Survey of SNAP Food Providers in Eight Kentucky Counties:

LOCAL FOOD DEMAND

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In 2018 a survey was conducted of stores accepting SNAP electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards in the Kentucky counties of Bourbon, Boyle, Breathitt, Jackson, Knott, Lincoln, Madison, and Owsley. The survey was a component of research conducted by CEDIK at the University of Kentucky, in conjunction with the Kentucky Grocers and Convenience Store Association to gain a better understanding of local food environments and to learn more about grocery store policies and practices. The reports in this series explore the challenges and practices of stores that accept EBT cards and the implications for local food access in the study area. All the participating counties represent areas of high eligibility for participation in the federal SNAP programs.

Two hundred and sixty surveys were sent by mail with a pre-paid return envelope to the addresses of stores provided by the USDA SNAP website[1] listing stores that accept SNAP EBT cards. Surveys went to one hundred and sixty-eight addresses in the Central Kentucky counties (in dark blue on map above), and fifty-one addresses located in the Eastern counties (in lighter blue). Sixteen percent of the total initial mailing were returned undelivered. Twenty-eight surveys, or twelve percent of the deliverable surveys, were completed and returned. Surveys were completed by the store owners, managers, or a designated representative.

Food Environment

To understand the types of foods available to the residents of the surveyed counties, the survey asked store managers/respondents to indicate the percentage of store floor space occupied by types of foods. Floor and/or shelf space is often used as a proxy for food availability by food type[2]. It also has a documented effect on consumer purchasing patterns. Increased shelf space for product categories is related to increased purchasing. Understanding the relative proportions of different product types gives us a sense of the overall food environment of retail environments in these counties.

The corresponding convenience stores noted that ~70% of their floor space was dedicated to food of some kind (fresh or processed) while approximately 30% of floor space was dedicated to non-food items. However, candies, pastries, and processed snacks represent 60% of the floor space dedicated to food. When these snack food items are removed, only 28% of total store space is food (canned, frozen, and fresh food + prepared meals, bread, and cereal). Around 10% of the total floor space contains fresh food, frozen vegetables/fruits, meat, and dairy. These percentages are similar in central and eastern Kentucky. See Figure 2 (next page) for percentage of shelf space for food and drink items in convenience stores.

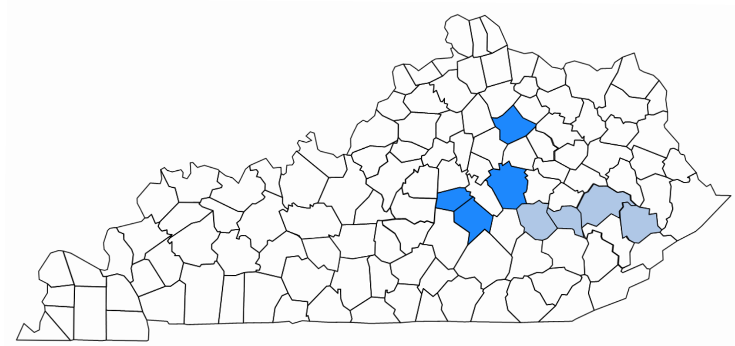


FIGURE 1. KENTUCKY COUNTIES PARTICIPATING IN SURVEY.

Central Kentucky: Bourbon, Boyle, Lincoln, and Madison (darker blue)

Eastern Kentucky: Breathitt, Jackson, Knott and Owsley (lighter blue)

