate the implications of *town-gown tensions*.

Do Right by Rundberg

Given our constraints as students and professors limited to a research project of less than one year, we knew the limits of the extent to which we could serve the North Central Austin/Rundberg area residents' food challenges. However, we still needed to set realistic goals. In an effort to be accountable to those that we set out to serve, we decided that our guiding principle and main objective should be to *do right by the community*. Of course our purpose is to help the community in ways that we can but also trying to ensure that no harm is done in the research process or as a result of the policy recommendations we make. In other words, we want to *do no harm*. Well-intentioned graduate students can do good things for an underprivileged community but there is always the possibility of unintended consequences. By gathering community input on our research findings and our policy recommendations through our report back and feedback tool, we are attempting to ensure we will not do more harm than good.

Respect Community Input

The research team conducted nine focus groups that included about 117 participants, each of whom gave about two hours of their time. The report back and feedback process is intended to show respect for the time and the ideas the participants contributed to the research project.

The research team asked participants for their phone numbers if they would like to continue to participate in improving food access. The feedback and report back is intended to continue participants' involvement in the food planning process.

Build Rapport with the Community

The research team reached out to community leaders that the City of Austin had relationships with and also asked personal contacts to participate in the project. In this respect, the research process became a community building and community engagement exercise. The opportunity to build rapport with leaders in the community arose throughout the process. To continue to build on the relationships that were cultivated through the research, the report back and feedback process is designed to build rapport with the community by creating open lines of communication.

This rapport building was especially important given the oversaturation of programs in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area. Over the last few years, the North Central Austin/Rundberg area has been the target of many *revitalization* efforts. Revitalization efforts include reducing crime, increasing education, providing jobs, cleaning up the neighborhood, building parks, etc. The Austin Police Department (APD) received a \$1 million grant from the U.S. Department of Justice to reduce crime in the area through community engagement. For the last three and a half years, APD has been engaging community members to increase access to affordable housing, education, healthcare, job training, and immigration services. These efforts have led to other organizations focusing their assistance programs on the area as well.

Overall, these efforts seem to have had a positive impact on the community. Many residents complain, however, that researchers engage community members in the projects that eventually result in few long-term changes or improvements. By informing the community of the research findings and getting their recommendations, the community report back and feedback process is intended to curb this burnout effect.

Community Buy-in

After the policy recommendations are presented to the City of Austin there will be a process of implementation. If people who identified the challenges facing the area are included in the process creating solutions then they will be more inclined to support future policy implementation. The role of the community is to not only make suggestions of how the area can improve but to also be a part of the solution through policy implementation. The role of the research team is simply to provide information to facilitate this process.

Creating Durable Change

Accountability involves following through on commitments and promises. Community conversations were about creating change, improving food access, and addressing challenges.

Through those conversations there is an unstated understanding that the City of Austin is committed to working with the community to create change. It became apparent from the research that many of the challenges in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area exist due to structural inequities. The research team maintained the framing of the research around creating durable change throughout the research process. The community report back and feedback process is an attempt to continue the efforts of creating long-term structural change.

Validate the Research

The research team's second reason for engaging in community report back and feedback process is to validate the research findings and the policy recommendations. The research team needed to ensure that we accurately captured the information that was presented by North Central Austin/Rundberg area residents.

By returning to the community to share our findings and recommendations, we ensured that we had listened to and understood the community and properly translated the community's desires and concerns into sound policy recommendations. Given the short span of our research project, there were certainly populations and issues we missed. However, the validation process allows us to recognize the gaps in our data and provide future researchers or the City with issues to examine and hopefully improve through policy change. Most importantly, perhaps, it shows community members that this project was not intended to further our interests or career goals, but to listen to them, to advocate for their needs, and make Austin's food landscape more equitable.

Community Feedback Methodology

Four Target Audiences

The research team developed a survey approach for the report back to the community and to get feedback on the research findings and recommendations. The survey was designed to both provide information to and receive information from the participants. The research team determined that there should be four different constituencies engaged in the report back. These four groups were: randomly selected residents; the people that participated in the key contact interviews; people on community listservs; and the focus group participants.

