

County Snapshot Methodology



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INTRODUCTION

County local food system snapshots are a product developed by ASAP (Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project) to support community efforts to create a sustainable food system. The local food system information presented in the snapshots offers perspective and context, and a way for community stakeholders to identify capacity and establish priorities for action.

Each food system variable presented in the snapshots was chosen based on the criteria: (1) data must relate directly to local food system development, (2) data must be obtainable and available to the public, (3) data must come from a reliable, credible source, and (4) collectively, the data must give an idea of the social, economic, and environmental components of the local food system.

The snapshots should be used as a starting point for communities to better understand the dynamics of the food system where they live. The snapshots are concise by design; all counties are encouraged to investigate the elements of their local food system in greater depth to develop a well-rounded view of the opportunities, assets, and obstacles to food localization efforts in their community.

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PRODUCTION

Number of farms and changes in farmland acres

For a local food system to operate effectively, there must be enough farms growing a sufficient quantity and variety of food to support a healthy diet for the local population. While it is *not* assumed that a local food system must supply the entire caloric needs of the local population, there must be a base minimum number of food-producing farms and acres of farmland to supply product to a number of diverse local food outlets (e.g., farmers markets, roadside stands, restaurants, grocery stores, schools, etc.) in order for a local food system to flourish.

Data source	Table 1. County Summary Highlights, USDA Census of Agriculture
Year	2007 and 2012
Link	http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/

Principal farmers farming less than 10 years

The USDA considers producers who have been farming for less than 10 years beginning farmers. Those entering farming as a career often face immense barriers to accessing land, building capital, and entering profitable markets. In order to succeed in farming, these producers especially need access to affordable and accessible training and technical assistance around bookkeeping, marketing, financial planning, promotions, and other business skills if they are to continue farming profitably and sustainably. It is essential that communities support their beginning farmers by helping them access these training and learning opportunities so that there are enough producers contributing product for a local food system to work.

Data source	Table 45. Selected Operation and Operator Characteristics, USDA Census of Agriculture
Year	2012
Link	http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/

Principal farmers younger than 35

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the median age of the U.S. worker is 42 years old; the average age of U.S. farm operators has been greater than 50 years of age since at least the 1974 census. The majority of our country's farmers are approaching (and in many cases surpassing) retirement age. "Who will continue to farm the land?" is therefore a critical question facing local food system stakeholders.

Data source	Table 45. Selected Operation and Operator Characteristics, USDA Census of Agriculture
Year	2012
Link	http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/

Direct-to-consumer sales

Direct sales refer to the value of agricultural products sold directly to individuals for human consumption from roadside stands, farmers markets, u-pick, etc., and excludes non-edible products such as nursery crops, cut flowers, and wool, but includes livestock sales.

Direct markets provide farmers with an easy point of entry into local markets; they build consumer awareness and loyalty, raise the visibility of agriculture, and build demand across a variety of local market segments. Direct markets also have the added potential to increase access to fresh foods for communities with food needs. As a variable in the local food system, changes in the proportion of farms participating in direct sales over time provides insight into the vitality and growth of the local food economy in a region.

Data source	Table 2. Market Value of Agricultural Products Sold Including Direct Sales, USDA Census of Agriculture
Year	2012
Link	http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/

Farms growing fruit & vegetables

Nationally, only about eight percent of farms are engaged in the production of fresh fruits and vegetables, and yet according to the USDA a large proportion (43 percent) of the farms that produce commodities for local food systems are classified as vegetable, fruit and nut farms.¹ The importance of farms that grow food for human consumption -- produce, meats, cheeses, eggs, grains, etc. -- are of clear importance for a local food system, but the backbone of a local food system is best measured by farms producing fresh produce.

Data source	Table 2. Market Value of Agricultural Products Sold Including Direct Sales, USDA Census of Agriculture
Year	2012
Link	http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/

¹ Low, Sarah A, and Stephen Vogel. Direct and Intermediated Marketing of Local Foods in the United States, 2011. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/ERR128/>.

County land in farmland

A productive local food system must strike a balance between the urban/rural divide. According to the National Resources Conservation Service 2010 National Resources Inventory Summary, since 1982 the United States has lost more than 23 percent of its prime farmlands (land best suited to produce food) to development.² Rural areas are important to local food systems, serving as the primary location of food production. Urban areas, with their high population densities, are important markets for local farmers to sell their goods at competitive and equitable market prices. Understanding your community's role in the local food system and determining the best way to manage this careful urban/rural balance is of utmost importance to a local food systems development strategy.

