

Toolkit for Community Food Assessments in Jersey City

Lessons Learned from a Community Food Assessment in Bergen- Lafayette



Bardia Vaseghi
Bill Emerson Hunger Fellow
Department of Health & Human Services

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Introduction

My community food assessment was written from September 2017 to February 2018 when I worked as a Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellow at the Jersey City Department of Health and Human Services (JCDHHS). The Bill Emerson Hunger Fellowship was created to train the next generation of anti-hunger leaders and to bridge the gap between field-based and policy-focused anti-hunger efforts. To achieve these goals, fellows are placed at field-based organizations for six months (I was placed in Jersey City) and then relocate to Washington D.C. to work at policy organizations.

Most community food assessments are conducted over a period longer than six months, but even a short community food assessment can help outline a neighborhood's current food landscape, identify dire food needs, inform neighborhood organizations' resource allocation decisions, and stimulate a discussion of food issues.

The structure of my community food assessment reflected these goals. We conducted surveys and interviews that asked residents and community leaders about barriers to healthy food access and their thoughts on potential solutions so that JCDHHS and other organizations could create targeted policies that address needs in the most effective ways. To gain a broader understanding of Bergen-Lafayette, we supplemented this information with census data.

This community food assessment was the first ever conducted in Jersey City, so JCDHHS decided to create a toolkit that would explicate the lessons learned and allow for more effective food assessments in the future.

Step 1: Define the assessment area

You need to delineate the precise borders of the community you are assessing. Government activity in Jersey City is ward-driven, which means that policymakers categorize data by ward and devise their policies to target certain wards. However, my conversations with community members revealed that they did not think of their neighborhoods in terms of wards, and most were not even certain which ward they lived in.

Instead, community members seemed to think of themselves as living in neighborhoods such as “Bergen-Lafayette” or “Greenville.” After further conversation, it became clear that the borders on Google Maps for “Bergen-Lafayette” or “Greenville” did not reflect the community’s understanding of their neighborhood. I continued discussions with residents, and I created a map of “Bergen-Lafayette” that most residents seemed to agree with.

Thus, you must first talk to residents and investigate their perceptions of their neighborhoods. You should think about these questions:

- Do they organize their neighborhoods in the “ward” framework?
- Do they have another idea of their neighborhood?
- What does that idea exactly entail?

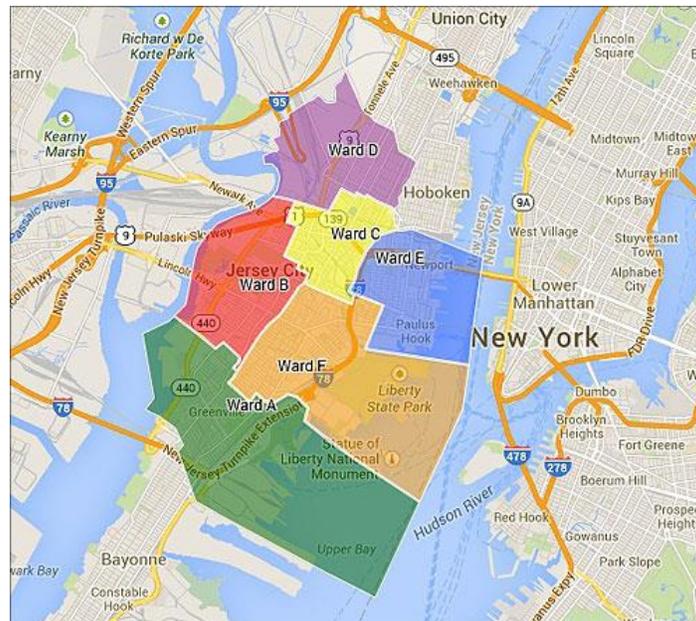


Figure 1: A map of the wards in Jersey City

Step 2: Identify Community Partners

Before you collect any data, you should set up a meeting with the Food and Nutrition Division Director and the Director of Health and Human Services to identify community leaders that you can interview and determine locations where you can conduct surveys. To ensure that you prioritize both interviews and surveys, there should be two different lists.

You should set up this meeting **almost immediately**, because organizations in Jersey City are **extremely slow to respond to requests**. During my Community Food Assessment, I reached out to organizations after collecting data and struggled to reach some organizations for months. You can avoid this situation by giving organizations ample time to respond.

Step 3: Draft Interview and Survey Questions

After identifying organizations, you should begin drafting interview and survey questions.

