Making Food Access Policy Work

How do we know what helps?

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November 14, 2026



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Better food access. Stronger local markets.

Many policy tools can help us get there:

Farm-to-school purchasing

Grants for local-food markets

Support for cottage food businesses

Neighborhood pickup and delivery

Which should we fund, implement, or expand?

Program evaluation: how much did the policy help?

Measure how people benefit—and how much of that benefit happened because of the policy.

Reliable access to local food

Enough food for the household.

More local-food purchases.

Household surveys · purchase records

Stronger farm businesses

More customers.

Higher farm sales.

Producer surveys · sales records

Choose measures that fit the goals. Make sure the data are collected.

Why evaluation matters for policy

Inform funding requests

Show what public investment achieves.

Report to stakeholders

Explain who benefits and what changed.

Expand—or improve

Build a credible case for what comes next.

Good evidence helps you make the decision—and explain it.

Four ideas to take into your next policy decision

1 **Evaluate whether the policy helps.**

Choose measures that fit the goals—and collect the data.

2 **After does not necessarily mean because of.**

Other things change at the same time.

3 **Build learning into implementation.**

Funding rules and start dates shape the comparison.

4 **Bring in an evaluation partner early.**

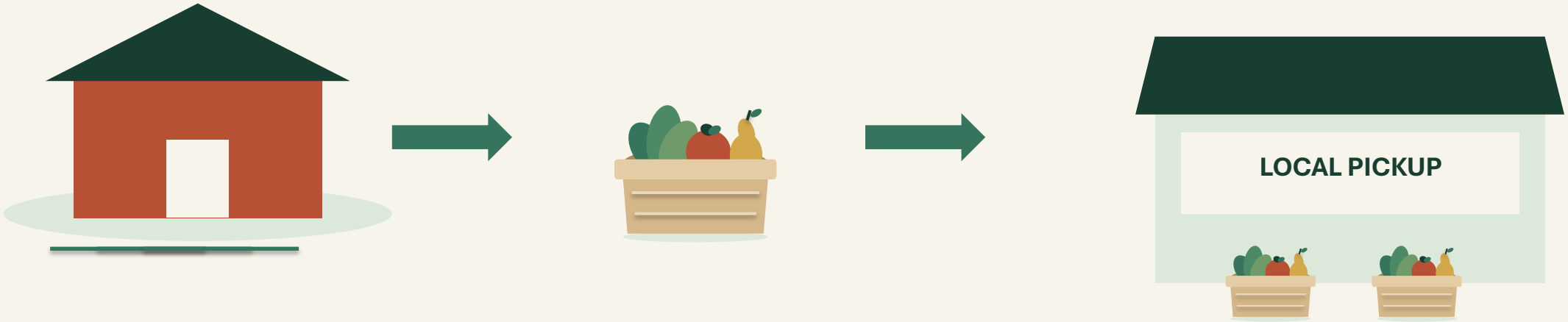
Talk before the rules, dates, and data systems are fixed.

One food-access example. Lessons for many policies.

HYPOTHETICAL EXAMPLE

Imagine neighborhood food pickup in California

Residents order local farm products and collect them closer to home.



1 Order

Households choose products

2 Pack orders

Farms gather and pack orders

3 Collect

A convenient neighborhood site

Our measure: local-food purchases per month, wherever people shop.

A fictional policy, inspired by real approaches

MASSACHUSETTS

New Entry

Produce from 30+ small farms,

with community pickup.

Operating local-food program

Source ↗

NEW JERSEY

Grocery pickup lockers

A state grant approved for a grocery pickup locker.

Groceries generally; approval is not completed installation

Source ↗

OHIO

Franklinton FarmStore

Online farmers market with multiple pickup sites.

USDA-funded project; completion not confirmed

Source ↗

Similar ideas—not the same policy, and not evidence of their effects.

HYPOTHETICAL EXAMPLE

Three neighbors. Three reasons pickup could help.



Maya

Work hours make market trips difficult.



Ben

The nearest farm market is a long drive.



Ruth

Transportation options are limited.

Fictional residents; a real evaluation would include many households and communities.

HYPOTHETICAL EXAMPLE

2020: all three get access at the same time

Local-food purchases per month · wherever people shop

	2019 · BEFORE		2021 · FOLLOW-UP
 Maya	1	→	3
 Ben	2	→	4
 Ruth	3	→	5
Average	2		4

Purchases doubled. How much was because of the program?

Before and after: a tempting comparison

One way to evaluate a policy is to compare purchases before and after it starts.

2019 · BEFORE

2



2021 · AFTER

4

Average local-food purchases per month

But other things change, too.

In our example: more interest in buying local food.

Purchases rose after the program.

That does not tell us how much they rose because of the program.

