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Transportation Access for the Food Insecure

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TRANSPORTATION ACCESS FOR THE FOOD INSECURE

A NITC small starts project explores transportation barriers for Tampa Bay's food insecure population, and recommends strategies to help.

The Issue

According to a new study from NITC investigators at the University of South Florida (USF), there are 136,401 people in Tampa Bay, Florida's Hillsborough, Pasco and Pinellas counties who are both food insecure and lack adequate access to transit. Food insecurity affects a wide range of people and most acutely affects vulnerable populations such as children, pregnant women, seniors and individuals with disabilities. The study, led by Ann Joslin and Kevin Salzer of USF's Center for Urban Transportation Research, was part qualitative, part quantitative. They gathered data through interviews and surveys of food organizations' staff, and also conducted a GIS analysis of transit accessibility for the food insecure. From the project, which was funded in part by a NITC Small Starts grant, emerged several recommendations to help close the transportation gaps between people and food.

The Research

The first recommendation: Transit providers should make transit more efficient and straightforward for food pantry and meal provider clients. Through the work of the emergency food system in Tampa Bay, many food-insecure households are able to access food. However, food access is dependent on the ability to reach the food pick-up locations. The dominance of the automobile has impacted the urban and suburban built environment in the region. Public transit by bus, according to the survey, was a common and important transportation mode for people to access food pantries and meal providers. Given this, it makes sense to make minor transit adjustments such as placing bus stops closer to those food providers.

THE ISSUE

There are 136,401 people in Tampa Bay, Florida who are both food insecure and lack adequate access to transit.

THE RESEARCH

Researchers recommend:

- Making transit more efficient for food pantry and meal provider clients;
- Exploring low-cost improvement strategies to bridge food access gaps;
- Establishing a dedicated organizational network to address these issues.

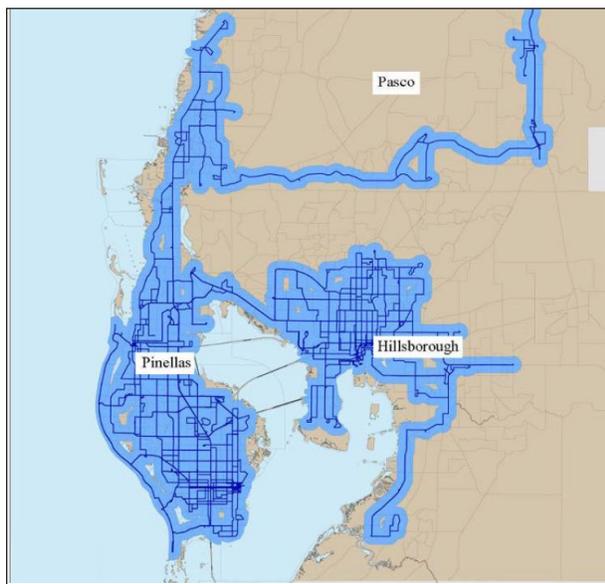
IMPLICATIONS

Although these recommendations focus on Tampa Bay, they may have broader applicability for communities across America, particularly in rural areas where food insecurity is more prevalent.

Photo: A young boy carries grocery bags

The second recommendation: Community stakeholders should explore multiple low-cost, transportation-improvement strategies to bridge food access gaps. One potential strategy is leveraging vehicles owned by faith-based organization and organizations whose missions include serving the food insecure. These organizations may donate the use of a vehicle and a volunteer driver to transport food insecure people to food pantries, meal providers or grocery stores. A second strategy is bus-pass programs that distribute free or reduced-cost bus passes to clients. For instance, transit agencies typically sell passes in bulk to organizations. A third strategy is private partnerships with retail outlets. For example, grocery stores that stand to benefit from additional customers may schedule a free or affordable shuttle pick-up to bring food-insecure customers lacking transportation to their store.

The third recommendation: Establish an organizational infrastructure dedicated to transportation for the food insecure. In the Tampa Bay region, many of the most effective organizations that address food insecurity are part of a non-profit network called the Tampa Bay Network to End Hunger (TBNTEH). The TBNTEH's mission is to end hunger by bringing people together to find solutions that eliminate barriers, increase access and expand the amount of nutritious food available. Because transportation access plays a key role in the TBNTEH's mission, it created the Transportation Innovation Group in 2011 to explore the linkages between transportation access issues and food insecurity. To leverage the knowledge of these existing institutions, Salzer and Joslin recommend bringing transit authorities, and the food providers who participated in this study, into the fold so that a unified effort can be made.



Transit Routes in Hillsborough, Pasco and Pinellas Counties

As this map shows, bus routes run in limited areas of Tampa Bay. This leaves portions of the region with inadequate access to transit.

Implications

Bringing together a diverse group of stakeholders can lead to a better understanding of the transportation needs of the food insecure and the availability of existing transportation resources. As part of this collaboration, organizations should ensure their clients are aware of services they may qualify for, such as paratransit or other services for the transportation-disadvantaged. This could be particularly important for someone experiencing a financial crisis, who used to drive and has recently become transit-dependent and food-insecure. People in this situation often lack knowledge of the assistance programs that are available to them. Although the recommendations resulting from this study focus on transportation barriers for the food insecure in the Tampa Bay region, they may have broader applicability for communities across America, particularly in rural areas where food insecurity may be even more prevalent.

PROJECT INFORMATION

TITLE: Travel to Food: Transportation Barriers for the Food Insecure in Tampa Bay

LEAD INVESTIGATOR: Ann Joslin, University of South Florida

PROJECT NUMBER: 2017-997

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MORE INFORMATION
<http://nitc.trec.pdx.edu/research/project/997>