

What's Cooking in Your Food System?

A GUIDE TO COMMUNITY FOOD ASSESSMENT

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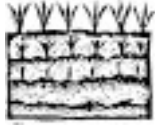


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Preface

Background

This Guide is aimed at informing and supporting the development of Community Food Assessments as a tool for increasing community food security and creating positive change. In 1993, Community Food Security Coalition co-founders Andy Fisher and Bob Gottlieb were involved in a year-long study of the Los Angeles food system, entitled *Seeds of Change: Strategies for Food Security for the Inner City*.¹ This study sparked interest among advocates in other communities in completing similar studies, and numerous requests to the Coalition for information and support. Thus, in 1999, the Coalition started offering workshops on how to do Community Food Assessments, and decided to develop a guidebook on the subject. This publication is our first attempt to systematically summarize information on how to do a Community Food Assessment. Reflecting the state of current knowledge of this emerging field, it is necessarily imperfect and incomplete.

We encourage readers to supplement this Guide with other material, including the *Community Food Security Assessment Toolkit*², the resources listed in Appendix 6, and the reports from assessments highlighted in the cases in Chapter 3.

Intended audience

We envision the audience of this guidebook to be individuals and representatives of diverse organizations who are working on food issues in their communities, and who are interested in gathering information to highlight what is happening in their food system, and to encourage positive change. We expect that most readers are active in their communities, experienced with basic organizing approaches, and interested in working collaboratively with community residents and representatives of diverse agencies and organizations.

Authors and editors

This Guide was assembled through the work of several authors who joined the process and worked on it at different times since 1999. Andy Fisher conceived of and raised the funds for the project, and contributed to the writing. Hugh Joseph, initially charged with the project, fleshed out the idea, created the basic framework, and was responsible for much of the initial writing. Kami Pothukuchi, joining in 2002, worked with existing material, filled significant gaps, and developed much of the final content, collaborating with Kai Siedenburg on editorial decisions. Hannah Burton was responsible for obtaining and compiling the material on the case studies and related tables, and provided additional editorial assistance.

It is important to note that Kai Siedenburg and Kami Pothukuchi, the Guide's editors, accept full and final responsibility for the Guide's contents. In this Guide, the authorial "we" refers to these editors. Any questions on the contents of the Guide may be directed to us at the Community Food Security Coalition.

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- ¹ Ashman, L., J. de la Vega, M. Dohan, A. Fisher, R. Hippler, and B. Romain. 1993. *Seeds of Change: Strategies for Food Security for the Inner City*. Los Angeles, CA: University of California in Los Angeles, Graduate School of Architecture and Urban Planning. <http://www.foodsecurity.org/pubs.html>.
- ² Cohen, B., L. Kantor, and M. Andrews. 2000. *Community Food Security Assessment Toolkit*. Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/AboutERS/Sales/> (Date accessed: 25 Sept 2002).



Communities and Food

In communities across the nation, advocates and organizations are working hard to develop solutions to food system problems and create innovative models that meet community needs. They are providing nutritious food to the hungry, creating community-based food businesses, organizing food policy councils, developing community gardens in inner-city neighborhoods, and linking consumers with local farmers through farmers' markets, along with many other initiatives. These efforts are necessarily diverse; they represent local solutions to local manifestations of larger problems. However, they often share common goals, such as making nutritious food more accessible, revitalizing and empowering communities, and supporting local and sustainable food production and distribution.

As advocates seek to address a range of interconnected food system problems, many find that building partnerships and coordinating efforts is essential to developing effective and lasting solutions. They also find that gathering information about conditions in the food system and publicizing that information is valuable, both to help inform their own work to create positive change, as well as to build broader awareness of and support for their efforts. For these and other reasons, advocates across the country have become increasingly interested in Community Food Assessments.

This publication offers guidance and resources for conducting a Community Food Assessment. The following chapters define the elements of an assessment; provide selected examples of assessments that have been done; and outline the process for planning an assessment, conducting the research, and using the results to promote food system change.

This chapter briefly sets the context of our current food system; describes efforts underway to promote community food security, and introduces Community Food Assessments as a tool for this work. It is organized in the following sections:

1. What's Wrong With the Current Food System?
2. The Community Food Security Movement
3. Community Food Assessments as a Tool for Community Food Security
4. Overview of the Contents of This Guide

1. What's Wrong With the Current Food System?

In recent years, our food systems have become truly global in scope and structure. In the United States, we import and export hundreds of billions of dollars worth of food every year. Supermarket shelves abound with a dazzling array of foods, with more and more fresh items available year round. In the period from 1980 through 2000, US per capita food consumption grew from about 1800 pounds per year to 2000 pounds per year.¹ "What exactly is the problem?" an observer of this picture of the abundant and productive food system may be tempted to ask.

Yet, despite the apparent glut in our supermarkets, both urban and rural communities face numerous problems with respect to food production, distribution, and consumption. The following are only a few illustrations of the great cause for concern about current and future food security.

Millions of Americans are food insecure.

- ▶ The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) reports, based on a national Census Bureau survey, that in 1999, ten percent of all US households, representing 19 million adults and 12 million children, were “food insecure.”²
- ▶ Of these, five million adults and 2.7 million children suffered from food insecurity that was so severe that they were classified as “hungry.”
- ▶ In a recent national survey of emergency food programs, America’s Second Harvest found that their network served 23 million people in a year (nine percent more than in 1997), including over nine million children.³

Diet-related health problems are on the rise.

- ▶ One-third of all cancer deaths are linked to diet, according to the National Cancer Institute.⁴
- ▶ An estimated 300,000 deaths per year may be attributable to obesity.⁵
- ▶ Just seven diet-related health conditions cost the United States \$80 billion annually in medical costs and productivity losses, according to the latest Economic Research Service estimates.⁶
- ▶ An estimated 76 million persons contract food-borne illnesses each year in the United States. The high incidence of food-borne diseases in children, especially infants, are a major concern.⁷

The US food industry aggressively promotes unhealthy foods.⁸

- ▶ The US food industry spent \$7 billion in advertising in 1997. Most of this advertising focused on highly processed and packaged foods. Advertising for fruits, vegetables, and other healthful foods is negligible in comparison.
- ▶ In 1997, food manufacturers accounted for almost two-thirds of food system advertising. Another 28 percent was covered by fast food outlets (up from about 5% in 1980).

The food industry is becoming more concentrated.

- ▶ A handful of huge multinational corporations control an increasing share of production, processing, and distribution of food products, squeezing out local and regional businesses.
- ▶ Today, the top five firms account for 42% of retail sales, whereas in 1997, they accounted for only 24% of the market.⁹
- ▶ Four companies control 84% of the US cereal market.¹⁰

The US farm sector is declining.

- ▶ Thirty-two percent of the best quality farmland in the US has already irretrievably been lost to development; as much as 70% of the remaining prime farmland is threatened by sprawl.¹¹
- ▶ The number of farms has declined dramatically since its peak in 1935, dropping from 6.8 million in 1935 to only 1.9 million in 1997.¹²
- ▶ Market forces have squeezed US farmers to the point that it is extremely difficult to make a living producing food. In 1998 farmers earned an average of only \$7,000 per year from their farming operations.¹³
- ▶ The conventional food system has significant negative impacts on air, water, soil, and biodiversity.
- ▶ The 1998 National Water Quality Inventory reports that agricultural non-point source pollution is the leading source of water quality impacts to surveyed rivers and lakes and a major contributor to contamination of the ocean.¹⁴

- ▶ Conventional agricultural production also pollutes the air and soil and damages wildlife habitat.
- ▶ Long-distance transportation of food, now mostly by truck, creates air pollution and contributes to global warming.

Thus, despite appearances that our food supply is safe, abundant, and affordable, serious food-related problems affect most of the population, and there are grave threats to the long-term security and sustainability of the food system.

2. The Community Food Security Movement

The good news is that, as mentioned in the introduction, all across the country, people are working together to develop innovative solutions to the significant problems in our current food system. Many pioneering groups are working to develop ways to produce and distribute food that meet human needs, strengthen communities, and conserve natural resources. While most of these efforts are small-scale, they represent the seeds of creative and lasting solutions to food system problems.

Many of these organizations and individuals are linking efforts under an umbrella that is called the community food security movement. Like this movement, the definition of community food security reflects many different voices and continues to evolve. The following definition captures many elements on which there is broad agreement.

Community food security is a condition in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice.¹⁵

Community food security strives to link and integrate diverse fields, including community economic development, anti-hunger, social justice, local and sustainable agriculture, public health, nutrition, and environmentalism. The movement encompasses a broad range of participants working on many different issues. While they may not agree on every issue, increasingly they are working toward similar goals:

- ▶ To support access to food as a basic human right for all
- ▶ To eliminate hunger and food insecurity
- ▶ To build more local and regional food self-reliance, and thriving local economies
- ▶ To create a more democratic food system that gives communities a greater role in deciding how their food is produced and distributed
- ▶ To make the food system more equitable and socially just
- ▶ To develop environmentally sustainable food production and distribution systems
- ▶ To teach young people skills in food production and preparation, and to connect them to other community issues through food
- ▶ To preserve and celebrate diverse cultures through food

Conventional “food security” programs generally focus on the individual or household level of need, mostly as food assistance and social welfare programs. There is less emphasis on the infrastructure of food access, where the food comes from, how it is produced, or the effects of current food production and distribution. In contrast, community food security advocates stress improved access to and availability of food at the community level; for example by advocating for more full-service food stores in low-income neighborhoods, and for direct links between local farms and consumers. Many also focus on increasing the availability of locally, organically, or sustainably produced food. They also consider the issue of who controls the food system, and support the right of local communities to have a say about how their food is produced and distributed.

In contrast to more traditional top-down or single-issue organizational strategies, community food security encourages integrated, community-focused strategies that emphasize the following elements:

- ▶ Progressive planning
 - Getting at the underlying causes of problems and designing preventive approaches
 - Encouraging community-based visioning about the future of the food system
- ▶ Increased collaboration
 - Bringing together a broad range of players to work together toward common goals
 - Transcending top-down or expert-based decision-making and program delivery
- ▶ Community responsiveness and ownership
 - Taking the broad needs of the community into account in developing programs
 - Expanding awareness and promoting a greater sense of ownership of food system issues
 - Developing responses and strategies that are inclusive and that increase community access to information
- ▶ Multi-sectoral strategies
 - Incorporating diverse sectors of society in developing solutions and alternatives, including the private, public, and nonprofit sectors
 - Incorporating sustainable development strategies that integrate environment, public health and nutrition, urban economic development, and other quality of life needs

The publisher of the Guide, the Community Food Security Coalition, plays an important role in building and supporting this growing movement. Founded in 1994 by advocates working on a range of food and farming issues, the Coalition has grown to a network of over 250 organizational members. The organization provides a broad range of training, networking, and advocacy programs that further the efforts of grassroots groups to create effective food system solutions from the ground up. For more information about the Coalition and its activities, go to www.foodsecurity.org.

3. Community Food Assessments as a Tool for Community Food Security

As the work of those in the community food security movement continues to evolve, new approaches and strategies emerge. In recent years, there has been increased interest in strategies that go far beyond the level of a single project to involve a range of stakeholders in developing integrated approaches to a range of food and farming issues. These strategies include food policy councils, local and regional food marketing programs, and conducting systematic, community-focused studies of the food system through Community Food Assessments. Such integrated approaches offer exciting potential to develop broad-based, long-term solutions to persistent problems in the food system.

The Community Food Assessment approach reflects many fundamental aspects of the community food security movement, and contributes to it in important ways. It is integrative, and takes a systems approach. It involves collaboration between diverse stakeholders. It is solution-oriented, looking at assets and resources as well as problems. Community food assessments promote community food security by increasing knowledge about food-related needs and resources, by building collaboration and capacity, by promoting long-term planning, and by facilitating a variety of change actions including policy advocacy and program development.

By emphasizing participatory research that directly helps generate change actions, the Community Food Assessment approach distinguishes itself from more traditional research conducted by universities and private consultants. Community Food Assessments can be of, by, and for communities and their members. This participatory approach is consistent with the general emphasis in the community food security movement on promoting more community participation in and control of the food system.

Figure 1-1. Community Food Security Goals and Community Food Assessment

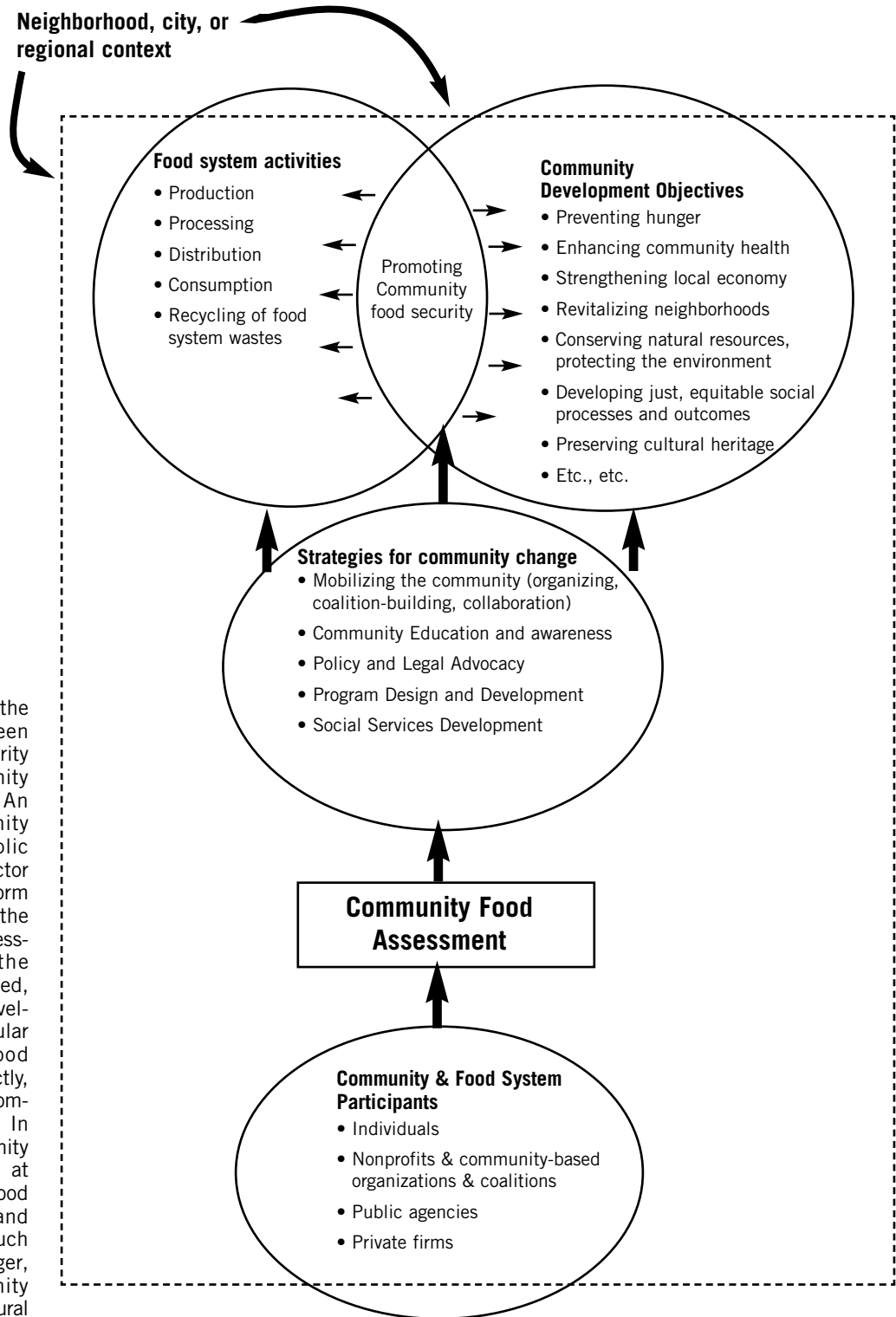


Figure 1-1 illustrates the connection between community food security goals and Community Food Assessment. An individual, community organization, public agency, or private sector organization could form a coalition to initiate the Community Food Assessment. Based on the information generated, actions could be developed to affect particular community or food system activities directly, in order to improve community food security. In this diagram, community food security stands at the intersection of food system activities and community goals such as preventing hunger, enhancing community health, conserving natural resources, and promoting social justice.

Movements do not necessarily need to conduct systematic community-based assessments to bring about significant change. However, the knowledge gained from such assessments can be a powerful resource for helping organizations to be more effective, to maintain momentum, to gain new allies, to build new knowledge and support in the community, and to bring about new policies and practices. Community Food Assessments can help achieve these objectives on community food system issues.

4. Overview of the Contents of This Guide

The Community Food Security Coalition has created this Guide to help readers learn about what Community Food Assessments are, how they are organized, and what benefits they can offer. We hope it will help you to decide whether an assessment is right for you, and help you to organize a successful assessment if you decide to initiate one.

Here is a chapter-by-chapter overview of contents of this Guide:

Chapter 1 provides context for the emerging field of Community Food Assessment through an overview of the state of the US food system and the community food security approach.

Chapter 2 defines Community Food Assessments, describes key elements of assessments, and outlines the potential benefits from conducting an assessment.

Chapter 3 includes brief case studies of nine Community Food Assessments from around the country, focusing on their goals, methods, collaborators, and outcomes.

Chapter 4 provides an overview of the process of planning and organizing an assessment, including recruiting collaborators, setting goals, identifying resources, and preparing for follow-up actions.

Chapter 5 delves into the specifics of the assessment research, providing guidance on developing research goals and questions, and selecting indicators and research methods.

Chapter 6 considers how to effectively put your assessment to work by disseminating the results and developing strategies and actions to create positive change in the community.

¹ Jerardo, A. 2002. *The Import Share of US Consumed-Food Continues to Rise*. Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Economic Research Service. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/fau/july02/fau6601/fau6601.pdf>. (Date accessed: 23 Sept 2002).

² Food Research and Action Center. 2000. *New Data Show Persistent Hunger and Food Insecurity Among American Families*. Washington, DC: Food Research and Action Center. <http://www.frac.org/html/news/food-security99.html>. (Date accessed: 29 Aug 2002).

³ America's Second Harvest. 2001. *Hunger in America*. Chicago, IL: America's Second Harvest. <http://www.hungerinamerica.org/>. (Date accessed: 29 Aug 2002).

⁴ Doll, R. and R. Peto. 1981. The causes of cancer: Quantitative estimates of avoidable risks of cancer in the United States today. *Journal of the National Cancer Institute*, 66: 1191-1308. http://rex.nci.nih.gov/NCI_Pub_Interface/raterisk/risks73.html. (Date accessed: 27 Aug 2002).

⁵ Allison, D. B., K. R. Fontaine, J. E. Manson, J. Stevens, and T. B. VanItallie. 1999. Annual deaths attributable to obesity in the United States. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 282(16): 1530-8.

⁶ USDA Economic Research Service. "Diet and Health: Overview." Washington, DC: USDA Economic Research Service. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/DietAndHealth/>. (Date accessed: 29 Aug 2002).

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- ¹³ USDA Economic Research Service. 2000. "Farm Income." *Agricultural Outlook*. Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/agoutlook/may2000/ao271.pdf>. (Date accessed: 29 Aug 2002).
- ¹⁴ United States Environmental Protection Agency, Office of Water. 2000. *The Quality of Our Nation's Waters: A Summary of the National Water Quality Inventory: 1998 Report to Congress*. Washington, DC: US EPA, Office of Water. <http://www.epa.gov/305b/98report/> (Date accessed: 29 Aug 2002).
- ¹⁵ Hamm, M. and A. Bellows. 2002, in press. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*.



CHAPTER 2

Defining Community Food Assessment: Elements and Purposes

Chapter 1 introduced Community Food Assessments as a tool for groups to highlight and take action on the many connections between their communities and the food system. These assessments enable groups to systematically explore a wide range of food-related issues, and to build momentum and support for positive changes in their communities.

Community Food Assessment integrates activities in community organizing, planning, research, and implementing change actions. It is a relatively new approach and still lacks well-established definitions and practices. So far, it has been defined primarily by what has been done in the field by pioneering organizers. These assessments have varied greatly in their scale, methods, and level of community involvement. Various terms have been used to describe them, including: community food security assessment, food security assessment, and food system assessment.

The editors of this Guide use the term Community Food Assessment for two reasons: first, to allow flexibility for an assessment to focus on a range of food-related issues and goals; and second to emphasize the focus on the community level and on community participation in conducting the assessment. We have developed the following definition for this term.

A Community Food Assessment is a collaborative and participatory process that systematically examines a broad range of community food issues and assets, so as to inform change actions to make the community more food secure.

This chapter explores what a Community Food Assessment is, and the potential benefits of conducting an assessment. It is divided into two major sections:

1. Key Elements of a Community Food Assessment
2. Why Do a Community Food Assessment?

1. Key Elements of a Community Food Assessment

Community Food Assessment is not a distinct field of study with its own methods, concepts, and issues. It builds on other kinds of assessments, including those from the fields of community planning (asset mapping), social work (needs assessment), public health (nutrition assessment), environmental studies (environmental assessment), and international development (participatory rural assessment). This mix of frameworks and methods can make the Community Food Assessment process seem difficult to pin down, but they also give it flexibility and strength.

In doing program planning or evaluation, you may have completed a needs assessment. The needs assessment is designed to describe conditions, identify problems and desired improvements, and to develop strategies to address them. It is an important and popular category of assessment, and many Community Food Assessments include one. However, Community Food Assessments also seek to overcome some of the typical limitations of needs assessments:

- ▮ Needs assessments usually focus on a community's problems rather than its assets. This tends to lead to programs that focus on bringing in outside experts and resources, rather than building from a community's existing assets.
- ▮ Programmatic needs assessments generally address pre-defined needs through the continuation, expansion, or modification of existing approaches. They tend to reinforce existing relationships and structures, rather

than considering broader or more fundamental solutions.

- ▮ Organizational needs assessments also tend to be top-down, reflecting the existing management structure. They generally do not include broad participation in decision-making by staff, clients, and community interests. In fact, outside consultants sometimes contribute significantly more to the process than do many people who are part of the organization.

A Community Food Assessment is a flexible and multi-faceted approach that has been applied in many different ways, as the case studies in Chapter 3 illustrate. Still, there are some key elements that characterize most Community Food Assessments that take an approach similar to that promoted in this Guide, which calls for exploring a range of food system issues, involving significant community participation, and focusing on creating positive change. The following elements are both descriptive and prescriptive. They are descriptive in that they are based on the case studies profiled here, and prescriptive in that they emphasize qualities that we believe will help make future assessments effective.

Key elements of a Community Food Assessment

1. A Community Food Assessment examines a range of food issues, and the links between these issues and community goals.

Conducting an assessment is a way to explore and understand the many ways that food is connected (or not) to your community, and their implications for quality of life, food security, social justice, and other community values. It helps you examine the various ways community members participate in the food system, how it impacts their lives, and how well they are served by it. An assessment helps promote broader dialogue about how to develop a food system that will reflect shared values and meet community goals and needs.

Community Food Assessments also help highlight the connections between various kinds of food system activities, such as production, processing, distribution, and consumption. These linkages are often the areas in which new programs, policies, and innovations emerge, and understanding these linkages helps inform changes that are systemic and long-lasting. Assessments should therefore examine more than one issue or sector of the food system—not just hunger or the plight of family farmers, but multiple issues or sectors and the linkages between them.

In addition to highlighting specific needs and resources, an assessment can promote understanding of the broader context in which they exist. Individual programs can be examined in the context of social, economic, and environmental systems that operate not just at the local level, but regionally, nationally, and internationally. For example, the vast majority of the food consumed in most communities comes from hundreds or even thousands of miles away. The availability and quality of this food is driven by complex forces and processes operating from the community to the global levels. By promoting understanding of these contexts and how they affect the community, an assessment can help that community gain greater participation in or control over its food system.

2. A Community Food Assessment is designed to inform and build support for practical actions to enhance community food security.

A Community Food Assessment is a practical tool with practical applications, to develop recommendations and support for concrete actions to improve the food system and enhance community food security. This is different from more conventional research conducted in universities or private firms, in which there are few direct links to specific actions. Actions supported by assessments may be targeted at public policy agencies, private firms, civil society organizations, or the community at large. You may need to consider these potential targets carefully when designing your assessment process and its products.

Community Food Assessments work best when the research planning and action planning are conducted by the same set of actors and in an integrated way. It is important to plan ahead for an implementation or follow-up phase, including raising funds for this phase well before the report is released.

3. A Community Food Assessment is a planned and systematic process of gathering information about and analyzing community food issues.

The scope of possible questions and research in an assessment is so broad that it takes some thoughtful planning to clearly define the research goals and questions and to plan the process. This requires having clear overall goals for the assessment and follow-up actions. The research process generally involves a blend of collecting information from scratch and compiling information that already exists through previous research or other published material.

For the assessment findings to be credible and persuasive, it is important that the research methods are reasonable and appropriate, and defensible against charges of bias. It is important to design your research so that the findings are not biased by your expectations, and to allow the emergence of new and unexpected information. Chapters 4 and 5 detail the assessment planning and the research processes.

4. A Community Food Assessment addresses both needs and assets.

Community food security work is grounded in an asset-based approach to community development. This is in contrast with the conventional need- or problem-based approaches that typically drive policies and services in historically disadvantaged neighborhoods. The Community Food Assessment is an integral component of such an asset-based approach, as it identifies local resources that can be used to increase food self-reliance and to build other community capacities.

In general, three main rationales support an asset-based approach to Community Food Assessment.

