



Photo Credit: Yardmap.org (2011)

Access to Food

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Access to food is a key determinant of the health and prosperity of residents in small towns (Spina & Menec, 2013) – it influences the ability of older adults to comfortably age-in-place. As the number of older adults over the age of 65 increases on a global scale (World Health Organization, 2007), ageing-in-place has become a significant concern of both urban and rural populaces. **Accessing food sources, such as supermarkets and convenience stores, as well as food services, such as restaurants and services stations, with relative ease is important to adults as they age.** Availability, cost, accessibility, proximity, social capital and local sourcing of food impacts the way in which food is obtained and consumed, specifically in small towns.

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Availability & Cost

The availability and cost of food in small towns is determined by their source. A combination of conventional food sources like supermarkets and grocery stores, as well as non-traditional food sources like convenience stores and service stations offer a range of choices and costs (Bustillos, Sharkey, Anding, & McIntosh, 2009). Conventional sources of food offer the most variety in terms of choice and cost. Non-traditional food sources, however, are more convenient as they outnumber conventional food sources in small towns (Bustillos, Sharkey, Anding, & McIntosh, 2009). Less can be bought with the same amount of money at a convenience store than at a supermarket and this can become problematic for older adults relying on a fixed income.



Photo Credit: Nam

Figure #2: Typical Grocery Store, Photo Credit: Flickr, 2006

The limitations of existing food sources and services in the Brazos Valley counties, Texas, were identified in a study conducted in 2009 by the American Dietetic Association. The study suggested that **public policies need to be established to improve the supply and cost of nutritious food** products in rural American counties (Bustillos, Sharkey, Anding, & McIntosh, 2009). The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is a program that offers a number of solutions to food accessibility. The SNAP program ensures that food stamps are accepted by a majority



Figure #3: Grocery Delivery, Photo Credit: Soyummi.ca (2014)



Figure #4: SNAP Food Stamp Program, Photo Credit: Jacksonville.com (2011).

of conventional sources of food in participating areas of rural United States. Food becomes more affordable to older adults living on fixed incomes, however further studies to determine the long-term success of the program in each of its locales has not yet been conducted (United States Department of Agriculture, 2009).

Accessibility & Proximity

The location and characteristics of food sources and services can influence the ability of older adults to safely and securely access them, especially those with reduced mobility. In order for nutritious foods to be purchased and consumed, they first have to be accessible. The distance to a super market or grocery store can be a barrier for older adults who choose not to drive. Adults are less likely to drive as they age due to physical limitations and increasing costs (Huang, Rosenberg, Simonovich, & Belza, 2012).

In King county, Washington, an analysis of barriers to food access among older adults was conducted in 2012 (Huang, Rosenberg, Simonovich, & Belza, 2012). The results suggest that the federal government should mandate further studies of planning practices revolving around food access. **Small towns should strongly consider better way-finding and pedestrian access to food sources and services** (Huang, Rosenberg, Simonovich, & Belza, 2012).

Social Capital

The level of social and familial ties experienced by individuals and communities as a whole can determine access to food in small towns (Dean, Sharkey, & Johnson, 2011). Running out of food and being unable to buy more are both characteristics of food insecurity. Older adults may experience increased food insecurity based on a loss of familial and or social networks.

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Figure #5: Unknown Supermarket, Photo Credit: Flickr (2011).

Figure #6.
Community
Cooking
Classes, Photo
Credit: Flickr
(2011).



Figure #7. Un-
known grocery
Store, Photo Credit
Flickr.com (2011).



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The results of Dean, Sharkey, and Johnson's 2011 study of the Brazos Valley county, Texas indicate that a greater importance must be put on understanding how social capital can influence an older adult's ability to access food. Recommendations stemming from this study suggest that food assistance programs need to be offered to older adults in response to low-incomes and food insecurity present in small towns. Programs like grocery delivery or classes that teach how to obtain and prepare nutritious foods should be made available to older adults.

Community Gardens



Figure #8.: Unknown Community
Garden, Photo Credit: Holdingtheline.com
(2010).

Establishing community gardens in small towns in response to the accessibility and cost of produce has been shown to increase the amount of nutritious foods – like fruits and vegetables – consumed by participants (Barnidge et al., 2013). Including older adults in the organization of community gardens greatly increases their access to food. For some older adults, access to food sources and services may be related to transportation, or lack thereof (Porter & McIlvaine-Newsad, 2014). Community gardens that are strategically located within proximity to concentrations of retirement homes aid in solving this problem.

A survey of twelve county community gardens located throughout the United States indicated that an overwhelming 72% of participants were older adults (Barnidge, et al., 2013). The gardens were developed as community resources and were organized by a number of policies determining how the spaces were used and who was able to use them. The amount of nutritious foods consumed by older adults participating in the community gardens increased over the duration of the study (Barnidge, et al., 2013). The authors of the study suggested that community gardens have the ability to create a ripple effect of use and that further studies of the twelve gardens and their successes should be conducted in the future.

Final Thoughts

The future of food access in small towns among older adults will be a challenge as the number of those over the age of 65 continues to increase. It is evident that there is still much to be understood of food sources and services and their influence on the ability to age-in-place in small towns. Current literature on the subject recognizes the breadth of publications regarding urban food access and that there is a lack of information in the rural context. More projects aimed at improving food security need to be conducted and case studies of these projects must be published. **Action is necessary in order to impact the ease of food access for older adults in small towns.**

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Image Sources:

- Figure #1. Typical Community Garden 1, <http://www.yardmap.org> (2011).
- Figure #2. Typical Grocery Store, <http://www.Flickr.com> (2006).
- Figure #3. Nutritious Groceries, <http://www.soyummi.ca> (2014).
- Figure #4. SNAP Food Stamp Program, <http://www.jacksonville.com> (2011).
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- Figure #8. Community Garden, <http://www.holdingtheline.com> (2010).