

# HOW FOOD SYSTEMS INFLUENCE HUMAN HEALTH

A “food system” includes everything involved in getting food from farm to table. Food systems are influenced by the social, cultural, political, economic, and natural environments in which they operate. That means the availability, quality, and price of food are not the same everywhere.

For example, some areas are called “food deserts” because it is difficult to buy fresh food.

Land-grant universities are working together to better understand exactly how food systems influence individual and community health and wellbeing and identify changes to food systems that will enhance the ability of families and individuals to make healthy choices.

Researchers and Extension specialists involved in this project are engaging communities and facilitating institutional, family, and individual changes that improve health and wellbeing. Over the past five years, they have:

- Produced the Missouri Hunger Atlas and a Regional Profile of Missouri Food Pantry Clients and Households, which identify food access and affordability gaps.
- Identified rural communities in Kansas that have lost grocery stores and Maryland community stores that need to upgrade the foods they offer.
- Noted a lack of adequate cooking facilities in low-income homes and a lack of healthy cooking skills, like vegetable preparation, in Minnesota and Texas households.
- Created “Cooking Together for Family Meals.” New knowledge and skills have helped participants change their eating habits.
- Connected community gardens to food pantries in Missouri so they can provide more fresh produce to clients.
- Organized the “Seeds that Feed” program that distributes vegetable seeds to Missouri food pantry clients and provides training on how to grow them.
- Coordinated “Grow Well Missouri,” which provides gardening education, tool sharing, and seed exchange. Participants added new types of produce to their gardens, increased freezing and canning, and shared more produce with neighbors and family.
- Developed “Go, Eat, Grow” in Texas. Over 1,000 3rd and 4th graders learned about vegetable gardening, built gardens at their schools, and harvested and ate what they grew. The students said they now like vegetables. Parents said their children ask for more vegetables.
- Developed “Head Start Preschoolers Jump Start a Healthy Lifestyle” in Maryland to help prevent childhood obesity. This program used stories, music, dance, gardening, and visual tools to teach 300 preschoolers about nutrition and healthy behaviors. Preschoolers now ask to eat more fruits and vegetables and caregivers at home and at school make healthier choices.



This Multistate Research Project (*NC-1196: Food systems, health, and well-being: understanding complex relationships and dynamics of change, 2011-2016*) is supported by the Multistate Research Fund through USDA-NIFA and by grants to project members from the following institutions: University of California-Davis, University of California-Santa Cruz, Cornell University, University of Florida, University of Hawaii, University of Illinois, Kansas State University, University of Maryland, University of Maryland-Eastern Shore, University of Massachusetts, Michigan State University, University of Minnesota, Mississippi State University, University of Missouri, Ohio State University, Oklahoma State University, Purdue University, Rutgers University, and Texas AgriLife Research.

Learn more: [bit.ly/NC-1196](http://bit.ly/NC-1196)