

# Food Deserts: Can We Close the Gap?

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As the world population continues to increase, one consideration that is becoming increasingly important is ensuring that there is enough food supply to comfortably meet the population's needs. Worldwide, measures are being implemented to preserve the quality and availability of the food supply. For example, legume farmers in Ethiopia are making sure to plant a wide variety of crops in order to increase the adaptability and resilience of crops to temporal changes and natural disasters.<sup>1</sup>

The term "food security" is used to describe having physical and economic access to food sufficient to meet dietary needs for healthy living. A family is described as food secure when its members do not live in hunger or in fear of going hungry.<sup>2</sup> Food insecurity is often related with lower socio-economic status and has major long-term effects on affected individuals, contributing to chronic health issues, such as heart disease, diabetes, and hypertension.

This problem is exacerbated when considering children who grow up in food-insecure households. In some places, there are food "safety nets" available to school-aged children. Some children from food-insecure households can typically supplement their nutritional consumption during meals at school, extracurricular activities, or through meals provided at a job, for instance.<sup>3</sup> However, in other places, these safety nets may not be sufficient, may not exist, or may be inaccessible for a variety of reasons.

One of the major contributing factors to food insecurity is the concept of "food deserts." These are geographic areas where the population's ability to access healthy food options at an affordable price is significantly restricted, usually due to a lack of supermarkets or grocery stores in a convenient distance. Nearly 39.5 million people, making up over 12% of the American population, live in low-income and low-access areas.<sup>4</sup> As mentioned earlier, food deserts are often characterized by

areas with low socio-economic status. They are most likely to be found in urban areas that contain predominantly African American and Hispanic residents and are usually low-income areas, where many people do not own vehicles, making it difficult to reliably access grocery stores in many cases.

Further complicating the matter is that high-income districts have been found to have approximately triple the number of supermarkets as poor districts, and grocery stores in predominantly white neighborhoods are significantly larger and have a greater selection of food choices than those in predominantly African American communities.<sup>5</sup> The fact that struggles regarding food security tend to fall along lines separating race and class has led to the increased use of the term "food apartheid" to highlight the societal causes of decreased access to nutritious foods by ethnic minorities and low-income communities.<sup>6</sup>



Figure 1. An illustration depicting the hardship faced by those living in food deserts. Source: Chapman University, 2020, JPEG image. <https://blogs.chapman.edu/sustainability/2020/08/26/intersectional-issues-food-deserts/>

An individual's dietary choices are restricted by the options physically and financially available to them. In many of these geographical areas, the stores that are available are discount chain stores that typically sell cheaper products that tend to be high in levels

of salt, sugar, and fat. The available processed foods typically lack in nutritional quality as well.

The fact that nutritious food choices are significantly more expensive than less nutritious options is compounded in food deserts. A comprehensive review of studies looking at the relative costs of healthier and less healthy diets found that healthier diet patterns cost an average of \$1.48 more per day.<sup>7</sup> For many families, what may seem like a small difference to some adds up rather quickly, making it financially difficult to follow a nutritious dietary pattern, even when the ingredients are physically available.

Thankfully, public awareness of the issue is steadily increasing. The work of government officials and activists across the country has served to bring light to the inequality regarding food security, and steps are being taken towards creating a more equitable future. As many individuals in low-income communities rely on public transportation to get to the supermarket, bus stop farmers markets are starting to pop up around the country, including in cities such as Dayton, Ohio; Tampa, Florida; and Atlanta, Georgia. The goal is to give people the opportunity to choose from fresh, nutrient-dense groceries on their way home from work at the bus stop.<sup>8</sup>

The bus stop farmers' market is just one example of recent countermeasures taken against food insecurity. Many cities, especially those with a higher proportion of residents living in a food desert, have taken measures to restrict or prevent the opening of more chain discount locations such as Dollar General or Dollar Tree, which are known for providing little to or no fresh food options along with numerous processed food items. Their convenient locations and low prices make them attractive options to residents in low-income areas without convenient access to more nutritious options, which are typically further away and more expensive. The existence of these chains serves to undercut the few grocery stores and supermarkets that do exist in these areas, with many being forced to close.<sup>9</sup>

After Kansas City's regional planning commission passed a bill that restricted the opening of discount

chains in the city in 2016, other cities such as Birmingham, Alabama; Cleveland, Ohio; New Orleans, Louisiana; and Atlanta, Georgia, followed suit.<sup>10</sup> Many city councils are proposing and passing legislation that encourages more fresh food retailers and farmers markets, as well as raising funds to offset the costs of implementing high-quality grocery stores in areas that are lacking.

The inequality in physical and economic access to healthy, nutrient-dense food options is one of the most important factors threatening food security today. As previously mentioned, approximately one-eighth of Americans have limited access to nutritious food choices, a proportion that is bound to increase if serious changes are not made in the near future. However, with some creativity and hard work, a future where everyone can conveniently acquire the components of a nutritious diet is entirely possible.



Figure 2. A mobile farmer's market helping to combat a shortage of nutritious food choices in low-income areas. Source: Mark Gardner, JPEG image. <https://cdn10.bostonmagazine.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/07/MobileMarket.jpg>

## Notes

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