Surveys

Surveys were distributed in English and Spanish and asked participants to rank the difficulty of various challenges to accessing food and how important they found possible solutions. The challenges that emerged from our research as most significant include:

- It's hard to find reliable information about healthy food or cooking on a budget
- It's hard to get by food or bus to a store, especially at night or in the summer heat
- It's a struggle to eat healthily given my budget
- It's a struggle to eat healthily given my schedule
- It's difficult to get government food assistance, for example SNAP or WIC
- It's difficult to eat healthily because (other reason): _____

Solutions, presented as things that people would like to see change, were:

- More information about nutrition, emergency food, and government programs through schools, community centers, mobile phone apps and radio stations
- More smaller markets and restaurants with healthy food (ex. Ethnic markets, fruterías, mobile markets, farm stands, etc.)
- Better sidewalks, lighting, and buses
- More affordable housing
- Other things you'd like to see in Rundberg: _____

Respondents were asked to rank from 1 (most important) to 5 or 6 (least important) for both challenges and solutions. Surveys had slightly different formats based on when they were distributed because we found that our original format was sometimes difficult to read or contained errors. Surveys online also allowed participants to write in reasons accessing WIC and SNAP were difficult and what they would like to see the City do in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area, along with other ideas about what they would like to see happen. The general format and questions, however, remained consistent among the survey manifestations. Surveys distributed online were administered via Qualtrics survey software.

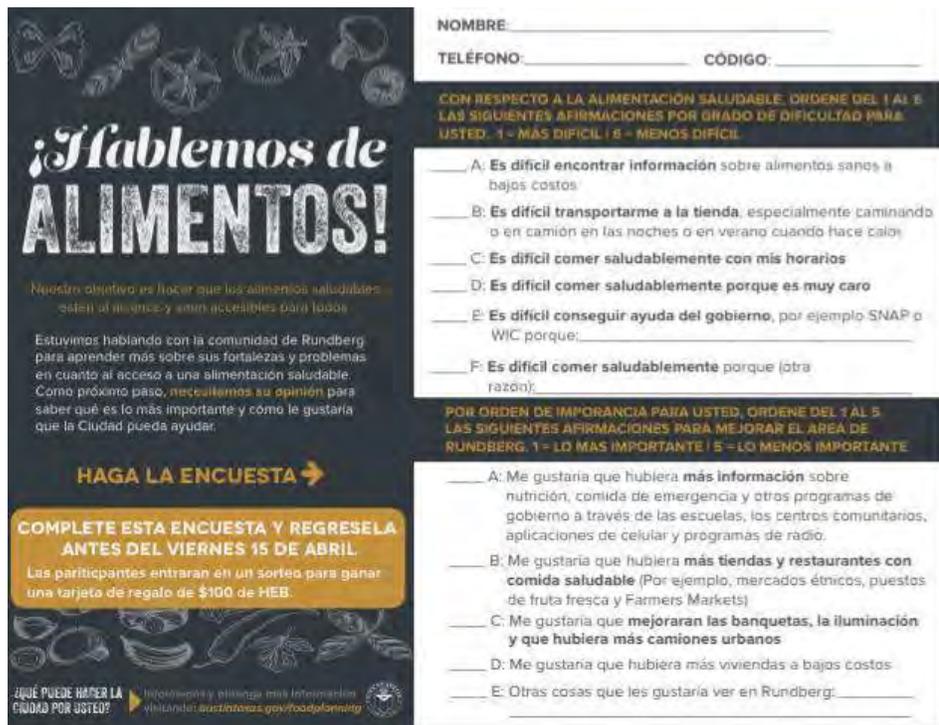


Figure B.1

Let's talk about FOOD!

Our goal is to make healthy food affordable and accessible for all.

We spent time talking with the Rundberg community to learn more about their strengths and struggles around accessing healthy food. As a next step, we need your input to understand what's most important and how you'd like the City to help.

TAKE THE SURVEY →

SURVEY DUE: FRIDAY, APRIL 15
Completed surveys will be automatically entered to win a \$100 HEB Gift Card.

WHAT CAN THE CITY DO FOR YOU? Tell us and learn more by visiting austintexas.gov/foodplanning

NAME: _____

PHONE #: _____ **ZIP CODE:** _____

PLEASE RANK THE FOLLOWING: (1 = most important | 6 = least important)

WHAT'S MOST CHALLENGING FOR YOU?

