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Community Residents' Beliefs About Neighborhood Corner Stores in 2 Latino Communities: Implications for Interventions to Improve the Food Environment

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Abstract

We assessed community residents' perceptions of corner stores to better understand what facilitates and deters patronage at these food outlets. Data came from 978 household interviews in 2 Latino communities undergoing corner store interventions. Chi-square tests, an independent sample *t* test, and a multivariate logistic regression were conducted to assess the relationship between residents' perceptions about corner stores and their reported patronage at these food outlets. Residents reported that corner stores do not sell a variety of fruits and vegetables and are not places where one can get information about healthy eating. Convenience, cleanliness, positive customer service, availability of culturally appropriate items, and availability of quality fresh fruit increased the odds of store patronage. Simply providing healthy foods will not incentivize patrons to purchase them. Corner store interventions can be more effective if they address the characteristics that community residents prioritize.

Keywords

Obesity; diet; attitudes; food environment; community interventions; social marketing; Mexican Americans

Introduction

Decreasing obesity rates is a national public health priority in the United States.¹ Latinos are the largest ethnic minority group in the United States, have disproportionate rates of obesity,² and are less likely to meet guidelines for physical activity and dietary intake than their white counterparts.³ Thus, improving health behaviors associated with obesity risk, including dietary behavior, among Latinos is a major focus of public health efforts. Although the etiology of obesity is multifaceted,⁴ research is increasingly focusing on the role of the built environment, including access to healthy food, in the prevention and management of chronic diseases including obesity.^{5,6}

The *2015–2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans* advocated for more environmental approaches to improving dietary habits.⁷ A popular approach, guided by the socioecological model, is neighborhood corner store conversions to increase the availability of affordable fresh fruit and vegetables in low-income communities.^{8–13} This strategy may be particularly effective in urban Latino communities where residents frequently shop at small stores.¹⁴ However, recent studies of food environment interventions suggest that these types of interventions have limited, or mixed, effectiveness in increasing store patronage and/or in improving dietary behavior.^{8–10} This is because, as some argue, increasing access to fruits and vegetables alone does not lead to increased purchasing/consumption of these items.^{15–17}

Studies have largely focused on patrons (as they enter/exit the stores) or store owners, leaving a gap in our understanding of what factors promote and deter patronage at local corner stores among community residents in general. Assessing community residents' perceptions and current use of local retail food outlets can help inform the design of programs and improve the effectiveness, appropriateness, and sustainability of corner store interventions. The current study fills this gap by reporting on the community resident's perceptions of corner stores in 2 Latino neighborhoods undergoing corner store conversions.

Methods

Intervention and sample

This study utilizes data from Proyecto MercadoFRESCO an intervention aimed at reducing cardiovascular disease risk among residents of East Los Angeles and Boyle Heights.¹³ These urban, predominantly Latino (97.1%¹⁸ and 95.4%,¹⁹ respectively) neighborhoods are characterized as “food swamps,” because they have a disproportionate amount of unhealthy food retail outlets.¹³ In order to improve the food environment, 4 neighborhood corner stores were converted into healthy food retailers.¹³ In brief, the primary way in which these stores were made more healthful was by increasing the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables. The conversions entailed installing refrigeration units at the front of stores to display the variety of the newly available affordable and seasonal produce. In addition, chips and other energy-dense foods were moved to the back of the stores. Additionally, advertisements for sugar-sweetened beverages and alcohol were replaced with messages promoting healthy eating. Part of the intervention was a nutrition-related social marketing and educational campaign led by local high school students²⁰ aimed at increasing community awareness of availability and demand for fresh fruits and vegetables.

The corner store initiative was influenced by findings from 10 focus groups that took place in September and October of 2010, roughly 1 year prior to the start of intervention activities. Ninety-two community residents were recruited by community partners to participate in the focus groups. Participants were at least 18 years of age, were predominantly female (88%) and foreign-born (80%), and all identified as Latino. Focus group participants expressed an interest in increasing access to healthy food in their communities and specifically identified corner stores as appropriate venues for improving both residents' dietary habits and the community's food environment.

This study presents findings from the baseline data collection that began in August 2011, approximately 1 year before the first corner store was converted in 2012. Because conversions of all participating stores were staggered, baseline data collection continued until July 2013. Households were randomly sampled from neighborhoods surrounding the 4 converted stores and 4 additional stores that served as comparisons. Within each household, the adult (18 years of age or older) who identified as the household's primary food purchaser and preparer was invited to participate after providing written consent. Interviewer-administered surveys were conducted in either English or Spanish using a computer-assisted personal interview software in the participant's home. Respondents received \$25 for participation. In total, 1035 participants completed the survey, for an 80% response rate. The University of California at Los Angeles Institutional Review Board approved all protocols and procedures for this study.

