



Improving Healthy Food Access in Rural Food Retail Through the Food Retail Assessment Tool

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OBJECTIVE: Highlight a statewide effort to improve healthy food access in rural retail stores through the Food Retail Assessment Tool (FRAT), which supports Oklahoma communities and retailers in implementing evidence-based strategies that promote healthy eating.

BACKGROUND: The Oklahoma Tobacco Settlement Endowment Trust (TSET) was created by voters in 2000 to address preventable causes of death, tobacco use and obesity. TSET's Healthy Living Program (HLP) supports community implementation of evidence-based strategies to address these causes across Oklahoma. In many rural Oklahoma communities, small grocery and convenience stores serve as primary food sources, making the retail food environment an important setting for intervention. The FRAT is used to examine how these retail environments support or hinder healthy food choices.

WHO and WHERE: 17 TSET HLP grantees working in 18 Oklahoma counties with 74 food retail outlet partners.

WHEN: Grantee-conducted assessments were submitted to TSET and OU Health Hudson College of Public Health for review from 3/9/2022 to 2/5/2026.

HOW: The FRAT assessment process includes the following steps:

- Partner with food retail store owners and managers
- Conduct FRAT and enter data into the assessment workbook
- Compare produce pricing across local retailers
- Submit assessments for review
- Examine results and recommendations with store partners
- Implement changes based on findings
- Conduct follow-up reassessments to measure progress

RESULTS:

FRAT Category Findings

- Availability, Marketing and Promotion, and Display categories showed the greatest improvement, with 55%–65% of retailers increasing their scores from baseline to final reassessment.
- Price and Retail ID categories showed the least amount of change, with 42% and 58% of retailers having no change between baseline and final reassessment.
- Despite limited change overall, rural retailers were more likely than urban retailers to make improvements in the Price (41% vs. 29%) and Retail ID (38% vs. 19%) categories.

Chart 1. Percent of retailers (N=74) with increased, no change, and decreased overall and FRAT category scores