[1] https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/retailerlocator

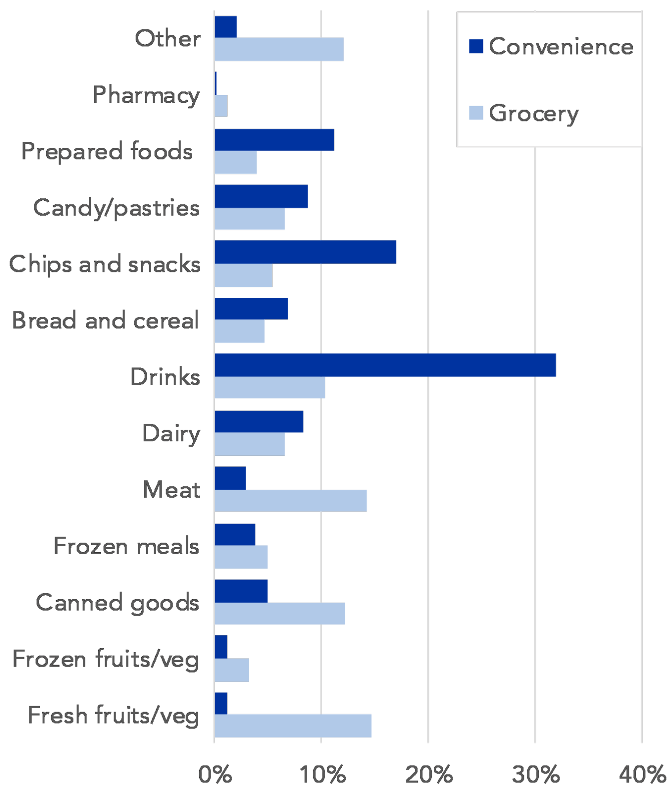
[2] Vandevijvere, S et al. (2017). Indicators of the relative availability of healthy versus unhealthy foods in supermarkets: a validation study. International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity, 14(1), 1-9.

[3] Farley, T. A et al. (2009). Measuring the food environment: shelf space of fruits, vegetables, and snack foods in stores. Journal of Urban Health, 86(5), 672-682.

The floor space in supermarkets and other independent food stores is differently composed. On average, 76% of the store space contained food items. Of the food items, only 13% was candy and processed snack foods, while the remaining 87% was dedicated to canned, frozen, and fresh food as well as prepared meals, bread, and cereal. Fresh food, frozen vegetables/fruits, meat, and dairy comprised 46% of the total store area, much higher than that those in convenience stores.

Farmers markets averaged 91% of fresh produce by booth space. Breads accounted for 7%, and prepared foods at 2%. In general, residents are more likely to have access to fresh food if they live near farmers markets or grocery stores.

FIGURE 2. FLOOR SPACE ALLOCATION BY STORE TYPE.



[4] Jairus Rossi and Lee Meyer (2018). "Beyond Farmers Markets – Local Food Opportunities in Southeastern Kentucky's Retail and Institutional Industry". Department of Agricultural Economics, University of Kentucky, March.

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Local and Organic Food in Kentucky

Interest in locally grown foods has risen in recent years across in Kentucky[4]. Advocates of local food argue that purchasing produce, meat, and processed products from nearby locations helps keep money flowing within a region and provides small and medium farms with market opportunities. Additionally, local food in stores can provide fresher produce options than those which must be harvested early, treated, and transported across the country or from other locations around the world. Finally, local food may provide some measure of food security if national supply chains become disrupted.

There is increased demand for organic foods among consumers concerned about the impact of pesticides and synthetic fertilizer on the health of humans, the soil, and the environment. Some farmers have adopted organic practices as a way to secure higher premiums on their farm products as consumers expect to pay a certain percentage more for organics. Local foods are not as associated with higher premiums for farmers, but some producers will use 'local' as a marketing approach. Additionally, many consumers associated local food with higher prices. With these considerations in mind, this survey asked stores whether and to what extent local and organic foods are important marketing categories and/or product categories.

Organic Food Interest and Presence

Supplying organic foods was not a priority for neither convenience nor grocery stores. Both convenience and grocery stores had low interest in organic foods. In the convenience store category, only two stores (out of 10) mentioned that they had any organic products. All other stores said that customers have no interest in organic options.

In grocery stores, only two stores (out of 13) carried organic products. In contrast to the convenience stores, these outlets rated consumer interest higher with an average score being 'a little' consumer interest. On average, only 2% of grocery store food sales are organic.

Farmers markets on average indicated a moderate consumer interest in organics, though none of the 4 markets surveyed had organic products.

FIGURE 3. CONSUMER INTEREST IN ORGANIC FOOD BY LOCATION.

