

# Extension Nutrition Educators and Community Stakeholders Perceive the Healthfulness of their Under-Resourced Florida Communities Differently

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Community stakeholders and Extension nutrition educators (NEs) are invested in the health of their under-resourced communities and should be included in the development of interventions designed to improve the health of their residents. These groups understand barriers and facilitators to healthy living that can help inform appropriate health interventions. As perceptions can differ, input from both groups can provide a more well-rounded approach. **Objective:** To compare Extension NE and community stakeholder perceptions on the healthfulness of the environment of under-resourced communities in the five Florida Extension districts. **Study Design, Settings, Participants:** Focus groups (n=8) with Extension NEs (N=49) and in-depth interviews (n=10) with community stakeholders were conducted using semi-structured scripts following the Social Cognitive Theory to explore perceptions on the healthfulness of the communities. **Measurable Outcome/Analysis:** Focus groups and in-depth interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and coded. Cross-tab analysis was used to compare data from the districts' participants. **Results:** Overall, participants described healthy eating and physical activity as the main components of a healthy lifestyle. They also viewed access to and availability of food as an essential part of a healthy community. While both NEs and stakeholders perceived food access (Northwest, Southwest), safety (Central), and lack of education (Southeast) as major barriers to a healthy lifestyle, NEs also identified lack of knowledge and education as major barriers, whereas stakeholders perceived financial constraints (i.e., unemployment) as the primary challenge. When asked about resources available to address challenges, NEs (all districts) did not perceive many, which they attributed to a lack of promotion of resources. In contrast, stakeholders (all districts) perceived multiple opportunities available but noted a lack of participation from community members. **Conclusion:** Extension NEs and community stakeholders provide unique perspectives about barriers and opportunities in the under-resourced communities they serve. Differences among the districts and between participants highlight diverse characteristics of these communities, which should be considered when developing interventions.

## BACKGROUND

Healthy eating and physical activity are key modifiable lifestyle components that influence health conditions, such as obesity, diabetes and other chronic diseases.<sup>1</sup> The built environment of a community can also greatly influence these health behaviors, among others. Understanding barriers and facilitators to living a healthy lifestyle is especially important in under-resourced areas, as the prevalence of obesity is higher in adults who live in rural areas compared to urban areas.<sup>2</sup> Utilizing a community-based participatory research (CBRP) approach is essential to recognize perceptions of community members in order to develop meaningful interventions.<sup>3</sup> Extension professionals and community stakeholders have a vested interest in the communities they serve, making them an essential part of research to develop sound, transparent and trusted interventions.<sup>4</sup>

## OBJECTIVE

To compare Extension NEs and community stakeholder perceptions on the healthfulness of the environment of under-resourced communities in the five Florida Extension districts.

## METHODS

**Participants:** Extension NEs (N=49) and stakeholders (n=10) working in communities with low income in the five Florida Extension districts.

**Data Collection:** Participants participated in Focus groups (n=8) and in-depth interviews (n=10) based on semi-structured scripts following key Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) constructs.

**Data Analysis:** Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Cross-tab analysis was used to compare data from the districts' participants.

## RESULTS

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

Extension Districts	Nutrition Educators	Stakeholders
<b>Northwest</b>	<b>Food access and availability</b> Resistance to change/ community readiness Lack of knowledge/education	<b>Food access and availability</b> Community buy-in/motivation to participate in programs Lack of transportation
<b>Northeast</b>	Food access and availability Lack of transportation Lack of resources	Food insecurity Financial constraints/unemployment Lack of time
<b>Central</b>	<b>Safety</b> Inequity of resources Lack of knowledge/education	<b>Safety</b> Lack of transportation Financial constraints/unemployment
<b>Southwest</b>	<b>Food access and availability</b> <b>Lack of knowledge/education</b> Lack of resources	<b>Food access and availability</b> <b>Lack of knowledge/education</b> Lack of mental health services/resources
<b>Southeast</b>	<b>Lack of knowledge/education</b> Financial instability Lack of information (culturally appropriate)	<b>Lack of knowledge/education</b> Lack of community support services and resources Affordability (cost) of services and resources
<b>Overall</b>	<b>Food access and availability</b> Lack of knowledge/education Lack of resources	<b>Food access and availability</b> Financial constraints/unemployment Lack of transportation

### SCT Environmental Factors: Nutrition Educators' Perceived Opportunities that Facilitate Healthy Behaviors in Communities with Low Income

Extension Districts	Nutrition Educators	Stakeholders
<b>Overall</b>	<b>Not many</b> resources/services available to the community Not well advertised/disseminated to the public	<b>Varied</b> resources/services available to the community Limited in some areas (mental health) Lack of participation from community members.

## DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Living a healthy lifestyle is multifactorial, signifying the importance of considering all of the components (i.e. healthy eating, physical activity, mental health, positive relationships, etc.) when developing interventions.



- Although NEs and stakeholders held unique perspectives about barriers in the communities they serve, several similarities also exist: 1) food access and availability, 2) safety and 3) lack of knowledge and education as major barriers to living a healthy lifestyle. NEs also acknowledged lack of resources, while stakeholders identified financial constraints (i.e., unemployment) as additional barriers.
- Distinct differences were identified between each type of participant when asked about perceived opportunities (resources/services) that facilitate healthy behaviors. Further exploration is needed to understand these differences to identify effective solutions.
- Overall, perceptions of NEs and stakeholders vary across Florida highlighting the need for additional research to further understand the barriers and opportunities in communities with low income. Considering these diverse characteristics is essential when developing community-based interventions.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Future directions will aim to explore the impact of COVID-19 on these communities across Florida, and identify whether perceived barriers and opportunities have been affected or shifted as a result of the pandemic.
- Focus groups with community members residing in communities with low income will be conducted to assess their perceptions on barriers and opportunities to living a healthy lifestyle to gain better representation across all stakeholders.
- To ensure diversity and inclusion, discussions with diverse racial/ethnic stakeholders will be conducted across Florida.
- Ultimately, this study will inform the development a Behavior and Environmental Perception Survey (BEPS) for communities with low income in urban and rural geographical areas to help determine individuals' perceptions of the healthfulness of their environments.

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