Measures

The survey instrument, developed by the research team, included topics such as participants' food purchasing, preparation, and consumption behaviors as well as characteristics related to nutrition, health, and demographics. This specific study utilizes a set of 15 items assessing perceptions about corner stores (Table 1). These items, developed by the research team due to an absence of an existing measure of this construct, were based on focus groups conducted as part of formative research. Analyses of focus groups yielded major themes about corner stores that guided the development of the 15-item module.

For each item, respondents were asked to indicate whether they believed the statements about corner stores were true or false. Responses were scored as 1 if a response represented a positive perception and 0 if it represented a negative perception about corner stores. Furthermore, responses of "don't know" were coded as 0, indicating not having a positive perception. Four items were reverse coded when the original statements were phrased as a negative statement about corner stores. Questions were then summed to create a count of positive perceptions of corner stores (range = 0–15; Cronbachs' alpha = 0.81).

Demographic variables including age, marital status, place of birth, Mexican heritage, language spoken at home, education, recipient of food stamps, and participation in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program served as control variables in multivariate analyses.

Analyses

STATA/IC, Version 14 (StataCorp LP, College Station, TX), was used for statistical analyses. The sample was limited to the 978 individuals with responses to all 15 perception questions. Results are presented 3 ways. First, data on the 15 individual corner store perception statements as well as the summary score are shown for the full sample. Second, the data were stratified by patronage, and chi-square tests and an independent sample *t* test were used to test for associations between the individual items and the overall score and corner store patronage. Third, a multivariate logistic regression modeled the association between corner store patronage and individual corner store perception items controlling for demographic characteristics.

Results

The majority of respondents were female, under the age of 50, married or living with a partner, foreign-born, of Mexican heritage, spoke both English and Spanish, had a high school education or less, and were not recipients of food stamps or participants in WIC (Table 2). Nearly three quarters of the sample (72%) reported shopping at corner stores. When the sample was stratified by patronage, statistically significant differences emerged in the demographic characteristics of 92 corner store shoppers versus nonshoppers in terms of age, nativity status, language, education, and WIC participation.

Overall, the findings suggest that community residents have mixed perceptions about corner stores (Table 1). Corner store characteristics that respondents had the most positive perceptions of were, “The staff at corner stores speaks my language” (83.4%), “Corner stores sell traditional Latino food ingredients” (75.9%), “Corner stores are not dangerous” (71.0%), and “Corner stores have good customer service” (69.6%). Conversely, relatively few respondents held positive perceptions about corner stores in terms of the following characteristics: “I can get information about nutrition and healthy eating at corner stores” (11.0%), “Corner stores sell a wide variety of fresh fruits” (13.9%), and “Corner stores sell a wide variety of fresh vegetables” (15.6%).

Further, the average count of positive perceptions across the 15 items was 6.3 out of 15, indicating overall moderately low perceptions toward corner stores.

Table 1 also shows that respondents who do not shop in corner stores had less positive perceptions than those who shop at corner stores on 14 out of the 15 items. The largest differences between the 2 groups were in perceptions of convenience of the store location, cleanliness, perceived danger, and customer service. The average count of positive perceptions was also significantly lower for those who do not shop at corner stores compared to those who do (4.1 versus 7.1). This relationship persisted after controlling for demographic characteristics in a multiple regression model, and additional tests revealed that demographic characteristics did not moderate this relationship (not shown).

Finally, when the 15 perception items were simultaneously entered into a logistic regression model controlling for demographic characteristics, 5 perceptions of corner stores were associated with greater odds of shopping at a corner store (Table 3), including (1)

convenience of shopping at corner stores, (2) corner stores not being dirty, (3) corner stores having good customer service, (4) corner stores having specialized Latino ingredients available, and (5) fresh fruits sold at corner stores not being of poor quality. Conversely, perceived availability of a variety of fresh vegetables and perceived availability of a variety of frozen/canned vegetables were each associated with lower odds of shopping at a corner store.

Discussion

Despite the current trend to improve the retail food environment, there is a dearth of literature on assessing community residents' perceptions of corner stores.¹¹ This exploratory study aims to fill this gap in the literature by illustrating the importance of understanding community residents' perceptions of and what drives and/or deters them from corner stores.