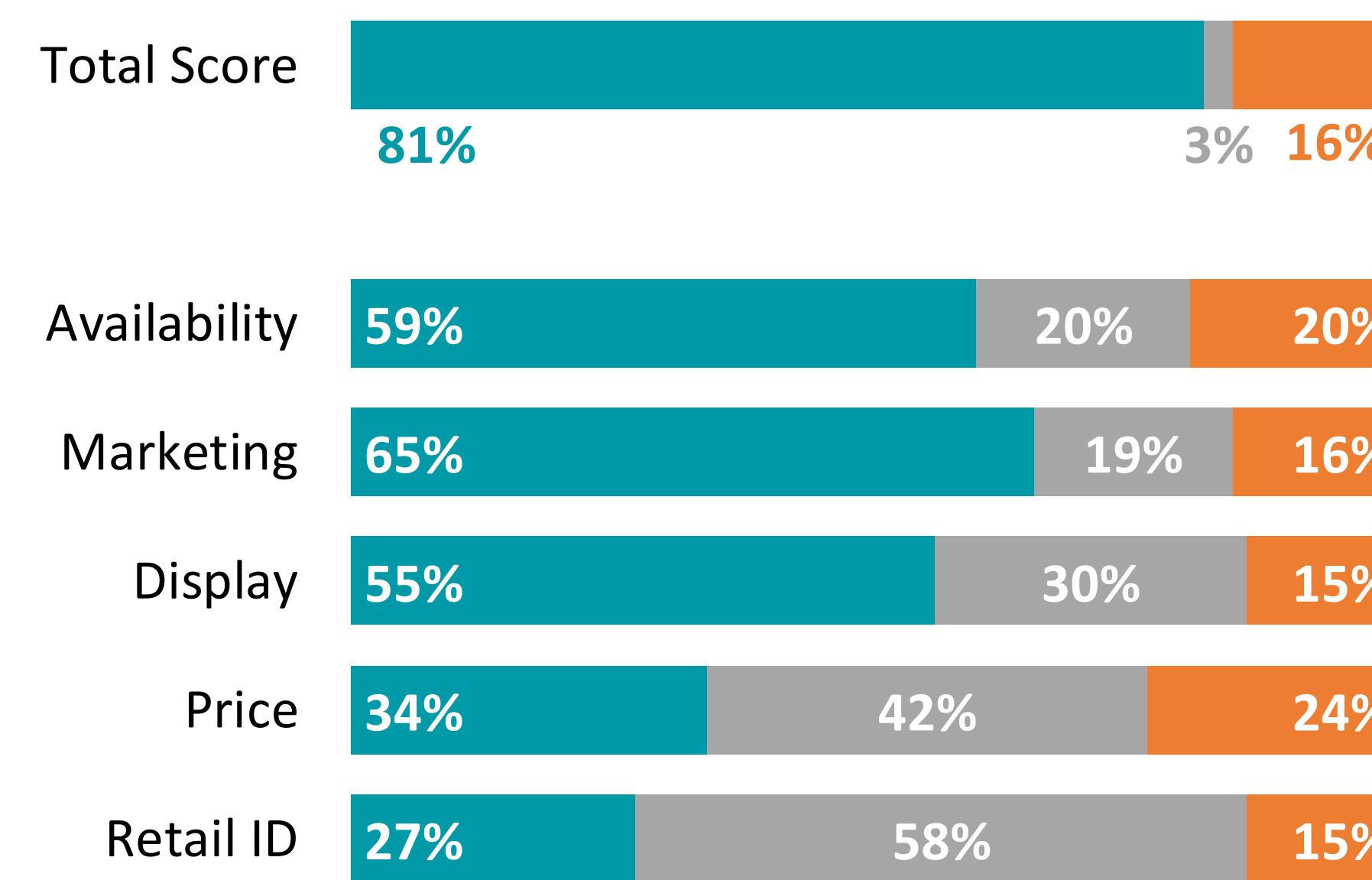
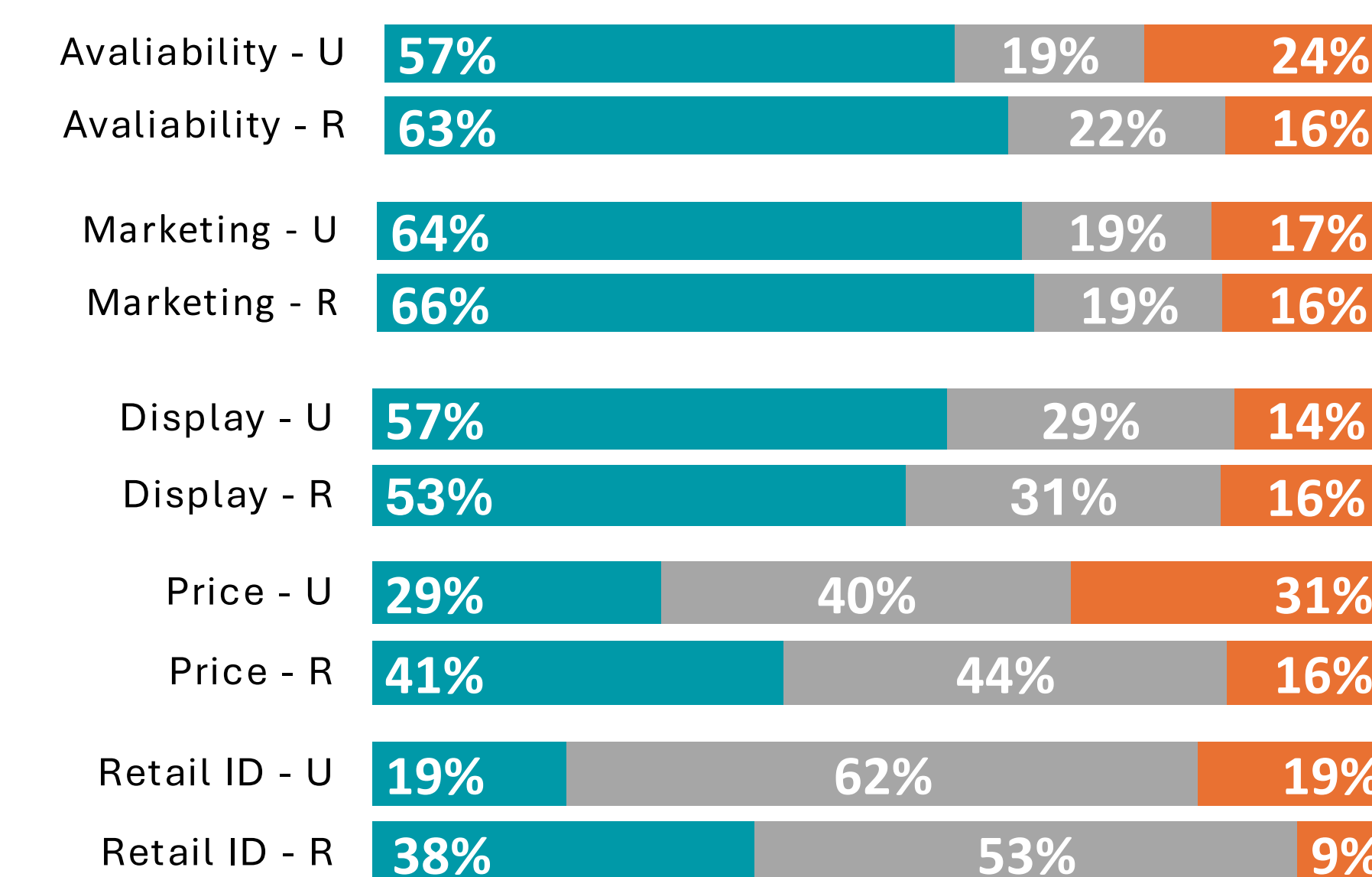