____ A: It's hard to find reliable information about healthy food or cooking on a budget.

____ B: It's hard to get by foot or bus to a store, especially at night or in summer heat.

____ C: It's a struggle to eat healthily given my budget.

____ D: It's a struggle to eat healthily given my schedule.

____ E: It's difficult to get government food assistance, for example SNAP or WIC.

____ F: It's difficult to eat healthily because (other reason): _____

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE IN RUNDBERG?

____ A: More information about nutrition, emergency food and government programs through schools, community centers, mobile phone apps and radio stations.

____ B: More smaller markets and restaurants with healthy food (ex. ethnic markets, fruterias, mobile markets, farm stands, etc.)

____ C: Better sidewalks, lighting and buses.

____ D: More affordable housing.

____ E: Other things you'd like to see in Rundberg: _____

Figure B.2

Survey In-Person

We surveyed individuals at two neighborhood events. Several members of the research team spoke to residents at a public high school during an immigration workshop with an estimated participation about 25 people. Next, research team members surveyed members of the community at a local youth soccer tournament in an attempt to speak to parents, with an estimated participation of about 35 people. We believe these two events offered important cross-sections of the North Central Austin/Rundberg community because these events involved people not as easily captured through the other methods.

In order to organize these events, the research team worked with the City of Austin to reach out to community leaders and organizations that had access to a cross section of the population. The coordinator at the Family Resource Center at Lanier High School provided the research team with the opportunity to reach out to the parents. Catholic Charities allowed the research team to survey an immigration event to reach out to non-English speaking community members.

Survey via Email

In order to report back to and gather feedback from the people who participated in the one-on-one interviews, the research team worked with the City of Austin to send the survey via email. We also sent it to about 150 individuals and organizations in the community and asked them to forward the survey to other people in the area.

Survey via Text Message

The research team decided that the best way to follow up with the focus group participants was to send a mass text message that included a link to the survey. Focus group participants

were less likely to have regular Internet and email access due to the digital divide, but many had cell phones that connected to the Internet. The survey was sent via text message to the focus group participants that provided their cell phone numbers.

Survey Via "Wednesday Folder"

The survey was also distributed to parents of children attending schools within the Austin Independent School District (AISD) via their children's Wednesday folder. This helped ensure that parents in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area were reached were able to have their voices heard. Children and families with children may face additional challenges in obtaining healthy food than was captured in other focus groups or interviews due to our inability to interact with minors.

Logistics of Seeking Community Feedback on Research

Flyers

The research team prepared flyers to inform participants of the research findings and to validate those findings. Those directly impacted by the inequities of the food system are the ones that understand problems and solutions in food access. The first step to provide opportunities for continued engagement is to inform people of how they can participate in the City's food planning process in the future. In concise terms, the flyers said, "Tell us, learn more and get involved."



Figure B.3

Figure B.4

Visual Aids

At the community connections events, we used visuals to encourage participation and communicate the purpose of participating in the survey. Three large signs explained the survey and project to participants and informed them of an opportunity to win a \$100 gift card to the local grocery store.

Let's Talk About Food!

WHAT'S MOST CHALLENGING FOR YOU?

- ➔ It's hard to find reliable information about healthy food or cooking on a budget.
- ➔ It's hard to get by foot or bus to a store, especially at night or in summer heat.
- ➔ It's a struggle to eat healthily given my budget or schedule.
- ➔ I want to enroll in SNAP/WIC but find it difficult because: _____
- ➔ Other challenges, if any?

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE IN RUNDBERG?

- ➔ More information about nutrition, emergency food and government programs through schools, community centers, mobile phone apps and radio stations.
- ➔ More smaller markets with healthy food (ex. ethnic markets, fruterias, mobile markets, farm stands, etc.)
- ➔ Better sidewalks, lighting and buses
- ➔ More affordable housing
- ➔ Other things you'd like to see in Rundberg: _____



Figure B.5: This information was also provided on the back of flyers handed to community members

¡Hablemos de Alimentos!

¿QUÉ ES LO MÁS DIFÍCIL PARA USTED?

