

## Crossing America's Food Deserts To Fight Obesity

(NAPS)—When First Lady Michelle Obama announced her Let's Move campaign to fight child obesity, she noted that many families live in "food deserts": places where residents may not be able to get to a supermarket easily because they do not own a car, have access to public transportation or live along walkable roads.

### A Solution

Researchers at the nation's Prevention Research Centers (PRCs), a network of 37 academic and community partnerships funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, are working to improve the selection at the smaller markets that residents can reach.

"For many people, nontraditional food stores, such as convenience stores or the 'dollar store,' are the neighborhood supermarket," says Joseph Sharkey, PhD, MPH, RD, a researcher at the Texas A&M University PRC in College Station—about 100 miles east of Austin. Dr. Sharkey and other PRC researchers spent more than a year driving the rural roads in eight counties in the Brazos Valley and along the Texas-Mexico border, mapping the places where people bought food and learning how the residents shopped at convenience stores, discount stores, pharmacies, flea markets and even front-yard or mobile food stands.

### Needed:

#### Community Participation

Making healthy foods available at small stores often requires cooperation between the shop owners and the entire community. Store owners may try to offer produce, says Diego Rose, PhD, MPH, director of the Tulane University PRC in New Orleans, Louisiana, but if they do not have facilities to

### A Shopping List Of Nutritious Foods

"Quality, affordability and variety are major considerations in improving the food environment of communities dealing with inequities in healthy-food access," says Elaine Prewitt, DrPH, a researcher with the Arkansas PRC. Here is an example of a healthy-food shopping list. For more information and resources on healthy eating, see [www.mypyramid.gov/pyramid/index.html](http://www.mypyramid.gov/pyramid/index.html) and [www.eatright.org/](http://www.eatright.org/).

- **Fresh Fruits and Vegetables** (Canned fruits and vegetables can be nutritious, but look for low-salt and low-sugar): Apples, pears, peaches, bananas, grapefruit, pineapple, grapes, cantaloupe and other melons, kiwifruit, oranges and other citrus, berries, mangoes, kale, turnips, spinach, eggplant, broccoli, sweet potatoes, carrots, peppers, squash, green beans and peas, asparagus, cabbage, tomatoes, corn, beets.
- **Milk/Dairy:** Low-fat/fat-free yogurt, cheese, milk.
- **Poultry, Fish, Meat:** Chicken, turkey, fish, lean ground meat, lean, low-fat, unprocessed cuts of meat.
- **Dry Beans and Peas:** Pinto beans, black-eyed peas, chickpeas, black beans, navy beans, split peas, lentils, great northern beans, kidney beans.
- **Grains:** Whole-grain and pita breads, crackers, pasta, oatmeal, noodles, spaghetti, grits, brown and white rice, ready-to-eat cereals (low-/no-added-sugar).



keep it fresh, it may not sell. Then such calorie-dense items as chips and candies, which do not require refrigeration, are likely to dominate the shelves.

"We need to see if we can reset this supply-and-demand relationship at a healthier level," says Dr. Rose. In post-Katrina New Orleans, the Tulane PRC helped

form a food-policy advisory committee with local organizations and petitioned the city council to adopt the group's store-friendly recommendations, such as helping area merchants get low-interest loans. The advocacy helped secure \$7 million in disaster-related Community Development Block Grant funds from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to attract new businesses and, in existing stores, finance upgrades, such as refrigerators that keep produce fresh.

### The Power of Change

Neighborhood improvements can help residents feel good about their communities and their lives, so they are more willing to try a healthy diet, adds Jessica Kelley-Moore, PhD, from the PRC at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio.

"People start feeling that something is afoot and they want to be a part of that change," she says. The Cleveland PRC is working to increase school and community gardening programs, which help people grow healthy food and may make them want to buy more of it.

The PRC researchers are also working with corner stores, sharing successful strategies on selling healthy foods and even hosting cooking demonstrations—which surprised some shoppers, who said they thought such events only happened at fancy shops in affluent neighborhoods.

"We are telling residents that they are important people and that a good diet is important to staying healthy," says Dr. Kelley-Moore. "When you communicate that, residents jump in 100 percent."

For more information about the CDC's PRC network and research, see [www.cdc.gov/prc](http://www.cdc.gov/prc).

### Food Ideas

The Prevention Research Centers, a network of 37 academic and community partnerships funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, say one solution to national obesity is to improve the selection at the smaller markets that residents can reach. For more information, see [www.cdc.gov/prc](http://www.cdc.gov/prc).

A healthy-food shopping list. ///  
Crossing America's Food Deserts  
To Fight Obesity