- It is more effective. By building on existing resources, it avoids unnecessary duplication and uses limited funds and resources more effectively.
- It is a more positive and respectful. It is based on the concept that even the most impoverished organizations and individuals are agents and resources for themselves and their communities. It recognizes the right and capacity of all people to have a say in decisions that affect them.
- It is more sustainable. Because it taps into a community's experience and culture, it can be absorbed into these experiences and become a resource for addressing future issues. Its emphasis on building local capacity and social capital, rather than simply gathering data about community needs or problems, also enhances its sustainability.

Implications of an asset-based approach to Community Food Assessment:

The planning process should involve groups and individuals in low-income and minority communities in decisions about the assessment goals and process. For example, these communities could be represented in the assessment team, while community meetings could be held to invite broader input. This helps ensure that the assessment is broadly representative of the concerns and resources in the community.

The research should include compiling inventories of relevant community assets and resources. For example, an ethnic minority community that is concerned about the influx of fast food and the loss of traditional cultural practices might want to inventory plants that are part of traditional diets; compile traditional recipes; and include oral histories from local elders about other cultural practices related to food.

The research activities can be designed to involve participants from the community. For example, young people could be trained to interview seniors about food access issues and coping strategies. This would have multiple benefits, including building intergenerational ties, developing youth capacities, and encouraging youth involvement in community concerns.

Community members and resources need to be part of the assessment follow-up actions. For example, in a program to encourage more nutritious diets in an African-American community, people who are part of and trusted by that community would likely be more effective at conducting outreach.

5. A Community Food Assessment focuses on a geographically defined place.

As discussed in Chapter 1, numerous efforts are underway to promote community food security and to build local food systems that provide viable alternatives to the current global food system. Place is central to these efforts because it links people, culture, and resources. Assessments usually focus on a geographically defined place, from a neighborhood to a city to a larger region. Identifying such a place-based community also provides practical benefits: it outlines the scope of the project and makes it manageable, as well as providing a clear link to various stakeholders and their activities. It also has implications for decision-making and follow-up actions, as policies and programs usually are developed for geographically defined areas.

All Community Food Assessments will need to identify geographic boundaries that are relevant for their research questions and for the follow-up actions to be supported by the assessment. They can include different geographic areas for different types of research (for example, the Madison Food System Project profiled in Chapter 3 did some Dane county analyses, some Madison city analyses, and then focused on one low-income area of the city).

6. A Community Food Assessment involves a broad spectrum of actors from the community.

Both communities and food systems are complex and multi-faceted, with expertise related to different aspects of each spread out among various disciplines, individuals, and organizations. It is valuable to cast a wide net in identifying potential collaborators, to include individuals, organizations, and coalitions from the private, non-profit, and public sectors. Stakeholders not traditionally associated with food or agriculture-related activities, such as local government and community development corporations, can be valuable partners.

Direct participation by community residents, especially from those groups whose situation the assessment is seeking to improve, is extremely important. Agency representatives and other organizational professionals, for all their strengths, usually are limited in their ability to address all community interests. Community residents can contribute valuable knowledge, skills, and perspectives. Their participation helps foster trust, community links, and shared ownership of the process and outcomes. Thus, the assessment can help increase community participation in addressing local issues, and contribute to empowerment of traditionally disenfranchised constituencies. (See Chapter 4 for more on recruiting participants and community involvement.)

Case Study	Foundations	Government Agencies	Universities, Institutes, Education Centers	Non-Profit Organizations	Businesses	Coalitions
Austin	1	1		1		1
Berkeley	1		1	9		1
Detroit		2	1	7		1
Los Angeles			1	4	1	
Madison/Dane County	1	1	1	1		
Milwaukee		5	8	12	1	3
The North Country		3	1	1	8	1
San Francisco		1		2		1
Somerville		5	2	5		
Totals:	3	18	15	42	10	8

This information was derived from surveys completed by case study contacts.

“Community” can be defined in a variety of ways. In general, community as used here is defined by place, or by relationships among people based on their identity, social situation, or interests and values. We use “community participation” to refer to participation by residents representing grassroots issues and interests, often including disenfranchised groups. This is in contrast to participants who represent an organization or institution and participate in the assessment as part of their regular paid work. Of course, this distinction is not always clear-cut.

7. A Community Food Assessment emphasizes collaboration among participants.

Community Food Assessment is based on a collaborative approach, with participants working as a team to make decisions and implement actions. Such a collaborative approach can be more challenging and time-consuming than a top-down approach, but it also can convey important and long-lasting benefits. It brings in a range of perspectives that help ensure that the assessment reflects the community and is appropriately broad and integrated in its scope. It pools expertise, contacts, and resources from a variety of sources. It also helps build ownership of and accountability to the process, and thereby builds broader support for the assessment and its recommendations. Collaboration also builds new relationships that will be valuable to participants in their work, as well as giving them a chance to develop their skills in working with a diverse group. And last but certainly not least, collaboration builds a foundation for effective actions to create long-term change in the community.

In practical terms, participants will vary in the amount of time and resources they can commit to an assessment. Thus, most assessments develop a clearly-defined core group that takes on additional responsibilities not held by all team members.

8. A Community Food Assessment requires significant time and resources to plan and implement.

There is no set time frame for an assessment; depending on the scale or scope, it could take just a few months or two or more years to complete. Assessments do need to be completed in a reasonable time frame to inform and support actions and to maintain group participation and momentum. Some assessments may need to be completed more quickly to inform a pending decision or to help implement an urgently needed program. Follow-up actions also may take significant time to implement.

A Community Food Assessment also requires substantial resources, to bring people together, encourage community participation, design and implement the research, disseminate the results, and organize follow-up actions. If it is small in scope, an assessment can be done with very few resources, but many may ultimately require tens of thousands of dollars to complete. Most assessments rely on substantial in-kind resources, and many start with limited funding and raise additional funds as they move forward. The key is designing your assessment to match the resources that will be available. (See Chapter 4 for more information on funding and resources for an assessment.)

Elements of a Quality Assessment

Community Food Assessments vary greatly in their scope, form, and outcomes, so successful assessments may differ from each other in many ways. The following are broadly-defined elements of a quality assessment:

- ▶ It examines a **range of food system issues**, and the connections between food and community goals.
- ▶ It involves a **broad range of actors** from the community, including individuals and organizations, and the public, private, and nonprofit sectors.
- ▶ It involves **community residents** in significant and meaningful ways, and builds community capacity for future actions.
- ▶ It uses **participatory and collaborative** processes that generate results, build new partnerships, and leave participants feeling satisfied with the process.
- ▶ It focuses on community food **assets as well as problems**.
- ▶ The **research is rigorous**, and the methods used are consistent with the overall goals of the assessment.
- ▶ It makes **effective use of cash and in-kind resources** available, and is completed in a **reasonable time-frame**.
- ▶ It **fosters broader awareness and understanding** of the community and its food system.
- ▶ It contributes to **tangible actions** to bring about positive change in the community's food system.

2. Why Do a Community Food Assessment?

Many activists working to improve their community's food system may be reluctant to conduct a Community Food Assessment. They may feel like they already know what is happening in their community, and that they do not need to do a study to reinforce that knowledge. They may be reluctant to take on what seems to be a cumbersome research process, when so many studies have wound up collecting dust while the problems they examined worsened. They would rather roll up their sleeves and work for practical improvements and solutions.

These concerns are certainly understandable, and Community Food Assessments are not right for every situation. Yet they can be a powerful tool for activists seeking to create lasting change. The information gathered can lead to more strategic and effective action, and can highlight issues and build broader support and pressure for change. And a Community Food Assessment is much more than an information-gathering process. It also is an organizing and planning process that involves coalition building, priority setting, advocacy, and developing capacities in the community. All these processes can generate multiple benefits, such as more community involvement, increased collaboration, and better integration between programs. Ultimately, an assessment can lead to important changes in the community's food system, such as better food access for low-income people, local economic development, and improved public health.

<p>Possible Benefits of Community Food Assessments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Improved program development and coordination▶ Positive changes in public policy affecting the food system▶ Broader awareness and understanding of food-related issues▶ Development of new and stronger networks and coalitions▶ Increased community participation in shaping the food system▶ Greater community capacity to create positive change
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Community Food Assessments can provide a range of benefits that make them well worth the effort. Some of these benefits are accrued to participants through the process of planning, implementing, and using an assessment. These are called process benefits and are valuable to building various skills, shared understandings, confidence, and a sense of ownership. Outcome benefits are more tangible products or changes in the larger community that result from the assessment. These could include reports, media coverage, and policies or programs created in response to the assessment.

Outcome Benefits

Community Food Assessments generate valuable information that allows participants to better understand the well-being of community residents, and their needs and resources related to access to nutritious, affordable food. While assessment participants will likely already have a good understanding of local issues, gathering and analyzing more detailed information on local conditions can be extremely valuable. This information can increase awareness and understanding of local food system issues, and inform the development of more appropriate strategies to address these issues. Such strategies can include program development, policy advocacy, and public education.

1. Program development

Assessments can be a valuable tool in program design, development, and improvement. They can provide a more complete picture of how individuals interact with their food system, the needs and resources available, and the potential for building or improving linkages between community organizations and other insti-

tutions. By doing so, assessments can inform the improvement of existing programs, increase coordination between programs, or give rise to creation of new programs or policies.

Assessments often result in more comprehensive and integrated approaches to addressing the community's food needs. The food system focus and collaborative nature of the assessment process make it possible for participants to develop programs outside their usual institutional parameters to address the broader needs of the community. The assessment process can allow for integrating multiple perspectives, fostering innovative approaches, and developing more sustainable projects by leveraging resources and commitments from diverse interests. This integrated approach can in turn give rise to strategies to address complex issues such as: dealing with the links between poverty, hunger, food access, and diet-related diseases; and addressing the long-term sustainability of the mainstream food system.

For example, the Seeds of Change study documented the trouble low-income community residents in Los Angeles had with access to affordable, nutritious food. It highlighted the importance of community-based programs such as farmers' markets in addressing this problem. As a result, the study's client, the Interfaith Hunger Coalition, which previously had been focused on federal food programs, decided to dedicate staff to create new community gardens and farmers' markets as part of its AmeriCorps program. Similarly, the food assessment study in Milwaukee led the Hunger Task Force of Milwaukee, a food bank and anti-hunger agency, into the economic development realm through sponsoring the Fondy Food Center, a market and kitchen incubator project.

2. Policy advocacy

Governments at all levels make decisions that profoundly shape the way food is produced, distributed, accessed, and consumed. (See *Getting Food on the Table: An Action Guide to Local Food Policy*¹, for a fuller description of the role of local policy and opportunities to shape it.) Changing public policy is an important goal of many assessments.

Assessment reports can be an important tool in the policy advocacy process. Reports provide documentation and publicity for conditions that may be well known to advocates and community members, but unrecognized by government officials and other decision-makers. They can provide compelling evidence of community needs, clearly articulate policy opportunities to promote community food security, and help mobilize the community to advocate for policy change. The role of the assessment report in policy advocacy can be greatly strengthened by effective publicity and media outreach.

Austin's Sustainable Food Center published the results of their food access study in a report titled *Access Denied: An Analysis of Problems Facing East Austin Residents in Their Attempts to Obtain Affordable, Nutritious Food*.² One of their key recommendations, which was implemented by local government, was to create a food policy council to address local issues. One of the first actions of this council was to recommend a new bus line directly connecting low income neighborhoods and supermarkets in outlying neighborhoods. They collaborated with the local transit authority to establish it, and the "Grocery Bus" soon became quite popular with transit-dependent residents in East Austin.

3. Visibility and awareness

Community Food Assessments offer an opportunity to raise awareness of food system problems and opportunities, which is key to building support for long-term change. As noted above, assessments can raise the profile of issues that have not received adequate attention from policy makers, businesses, media, and others. The information gathered, the needs identified, the solutions proposed, and sometimes even the process itself can all provide good opportunities for media coverage. Assessments also can provide visibility for participants and sponsors and their ongoing work, helping them gain additional support, funding, and legitimacy.

Media exposure of issues and programs is useful for educating the community and building greater understanding of local concerns and assets. It also is important in policy advocacy efforts, as policy makers often pay close attention to compelling media stories. For example, the Seeds of Change study in Los Angeles gained significant media coverage in the form of a front-page article and an editorial in the *Los Angeles Times*, as well as numerous radio and television news stories. This media attention was instrumental in pressuring policy makers to develop a hunger policy for the city.

Process Benefits

In addition to practical outcomes generated by an assessment, the process itself also can provide important benefits to participants. It can help them develop new skills and capacities, as well as new contacts and partnerships. These benefits can enhance participants' work beyond the scope and duration of the assessment, and in turn lead to additional outcomes. Such process benefits are one of the ways Community Food Assessment is different from a more conventional top-down research process. Some types of process benefits are summarized below.

1. Development of networks and coalitions

Community Food Assessments are collaborative efforts, typically involving participation by many stakeholders. They facilitate new and improved working relationships, which can in turn provide new resources and support to participants. They may lead to better coordination of existing efforts, collaboration on specific projects, or valuable political support. Assessments also provide an opportunity for participants to strengthen their skills in collaborating with diverse partners, which increases their capacity to work together to create change.

After the study is completed, assessment partners may choose to form a coalition or collaboration to pursue implementation of the report's recommendations. For example, the assessment process in Madison, Wisconsin, helped bring together an advisory group of community food stakeholders, many of whom had never worked in such a wide-ranging group before. As a result of this participation, this informal network coalesced (with new members) into the Madison-Dane County food policy council. Even if an ongoing coalition is not formed, it is likely that the assessment will lead to partnerships that continue beyond the duration of the assessment.

2. Community participation and collaboration

Because everyone eats, everyone is a food system stakeholder with some knowledge about community food issues. The Community Food Assessment process provides an opportunity to promote broad representation of residents and other stakeholders (including the disenfranchised) in determining priorities, rather than leaving most decision-making to business owners, politicians, and others in positions of power. Thus, assessments can help mobilize and empower residents to take charge of their food system.

Community members can play key roles in overall planning, recruiting participants, gathering information, identifying and prioritizing needs, and choosing and implementing follow-up actions. They can help ensure that the assessment is accountable to residents' needs and concerns, and that the changes resulting from it are effective and long-lasting.

Collaboration among community residents and professionals helps build shared understanding and trust, and can serve as a resource to create many kinds of actions in the community. For example, the Detroit Food Security Council planning process brought together resident leaders of the Gratiot-McDougall neighborhood and professionals in nutrition, anti-hunger, community economic development, and urban planning. This collaboration led to joint efforts to write grant proposals to bring food-related community development into the neighborhood. (See Chapter 4 for more information on community participation in assessments.)

3. Capacity development

A Community Food Assessment can provide informal training to its participants in a variety of areas, including planning, process facilitation, research, analytical, and implementation skills. Many of these skills

will likely prove useful in other areas of their work. Building such individual capacities helps develop organizational capacities, which in turn increases the community's potential to create positive change.

Assessments have helped people leading them to develop expertise in areas besides those in which they were trained or had experience. For example, participating in an assessment has helped nutritionists speak to food access issues more effectively; community organizers to advocate for improved food policies; and graduate students learn to facilitate meetings.

When a Community Food Assessment may not be right for you

A Community Food Assessment is a valuable and flexible tool, but it will not be right for every community or situation. For example, if your group needs to respond to an urgent issue such as the pending closure of your local supermarket, then you may not have the time to conduct a Community Food Assessment. In this case, organizing your community and pressuring local officials to take action would be more appropriate.

Similarly, your situation may call for particular kinds of research that are different from a Community Food Assessment. For example, your organization may have an opportunity to influence the content of meals in local school cafeterias. You may want to commission an independent, scientific analysis of the nutritional content of the meals without taking the time to organize a participatory process or evaluate other contextual issues.

Finally, if your community has few organizations working on local food issues, then you may want to undertake an assessment yourself, rather than organizing a broader, collaborative process. You may want to use the results of your assessment to recruit others and develop broader collaboration.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we defined Community Food Assessment and described its key elements. We outlined some of the possible purposes for an assessment, and the direct and indirect benefits that can result from an assessment. We hope that this and future chapters will help your group decide whether a Community Food Assessment is right for you, and help guide you through the process if you decide to go ahead.

¹ Biehler, D., A. Fisher, K. Siedenburg, M. Winne, and J. Zachary. 1999. *Getting Food on the Table: An Action Guide to Local Food Policy*. Los Angeles, CA: Community Food Security Coalition and California Sustainable Working Group. <http://www.foodsecurity.org/pubs.html>.

² Sustainable FoodCenter. 2001. *Access Denied: An Analysis of Problems Facing East Austin Residents in Their Attempts to Obtain Affordable, Nutritious Food*. 2001. Austin, TX: Sustainable Food Center and Austin Community Gardens. http://www.main.org/sfc/access_denied/. (Date accessed: 3 Sept 2002).



CHAPTER 3

Community Food Assessment Case Studies

1. Introduction

This chapter highlights examples of Community Food Assessments conducted in nine communities nationwide between 1992 and 2001. Each case study briefly describes the background, goals, actors, process, resources, and outcomes for that assessment. These cases illustrate some of the different ways that groups have shaped assessments to address local concerns and resources, and provide a sense of the flexibility and power of the Community Food Assessment approach for understanding and acting on local food issues.

For simplicity, we have applied the term Community Food Assessments to this collection of case studies, but the groups who implemented them have taken various approaches and used different terms to describe their assessments. The overall approach to Community Food Assessment conveyed in this Guide is generally informed by the work of the case study groups, but it is not based on one particular model. Although the cases include most of the elements of an assessment presented in Chapter 2, not all of them include all these elements. For example, the case studies involve varying degrees of community participation in the planning and implementation of the assessment, while this Guide encourages an approach that integrates substantial community participation.

Community Food Assessment is a relatively new field, and the approach is still being developed. We present these case studies not with the idea that they are perfect models to be replicated. Rather, we present them as examples of valuable and pioneering work, with the understanding that it is important for us to learn from each others' experiences, especially in a young field like Community Food Assessment. We encourage you to share the stories and lessons from your assessment, to continue this learning process.

Communities Addressed by Case Studies

Case Study	Assessment Area	Population of Study Area
Austin	East Austin, Texas	East Austin: 24,000
Berkeley	West and South Berkeley, California	West and South Berkeley: approximately 35,000
Detroit	City of Detroit; Southeastern Michigan region (six counties); and Michigan at large	Detroit: 970,000
Los Angeles	South Central Los Angeles, California	South Central LA: 53,000
Madison/Dane County	City of Madison, Wisconsin, and Surrounding Area	City of Madison: 207,000; County: 400,000
Milwaukee	Near-north and near-south sides of the city of Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and Milwaukee County	Milwaukee: 959,275
The North Country	Jefferson, Lewis, St. Lawrence, Franklin, Clinton, and Essex Counties of New York state	Six-county area: approximately 431,000
San Francisco	Southeast San Francisco, California—Bayview Hunters Point neighborhood	Bayview Hunters Point: 34,000
Somerville	Somerville, Massachusetts	Somerville: 77,500

This information was derived from surveys completed by case study contacts.

In this chapter and elsewhere, tables and charts with summary information derived from these case studies are included. These tables provide an overview of the communities, participants, funding sources, and research questions for these assessments. We developed these tables based on information provided by case study contacts. They are meant to be illustrative, rather than an exhaustive representation of each assessment's characteristics.

2. Community Food Assessment Case Studies

✿ AUSTIN, TEXAS

Access Denied: An Analysis of Food Access in East Austin

East Austin is an inner-city community of about 24,000 people, primarily Hispanic and African-American. The area covers about six square miles, and encompasses strong neighborhoods and well-established minority-owned businesses. However, poverty and diet-related diseases are widespread.

In 1994, the Sustainable Food Center (SFC) initiated a study of food access in East Austin, with the goals of raising awareness and forming a food policy council to help address food access issues. SFC is a non-profit organization that works to develop sustainable food systems through local, state, and national initiatives. The study was planned and implemented over a period of eight months by SFC's then-Director, Kate Fitzgerald, and VISTA volunteer Jon Schragg with the support of the SFC board of directors. The Eastside Advisory Board, a group of community stakeholders, also provided project guidance.

Key project expenses included staff time and printing for the report. SFC paid for the study through their core funds, plus federal government support for the VISTA volunteer's salary. SFC requested donations to help cover printing costs for the report.

Extensive community input was gathered through interviews with over 200 residents. The SFC staff were both bilingual and lived in the neighborhood, and they made it a high priority to gather information in ways that would build trust and yield meaningful responses. They conducted extensive community outreach designed to engage residents in settings in which the residents felt comfortable. The staff worked through trusted community leaders who would introduce them and encourage community members to talk to them. (Of all the people they asked to help in this way, everyone agreed.) Outreach was conducted at churches, health clinics, elementary schools, public housing, neighborhood associations, grocery stores, farmers' markets, restaurants, bus stops, and by going door to door.

In these interviews, SFC staff focused on engaging community members in a conversation to identify their concerns about the local food system, and recorded notes afterward. SFC staff felt that these informal conversations conducted by local residents were more effective at soliciting honest responses than a survey administered by an outsider would have been.

In addition to these interviews, the project also analyzed census data and conducted detailed surveys at neighborhood grocery and convenience stores. The researchers compared selection and prices in East Austin with stores outside the neighborhood. Like similar studies in other cities, these surveys demonstrated that low-income East Austin residents generally paid higher prices and had a narrower selection of groceries available than people in other parts of the city.

The Austin study was conducted with modest resources by people who had a solid base in the community, and using methods that were sensitive to the community context. They successfully built on these strengths to create an accurate and compelling picture of food access that generated impressive outcomes.

The assessment results were published in a 1995 report titled *Access Denied: An Analysis of Problems Facing East Austin Residents in Their Attempts to Obtain Affordable, Nutritious Food*¹. The report proposed that a food policy council be established to address these problems, and recommended practical solutions for improving food access in East Austin. About 2,000 copies were distributed.

Sponsoring Organizations for Case Studies

Case Study	Sponsoring Organizations
Austin	– Sustainable Food Center
Berkeley	– San Francisco State University – Northern California Food Systems Alliance
Detroit	– Department of Urban Planning, Wayne State University – Hunger Action Coalition of Michigan
Los Angeles	– Department of Urban Planning, University of California Los Angeles – The Southern California Interfaith Hunger Coalition
Madison/ Dane County	– Madison Food System Project – Department of Urban and Regional Planning, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Milwaukee	– Hunger Task Force of Milwaukee – Center for Urban Initiatives and Research, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee – Wisconsin Food System Partnership
The North Country	– Division of Nutritional Sciences, Cornell University – The New York State Department of the State – New York State Community Action Association – Cornell Cooperative Extension
San Francisco	– San Francisco Department of Public Health – San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners – Literacy for Environmental Justice
Somerville	– Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, Tufts University – Massachusetts Health Research Institute

This information was derived from surveys completed by case study contacts.

Other outcomes include:

- ▶ A new bus route that provided transportation from the Eastside to the two biggest supermarkets
- ▶ Legislation that allows state land to be used free of charge for community gardens or farmers' markets
- ▶ Complete renovation of a grocery store in the neighborhood.
- ▶ Increased awareness about food access
- ▶ Establishment of a food policy council with in-kind support from the city and county

For more information, contact:

Sustainable Food Center
PO Box 13323
Austin, TX 78711
512-236-0074

Copies of the assessment report are available from:

http://www.main.org/sfc/access_denied/

🌿 BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA

Berkeley Community Food Assessment

The city of Berkeley is located just a few hours' drive from the heart of California's legendary agricultural sector. Yet Berkeley residents are subject to some of the same challenges faced by municipalities across the country—inadequate retail service in poorer neighborhoods, a financially struggling school food system, and food “education” dominated by TV ads. At the same time, Berkeley is home to exciting pilot initiatives to foster sustainability, nutritional health, and equity in the food system.

Between 1998 and 2001, members of the Northern California Food Systems Alliance and faculty from San Francisco State University came together with a committed group of community organizations to take a fresh look at how to link local farmers and urban consumers. They wrote a report that chronicles and analyzes Berkeley's efforts to build a healthy and equitable food system, titled *Good Farming, Healthy Communities: Strengthening Sustainable Agriculture Sectors and Local Food Systems*².

The report focused on five sectors of the Berkeley food system in which organizations were working to create change, and identified the kinds of projects these organizations were pursuing (in parentheses):

1. The food production sector (cooperative ownership, marketing strategies for family farms, and land trusts)
2. The retail food sector (direct marketing, inner-city greening projects, neighborhood markets)
3. Urban agriculture (mini-farms, community gardens, agricultural research)
4. The role of educational institutions (farm-to-school, community nutrition education, and community-driven urban agricultural research)
5. Public policy (advisory groups, public health, coalitions between green space and housing advocates)

The major sponsors of the project were the Northern California Food Systems Alliance, the San Francisco Foundation, and San Francisco State University. The principal leadership came from Raquel Pinderhughes, a professor at the university, with graduate student research assistance. The project was closely tied to community-based organizations such as the Ecology Center, the Berkeley Farmers' Market, the Berkeley Food Policy Council, and Berkeley Youth Alternatives. Five members from participating organizations formed a Community Advisory Board, which served as the steering committee for the project. Researchers working on the project and the Community Advisory Board held regular meetings and strategy sessions.

Community activists and residents were integral to the project. Community participation was generated through information sharing between local councils, neighborhood projects, and non-profit organizations at meetings and through involvement in project activities. Local high school students were trained in data collection. Further community input came from interviews and surveys of business owners, school children, farmers, market coordinators, and emergency food system staff.

The direct funding for the assessment consisted of two grants of \$25,000 each, from the San Francisco Foundation and California Urban Environmental Research and Action Center. In-kind donations were valued at \$100,000 and included the lead investigator's time, the research work of university students, the voluntary efforts of Community Advisory Board members, and additional guidance from other members of the community.