- ➔ Es difícil encontrar información confiable sobre alimentos sanos o comida en un presupuesto.
- ➔ Es difícil ir caminando o en autobús a un almacén, especialmente por la noche o en verano cuando hace calor.
- ➔ Es una lucha comer saludable dado mi presupuesto y mis horarios.
- ➔ Quiero anotarme en SNAP/WIC, pero me resulta difícil porque: _____
- ➔ Otros desafíos, si los hubiera _____

¿QUÉ LE GUSTARÍA VER EN RUNDBERG?

- ➔ Más información sobre programas de nutrición, comidas de emergencia y otros programas del gobierno a través de las escuelas, los centros comunitarios, aplicaciones de telefonía móvil y programas de radio.
- ➔ Más almacenes pequeños con comida saludable (por ej. mercados étnicos, fruterías, mercados móviles, puestos de granja, etc.)
- ➔ Mejores aceras, iluminación y autobuses
- ➔ Viviendas más accesibles
- ➔ Otras cosas que les gustaría ver en Rundberg: _____



Figure B.6

Incentives

To encourage participation in the survey, and in recognition that people have limited time to fill out a survey, we distributed free tote bags and entered participants into a raffle for a \$100 gift card to a local grocery store.



Figure B.7

Limitations to Soliciting Community Feedback on Research

Language

Language barriers were a major obstacle to presenting the findings and getting feedback from a population that is truly representative of the community. Due to limited resources, we were only able to provide the survey in Spanish and English. However, the members of the research team that administered the survey in Spanish noticed, in some cases, that the type of Spanish spoken by the participants was different than the Spanish that was on the survey. The work that was required to make the survey accessible to a Spanish speaking audience would make it extremely difficult to repeat that work to include the 30 (or more) other languages that are spoken in the area.

Time

Given the deadlines for the research project, there was limited time to plan, design, and carry out the type of community report back that fulfilled all of the objectives set by the research team. Even though the research team began to conceptualize and plan for the report in early December of 2015, it was a challenge to develop a large scale outreach and engagement event by March 2016. The research team was still in the data collection process during the early months of 2016. Ideally, the report back and feedback would have taken place at more than just two different events. The research team compensated by using digital communications, but one of the accountability principles of building rapport with community requires in-person contact.

The other time limitation was the limited time available to engage with participants. Survey participants tended to be in a rush and were trying to participate in other activities. Due to our approach of going to already planned events and asking people to participate, people were interested in the other events that they were there to attend. For example, at the Lanier High School Immigration 101 event participants were in a hurry to get seated and begin the workshop. People were not expecting to have their attention diverted and give their time to a seemingly unrelated issue. Some did not seem interested yet participated anyway. This time limitation limited the research team's ability to engage with participants in a manner that upholds the objectives of accountability. This offers an opportunity for this work to be used as the basis of future conversations between the City and North Central Austin/Rundberg area residents, though not one we could fully engage in ourselves.

Funding

The scale and scope of the report back and feedback process was originally conceptualized to reach hundreds of people from very diverse backgrounds that would engage in activities based on the principles of participatory democracy. A range of consultants and experts specialize in this type of process and we had hoped to engage them in the design and execution of the report back. Unfortunately, funds were limited and we were unable to bring in any external support. Had the funds been available, the type of feedback and community engagement might have been deeper. Instead we relied on a survey as the main form of ensuring accountability and validity. There are limitations to depending on a survey to fulfill these objectives. Literacy and familiarity with filling out forms were barriers limiting the number of people that could participate. There were some people that had a very difficult time filling out and understanding the survey, even with assistance.

Another financial limitation was the limited number of incentives we had to offer to participants. The research team wanted to ensure a high response rate and wanted to provide an incentive for people to share their time and ideas with us. Originally, the team wanted to provide \$5-\$10 gift cards to each person who participated in the survey but due to limited funds we instead had to create a raffle to give out just one \$100 gift card. If each participant received a gift card, it is possible that the number of participants would have been higher.

Limitations to Creating Durable Change

This project is about improving the lives of people through access to affordable and healthy food which requires addressing the root causes of inequality. Social change is a critical piece to achieving the objectives of this project. Change does not happen overnight and it would be unreasonable to expect dramatic change from a twenty week survey-based learning project. To create truly durable change and a completely equitable food system in Austin would require changes in American economics and our agricultural system. While our research project acknowledges our inability to address the root causes of American health and wealth inequality, which contribute to the North Central Austin/Rundberg area's poor health outcomes, our project would not be able to make those massive structural changes. However, we hope that by identifying these problems, the City may begin a journey of a thousand steps toward a more equitable and healthy future.

