Healthy Food, Healthy Communities:
Improving Access and Opportunities
Through Food Retailing

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Disparities in Access to Healthy Food and Why It Matters

Disparities in Access to Healthy Food

Geographic Access is Linked to Race and Income
Many studies have documented the lack of supermarkets in poor communities and communities of color compared to wealthier, white communities:

- One study found that middle and upper income communities in Los Angeles County have 2.3 times as many supermarkets per capita as low-income communities; the same study found that predominantly white communities have 3.2 times the supermarkets of predominantly black communities, and 1.7 times those of predominantly Latino communities.

- A multi-state study found that wealthy neighborhoods had over three times as many supermarkets as low-wealth neighborhoods. Access also varied by race, with predominantly white neighborhoods having four times more supermarkets than predominantly black neighborhoods.

- In Atlanta, wealthy black communities have fewer grocery stores within a five-minute travel distance than wealthy white communities, indicating that the racial composition of a neighborhood has effects on store locations independent of income level.

Not only are grocery stores scarce in many of these communities, but local residents typically lack transportation options to easily get to stores located in other parts of town. Low-income, African American, and Latino households have less access to private vehicles than higher income and white households. Without access to private vehicles, residents of low-income communities often need to arrange rides with friends or relatives, piece together multiple bus routes, or pay for taxi rides to do their grocery shopping. This makes shopping for groceries costly, or inconvenient, unreliable, and time-consuming. For example, residents of low-income communities in the San Francisco Bay Area who rely on public buses to travel to a grocery store spend about an hour commuting to and from the store. The average resident in affluent communities in the area can reach
more than three supermarkets by car within 10 minutes round-trip.\textsuperscript{12}

Myser Keels, a resident and community activist who was involved in a coalition that brought a supermarket to underserved West Fresno, highlighted the problem caused by a scarcity of stores and limited transportation options at a press conference:\textsuperscript{13}

“We want choices. Some poor people use public transportation and they don’t haul all the groceries they need on the bus. And if they call a cab, the fare alone can put them in the hole. Some of the senior citizens I know have trouble getting around because they can’t move like they used to. They have to rely on other folks to take them shopping …. It’s just a tragedy that we don’t have a decent shopping center in our area.”

\textbf{The Poor Pay More for Food}

Shopping trips to supermarkets, the lack of nearby stores and limited transportation options lead low-income residents to shop at small stores located closer to their homes. These small stores, though more convenient, generally offer fewer healthy foods, are poorly maintained, and charge higher prices. The smaller grocery stores, convenience stores, and grocery/gas combinations commonly patronized by poor inner city and rural residents charge prices that are about 10 percent higher than those found at large chain supermarkets.\textsuperscript{14} Prices at the corner stores that dot inner city neighborhoods, for example, can be much as 49 percent higher than those of supermarkets, for a limited selection of canned and processed foods and very little, if any, fresh meat and produce.\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{Why Access Matters}

\textbf{Benefits for Residents}

Studies have shown that access to local places to purchase healthy food can improve eating behaviors:

\begin{itemize}
  \item A United States study found that African Americans living in neighborhoods with at least one supermarket were more likely to meet dietary guidelines for fruit and vegetable consumption and for fat intake than African Americans living in neighborhoods without supermarkets. Additional nearby supermarkets resulted in even greater fruit and vegetable consumption.\textsuperscript{16} This remained true even after the researchers statistically controlled for the effects of education and income on food choices.
  \item In a low-income neighborhood in England, the opening of a supermarket resulted in an increase in the amount fruits and vegetables eaten by residents. Those residents with the poorest dietary habits before the store opened increased their consumption of healthy food the most.\textsuperscript{17}
  \item An evaluation of eight Philadelphia farmers’ markets operating primarily in low-income communities found that more than half the visitors to the markets (57 percent) said they had increased their fruit and vegetable consumption since they started coming to the market.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{itemize}
Benefits for Communities

In addition to the effects on individual eating behaviors, successful healthy food retailers contribute to the broader economic health of the community. Grocery stores, along with other types of retail and services like banks, pharmacies, and restaurants, are essential components of livable and well-functioning communities.

