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**Understanding a community's shared vision for public health is key  
to supporting change**

*Research published in the Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior explores how social norms and culture influence food preferences, physical activity behaviors and future hopes for community development*

**Philadelphia, April 11, 2023** – The prevalence of obesity in rural communities goes beyond food choice and geography to include issues such as class, culture and identity; however, these issues are often not taken into account in policy, systems and environmental (PSE) change programs developed for community members. This [study](#) in the [Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior](#), published by Elsevier, explores the influence of factors beyond food and fitness, such as race relations, generational influences, physical activity social norms, and shared community goals with regard to PSE initiatives.

"Culture is a really big part of history and history is a really big part of rural communities. So, we wanted to examine the relationship between lack of access from the built environment as well as how culture and cultural identity interact," says corresponding author Catherine E. Sanders, PhD, currently Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist of Food Systems Communication at North Carolina State University. "Cultural differences and expectations, including norms around physical activity and body size, may influence obesity prevalence and effectiveness of programs implemented by health professionals."

The research was conducted by Dr. Sanders during her doctoral program at the University of Georgia in the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communication along with co-investigators Alexa Lamm, PhD, Alison Berg, PhD, RDN, LD, and Nekeisha Randall, MAL.

Researchers looked at data from a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) funded project, *Healthier Together*, where university and coalition members used grant funding to create shared-use community gardens, work with food pantries for greater access to healthy food options, install grab and go coolers, and build walking trails to encourage physical activity. The project was the result of a partnership between the University of Georgia Colleges of Public Health, Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, Family and Consumer Sciences, and Environment and Design as well as UGA Extension. This PSE project was started in 2018 in five rural counties in Georgia where adult obesity prevalence exceeds 40%. The research team interviewed 39 community coalition members who were instrumental in implementing the project in these counties.



Caption: Determining the location of community gardens was just one of the community-led projects influenced by culture and tradition (Credit: Monkey Business/stock.adobe.com).

Key themes emerging from the study include:

- The challenge of addressing healthy eating and physical activity practices in communities where those practices counter cultural norms.
- The impact of food availability on communities where grocery stores with less healthy but more affordable options are prevalent.
- The importance of relationship building in collective action. Participants cited improvements in community cohesion and shared goals from those of different backgrounds and cultures through their involvement in the *Healthier Together* project.

"Overall, community coalition members just wanted people to see value in the change initiative. They wanted to lower obesity rates, but some of the interesting findings related to culture included the

slowness of change and how rural communities should help us qualify successes. They recognized you're not going to come in and have change overnight because of community traditions," states Sanders. "Knowing the strong influence that culture has on food choice and physical activity, health practitioners should be encouraged to create interventions in alignment with the cultural norms of the communities they serve. Working with this in mind will help create more effective and sustainable programs with long-term success."

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### **Notes for editors**

The article is "Qualitative Exploration of Cultural Influence on a Rural Health-Promotion Initiative," by Nekeisha L. Randall, MAL; Catherine E. Sanders, PhD; Alexa J. Lamm, PhD; and Alison C. Berg, PhD, RDN, LD (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2022.10.011>). It appears in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, volume 55, issue 4 (April 2023), published by [Elsevier](#).

The article is openly available for 90 days at [https://www.jneb.org/article/S1499-4046\(22\)00595-4/fulltext](https://www.jneb.org/article/S1499-4046(22)00595-4/fulltext).

Full text of the article is also available to credentialed journalists upon request; contact Eileen Leahy at +1 732 238 3628 or [jnebmmedia@elsevier.com](mailto:jnebmmedia@elsevier.com) to obtain a copy. To schedule an interview with the author(s), please contact Catherine E. Sanders, PhD, at [catherine\\_sanders@ncsu.edu](mailto:catherine_sanders@ncsu.edu).

An audio podcast featuring an interview with Catherine E. Sanders, PhD, and other information for journalists are available at <https://www.jneb.org/content/media>. Excerpts from the podcast may be reproduced by the media with permission from Eileen Leahy.

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The *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* (JNEB), the official journal of the Society for Nutrition Education and Behavior (SNEB), is a refereed, scientific periodical that serves as a resource for all professionals with an interest in nutrition education and dietary/physical activity behaviors. The purpose of JNEB is to document and disseminate original research, emerging issues, and practices relevant to nutrition education and behavior worldwide and to promote healthy, sustainable food choices. It supports the society's efforts to disseminate innovative nutrition education strategies, and communicate information on food, nutrition, and health issues to students, professionals, policy makers, targeted audiences, and the public.

The *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* features articles that provide new insights and useful findings related to nutrition education research, practice, and policy. The content areas of JNEB reflect the diverse interests of health, nutrition, education, Cooperative Extension, and other professionals working in areas related to nutrition education and behavior. As the Society's official journal, JNEB also includes occasional policy statements, issue perspectives, and member communications. [www.jneb.org](http://www.jneb.org)

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