Results

After collecting survey responses, the research team analyzed the results. Our surveys included both qualitative and quantitative questions; therefore, we conducted both statistical analysis and thematic analysis of responses. The thematic coding followed the methodology used in the focus groups and interview analysis. Themes of affordability, nutritional adequacy, and accessibility were heard in responses to our surveys, along with the addition of the themes of community building (infrastructure), community building (people), and other concerns. Overall, we found that our report back validated our original findings, despite the limitations and other challenges we found in administering the survey.

Statistics

It was difficult to calculate a response rate for our surveys, given that at some community events we did not have knowledge of how many people attended the events and, in the case of our emailed surveys, a snowballing technique was used to recruit participants. Thus, it was impossible to know how many people were eventually reached. In terms of text message, we had three responses out of 31 delivered English surveys and three responses out of 15 delivered Spanish surveys, resulting in a response rate of 9.6% and 20% respectively. In regard to folder surveys distributed to AISD students to give to their parents, 23 surveys were returned out of 800 distributed, giving us a response rate of 2.875%.

After distributing the surveys, we found that there had been some confusion about respondents using paper surveys related to the rules for ranking. These surveys had to be recoded in order to fit the survey responses to the survey format (ranking 1 through 5, with 1 being the most important). When respondents wrote down the same number multiple times, the responses were rescaled. First, the lowest repeating number was averaged across the number of times it appeared, and the other numbers were rescaled accordingly. Given that we had a considerable number of disordered surveys, we decided to use the reordered and re-ranked statistics when considering average rank for the challenges and recommendations.* ⁸²Different versions of the survey split the challenge "It's a struggle to eat healthily given my budget or time" into two separate questions; for our analysis they were consolidated into one and the most important number (closer to 1) was used for the new ranking. Surveys conducted via Qualtrics were required by the software to be ordered, and thus did not have to be reordered. We analyzed the statistics five times: Overall rank, English language survey rank, Spanish survey rank, paper survey rank, and digital survey rank. The following tables summarize our findings.

Challenge	Number of Respondents	Mean Ranking	Relative Ranking
It's hard to find reliable information	165	2.71	2

*We suppress the mean and relative rankings for the "Other" category, which include a wide variety of responses. We used the values assigned to "Other" when computing the mean rankings.

about healthy eating and cooking on a budget			
It's hard to get by foot or bust to a store, especially at night or in the summer heat	163	3.11	3
It's a struggle to eat healthily give my budget or schedule	174	2.58	1
I want to enroll in SNAP/WIC but find it difficult to do so	164	4.16	4
Other	56		

Table B.1 Challenges Overall

Challenge	Number of Respondents	Mean Ranking	Relative Ranking
It's hard to find reliable information about healthy eating and cooking on a budget	101	2.53	2
It's hard to get by foot or bust to a store, especially at night or in the summer heat	100	2.83	3
It's a struggle to eat healthily give my budget or schedule	104	2.16	1
I want to enroll in SNAP/WIC but find it difficult to do so	101	4.25	4
Other	41		

Table B.2 Challenges-English Language Survey

Challenge	Number of Respondents	Mean Ranking	Relative Ranking
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It's hard to find reliable information about healthy eating and cooking on a budget	64	2.98	1
It's hard to get by foot or bust to a store, especially at night or in the summer heat	63	3.56	3
It's a struggle to eat healthily give my budget or schedule	70	3.2	2
I want to enroll in SNAP/WIC but find it difficult to do so	63	4	4
Other	15		

Table B.3 Challenges-Spanish Language Surveys

Challenge	Number of Respondents	Mean Ranking	Relative Ranking
It's hard to find reliable information about healthy eating and cooking on a budget	77	3.04	1
It's hard to get by foot or bust to a store, especially at night or in the summer heat	75	3.51	3
It's a struggle to eat healthily give my budget or schedule	84	3.3	2
I want to enroll in SNAP/WIC but find it difficult to do so	74	3.97	4
Other	18		