Low-income residents often live in distressed, high-poverty communities that have experienced years of population and job loss, and physical and economic decline. New grocery store developments can help revitalize these communities, contributing to economic development. In addition to creating jobs for local residents, new stores create local shopping opportunities that can capture dollars being spent outside of the community. One study estimated that residents of inner city communities across the United States spend $85 million per year at stores located outside their community.\(^\text{19}\)

New retailers also recycle money in the local economy. As purchasers of goods and services, the retailers spend money at existing local businesses, which leads to the creation of new jobs, which leads to more money for people to spend at local businesses. This cycle also generates more local sales tax revenue. While all retail outlets can have this effect, new large grocery stores and supermarkets that locate in disinvested communities often also serve as high volume “anchors” that generate increased foot traffic, and they tend to draw other retail stores that sell complementary goods and services.\(^\text{20}\)

The Pathmark supermarket in Newark’s Central Ward provides a striking example of how a new grocery store can contribute to community revitalization. The Central Ward is an African-American community that suffers from severe poverty, depopulation due to white flight, and disinvestment. When Pathmark opened its doors in 1990, it was the first supermarket to serve the 55,000-person community in 25 years. The supermarket anchors the New Community Shopping Center, and the entire development is jointly owned and operated by Pathmark and the New Community Corporation (NCC), a faith-based community organization. The supermarket has created thousands of jobs, and since NCC owns 66 percent of the supermarket and all of the other businesses in the center, profits are channeled directly back into the community through the organization’s housing, child care, job training, and educational activities.\(^\text{21}\)

Market Creek Plaza in the Diamond Neighborhoods of San Diego provides another example of the community benefits that can accompany a grocery store development. Around a third of residents in this area have incomes of less than $20,000 a year, and 30 percent of residents do not have access to a car. The Jacobs Center for Neighborhood Innovation (JCNI), an operating foundation dedicated to neighborhood strengthening and community building, will invest all of its resources into the Diamond Neighborhoods until it spends or transfers all its assets, in less than 20 years. JCNI purchased 10 acres of land for Market Creek Plaza, a commercial
real estate project that is being designed, built, and will ultimately be owned by community residents. Food 4 Less, which opened four years ago, was selected by the community as the anchor tenant for the development, and was the first major grocery store in the area in thirty years. Sixty-nine percent of the construction contracts for the plaza were awarded to local minority-owned enterprises, and 91 percent of initial employees were hired from the community in a process run jointly with the United Food and Commercial Workers union. Additional stores built in the plaza include ethnic restaurants, a fitness center, a bank, and a gift shop featuring crafts of local residents from many cultures. Residents will eventually own a new community foundation and a property development business as a result of JCNI’s investments and ongoing efforts to promote “resident ownership of neighborhood change.”

Rural California: Limited Food Access in a Land of Plenty

Although much research has been done on food access in inner city communities, less is understood about the food access problems faced by rural communities. Existing studies suggest that despite their proximity to some of the most productive agricultural areas in the world, many rural residents have little access to fresh, healthy foods. The rural poor have limited access to supermarkets, and even when they do reach supermarkets, they face prices that are about 4 percent higher than those charged by suburban stores. And while rural households generally have access to cars, those that do not are particularly burdened given the lack of public transportation options in rural areas. Many rural farmworkers, for example, have limited access to cars, and therefore have little mobility to reach stores beyond their immediate neighborhoods.

Some of the promising strategies and policy options for improving access to healthy food outlined in this report are also relevant for rural underserved communities. Community organizations have successfully brought supermarkets to low-income rural areas. Dineh Cooperatives Incorporated, a community development corporation on the Navajo Nation, built a Basha’s Market in rural Chinle, Arizona that created over 170 jobs for local residents. The store has been profitable since its opening and has been expanded four times. Other types of food retailers also show promise. The Selma Flea Market in rural Fresno County, California was the first flea market in the nation to accept electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards (food stamps) for purchasing fresh fruits and vegetables. Other good potential strategies for rural areas include: mobile markets, which are trucks that travel through communities selling healthy food; improved public transportation; community supported agriculture; and farmers’ markets organized by hospitals or other institutions or businesses.
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