COVID-19 has profoundly impacted people all over the world both in terms of health and financial stability. While it is easy to be entranced by extraordinarily high numbers of COVID-19 cases in large cities like Chicago, Atlanta, and Miami, health disparities that exist in rural communities elicit distinctive medical challenges. Systemic and social inequalities including less access to healthcare, lower rates of insurance, and higher rates of smoking/hypertension/obesity put individuals in rural communities at higher risk of getting COVID-19 or having worse disease prognosis. One heightened struggle faced by rural communities is the ability to maintain a healthy and balanced diet, especially in those of financially vulnerable populations. This is especially important in diabetic populations in which a healthy diet is crucial in controlling blood sugar and overall health. In Haywood County, North Carolina, diabetes is the most common chronic disease, affecting 16.6% of residents.

Furthermore, 96.1% of residents did not meet recommended levels of fruits and vegetable consumption and 23% are food insecure. Access to food is an important factor in addressing the health inequalities existing in rural North Carolina, particularly during times such as now when transportation is further limited due to COVID-19. Researching into possible causes of the poor diet and food availability in Haywood County, I created a map of different stores selling food items. Following the USDA criteria of a food desert being at least 10 miles from the nearest supermarket/Grocery store, I overlaided circles with radii of 10 miles from grocery stores, fast food, gas stations, and Dollar Stores. I also contacted local establishments listed on a Blue Ridge Health handout for diabetic patients for food, medicine, and supplies as to update their form post-COVID. Lastly, I have included COVID-19 precautions that should be taken by diabetic patients. Further studies of food disparities that exist in rural North Carolina could address one of the many factors that contribute to poor health in rural communities, guiding us toward a future of better health in rural North Carolina.

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Conclusions/Future Directions

There are many factors that contribute to the disparities in diet in rural North Carolina. Mapping accessible food locations draws attention to access as a causative factor. The few grocery stores and supermarkets of Haywood County give limited coverage to the county as a whole and leave many populations vulnerable to limited healthy options for food. Furthermore, the abundance of unhealthy food options via fast-food, gas stations, and dollar stores leaves many who have limited access to transportation, let alone financial stability to fund healthier food options, stuck with unhealthy food options. With the heightened difficulties in transportation and access resultant from COVID-19, now more than ever is it important to address food insecurities in rural NC. Forms such as Figure 6 are crucial, especially in populations such as people with diabetes whose health relies heavily on diet, in giving options for access to healthy food.

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