

Photovoice: A useful method to learn about the food environment

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Childhood obesity is linked to diet habits and food environment, but gaining information about these topics from children can often be difficult. Using the Photovoice method, however, researchers from the University of Minnesota were able to engage participants and learn about the food environments and eating habits of 9- to 13-year-old children eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

The Photovoice method pairs photographs taken by participants with interviews about those photos, and has been shown to be effective in conducting research and building trust with children. In the University of Minnesota study, participants were given disposable cameras and instructed to take photos of commonly consumed foods at home, school, and in the community, as well as the people who influenced their food consumption. Collecting data in this manner helped the researchers to connect with the youths and gain valuable insight.

"Children enjoyed taking pictures and wanted to keep a copy of their photos," principal investigator Chery Smith, PhD, MPH, RD, said.

Researchers quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed the photos and selected 3 to 5 to follow up through interviews with the children. In interviews, children explained why they photographed certain foods and how the people and places they photographed were related to their experiences with food.

Food insecurity was shown through photographs and discussed in interviews. Most refrigerators, freezers, and pantries were half full, but some were nearly empty; children reported that their family's use of SNAP determined what food was available to them. Likewise, it was observed that peers and siblings are the most involved at meal times, but parents determined what food was available by shopping, cooking education, and passing on

cultural norms. These insights helped the researchers understand ways the participants' diets may be improved.

"The diet of the entire family must be addressed before any changes in the individual child's diet can occur," explained researcher Lindsay Heidelberg, RD, LD. "Encouraging parents to make healthy foods more available at home and to introduce healthy new foods could improve the likelihood that children would try and accept healthy foods."

Overall, the information from this research could be used to help inform future research on [food](#) environments and dietary habits. Similarly, as the Photovoice method proved effective, it may be a useful tool for future research with [children](#).

More information: "The Food Environment Through the Camera Lenses of 9- 13-Year-Olds Living in Urban, Low-Income, Midwestern Households: A Photovoice Project," by Lindsay Heidelberg, RD, LD; and Chery Smith, PhD, MPH, RD (DOI: [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2015.05.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2015.05.005)), *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, Volume 47, Issue 5 (September-October 2015)

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