In addition to the above-mentioned report, outcomes from the Berkeley Community Food Assessment include:

- Formalized collaboration between the Berkeley Food Policy Council, farmers' markets, community-based organizations, and the Berkeley Youth Alternatives project
- Linkages between local growers and Berkeley school cafeterias
- Survey instruments provided for inclusion in the *Community Food Security Assessment Toolkit*³ recently published by USDA

For more information, contact:

Josh Miner
Department of Environmental Science, Policy and Management, UC Berkeley
510-643-0541
jminer@nature.edu

Copies of the assessment report are not available at this writing.

✿ DETROIT, MICHIGAN

The Detroit Food System Assessment

Detroit is home to many individuals and organizations working in low-income communities to increase access to fresh, nutritious, and culturally appropriate choices in food. However, when this study began in the late 1990s, these were disparate efforts without common goals, a broadly shared knowledge base, or a conceptual framework for action. Wayne State University Professor Kami Pothukuchi initiated the Detroit Food System Assessment to bring community food security concepts and systematic research into a community-based discussion that was already underway. The form of the assessment was shaped by discussions with representatives from the Hunger Action Coalition and other organizations that participated in the planning process to create the Detroit Food Security Council, but it was completed almost entirely within the university.

The goals of the assessment were to:

1. Develop a handbook of basic information about Detroit's food system to support actions and policies that foster community food security
2. Demonstrate how university faculty could partner with community members to conduct research on local issues

Wayne State University provided cash and in-kind support by funding Kami Pothukuchi's time and a student assistant to work on the study over two summers. Although community organizations were supportive, their efforts were not yet developed to the level of raising funds for systematic assessment work. Hence the assessment progressed more slowly than some others, developing over multiple cycles of initial assessment, community presentations of findings, discussion of further research questions, and additional research. Community partners played key roles in brainstorming research questions, identifying data sources, networking with key informants, helping build support for the assessment, and planning for program development based on the assessment's findings.

The initial assessment (conducted in 1999) was organized into sections based on links between food and the community goals of health, community economic development, and neighborhood revitalization. Initial presentations were made in community forums to provide an overview of basic statistics, and a more detailed assessment program emerged from the ensuing discussions. The report expanded to include sections on hunger and food insecurity, regional farmland, and small pilot studies that would provide more qualitative glimpses of the area's food system. For example, one pilot study examined the availability of a healthy basket of food in stores in an especially underserved neighborhood, while another documented the benefits of a youth nutrition garden in a Latino neighborhood.

The assessment was not the product of a systematic planning process of one organization or coalition; instead it emerged from an ongoing set of relationships that increased in size and complexity over time. Accordingly, local organizations use it as they see fit, to educate new members about Detroit's food system, to tell the story of the organizing efforts, and to raise more complex questions about unexplored issues. Because the assessment was initiated and carried out by a university faculty member, many of the outcomes are university-related.

The report on the Detroit Food System Assessment is still being finalized at this writing. The assessment has contributed to the following outcomes:

Hunger and Food Insecurity in Detroit

Household food security status by household type and race in Northwest Detroit, 1997

Household food security status	Total House holds	Food Secure		Food insecure, hunger not evident		Food insecure, moderate hunger evident		Food insecure, severe hunger evident	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
ALL HOUSEHOLDS		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
All household types	352	217	61.6	35	9.9	79	22.4	21	6.0
Households w/children under age 18	210	108	51.4	23	11.0	65	31.0	14	6.7
Households w/elderly, no children	63	51	81.0	3	4.8	5	7.9	4	6.3
Households w/no elderly, no children	77	57	74.0	9	11.7	8	10.4	3	3.9
BY RACE									
All Black households	309	191	61.8	29	9.4	71	23.0	18	5.8
All White households	21	11	52.4	3	14.3	5	23.8	2	9.5
All other race households	19	12	63.2	3	15.8	3	15.8	1	5.3

Source: Pothukuchi, 2002.⁴

The table reports on household food security status in a Northwest Detroit neighborhood, derived from a survey of 352 households selected randomly. It identifies four categories of food security status and helps compare between different types of households and racial groups. In this neighborhood, nearly four out of 10 households are food insecure with varying degrees of hunger evident.

- ▶ The formation of the Detroit Food Security Council, consisting of representatives from many area organizations, private sector groups, and public agencies, including Hunger Action Coalition, Michigan Coalition of Black Farmers, Michigan Department of Agriculture, Michigan Neighborhood Partnership, and Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice
- ▶ A firm basis for university-community collaboration on food system research and program development, with collaborations related to a youth nutrition garden, grocery store investigation, the Community Food Projects (CFP) grant process, etc.
- ▶ At least two CFP proposals from area organizations and numerous other grant proposals written by organizations and partnerships
- ▶ Efforts to inform city agencies and local policy makers on specific issues such as the links between food and land use and economic development planning, and local advocacy to improve allocation of public land for urban agriculture initiatives
- ▶ Greater interest among university students, faculty, and administrators in community food issues and related university-community partnerships

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✿ LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

Seeds of Change Food System Assessment

In 1992, Los Angeles emerged from a period of civil unrest that had wreaked economic and social havoc on the city. Los Angeles faced serious food security problems, including significant levels of hunger, inadequate government support programs, and an overwhelmed emergency food network. These problems were made worse by the lack of basic infrastructure in the inner city, where there were few supermarkets, generally high food prices, limited public transportation options, and no integrated policy framework to address these problems.

Researchers at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) Department of Architecture and Urban Planning and the Southern California Interfaith Hunger Coalition (IHC), a nonprofit advocacy and education organization, joined forces to undertake a comprehensive study of a low-income community of color in South Central LA.

The purposes of the study, called Seeds of Change, were to:

1. Evaluate problems of food security in the inner city, in both local and national contexts
2. Describe and assess the adequacy of the federal government's response to these problems
3. Analyze how the structure of the food industry has contributed to food insecurity
4. Identify and evaluate community-based strategies for change
5. Propose a framework for food security planning that is equitable, economically efficient, and environmentally sound

The Seeds of Change project was carried out with no cash budget, but with major in-kind support, especially from UCLA. Six principal researchers, two supervisors, and more than a dozen research assistants participated in the year-long study (1992-1993). Collaborators and non-profit groups contributed additional in-kind support, and students covered the cost of mileage and telephone calls.

The researchers divided the project into three areas: local, regional, and state/national. The local study included a telephone survey; extensive demographic, land use, and spatial analysis using GIS (Geographic Information Systems) software; a profile of food outlets; and a comparative price survey at outlets in the case study area and two suburban communities. Community members participated through a series of household surveys, market surveys, and interviews.

At the regional level, the researchers conducted surveys of consumers and growers at farmers' markets, interviewed low-income community gardeners, reviewed policy and agency activities, examined the structure of the food system from grower to grocery store, surveyed land use and transportation routes, and conducted comparative demographic analysis. At the state and national level, the study gathered data on existing food support programs, examined food policy council initiatives, and analyzed trends of the supermarket industry over the past several decades.

The research from the project was compiled and published as *Seeds of Change: Strategies for Food Security for the Inner City*⁵. Other outcomes included:

- ▮ Formation of the LA Community Food Security Network and the LA Food Security and Hunger Partnership (a food policy council)
- ▮ Further growth of community gardens and farmers' markets, and increased food stamp outreach at farmers' markets
- ▮ Examples and inspiration that helped spark food assessments in other cities
- ▮ Increased awareness that catalyzed the movement for food security in the United States, including establishment of the Community Food Security Coalition in 1994

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Copies of the assessment report are available from:

<http://www.foodsecurity.org/pubs.html>

🍂 MADISON, WISCONSIN

Madison / Dane County Food System Assessment

*Fertile Ground: Planning for the Madison / Dane County Food System*⁶ was the result of a 1997 planning workshop for graduate students in the University of Wisconsin-Madison Department of Urban and Regional Planning (URPL). Students and faculty members took on this project because they believed that the state of the food system could act as a barometer of the well-being of the community. The goals of the study were:

1. To develop a better understanding of the food system in Madison/Dane County
2. To build strategies for improving food security
3. To establish university/community partnerships

The class described the conventional food system in Dane County, evaluated how well this system was working, and spelled out how to develop alternative food systems. The study covered both the City of Madison and surrounding Dane County, a primarily agricultural region in South-Central Wisconsin. The Madison Food System Project (MFSP) and its Director, Jerry Kaufman, provided overall sponsorship and leadership for the project. The research team comprised Professors Kaufman and Kami Pothukuchi (then a visiting faculty at URPL), teaching assistant Mark Stevens, and more than 20 graduate students. Funding for the project came from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (through MFSP) and in-kind donations from the university.

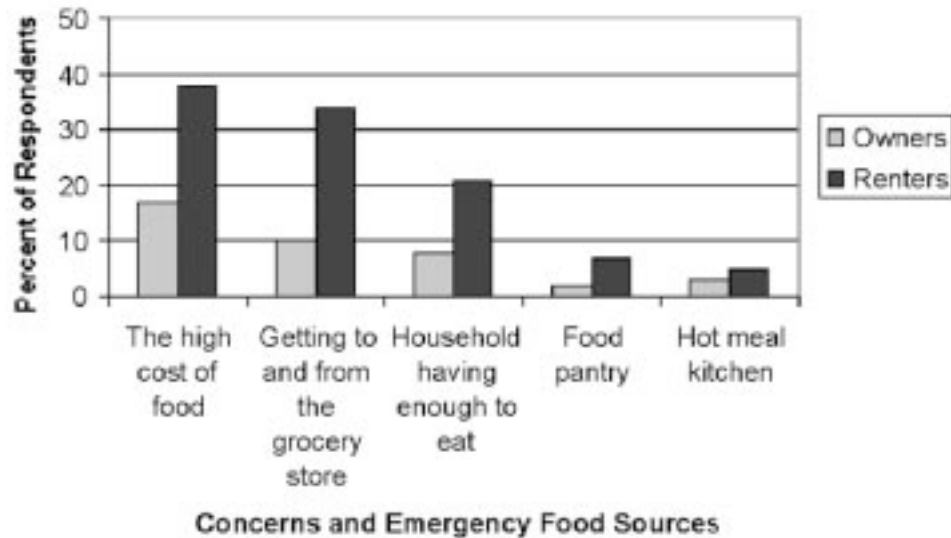
A 20-person advisory committee, consisting of 12 community members and eight academics, provided guidance for the project. The community groups represented included the Northside Planning Council, the Madison Community Gardeners Coalition, the Community Action Coalition, and the Hunger Prevention Council of Dane County. Between phases of the project, the students presented their research projects to the advisory committee and other key informants.

The researchers held focus groups with low-income adults and children in Madison's Northside and Southside neighborhoods to better understand the strategies low-income people used to stretch food budgets. They gathered information on location and number of food stores, restaurants, food pantries, farmers' markets, WIC sites, community gardens, and other establishments. The students also collected data about local businesses through a food-related business survey and a food pricing study in selected supermarkets.

The workshop culminated in the publication of *Fertile Ground: Planning for the Madison/Dane County Food System* in August of 1997. Over 400 copies have been distributed to individuals and organizations in the U.S. and other countries. Other outcomes include:

- ◆ Development of the Dane County REAP (Research, Education, Action, and Policy) Food Group, which focuses on promoting food security through joint projects, networking, analytical work, and by organizing the annual Food for Thought Festival
- ◆ Greater visibility of food system issues in Madison

Differences in food security concerns by respondent's housing tenure, Madison, Wisconsin, 2000 (n=372)



Source: Stevens and Raja, 2001.⁷

The chart compares the food security concerns of and the use of emergency food by homeowners and renters in Madison, Wisconsin. About twice as many renters as owners are concerned about the high cost of food, getting to the store, and having enough to eat.

This chart was excerpted from one of a series of working papers that were developed after the Fertile Ground study, as a way to address questions that were raised but not resolved in that study.

- ▶ Increased networking and contacts among individuals and organizations involved in various aspects of the food system
- ▶ Presentation of a session developed by the faculty instructors and three student researchers at the annual conference of the Wisconsin Chapter of the American Planning Association
- ▶ The start of a Madison Food System Partnership Working Paper Series

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Copies of the assessment report are available from:

Professor Marcia Caton Campbell at the above address for \$10.00. Several working papers from the Madison Food System Project are available at <http://www.wisc.edu/mfsp/pubsf/pub.html>.

✿ MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN

Milwaukee Food System Assessment Study

Milwaukee's Food System Assessment Study (FSAS) was a broad, five-year collaborative campaign (1995-2000). Its goals were:

1. To examine the root causes of hunger
2. To develop partnerships to promote food security and systemic change in Milwaukee County

An important objective of the study was to create projects that would promote affordable food access while addressing the lack of economic resources that cause families to experience hunger. The study developed a comprehensive picture of food security in Milwaukee and highlighted the links between poverty and food insecurity in the city.

The Hunger Task Force of Milwaukee collaborated with the Center for Urban Initiatives and Research (CUIR) at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee to oversee and conduct the research. The Hunger Task Force was the main sponsor, under the leadership of Michael Salinas, then Director of Advocacy. Two researchers from the University of Wisconsin, Olmedo Varela and Stephen Percy, developed the research protocol. These collaborators sought input from the Community Food Security Coalition, Cornell University staff, and local community contacts. Students from the university participated in the third phase of the project (described below).

The Hunger Task Force of Milwaukee established a Food System Advisory Council to guide and review the research and to make recommendations in response to the study's findings. The Council, which met quarterly, represented diverse interests in the food system, among them city and state government, non-profit organizations, food pantries, farmers, community activists, and university staff. For detailed decision-making and coordination of the research, the CUIR and the Hunger Task Force staff conducted planning and operational meetings as needed.

The total budget for the study was close to \$20,000, which included research assistance, printing, and labor. Cash support was provided by the Wisconsin Food System Partnership (\$10,000) and Kraft Foods, Inc. (\$4,500). In-kind support (estimated at \$5,000) included staff time, reduced rates from printers and graphic artists, and university support for survey work and photocopying.

The assessment's target areas were located in the near north and near south sides of Milwaukee, both high poverty areas. Community members participated in telephone surveys and focus groups. Phone surveys were conducted to determine what foods were purchased by residents and where. Focus groups were held with clients at food pantries and meal sites.

The study gathered a broad range of information in four phases. The first phase compiled data on population density, income, race and ethnicity, transportation access, as well as the location of emergency food providers, community gardens, farmers' markets, and other indicators. The second phase collected information on food retailers, including location, food availability, and pricing. The third and fourth phases compiled data from surveys and focus groups on perceptions and experiences of the food system among inner-city individuals and families using emergency food programs.

The study developed a thorough picture of food insecurity in Milwaukee and its relationship to poverty. Researchers found that the number of people living below the poverty line had increased dramatically since 1970, and that demand for emergency and non-emergency food programs exceeded their capacity. They also found that Milwaukee's low-income residents paid more for their groceries and had fewer stores located in their communities. The Hunger Task Force identified strategies for improving food access, promoting economic development, and decreasing poverty. These strategies included promoting public markets, establishing a micro-credit program to help low-income people start food-related enterprises, coordinating transportation routes to grocery stores, developing a food-buying cooperative for small inner city convenience stores, and starting a kitchen incubator for community-based food enterprises.

Problems identified in using “best” stores, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1997 (n=514)

Responses	All Areas
Distance or transportation	40.6%
Long lines	25.0%
Too crowded	9.4%
Items too big	6.3%
Child care	3.1%
Parking	3.1%
Coupon items not available	3.1%
Not consistent	3.1%
Credit card system out of order	3.1%
Time machine out of order	3.1%
Employee attitudes about coupons	3.1%
Bad neighborhood	3.1%

Source: Varela, Haider-Markel, and Percy, 1998.⁸

This table reports on the problems respondents (who were randomly selected for a phone survey) had with shopping at stores they considered to be the best for them. Eighty-eight percent of respondents defined “best” stores as large supermarkets with good quality, prices, and variety. By far the most commonly reported problem related to distance and transportation.

Four reports, one for each stage of the study, were published:

- ▶ *Perceptions and Experiences of Consumer Access to Food in Milwaukee’s Inner City Neighborhoods*⁸
- ▶ *Socio-Spatial Relationships and Good Programs in Milwaukee’s Food System*⁹
- ▶ *Comparative Study of Food Pricing and Availability in Milwaukee*¹⁰
- ▶ *Food Insecurity in Milwaukee: A Qualitative Study of Pantry and Meal Program Users*¹¹

Other outcomes include:

- ▶ Formation of the Milwaukee Farmers’ Market Association to develop and promote new markets in the inner city
- ▶ Development of the Fondy Food Center Project, a \$5 million year-round food center, market, and kitchen incubator
- ▶ Overhaul of the Emergency Food Pantry Network and Community Meal Program Coalition, including new types of technical assistance and guidelines
- ▶ Expansion of the WIC Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program to all of Milwaukee’s farmers’ markets
- ▶ Increased partnerships between the university and non-profit groups, leading to new courses, new research, and greater university involvement in the community

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Copies of the assessment report are not available at this writing.

Types of stores where commonly used items are purchased most often, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1997 (n=514)

Item Purchased	Large Stores	Medium Stores	Small Stores	Don't Buy	No Response
Milk and Dairy Products	83.1%	4.7%	9.7%	1.4%	1.2%
Canned Food and Vegetables	86.2%	6.4%	1.4%	4.9%	1.2%
Fresh Food and Vegetables	89.3%	7.4%	0.4%	1.6%	1.4%
Meat	80.9%	13.8%	1.4%	2.3%	1.6%
Frozen Food	84.2%	6.6%	1.2%	6.6%	1.4%
Coffee	62.3%	4.7%	4.7%	25.9%	2.5%
Bread	73.2%	11.5%	11.9%	1.4%	2.1%
Bakery Items	68.5%	8.0%	6.4%	15.2%	1.9%
Beer and Alcohol	16.7%	2.3%	14.0%	65.2%	1.8%
Cigarettes	12.3%	1.9%	18.5%	65.4%	1.9%
Ethnic or Specialty Food	23.3%	14.0%	1.8%	57.4%	3.5%

Source: Varela, Haider-Markel, and Percy, 1998.*

This table reports on the type of stores where 514 respondents most often purchased commonly used items. Store size was defined by examples of specific stores. Corner stores and convenience stores were defined as small. Large stores were used most often for purchasing all products except cigarettes.

🍁 NORTH COUNTRY REGION, NEW YORK

The North Country Community Food and Economic Security Project

The North Country of New York State spans six counties near the Canadian border. These counties are primarily rural, and agriculture is an integral aspect of the history and identity of the area. Unemployment is roughly twice the state average, and the region faces high rates of poverty and social isolation.

The North Country Community Food and Economic Security Project was conducted between December 1996 and May 1998, with follow-up work still continuing at this writing. The primary goal of the project was to engage and mobilize a broad network of county residents and improve access to healthful, locally produced foods while strengthening the economic viability of regional agriculture.

The project used a community-centered approach to identify residents' key concerns about the food system. A broad range of North Country residents—including dairy farmers, local processors, market managers, local agency staff, religious leaders, teachers, low-income parents, and county legislators—participated in two-day conferences in each county. Participants engaged in a series of open-ended questions, selected by local advisory committees in the search conference model. The search conference is a structured process that engages the community in reviewing the past and present, creating ideal future scenarios, identifying common ground, and developing action plans. Questions included:

1. Who's feeding you and what are you eating?
2. How can we build a stronger community through better management of local food resources?
3. How should our local food system look and work in the next five years?
4. How should our local food system work in 2020?

Conference participants also reviewed county-specific data on demographics, health, the economy, agriculture, and food availability. Residents provided qualitative data such as first-person accounts of historical shifts in local agriculture, trends in community development, and changing industries. Additional data were gathered through the workshop evaluation form.

The project was implemented through the North Country Community Food and Economic Security Network, which included a small campus-based team in the Division of Nutritional Sciences at Cornell and representatives of the county offices of Cooperative Extension and Community Action Programs in each of the six North Counties. In addition, county representatives from the regional network formed separate advisory committees with local residents to steer each of the county search conferences.

The study was funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The USDA provided tuition and a stipend for a graduate student and CDC provided a budget of \$184,000 over a two-year period for staff salary, office expenses, search conference fees, and other operating costs. In-kind resources of staff time from Community Action Agencies and facilities and food from Cornell Cooperative Extension amounted to approximately \$4,000 per county.

Outcomes include:

- ▶ Development of a Cornell Cooperative Extension position to continue and further work group efforts started during the conferences
- ▶ Increased networks among community and agency members
- ▶ Creation of a fellowship kitchen to serve all community members including the hungry, elderly, disabled, and single-parent families in Essex County
- ▶ Implementation of a system to provide donations of venison and beef to local food pantries in Lewis and St. Lawrence counties
- ▶ Establishment of a weekly regional farmers' market in Jefferson County
- ▶ Improved food distribution networks between the Community Action Programs of Jefferson County and Franklin County
- ▶ Increased storage and trucking facilities through joint efforts of a Food Security Committee.
- ▶ Numerous publications targeted at a variety of audiences

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Copies of the assessment report are available from:

The Journal *Agriculture and Human Values*, Volume 17, Issue 1, 2000¹².

🍃 SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

Youth Envision: Bayview Hunters Point Food Study

The Bayview Hunters Point neighborhood is located in Southeast San Francisco. It is one of the fastest growing and most ethnically diverse areas in the city, and also among the poorest. The goal of the Bayview Hunters Point Food Study was to identify and promote strategies for improving access to nutritious food in the neighborhood, while also providing job training for community trainees and youth interns.

In March 2001 the San Francisco Department of Public Health, Environmental Health Section (EHS) began a partnership in the Bayview Hunters Point neighborhood with a community-based organization, the San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners (SLUG). EHS approached SLUG because they had long been active in urban agriculture and food security projects in this neighborhood. In turn, SLUG engaged in a collaboration with

Literacy for Environmental Justice (LEJ) to develop a youth program around food security issues in the Bayview Hunters Point. A participatory action model was used to train youth in the skills and resources needed to investigate food security in their neighborhood. EHS provided technical instruction and assistance, as well as support to SLUG and LEJ project staff on action research methods. SLUG and LEJ coordinated the youth interns.

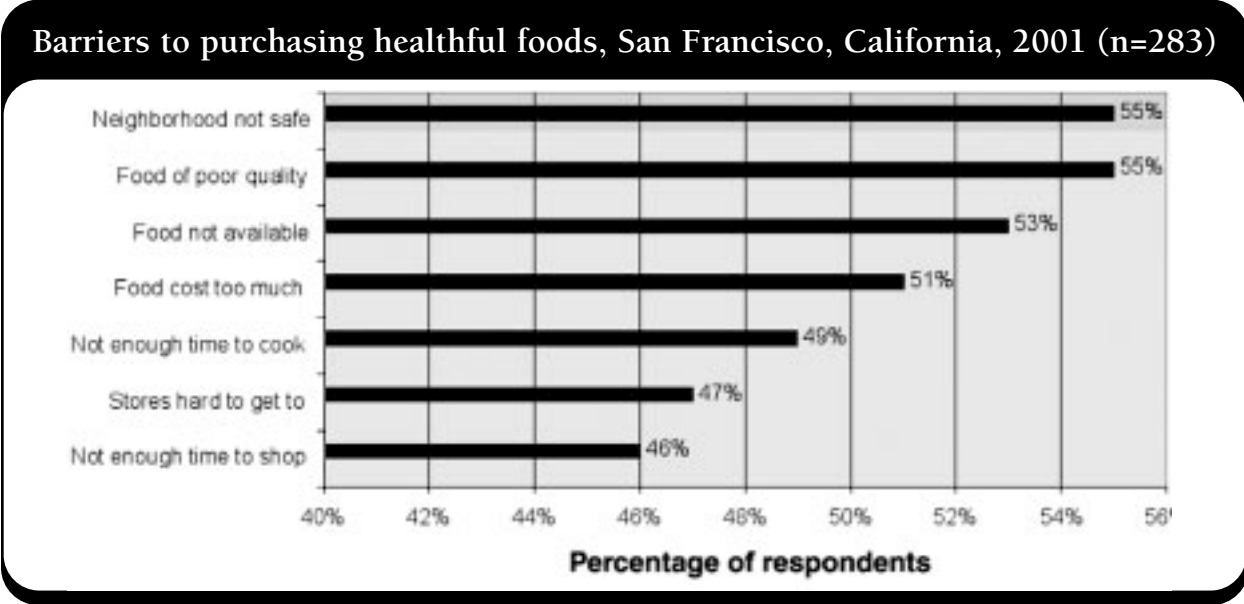
The total budget for the study was approximately \$20,000, plus significant in-kind time from EHS and SLUG's Youth Internship Program. The assessment project was funded by the Department of Public Health, while additional funding for the youth interns was provided by other city agencies. The steering committee consisted of the Director of Urban Agriculture at SLUG and members of the Department of Public Health's Environmental Health and Nutrition Sections. Decisions about data and reports were made by the steering committee.

Project staff working with EHS and the youth participants created a questionnaire focused on identifying ways to increase access to nutritious food. The survey sought information on where people were getting their food, the barriers to purchasing healthy foods, and changes that would help people to purchase healthy foods.

Youth empowerment was a significant aspect of the project. The youth developed their own recommendations, work plan, and deliverables with the help of project staff. The youth program combined learning about the food system with community actions such conducting outreach for a new farmers' market in the neighborhood, and community mapping of food assets. Youth were trained in survey methods, data analysis, health impact assessment, public communications, and other areas. Seventeen youth advocates collected survey responses from more than 280 individuals in their neighborhood. Survey locations included grocery stores, churches, community colleges, a post office, and a fast food restaurant.