For the interview questions, you should:

- **Create different templates for different types of organizations.** One thing that I did not do that I wish I had was create organization-specific questions. In other words, you should adjust your template based on the kind of organization you are interviewing. For instance, your question template for food pantries should differ from your question template for policymakers.
- **Learn about the organization – but learn more about their thoughts on the neighborhood’s challenges.** Learning about the populations that an organization serves, the frequency they perform food services, and their reach is extremely important. However, I found that discerning what an individual thought were the biggest barriers to food access was far more important.
- **Be brief.** Community leaders are extremely busy. They are more likely to accept an interview request if you promise them a brief interview (20 – 30 minutes). In addition, they will give more detailed and meaningful answers if you do not exhaust them with a long interview.

To create the survey, you can use [GoogleForms](#).

For the survey questions, you should:

- **Be very brief and simple.** We found that residents would not respond to a survey that had over 13 questions. In addition, many residents would not answer the survey questions that were formatted as a multiple-choice matrix. The briefer, the better. The simpler, the better.
- **Immediately determine the topics you want to highlight in the report.** Since you must be very brief, focus on asking the questions that you think are most important for the report. You can determine which questions are most important by first determining what challenges you want to highlight in the report. For instance, if you want to focus on health outcomes, make sure that you investigate residents’ perceptions of their health. On the other hand, if your emphasis is on economic issues, you should examine the residents’ income levels.
- **Use multiple-choice questions.** We found that residents were less likely to answer open-ended questions, so use multiple-choice wherever you can.
- **Try to send surveys online.** During my community food assessment, I was not aware of Google Forms, and thus could not send surveys online. It is worth taking time to think about ways you can collect surveys online. An online form would allow you to distribute the survey to community partners who can send blast e-mails out to their members asking them to complete the survey.

You can find a complete list of the survey and interview questions that I used in the Appendix.

Step 4 Part 1: Reach Out to Organizations to Interview/Survey

Once you have created a list of interview and survey questions you should draft the e-mail that you will send out to request interviews. You do not have to draft a completely new e-mail for each organization and can use a standardized template, but you should first obtain approval for the template from the Division Director.

Below is the template I used:

Dear [individual name]

Hope you're having a great afternoon! My name is Bardia. Angela gave me your contact information, because she thought that you could provide great insight on the project I'm working on during my time here. I'm working on a healthy food assessment in Bergen-Lafayette, soliciting input from the community about healthy food access in the neighborhood, so that the Department can create effective policies to address this issue. I'll be compiling all these insights into a report for presentation to Jersey City policymakers and the Jersey City community.

As part of the report, I'm planning on interviewing community leaders in Bergen-Lafayette and asking for their thoughts on improving healthy food access in this neighborhood. I'm reaching out because you and [organization name] are important to these communities, and I know your insights would be essential to the report. I would love to set up a time to conduct an interview.

If it is more convenient, I would be happy to send along interview questions that you could answer by e-mail. Please let me know if you would be available and willing to contribute to the report! Thank you so much in advance.

Best,
Bardia

As you are sending out these e-mails, you should always keep the Division Director and the Director of Health and Human Services abreast of your progress in communicating with external partners, and CC them on every e-mail you send. Both have invaluable connections in the community and can help you get in touch with organizations that would not respond otherwise. In line with this, if an organization is not responding, be a little aggressive and continue to remind Directors to put you in touch. They are very busy but want to be helpful in any way.

Also, be aggressive with reaching out to organizations. If they do not respond to your e-mail after a few days, call or leave a voicemail. If they do not answer your voicemail, call again a few days later. In Jersey City, aggressiveness is key in convincing organizations to participate in your food assessment.

Step 4 Part 2: Collect Secondary Data

As you are waiting for people to respond to your e-mails and calls, you should be collecting secondary data on your designated neighborhood. You can do this through American FactFinder by following these steps:

1. **First, figure out which census tracts comprise your neighborhood.** Go to [this website](#), click “State” files and upload the .kml file on Google Maps. You should then zoom into Jersey City and find the census tracts that correspond with your neighborhood. The census tracts will likely not map onto your exact neighborhood. It is then your decision whether you want to be underinclusive or overinclusive with the census tracts you include.
2. **Enter the census tracts into American FactFinder.** Go to [American FactFinder](#), and click on Advanced Search. Click “Geographies” and then click on “Select a Geographic Type” and under “State,” choose “Census Tract.” Select “New Jersey” and then “Hudson County.” Choose your corresponding Census Tracts and click submit.
3. **Use the census tracts to find specific information on your neighborhood.** You can now use American FactFinder to find secondary data, ranging from Education to Poverty. For more information, view [the tutorial](#).
4. **To obtain health data, you can use the [500 Cities’ Interactive Health Maps](#).** This works similarly to the Census, and you can use the maps to find health data in your specific census tracts by clicking “Census Tract Data by City.” You can also create a table of your combined census tract data.