Table B.4 Challenges-Paper Surveys

Challenge	Number of Respondents	Mean Ranking	Relative Ranking
It's hard to find reliable information about healthy eating and cooking on a budget	88	2.42	2
It's hard to get by foot or bust to a store, especially at night or in the summer heat	88	2.77	3
It's a struggle to eat healthily give my budget or schedule	90	1.91	1
I want to enroll in SNAP/WIC but find it difficult to do so	90	4.3	4
Other	38		

Table B.5 Challenges-Digital Surveys

Recommendation	Number of Respondents	Mean Ranking	Relative Ranking
More information about nutrition, emergency food and government programs through schools, community centers, mobile phone apps and radio stations.	170	3	4
More smaller markets with healthy food (ex. ethnic markets, fruterías, mobile markets, farm stands, etc.)	171	2.43	1
Better sidewalks, lighting and buses	170	2.48	2
More affordable housing	171	2.56	3

Other	78		
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Table B.6 Recommendations-Overall

Recommendation	Number of Respondents	Mean Ranking	Relative Ranking
More information about nutrition, emergency food and government programs through schools, community centers, mobile phone apps and radio stations.	100	3.12	4
More smaller markets with healthy food (ex. ethnic markets, fruterías, mobile markets, farm stands, etc.)	102	2.56	2
Better sidewalks, lighting and buses	102	2.27	1
More affordable housing	101	2.97	3
Other	51		

Table B.7 Recommendations-English Language Surveys

Recommendation	Number of Respondents	Mean Ranking	Relative Ranking
More information about nutrition, emergency food and government programs through schools, community centers, mobile phone apps and radio stations.	70	2.83	4
More smaller markets with healthy food (ex. ethnic	69	2.26	2

markets, fruterías, mobile markets, farm stands, etc.)			
Better sidewalks, lighting and buses	68	2.79	3
More affordable housing	70	1.96	1
Other	27		

Table B.8 Recommendations-Spanish Language Survey

Recommendation	Number of Respondents	Mean Ranking	Relative Ranking
More information about nutrition, emergency food and government programs through schools, community centers, mobile phone apps and radio stations.	80	2.75	4
More smaller markets with healthy food (ex. ethnic markets, fruterías, mobile markets, farm stands, etc.)	81	2.31	2
Better sidewalks, lighting and buses	80	2.72	3
More affordable housing	81	1.98	1
Other	39		

Table B.9 Recommendations-Paper Survey

Recommendation	Number of Respondents	Mean Ranking	Relative Ranking
More information about nutrition, emergency food and	90	3.22	4

government programs through schools, community centers, mobile phone apps and radio stations.			
More smaller markets with healthy food (ex. ethnic markets, fruterías, mobile markets, farm stands, etc.)	90	2.56	2
Better sidewalks, lighting and buses	90	2.27	1
More affordable housing	90	3.07	3
Other	49		

Table B.10 Recommendations-Digital Survey

The “other” category allowed the respondents to fill in their own challenges and recommendations. Those were analyzed thematically; for the most part, the themes matched earlier themes raised during focus groups and interviews. However, affordable housing and the theme of community building did not appear in earlier focus groups or interviews. The majority of the community report back supported the initial findings from surveys, focus groups, and interviews. We do not provide relative ranking or mean ranking for “other” category, which included a variety of responses.

Analysis

Challenges:

Information:

The question asking about information challenges received an overall mean rank (from 1 to 5) of 2.71. English respondents gave it a mean rank of 2.53 and Spanish language respondents a rank of 2.98. Respondents on paper surveys provided a rank of 3.04, while digital surveys had a mean rank of 2.42. Survey respondents were able to provide comments on the surveys; in terms of information, respondents commented on a lack of information or knowledge about where to access information relating to health. As with the initial findings, respondents found it difficult to eat healthily given limited informational resources. For these reasons, additional information resources for the community are an important step forward that the City should take.

Accessibility:

There were two survey questions relating to accessibility: one relating to time and money, the other to transportation. The question about time and money constraints received an overall rank of 2.58. For English respondents, the mean ranking was 2.16 and for Spanish language respondents the mean value was 3.2. Paper surveys had a mean value of 3.3 and the digital survey had a mean value of 1.9. Comments left on surveys supported the idea that time and money were serious constraints to eating healthy. One respondent reported that "It is much easier to buy fast food than to cook when you are busy," showing the intersection of time and money as a constraint to eating healthy. Fast food is generally a less healthy option than home cooked food; thus, when one is busy, it becomes the quickest, and often cheapest option, though not the healthiest.