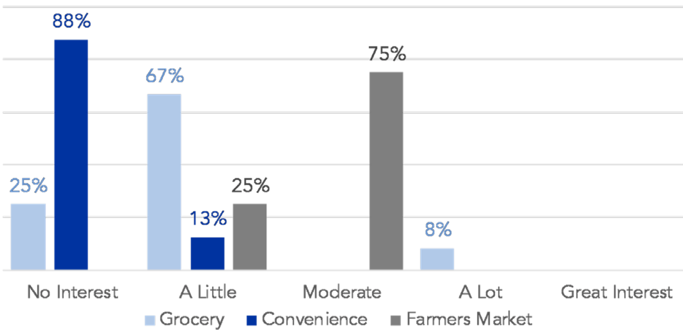
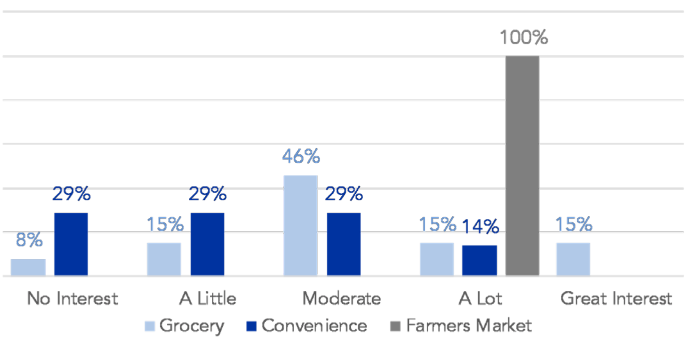


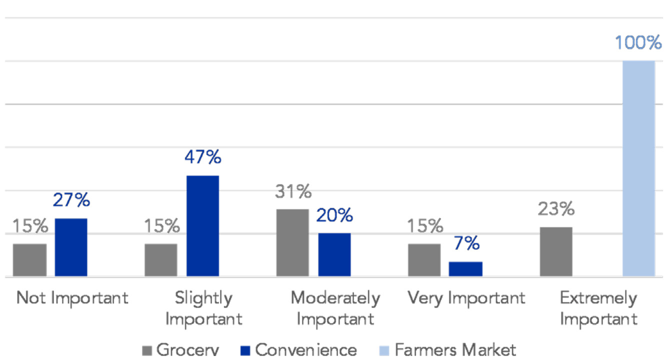
FIGURE 4. CONSUMER INTEREST IN LOCAL FOOD BY LOCATION.



Local Food Interest and Presence

Local food was more important than organics to food providers in our surveyed counties. The majority of responding stores stock items grown or produced in Kentucky. All but one grocer stocked local products in their stores. These grocers on average feel that customers are interested in local products. Their average rating is between 'moderately interested' and 'very interested' (Figure 4). These grocers also felt that local food was important to their business and marketing strategy with a similar rating between 'moderately' and 'very' important (Figure 5).

FIGURE 5. LOCAL FOOD AS MARKETING STRATEGY BY LOCATION.

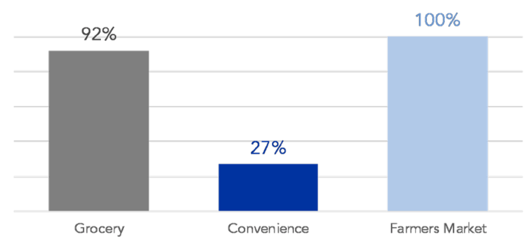


Convenience stores had a slightly different perspective on local foods. Three of the 9 stores stocked local products. Owners felt that customers' interest was between 'a little' and 'moderate' (Figure 4). Similarly, local food was only 'slightly' to 'moderately' important to their business and marketing strategy (Figure 5).

Farmers markets said that consumers were 'very interested' in local products and that having local products was 'extremely important' to their marketing approach.

All market channels had some stores which carried local food items. All farmers markets had local food. While only about 25% of convenience stores had food items from Kentucky, over 90% of grocery stores had local food products (Figure 6).

