

Researchers devise, test food-safety training program for farmers market vendors

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As a result of the training, participants understand the importance of hygiene, hand washing, cross contamination, thermometer use and food safety hazards at farmers markets. Credit: Joshua Scheinberg

Responding to a need revealed in their earlier studies, a team of Penn State researchers developed and pilot-tested a customized food safety training program for farmers market vendors.

The training caps several years of research and addresses a problem in Pennsylvania and other states related to inadequate food [safety](#) practices among farmers market vendors, noted team leader Catherine Cutter, professor of Food Science and assistant director of Food Safety and Quality Programs for Penn State Extension.

Cutter said the training and research are especially relevant because the farmers market movement is thriving, with the sale of locally grown agricultural products direct-to-consumers becoming commonplace and extremely popular.

According to 2017 U.S. Department of Agriculture statistics, the number of farmers markets in the U.S. has increased to more than 8,600, amounting to approximately \$2.8 billion in agricultural sales. While direct-to-consumer sales still account for less than 1% of total agricultural sales in the U.S., the impact is significant for the 130,056 farms that participated in direct-to-consumer marketing in 2017, in addition to the millions of consumers who purchased those agricultural products.

But despite these benefits, many in [public health](#) have begun to realize the inherent food safety risks associated with this relatively under-regulated food industry, Cutter pointed out. "In most states, farmers market vendors and their food products may not be inspected by local, state or federal public health inspectors, so the safety of foods sold at farmers markets may be unknown," she said. "Farmers market vendors may be uncertified or untrained in food processing and food safety concepts."

Research team member Joshua Scheinberg, a former doctoral degree student in Cutter's research group in the College of Agricultural Sciences, spearheaded the research, which was part of his doctoral thesis research; he was assisted in the work by Penn State Extension educators.

The Farmers Market Food Safety [training program](#) includes a PowerPoint presentation and a resource guide. The PowerPoint presentation slide collection and associated training activities were designed by Penn State Extension educators experienced in retail food safety education.

The topics covered for the training program were researched thoroughly and specifically selected to address the gaps identified in the comprehensive farmers market food safety needs assessment performed by Scheinberg and colleagues in a previous study, while also covering major areas of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's Food Code and applicable Pennsylvania state food safety regulations.

In that earlier study, researchers performed a needs assessment that utilized retail food safety vendor observational analysis, vendor and health inspector surveys, and farmers market manager structured group interviews to determine gaps, needs, the knowledge and attitudinal base of farmers market vendors, and training preferences. Based on responses from vendor surveys and market manager group interviews, researchers determined that a three-hour, in-person, semi-interactive program in a classroom setting would be appropriate for training farmers market vendors.

The results of the current study, recently published in the *Journal of Extension*, also demonstrated that a combination of a training resource guide with traditional slide-presentation training methods resulted in a significant gain in knowledge and change in attitudes among farmers [market vendor](#) participants. The results also revealed that participants

understand the importance of hygiene, hand washing, cross contamination, thermometer use and food safety hazards at the [farmers markets](#).

Additional results suggest that demographic and even educational background differences among participants had little bearing on their knowledge, and that the training was effective in reaching participants of varied backgrounds.

As a result of the success of this pilot study, a four-hour online version of the training developed from this study is currently offered by Penn State Extension [here](#).

More information: Joshua Scheinberg et al, Development and assessment of a food safety training program for farmers' market vendors, *Journal of Extension* (2022). [DOI: 10.34068/joe.60.04.18](https://doi.org/10.34068/joe.60.04.18)

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