

INTRODUCTION: Consuming healthy foods, including fruits and vegetables, reduces the risk of chronic disease and poor health outcomes. Low-income individuals who lack transportation and live in areas without full service grocery stores may not be able to access healthy food options. As a result, some low-income families living in urban settings may rely on small neighborhood stores for food purchases. Studies have shown that corner storeowners are often willing to sell healthy foods, but may need support to stock and market these items. The purpose of this study was to 1) audit corner stores to assess healthy food availability in six low-income zip codes in Mecklenburg County, NC, 2) identify store owner interest in selling healthy foods, and 3) assess customer practices related to healthy food purchases.

METHODS: Two hundred stores classified as corner or convenience stores in the target zip codes were identified. A list of corner stores provided by the Mecklenburg County Health Department was supplemented by adding food retailers that accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Data was collected from each store using a three-part process. First, the storeowner or manager gave permission to conduct a food audit, and participated in a survey. Second, the store was audited using the Healthy Food Availability Index (HFAI) to collect information about the foods available in each store. This tool scores each store according to the types of food for sale, and ranks the availability of healthy food in each store as high, medium, or low. Scores were compared across stores, zip codes, and geographic characteristics. Third, customers shopping in the store participated in a survey regarding food shopping behaviors and desire for the availability of healthy food options.

RESULTS: Data collection is ongoing, however, preliminary results suggest that the majority of corner stores score low on the HFAI. To date, 73 corner stores have been audited, and nearly two-thirds of stores rank in the low range. Only one corner store ranks in the high range. Roughly half of the stores audited to date accept SNAP, and one-third of the stores accept WIC. Storeowner surveys suggest they have varying degrees of intention to increase healthy food availability, and reported that few customers request healthy food options. According to customer surveys, some shoppers were interested in purchasing healthy options that were often not available. The audit and survey data collection will conclude in September 2018.

PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS: The current study provides a framework for understanding the food landscape of corner stores in low-income zip codes, and suggests that there is a demand for increased availability of healthy foods in these areas. Based on preliminary results, corner stores may be viable retail outlets for increasing the availability of healthy foods in Mecklenburg County. Upon completion of the current study, next steps will include identifying opportunities to work with corner storeowners to increase availability of healthy options, and the identification of ways to encourage the purchase of these foods.