Chart 2. Percent of Urban (U) (n=42) and Rural (R) (n=32) retailers with increased, no change, and decreased FRAT category scores



FRAT Category Subset Findings

Availability Subset Findings	Marketing and Promotion Subset Findings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Largest score increases were seen in the “sells a variety of staple foods and beverages” and “sells healthy versions of staple foods and beverages” subsets, with stronger improvement in rural retailer sites. Minimal change was observed in the “sells a variety of fresh vegetables”, “sells good quality fresh vegetables”, “sells healthy options at the fountain drink station” and “free, clear drinking water available to customers” subsets. Over 80% of retailers reported no change between baseline and final reassessment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Subsets with greatest increases focused on healthy advertising and included the “Promotes selection of healthy options with exterior ads/images”, “Promotes selection of healthy options with ads near checkout”, and “Places ads or health promotion items near healthy options” subsets. Operational strategies changed less often for retailers, with no change occurring in the “food assistance program signage displayed” (84%), “ongoing activities to promote healthy food” (80%), and “strategies to limit consumption at the fountain drink station” subsets (89%).
Price Subset Findings	Retail ID Subset Findings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This category showed little change overall. Over 74% of retailers showed no change in each subset, for both urban and rural retailers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Retail ID category showed the least overall change, with over 80% of retailers reporting no change in 4 of 5 subsets. The subset with the greatest increase (15%) among retailers was “providing a safe and well-maintained environment”. However, 12% of retailers declined on this subset over time.
Placement and Display Subset Findings	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For each subset in this category, fewer than 50% of retailers made any change (positive or negative). Among retailers that made positive change, the most common areas of improvement were for the “Healthy items displayed appealingly” (36%) and “Display fruits, vegetables, and healthy options outdoors” (34%) subsets. The subset with the least change was “promotes selection of healthy options on end caps and displays” with 71.6% of retailers having no change. 	

Table 1. Summary of FRAT categories, subsets and associated possible points for practices in place

Categories	Possible Points
Availability of Select Products	76.5
Sells a variety of fresh fruit	12
Sells good quality fresh fruit	8
Sells a variety of fresh vegetables	12
Sells good quality fresh vegetables	8
Sells a variety of staple foods and beverages	12
Sells healthy versions of staple foods and beverages	10
Sells healthy single serving beverages	6
Sells healthy snack foods	3.5
Sells healthy options at the fountain drink station	3
Free, clean drinking water available to customers	2
Marketing and Promotion	22
Promotes selection of healthy options with exterior ads/images	5.5
Promotes selection of healthy options with ads near checkout	4
Places ads or health promotion items near healthy options	5.5
Food assistance program signage is displayed	2
Ongoing activities to promote healthy options	3
Strategies to limit consumption at the fountain drink station	2
Placement and Display	15.5
Healthy items are displayed appealingly	4.5
Display fruits, vegetables, and healthy options outdoors	2
Promotes selection of healthy options at checkout	5
Promotes selection of healthy options on end-caps and displays	4
Price	22
Prices for fruit and vegetables are reasonable	8
Healthy varieties of bread and beverages are priced competitively	7
Healthy fountain drink options are priced competitively	4
Sales and price promotions support selection of healthy snacks	3
Retail Identity (ID)	27
Accepts food assistance programs	10
Utilizes innovative business practices	5
Provides a safe and well-maintained environment	7
Provides an accessible environment	3
Offers customer amenities	2
Total Possible Points	163

Table 2. Description of food retail partners, including urban/rural status, retailer type, and intervention population reach

	N	%
Partners		
Urban	42	56.7
Rural	32	43.3
Retailer Type		
Convenience Store/Food Mart	53	71.6%
Small Market	12	16.2%
Large Grocery	7	9.5%
Other	2	2.7%
Population Reach		
Urban	144,247	
Rural	138,529	
Total	282,776	

LESSONS LEARNED:

- Store owner and management engagement emerged as a key factor in influencing implementation and sustainability.** Retail sites with strong owner/management support were more likely to adopt and maintain healthy retail strategies identified through FRAT findings.
- Turnover was identified as a threat to intervention sustainability.** Changes in store ownership and/or management were associated with the removal of healthy option promotional materials, such as “Healthy Picks” signage (Figure 2) and reduced participation in follow-up assessment activities.
- Point-in-time assessments should be interpreted within operational context.** FRAT findings may vary based on the timing of the assessment and product availability at the time of observation, emphasizing the need to account for store inventory cycles when evaluating FRAT-informed intervention outcomes.

