Researcher says northern NH residents have limited access to healthy food choices

By KIMBERLEY HAAS Union Leader Correspondent  Jun 12, 2019

Researcher Jessica Carson has spent the last year pulling together data about food access and security in the state. She created these maps for policy makers and community leaders.

COURTESY

DURHAM — A researcher who has been working on food insecurity issues says residents in large areas of northern New Hampshire have significantly limited access to healthy food.
A brief written by Jessica Carson, a research assistant professor with the Vulnerable Families Research Program at Carsey School of Public Policy at the University of New Hampshire, was released Tuesday.

Carson mapped the food landscape in the state and found residents outside the I-93 corridor in northern New Hampshire have few food retailers to choose from, particularly grocery stores and farm food options.

Carson said in much of Coos County, parts of Grafton County and parts of Merrimack County, towns have no grocery stores. In places with a grocery store one or two towns away such as Waterville Valley or Andover, reaching that store may be difficult for residents with no access to private transportation.

Carson spoke about her research with the New Hampshire Union Leader Tuesday morning.

"I wanted to provide a solid documentation of what exists, and the next step might be figuring out whether certain types of food resources are more important than others," Carson said.

As part of the brief, Carson mapped out the distribution of farm-related food sources throughout the state and found farm retailers are concentrated in more populated regions of the state, another blow to residents living in northern New Hampshire.
Carson said that north of Lancaster and Berlin, the only farm food available is in Stewartstown.

Carson said people do not need to be poor or live in rural areas to experience food insecurity, but some of the regions with less access to nutritious foods have the highest rates of poverty in the state and the lowest population density. Again, that affects the northern third of the state which has the highest percentages of low-income residents.

Carson hopes her mapping work will help policy makers and community leaders understand the food access issues in New Hampshire as they plan for the future.

“There might be parts of the state which realize they don’t have a farmer’s market nearby and that might be something of interest. From a research perspective, I’m interested in untangling the issues of food access and food availability and affordability, which are all related concepts,” Carson said.

More than 4,000 food sites were used in the creation of Carson's maps. She used data from a marketing database and then checked it against food protection data held by the state, data from the USDA Food and Nutrition Service and data from various New Hampshire based organizations, such as Made in New Hampshire.
Sites that sold prepared foods to be eaten on site, businesses that focus on alcohol or sweets and places which only sell live animals were excluded from the maps.

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