The youth then worked with staff to analyze the survey data and create a list of recommendations to improve food access in Bayview Hunters Point. The four strategies identified as most helpful by survey respondents were the following:

- 1. Creation or improvement of a grocery store/supermarket
- 2. Creation of a neighborhood farmers' market



Source: Bhatia, Calandra, Brainin-Rodriguez, and Jones, 2001.¹³

In this project, youth conducted a survey of 283 non-randomly selected residents of Bayview Hunters Point, a neighborhood in San Francisco, and asked what keeps them from purchasing healthful foods. The respondents identified a variety of barriers related to access and availability, food quality and costs, and time constraints.

3. Better quality food on shelves of corner stores
4. Healthy fast food retailers

The youth interns shared their research findings widely through meetings and presentations with residents, community organizations, and service providers. At this writing, action plans have been developed for the local farmers' market and corner stores, and a plan for a new or improved grocery store is underway.

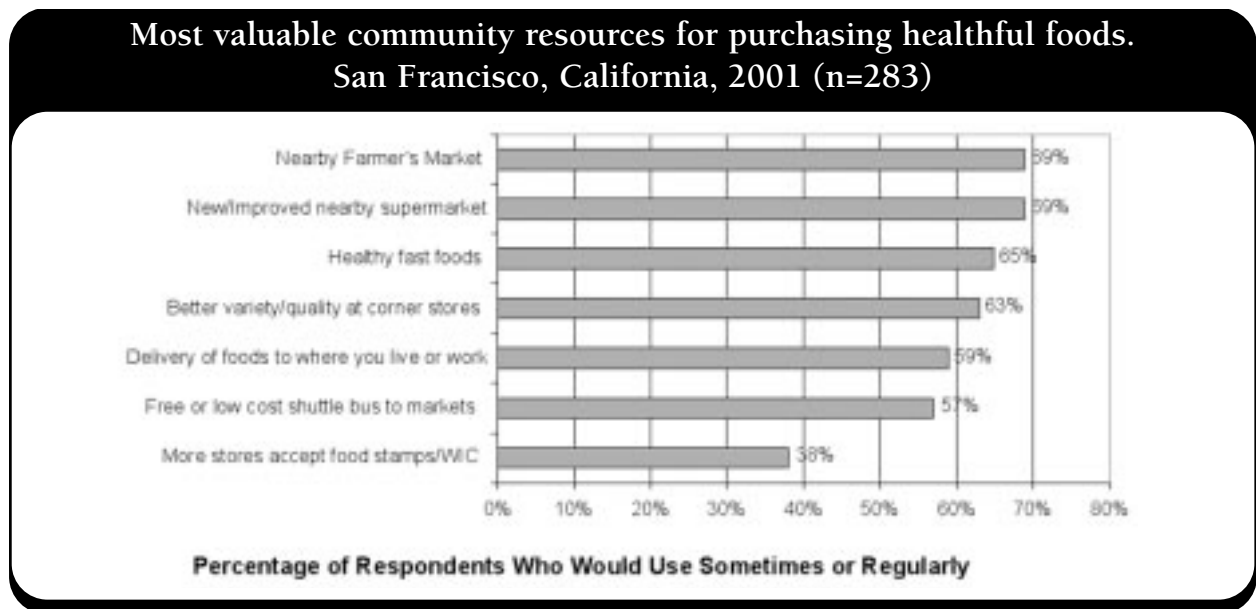
Other outcomes include:

- ▶ SLUG youth interns and staff created a new Bayview Community Farmers Market as a community development project. Youth have assisted with outreach, vendor relations, and market operations.
- ▶ Some corner store owners have made a commitment to stock a minimum amount of fresh food. Youth interns have conducted healthy snack taste tests at the farmers' market, and the results have been incorporated into an action plan for the corner stores. The Department of Public Health awarded a \$100,000 grant to the Youth Envision Project to continue the youth work with the corner stores.
- ▶ The city's transit authority agreed to provide new shuttle routes directly from the community to food sources.
- ▶ Neighborhood youth gained new skills and empowerment through job training and by working to educate and serve their community.

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Copies of the assessment report are not available at this writing.



Source: Bhatia, Calandra, Brainin-Rodriguez, and Jones, 2001.¹³

In this survey of 283 residents of Bayview Hunters Point (selected non-randomly), respondents were asked which of the above resources would most help them purchase healthful foods. The percentages indicate how many respondents said they would use each resource "sometimes or regularly."

☛ SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS

Somerville Community Food Assessment

The Somerville Community Food Assessment (SCFA) was a one-year initiative started in late 1999 to take a comprehensive look at food and nutrition resources in the city. The goal was to strengthen planning and policy for community-based food and nutrition resources for low-income residents in Somerville, Massachusetts, a largely working class and ethnically diverse community north of Boston.

The SCFA was sponsored by the Massachusetts Health Research Institute (MHRI) in Boston, working in collaboration with Hugh Joseph at the Tufts University School of Nutrition Science and Policy. It was funded by a \$49,000 Health and Human Services/Community Food and Nutrition Program grant. Two part-time staff and a steering committee of 18 professionals and unaffiliated residents collaborated to collect the data. The organizations involved were principally providers of food and nutrition services in Somerville, including emergency food programs, community gardens, elder services, school food services, public health services, WIC, and Head Start. In addition, there were participants from other social services and from academic institutions (Tufts and University of Massachusetts at Amherst).

The steering committee met monthly and made all major decisions regarding data collection, community input, and determination of needs and responses to them. Subcommittees helped with collecting information, contacting community leaders, and other activities. Staff coordinated activities between meetings, collected data, prepared reports and carried out other administrative tasks; four interns from Tufts University also assisted with activities. Interviews were held with dozens of community leaders and other stakeholders, particularly those representing ethnic communities and the public schools.

A significant component of the Somerville Community Food Assessment was to model participatory food systems planning. Project participants attended a Participatory Action Research workshop to learn how to involve the community in this process. They then met with city agencies and citizens' groups to identify community priorities in relation to food, health, and nutrition. From these meetings, the assessment participants determined that many food and nutrition resources were underutilized due to a lack of awareness about their existence or a lack of understanding of eligibility requirements. As a result, project participants decided to create a guide to food and nutrition resources in Somerville.

Outcomes of the assessment include the following:

- ▶ An extensive community food and nutrition resource guide was published. The 89-page guide lists a wide range of programs and services, primarily targeting low-income and ethnic minority residents. It includes retail food stores, government and private food assistance programs, nutrition and health services, community gardens, farmers' markets, and CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) farms. Several hundred copies were distributed and the guide was posted online (see web address at the end of this case study).
- ▶ A group of organizations, including Head Start and Project Soup, joined together to offer a series of cooking classes for low-income residents through the Operation Frontline program. The group is seeking funds to offer more cooking classes in Somerville.
- ▶ A Community Kitchen Task Force is examining the feasibility of setting up commercial kitchen facilities and resident cooking programs. The group is conducting a focused needs assessment—collecting technical assistance information, surveying potential sites and resident and commercial interest, and determining sponsorship, development costs, and operational strategies.
- ▶ A Public Health Nutrition Task Force was formed after nine months, and now has over 20 participants. It has carried out an extensive strategic planning process and made addressing obesity its primary focus. Additional activities in planning, research, and fundraising for a healthy weight campaign for children are underway.

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Conclusion

These case studies are a tribute to the skills and resourcefulness of their organizers, and to the power of the Community Food Assessment approach. The case study groups were successful in organizing assessments, gathering a wide range of data, and using the results to generate tangible outcomes. They demonstrated that assessments in diverse settings can generate a range of powerful results, both tangible outcomes such as new policies and programs, and process benefits such as new partnerships and capacity development. That these results were achieved at a time when almost no guidance or resources were available to support Community Food Assessments is especially remarkable. To us, it is indicative of the depth of concern about local food issues and an optimistic sign of the potentially rich future of this approach to addressing them. Our hope is that this Guide and other emerging resources, along with the growing body of knowledge from assessments that are being conducted, will further support—and speed up!—the development of many more successful Community Food Assessments all over the country.

Information Gathered by Assessment Case Study Groups

	HIGH	LOW	NO
COMMUNITY DEMOGRAPHICS			
Broad community demographics	LA, BK, SM, SF, TX	DT, MD, NY,	MW
Population make-up	DT, LA, NY, BK, SM, SF	MD, MW, TX	
SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEMOGRAPHICS			
Incomes, employment, related data	DT, MW, NY, BK, SM, TX	LA, MD	SF
Focus on low-income/ disadvantaged populations	DT, LA, MD, MW, NY, BK, SF, TX	SM	
Hunger/food insecurity	DT, LA, MD, MW, BK, SF, TX	NY, SM	
ANTI-HUNGER RESOURCES/SERVICES			
Emergency food assistance	DT, LA, MW, NY, SM	MD, BK, TX	SF
Government food assistance	LA, NY, BK, SM	DT, MD, MW, TX	SF
Other anti-hunger services and outreach programs	LA, NY, SM	MD, MW	BK, SF, TX, DT
PUBLIC HEALTH AND NUTRITION			
Diet-related diseases	DT, LA, NY, SM, SF	SM, TX	MD, MW, BK
Community public health	NY, SF, TX	LA, MD, SM	MW, BK
Quality of diets / nutritional status	SF, NY, BK, TX	DT, LA, MD, MW, SM	
Exercise, lifestyle habits	NY, SM	SM	DT, LA, MD, MW, BK, SF, TX
CONVENTIONAL FOOD SYSTEM			
Broad food system characteristics	DT, LA, MD, MW, NY, BK, SF, TX		SM
Retail food sector data	DT, LA, MD, MW, BK, SM, SF, TX	NY	
Wholesale, other food system data	DT, LA	MD, NY, BK, SM, SF, TX	MW
Restaurants/institutional food service data	DT, BK, SF, TX	MD, MW, NY	LA, SM
COMMUNITY-BASED AND/OR LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS			
Local/regional agriculture—status	DT, MD, NY, BK, SF, TX	LA, MW	SM
Local/regional agriculture links to community (e.g. CSA's, farm mkts)	LA, MD, NY, BK, SM, SF, TX	DT, MW	
Community-based food production (e.g. gardens)	DT, LA, MD, BK, SM, TX	MW, NY, SF	
INFRASTRUCTURE/TRANSPORTATION			
Public transportation access	DT, LA, MW, NY, SM, TX	MD, SM, SF	BK
Vehicle access	DT, LA, MW, TX	MD, SF, NY	BK, SM
Comprehensive transportation access	DT, TX	NY, SM	LA, MD, MW, BK

Information Gathered by Assessment Case Study Groups - continued:

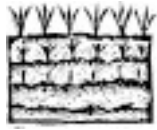
	HIGH	LOW	NO
COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS / INSTITUTIONS			
Community institutional resources (broad)	BK SF, TX	MD, MW, NY, SM,	DT, LA
Community leadership and power	SF	MD, NY, BK, SM, TX	DT, LA, MW
Labor issues, roles		LA	DT, MD, MW, NY, BK, SM, SF, TX
COMMUNITY FOOD HEALTH AND NUTRITION RESOURCES			
Health/nutrition outreach/referral services	MW, NY, BK, SM, SF	MD, TX	DT, LA
Food / nutrition related projects	MW, NY, BK, SM, SF	LA, TX, DT	MD
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT / ECONOMIC			
Food system related (business, job training)	DT, MD, NY, BK, TX	LA, SM, SF	MW
ENVIRONMENTAL (FOOD SYSTEM RELATED ISSUES)			
Waste disposal, recycling, composting	MD	NY, BK, SM, SF	DT, LA, MW, TX
Water quality		MD, NY, SM	DT, LA, MW, BK, SF, TX
Land contamination, hazardous waste		MD, NY	DT, LA, MW, BK, SM, SF, TX
Open space, land use or access	DT, BK, TX	LA, MD, NY, SM, SF	MW
POLICY			
Legislation, funding, regulations	LA, NY, TX	MD, BK, SM	DT, MW, SF
MEDIA			
Coverage of issues, food ads, etc.	DT	MD, NY, SM	LA, BK, SF, TX
ANY OTHER DATA			
Hunting, fishing and trapping licenses / game deer take		NY	SF, TX
Physical activity resources	SM		SF, TX

KEY

- BK:** Berkeley Community Food Assessment, Berkeley, CA
- DT:** Detroit Food System Assessment, Detroit, MI
- LA:** Seeds of Change Food System Assessment, Los Angeles, CA
- MD:** Madison/Dane County Food System Assessment, Madison, WI
- MW:** Milwaukee Food System Assessment Study, Milwaukee, WI
- NY:** The North Country Community Food and Economic Security Project, NY
- SF:** Youth Envision: Bayview Hunters Point Food Study, San Francisco, CA
- SM:** Somerville Community Food Assessment, Somerville, MA
- TX:** Access Denied: An Analysis of Food Access in East Austin, Austin, TX

Note: This table was assembled based on information provided by case study contacts. Not all rows contain information related to all cases because of incomplete responses.

- ¹ Sustainable Food Center. 2001. *Access Denied: An Analysis of Problems Facing East Austin Residents in Their Attempts to Obtain Affordable, Nutritious Food*. Austin, Texas: Sustainable Food Center. http://www.main.org/sfc/access_denied/ (Date accessed: 3 Sept 2002).
- ² Pinderhughes, R., and J. Miner. 2001. *Good Farming, Healthy Communities: Strengthening Sustainable Agriculture Sectors and Local Food Systems*. San Francisco, CA: San Francisco State University, Urban and Environmental Studies Program.
- ³ Cohen, B. 2002. *Community Food Security Assessment Toolkit*. Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/efan02013/> (Date accessed: 3 Sept 2002).
- ⁴ Pothukuchi, K. 2002. *The Detroit Food System: A Handbook for Local Planning*. Detroit: Wayne State University.
- ⁵ Ashman, L., J. de la Vega, M. Dohan, A. Fisher, R. Hippler, and B. Romain. 1993. *Seeds of Change: Strategies for Food Security for the Inner City*. Los Angeles, CA: University of California, Graduate School of Architecture and Urban Planning.
- ⁶ University of Wisconsin-Madison, Department of Urban and Regional Planning. 1997. *Fertile Ground: Planning for the Madison/Dane County Food System*. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin-Madison Food System Project. <http://www.wisc.edu/mfsp/pubsf/pub.html> (Date accessed: 3 Sept 2002).
- ⁷ Stevens, M. R., and S. Raja. 2001. *What's Eating You About What You Eat?* Madison Food System Project Working Paper Series MFSP-WPS-05. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison Food System Project.
- ⁸ Varela, O. J., D. P. Haider-Markel, and S. L. Percy. 1998. *Perceptions and Experiences of Consumer Access to Food in Milwaukee's Inner-City Neighborhoods*. Milwaukee, WI: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Center for Urban Initiatives and Research.
- ⁹ Varela, O. J. 1996. *Socio-spatial Relationships and Food Programs in Milwaukee's Food System*. Milwaukee, WI: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Center for Urban Initiatives and Research.
- ¹⁰ Johnson, K., S. Percy, and E. Wagner. 1996. *Comparative Study of Food Pricing and Availability in Milwaukee*. Milwaukee, WI: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Center for Urban Initiatives and Research.
- ¹¹ Varela, O. J, K. Johnson, and S. Percy. 1998. *Food Insecurity in Milwaukee: A Qualitative Study of Food Pantry and Meal Program Users*. Milwaukee, WI: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Center for Urban Initiatives and Research.
- ¹² Pelletier, D. L., V. Kraak, C. McCullum, U. Uusitalo and R. Rich. 2000. Values, Public Policy and Community Food Security. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 17(1): 75-93.
- ¹³ Bhatia, R., C. Calandra, L. Brainin-Rodriguez, P. Jones. 2001. *Food Access Study of the Bayview Hunters Point*. San Francisco, CA: San Francisco Department of Public Health; San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners.



Planning Your Community Food Assessment

There is no master plan for implementing a Community Food Assessment—each one is unique. Still, there are some basic steps to consider in planning an assessment to ensure that it incorporates key features such as a food system focus, collaboration among stakeholders, community involvement, and an action orientation. This chapter is organized into sections that describe the major areas of work in planning an assessment:

1. Getting Your Assessment Team Together
2. Clarifying Assessment Goals, Interests, and Decision Processes
3. Planning the Assessment Budget and Mobilizing Resources
4. Planning the Assessment Research
5. Planning for the Use and Evaluation of Your Assessment

We offer this overview of the assessment planning work in order to highlight key areas of decision-making and the players and activities associated with these areas, and to help you map out and anticipate the process before you start. While these areas of work are presented sequentially in this chapter, in practice they often will overlap. For example, you may find the need to include new members as you think through your research questions and methods, and to start planning for the use of your assessment before you begin your research. Such adjustments and changes are an appropriate part of an organizing process, and it is important to strike a balance between making clear decisions and remaining flexible, so that you make progress while also maintaining buy-in and support.

1. Getting Your Assessment Team Together

Organizing the core assessment team is one of the most important aspects of the process. This team will determine the shape of the assessment and its outcomes, decide whom to invite to be part of the process, and be responsible for implementing the assessment and follow-up actions.

Assessments can get started in many different ways, with varying levels of community participation. One or several groups could take the lead and invite others to join later. A coalition of organizations that has already worked together might decide to conduct an assessment. Or an assessment could begin with a broad community organizing process that involves a range of stakeholders in deciding whether to conduct an assessment and what the focus should be. All of these are valid approaches that can result in successful assessments and follow-up actions. Yet the way an assessment starts, and who is at the table when it gets started, will have lasting implications for the process and its impact in the community. The editors of this guide encourage an approach that involves collaboration between diverse organizations and meaningful participation by community members.

Potential assessment participants

Who might want to or should be involved in an assessment? It is valuable to start with a broad pool. Everyone has a stake in the food system, and valuable players can come from almost anywhere in the community. All the assessments presented in Chapter 3 involved partnerships among organizations active on various community food issues. Many had representatives from universities, public agencies, private sector firms, the nonprofit sector, and community-based organizations. Ideally, such representatives should have both an individual and organizational interest in participating, and their institution should support the assessment with their staff time and other resources.

1. Organizational representatives

In many assessments, organizational representatives are the primary participants. They often bring to the process extensive knowledge of the local community and its food system, contacts with other stakeholders and community members, and experience with organizing and group process. Organizations focused on food and agriculture issues such as anti-hunger, sustainable agriculture, urban gardening, public health, and nutrition are clear candidates. Groups working on related issues may be natural allies; these may include environment, community development, housing, social service, and civic groups.

2. Colleges and universities

Academic institutions can bring important research skills to the table, and contribute their and students' time to conduct and analyze research. They also have access to resources that community organizations may lack, including computers, data, and computer mapping capability. (See sidebar on next page.)

3. Public officials and agencies

Public agency staff often collect data about the food system and related issues, and may conduct assessments to inform policy making. They also communicate with decision-makers in other government agencies. Involving public officials and agency representatives in the assessment planning process, even those who do not work directly on food issues, can facilitate access to information and increase the chance that the assessment's findings will lead to policy changes.

4. Private sector firms

The private sector, including farmers, grocery stores, food processors, and distributors, plays an important role in the food system. Many business leaders are interested in contributing to the community. They also may be visible, influential, and well connected. Involving them as partners can facilitate linkages to community economic development, encourage private sector involvement in improving the food system, and potentially bring in tangible resources such as money, facilities, and databases.

5. Community residents

This category refers to participants who live in the community, but do not directly represent an organization (although they may be involved with local groups). Resident participation is essential to ensure that the assessment addresses the needs and interests of the community. They can best understand and represent the interests of ordinary households, and provide an important balance to the views of organizational representatives.

Criteria for identifying assessment participants

Participating in an assessment, especially as a core member, can involve a significant commitment of time and energy. It is important to take the time to recruit a diverse group of capable and dedicated participants. Below are some criteria to consider as you identify potential participants.

1. Community representation

Those who live and work in a community are vital to the assessment process. Seek out people who are involved in their communities, respected as community leaders, and have a stake in the outcomes.

2. Diversity

Representation from diverse stakeholder and population groups helps make an assessment effective, by bringing in different perspectives, helping the group to think creatively, and building the buy-in and support that foster successful follow-up actions.

3. Expertise and experience

A broad range of knowledge and skills among assessment participants will increase the group's resourcefulness and its capacity to move forward. This expertise can include understanding of the community or food issues,

skills in research, or background in community organizing, policy advocacy, or program development. Having a good mix of content and process skills in the team is important.

4. Availability

Consistent participation and follow-through are important for the continuity of the assessment process. Anyone who will be significantly involved should understand the process, the timetable, and their role, and consider whether they can commit to participating for the duration of the assessment. It is especially important to be respectful of the time of volunteers, and to consider their needs when scheduling meetings and assessment work.

5. Capacity for decision-making

In order for the assessment team to move forward effectively, it is important that organizational representatives are empowered to make decisions on behalf of their organization in the context of the assessment process, or have a way to efficiently get input or approval from others in their group as needed.

Benefits and Limitations of Universities as Assessment Partners

Including university- or college-based researchers in assessment partnerships has many benefits. Faculty members bring expertise in their subject areas, such as health, social work, urban planning, or nutrition. They also bring extensive knowledge of and skills in research approaches and methods, and many care about applying their knowledge to serve their community and create positive change. Involving university-based researchers also conveys valuable credibility to the assessment research, which can be especially important if the results are likely to be controversial.

Additionally, university involvement typically contributes the brain and labor power of students in ways that are beneficial to both the community and the students. Communities gain through the ideas and efforts that students contribute through service learning, volunteer work, internships, and class projects designed in collaboration with the assessment team, with little or no direct cost to the assessment organizers. Communities also gain when a new generation of students learns skills related to community partnerships and collaborative processes. Students gain an education in research and community work, while contributing to real world decisions and actions.

In addition to contributing their time, university faculty also may bring in funding and in-kind resources to assessments that can be quite significant. Most of the cases described in the Chapter 3 have involved grant funding sought by university faculty members from public or foundation sources. Universities also can contribute in-kind resources through providing classrooms

for meetings, computer lab access, copying and mailing, and dissemination of assessment findings through university channels.

Finally, through such partnerships universities are made more accountable to their communities and challenged to think creatively about how public investments in higher education return direct benefits to the local community. More and more universities are devising policies for community engagement and partnerships, following a long history of benign neglect if not active conflict with surrounding communities. For all these reasons, you may want to involve faculty from a nearby university in your assessment team.

However, university involvement can also bring with it certain limitations, which are important to recognize and address up front. University faculty often are subject to pressures that make community partnerships more difficult: universities usually reward leadership and not collaboration; they demand new and widely-generalizable theories and questions rather than local theories, community knowledge, and local testing of theories; they demand quick results and tend to be impatient with the time and effort community processes need; and finally, university bureaucracies often seek to control processes and outcomes rather than sharing widely. We urge university and community participants to clearly identify personal, professional, and organizational/institutional interests in participation and to engage in a dialogue about how the assessment can or cannot serve these interests.

Facilitating and implementing a Community Food Assessment requires a variety of skills in organizing, research, and process facilitation. Providing training in these skills can be very valuable to build the capacity of assessment team members, both for the assessment process itself and other work in the future. For example, the Youth Envision assessment in San Francisco trained young people to conduct a survey and analyze and report on its results. The Austin assessment trained community members to use an instrument to survey which neighborhood stores had food products that could be used to prepare balanced meals.

Training sessions for process facilitation might include topics such as: facilitating discussions, building group consensus, creatively resolving conflicts, and planning with groups. Training in research methods might include topics such as survey administration, use of mapping software, data sampling, management, analysis, and presentation. Finally, training could also cover designing and implementing change actions, with topics like coalition building, community outreach and organizing, policy advocacy, and media outreach.

Encouraging community participation

Community Food Assessment is by definition a participatory process. Yet depending on who organizes the process and how, the breadth of participation can vary widely. The editors of this guide support an approach that emphasizes significant community participation. Such participation helps ensure that the assessment will reflect community concerns and goals, generate meaningful results, and lead to positive and lasting changes.

This discussion of community participation may suggest that we are assuming that the assessment organizers and community members are separate groups who are not yet working together. This is not the case; we merely want to highlight how to encourage community participation. We expect that assessment organizers already will have some connections and working relationships with community members; indeed we hope those links will be strong.

Community members can play a valuable role not only in gathering and providing information, but also in shaping key decisions about the assessment and follow-up activities, and in helping implement these decisions. Involving community partners from the start fosters trust, inclusiveness, and shared ownership of the process. It can make the assessment a vehicle for empowering traditionally disenfranchised constituencies, and for increasing community capacity to create positive change. Like other assessment team members, community residents can be involved at different levels. Some may attend a focus group or respond to a survey; others may serve on the steering committee or work part-time to do community outreach.