You should spend some time discovering other databases that might be useful for your report. Although I did not have the time to search for other databases, there are many resources that could be helpful in painting a comprehensive picture of your neighborhood. It is important that you only search for secondary data after you have done initial outreach to organizations. This will allow you to make progress on the report even as you are waiting for replies.



Figure 2: An example of a neighborhood broken up into census tracts.

Step 5: Collect Primary Data

Conduct Neighborhood Food Surveys and Food Source Analyses (Field Work)

Since there is very little specific information available on food sources in Jersey City neighborhoods, collecting data through field work can greatly augment a report's usefulness. I did not have enough time to conduct extensive field work aside from surveys and interviews and I found this to be the biggest missing piece in the assessments. I highly recommend that you prioritize going into the field and collecting data. There are several ways you can do so:

- **Neighborhood Food Layout.** A map of the exact food sources in a neighborhood, coupled with information on which food sources are most popular, would be extremely useful for the Department's future initiatives. You should go street-by-street, and designate the location of each corner store, grocery store, or other food establishment. You can also include information on which establishments residents frequented the most.
- **Grocery Store Pricing and Availability Analysis.** This analysis looks at the prices and availability of different common goods in a neighborhood's grocery stores. Since affordability and availability are persistent obstacles to healthy eating in low-income communities, it is important to discover exactly what residents are paying for basic food goods. There are many templates for this analysis, but the [Alaska Food Cost Survey](#) is an excellent standard. You should conduct this analysis in the major grocery retailers in the neighborhood, and in at least two corner-stores. If there are other significant food establishments in your neighborhood, you should conduct them there too. As the Idaho Plan4Health Coalition notes, there are a few guidelines you should follow
 - Use the cheapest non-sale price of a good that is available in a standard quantity
 - Avoid using the prices of bulk quantity goods
 - If an item is on sale, look for the non-sale price
 - If an item is priced in a different quantity than what is listed below on the template, write down the store price and attempt to convert it to a standard quantity during the coding process
 - If available record the unit price as well as the package price
 - Whenever possible use the same surveyor to reduce the variation in collection processes.
- **Store Layout and Marketing Analysis.** This analysis allows you to simulate and understand the everyday shopping experiences of residents in your neighborhood. You can ascertain whether there is an available selection of healthy foods and if they are arranged and marketed in a way that is conducive to healthy eating. A sample analysis template can be found [here](#).

Conduct Interviews

Now that you have interviews set up, you should prepare to conduct them. A couple of things to keep in mind:

- Remember to record every interview (and ask beforehand whether you can) and to take copious notes, so that you can use the community leaders' quotes in your report.
- Be patient. Community leaders in Jersey City can cancel on a moment's notice. I administered interviews that had been cancelled four or five times before actually happening.
- Try to conduct interviews in-person whenever possible. It is much easier for someone to cancel a phone interview than to cancel an in-person interview, and therefore people are more likely to maintain their commitment if you interview them in person.
- **There should be some organizations (churches, Jersey City Housing Authority, even corner stores) that you have listed in both your interview and survey lists. At the end of your survey, ask if you can conduct surveys at their establishment.** I had the most success

in finding places to conduct surveys by using this tactic, especially when interviewing church leaders.

You should aim to complete 18 – 20 interviews. Try to interview a diversity of individuals involved in anti-hunger work.

Conduct Surveys

At this point, you hopefully have scheduled a few places to conduct surveys from the interviews you conducted. If not, you should speak with the Directors and ask them to help set up times for you to conduct surveys. You should work closely (and aggressively) with the Directors.

Before conducting interviews, you should gather Department of Health and Human Services branded items (chip clips, jar openers, cups, etc.) that you can hand out as incentives to those that complete the survey. You should contact the Division of Food and Nutrition's Program Assistant to help you gather these materials.

Areas that worked well during my food assessment:

- Senior Lunch Sites
- Churches (especially when they hold events during the week)
- Housing Complex Community Meetings (talk to the Jersey City Housing Authority to set this up)
- Events at the Bethune Center
- The Women, Infant, and Children Clinic
- Waiting Rooms in the Neighborhood's Robert Wood Johnson Clinics.

