Food policy councils (FPCs) are becoming more common and active in the U.S., but the public knows very little about what they do. These coalitions are made up of any combination of policymakers, business owners, advocates, non-profits, farmers, and concerned citizens. Their goals and methods vary greatly—there is no cookie-cutter FPC. Some work at the state level, others at the municipal level. Some focus on creating and changing policy to improve existing food systems, while others work primarily toward educating the public and getting food system issues on the public agenda. Some FPCs are initiated at the government level, while others are grassroots initiatives.

Examples of work undertaken by an FPC are: policy changes that improve school lunch menus, funding for a community garden program, or advocating for better access to healthy food in low-income neighborhoods. Overall, these councils seek to change food environments, and they emphasize policy and environmental change instead of behavior change by individuals.
Key Findings

- Most FPCs surveyed serve at the local, institutional, and county levels.
- FPCs typically build partnerships with stakeholders; educate the public; and support or create programs that address food system issues.
- Most of the surveyed FPCs (86 percent) reported doing policy work, including examining current policies, regulations, and ordinances related to food, but the definition of policy varies greatly across councils.
- The challenges to policy work cited by surveyed FPCs include: lack of time; lack of financial support; lack of policy training or skills; differences in opinion among group members; and issues concerning the group’s relationship with the government.

Public Health Concerns

- Understanding and evaluating the work of FPCs would help improve the effectiveness of FPCs, and their role in policy and the food system.
- FPCs provide a forum for improving the food system, ranging from food production to food access.

Who We Are

Based within the Bloomberg School of Public Health, The Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future (CLF) is an academic center that conducts and promotes research and communicates information about the complex inter-relationships among food production, diet, environment and human health.

Study Summary

Researchers emailed a 12-question survey to all known FPCs and received responses from 61 percent of the 92 existing councils. The survey assessed how the FPCs engage in policy work and what barriers prevented them from further engagement. The research is part of a larger study exploring FPC policy activities.

Abstract available at:

Strategies for Action

- The processes and outcomes of food policy councils should be systematically and rigorously evaluated.
- Evaluation of FPCs will make them more effective at engaging in policy and having a positive impact on the food system.