Perceived Healthfulness of Environment of Low-Income Communities by Community Extension Nutrition Educators

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ABSTRACT

Background: The environment in which people live affects food and physical activity decisions but low-income communities often lack the resources to support more healthful behaviors. Understanding the perceived barriers and facilitators to engaging in healthful practices in communities is an important first step in developing targeted interventions to improve health. Partnering with Extension educators who serve these communities can help inform impactful interventions.

Objective: To determine Extension nutrition educators’ perceptions about the healthfulness of the environment in the communities they serve.

Study Design, Settings, Participants: Focus groups (n=16) and in-depth interviews (n=6) were conducted in English (n=11) and Spanish (n=5) with Extension nutrition educators (N=16) working in low-income communities in Kansas, Florida, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, South Dakota, and Tennessee, and West Virginia. Trained focus group moderators used a semi-structured script to ask questions about the healthfulness of the community environment in which they work.

Methods: Descriptive statistics of demographic data summarized using SPSS. Qualitative data analyzed using thematic analysis.

RESULTS

SCT Environmental Factors: Nutrition Educators’ Perceived Barriers that Interfere with Living a Healthy Lifestyle in Low-Income Communities

Lack of Access to and Availability of Healthy Food

“Transportation is always a big theme meaning they can’t access food pantries because they are across town.” (NH)

“Lack of knowledge, not understanding the importance of the choices we make. What we put in our bodies can have a detrimental or beneficial effect.” (NV)

“Access to health care as far as cost or preventive services.” (TN)

“Mental health is high with young people, committing suicide, I think we need more resources.” (OH)

Lack of Nutrition Education and Information

“Access to local food banks and food pantries”

“Access to trustworthy and free-of-cost nutrition education resources”

“Community support groups and organizations, including local networks, that provide access to information and resources”

Limited Access to Public Transportation

“Climate and socio-cultural norms influence low-income communities can be conducive to unhealthy behaviors and associated with increased sedentary behavior, poor diet quality, and mental health problems.”

Understanding the perceived barriers and facilitators to engaging in healthful practices in communities is an important first step in developing targeted interventions to make the healthy choice the easy choice.

OBJECTIVE

To determine Extension nutrition educators’ perceptions about the healthfulness of the environment in the communities they serve.

METHODS

Participants

• Extension nutrition educators (N=16) working in low-income communities in Kansas, Florida, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Tennessee, and West Virginia.

Data Collection

• Participants completed a demographic questionnaire and participated in focus groups (n=16) and in-depth interviews (n=6) conducted in English (N=11) and Spanish (N=5) based on key Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) constructs (environmental factors: barriers and opportunities).

Data Analysis

• Descriptive statistics of demographic data summarized using SPSS.

• Qualitative data analyzed using thematic analysis.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

• Both English and Spanish participants primarily reported (1) lack of access to and availability of healthy food; (2) limited access to public transportation; (3) lack of nutrition education and nutrition resources; and (4) limited access to physical and mental health resources.

• Spanish participants emphasized the need for culturally and linguistically appropriate nutrition education and other health-related resources.

• Participants also mentioned a variety of places and resources in their communities that offer opportunities to facilitate healthy behaviors. However, there is a gap between best practices for making this information available and accessible to members living in these communities.

• Additional research is needed to understand the perceptions of other key community stakeholders, including residents of these communities, to obtain a better understanding of the barriers and opportunities available for living a healthy lifestyle in low-income communities.

Implications

• Results cannot be generalized, and could be considered a threat to external validity:

• Data represent the perceptions of a wide range of nutrition educators in the states listed above.

• Participants were self-reported measures.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

• Conduct formative research to understand the perceptions of other key stakeholders invested in providing services and resources to families in low-income communities regarding the healthfulness of the environment of these communities.

• Conduct focus groups with community members living in low-income communities to assess their perceptions regarding living a healthy lifestyle.

• Conduct formative research to inform how influential factors, including the current pandemic (COVID-19), has impacted the environment of these communities.

• Develop a Behavior Environment Perception Survey (BEPS-community) for communities with low income in urban and rural geographical areas considering influential factors (e.g., pandemic, flooding, tornadoes).

REFERENCES


BACKGROUND

Overweight and obesity are most prominent in economically disadvantaged groups. 1 Poor diets, physical inactivity, and sedentary behaviors are directly or indirectly linked to obesity and other chronic diseases. 2 Understanding the environments where people live and interact, and how these can be beneficial or detrimental on an individual’s overall health is pivotal in identifying the barriers and facilitators to engaging in healthful practices. 2 Individuals living in low-income communities are highly influenced by characteristics of their environment. Research has found that financial constraints, aspects of the built environment, and socio-cultural norms that influence low-income communities can be conducive to unhealthy behaviors and associated with increased sedentary behavior, poor diet quality, and mental health problems. 3 Understanding the perceived barriers and facilitators to engaging in healthful practices in communities is an important first step in developing targeted interventions to make the healthy choice the easy choice. 4