The alternative: compare people during the same period

Compare communities with access and communities without access during the same period.

WITH ACCESS

Ask how purchases changed where the program has started.

WITHOUT ACCESS

Ask the same question where the program is not available.

Same month. Same year. A carefully chosen comparison.

[Government evaluations · World Bank ↗]

[Technology companies · Microsoft ↗]

Two ways to create that same-time comparison

Both approaches let us compare communities with access and communities without access during the same period.

1 One-time lottery

One funding round: a lottery selects which communities get a site. Others do not receive this award.

[Kopper & Sautmann · J-PAL ↗]

2 Staggered rollout

Introduce the program in stages. Everyone can receive it eventually; they do not have to start together.

[World Bank · Impact Evaluation in Practice ↗]

The opportunity: plan how to learn before setting the rollout dates.

HYPOTHETICAL EXAMPLE

One-time lottery: who receives a pickup-site grant?

40 equally prioritized applicants. Funding for 20 pickup sites in 2020.

20 receive grants

Funded pickup sites open in 2020

4 purchases per household per month in the 2021 survey

20 do not receive grants

No pickup sites from this funding round

3 purchases per household per month in the 2021 survey

Estimated benefit: 1 additional purchase per household per month.

A lottery creates a randomized experiment: a scientific test of the policy.

Why a lottery makes this a scientific test

1 **Assign grants by chance.**

Officials do not select the places most likely to improve.

2 **Measure both groups in the same period.**

Use the same questions, including households that do not use a site.

3 **Compare the results.**

Chance assignment makes the groups comparable on average.

[Scientific method: randomized evaluation · J-PAL ↗]

Other chances to use a lottery

01 More applicants than grants

Use a lottery among applicants who qualify equally.

02 Limited business support

Use a lottery to decide who receives help first.

03 Outreach

Choose who gets an invitation first; measure whether it helps.

HYPOTHETICAL EXAMPLE

Different start dates create a comparison

Everyone is scheduled to get access. Some communities start later.

JUNE 2021: SURVEY BOTH GROUPS

Already started

Sites open

Opened in 2020

Not started yet

Still waiting

Scheduled to open in 2022

Compare them in the same month and year—while one group is still waiting.

HYPOTHETICAL EXAMPLE

Same dates. Same measures. Compare the changes.

Average local-food purchases per household per month

COMMUNITIES	JUNE 2019	JUNE 2021	INCREASE
Already started	2	4	+2
Not started yet	2	3	+1

Additional increase: 2 – 1 = 1 purchase per month.

This estimates impact if the groups would have changed similarly without the program.

Bring in an evaluation partner early

Ask these questions while implementation choices are still open.

1

What should we measure?

Benefits for households and farms.

2

Who can we compare?

Funding rules and opening dates.

3

Who will collect the data, when?

Before launch and after, in both groups.

Invite a university researcher, agency evaluation team, or evaluation specialist.

Four things to take back to your team

1 **Evaluate whether policies help.**

Choose measures. Collect the data.

2 **After does not mean because of.**

Other things change too.

3 **Build learning into implementation.**

Funding rules and start dates matter.

4 **Bring in a partner early.**

Talk before decisions are fixed.

Roll out the policy.
Build in the learning.

Before you launch: choose the measures, plan the comparison, and collect the data.

Reach out to discuss your policy or evaluation.

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Illustrative photo

Adrien Olichon / Unsplash

Real-world inspiration

Massachusetts · New Entry CSA

Operating program; aggregates produce from 30+ local small farms.

Pickup in Beverly, Medford, and Somerville.

Program details ↗

New Jersey · FRIDG

December 2023: $250,000 ShopRite locker grant approved in Newark.

Groceries generally; announcement does not confirm installation.

NJEDA announcement ↗

Ohio · Franklinton FarmStore

May 2026 state newsletter describes a USDA-funded Columbus project:

an online farmers market with multiple pickup sites.

Ohio Department of Agriculture ↗

These inspired the fictional example; they are not three laws establishing that policy.

Methods behind the plain-language recommendations

J-PAL · Randomization ↗

Kopper & Sautmann. Why a lottery creates comparability on average; practical design choices, community assignment, and spillovers.

World Bank · Impact Evaluation in Practice, 2nd ed. ↗

Gertler, Martinez, Premand, Rawlings & Vermeersch (2016). Chapter 4: randomized assignment. Chapter 7: comparing changes and the assumption of similar changes without the program.

Microsoft Research · Online Experimentation at Microsoft ↗

Image credits & example conventions

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Farmers market · Adrien Olichon / Unsplash ↗

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Maya, Ben, Ruth, the farm, and the pickup site:
original illustrations made from editable PowerPoint shapes.

All California program details, people, dates, trends, and purchasing numbers are hypothetical. Photographs are illustrative.