

Study looks at efforts to improve local food systems through policy

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(Medical Xpress)—Communities attempting to improve their local food system are increasingly creating food policy councils as an important tool in that effort, but little research has been done into how those councils are functioning.

A team of Johns Hopkins researchers recently conducted a nationwide survey of food policy councils to try to fill some of this research gap. Their results were published online August 24 by the *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems and Community Development*.

"All over the U.S., food policy councils are bringing together stakeholders to examine how the [food system](#) is operating and to develop ways to improve it," said Keshia Pollack, PhD, an associate professor at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and one of the authors of the study, which was funded by the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future. "This study is the first to comprehensively explore how food policy councils across the country are using policy to improve the food system."

The study identified 92 active food policy councils across the U.S. at the time of the survey, and 56 of these councils are included in the survey results. Meanwhile, the Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC) documented 80 percent growth in the number of food policy councils in the U.S. between 2010 and 2012 alone.

Food policy councils get involved in a range of food system topics,

promoting policies that increase access to healthy foods for low-income people, support local [sustainable agriculture](#), or improve the food-purchasing practices of large institutions such as schools, hospitals, and government entities.

Some food policy councils get only as far as identifying food system problems and educating the public about food system issues but stop short of doing direct policy work such as formulating policy proposals or advocating for existing proposals. Survey respondents reported some of the main barriers to food policy councils doing this kind of work are lack of time, lack of funding targeted to policy work, and "lack of training or skills in how to engage in the policy process," according to Pollack.

"The policies that these councils are trying to develop are very much linked to [local food](#) system issues – trying to increase the production and the purchasing of locally produced foods," said Mark Winne, a food policy expert who provided technical assistance to the study's authors and has assisted dozens of budding councils across the country. "They're looking at linkages among health, equity, social justice, and locally produced food. I was surprised that many food policy councils [16] were focusing on that larger category of issues – namely, procurement and access."

The Johns Hopkins survey was part of a larger study that is ongoing. Pollack explained:

"We identified a dozen food policy councils that we included in an in-depth investigation to further understand the policy activities of food policy councils. This study will allow us to highlight important lessons that may help other [food policy](#) councils who are interested in engaging or expanding their involvement in food system policy."

Provided by Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health

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