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Promotora-researcher Esther Valdez conducts a survey of snack foods in a neighborhood convenience store.

Core Research Project: Healthy Food Environment

The Center for Community Health Development (CCHD) is one of 37 Prevention Research Centers designated and funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention nationally. As a Prevention Research Center, CCHD is funded to develop and maintain several key functions to support prevention research, including at least one core research project. In 2009, when CCHD began its second 5-year funding cycle, the Brazos Valley Health Partnership reviewed several concept papers and selected a healthy food environment as its focus for a core research project.

Developed in collaboration with community partners in the Brazos Valley and Hidalgo County, the project targets four rural counties in the Brazos Valley and four large areas of *colonias* in Hidalgo County in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas. Led by Dr. Joseph Sharkey, this project uses an innovative sequential mixed-methods design of geospatial, quantitative, and qualitative methods to support community efforts to improve accessibility and availability of healthy foods.

Project goals are:

- To raise awareness of community needs, problems, and assets;
- To inform county and community action on community food problems;
- To enhance community knowledge and awareness of potential interventions;
- To create community-university partnership on community food issues;
- To mobilize and engage a broad network of community residents;
- To improve access to healthful, locally produced foods;
- To inform strategies for improving food security, and
- To evaluate community initiatives throughout the target communities.



Center for Community Health Development

Celebrating 10 years of Accomplishments

Core Research Project Addresses Healthy Eating and Food Insecurity



Raquel Flores conducts a training and review of study materials with a team of promotora-researchers (Maria, Mayte, Esther, Thelma, and Hilda).

Healthy Eating:

The research team studies food access and food choice from both sides of the counter; that is, from the perspectives of the buyer and the seller. Our teams conducted a survey of all food stores and food service places and performed in-store audits at these places throughout the rural Brazos Valley and in target areas in Hidalgo County in South Texas. The team conducted numerous focus groups in both study areas to understand the challenges and coping strategies faced by rural and *colonia* residents. In addition, the team completed a series of household food inventories and dietary recalls to

document the foods and beverages available in the home and consumed by Mexican-origin children. The research identified alternative retail sources of food, which led to a series of interviews to understand the retailing of prepared foods and snacks from an individual's home to their neighbors. Currently, the research team is studying the access and availability of sugar drinks and high-fat and high-sugar snack foods, especially in convenience and neighborhood stores. Using an audit instrument, team members have been documenting the presence and different types of beverages and snack foods.

Reducing Food Insecurity:

In order to address the issue of food insecurity, the research team has used a variety of methods including community nutrition assessments, household food inventories, and dietary intakes. A team of promotora-researchers conducted a survey of community and household nutrition resources and food security among 610 women who resided in colonias in Progreso and La Feria. Results from the survey showed higher than expected levels of adult and child food insecurity. The survey found that food insecurity was related to country of birth and fruit and vegetable intake. Another activity used to address food insecurity is an evaluation of the children's backpack program, sponsored by the Brazos Valley Food Bank.

Dr. Dean initially found that children depended on their backpacks and often shared the food with other family members. Focus groups with community residents in rural areas of the Brazos Valley and in South Texas were conducted to understand the challenges for acquiring and preparing food for families. During these focus groups, participants discussed the lack of available quality fruits, v vegetables, and meats in local or area stores. In both the Brazos Valley and South Texas, the lack of food security affected the frequency and quantity of fruit and vegetable consumption. The research team also studied neighborhood and household food availability and children's diets. Household food inventories and multiple dietary recalls were completed with 100 mother-child pairs. As part of this study, children reported their experiences with food security. Results found that children with low or very low food security ate more calories, added sugars, and fat than children who were more food secure.



Promotora-researcher, Thelma Aguillon, works with a participant child on dietary recall.

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