



Healthy
Eating
Research



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COVID-19's Effects on Groceries, Food Assistance Programs Worsen Food Insecurity, Health Disparities, According to New Paper

Special Issue of the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health and New Report Highlight Importance of Retail Strategies to Improve Healthy Eating

Durham, N.C. – Changes to America's retail food system during the COVID-19 pandemic are increasing food insecurity and health disparities, particularly for lower-income communities and communities of color, according to a new paper published in a [special issue](#) of the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. "[Healthy Food Retail during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Challenges and Future Directions](#)" is one of nine papers and commentaries in the journal issue examining the importance of research and evaluation of retail strategies to support healthy eating.

"This groundbreaking special issue is the result of a collaborative effort between food retail and public health experts to determine research priorities that will help support healthy eating in places where Americans shop," said Megan Lott, MPH, RDN, deputy director of Healthy Eating Research. "This is especially urgent as the pandemic continues to affect the food retail environment and access to healthy food."

The special journal issue also is accompanied by a [new report](#) that outlines a national research agenda on promoting healthy food in the retail environment. The journal issue and report, both funded by Healthy Eating Research, a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, mark the culmination of efforts led by the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), Healthy Eating Research, the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and The Food Trust to build consensus around key research priorities for healthy food retail practices. In the report, the authors conclude that public health and industry experts must work together to counter growing food insecurity and disparities by developing retail strategies and best practices that build a more equitable and healthful food system.

The issue is especially timely as a growing number of American families face food challenges as a result of the pandemic. With food supply chain disruptions, shortened store shopping hours and limitations in getting food from restaurants and school cafeterias, families in the United States struggling with food insecurity have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the paper on healthy food retail during the pandemic. Pre-pandemic, food insecurity – or limited, uncertain access to adequate food for a household – affected 11 percent of families in the United States, but has since soared to a record 23 percent. Communities of color are disproportionately affected, with an estimated 38 percent of Black households now experiencing food insecurity.

In March 2020, spending on food prepared outside the home was 51 percent lower than in March the prior year. Online grocery ordering surged at the initial onset of the pandemic. However, most online retailers could not accept payment cards from consumers relying on federal food assistance from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC). While some consumers turned to meal delivery services, such services are often expensive for budget-strained families or unavailable in more rural communities. And as grocery stores dealt with sporadic shortages of food on their shelves, some customers began stockpiling food, worsening food inequities for those who could not afford to travel to multiple stores or make bulk purchases.

Part of the response to these challenges has been through policy changes, such as Congress's expansion of SNAP online purchasing at more retailers. Congress also allowed states to provide additional SNAP benefits to families with children who would normally receive free or reduced-price meals in school. At the local level, governments passed policies and allocated funds for efforts such as home delivery for vulnerable populations and emergency feeding programs such as grab-n-go meal sites during school closures. And, many retailers instituted limits on the quantities of shelf-stable goods consumers could purchase during one shopping trip to help address food shortages.

“It will not only be important to study the direct impact of changes to the retail food environment during the pandemic, but to look at the implications for building more resilient food systems following the pandemic,” said Lucia A. Leone, lead author of the paper on COVID-19's effects on the food retail environment and an assistant professor of community health and health behavior at the University at Buffalo.

In the special journal issue and research agenda report, the authors cover key aspects such as the food retail environment and industry practices; consumer food shopping patterns; effectiveness of retail interventions to support healthy eating; and the future of food retail research. The papers also delve into more specific topics such as the influence of online food and grocery shopping on dietary behaviors, the effects of sugary drink marketing and stocking

practices on consumption, disparities in packaged food purchases between urban and rural households and policies to increase healthy food purchases in supermarkets.

Americans consume three times more calories from supermarket and retail purchases than from purchases made at other places outside the home, such as restaurants and schools, according to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). At the same time, diet-related chronic diseases, such as Type 2 diabetes and heart disease, continue to serve as leading causes of death in the nation. The special journal issue and accompanying research agenda report aim to bring attention to the importance of research and evaluation of retail strategies to improve public health, following years of efforts and a recent convening of 46 expert stakeholders representing a wide range of academia, government, advocacy groups, and food and retail industry.