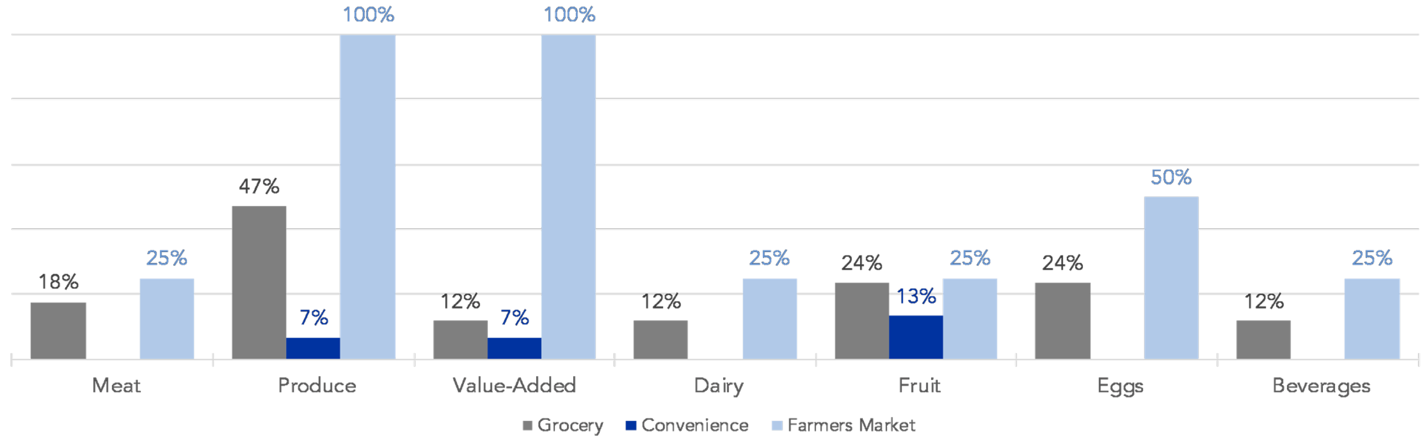
FIGURE 6. PERCENT OF LOCAL ITEMS STOCKED BY LOCATION.



Of stores offering local foods, produce is the most widely offered local product in grocery stores. 47% of all responding grocery stores carried local produce. Fruit and eggs were stocked in 24% of the stores that responded. Locally produced meat is available in 18% of grocery stores. In convenience stores, the only products offered were produce, fruit, and value-added goods with only fruit being found at more than one store. All four farmers markets had vegetables and value-added goods. Eggs were in half of the markets, while fruit and dairy were only in one market (Figure 7, next page).

Our survey also asked respondents to discuss where they sourced local food. Grocers are sourcing a majority of local foods either directly from the producer or the manufacturer. Fifty-six percent of respondents noted that they participated in these direct relationships with producers. Forty-four percent of stores said that they worked with local or regional distributors. Local food was not purchased through large broadline (regional/national) distributors.

FIGURE 7. PERCENT OF LOCAL ITEMS STOCKED BY PRODUCT BY LOCATION.



All farmers markets, not surprisingly, sourced most of their local food directly from producers. One market noted that they did get some products from a local/regional specialty distributor.

Two convenience stores get local products from a broadline distributor while one of these two also source from local producers.

Twelve stores offered their opinion as to what resources or assistance would be needed to increase their ability to offer more local foods. Four stores mentioned price or cost of local products was a challenge to stocking more local foods. Increased availability and increased personal promotion by the product company could assist two stores in their ability to offer more local foods. One store mentioned that sourcing decisions are made at a corporate level – a common arrangement that limits the ability of many grocery stores to go local. Survey participants also reported financial assistance, increased customers, continued Extension assistance, and increased store-level purchasing autonomy could assist them in being able to offer more local foods to their customers.

Summary

While small in scope, this survey provides details regarding the food purchasing opportunities for communities. The general composition of market venues for consumers is critical to understand as these data provide insights into the structural limits and opportunities for residents to access healthy food. This survey of market structure also shows where local producers might find a receptive audience for their goods.

Our data show that in general, organic food is not a primary focus for food consumers and providers in these rural locations. At the same time, locally produced goods are becoming more popular for consumers and stores alike. All market types are receptive to local food items, though grocers and farmers markets are the most supportive venues for finding local produce, meat, and other goods. They also seem to be the primary channel for residents to find fresh foods in general. Each channel has its own challenges in providing fresh food access to consumers: price, seasonal availability, operating hours, geographic proximity, etc. How to overcome these challenges to augment food environments with fresh food requires more research, intervention, and collaboration from individuals and groups at a local level. This survey data indicates that there may be opportunities for supplementing fresh food in stores with locally-produced food items.

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Note: A series of publications on the Survey of SNAP Food Providers in Eight Kentucky Counties can be found at cedik.ca.uky.edu/pse-survey

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