



Health Policy Connection

Childhood Obesity

ISSUE BRIEF

July 2011

Do all Americans have equal access to healthy foods?

Takeaways:

- For millions of Americans, particularly racial and ethnic minorities in lower-income communities, and residents in rural areas, accessing healthy foods is a challenge.
- Lack of access to healthy foods is linked with obesity, and better access to healthy foods corresponds with healthier eating.
- New or renovated stores that sell healthy foods in underserved communities can create jobs and help to revitalize areas.

Overview

Many Americans lack regular access to healthy, affordable foods. Supermarkets provide the most reliable access to nutritious and affordable produce, and their presence is an important indicator of a community's physical health and economic vitality. In 2004, the Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative (FFFI) tried to address the dearth of supermarkets by creating a statewide program offering grants and loans to supermarket developers to build stores in underserved communities. A federal Healthy Food Financing Initiative was authorized in the 2011 federal budget.

DISPARITIES IN ACCESS

Research provides clear evidence that food deserts, areas with limited access to affordable and nutritious

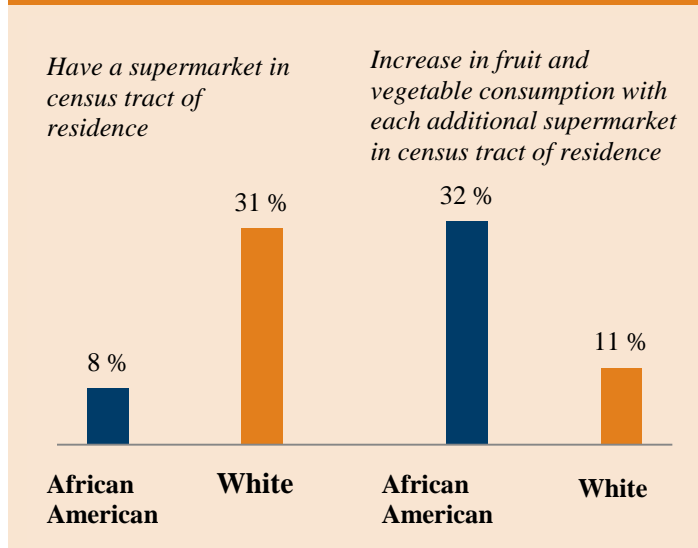
food, exist in numerous lower-income communities across the country.

- **Millions of Americans affected.** More than 23 million people don't have a supermarket within a mile of their home or access to a vehicle.¹
- **Racial and ethnic minorities and lower-income communities hit hardest.** Lower-income ZIP codes have 25 percent fewer chain supermarkets compared with middle-income zip codes. Predominately African-American zip codes have about half as many chain supermarkets as predominately white zip codes, and predominately Latino areas have only a third as many.²
- **Rural communities suffer, too.** A nationwide analysis found that there are 418 rural food deserts—counties where all residents live more than 10 miles from a supermarket or supercenter. This is 20 percent of rural counties.³

SUPERMARKETS AND HEALTH

When communities lack access to healthy foods, adults and children have a harder time finding healthy food to eat. In many urban and rural neighborhoods, it is easy to buy soda, unhealthy snacks or fast food, but difficult to find fruits and vegetables. Studies that looked at the relationship between access to food stores and obesity show that the type of store available makes a difference for residents' health. While greater access to supermarkets can have a positive impact on residents' health, greater access to convenience stores may be detrimental.

Access to Supermarkets and Consumption of Fruits and Vegetables by Race, 2002



Source: <http://www.policylink.org/atf/cf/%7B97C6D565-BB43-406D-A6D5-ECA3BBF35AF0%7D/FINALGroceryGap.pdf>

- Healthy diets.** A study in North Carolina, Baltimore and New York City found that adults with no supermarkets within a mile of their homes are 25 percent to 46 percent less likely to have a healthy diet than those with the most supermarkets near their homes.⁴
- Fruit and vegetable consumption.** African-Americans living near a supermarket are more likely to eat enough fruits and vegetables. For every additional supermarket nearby, fruit and vegetable consumption increased by 32 percent.⁵ However, not all additional stores are better. One study of eating behaviors of boys ages 10-14 found that proximity of convenience stores was linked with reduced fruit and vegetable intake.⁶
- Obesity rates.** Adults in neighborhoods with supermarkets alone or supermarkets and grocery stores have the lowest rates of obesity (21%) and overweight (60% to 62%).⁵ Adults in areas with no supermarkets and access to only convenience stores or smaller grocery stores had the highest

rates of obesity (32% to 40%) and overweight (73% to 78%).⁵

SUPERMARKETS HELP NEIGHBORHOODS

New and improved supermarkets can also help revitalize lower-income neighborhoods. They generate foot traffic and attract complementary services and stores, such as banks, pharmacies and restaurants. The Pennsylvania public-private supermarket initiative created jobs and raised real estate values.

- Job creation.** The Pennsylvania FFFI, which helped develop 78 supermarkets and other fresh food outlets in underserved urban and rural areas, created 4,860 jobs.⁵ A study of Philadelphia supermarkets found that a majority of the jobs were filled by locals living within three miles of their workplace.⁷
- Real estate values.** New supermarkets in Philadelphia raised the value of homes located within one-quarter to one-half mile of the new supermarkets by 4 percent to 7 percent.⁸

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- [The Grocery Gap: Who Has Access to Healthy Food and Why it Matters \(The Food Trust/PolicyLink\)](#)
- [Bringing Healthy Foods Home \(Healthy Eating Research\)](#)
- [Harnessing the Power of Supermarkets Help Reverse Childhood Obesity \(The Food Trust/RWJF\)](#)

¹<http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/ap/ap036/ap036.pdf>

²http://www.healthydurham.org/docs/file/committees/obesity_chronic_care/Grocstore.pdf

³<http://www.ruralsociology.org/StaticContent/Publications/Ruralrealities/pubs/RuralRealities1-4.pdf>

⁴<http://www.rwjf.org/pr/product.jsp?id=43888>

⁵<http://www.policylink.org/atf/cf/%7B97C6D565-BB43-406D-A6D5-ECA3BBF35AF0%7D/FINALGroceryGap.pdf>

⁶<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2014759/>

⁷<http://www.trfund.com/resource/downloads/policypubs/supermarkets.pdf>

⁸<http://www.trfund.com/resource/downloads/policypubs/CDFIStudySummary.pdf>