The other accessibility question dealt with transportation. This question had an overall mean rank of 3.11. English respondents gave it a mean rank of 2.83 while Spanish language respondents gave it a rank of 3.56. Paper surveys had a mean rank of 3.51 while digital surveys had a mean rank of 2.77. Respondents commented that healthy food was located in stores far away from where they lived and that the neighborhood was not always walkable.

As in our initial findings, the report back results indicated that time, money, and transportation are all constraints to accessing healthy food. Transportation, especially sidewalks and bus routes, were mentioned often in focus groups and interviews. Therefore, it is not surprising to see transportation with a mean rank of 3.11 for all respondents regardless of language or survey type. This is an issue facing residents of the North Central Austin/Rundberg area. Programs to improve transportation and sidewalks in the area could help improve residents' access to healthy food.

Affordability:

The question dealing with affordability asked residents to discuss difficulties they faced enrolling for SNAP and WIC. Overall, this question had a mean rank of 4.16. For English respondents, it had a mean rank of 4.25 while Spanish language respondents gave it a mean rank of 4. Paper respondents gave it a mean rank of 3.97 and digital respondents gave a mean rank of 4.3 While there is a clear problem with a gap between the number of people who are eligible for SNAP and those who utilize those benefits, our report back told us that of our survey respondents, this issue was less of a priority compared to our other findings. Clearly, North Central Austin/Rundberg area residents face difficulties in enrolling in SNAP and WIC. Some respondents commented that their issues were because they were unsure of the financial requirements or that they made too much to qualify but did not actually make enough to eat healthily. Others commented on language barriers that made it difficult to understand SNAP and WIC. These findings are similar to the initial findings that SNAP and WIC requirements can be difficult to understand, as well as that they generally do not provide enough benefits. Increasing the number of stores that accept

SNAP and WIC will enable residents with benefits to buy food, but does little to help residents who are confused about the requirements to gain benefits.

Other:

Respondents were also asked to rank other challenges to accessing healthy food. Not every respondent wrote down a challenge in the available space. Respondents indicated challenges including problems such as lack of organic food or variety in stores in the area. A lack of variety of food sold in the area was mentioned many times by respondents. Safety was also mentioned. Other responses included restating issues of time, money, transportation, taste, and personal and family behaviors which make eating healthy difficult. Findings about issues with variety and quality of food and safety in the neighborhood supported the initial findings from focus groups and interviews.

The relative rankings for challenges are listed in Table B.1.

Recommendations

Survey respondents were also asked to rank policy recommendations, listed as changes people would like to see implemented in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area. Online surveys also included an open-ended question about what people would like to see the City of Austin do to help them access healthy food. This will be analyzed below for themes, as they were not ranked and thus do not have rankings or statistics attached to them.

Recommendation one is to increase information about nutrition, emergency food, and government programs through schools, community centers, mobile phone apps, and radio stations. Overall, it received a mean rank of 3. English respondents gave it a mean ranking of 3.12 and Spanish language respondents gave it a ranking of 2.83. Paper survey respondents gave it a mean ranking of 2.75 and digital survey respondents gave it a mean ranking of 3.22. Respondents noted in comments that they did indeed want more information about the relationship between health conditions and food. However, the relatively low ranking of the importance of this recommendation would suggest that despite the amount of times it was mentioned in interviews, residents overall do not find a lack of information to be the most pressing problem to fix in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area.

Recommendation two is to increase the number of smaller markets, such as ethnic markets, fruterías, mobile markets, or farm stands, in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area. Overall, it had a mean rank of 2.43. English respondents ranked it 2.56 and Spanish language respondents ranked it 2.26. Paper surveys had a mean rank of 2.31 and digital surveys had a rank of 2.56. Comments did not necessarily stress the need for “smaller” markets, respondents did ask for more farmers markets and stores that sell healthy food. Earlier findings in interviews and focus groups had found that people wanted more options to purchase healthy food; in one interview, an increase in fruterías was hypothesized as a good start to increase access to fresh fruit and vegetables. In their rankings and comments, respondents backed up this

sentiment by stressing the need for more stores to sell healthier food items, including fruits and vegetables.

