



Health Policy Snapshot

Childhood Obesity

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ISSUE BRIEF

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Do all Americans have equal access to healthy foods?

Takeaways:

- Millions of Americans live in urban areas and rural towns where they lack access to healthy affordable foods.
- People who have access to supermarkets tend to consume more fruits and vegetables and have lower risk for obesity.
- The benefits of new or renovated supermarkets and grocery stores go beyond health and include job creation, neighborhood revitalization, and economic development.

Overview

Supermarkets and supercenters provide the most reliable access to a variety of healthy, high-quality products at the lowest cost, and shoppers generally prefer these stores to smaller grocery stores and convenience stores.¹ The presence of supermarkets also is an important indicator of a community's physical health and economic vitality. In 2004, the Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative (FFFI) pioneered a statewide program offering grants and loans to supermarket developers to build stores in underserved communities, making it easier for an estimated 500,000 residents to find healthier food in their communities. The federal government is now funding similar projects across the country through the U.S. Departments of Treasury, Agriculture, and Health and Human Services.

DISPARITIES IN ACCESS

Research provides clear evidence that food deserts, areas with limited access to affordable and nutritious foods, exist in numerous lower-income communities and communities of color across the country.

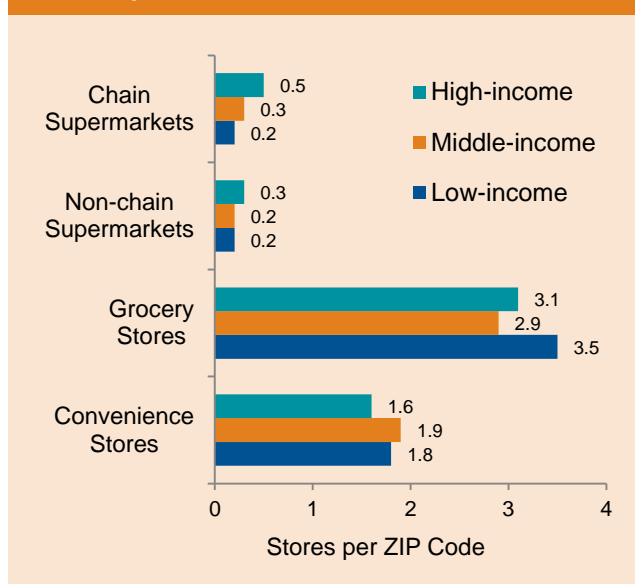
- More than 29 million people who live in low-income areas do not have a supermarket within a mile of their home.²
- Low-income zip codes have 25 percent fewer chain supermarkets compared with middle-income zip codes. Predominately African American zip codes have about half the number of chain supermarkets compared with predominantly White zip codes, and predominately Latino areas have only a third as many.³
- Twenty percent of rural counties are considered rural food deserts—counties where all residents live more than 10 miles from a supermarket or supercenter.⁴

SUPERMARKETS AND HEALTH

Studies that have examined 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.

- **Healthy Diets.** According to a study that used data from North Carolina, Baltimore, and New York City, adults with no supermarkets within a mile of their homes are 25 percent to 46 percent

U.S. Food-store Availability by Income, Mean Number per ZIP Code



Source: http://www.healthyeatingresearch.org/images/stories/her_research_briefs/her%20bringing%20healthy%20foods%20home_7-2008.pdf

less likely to have a healthy diet than those with the most supermarkets near their homes.⁵

- **Fruit and Vegetable Consumption.** African-Americans living in a census tract with a supermarket are more likely to meet dietary guidelines for fruits and vegetables, and for every additional supermarket in a tract, fruit and vegetable intake increased by 32 percent.⁶ However, not all additional stores are better. One study that looked at eating behaviors of boys ages 10-14 found that proximity of convenience stores was associated with reduced fruit and vegetable intake.⁷
- **Obesity Rates.** Adults living in neighborhoods with supermarkets alone or supermarkets and grocery stores have the lowest rates of obesity (21%) and overweight (60% to 62%).⁵ Adults living in neighborhoods with no supermarkets and access to only convenience stores and/or smaller grocery stores had the highest rates of obesity (32% to 40%) and overweight (73% to 78%).⁵

SUPERMARKETS HELP ANCHOR COMMUNITIES, REVITALIZE ECONOMIES

In addition to increasing families' access to healthy foods, new and improved supermarkets and grocery stores can help revitalize lower-income neighborhoods because they help generate foot traffic and attract complementary services and stores, such as banks, pharmacies, and restaurants. Evaluations of the Pennsylvania initiative, which led to the financing of 88 healthy food stores or farmers' markets in underserved neighborhoods, found that:

- The initiative created or retained 5,000 jobs in struggling neighborhoods and the majority of those jobs were filled by local residents living within three miles of their workplace.⁸
- Total employment surrounding the supermarkets increased at a faster rate than citywide trends for four of five new stores examined, suggesting a positive effect on overall economic activity.⁷
- The values of homes located within one-quarter to one-half mile of the new supermarkets increase by 4 percent to 7 percent (an average of \$1,500) after the stores open. The effect was larger in neighborhoods with weaker housing markets.⁹

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

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

¹ http://www.healthyeatingresearch.org/images/stories/her_research_briefs/her%20bringing%20healthy%20foods%20home_7-2008.pdf

² <http://www.ers.usda.gov/media/956784/err143.pdf>

³ http://www.healthyeatingresearch.org/docs/file/committees/obesity_chronic_care/GroceryGap.pdf

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

⁵ <http://www.rwjf.org/pr/product.jsp?id=43888>

⁶ <http://www.policylink.org/atf/cf/%7B97C6D565-BB43-406D-A6D5-ECA3BBF35AF0%7D/FINALGroceryGap.pdf>

⁷ <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2014759/>

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

⁹ <http://www.trfund.com/resource/downloads/policypubs/CDFIStudySummary.pdf>