Data source	Farmland data comes from Table 1. County Summary Highlights, USDA Census of Agriculture. County lands data comes from the U.S. Census Bureau, Census of Population and Housing
Year	2012 and 2010
Link	http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/ http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/index.html

² U.S. Department of Agriculture. 2013. Summary Report: 2010 National Resources Inventory, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Washington, DC, and Center for Survey Statistics and Methodology, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa. http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb1167354.pdf

RETAIL INFRASTRUCTURE

Grocery stores

Among Americans, grocery stores tend to be the primary source for food purchases intended for at-home consumption. The prevalence of grocery stores per 1,000 individuals in a community indicates the availability of foods for at-home consumption (though not their proximity to specific populations). As individuals become more connected to their food and make food purchasing choices based on decisions beyond price (place of origin, production practices, unique varieties), niche grocery retailers are more likely to be attracted to the area (e.g., Whole Foods, Fresh Market, Trader Joes), and the ratio of grocery store options to residents increases.

Data source	Store data are from the U.S. Census Bureau, County Business Patterns. Population data are from the U.S. Census Bureau, Population Estimates
Year	2009
Link	http://www.census.gov/econ/cbp/index.html http://www.census.gov/popest/index.html

Full service restaurants

A considerable portion of resident food spending occurs in restaurants, and a high proportion of full service restaurants per 1,000 residents is an indicator of demand for variety in food options by residents within a community. A high proportion of restaurants to residents within a community can also be an indicator of a dedication to a food-based culture, as well as the availability of business opportunities for both independent restaurant owners and local farmers.

Data source	Restaurant data are from the U.S. Census Bureau, County Business Patterns. Population data are from the U.S. Census Bureau, Population Estimates
Year	2009
Link	http://www.census.gov/econ/cbp/index.html http://www.census.gov/popest/index.html

Farmers markets

The presence of farmers markets in a community indicates both the availability of fresh local food and an opportunity for community members to connect with where their food comes from and who grows it. Farmers markets also provide economic opportunities for farms who are interested in participating in the local food system. Note: more is not always better, especially with this variable. Number of farmers markets is not synonymous with size or quality, and as with any other business or product, too much supply with too little demand can be just as problematic as too much demand with too little supply.

Data source	The USDA National Farmers Market Directory, maintained by AMS Marketing Services
Year	2014
Link	http://search.ams.usda.gov/farmersmarkets/#

CONSUMPTION AND HEALTH

Inadequate fruit and vegetable consumption

Local food systems promote fresh farm products that primarily consist of fresh produce and lean meats. As a region begins to embrace a local food system, and as a community begins to shift to favor local foods, the variable of fruit and vegetable consumption should show a positive trend towards increased fruit and vegetable consumption.

Data source	Community Commons Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) Full Health Indicators Report, as reported from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System
Year	2005-2009
Link	http://www.communitycommons.org/

Diabetes and obesity (adults 18 years or over)

The prevalence of food-related illnesses like diabetes and obesity in the population are often used as a proxy measure for the influence of the food environment on community health. A local food system “environment” is characterized by plentiful access to fresh or minimally processed fruits, vegetables, grains, and lean meats. When these types of whole foods become the staples of people’s diets, the prevalence of food-related illness decreases in the population.³

Data source	The National Diabetes Surveillance system produces data estimating the prevalence of diagnosed diabetes and population obesity by county using data from CDC's Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) and data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s Population Estimates Program.
Year	2011
Link	http://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/atlas/countydata/atlas.html http://www.cdc.gov/brfss/

³ Henderson et al. 2011. *Health Impact Assessment: Farm to School and School Garden Policy*. HB 2800, Upstream Public Health and the Health Impact Project

EQUITY

Population below poverty level

The most significant cause of inequity in the food system is poverty. Individuals and families struggling to maintain financial security face increased challenges when it comes to obtaining a nutritious and diverse diet. Limited finances restrict where families are able to shop and what they can buy. Costs associated with transportation and time management further limit the accessibility of healthy food.

Data source	American Community Survey 2008-2012 5-Year Estimates
Year	2008-2012
Link	http://www.census.gov/acs/www/

Households receiving SNAP

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps, refers to the federal assistance program which helps qualifying low-income individuals and families to purchase food. As a local food system becomes increasingly equitable, this indicator should show a decrease.

Data source	American Community Survey 2008-2012 5-Year Estimates
Year	2008-2012
Link	http://www.census.gov/acs/www/

Workforce employed in foodservice and farming

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, six in ten workers earning the minimum wage or less in 2011 were employed in service occupations, primarily in food preparation and food serving. According to a 2012 report from the U.S. Department of Labor, the lowest paying major occupational groups in the country are food preparation and serving related occupations.⁴ In addition to low wages, food system jobs consistently rank poorly in terms of their physical demands on workers, work environment, hiring outlook, and worker stress levels. An equitable food system should operate in a just manner from producer to consumer. This includes decent treatment of workers, safe working conditions, and living wages. For the snapshots, the variable of worker wages was chosen as it is a readily available, quantified discrete value that is easily compared and analyzed.

Data source	Foodservice data comes from the Bureau of Labor Statistics Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages. Farmer data comes from Table 45. Selected Operation and Operator Characteristics, USDA Census of Agriculture.
Year	2013 and 2012
Link	http://www.bls.gov/cew/apps/data_views/data_views.htm http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/

⁴ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2012) Occupational Employment and Wages Summary. Press Release May 2012. <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/ocwage.nr0.htm>