You should aim to have 100 – 150 surveys completed. Try to capture a wide variety of ethnicities, income levels, and age groups.

Step 6: Begin Outlining and Analyze Results

Before you begin compiling results, you should outline your food assessment. It is helpful to outline before you compile results (which I did not comprehensively do) because it allows you to more easily ascertain which portions of the interview and survey will be most helpful for your report. Before moving on, you should obtain approval of the outline from the Director of Food and Nutrition.

It is important that you spend a week to compile the results. First, begin with the surveys. You should use [GoogleForms](#) to manually enter the surveys. You can do this by opening your survey, clicking “Send,” clicking the “Link” button and copying and pasting the link into your browser. You can then manually enter surveys. Then, you should compile the interview results. You should listen to the interview recordings again and write down any shared themes between interviewees.

After you have compiled the surveys and interviews individually, you should begin to examine the surveys, interviews, and secondary data holistically. In other words, you want to try to identify patterns and themes from all the gathered data. I would recommend conducting a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis, since this is a tried-and-true technique used in dozens of community food assessments. More information on the SWOT analysis can be found in Step 5 [of this document](#).

Lastly, think about the best ways to present your data given your audience. Do you want to convey just the key facts in bullet points? Do you want to present the information in pie and bar charts? Do you simply want to present the information in paragraph form? It is important to think about this before you begin writing the report.

Step 7: Write the Report

You are now ready to write the report! There are some initial things that you should keep in mind you should keep in mind before you keep writing.

- **Let the data and findings guide the structure of the report.** Originally, I had attempted to mimic the outlines of other community food assessments. However, I realized that my most important and interesting findings were obscured by their outlines. Then, I placed the most interesting findings, the survey results, at the center of the report. You should create a structure that allows you to highlight your unique findings.
- **Give yourself a great deal of time.** I had very little time to write the report and was not able to have an extensive draft process with my supervisor. To give yourself more time, you should write portions of the report as you collect more data. For example, I wrote the introduction at the very beginning of my placement, when I had ample downtime.
- **Know your audience.** As you are writing the report, always keep your audience in mind. In other words, you should highlight the portions of the report that they would find most useful and interesting. For example, I knew that I was writing the report mostly for policymakers and the Department of Health staff. Therefore, I created a succinct Executive Summary page because that is likely the only thing they will have time to read.

Finally, you should organize your recommendations/potential solutions with your audience in mind. For example, if you are distributing the food assessment to policymakers, you should first display the tangible and immediate solutions and emphasize the specific steps government entities can take.

The Idaho Plan4Health Coalition recommends that you split recommendations into three categories¹:

1. Simple and Short-term, designed to take advantage of small but effective actions.
2. Moderate interventions can work in the interim while longer term strategies are being developed and financed.
3. Complex and Long-term interventions are designed to make structural changes that would require significant shifts in current policy or beliefs.

They believe that these categories align well with the stages of strategies necessary to bring about long-lasting change.

¹ ["Idaho Plan4Health Food Assessment Toolkit"](#) IdahoPlan4Health.

Appendix

Survey Questions

* 1. Do you live in the Bergen-Lafayette or Greenville neighborhoods?

- Yes, Bergen-Lafayette
 Yes, Greenville
 No

* 2. What is your gender?

- Male
 Female
 Other

* 3. How old are you?

* 4. What is your race/ethnicity?

- White Asian
 African American/Black Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander
 Native American/Alaskan Native
 Other (please specify)

S

* 5. How many people (other than yourself) live in your household?

* 6. What category best describes your annual income?

- \$18,000 to \$24,999 \$50,000 to 99,999
 Less than \$18,000 \$100,000 or more
 \$25,000 to \$49,999

* 7. Where do you get **most** of your food?

- Grocery Store Other Restaurants (Not Fast Food)
 Bodega / Convenience Store Food Pantry
 Fast Food Restaurants Farmer's Market
 Other (please specify)

* 8. On average, how many meals do you eat out of the house on a typical week?

* 9. When you eat a meal outside of the home, where are you most likely to get your food?

- I go to a fast food restaurant or drive through
- I get food from a local restaurant (not fast food)
- Eating at a friend's/relatives' house
- Other (please specify)

* 10. How often do you eat the following types of foods (on average)?