The results indicate that the majority of residents shop at local corner stores but, in general, have mixed perceptions about these stores. Residents generally believed that corner stores do not sell a wide range of fruits and vegetables and that the fruits and vegetables that are for sale are of poor quality. Further, consistent with other findings, residents view corner stores more positively when they perceive that they have good customer service, sell culturally appropriate ingredients, and have language concordance between the staff/owner and patrons.²¹ Thus, what appears to be important in predicting patronage at stores are factors related to cleanliness, provision of culturally appropriate ingredients, and customer service rather than the availability of healthy food items. These findings mirror the results yielded from another study among store owners and managers, in a predominantly Latino neighborhood, that revealed that the social environment (customer services and interpersonal dynamics) of small stores largely influence customers' patronage.¹⁴

These results emphasize the importance of supplementing efforts to provide fresh fruits and vegetables with activities that focus on factors that will incentivize community residents to hold more positive perceptions of corner stores so that they are more likely to shop at the stores and thereby potentially purchase the newly available items. For example, our study reveals that in East LA and Boyle Heights, factors that may foster patronage at a corner store include cleanliness of the store, provision of ethnically appropriate foods (in this context, traditional Latino food ingredients), and provision of high-quality produce. Thus, store owners may be more successful in maintaining and/or increasing patronage at their stores, as well as the purchasing of healthy food items, by focusing on these specific factors.

These findings also address the limited focus on the demand side of corner store initiatives, because most efforts focus on increasing the supply of fresh fruit and vegetables while neglecting the need to generate a demand for the newly available healthier food items.^{11,16} Specific to increasing the demand for produce, a potential strategy for future initiatives is to implement social marketing campaigns and nutrition education efforts to help attract and sustain patrons at the converted stores. Such efforts can increase awareness of the newly available items and draw attention to improvements of the stores that emphasize facilitators and/or deterrents of shopping at the stores that community residents expressed. For example, in another Latino community, store owners explained that cooking demonstrations at the

stores are effective in increasing the sales of the specific food items used in the demonstrations.¹⁴ Strategies that aim to increase awareness about the availability of healthier foods at retail food outlets, such as corner stores, may also be particularly beneficial for community residents participating in the WIC program. As of 2009, the WIC food package was revised by increasing the amount for cash value vouchers specifically for purchasing fruits and vegetables.²² Thus, the greater availability of high-quality, affordable fruits and vegetables can be mutually beneficial to both patrons and store owners in underresourced communities.

There are limitations to this study. First, these findings reflect the context-specific attitudes of residents of 2 urban Latino communities and cannot necessarily be generalized to all communities. However, the characteristics included in the measure are likely to share commonalities corner stores in other low-income urban communities.²¹ Nonetheless, we encourage future initiatives to assess the perceptions among residents within their respective communities. Second, the study sample was restricted to respondents who reported being the household's primary food purchaser and preparer, further limiting generalizability. Third, the specific module only allowed for dichotomous "true" or "false" responses that may not have been sufficient to capture more nuanced perceptions.

Implications for future research and practice

The purpose of this study is to emphasize the importance of assessing local customers' perceptions toward corner stores because simply providing new products is unlikely to result in the desired behavior changes if interventions do not enhance characteristics of stores that promote local patronage. Moreover, it remains unclear whether corner store conversions influence health behaviors and outcomes.^{8–10,16,17} However, in the meantime, initiatives to improve the food environment can assess changes in perceptions about local stores, and these findings can serve as more proximal outcomes of these efforts that, over time, can potentially lead to more positive health behaviors, including increasing purchases of fresh fruits and vegetables. Furthermore, similar studies may provide critical information for future efforts by testing the underlying assumption that residents will purchase fruit and vegetables from corner stores. We hypothesize that residents will purchase these items from stores that they hold more favorable perceptions about (e.g., that the fruit and vegetables are of high quality and affordable). Future research assessing the outcomes of corner store conversions among community residents can help test this hypothesis and inform future initiatives.

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Table 1 Perceptions about corner stores among Proyecto MercadoFRESCO sample by patronage ($n = 978$).^a

CS perceptions	Percentage or mean (SD)			Significance ^b
	All respondents	Does not shop at CS ($n = 273$)	Shops at CS ($n = 705$)	
Food sold at CS is not expensive ^c	23.1	9.2	28.7	$p < 0.001$
It is convenient to shop at CS	46.5	20.9	56.5	$p < 0.001$
CS sell a wide variety of fresh fruits	13.9	7.7	16.3	$p < 0.001$
Fresh fruits sold at CS are not of poor quality ^d	41.7	25.7	48.1	$p < 0.001$
CS are not dirty ^e	60.7	36.3	70.2	$p < 0.001$
CS sell traditional Latino food ingredients	75.9	59.0	82.4	$p < 0.001$
I can get information about nutrition and healthy eating at CS	11.0	6.2	12.9	$p = 0.003$
CS are not dangerous ^f	71.0	48.4	79.7	$p < 0.001$
CS sell a wide variety of fresh vegetables	15.6	11.0	17.5	$p = 0.013$
The fresh vegetables sold at CS are of good quality	23.0	9.5	28.2	$p < 0.001$
The staff at CS speaks my language	83.4	72.5	87.7	$p < 0.001$
CS sell a wide variety of frozen or canned fruits	28.9	24.9	30.5	$p = 0.084$
CS sell a wide variety of frozen or canned vegetables	28.4	22.7	30.6	$p = 0.014$
CS sell healthy food	35.8	18.7	42.4	$p < 0.001$
CS have good customer service	69.6	42.5	80.1	$p < 0.001$
Count of positive perceptions about CS (range = 0–15)	6.3 (3.4)	4.1 (3.1)	7.1 (3.1)	$p < 0.001$