“With smart, research-backed policies and strategies, we can create a positive impact on health, starting in the food aisles,” said Breanne Wright, PhD, senior scientist at the Center for Science in the Public Interest. “We are proud to partner with researchers, retailers, funders, advocates and others who share our vision for a food system that prioritizes health.”

The research agenda report was supported by Healthy Eating Research (a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation), the Bloomberg American Health Initiative of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and the Center for Science in the Public Interest.

Read the paper: [“Healthy Food Retail During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Challenges and Future Directions”](#)

Read the research agenda report: <https://bit.ly/healthyfoodretail>

See a full list of the papers and commentaries in the special journal issue [below](#).

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About Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI)

Founded in 1971, the Center for Science in the Public Interest is one of the oldest independent, science-based consumer advocacy organizations devoted to improving the food system to support healthy eating. Known as America’s Food and Health Watchdog, CSPI’s twin missions are to conduct innovative research and advocacy programs in health and nutrition, and to provide consumers with current, useful information about their health and well-being. Learn more at cspinet.org.

About Healthy Eating Research

Healthy Eating Research is a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The program supports research on policy, systems, and environmental change strategies with strong potential to promote the health and well-being of children, and that advance health equity in the areas of nutrition, nutritional disparities, and food security. For more information, visit www.healthyeatingresearch.org.

About The Food Trust

The Food Trust is a nationally recognized nonprofit dedicated to ensuring that everyone has access to affordable, nutritious food and information to make healthy decisions. Headquartered in Philadelphia, The Food Trust works with neighborhoods, schools, grocers, farmers and policymakers in the city and across the country to develop a comprehensive approach to improved food access that combines nutrition education and greater availability of affordable, healthy food. Learn more at thefoodtrust.org.

List of Papers in the International Journal of Environmental Health and Research Special Issue: "Retail Strategies to Support Healthy Eating"

Note: To access the full issue, please visit <https://bit.ly/healthyfoodretail>

- [Developing A National Research Agenda to Support Healthy Food Retail](#)
By Amelie A. Hecht, Megan M. Lott, Kirsten Arm, Mary T. Story, Emily Snyder, Margo G. Wootan and Alyssa J. Moran
- [Urban vs. Rural Socioeconomic Differences in the Nutritional Quality of Household Packaged Food Purchases by Store Type](#)
By Allison Lacko, Shu Wen Ng and Barry Popkin
- [A Model Depicting the Retail Food Environment and Customer Interactions: Components, Outcomes, and Future Directions](#)
By Megan R. Winkler, Shannon N. Zenk, Barbara Baquero, Elizabeth Anderson Steeves, Sheila E. Fleischhacker, Joel Gittelsohn, Lucia A Leone and Elizabeth F. Racine
- [Healthy Food Retail during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Challenges and Future Directions](#)
By Lucia A. Leone, Sheila Fleischhacker, Betsy Anderson-Steeves, Kaitlyn Harper, Megan Winkler, Elizabeth Racine, Barbara Baquero and Joel Gittelsohn
- [Understanding the Intersection of Race/Ethnicity, Socioeconomic Status, and Geographic Location: A Scoping Review of U.S. Consumer Food Purchasing](#)
By Chelsea R. Singleton, Megan Winkler, Bailey Houghtaling, Oluwafikayo S. Adeyemi, Alexandra M. Roehll, JJ Pionke and Elizabeth Anderson Steeves
- [Improving Consumption and Purchases of Healthier Foods in Retail Environments: A Systematic Review](#)
By Allison Karpyn, Kathleen McCallops, Henry Wolgast and Karen Glanz
- [Associations between Governmental Policies to Improve the Nutritional Quality of Supermarket Purchases and Individual, Retailer, and Community Health Outcomes: An Integrative Review](#)
By Alyssa J. Moran, Yuxuan Gu, Sasha Clynes, Attia Goheer, Christina A. Roberto and Anne Palmer
- [Influence of Food and Beverage Companies on Retailer Marketing Strategies and Consumer Behavior](#)
By Amelie A. Hecht, Crystal L. Perez, Michele Polascek, Anne N. Thorndike, Rebecca L. Franckle and Alyssa J. Moran

- ***(Publication Pending)* Supermarkets in Cyberspace: A Conceptual Framework to Capture the Influence of Online Food Retail Environments on Consumer Behavior**