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS: These findings demonstrate that with targeted technical assistance and community partnerships, small and rural retailers can improve food environments and expand access to healthy foods. The FRAT provides a practical, evidence-based framework that other states and rural initiatives can adopt to assess and improve food retail environments, increase healthy food access and reduce chronic disease.



Figure 2: Grantee photo of “Healthy Picks” sign promoting produce at a grocery store retail partner.

REFERENCES: Materials and protocols for the FRAT were adapted from the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) Communities of Excellence in Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity Prevention (CX3) Initiative with permission.

To view additional information and resources scan QR code:

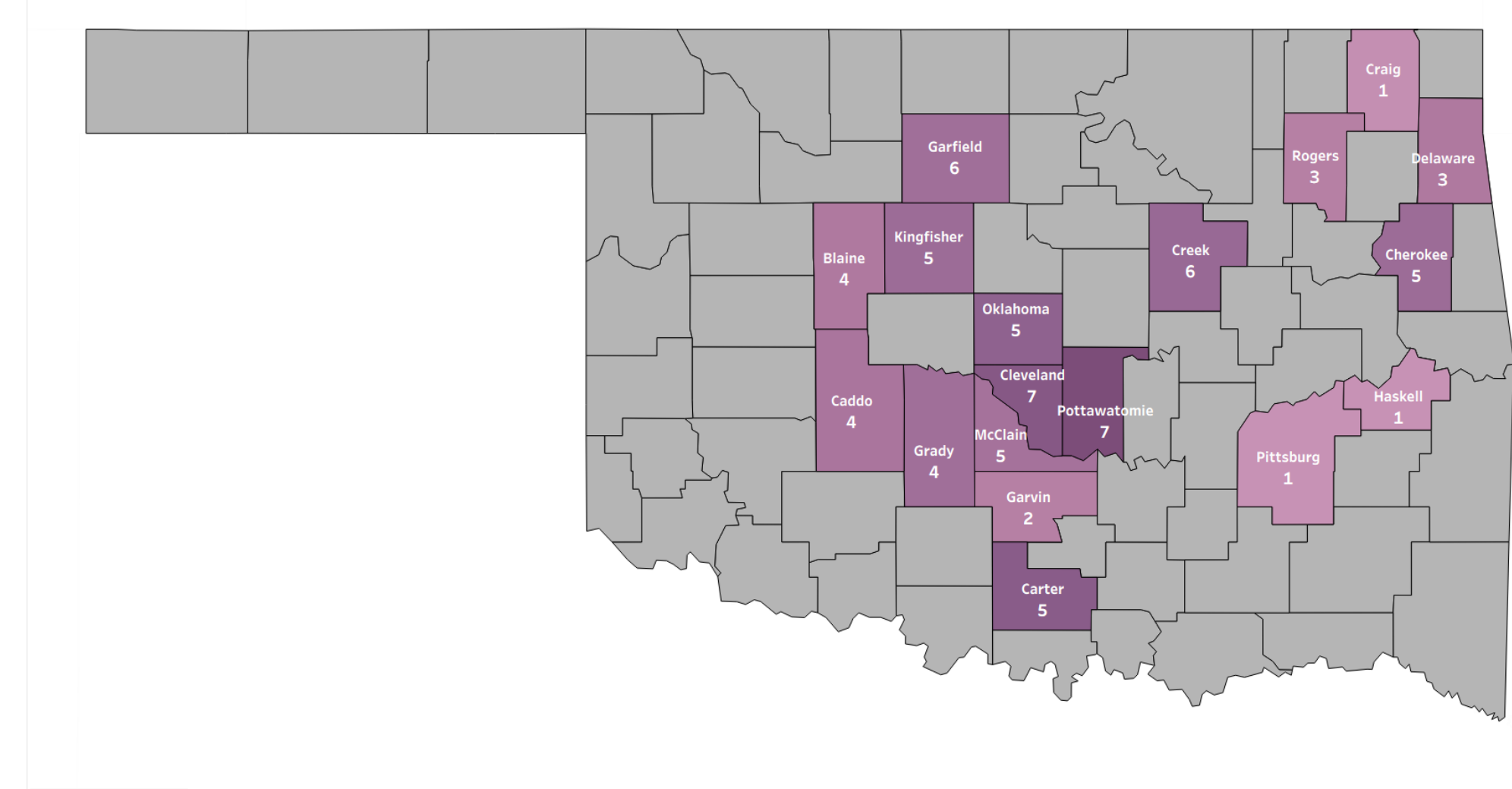


Figure 1. Map of Oklahoma HLP counties that conducted FRAT assessments and the number of unique partners by county.