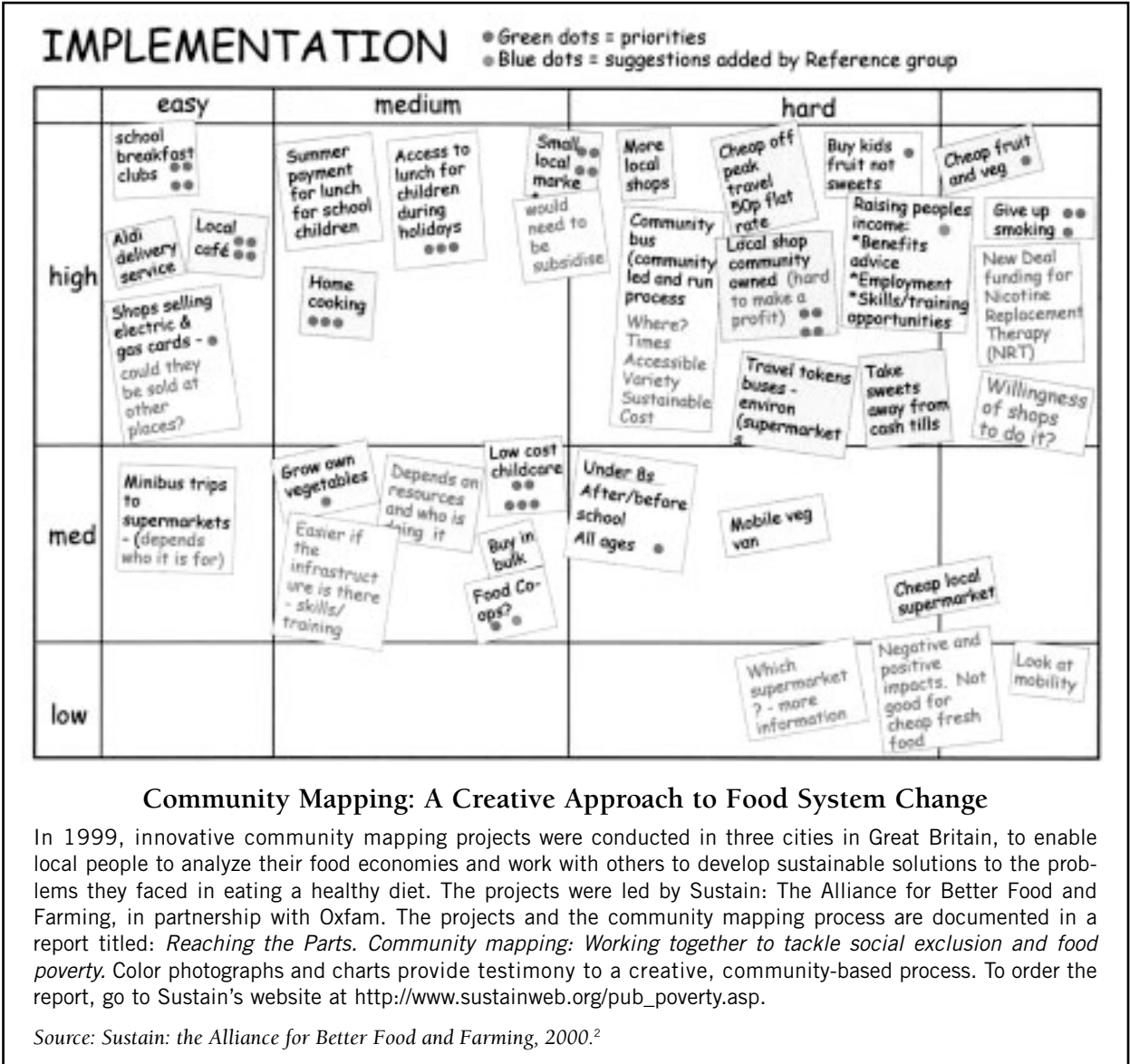
The extent of community participation in an assessment should be clarified early on by the assessment team, as it will have a major impact on many aspects of the process. It will be important to build outreach plans and opportunities for participation into the overall assessment plan. Here are some key principles to keep in mind when designing your assessment process to obtain meaningful community participation:¹

- ▶ Effective participation requires a planned process in which the key interests in your group agree on the level of participation that is appropriate.
- ▶ Participation involves developing agreements on both what is to be achieved (the outcomes) and how it is to be done (the methods).
- ▶ Participation is a process of learning and development for all concerned. It takes time.
- ▶ People will only be involved if they understand each other, have the confidence to participate, and can see some point to it.
- ▶ The use of short-term methods and techniques for participation requires understanding of the overall process, and skilled application. There are no quick fixes.

The process of organizing community participation in an assessment can take many forms, ranging from one-on-one outreach to facilitating a rapid Community Food Assessment. (See sidebar in section 4 below.) It should include communicating both the goals of the assessment process and the benefits of participation, as well as seeking to understand community members' issues and interests related to the assessment. It is important

for those involved in outreach to see their role as facilitating two-way communication between the communities and the assessment team, rather than just getting information out to the community. For example, simply publicizing a meeting or inviting people to participate may not be enough. It may take significant time and effort to build trust and get people interested, and it is important to do a lot of listening and demonstrate genuine interest in their concerns and ideas.

Community members who might participate in an assessment could include diverse neighborhood residents; workers in food production, distribution, and sales; clients of food assistance programs; farmers; and others. They should include people of diverse ages, ethnicities, and income levels. It is valuable to work with a group of organizers who are multi-ethnic and multi-lingual, in order to reach out to various types of communities effectively. Conducting outreach and organizing at multiple sites also is important to reach a broad range of community members. These sites might include workplaces, social service centers, neighborhood centers, churches and other places of worship, and meetings of community-based organizations. You may want to consider returning to the same sites later to request additional feedback or share results.



Community Mapping: A Creative Approach to Food System Change

In 1999, innovative community mapping projects were conducted in three cities in Great Britain, to enable local people to analyze their food economies and work with others to develop sustainable solutions to the problems they faced in eating a healthy diet. The projects were led by Sustain: The Alliance for Better Food and Farming, in partnership with Oxfam. The projects and the community mapping process are documented in a report titled: *Reaching the Parts. Community mapping: Working together to tackle social exclusion and food poverty*. Color photographs and charts provide testimony to a creative, community-based process. To order the report, go to Sustain's website at http://www.sustainweb.org/pub_poverty.asp.

Source: Sustain: the Alliance for Better Food and Farming, 2000.²

To effectively foster community participation, it is important to address constraints to this participation. These range from practical issues such as not owning a car or needing child care, to cultural and political issues such as not feeling part of the dominant culture of the assessment group, or negative past experiences with organizers coming in to a community.

The composition and leadership of the assessment group, decision-making process, meeting times and places, interpreter assistance, and providing expense reimbursements and childcare all are important to consider in creating an inclusive process. For example, in planning meetings you may want to consider the following:

- ▶ Is the time convenient for those who want to be involved?
- ▶ Is the location convenient and accessible by public transit? Will anyone need a ride?
- ▶ Is the site comfortable and welcoming for community members?
- ▶ Will interpreters be needed, and for what languages?
- ▶ Will participants need childcare?

Finally, since assessment planning can be time-consuming, it's important to consider reimbursing community participants for their time, out-of-pocket expenses, and possible foregone income. This can be extremely important to encourage substantial participation by people whose time spent on assessment activities isn't supported by their organizations.

Techniques for participatory information-gathering

A variety of techniques can be used to facilitate broad community participation in an assessment. It generally is a good idea to use more than one, to ensure a range of diverse responses. Anyone who is using such a technique should be sensitive to the social and cultural environment in which it is to be implemented. In choosing a technique, the following criteria should be considered:

- ▶ The objectives for community participation (e.g., providing input or decision-making)
- ▶ Who will be involved in these sessions (e.g. youth, elderly, farm workers)?
- ▶ The social relationships that already exist in the community (including tensions)
- ▶ Whether the participants have previous experience with involvement in similar projects

Commonly used techniques for gaining significant community input include:

- ▶ Meetings in which information is sought and given
- ▶ Community committees that can meet to provide feedback as needed
- ▶ Participatory data-gathering

Participatory data-gathering is discussed in greater detail in Appendix 1, in a summary of various techniques as they relate to conducting a Community Food Assessment.

2. Clarifying Assessment Goals, Interests, and Decision Processes

The Community Food Assessment is created from the ground up by its participants, based on their goals and interests and the resources they are able to mobilize. People will come to the process with a wide range of interests and expectations. Therefore, it is very important to clarify participants' goals and interests, identify shared goals, and develop clear agreement on the assessment goals and decision-making processes.

Clarifying goals and interests

Once you've assembled your initial group, invite members to identify their goals and interests related to the

Basic steps of an assessment

This checklist provides an overview of the steps typically involved in planning and implementing an assessment. These steps may not all be needed in each situation, and they won't necessarily occur in this sequence.

Get some background on Community Food Assessments

- Read reports from previous assessments and related resources
- Talk to people who have conducted assessments to learn about their experiences

Recruit participants

- Identify a group of key stakeholders and organize an initial meeting
- Determine the group's interest in conducting an assessment
- Identify and recruit other participants, representing diverse interests and skills

Determine assessment purposes and goals

- Identify participants' goals and interests
- Clarify and prioritize initial goals for assessment
- Revisit and refine goals later as needed

Develop a planning and decision-making process

- Clarify who will make decisions and how
- Clarify the roles of participants, defining various levels of participation
- Develop a plan for meaningful community participation

Define the community

- Define geographic boundaries for the assessment
- Decide whether to focus on specific population groups

Identify funds and other resources

- Develop overall budget
- Secure grants or other funding

- Identify in-kind resources and a project sponsor
- Recruit and train staff and volunteers as needed

Plan and conduct research

- Develop assessment questions and indicators
- Identify existing data and information needed
- Determine appropriate research methods
- Collect data from existing and original sources
- Process and analyze data
- Summarize assessment findings

Present and disseminate assessment findings

- Identify audiences for assessment and appropriate ways to reach them
- Compile assessment findings into a report and/or other materials
- Disseminate findings through materials, meetings, and media outreach

Evaluate and celebrate

- Review assessment process and outcomes
- Celebrate! Thank and honor participants

Implement follow-up actions

- Develop goals and action plan based on the assessment results
- Mobilize additional resources and participants if needed
- Consider whether to implement another assessment phase

community's food system. Examples of goals might include: more farmland saved; more economic opportunity; greater access to fresh produce in low-income neighborhoods; and building healthful eating among youth. As you review participants' goals, it is valuable to step back to see if other important goals may need to be included, and to consider whether there are others who can address these missing goals who should be invited to participate.

Once you have identified participants' goals, it is important to use a clear process to prioritize these and agree upon a limited number of shared goals for the assessment team. As you prioritize the goals, you may want to consider criteria such as the breadth of support among the participants for the goals, the relative difficulty or ease of realizing the goals, resources the group may expect to mobilize, and the urgency with which particular goals are sought. You also may want a mix of short-term goals that can be achieved relatively easily, and longer-term goals. As you examine further issues of scope, resources, and capacity to do the research, you may

need to revise this list somewhat. But you will be well on your way to having addressed the fundamental planning question of identifying the goals for your assessment.

In addition to identifying participants' goals, you may wish to explicitly identify interests. The key question is: "What are we hoping to gain for ourselves and our organizations by participating in the Community Food Assessment process?" Often, these are the same as the goals identified above. Examples of interests might include: organizations might want to gain visibility or support for their work; a local official might want to improve her standing in the neighborhood; retailers would want to improve their sales and profits; and university faculty might want to get a paper published from the research.

In a group process characterized by familiar and close ties, past collaborative successes, and professional respect, these personal and organizational interests would likely be easily voiced and mutually supported in the group. However, in a group that is coming together for the first time or where significant mistrust or conflict exists, many interests might remain unspoken.

Some interests may well emerge as the planning team members build trust and recognize shared interests. However, unspoken interests may continue to affect the process, and in some cases may be at odds with the assessment goals. Therefore, it is very important to create an environment in which personal and organizational interests can be openly articulated. If some participants' interests are different from the goals that emerge from the process above, it will be important to consider whether or not it is appropriate to incorporate these interests into the assessment goals.

Clarifying the decision-making structure and process

As a collaborative process, Community Food Assessment involves a great deal of group planning and decision-making. It is important to develop decision-making structures and processes that the group understands and supports, and that allow the group to move forward efficiently. These will go a long way to helping ensure that the assessment meets its goals and builds capacity for further collaboration and action. And they will make the journey easier and more enjoyable!

As you pull together your team and start planning for your assessment, it will become clear that different people have varying degrees of enthusiasm and ability to attend to the details of planning and implementing the assessment. You may need to identify a smaller group that can handle more day-to-day decision-making and implementation of broad group directions. Many assessments develop three basic tiers of involvement in assessment planning:

1. **A steering committee** decides overall directions for the assessment, provides some assistance in carrying out the research, identifies and helps to access resources, and helps to design action strategies based on the assessment findings. Committee members usually are linked to networks of formal or informal power and influence in the community, and should include community residents.

The size of the steering committee depends on the structure of the assessment, length of the process, resources available, and other considerations, but in general is around 15 or 20 people. The group needs enough members to provide diverse representation, but should not be so large as to be unwieldy. Such a group might meet once a month or so.

2. **A smaller core group and/or coordinator** usually makes and carries out day-to-day decisions that follow from the broad directives of the steering committee. This group or individual coordinates the planning process, gives shape to the final assessment design, brings questions to the steering committee for decisions, raises funds, and carries out the research. This smaller group includes people who can commit significant time to the process and who have specific skills needed for the assessment. They may conduct the research or hire outside researchers.
3. **Community hearings or meetings** often are held at key points in the planning and implementation process. These meetings provide opportunities to gain broad community input into planning, to update

the community on the progress of the assessment as it proceeds, and to report on the assessment findings after it is completed. Such meetings can be a valuable way to gain community input to and participation in the assessment planning and research. More importantly, they are central to building a broad base of community support for actions resulting from the assessment, and can encourage accountability from decision-makers and greater community control of decisions related to the food system. The success of these community meetings will depend greatly on the relationships and trust that have been developed between assessment organizers and community members, and the extent to which the community has an opportunity to shape the process.

Documenting the assessment planning process and decisions

As your assessment group starts to work together, you will need to develop ways to document the process and share this information with participants and others. This documentation can serve several purposes, including:

- ▶ Providing a memory of people, decisions, and resources
- ▶ Keeping participants updated and promoting accountability
- ▶ Helping tell your assessment's story
- ▶ Capturing information that can be used to evaluate the assessment process and outcomes

Some elements of this record keeping are standard for any group process; others may be more specific to your assessment. Some of this information should be provided to participants; some can be kept in a central location. Here is a sample list:

- ▶ A participant contact list
- ▶ Agendas for meetings
- ▶ Minutes of meetings, with decisions, action steps and responsible individuals, and timelines highlighted
- ▶ A periodically updated schedule of activities
- ▶ Files with information on relevant community food issues, such as newspaper clippings and academic studies
- ▶ Lists or files of resources that you may need for your assessment, including sources of funding or in-kind support, data sources, research tools, and media and presentation outlets

Clarifying who will do what

Deciding who will do what is a key part of planning an assessment. It is important to have clear agreements about roles and expectations, based on a shared commitment to the assessment as a collaborative project. Maintaining a sense of teamwork, appreciating people for their work, and keeping up a sense of momentum all are important to keep people motivated to participate actively.

Basic project management tools are helpful to keep people on track, especially when you are working with a team of busy people with multiple commitments. It is helpful to have clear timelines for completion of tasks and systems for checking in, perhaps at regular planning meetings. A formal agreement or Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) also can be valuable in clarifying roles. An assessment coordinator can play a key role in helping ensure coordination and accountability.

In dividing labor, consider which partners can do which types of work most effectively. It is helpful to start identifying each partner's skills and roles early on; this also will become clearer as the assessment moves forward and people get to know each other. Examples of assessment work that require particular skills include:

- ▶ Planning and facilitating the meetings and group process
- ▶ Inviting and organizing community participation
- ▶ Raising funds and identifying other resources

- ▶ Designing and implementing research activities
- ▶ Producing reports and other materials for distribution

Representatives of organizations that have an interest in the assessment and provide some staff time or other support will likely do the bulk of work on an assessment. Yet significant participation by community residents in shaping and implementing the assessment is valuable to ensure that it generates real change in the community, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Such community residents will likely have more limited time to contribute, and probably will be available only outside their regular work hours.

3. Planning the Assessment Budget and Mobilizing Resources

How much funding will you need to conduct your assessment? That depends, as discussed above, on the scope and scale of your assessment, as well as the amount of in-kind resources you can gather. Consider that resources will be needed to organize the team, to plan for the assessment, and to carry it out, as well as to support follow-up actions. Below is a list of major categories of expenses associated with assessments.

Categories of assessment expenses

- ▶ Planning meetings (organizing, materials, record-keeping, site, refreshments)
- ▶ Community outreach and participation (organizing, translation, payment for participation, reimbursement for expenses)
- ▶ Coordination or support staff
- ▶ Research personnel (research administration, instrument development, data-gathering, and data analysis)
- ▶ Infrastructure (office space, equipment, phone line, copying)
- ▶ Fundraising
- ▶ Developing materials (writing, graphics, layout)
- ▶ Dissemination (printing/copying, mailing, advertisements)
- ▶ Evaluation
- ▶ Follow-up actions

All the above items could be provided in-kind depending on the assessment partners and their ability to commit these resources. However, in most of the case studies, salaries for research and production staff and the direct costs of administration were funded by grants raised specifically for the assessment.

Possible funding sources for assessments

Federal funding may be difficult to obtain for this purpose, although the Community Food and Nutrition Program³ has funded assessments in the past. The Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program⁴ also sometimes funds assessments if they are part of a broader program development process, and in the future may provide planning grants that can be used specifically for assessments. Community development block grants and food stamp nutrition education funds are two other potential sources. VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America)⁵ volunteers can provide staffing. At the local level, government agencies that address nutrition, health, community development, or other relevant areas may be potential funding sources.

Community foundations can be a fruitful source of funds for assessments, given their planning and community involvement functions. While your local community foundation might not be interested in community food security, consider framing your assessment in other terms that match their interests, such as community economic development, public health and nutrition, leadership development, and/or democratic participation. Other private foundations with similar interests also may be a good source.

Funding and In-kind Resources Used in Case Studies

Case Study	Funding Sources	Cash Value	In-kind Sources	In-kind Estimated Value
Austin, 1994	Sustainable Food Center; AmeriCorps; VISTA	\$20,000	City of Austin; Travis County; Worldwide Design	\$10,000
Berkeley, 1998-2001	San Francisco Foundation; California Urban Environmental Research and Education Center	\$50,000	San Francisco State University; Northern California Food Systems Alliance; community advisors	\$100,000
Detroit, 1999-2001	Wayne State University	\$12,000 summer research funds	Wayne State University; Hunger Action Coalition of Michigan	\$10,000
Los Angeles, 1992	UCLA Graduate School of Architecture and Urban Planning	Unavailable	UCLA; Non-profit groups; community members	\$125,000–\$150,000
Madison/ Dane County, 1997	W.K. Kellogg Foundation; Madison Food System Project	\$3,700 + printing costs	Madison Food System Project; U. Wisconsin-Madison Dept. of Urban & Regional Planning	\$41,200
Milwaukee, 1995-2000	Wisconsin Food System Partnership; Kraft Foods Inc.	\$15,000	Center for Urban Initiatives and Research, U of Wisconsin–Milwaukee; printing businesses.	\$5000
The North Country, 1996-1998	USDA and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention	Tuition and stipend for graduate student; \$184,000 over two-year period	New York State Community Action Association Cornell Cooperative Extension	\$24,000 (approx. \$4000 per county)
San Francisco, 2001	San Francisco Department of Public Health	\$20,000	Department of Public Health; San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners	\$40,000
Somerville, 1999	Health and Human Services/Community Food and Nutrition Program Grant	\$49,000	Steering committee participants	Unavailable

This information was derived from surveys completed by case study contacts

Other funding sources can include:

- ▶ **Faith-based funders:** Churches and religious or faith-based organizations often have programs that deal with the issues addressed by assessments, and can be a good source of funding and other support.
- ▶ **Other community organizations:** Partner organizations or other supporters may have funds accessible for the assessment.
- ▶ **Fundraising events:** It can be hard to raise money directly for an assessment through such an event, but partners may be willing to agree to set aside a percentage of the proceeds from their fundraising events.
- ▶ **Special funds from legal settlements:** In recent years, legal settlements with corporations (e.g., tobacco, oil, anti-trust suits) have made funding available for community initiatives. These funds often are not well publicized, and may be housed in relatively unlikely domains such as the Attorney General's Office or a county agency.

In-kind resources

Non-cash or in-kind resources are a staple of Community Food Assessments. They can significantly reduce overall cash costs while reinforcing the collaborative nature of the assessment process. Following are some common types of in-kind contributions:

- ▶ Participation in the assessment coordinating body and/or other decision-making committees or meetings
- ▶ Personnel time from participating organizations to perform assessment-related tasks
- ▶ Student and faculty time for research assistance
- ▶ Access to other academic resources in the form of databases, computer mapping, and library resources
- ▶ Access to office-related support, such as desk space, copying, supplies, telephone, and Internet
- ▶ Administrative time and expertise in the form of financial management, fiscal sponsorship, event hosting, and program planning

Sources of in-kind support can be found throughout the community. They include assessment partners, community members and businesses, and volunteer organizations such as AmeriCorps and VISTA, which can provide substantial help with data collection and community organizing. Colleges and universities can be excellent partners, with both academic professionals and students involved in carrying out components of the assessment. For example, the influential Seeds of Change study in Los Angeles and Fertile Ground in Madison were conducted primarily by graduate students. (See sidebar in section 1 of this chapter.)

4. Planning the Assessment Research

The assessment goals your group identified earlier will provide the foundation for your research plan. You also will need to decide what questions your research will address, what kind of data you will collect, and what methods you will use. This process will be shaped by practical considerations of time and resources. Data take time to collect, assemble, and analyze, and some data may require intensive effort to obtain. You'll need to decide how to focus the information-gathering to get the most mileage toward your goals. As the research options become clearer, you may need to revisit your goals.

Your assessment research plan should answer the following questions:

- ▶ What questions or indicators emerge from the goals identified for your assessment? (The breadth of your questions will suggest the scope of your research.)
- ▶ What geographic boundaries make sense for each question or indicator you wish to investigate?
- ▶ What is the scale of your research project? Will it be relatively small, involving simply compilation and analysis of existing data? Or will it include collection and analysis of original information?
- ▶ What research skills and other resources are available or can be mobilized?

This section will explore these issues briefly. Chapter 5 will discuss research questions, methods, and data sources in greater depth. We encourage you to acquire the USDA's *Community Food Assessment Toolkit*⁶ for more information on some kinds of assessment methods. Early on in the research planning, you may want to review previous assessments done in other communities, or other relevant research on your community's food system. The case studies in this guide provide a good starting point; additional assessment reports are listed in the Resource List in Appendix 6.

Deciding the scope of your assessment: what topics to research

One of the first decisions you'll need to make as you formulate your research plan is what areas of the food system you will examine. Will the scope of your research be relatively broad, covering a diverse range of community food issues, or will it focus on one or two specific issues? These decisions will emerge from the clarification of goals and interests by your team, and will become more concrete as you discuss resource and time availability and access to information.

For example, your assessment questions may focus on evaluating food access in a low-income neighborhood and identifying existing and potential sources of fresh, nutritious food in this area. This would involve a fairly focused scope of questions touching on mostly food distribution and consumption issues. However, if your group decides to gather information on many more aspects of the food system and their links to various community objectives (such as health, environmental sustainability, equity), the scope will be much broader. In addition to food-related topics, you probably will want to assemble and present some background information on your community's population, economy, and resources.

As you start discussing the details of your research plan, your group may need to consider bringing in additional members who have knowledge and skills that you will need. As additional members enter the process, you may have to revisit the goals and research plan in order to bring new members up to speed and enable them to contribute ideas.

Sample List of Basic Community Indicators That May be Addressed by Your Assessment

- ▶ Community and household demographics
- ▶ Labor statistics (unemployment and under-employment, wage-levels, types of jobs)
- ▶ Local/regional agriculture (amounts and value of crops, sustainability, farmland loss)
- ▶ Community food assets/resources (grocery stores, food processing facilities, community gardens)
- ▶ Local employment and sales, in food retail, manufacture, and wholesale
- ▶ Community-based organizations involved in food issues
- ▶ Food and nutrition resources and services
- ▶ Incidence of hunger and food insecurity
- ▶ Incidence of diet-related illnesses, and resulting mortality and costs
- ▶ Local policies related to food issues (preserving agricultural land, promoting small businesses, attracting supermarkets)

Defining the boundaries of your assessment community

As we saw in Chapter 3, focusing on a specific geographical area is a fundamental element of the Community Food Assessment. What are the appropriate physical boundaries for an assessment? Geographically, a "community" can mean any grouping of people who live and/or work together in the same physical area such as a neighborhood or city.

In practice, an assessment can be carried out in any community or combination of communities, a neighborhood, town or city, metropolitan area or county, or multi-county region. It can use more practical boundaries

Case Study Communities

In the assessments profiled in Chapter 3, the targeted communities range broadly:

- ▶ A particular combination of census tracts or zip codes chosen for their relevance to food access, nutrition, etc. (Detroit)
- ▶ A part of a city with a predominantly low-income population (East Austin, West and South Berkeley, South Central Los Angeles, Madison's near north and near south sides, San Francisco's Bayview Hunters Point)
- ▶ Entire cities (Detroit, Los Angeles, Madison, Somerville)
- ▶ Entire counties (Dane County, Milwaukee County)
- ▶ A combination of counties or a region (North Country, Southeastern Michigan)

such as census tracts or zip codes. It may also focus on specific populations within a defined area, e.g. low-income seniors or families with young children. Depending on the questions you research and the availability of data sources, you may even draw different geographic boundaries for different questions.

Community boundaries can be classified in four ways: political, service, cultural or social, and environmental. Most of the assessments described in Chapter 3 include more than one of these categories.

1. Political or jurisdictional boundaries

This is probably the most common type of designation used in Community Food Assessments, and offers clear benefits. Most data are gathered and reported based on political boundaries such as a neighborhood, city, or county. Such boundaries also provide a defined framework for policy advocacy.

2. Service designations

There also are many types of service designations for geographic areas, including school districts, voting precincts, census tracts, and enterprise zones. These boundaries lend themselves to the collection of certain kinds of data, but may make it more difficult to collect other data or to advocate for broader policy changes.