Recommendation three is to prioritize better sidewalks, lighting, and buses. Overall, it had a mean rank of 2.48. English respondents gave it a mean rank of 2.27 and Spanish language respondents gave it a rank of 2.79. Paper surveys gave it a mean rank of 2.72 and digital surveys gave it a rank of 2.27. This recommendation sums up the issues residents reported in initial findings with transportation in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area, including reports of poor lighting at bus stops hindering use of the bus safely at night or early in the morning. In survey comments, respondents reported a desire for more bus routes, reduced traffic, bridges across major thoroughfares in the area, and better sidewalks. As reported above in the challenges section, poor public transportation and sidewalks create obstacles in accessing healthy food in the North Central Austin/Rundberg area. These same concerns and desires were also mentioned repeatedly in focus groups and interviews. It is clear that many North Central Austin/Rundberg residents worry about transportation and related issues that prevent or hinder them from accessing healthy food.

Recommendation four is to increase affordable housing. Overall, this recommendation had a mean ranking of 2.56. English language respondents gave it a mean ranking of 2.97 and Spanish language respondents gave it a mean ranking of 1.96, which is the highest ranked recommendation for Spanish language responses. Paper surveys had a mean ranking of 1.98 and digital surveys had a mean ranking 3.07. It is interesting to note the difference between English and Spanish language respondents' mean ranking. As established in earlier findings, many residents of the North Central Austin/Rundberg area, and especially undocumented immigrants, work low paying jobs. Spanish-speaking residents also face language barriers associated with access to services and higher paying jobs. More affordable housing, then, could help these residents direct more money toward food. In focus groups, participants mentioned issues with energy costs and keeping food fresh. While not directly about housing, these comments relate to issues about different requirements taking money away from their ability to purchase healthy food. Therefore, these results show that our initial research missed a serious issue for some residents of the North Central Austin/Rundberg area. This may be due to the fact that focus group discussions were framed specifically around food.

As with the questions related to challenges, respondents were asked to provide suggestions about what else they would like to see change in their neighborhood and what the City could do for them. Suggestions included improving transportation, cleaning up litter, providing greater services for the homeless in the area, and increasing fresh food in stores.

These suggestions were also analyzed thematically. Many of the same themes from earlier focus groups and interviews appeared again in the comments. These included issues around affordability, as fresh food was often described as being expensive, accessibility, relating to transportation and information, and issues around safety. Overall, much of the report back did validate the report's findings. Issues around

money, time, information, transportation, and language were repeated in written comments to survey questions. Safety, including concerns about using public transportation at night and encountering members of the homeless population, was a common theme at focus group meetings, though was not as prevalent as stated in the surveys. The findings and the recommendations provided in this report can be looked on with confidence as they were not met with surprise or disdain when the community was re-surveyed. Final rankings of the recommendations were as follows: Increase “smaller” markets, better sidewalks, lighting, and buses, more affordable housing, and more information about nutrition and cooking. Several people indicated “other” recommendations, described above.

However, the report did miss certain concerns and desires of the community. Affordable housing was already mentioned as a community concern missed by the original data collection. Respondents asked for programs and changes that would improve the North Central Austin/Rundberg area’s infrastructure and community. The theme of community building was used to code reported desires to work on improving the neighborhood both in terms of improving the physical space and in terms of the desire for more equitable and inclusive environment. Themes for community building in regards to infrastructure, for example, asked for improvements to the North Central Austin/Rundberg area such as more public art. Similar to earlier asks for better sidewalks, these types of developments create livable neighborhoods, which signal greater equity among residents than simply providing more food. Respondents asked for public parks, art, and places for people to congregate. They also asked for more events to bring community members together, such as block parties and classes, which help create a feeling of community. One respondent brought up the idea that “Rundberg” is in fact a fictitious community created in order to secure a grant. However, requests and desires for community building activities, both in physical spaces and between people, suggests a desire to create a community centered around improving the neighborhood and its people.

Overall, we conclude that while there are some aspects of the needs experienced by North Central Austin/Rundberg area residents that we may have missed or considered to be less significant than others, the report back and validation exercise indicated that our findings and policy recommendations are valid and represent the concerns and needs of the area as a whole.

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