

Finding Nutritious Foods in Small Food Stores

[Announcer] This program is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

[Melissa Wilson] Hi. I'm Melissa Wilson with the CDC's publication *Preventing Chronic Disease*. Joining me by phone today is Ellen Kersten. She is a PhD candidate at the University of California, Berkeley, and Ellen is the winner of *Preventing Chronic Disease's* 2012 student paper contest. Thank you for joining us today, Ellen.

[Ellen Kersten] I'm honored. Thanks for having me.

[Melissa Wilson] And, I'm just going to ask a few questions and first off, Ellen, tell our listeners the title of your paper and give us a brief overview of the study.

[Ellen Kersten] Sure. The title is *Small Food Stores and Availability of Nutritious Foods: A Comparison Database and In-Store Measures*, and it's in northern California and we found that for research on community nutrition environments, or commonly called food environments, which is access to healthful foods, that commonly used commercial databases do not accurately characterize small grocery stores. That a category that was supposed to be grocery stores in fact includes a variety of types of small food stores, including whole supermarkets, convenience stores, specialty stores, and small grocery stores.

[Melissa Wilson] And tell us a little bit about the methodologies that you used to study target areas?

[Ellen Kersten] We started with random sampling of grocery stores from a commercial database and we used stratified samplings, which means that we selected stores from a variety of different neighborhoods, from low income and upper income neighborhoods and everything in between, and then we visited over a hundred stores that we selected to conduct in-store surveys, and through these surveys, we quantified the availability of nutritious food items and also fresh produce to determine what types of stores these were, that they weren't all necessarily small grocery stores, as the database characterized them. And we analyzed these survey results by neighborhood context, such as population density and race and ethnicity of the population in those neighborhoods around the store, as well as comparing them to the characteristics, such as sales volume and employee count, that were included in the database.

[Melissa Wilson] And were you surprised at all by your findings?

[Ellen Kersten] Yes. Actually, we were really surprised because we were expecting that a selection of stores from a category that's titled "Supermarkets and Grocery Stores" would indeed be supermarkets and grocery stores that carried a variety of nutritious food options and produce, especially in California where there's ample access, or supplies, of fresh produce. So finding that over half of the stores were actually convenience stores that didn't offer nutritious food items was very surprising.

[Melissa Wilson] And how would you say your study relates to community health care?

[Ellen Kersten] Other recent research has shown that the availability of healthful food in a neighborhood can influence individual's diet and incidence of chronic diseases, such as diabetes, and recently, you know, policy makers have caught on to this research and, for example Michelle Obama's "Let's Move" campaign and "Healthy Food Financing" initiative was recently funded to improve access to nutritious foods in neighborhoods and so, in order to ensure that these policies can target the correct neighborhoods, we need to have an understanding of the food environment, as it is now, to know which areas are underserved. And so, I see this research as informing ways that we can more accurately characterize neighborhood food environments and access to nutritious foods. Maybe not just relying on these commercial databases, but also supplementing them with in-store surveys to see what's on the shelves in these stores.

[Melissa Wilson] And do you have any other research coming up that we should know about?

[Ellen Kersten] Well, I'll be building on this work to begin my dissertation which looks at food access, but also other neighborhood resources, such as parks and public transit, and I'll be using spatial statistics and geographic information systems, they're also called GIS, to compare the distribution of these resources, as they relate to neighborhood measures of race and class. So food access will be one component of my dissertation research.

[Melissa Wilson] And what's next for you on your career path?

[Ellen Kersten] Finishing my dissertation is my top priority, but after that, in a few years, I see myself working at a public agency, most likely, such as either the CDC or Environmental Protection Agency or a state health department. I'd really like to continue doing research, as well as community outreach, related to health disparities and public policy.

[Melissa Wilson] Thank you, Ellen, for joining us today and congratulations on your win. To read Ellen's full article, visit our website at www.cdc.gov/pcd.

[Announcer] For the most accurate health information, visit www.cdc.gov or call 1-800-CDC-INFO.