3. Ethnic/cultural/social boundaries

Often neighborhoods have cultural boundaries that are not officially designated, but are widely recognized by community residents. They can be based on the ethnic heritage of the residents, as with Chinatown or the French Quarter. Such boundaries may help encourage community involvement, but they probably will not match with data collection boundaries or with political jurisdictions.

4. Environmental boundaries

Environmental landmarks can make for appropriate community boundaries, especially when residents recognize them as such. These landmarks could be a river, a mountain range, or in urban settings a freeway. Foodsheds, watersheds, and bioregions also can provide boundaries for assessments or for food system planning. However, environmental boundaries tend not to match with data collection boundaries or with political jurisdictions.

Considerations in Choosing Community Boundaries

- ▶ What boundaries are suggested by your assessment purposes, goals, and questions?
- ▶ What kinds of data do you anticipate being central to your study, and what boundaries are associated with those data?
- ▶ What's the appropriate scale of study area to encourage community participation, and where is there good potential for such participation?
- ▶ Do you want to focus on particular ethnic and socio-economic groups, or a mix of groups?
- ▶ How does the community define its own boundaries? Is there a cohesive community sense within certain boundaries?
- ▶ Where do you expect to conduct follow-up activities once the assessment is completed?
- ▶ Is the community representative of larger trends in the region?

Defining the scale of your research

Among the first questions assessment organizers tend to ask are: how big does the study have to be, and how much time and money will it require? The answer is: it depends on the scope and scale of your project, and the skills and resources your group is able to mobilize. We discussed issues of scope previously in this section. Assessments can be implemented on a wide variety of scales, from a comprehensive study involving dozens of graduate student researchers and a \$200,000 in-kind budget, to a much more modest analysis of food access in a small neighborhood. In general, covering a broad range of community food issues, conducting significant original research, and/or facilitating extensive community participation all will tend to increase the scale of the project.

A key factor that will determine the scale of the research will be how much of your assessment is based on existing data sources and how much original data-gathering you do. Most assessments will contain some combination of original (primary) and existing (secondary) data analysis. The characteristics and advantages and disadvantages of each are discussed in Appendix 4. In general, the more primary data-gathering in your assessment, the longer it will take, and the more skills and resources will be needed for planning and conducting data-gathering, analysis, and presentation.

Additionally, assessments that involve extensive community participation in planning and implementation also tend to require more time and resources. This participation also can bring many benefits, as discussed in section 1 of this chapter.

No one has unlimited time and resources, and Community Food Assessments are action-oriented, so you will need to find a balance between doing a study that is appropriately comprehensive in scope and broad in its scale, while staying within resource constraints and moving the process forward to generate recommendations and action. Finding this balance is one of the central challenges in conducting an assessment. Fortunately, it is quite possible to conduct an assessment that is relatively small-scale and low-budget, but still generates important results. For example, the East Austin assessment (described in Chapter 3) was conducted in only eight months and with fairly modest resources, yet it generated impressive outcomes, including complete renovation of a grocery store in the neighborhood, a new bus route from the Eastside to the two biggest supermarkets, and establishment of a food policy council with in-kind support from the city and county.

The scale of your assessment also may depend on how quickly you need to produce results, and the commitment of your group to do an in-depth, longer-term assessment. One

Rapid Community Food Assessment

This process is designed to gather community input on a limited set of questions fairly quickly, and can be used as a basis for organizing change actions. It is important to carefully frame questions that are broad enough to capture a range of responses, but also specific in their language and purpose. With some advance planning, rapid assessments can generate data, analysis, and action recommendations in one collective exercise.

For example, you could organize three or four sessions to be held at a local school, community center, food pantry, and/or a farmers' market. Each session could ask a few questions that capture a range of community concerns, which would be explored through a facilitated dialogue. For example, the questions might be:

- ▶ What do community members do to get food, if they do not have adequate and dignified access to healthful foods at all times?
- ▶ What barriers prevent community members from having adequate and dignified access to healthful foods at all times?
- ▶ What resources currently exist to help community members have adequate and dignified access to healthful choices of food at all times?
- ▶ Who should do what to improve access to healthful food for all residents?

Based on a discussion of these questions, your group may identify specific actions for change in your community food system targeted at various sectors, including local government, community-based organizations, or the private sector. A rapid assessment also could generate products that include a brief report compiling the key points emerging from the dialogue; visual material such as photographs and videos; and other material that could be used in organizing actions, such as a petition or a list of skills in the group. It may be used to build interest in conducting a more comprehensive Community Food Assessment.

strategy for those with fairly limited resources and time is to approach the assessment process in stages. A preliminary assessment could focus on gathering data to help identify needs, bring in more people and resources, and build commitment to go forward. It could compile readily-available data such as: basic demographics, poverty and car ownership rates, statistics on participation in food assistance programs, mapping of grocery stores, mortality and morbidity statistics, and so on. Once initial findings are assembled into a report, you could distribute it to local media outlets, policy makers, and community organizations. If there is sufficient interest and support, you could organize a coalition to develop a larger assessment and mobilize resources for it.

5. Planning for the Use and Evaluation of Your Assessment

Planning for the use of your assessment results

In Chapter 2, we outlined possible purposes and outcomes for Community Food Assessments. Earlier in this chapter, we discussed the importance of defining clear goals for your assessment. After you plan your assessment research, you may wish to revisit the issue of how you plan to use your assessment results to generate change actions. This issue is discussed at greater length in Chapter 6, but it is mentioned at this stage of the planning process for four main reasons.

One, it keeps your assessment research planning on track and tied to your group's goals. Brainstorming about research can generate a wide range of topics and questions that pique participants' curiosity. Many of these questions are intriguing and can seem central to solving community food system problems. However, when the question, "How are we going to use the answers to this question to accomplish our goals?" is asked, some research topics can seem less urgent.

Two, it is possible that as you discussed your assessment goals and research topics, other audiences or uses for your assessment may have surfaced. For example, if one of your group's questions was to study the extent to which institutional food purchasers bought from local food producers or manufacturers, you may then want to consider representatives of these institutions as another audience for the findings.

Three, based on your discussion of fundraising and the need to garner in-kind resources, you may want to include new partners who might suggest additional uses for the assessment. For example, as you engage in discussions with a local foundation, you may be requested to distribute the assessment report to all their grantees.

Four, discussing the many audiences for the assessment results and the forms it will take will give you a better sense of the funding and support you will need for dissemination. Costs of developing materials, printing and copying, and video or audio production can add up quickly. Planning and fundraising for these costs in advance will help ensure that you can successfully get the word out about your assessment results.

Planning for evaluation of your assessment

Incorporating evaluation plans into your overall assessment plan is important to ensure that you will have the information you need to assess and learn from your efforts. Evaluation of your assessment is valuable for many reasons. It can:

- ▶ Help you assess whether or not your assessment delivered the desired **outcomes**
- ▶ Help you make your assessment more effective, by providing feedback about both content and **process** along the way
- ▶ Help you track **impacts** of your assessment, or the effects of change actions carried out as a result of your assessment

Your evaluation can help you assess **outcomes** related to:

- ▶ How timely your assessment was; whether major activities took place in the time frame scheduled
- ▶ How relevant to participating stakeholders and community members were the decisions made in the

assessment (goals, questions, methods, change actions, etc.)

- How efficient your assessment was in the use of money and other in-kind resources
- Whether your assessment met your targets for dissemination of results

Evaluation of your assessment **process** may include:

- Participation of stakeholders and community members (and their satisfaction with the opportunities for and impact of their participation)
- A sense of ownership and investment in the process
- Individual and organizational capacities that were developed as a result of doing the assessment (such as leadership in representing community food interests, facilitation of groups, technical skills in gathering and analyzing data)

Impact evaluation studies the changes in the community as a result of doing and implementing the assessment. These might include:

- Increased knowledge of community food issues among community residents
- Program development or improvement, or expanded participation in programs
- Policy changes put into place as a result of the assessment
- New coalitions or partnerships
- Community development or food security improvement (e.g., improved access to food through grocery store or community garden development)

Measuring impact is a longer-term activity, because creating change takes time and effort and it can take years for the effects to become apparent. However, your group may want to identify ways to monitor progress on particular issues of impact.

Categories of information to collect for evaluation

Systematic data from the following sources can be valuable for assessing the process, outcomes, and impacts of the assessment:

- Collection of demographic and other information about participants
- Surveys, interviews, or focus groups of participants about their perceptions of their contributions to the assessment and the benefits of their participation
- Review of documents produced during the assessment process, such as collaborative agreements, publicity materials, the research plan, and the assessment report
- Observation of assessment activities to assess the quality of the participation of assessment members, decision-making processes, collaborative work, and use of time and resources
- Measurement of progress toward intended outcomes, including information gathered, constituencies involved, and findings disseminated
- Review of change actions put into place following the assessment
- Impacts on the community's food system as a result of these change actions, to the extent that these can be documented
- Collection of demographic and other information about community members affected by change actions resulting from the assessment

Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the major activities involved in planning for a Community Food Assessment. It emphasized issues related to: pulling together a broad team of committed participants, involving community members in the process, clarifying participants' goals and interests, identifying sources for funding and other resources, and keeping a focus on the intended uses of the assessment. This chapter underscores the importance of investing time in planning in order to build a sense of shared purpose and mutual trust, and to facilitate activities that contribute to lasting and meaningful change.

- ¹ Wilcox, D. 1994. *The Guide to Effective Participation*. Partnerships Online. <http://www.partnerships.org.uk>. (Date accessed: 3 Sept 2002).
- ² Sustain: The Alliance for Better Food and Farming. 2000. *Reaching the Parts...Community mapping: Working together to tackle social exclusion and food poverty*. To order a copy of the report, go to <http://www.sustainweb.org> (Date accessed, 20 September).
- ³ United States Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Community Services. <http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/ocs/cfn02.htm>. (Date accessed: 19 Sept 2002).
- ⁴ United States Department of Agriculture, Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Services. Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program. <http://www.reeusda.gov/crgam/cfp/community.htm>. (Date accessed: 19 Sept 2002).
- ⁵ Corporation for National and Community Service. Volunteers in Service to America. <http://www.ameriacorps.org/>. (Date accessed: 20 Sept 2002).
- ⁶ Cohen, B. 2002. *Community Food Security Assessment Toolkit*. Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/efan02013/>. (Date accessed: 7 Sept 2002).



CHAPTER 5

Designing and Doing the Assessment Research

In this chapter, we will move from general assessment planning to more concrete issues related to designing and doing the research. As in Chapter 4, while these steps are discussed sequentially, the activities will tend to overlap in time. You may need to revisit some key planning questions as you go through the detailed design of your research.

This chapter is organized into the following sections:

1. Mapping Out Your Research Questions
2. Translating Questions Into Indicators
3. Using Primary and Secondary Sources of Data
4. A Brief Overview of Research Methods
5. Some Considerations in Ensuring Quality Research
6. Community Participation in Research
7. Assessing Food Access in Your Community: An Illustration

Additional information on many of these areas, particularly data sources and research methods, is included in the Appendices.

1. Mapping Out Your Research Questions

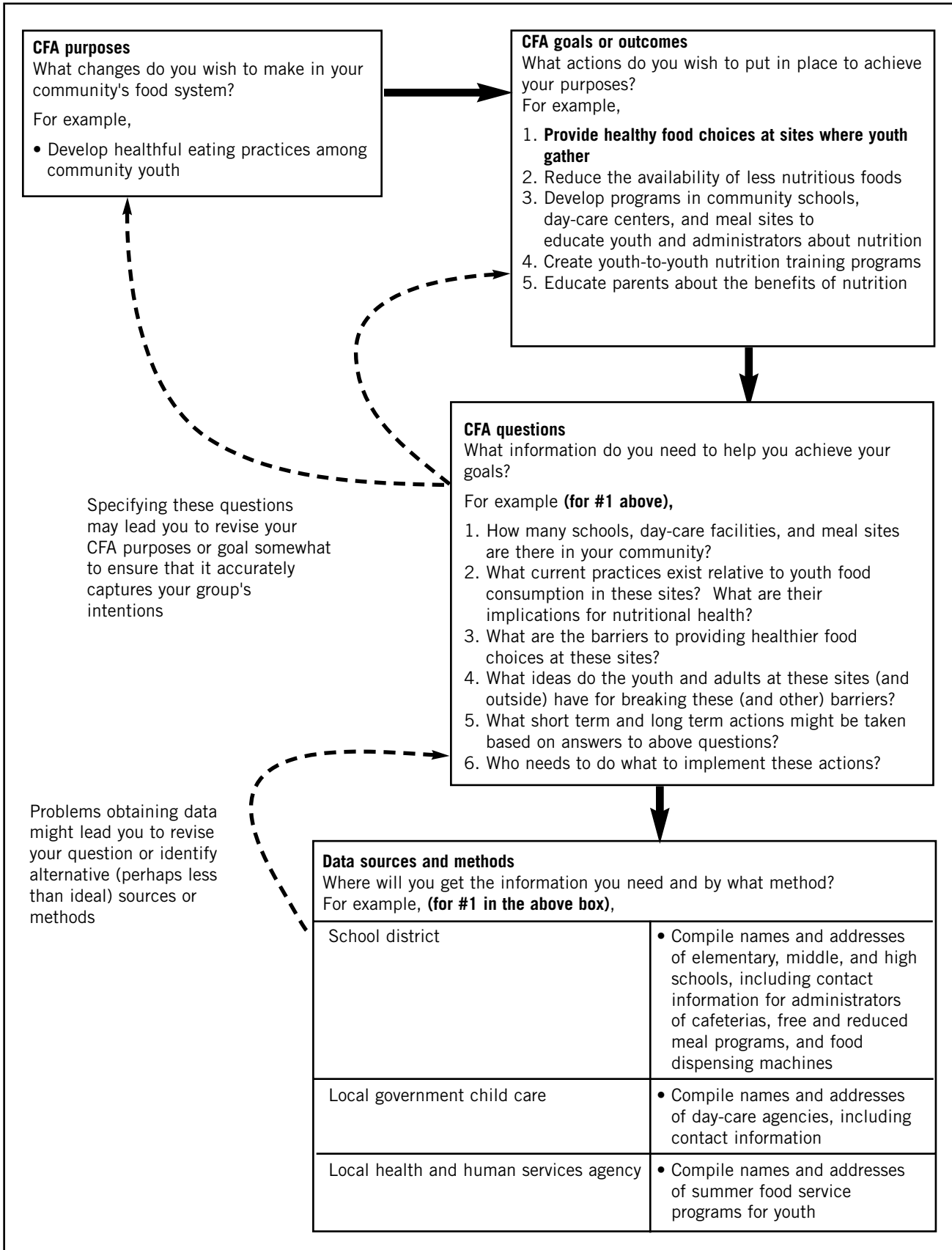
The research planning process described in Chapter 4 is useful for developing a prioritized list of questions your group wishes to answer through your Community Food Assessment. The answers to these questions will help you implement the change actions your group envisioned early in the process to achieve your goals. These research questions need to be fairly specific and compelling. They also need to be accompanied by a discussion about timelines and the skills, capacities, and resources (both cash and in-kind) your group is able to garner. See next page for an illustration of how to develop research questions that are integrated with your assessment purpose and goals.

“What,” “where,” “how,” and “why” questions

The key questions raised by your group will attempt to accomplish various objectives related to examining your community’s food system. They may seek to answer questions related to the “what,” “where,” “how,” and “why” of the issues you address. The following list provides an overview of some of the categories of information your assessment may include in response to these questions.

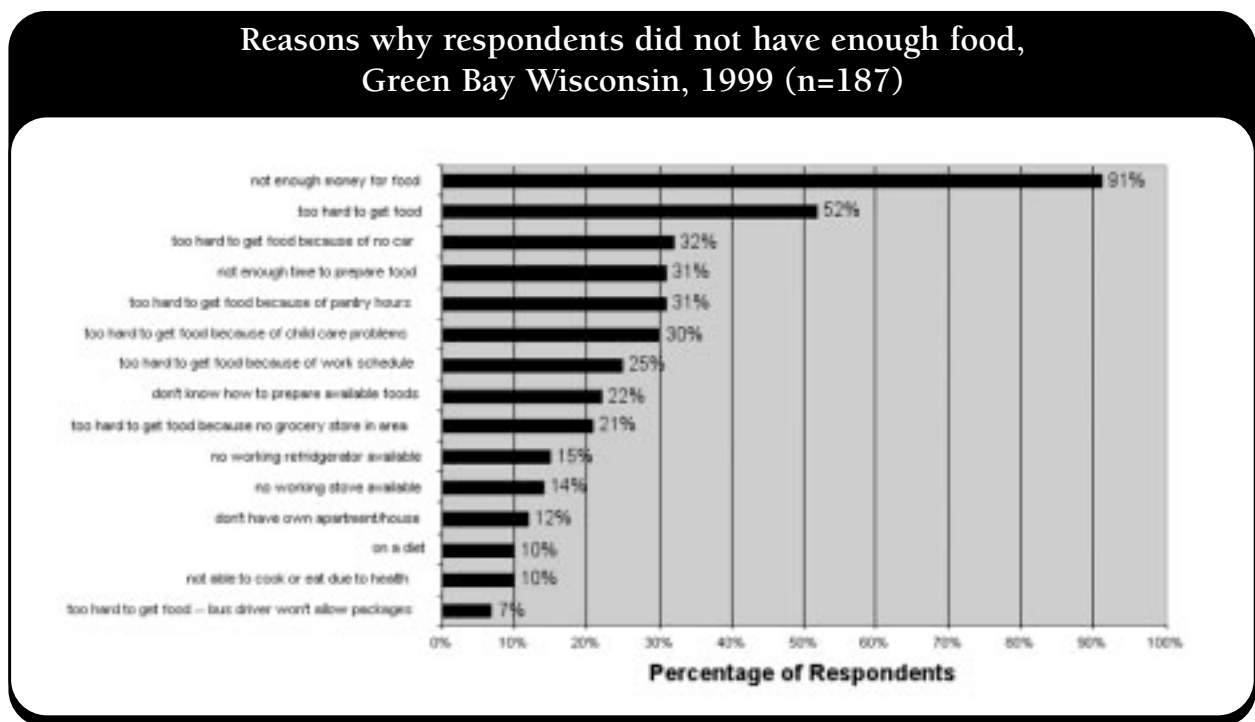
- A basic **description of your community and its food system**, including a summary of any existing assessment research. This could include:
 - Population and household demographics and socio-economic characteristics (number of people and households, income, race and ethnicity, age structure, etc.)
 - Major food system activities, including types, amounts, and value of foods produced, processed, and sold in the community
 - Number of people involved in food-related economic activities, including agriculture and fisheries, manufacturing, and distribution
 - Number and characteristics of households that depend on government programs such as food stamps, free and reduced school lunches
 - Rates of food insecurity in your community as defined in the US Census of Population and Households¹

Arriving at Assessment Questions



- D A discussion of **“how” different activities in the community’s food system take place**; that is, looking closely at various processes related to food production, distribution, and consumption, and their links to people, policy, and programs. Research addressing questions in this area could cover:
 - How low-income households cope with food insecurity
 - How farmers try to develop local markets or increase the returns from their products
 - How food is transported to various types of outlets from production and processing sites
 - How supermarkets make decisions about where to locate
 - How farmland is lost to development
 - How households make decisions about where to shop for food and what to buy

- D An analysis of **“why” things are the way they are** in your community’s food system; that is, understanding the deeper processes in society that are affecting your community’s food issues. This is often complicated because many of these processes are hidden and intertwined with each other. Before studying these types of “why” questions, it is important to gather basic background information on the issue. Examples of “why” questions might include:
 - Why many households rely on government and private food assistance programs
 - Why many young people eat fewer than five servings of fruits and vegetables daily
 - Why a large proportion of food sold in the community comes from outside the region
 - Why farmers decide to stop farming or sell off farmland for development
 - Why food service jobs pay low wages



Source: Dethlefs, Kok, and Early, 1999.²

This chart illustrates the explanations for food insecurity given by 187 respondents who had previously reported that they sometimes or often did not have enough food. Respondents were presented with a series of possible reasons and asked to identify those that contributed to their food insecurity. The most common response by far was “not enough money for food.”

- D A discussion of **what community members want their food system to look like** in the future. Different communities will have different visions, but examples might include:
 - Everyone has adequate and affordable choices of nutritious and culturally appropriate food at all times
 - Farmers, farm workers, and other food workers are able to make a decent livelihood
 - The community is able to make local decisions to influence their food system
 - A majority of foods available in community retail outlets are healthful and nutritious
 - Food system activities protect the quality of the community's air, water, and soil
- D A discussion of **possible steps to help move your community's food system toward the vision** articulated by your group, along with an examination of factors that will help or hinder these steps:
 - Increasing access to fresh and nutritious choices of food in low-income neighborhoods via neighborhood stores, farmers' markets, and farm stands
 - Identifying retailers who buy from local food producers and processors, and encouraging the public to buy from these retailers
 - Developing salad bars and nutrition programs in local schools
 - Promoting local policies to conserve area farmland and support farming
 - Developing a local food policy council to bring a more systematic focus on community food issues over the long term

Once you have identified key research questions, you will need to discuss and select relevant indicators, identify data sources, decide on methods for data collection and analysis, and discuss the details for disseminating the results and putting change actions into place. Each of these steps will be outlined below, in the rest of Chapter 5 and in Chapter 6.

2. Translating Questions Into Indicators

Indicators are used to express, describe and/or measure the key concepts in your research questions. They are derived from the issues you are examining in your assessment. For example, if you are researching food access in your community, the indicators you use to describe it might include:

- D Average distance to the store in miles from a particular neighborhood
- D For neighborhoods with low rates of vehicle ownership, time required to get to the store by foot or public bus
- D The availability (and cost, yet another indicator) of food items needed to assemble culturally appropriate, wholesome diets

Indicators can describe the existence, types, quality, or the amount of something of interest (for example, the amount of land under cultivation or type of stores selling food). They can provide summary information about conditions in the community (average time to travel to a grocery store from a particular neighborhood). Finally, they can help compare changes over time or across geographical boundaries (rate of farmland lost over the last 10 years; number of grocery stores per 1000 persons in your community's various zip codes).

Indicators help define a complex issue of interest, in practical, operational, and measurable terms. Appendices 2 and 3 in this Guide contain lists of possible indicators for examining a community's food system and sources for this information. These lists provide somewhat different information and are fairly comprehensive, but they certainly do not include every possible indicator. They are provided to assist you in selecting appropriate indicators for the topics you wish to study. It is important to start with the questions and issues that are of most interest to your group and then design or select the indicators that best describe them.

Indicators may be quantitative or qualitative. Quantitative measures for indicators are quite common, and often are expressed numerically to describe amounts, rates, or scale of something of interest, such as acres in food

production, or food retail sales as a percent of all retail sales. Qualitative indicators are more descriptive of perceptions or experiences, and tend to be more narrative in nature. They require some creative and careful thought about how to best describe the indicator. Most Community Food Assessments done to date have included both qualitative and quantitative data, and we encourage you to include both in your assessment. See sidebar on qualitative and quantitative data.

For an example of a qualitative method, let's say a group of youth wish to document the food wastes in local school cafeterias to spark community discussion about food practices in schools. They want to use videography for maximum impact among fellow students. Their method might include tracking food products through the cafeteria and interviewing a sample of students and cafeteria staff. Students and staff may need to be carefully selected from among the entire school population to minimize biases that might result when participants select themselves. The researchers may want to include participants who choose not to eat in the cafeteria at all.

The youth might list the following items of interest for video documentation:

- ▶ The process of assembly of food into finished products in the cafeteria
- ▶ The disposal of waste, both raw materials and cooked leftovers
- ▶ Students' preferred choices in food and products they would throw away
- ▶ The disposal of plate wastes

Quite possibly, students may uncover differences between various schools, and may be able to draw lessons, best practices, and recommendations for action based on this research. Even the process of videotaping may have the positive side-effect of raising the level of awareness among students and staff about food wastes, and generating a dialogue about how to minimize wastes and promote healthful cooking and eating (perhaps even before the video is developed and disseminated!)

Selecting and designing indicators

A standard set of indicators of community food security does not currently exist and is perhaps impossible to create, because community food security is determined by a complex array of factors, and because communities' food systems differ widely. However, USDA has developed a valuable *Community Food Security Assessment Toolkit*³ that provides templates for six different kinds of assessments related to community food security. (See sidebar on next page.)

In addition to the six components included in the USDA's Toolkit, we suggest that assessment organizers also consider the following general categories when developing or selecting indicators:

- ▶ Health and social impacts of food practices prevalent in the community
- ▶ Environmental impacts of food system activities, such as production, processing, distribution, and consumption
- ▶ Contributions of food system activities to the local economy, and wage rates in food system jobs

Qualitative and Quantitative Data

Qualitative data elicit verbal, visual, and other kinds of information in the form of pictures or films, or written records such as field notes or transcriptions from interviews or focus groups. They tend to have a descriptive, process-oriented, and contextual flavor. Qualitative data in the form of personal stories or quotes can "put a face" on your assessment, and can be quite persuasive with policymakers and the media.

On the other hand, quantitative data may be essential to understanding and communicating numerical information such as the incidence, rates, or causes of well-defined phenomena or elements, such as the number of people without vehicles in a community, or the number of farms that have gone out of business in the past decade. Quantitative data are useful for developing statistical relationships between variables and for confirming and predicting relationships that are precisely defined. Numbers also provide a broader context for personal stories, and can provide a basis for comparison across time and space.