	Never	Once a week	2-3 times a week	Once a day	2-3 times a day	4 or more times a day
Fruit and vegetables	<input type="radio"/>					
Whole grains (Bread, rice, or other grains)	<input type="radio"/>					
Lean meats (grilled chicken, turkey,	<input type="radio"/>					
Low-fat dairy	<input type="radio"/>					
Beans/nuts	<input type="radio"/>					

* 11. To what degree do the following issues affect your ability to purchase or eat healthy food?

	No influence	Not much	Neutral	Somewhat	Great
Too expensive	<input type="radio"/>				
Healthy food not available in stores/Poor quality of healthy foods	<input type="radio"/>				
Feel unsafe while shopping	<input type="radio"/>				
Too far to travel to healthy food stores	<input type="radio"/>				
Knowledge of how to cook healthy foods	<input type="radio"/>				

Other (please specify)

* 12. In the past 12 months, have you had trouble stretching your food budget until the end of the month?

- Yes
- No

* 13. Would the following help you buy and eat healthier foods?

	No, not much	Yes, a little	Yes, a moderate amount	Yes, a significant amount	Yes, a lot/the most important thing
More coupons and price discounts	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
More nearby farmers markets	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
More healthy choices at the restaurants and fast food places	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Better food selection and food quality at the places where you shop	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Learning how to prepare more healthy foods	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Free or low cost public transportation to local food stores	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other (please specify)	<input type="text"/>				

Interview Questions

Bergen-Lafayette and Greenville

Community Organization:

Individual Being Interviewed:

Role in Organization:

1. Can you please describe the current services or programs that your organization provides to improve healthy food access in the Bergen-Lafayette or Greenville neighborhoods?
2. Do you think improving healthy food access is a high priority for residents in these neighborhoods? For organizations in these neighborhoods? If not, what issues do you think are higher priorities and why?
3. How would you describe availability and access to healthy foods in Bergen-Lafayette and Greenville? Have there been any changes in the last 3-4 years?
4. What are the general problems your organization faces in improving healthy food access?
 - a. Recently, it has been more consistent. But it is not always consistent. We don't have any type of grants, so it is 100% based on donations. That can become inconsistent. Having more connections with organizations that can

provide things like HungerFreeJC – City can leverage these relationships.

5. Do you coordinate your programs with other organizations and/or government agencies? How do you avoid redundancy or overlap with other organizations?
 - a. Can you please describe any previous work you have done with the Department of Health and Human Services?
 - b. Can you think of any ways that the Department of Health and Human Services could be of greater help to your organization?
6. Can you think of particularly effective programs that could be initiated by the Department / municipal government? What could we be doing better?
 - a. Jersey City Department of Health and Human Services has launched a healthy corner store initiative to increase healthy food options in corner stores. What are your thoughts about the initiative?
7. For the past 3 years, the Department of Health and Human Services has partnered with the Friends at Arlington Park in Bergen-Lafayette to run Arlington Park.
 - a. Were you aware of the market? Did you shop at the market?
 - i. If you were not aware of the market, would you shop at the market now that you are aware of it?
 - ii. If you have shopped at the market, what could we improve about the market? What did the Farmer's Market do well?
 - b. Do you think a Farmer's Market is a vital component of improving healthy food access in these neighborhoods?

Outline for Bergen-Lafayette Community Food Assessment

Executive Summary

Introduction to the Community Food Assessment: Purpose and Methodology
Background and Community Profile of Bergen-Lafayette (Ward F)

Food Landscape in Bergen-Lafayette

A. The Current Food Retail Environment

1. Supermarkets
2. Corner Stores
3. Government Assistance Programs
4. Food Pantries and Emergency Food Programs
5. Alternative Outlets (Farmers Markets, CSAs)

B. Barriers to Healthy Food Access

1. Price
2. Accessibility
3. Quality
4. Community Habits and Awareness

Recommendations

Appendix

Bibliography

● **Purpose Statement**

1. Gather information and detail the current food landscape in Bergen-Lafayette.
2. Solicit opinions from community members to identify barriers to healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate food.
3. Collaborate with the community to devise short and long-term policy options that reduce these barriers.
4. Propose concrete ways that the Department of Health and Human Services can help implement these recommendations.

● **Research Questions**

1. Where can Bergen-Lafayette residents currently get food?
2. Where do people shop and what motivates their shopping preferences?
3. What do people know about nutrition and how does that inform their food choices?
4. What are the barriers to healthy, fresh, affordable, and culturally appropriate food?
5. How does the community think that non-profits and the government can help tear down these barriers?