^aCS indicates corner stores.^bChi-square test used to test for associations between individual items and patronage; independent samples *t* test used to test for differences in mean count of positive perceptions score.^cQuestion was reverse coded. Original statement was “Food sold at CS is expensive.”^dQuestion was reverse coded. Original statement was “Fresh fruits sold at CS are of poor quality.”^eQuestion was reverse coded. Original statement was “CS are dirty.”^fQuestion was reverse coded. Original statement was “CS are dangerous.”

Table 2 Demographic characteristics of Proyecto MercadoFRESCO sample by patronage ($n = 978$).

Demographic characteristics	Percentage			Significance ^b
	All respondents	Does not shop at corner store(s) ($n = 273$) ^a	Shops at corner store(s) ($n = 705$) ^a	
Sex				
Male	22.3	23.4	76.6	$p = 0.091$
Female	77.7	29.2	70.8	
Age				
18–34	29.6	20.9	79.1	$p < 0.001$
35–49	33.6	20.7	79.3	
50+	36.8	38.3	61.7	
Marital status				
Single	21.8	27.0	73.0	$p = 0.793$
Married/with partner	57.5	27.3	72.7	
Separated/divorced/widowed	20.7	30.0	70.0	
Nativity				
U.S. born	35.5	22.8	77.2	$p = 0.010$
Foreign born	64.5	30.5	69.5	
Mexican heritage				
Yes	88.1	25.0	75.0	$p = 0.516$
No	11.9	27.9	72.1	
Language spoken at home				
English only	13.7	25.6	74.4	$p = 0.003$
English and Spanish	50.8	24.1	75.9	
Spanish only	35.5	34.5	65.5	
Education level				
<High school graduate	48.5	31.6	68.4	$p = 0.043$
High school graduate/equivalent	28.1	23.6	76.4	
>High school graduate	23.5	25.6	74.4	
Food Stamp recipient				
Yes	17.6	29.1	70.9	$p = 0.068$
No	82.4	22.2	77.8	
Participation in Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children				
Yes	19.0	15.1	84.9	$p < 0.001$
No	81.0	30.8	69.2	

^a“Does not shop at corner store(s)” and “Shops at corner store(s)” were stratified by each demographic characteristic and therefore sum to 100 by row.

^b Chi-square test.

Table 3

Logistic regression model predicting shopping at a corner store from perceptions of corner stores ($n = 978$).^a

Perceptions of CS	AOR	95% CI
Food sold at CS is not expensive ^b	1.40	0.79–2.49
It is convenient to shop at CS	2.96	1.89–4.63
CS sell a wide variety of fresh fruits	1.35	0.66–2.76
Fresh fruits sold at CS are not of poor quality ^c	1.60	1.05–2.43
CS are not dirty ^d	1.73	1.11–2.68
CS sell traditional Latino food ingredients	2.35	1.53–3.63
I can get information about nutrition and healthy eating at CS	1.09	0.54–2.18
CS are not dangerous ^e	1.34	0.87–2.06
CS sell a wide variety of fresh vegetables	0.47	0.23–0.97
The fresh vegetables sold at CS are of good quality	1.81	0.90–3.63
The staff at CS speaks my language	0.98	0.58–1.63
CS sell a wide variety of frozen or canned fruits	0.48	0.25–0.95
CS sell a wide variety of frozen or canned vegetables	1.23	0.62–2.45
CS sell healthy food	1.27	0.77–2.11
CS have good customer service	2.78	1.82–4.24

^aCS indicates corner stores; AOR, adjusted odds ratio; CI, confidence interval. Model was adjusted for age, marital status, place of birth, Mexican heritage, language spoken at home, education, recipient of food stamps, and participation in Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children program. Reference group for all statements is those statements with a negative perception. Statistically significant values ($p < 0.05$) are bolded.

^bQuestion was reverse coded. Original statement was “Food sold at CS is expensive.”

^cQuestion was reverse coded. Original statement was “Fresh fruits sold at CS are of poor quality.”

^dQuestion was reverse coded. Original statement was “CS are dirty.”

^eQuestion was reverse coded. Original statement was “CS are dangerous.”