- ▶ Proportion of foods sold locally that are produced and processed in the state or region
- ▶ Local policies that link to food system activities

The potential number and type of measures for any indicator could vary substantially. For example, for an indicator as seemingly straightforward as food stamp use, measures could include:

- ▶ The total value of food stamps received in the last year; and changes over the past five or 10 years
- ▶ The number of food stamp recipients in the last year; and changes over the past five or 10 years
- ▶ Actual food stamp enrollment; and its value relative to total estimated eligibility for enrollment
- ▶ Characteristics of people using food stamps; especially the relative use of food stamps by traditionally underserved constituencies (immigrants, elders, etc.)
- ▶ Characteristics of those receiving food stamps relative to those most in need of them (for example, food stamp use in relation to food security/hunger status of households)
- ▶ Changes in food stamp eligibility and in other regulations that affect eligibility over the past two years
- ▶ Locations of food stamp office(s) relative to neighborhoods where households in need predominate; and hours of service
- ▶ Extent of awareness of food stamp availability among eligible residents
- ▶ Barriers to access—regulations, language, office location, and hours of operation
- ▶ Projected changes in future food stamp usage
- ▶ Current food stamp outreach efforts and links to other social service and anti-hunger programs
- ▶ Level of use of food stamps at farmers' markets and farm stands
- ▶ Presence or absence of nutrition education linked to food stamp availability

A combination of measures like these can shape a comprehensive assessment of the food stamp program in a community, but not all the data may be readily available, and they could be costly and time-consuming to collect from scratch. Your decisions on which measures to select could be based partly on the level of priority of having that information, and on the availability and ease of obtaining such data. Given the wide range of possible indicators, it will be crucial to clearly prioritize your overall goals, which will inform the key questions you want to address, which in turn will help you prioritize and limit the indicators your assessment examines. As you choose or develop indicators, it may be useful to keep careful notes on the strengths and weaknesses of your choices in relation to your overall assessment purposes.

Developing a precise measure of conditions can be quite challenging. Sometimes the professional literature provides guidance; for example, the *Nutrition Screening Initiative Checklist*⁴ is a broadly used screening tool for assessing elderly persons at nutritional risk. The USDA provides a scientifically validated, quantitative measure of household food security that is included in the Toolkit described in the previous sidebar.

Community Food Security Assessment Toolkit

In 2002, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) released a Community Food Security Assessment Toolkit that provides practical measurement tools for assessing various aspects of community food security. It includes a general guide to community assessment, and focused materials for examining six basic assessment components:

1. Profile of community socioeconomic and demographic characteristics
2. Profile of community food resources
3. Assessment of household food security
4. Assessment of food resource accessibility
5. Assessment of food resource availability and affordability
6. Assessment of community food production resources

The Toolkit also includes practical data collection tools such as focus group guides, a food store survey instrument, and secondary data sources. It is designed for use by community-based nonprofit organizations and business groups, local government officials, private citizens, and community planners.

The Toolkit can be downloaded from the USDA's Economic Research Service website at: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/efan02013/>.

Criteria for selecting or developing indicators

The following are some questions and criteria that you may want to consider as you select or develop indicators. You may also want to return to these criteria after you have identified indicators to confirm that they accurately reflect the goals and purposes of your group.

1. What does your group want to assess?

The indicators you select or design are the tools that help you answer your assessment questions. These questions, in turn, will help you achieve your group's goals and purposes. The same questions that were raised for the design of your research in Chapter 4, therefore, are also relevant for the selection or design of indicators. This process has been discussed in the previous chapter and earlier in this chapter.

Whatever specific questions your group is exploring, your assessment will be well-served to start with a basic social, economic, and demographic analysis of your community. Information in these categories is regularly collected and made available by government agencies. This is fundamental to gaining a better understanding of the overall context of the assessment. (See list in Section 1 of this chapter.)

2. How much data do you need for your purposes?

Developing a complete assessment of a community's food security and/or its food system is impractical and probably even unattainable. Given limited resources and time frames, the assessment team needs to identify a practical number of indicators and measures for them. How much data you need to collect depends on what would help you answer your questions, how much information already is available, and what resources you have. It also will depend on your overall purposes—persuading people to change their behaviors, advocating for new policies, or designing new programs.

3. Can you rely on sources of data that already are available to answer a significant proportion of your questions?

Many types of data are available on a regular basis from a variety of private, public, and nonprofit sources. If most of your questions can be answered through data obtained from these (secondary) sources, then identifying and selecting your indicators will be easier, because they will already have been defined by the institutions that collected the data. You may need to review these definitions to make sure that they accurately capture the information you seek. For example, the US Census of Agriculture provides numbers of farms in different kinds of production at the county level, based on a particular definition of "farm." If this definition and the data provided adequately meet your needs, you could rely on this existing source.

However, in other cases you may want to develop your own indicators. For example, no database currently exists that captures the following type of food retail operation: "a food store that sells all the ingredients needed to assemble at least five different types of healthy meals in accordance with the food guide pyramid." In attempting to map a particular type of food store, you may need to combine different indicators and use a variety of methods and data sources.

4. If you answered yes to #3, are the data of sufficient quality, appropriate for your time/place needs, and easily accessible?

If the available data are complete and reliable, are available for your desired time frame and up-to-date, and are broken down for the geographic boundaries of interest to you, then you may be able to use the existing indicators.

However, sometimes available data may require expert assistance to process that may not be readily available to your group. Alternatively, some data collected by public agencies may not be easily available for your use because of privacy concerns. In these cases, you may need to develop simpler indicators from scratch. Also, some data are collected once every ten years (such as the Census of Population). If you are close to the end of the ten-year period, but cannot wait until updated official data are available, you may need to use recent estimates rather than outdated census figures.

5. If you need to collect original data, what resources and expertise are you able to gather, and what is the time frame?

If you have to collect a lot of data from scratch, you will have to spend some time and effort developing the indicators for your research. Depending on the amount of time and the level of resources you have, you may need to simplify your questions to a few basic indicators. Information on these indicators may then come from original research such as interviews, surveys, document analysis, or geo-mapping.

3. Using Primary and Secondary Sources of Data

As your group clarifies your assessment questions and resulting indicators, you will need to determine how and where to get the data you need. Some of these issues have been discussed in the previous section. One of the major considerations is whether to use primary and/or secondary data sources.

Primary data are original information collected from scratch. Primary data may be obtained through surveys, personal interviews, document analysis, observation, visual documentation, or other approaches. Some primary data may be easy and inexpensive to collect, especially if members in your group are already involved with the topic; for example a list of community gardens or other food resources in the community. You will need to rely on primary data sources if secondary sources are unavailable or unsuitable for answering your assessment questions.

Primary data can help make your assessment more relevant for your purposes and ensure greater originality and accuracy in dealing with issues of interest. Methods to collect primary data can help you interact directly with sources, seek clarifications and additional information as necessary, and gain a degree of flexibility while doing the research. They may also be educational and/or empowering for those who participate in the research, and may increase buy-in to the assessment process.

However, relying extensively or entirely on primary sources for your assessment may also require more resources and expertise than your group may be able to mobilize on a timely basis. Primary research also requires greater care in the design and administration of questions, and in the analysis and interpretation of results.

Secondary data are information that already have been collected, and usually analyzed and published or made available for public use. Secondary data are especially useful to provide broad descriptors of your community's social, demographic, political, economic, and food security characteristics. Secondary data may be gathered and compiled by governmental, university, commercial, or nonprofit entities. Some categories of publicly collected information are not available to the public under any circumstances, in order to protect the privacy of individuals, but some that are not openly available may be obtained through the Freedom of Information Act (1996). These days, a variety of census and survey data collected periodically by government agencies are available on the web. See Appendices 2 and 3 for information on basic indicators and their sources.

Existing data can be extracted directly from the original source or indirectly from another source. For example, US Census data can be found directly from Census Bureau websites and from government and privately published data sets. But others will extract some of this data and publish it as well. Your municipal planning agency may be an excellent source of census data for your community. A university research center may take census data and analyze it to provide additional details about your community's population and trends that influence its characteristics.

Private databases such as Selectphone® Yellow Pages or Dunn and Bradstreet® business data are commercially available, and depending on your budget and needs, can be quite expensive. Selectphone® is available as a CD-ROM with yellow pages for the entire country organized by place, zip code, type of business, and SIC (Standard Industrial Classification—now changed to NAICS, or the North American Industrial Classification System) code.

Secondary data sources for your assessment

Types of Data	University Example	Government Agency Example	Private, Commercial Example	Nonprofit Organization Example
Census data (US Bureau of Census compiles and disseminates census data on a range of population, household, economic indicators)	Research project reports on area job loss/gain based on census data	US Department of Housing and Urban Development distributes CDBG (Community Development Block Grant) funding based on population, poverty, and rate of overcrowding in housing	Supermarket chain devises strategy for location of new stores based on census data on population density and income	Social service or community development organization designs transportation assistance program to serve low-income populations
Sample survey, polling data conducted by public or private entities	Researchers conduct cross-sectional (one-time) or longitudinal (over a period of time) surveys on dietary behavior	Bureau of Labor Statistics compiles costs of numerous consumer items to produce the Consumer Price Index	Food manufacturers conduct market studies on product taste, placement, and packaging	Nonprofit conducts evaluation of nutrition education program outcomes of WIC clients
Membership lists, databases	Extension agents use government or commercial databases to assess minority ownership of local farms	Department of Health and Human Services compiles list of stores accepting food stamps or WIC coupons	Private companies compile for sale, directories of commercial enterprises, including food businesses	Nonprofit referral service compiles list of service providers related to food and nutrition assistance
Research reports, articles	Ph.D. dissertation compares availability, costs, quality of foods in different types of local stores	Government agency studies economic viability of small farms across the country	Private consultant conducts feasibility study of market garden within city boundaries	Anti-hunger agency documents incidence of hunger and food insecurity in low-income neighborhoods
Spatial information, maps	Extension agent maps trends over last 50 years of farmland loss in a region	Regional council of governments assembles maps in population and economic categories to assist in regional growth management	Food processor conducts geographic assessment of potential locations for a meat-packing plant	Community development agency maps stores most used by community members for food purchase

Secondary data sources for your assessment

This table summarizes the typical kinds of information that can be useful for an assessment and gives examples of uses of that information by different institutional actors. It is provided to help stimulate ideas of sources and types of information that might be useful for your assessment, and to help you identify potential sources that your organization might not ordinarily approach.

A comparison of primary and secondary data sources and the implications for your research is available in Appendix 4. Ideally, most assessments will contain some mix of primary and secondary data analyses. Due to the ready availability of much secondary data and the time and effort required to assemble and analyze primary data, assessments typically contain much more information based on secondary sources.

Regardless of the source of your secondary data, here are some questions that you may need to ask to ensure that they meet your needs and enable you to report your results accurately:

- ▶ Who collected the data, how, and why? Voluntary filings, in which participation in a database or survey is voluntary, may be incomplete or contain inaccuracies. Lists generated by mandatory filing (e.g., government licensing) tend to be more complete and accurate.
- ▶ How are categories defined and organized?
- ▶ How often are the data collected, and when were they last updated?
- ▶ How complete are the data?
- ▶ What assumptions underlie the definition or collection of the data?

4. A Brief Overview of Research Methods

Research methods are tools with which you systematically collect primary data about a range of community food issues. Some will be more or less suitable for your group, and there is no formula for the selection of particular methods. They should be selected based on:

- ▶ The nature of the question and the kind of information desired
- ▶ Your purposes in gathering the information, and the amount and detail you will need to make your case, persuade others, and facilitate decisions
- ▶ The time, expertise, and resources you have at hand

We urge you to select methods with a view to encouraging broad and meaningful community participation in your Community Food Assessment planning and implementation. These issues are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4 and in the final section of this chapter.

Appendix 5 presents a range of methods your assessment could use to obtain information and briefly discusses their strengths and limitations in a table. These methods are commonly used in Community Food Assessments; many can be designed and implemented with minimal training prior to the implementation of the research. They are:

- ▶ Informal interview
- ▶ Survey interview
- ▶ Semi-structured interview
- ▶ Standardized open-ended interview
- ▶ Focus group interview
- ▶ Key informant interview
- ▶ Community meeting/ hearing
- ▶ Direct observation
- ▶ Participant observation
- ▶ Document analysis
- ▶ Photo documentation

- ▶ Photo novella
- ▶ Community asset/problem mapping

More details on how to implement these methods are available from sources included in the Resource List in Appendix 6. *The USDA Community Food Security Assessment Toolkit* is a good source for detailed information on selected methods appropriate for assessments (see sidebar in section 2).

Data collected through the methods described above will need to be processed, analyzed, and summarized to surface the study's findings and prepare them for dissemination. A discussion of techniques for analyzing different types of data is beyond the scope of this guide. We encourage readers to refer to the resources on this subject included in Appendix 6.

Reporting and disseminating research results also are essential parts of the assessment process, and are discussed in Chapter 6. It is important to consider the audiences and ultimate uses for your assessment information when planning the research.

5. Some Considerations in Ensuring Quality Research

In collecting primary data, your research team will need to consider issues such as relevance (do the questions capture what is relevant or meaningful to your group?), accuracy (do the findings truly reflect real-world conditions?), and generalizability (do the responses apply to a larger population than the group who participated in the study?). Here are some general guidelines for thinking about methods and techniques that are appropriate for your assessment.

1. **There is no one right way to see an issue, pose a question, or evaluate a response.**

Every method has strengths and weaknesses that affect the quality and usability of the information generated, and it is important to identify these before it is used. Appendix 5 lists some strengths and weaknesses of common data-gathering techniques.

2. **There are many approaches to getting the information you seek.**

Generally speaking, the more questions you ask about a topic and the greater the variety of sources and techniques you employ to gather the information, the more valid information you will gather and the more confidence you will have in your conclusions.

3. **Be sensitive to establishing trust and communication with community members who provide information.**

Asking people to provide information about their food habits or food insecurity issues can be delicate. Community members are more likely to provide information candidly if they feel safe and comfortable. Consider how to help people feel at ease in planning how information is requested and who will request it, for example by having surveys administered by people who are similar to the respondents.

4. **Document in detail the methods you used for getting your information.**

Document the process of developing your questions; the sources that you were able to use; sources you sought but were unavailable to you; people who refused to participate (in the case of surveys or interviews); difficulties you had in interpreting the responses; etc. These details will help you understand your findings in the context of your process; provide you with a way of defending your findings should the need arise; and be a source of feedback if you find that the information you gathered was less than useful for your purposes.

5. Be aware of the limits of your knowledge on a particular topic and state these limits openly and clearly.

Does your information apply to some population groups, but perhaps or definitely not others? Is your information valid for a specific geographical area but not for the entire city or county? Is your information valid for a particular time period? When in doubt, you may want to understate rather than overstate the implications of your information.

6. Be aware of built-in influences or interests that you or your group bring to the research process.

No person is objective, and every research question, even an objective-looking numerical one, has subjective elements. Subjectivity is not inherently bad: for example it can be a reflection of deeply-held values and principles about the problem of hunger. However, it is important to consider and be prepared to discuss openly how your interests might influence or limit the research.

7. Be careful not to be too invested in particular responses or findings.

This is difficult, especially when you have some experience in the community and you care about particular outcomes from the assessment. Keep an open mind and be prepared to be surprised by what you find. Whether or not you are surprised by a result, try to understand and explain it based on the evidence. Check and double-check your methods to make sure that the responses reflect real conditions.

8. Be careful and critical in interpreting and using information collected by others.

Know that claims of no evidence for something does not mean that it doesn't exist. It just means that no evidence was found by the party making that claim using the methods they used at that time. It is important to look carefully at the evidence when weighing some claims. Ask common sense questions, such as: Who collected the information, and how? Why are they making the claim? What does it mean? What information is absent? Are assumptions stated clearly and are they valid? Is there sufficient evidence to support their statement?

9. Scientific evidence is not enough, by itself, to elicit action.

Data do not vote or organize people; people do. If you need to create a change urgently, you are better off organizing your community to take action or to pressure those who have power to take action. Any information you have to help you make your case and persuade others is better than none, but advocacy may be at least as important for getting the results you need as the quality of your information.

6. Community Participation in Research

Active involvement of community members is important to the success of a Community Food Assessment, as discussed in Chapter 4. Community stakeholders and residents can play important roles in research design, implementation, and dissemination. Community participation makes the research more responsive to local concerns and more reflective of local assets, and builds community skills and capacities.

Community residents can bring important strengths to data gathering and analysis. These include:

- ▶ Easier entry into the community when outsiders may be viewed with suspicion
- ▶ A familiarity that helps participants feel comfortable and be more forthcoming in sharing information and ideas
- ▶ Ability to understand local meanings and context and identify patterns that outsiders might miss
- ▶ Capacity to build support for the assessment and to implement change actions in the community

Community participation in research also can contribute to building knowledge, resources and capacity in the community that will have benefits far beyond the scope and duration of the assessment. These may include:

- ▶ Richer informal networks and improved communications
- ▶ Increased awareness of assets and needs
- ▶ A stronger shared vision for creating change
- ▶ Analytical and research skills related to community issues
- ▶ Community-based planning skills
- ▶ Trust and mutual respect

Chapter 4 discussed some general issues related to community participation that are important to consider in the research planning. These include planning ahead for participation at different points in the assessment and raising funds to support it; recruiting collaborators who bring skills in community organizing and outreach and multi-cultural backgrounds; and providing appropriate training to residents and other assessment participants.

Different organizational models exist for involving residents in research. Whatever the model used, it is important to devise means for the community to make recommendations to the planning group, to get feedback, to conduct research tasks, and to disseminate research findings. These can include tabling, community meetings, surveys, and taskforces. Additionally, techniques have been developed to do rapid, participatory data-gathering in a community after some planning and preparation. These include community mapping, rapid Community Food Assessment, open space technology, and future search. These methods are discussed in Appendix 1.

7. Assessing Food Access in Your Community: An Illustration

Below is a list of some key questions related to assessing food access in a community. After each question are notes on issues to consider in defining indicators and identifying potential data sources. This list is merely a starting point and by no means comprehensive.

Question 1: How many food stores are there in the city or in a particular neighborhood, and what types of products do they sell?

One key factor for developing indicators will be the definition of a food store. Is it store that might sell anything edible: gas stations, discount stores, convenience stores, etc? Or a store where people can buy a variety of food ingredients in order to assemble complete meals at home? The definition used would be based on your overall purposes and data availability.

There are numerous classification schemes for food stores. The retail food industry tends to classify stores based on product category, sales, employees, and/or floor area. There is no easy way to relate these characteristics to the types, varieties, and quantities of products sold. For example, an inner-city liquor store may sell many types of food and may have total sales that are comparable to a chain grocery supermarket. However, the store's sales probably will include a much higher proportion of liquor, and the selection of foods they carry may not be adequate for home meal preparation.

The Census of Retail classifies food stores by code numbers (called North American Industrial Classification System or NAICS codes, previously known as Standard Industrial Classification or SIC codes). This system is useful in that it breaks down grocery stores by type (food stores, convenience stores, etc.), but it provides information only in the aggregate for cities, metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs), or other geographically defined areas—not for individual stores.

Another system of classification is based on food licensing regulations. For example, the Michigan Department of Agriculture classifies stores based on the amount and type of food handling required, to provide the appropriate food handling license. Community residents may categorize their neighborhood's stores by other factors such as the types of products carried, or whether the store takes WIC or other vouchers or provides credit. No objective database exists that can provide accurate data in all these categories.



Figure 5-1. This map shows the distribution of larger grocery stores in the Detroit, Michigan area relative to census tracts with 30 percent or more of the population in poverty. Only a handful of stores exist within a half mile of high poverty areas, suggesting a significant food access problem for low-income households.

Sources for information about food stores include the following:

- ▶ A drive- or walk-through of the community if it's small enough (this will not give you information on trends over time)
- ▶ Telephone Yellow Pages (different types of stores selling food may be in various categories: convenience store, liquor stores, pharmacies, etc.). Several private companies sell CD-ROMs containing Yellow Pages information for the entire country.
- ▶ State and local government licensing offices (sales tax, food handling licenses, etc.)
- ▶ Utility companies such as electricity, telephone, and gas providers.
- ▶ Commercial databases such as Dunn and Bradstreet® Business Databases
- ▶ Government databases such as the Census of Retail

QUESTION 2: Are there supermarkets within walking distance of low-income neighborhoods? How are larger supermarkets distributed relative to high-poverty census tracts?

You can identify “high-poverty” areas from census information (conventionally, tracts with 30% or more persons at or below poverty). Maps with census tract boundaries and basic demographic and population indicators are available to download from the US Bureau of Census at <http://www.census.gov>. Figure 5-1 shows a map of larger grocery stores in the Detroit area relative to high-poverty census tracts.

In addition to poverty statistics, you also could select vehicle ownership rates and shade tracts with low rates (where 20% or more households are without a vehicle). Plot supermarkets on this map (manually, or with computer mapping programs such as Maptitude®, ArcView®, or ArcInfo®)⁵. Draw concentric circles of a half-mile

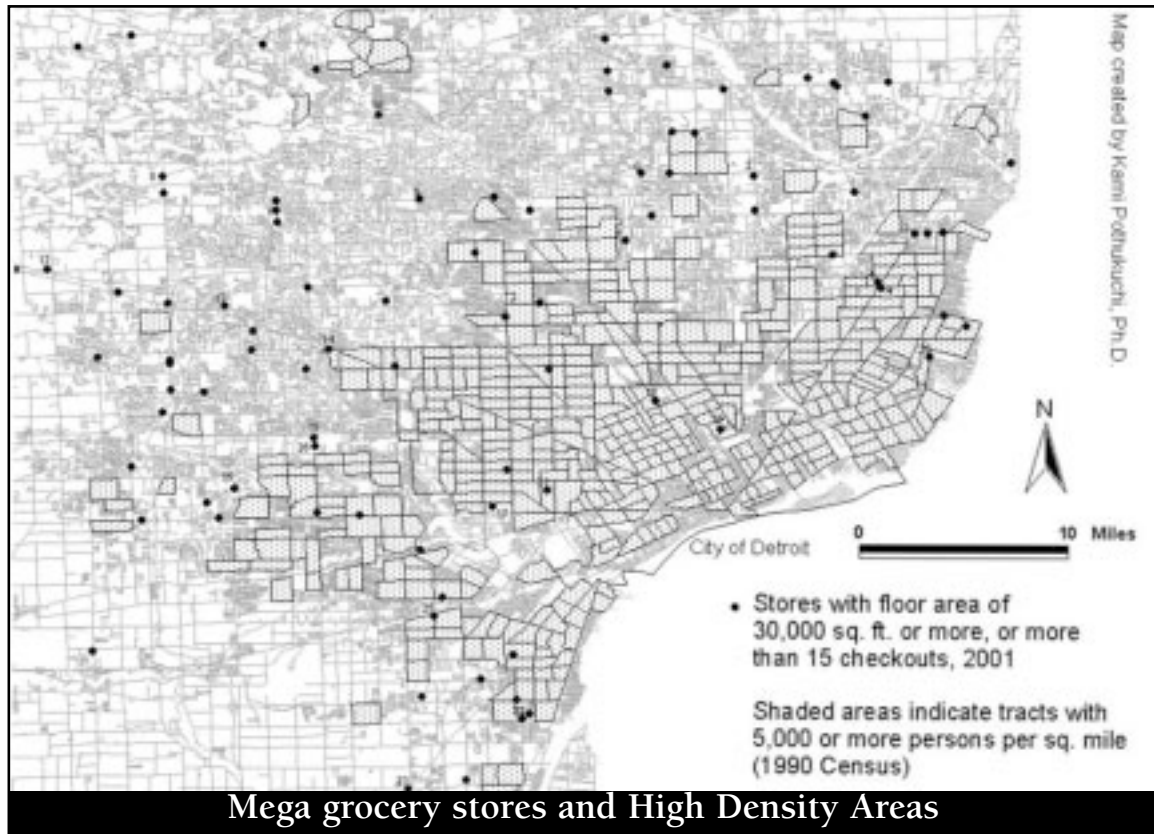


Figure 5-2. This map shows the distribution of larger grocery stores in the Detroit area relative to census tracts with population of 5,000 or more persons per square mile. Grocery stores seem to predominate in lower-density areas where large tracts of land are available for parking.

Source (for figures 5-1 and 5-2): Pothukuchi, 2002.⁶

radius (estimated maximum walking distance with grocery bags) around them. Are there shaded areas that fall outside these circles? These areas represent residents who have low rates of access to local supermarkets.

Another valuable layer of information would be to identify census tracts that are high or moderately high density (households per acre). This would be helpful for understanding supermarket locations and characteristics in your area that typically are attractive to supermarkets. The Census Bureau website provides maps with density information that could be used directly or with some manipulation by computer software. Figure 5-2 illustrates this scenario for the Detroit area.

QUESTION 3: What percentage of local residents lack cars?

As more and more full-service supermarkets locate in suburban or ex-urban locations, people without cars are more likely to have problems with food access. The census is the best source for information on vehicle ownership and demographics, with data available by census tract or for the city as a whole.

Here's one way to calculate rates of vehicle ownership among your area's households. First, find the total number of occupied housing units in the census tracts of interest to you. Then find the number of occupied housing units with no vehicles available. For each census tract, using a spreadsheet program, you should be able to determine the ratio of occupied housing units with no vehicles available to the total number of occupied housing units. The higher the ratio, the greater the degree of difficulty residents there might have in accessing supermarkets. Figure 5-3 shows a map of vehicle ownership in the Detroit area, directly downloaded from the Census Bureau website.

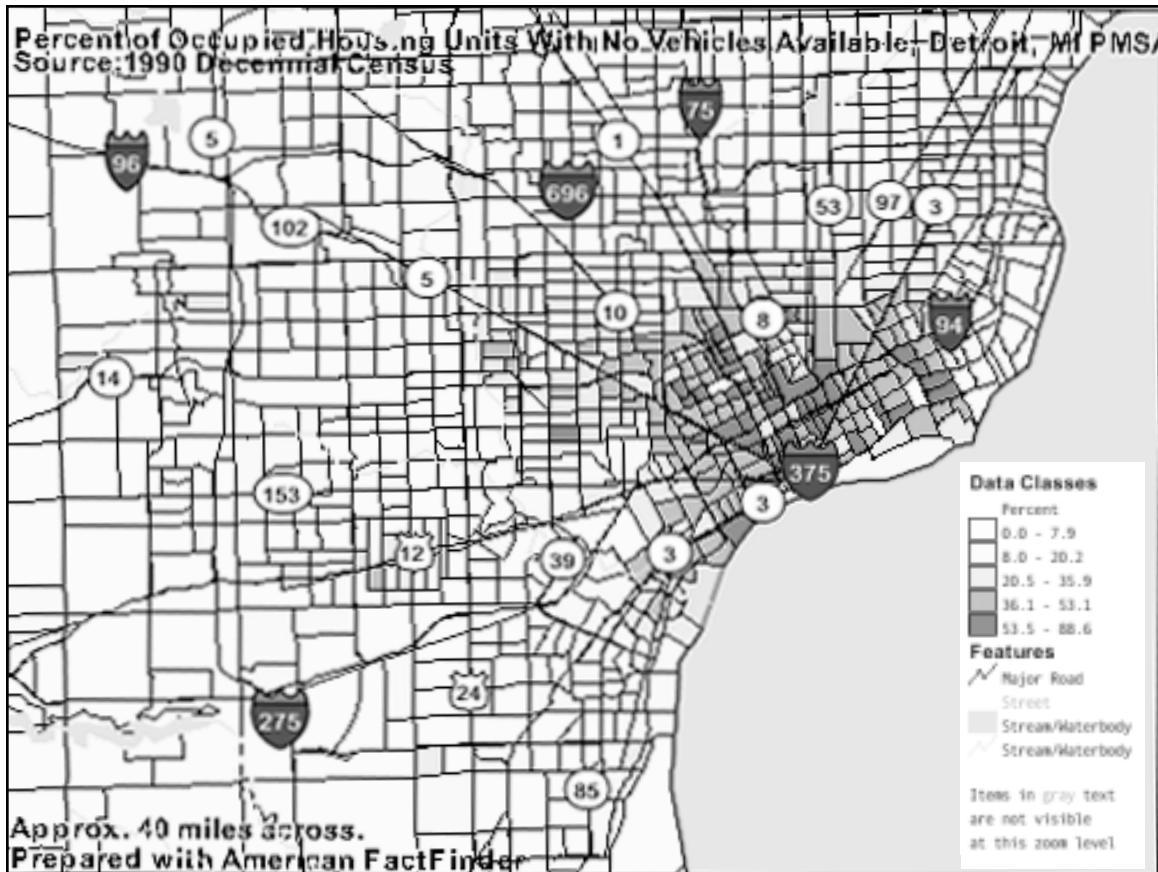


Figure 5-3. Vehicle ownership in the Detroit area (1990 Census).

Source: US Bureau of Census⁷

QUESTION 4: How well do the transit lines serve the food shopping needs of the community, especially low-income residents? Do people have to make a transfer to get to the store?

Look at transportation routes and the extent to which each one passes through or near supermarkets and low-income or transit-dependent neighborhoods. What are the distances between these neighborhoods and stores? How many supermarkets can be traced along the same transit route within a six to 10-mile length? More stores along a transit line likely indicate greater choice and convenience for residents using that line. Also examine the overall transit system. For example, do all transfers take place at one central point? This could mean longer distances to supermarkets that are located further away from city centers, and imply more time spent making transfers.

Mapping stores and transit routes is a convenient way to glean this information if maps and related software are easily available. In practical terms, this information can also be discovered from talking with local residents who use public transit, or with transit operators or dispatchers who are familiar with routes and the community. For example, you could enlarge a map of bus routes and bring it to a community meeting of transit users and/or bus drivers and dispatchers. Transit users could then place thumb-tacks of different colors to mark supermarkets where they currently shop or would like to shop in the future. This could provide the basis for identifying stores that are well-served by transit, as well as stores that need greater attention by transit route planners.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed a variety of issues related to designing and conducting Community Food Assessment research. We covered topics related to developing your research questions and selecting indicators, emphasizing the wide range of possibilities and the need to prioritize based on your assessment goals and other considerations. We also briefly introduced research methods (with details in relevant appendices) and some considerations for ensuring quality research. We emphasized the potential for significant community participation in the research process, and highlighted the benefits of such participation. With the help of a concrete illustration, we also discussed specific questions, data sources, and techniques for gathering information. This chapter underscores the adaptability of the Community Food Assessment approach to a wide range of issue areas and situations.

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 - ³ Cohen, B. 2002. *Community Food Security Assessment Toolkit*. Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/efan02013/> (Date accessed: 3 Sept 2002).
 - ⁴ American Association of Family Physicians, *Nutrition Screening Initiative Checklist*. <http://www.aafp.org/nsi/e-checkl.html> (Date accessed: 20 Sept 2002).
 - ⁵ Some versions of mapping software are available free of cost or for an affordable price from different sources. See <http://www.esri.com>. The US Department of Housing and Urban Development also makes available Maptitude at a low cost to enable communities to do geo-mapping. See <http://www.hud.gov> or call the housing and community development office in your city, town, or county.
 - ⁶ Pothukuchi, K. 2002. *The Detroit Food System: A Handbook for Local Planning*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University.
 - ⁷ United States Bureau of Census. <http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/BasicFactsServlet>. (Date accessed: 20 Sept 2002).



Putting Your Community Food Assessment to Work

Once you've completed your assessment research, two key steps remain: disseminating the assessment results and organizing change actions based on your findings. These steps are crucial to achieving your goals and to making your assessment an effective tool for change in your community. Yet even before you take these steps, it is likely that your assessment organizing and research work already will have attracted significant interest and built momentum for creating positive change in your community.

Other assessment follow-up activities may include conducting an evaluation of your process and outcomes (see Chapter 4), and considering whether you want to do some additional data-gathering. And last, but not least, don't forget to celebrate your accomplishments and thank all those who contributed!

This chapter is organized in two sections:

1. Disseminating Your Assessment's Findings
2. Putting Your Assessment to Work

1. Disseminating Your Assessment's Findings

Wide dissemination of the assessment results is important for building a shared understanding of food-related needs and assets, and to foster broad-based support for change actions. There are a range of potential audiences, types of content, and forms for your assessment reports and materials. These are outlined below, along with tips for producing effective materials. Your team may want to develop several pieces that present the results at varying levels of detail and for different audiences.

The audiences for your report

Who is going to read the assessment report? It is important to consider who your audiences are, what information will interest them, and what forms will be persuasive to them. They may want a brief summary of results, technical detail, and/or an analysis of the implications of your findings for policy and program development. Hopefully, you already identified your audiences in the assessment planning process. New audiences also may have emerged during and after the research process. Audiences may include the following groups:

1. Assessment partners, stakeholders, and participants

Those involved in the assessment process—core members, stakeholders, residents, and others who provided input—will likely be interested in hearing about how the effort proceeded, and what came out of it. You may want to distribute report brochures or other publicity material to anyone who ever attended meetings. A list can be compiled from meeting sign-up sheets.

2. Other community-based or non-profit organizations

A host of groups working in the community may be interested in the assessment results. Even if they do not work directly on food issues, the assessment may build their interest in collaborating on food-related issues, using the results to advance their community work, or perhaps conducting an assessment of their own. A list of these groups could be generated from suggestions of assessment participants, local resource guides, and requests from the groups themselves as news of the Community Food Assessment spreads.

3. The community at large

Community residents may be very interested in the assessment results and action recommendations, especially if they already are concerned about the issues addressed by the assessment. Reaching the broader com-

munity is an important way to build support for actions and advocacy. It requires identifying how different sectors of the community get their information, which may include local newspapers, radio and television outlets (including community cable stations), special interest or neighborhood newsletters, schools, city agencies, and local libraries. It may be important to develop materials in several different languages.

4. Policy makers within and outside the community

Policy makers are an important audience for assessments, and should be targeted for dissemination whether or not they were involved in the process. Such outreach will draw attention to your assessment findings and may help you identify valuable new allies. Materials sent to policy makers should be brief and to the point, probably no longer than two to three pages, with information about where to obtain the full report. (See sidebar.)

Consider sending this brief document to all the elected officials in your area, including representatives at the county, state, and federal levels. You also may want to include leaders and appointed officials in government agencies such as planning, parks, and transit commissions. Key staff in these offices may merit additional contacts before and after you send along your assessment materials.

5. Academic and professional organizations

Faculty and students working in various fields that are related to community or food issues, such as social work, community development, nutrition, and agriculture, may be interested in your research results. A list of faculty to target may be generated by university players on your assessment team, or by working with the local university's community relations office. If faculty and students were not involved in the assessment, seeing the results and learning about the process may motivate them to pursue similar projects or to incorporate the assessment into their teaching and research activities. Professional associations organized at the state or national levels may also be interested in the assessment process and results.

6. Private sector food system actors and businesses

Owners or managers of restaurants and grocery stores, chefs, farmers, representatives of trade associations, and others in the private sector may find your assessment results useful. The results might help them gain support for community-spirited actions they want to put into place, such as buying locally produced foods or composting food wastes. You may wish to write a letter briefly summarizing key findings and send it to such individuals, especially those who you think may be sympathetic to your goals.

7. Funders

As with any project, funders usually request reports on the progress and results of activities they have supported. You will need to send a report to organizations that funded your assessment or provided in-kind

Tips for Communicating With Local Policy Makers

- Identify the issue clearly, and state briefly why you're concerned. Your experience and the assessment will lend supporting evidence. Explain how you think the issue will affect your community, neighborhood, or family.
- If the policy maker has supported your cause or idea in previous decisions, let him or her know that you and others appreciate his or her past leadership on the issue.
- If you want the official to take actions, clearly (but politely) ask for these actions. Volunteer your services as an information resource or researcher.
- If your assessment issue has received media coverage, include copies with your correspondence. If it hasn't, it might be useful to focus on getting coverage before approaching policy makers.
- Restrict yourself to one topic in a letter or other communication. Summarize your arguments and make your recommendations on one page. Use your own words and avoid technical terms.
- You may find it useful to consider potential arguments against your position and provide responses to them.
- Communicate with lawmakers as a constituent, not as a self-appointed neighborhood, community, or professional spokesperson. However, if you are truly representing a particular group, mention it.

Checklist: Key Principles of Effective Print Materials

Content/Style

- The material is interactive and allows for audience involvement.
- The material presents “how-to” information.
- Peer language is used whenever appropriate, to increase personal identification and improve readability.
- Words are familiar to the reader. New words are defined clearly.
- Sentences are simple, specific, direct, and written in the active voice.
- Each idea is clear and logically sequenced (according to audience logic).
- The number of concepts is limited per piece.
- The material uses concrete examples rather than abstract concepts.
- The text highlights and summarizes important points.

Layout

- The material uses advance organizers and headers.
- Headers are simple and close to text.
- Layout balances white space with words and illustrations.
- Text uses upper and lower case letters.
- Underlining or bolding rather than capital letters to give emphasis.
- Type style and size of print are easy-to-read; type is at least 12 point.

Visuals

- Visuals are relevant to text, meaningful to the audience, and appropriately located.
- Illustrations and photographs are simple and free from clutter and distraction.
- Visuals use adult rather than childlike images.
- Illustrations show familiar images that reflect cultural context.
- Visuals have captions. Each visual illustrates and is directly related to one message.
- Different illustration styles, such as photographs, shaded line drawings, and simple line drawings, are pre-tested with the audience to determine which is understood best.
- Cues, such as circles or arrows, point out key information.
- Colors used are appealing to the audience (as determined by pre-testing).

Readability

- Readability analysis is done to determine reading level.

resources. It may be a good idea to send brief material to other, similar funders as well, to educate them and help build support for Community Food Assessments and related work. This may help you to raise money for future assessments or for activities that results from the assessment.

The above groups are the most common types of audiences for assessment findings. Others may include: food writers in the media, national non-profits associated with community food issues, and scholarly publications that deal with community food or assessment issues.

The contents of the assessment report

Whoever your audiences may be, it will be important to develop a well-organized, readable, persuasive, and affordable document that clearly communicates what the assessment is about and why it is important to them. Every Community Food Assessment has at least one major “story” in it. Sometimes the story centers around a specific research finding or comparisons between different locations or across time. Telling this story persuasively is important to build support for change actions.

Like other aspects of the assessment, the contents of the report should be derived from your broader goals. Given how much information your assessment has generated, it may be a challenge to decide what to highlight. You will need to step back from all the details and try to view your research findings from your audience’s perspective. This task will likely be easier if you have discussed the findings with a range of stakeholders at various points in the assessment process.

In developing materials, it is important to consider what your audience wants and needs, as well as factors that may affect their ability to read, understand, and use your report. These might include time constraints, lack of knowledge of the issues, low levels of literacy, or cultural differences. The accompanying sidebar discusses principles for effective print materials. It was developed for low-literacy audiences, but most of it is applicable to general audiences.

The contents of your report will likely include the following major elements:

1. An overview of your community and its food system

This typically is a compilation of secondary data on the community’s basic socio-economic and demographic indicators, economic base, and food system activities. It also may provide general context for the study and comparisons to nearby or similar communities or to the state or nation as a whole.

2. The story of your Community Food Assessment process

This includes the elements of who was involved, how decisions were made, what outcomes were desired, what key questions were posed, how research was conducted, the resources that supported the process, and when the assessment was conducted.

3. Highlights and discussion of the key research findings

This should include the key research questions and a brief description of research methods and indicators. The narrative may contain quotes, vignettes, human interest details, photographs, and other features to increase readability and appeal to broad audiences.

4. Recommendations for change actions

This is a very important section, because it explicitly links your research findings to proposed actions, and identifies who needs to do what to make these actions happen. Often these links need to be spelled out because they may not be obvious to people who are not directly involved with community food issues. Clearly explaining the recommendations should make it easier for you to implement action strategies and rally community support.

Forms your assessment report may take

Reporting on your Community Food Assessment process and findings can take many different forms, depending on the target audiences and the resources available. Generally, the most basic forms are written reports and media or policy briefs. If you have more resources, you may want to consider producing video documentaries, posters, comics, or study guides. Whatever format you use, it is important to allocate sufficient time and resources to generate the report, reproduce copies, and distribute them. Retain your originals in case heavy demand or additional resources prompt you to print additional copies. Below are brief descriptions of some of the most common formats.

1. Written report

A report allows you to convey the assessment goals, process, findings, and recommendations in some depth, and provides flexibility to include a wide range of narrative information and graphics. It is useful to have an executive summary at the beginning to summarize key points and provide a quick overview of the contents of the report. Additional copies of the executive summary can be published for distribution to audiences who may want more concise materials, and to keep dissemination costs down.

2. Newsletter articles

Organizational newsletters that cover food-related and community issues—especially of organizations involved in the assessment process—may be very interested in an article on your assessment process and findings. Their readers may already be engaged and active, and may be able to support your action recommendations. Newsletters may print what you write with little or no modification.

3. Media briefs

Written briefs produced for the media need to be concise, well crafted, and easy for a general readership to understand. Larger regional or national news media might adapt your piece to a more general article and interview key people for quotes and opinions. A similar media piece could be produced for radio and television, including interviews with key players about the assessment findings and their implications. News coverage can help you get the attention of policy makers and build public and policy support for proposed changes.

4. Policy briefs

Policies affecting community food issues are made at every level, from local to international, and policy makers can be a key target audience for your assessment. Policy briefs are designed to influence public officials, agency staff and leaders, or other institutional leaders to take or support actions that you recommend. In addition to government bodies, businesses, private non-profits, and other types of organizations also make policy that affects the food system. Policy briefs need to be brief and to the point—no more than two to three pages in length.

5. Research and professional papers

Research and professional papers usually are shorter in length than a full assessment report but contain all the same elements, as well as some discussion of the study in the context of existing literature on the topic. They are targeted to the research and professional community, in order to build their awareness of Community Food Assessments and how they compare with other kinds of assessments.

6. Resource guides or databases

Much of the information gathered by Community Food Assessments is in the form of data summarizing conditions in the food system, such as the numbers of farms or the percentage of the population that is food insecure. Another outcome may be a list of community food assets, such as food pantries, ethnic food stores, community gardens, and nutrition education programs, along with information on location, hours, costs, and services available. Such guides or databases may be distributed to agencies that are in direct contact with the public, especially those providing referrals to people in need. Examples might include emergency assistance providers, churches, resale shops, and health and human service agencies.

7. Internet

The Internet can be an inexpensive and efficient way to disseminate information about an assessment. Besides reducing the cost of printing and mailing hard copy documents, it makes it easy to include photographs and links to other sites (resources, organizations, etc.), and to provide regular updates. In addition to websites, there are many listserves focused on related issues that would be appropriate places to post a summary of the assessment.

8. Community presentations

Presentations to diverse audiences are a common form for disseminating Community Food Assessment results and encouraging follow-up actions. Presentations can briefly discuss the assessment goals, process, findings, and action implications. An oral presentation is generally more effective if it is supported by visual information in the form of slides, handouts, poster-boards, or transparencies that illustrate or summarize key points. A diverse team of presenters can reach different audiences effectively (e.g. youth, seniors, members of ethnic groups). Remember to leave enough time to answer questions and discussion, and if appropriate to encourage participants to brainstorm about follow-up actions. This type of meeting is a good way to brainstorm and prioritize actions, build support, divide follow-up work, and/or gather more data and input.

9. Study guides

A study guide for students or community members is another way to promote learning and action based on the assessment. Such a guide organizes assessment findings by issue, accompanied by general questions about what other kinds of information are needed to understand the issue better, and what kinds of actions should be put into place. The same kind of instrument could be used in a condensed form to engage community members in a dialogue in small groups or in a community hearing.

2. Putting Your Assessment to Work

The ultimate purpose of an assessment is to create positive changes in the community and its food system. These changes could take a wide variety of forms, including improvements in individuals' diets and health, new or improved programs, better policies at the local level, and increased community participation and collaboration.

We recommend a planning process for developing actions that is similar to the one for planning the Community Food Assessment. If your group has a process in place with periodic meetings for major decisions related to the assessment, then planning for actions likely will represent a continuation of this process. In this case, the transition from the study to disseminating the results and implementing actions will be easier.

However, if your group has not met since the initial planning, it may be a good idea to reconvene and develop a plan for the change actions to build on the assessment results. Planning and implementing change actions will involve stakeholders and community residents in brainstorming potential actions, prioritizing selected actions, identifying and gathering resources for implementation, and allocating responsibilities related to implementation. Hopefully, the assessment planning and research will already have built significant interest in and support for proposed change actions. This will be more likely if your assessment used participatory methods that involved a broad range of stakeholders.

Types of change actions

A wide variety of action strategies may emerge from a Community Food Assessment. It is beyond the scope of this publication to provide detailed guidance on these, but a brief overview of broad categories of change actions is included below.

1. Community mobilization or organizing

Your assessment may uncover information that could provide the basis for mobilizing the community on a broad scale. For example, you may have found that only a small percentage of households qualified for federal food assistance programs are actually enrolled in them, or that supermarkets in poor neighborhoods charge higher prices than those located in wealthier neighborhoods.

The forms mobilization could take could include door-to-door canvassing, community meetings, petition and letter-writing drives, tabling in public places, rallies and sit-ins, and media alerts. Working with a broad range of community residents and people directly affected by the findings will help you reach diverse sectors of your community and build support for your cause.

2. Community education

Community education can involve different types of public dissemination of a message, including community meetings, local media coverage, public service announcements, photo novellas or comics, videos, or materials for specific audiences (such as brochures in different languages).

Materials and messages should be designed for broad public appeal and interest.

They may contain various elements:

- ▶ Information on topics of general interest (e.g., “did you know that...?”)
- ▶ Recommendations for changes in behavior to improve individual or community outcomes in health and well-being
- ▶ Information about existing or recommended policies and programs, with an eye toward building support for future advocacy efforts
- ▶ Encouraging public debate about issues of cultural, economic, or social importance (for example, buying locally produced food to support local farms and jobs)

3. Public policy or legal advocacy

Public policy and laws profoundly affect the food system, and may be significantly shaped by advocacy efforts. Advocacy may focus on the creation of new laws and policies, better implementation of existing policies, or the resolution of public disputes that relate to laws and policies.

For example, based on an assessment of retail grocery stores in Hartford, Connecticut, the Hartford Food System advised the State of Connecticut’s Attorney General’s office not to permit the proposed merger of two grocery chains. The merger would have greatly reduced the number of stores in Hartford, causing significant hardship to area residents. The Attorney General opposed the merger as a result of this advice.

Advocacy may be aimed at politicians (including candidates running for office), government agency officials and staff, or the courts. Advocacy also can target private entities like corporations and businesses to change their policies. For example, a major fast food corporation decided require its suppliers to produce chicken and beef more humanely in response to pressure from advocacy organizations.

One innovative model for policy advocacy is the food policy council. These councils have been organized in recent years to track food issues, provide recommendations to policy makers, and monitor the effects of policy decisions. They can provide an effective forum for broad-based dialogue and action on local food issues. Food policy councils may be organized at the city, county, or state level, and can vary quite a bit in their mandates, structures, and functions, and in their relationship to local government. (See Resource List in Appendix 6.)

4. Program or activity development

Your assessment might recommend new programs or improvement of existing programs to address unmet needs or to harness existing resources more effectively. These programs can take many forms, including:

- ▶ Physical resource development (such as incubator kitchens for job training in food processing, or grocery stores or farm stands in underserved neighborhoods)
- ▶ Social services development (such as nutrition education for young mothers or targeting food stamp enrollment efforts)
- ▶ Linking existing resources or services (getting school cafeterias to buy from local farmers; training public housing youth to work in community-based food enterprises)
- ▶ Modifying existing programs to make them more effective (changing the hours of operation of food pantries to reflect the schedules of clients; or changing nutrition education materials to reflect culturally appropriate diets)

The Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program of the USDA has funded a wide range of projects seeking to enhance community food security. Brief project descriptions are available from USDA's Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service website: <http://www.reeusda.gov/crgam/cfp/community.htm>.

Prioritizing actions

As you identify possible actions that are suggested by your assessment, you may want to use the same prioritizing process used for your assessment goals (see Chapter 4). The following questions are provided to help your group identify criteria for ranking possible actions. This list is just a starting point; your team may identify other criteria as you discuss possible actions.

1. What is the extent of the problem or need?

Your assessment research may have helped highlight the most pressing food-related needs in your community, based on factors such as the number of people affected and level of impact.

2. What is the level of concern and support?

A high level of concern among assessment stakeholders and the community as a whole will make it easier to mobilize action, as will support from other key interests or decision-makers. Similarly, consider whether there is broad agreement on the need for change, or whether taking action may be divisive.

3. What will it take to make these actions happen?

Every action you undertake will require time, effort, and resources. It's important to evaluate the time and resources required for various actions in comparison to what is available. Also, consider whether someone is willing to take the lead in coordinating the action, and if others are willing to support their efforts.

4. What will these actions accomplish and who will benefit?

It is valuable to reflect on the potential impacts of proposed change actions and who the likely beneficiaries might be. This will help ensure that change actions are well thought out and appropriately targeted.

5. Will the actions facilitate collaboration?

Actions will likely be more effective in creating change if they provide opportunities for collaboration between diverse individuals and organizations. Building working relationships and identifying common goals will help build a foundation for continued collaboration in the future.

6. Will the actions foster long-term change?

It is valuable to consider whether a possible action will help you meet your long-term goals for creating positive change. In some cases, actions that are somewhat more challenging to implement in the short term may go farther toward addressing your long-term goals.

Planning for a follow-up assessment

Your assessment may have generated a great deal of interest, excitement, and momentum in your assessment team and in the community. As you plan and build support for change actions, you may find new questions and resources emerging. This may be a good time to start sketching out a plan for another phase of assessment work.

Follow-up assessments may be easier to implement because there already will be a structure and processes in place. It will be important to get clear agreement from the assessment team to move forward, and to give participants who are not able to extend their participation an opportunity to step down, as well as giving new stakeholders a chance to join the group.

Conclusion

In this Guide, we laid out and discussed a broad set of concepts and activities related to understanding and implementing a Community Food Assessment. To conclude, here's a brief review. We started out with a brief discussion of the current food system and the community food security concept, and introduced Community Food Assessment as a tool to help achieve community food security. We then focused on the Community Food Assessment approach itself, moving from its definition and characteristics, to specific case studies, and then to the process of planning and implementing an assessment. Finally, we ended with a discussion of how to disseminate findings and put your assessment to work.

Our intent has been to offer clear information about how to plan and implement a Community Food Assessment, which we hope will prove useful in your work. We have attempted to strike a balance between offering specific guidance and providing information that is flexible enough to accommodate a broad range of goals, interests, players, and approaches. We realize that any single publication cannot provide all the information and guidance needed to conduct an assessment. Some of that can be gained from the resources listed at the end of this Guide, and some only through experience.

We hope that you found this Guide useful in learning about and perhaps conducting an assessment. We wish you well in your efforts to enhance your community's food security, whether or not these efforts include a Community Food Assessment. We encourage you to contact the Community Food Security Coalition to let us know about your work—we would love to hear from you!

¹ Gatson N. and P. Daniels. 1988. *Guidelines: Writing for Adults with Limited Reading Skills*. Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service.