

Access to Healthy Food and Why It Matters: A Review of the Research

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Healthy food retailers—grocery stores; farmers’ markets; cooperatives; mobile markets; and other vendors of fresh, affordable, nutritious food—are critical components of healthy, thriving communities.

A new joint report by PolicyLink and The Food Trust, *Access to Healthy Food and Why It Matters: A Review of the Research*, provides an up-to-date review of the research. Three years after *The Grocery Gap: Who Has Access to Healthy Food and Why It Matters*, the large volume of new research demonstrates that improving healthy food access in low-income communities and communities of color continues to be an urgent need.

What follows is an executive summary of the new report, sharing key findings along with implications for policy and research. The report underscores access as the foundation for the positive benefits associated with healthy food. Without access to healthy foods, a nutritious diet and good health are out of reach. And without grocery stores and other fresh food retailers, communities are also missing the commercial vitality that makes neighborhoods livable and helps local economies thrive.

Findings

Given the rapid growth of research over the past several years, *Access to Healthy Food and Why It Matters* systematically reviews the new studies and reevaluates the evidence base. The majority of the evidence continues to support—or strengthen—three primary findings.

1. Accessing healthy food is still a challenge for many families, particularly those living in low-income neighborhoods, communities of color, and rural areas.

An overwhelming body of evidence over 20 years indicates that accessing affordable, high-quality, and healthy food is a challenge for many families; this challenge is most pronounced in low-income neighborhoods of color. Recent national-scale studies conducted by the United States Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service (USDA ERS) and The Reinvestment Fund have found that 25 to 30 million Americans—about 9 percent of the total population—are living in communities that do not provide adequate access to healthy food retailers, such as supermarkets or grocery stores, within a reasonable distance from their home.

Not only is access lacking in low-income communities and communities of color, but disparities exist in the quality, variety, quantity, and price of healthy foods as well. Together, these barriers, along with the plethora of inexpensive fast-food outlets, can make it more difficult for people in these communities to eat a healthy diet. This is also true in many rural communities, especially within Native American reservations.

2. Living closer to healthy food retail is among the factors associated with better eating habits and decreased risk for obesity and diet-related diseases.

More than 75 studies in the past three years have examined the direct health impacts of access to healthy food on diet and on the risk of obesity or overweight, as measured by fruit and vegetable consumption and body mass index (BMI), respectively. The majority of these studies find healthy eating and positive health outcomes associated with access to healthy food. One study using a sample of national, secondary data found that lower produce prices, higher fast-food prices, and greater access to supermarkets are related to increased fruit and vegetable consumption and lower BMI, especially among low-income teenagers.

The research also reveals that healthy eating is embedded in a complex set of relationships and factors in which the presence of a nearby store is not necessarily the only influence. These additional factors beyond proximity include transportation options, quality and price of produce and other healthy food options, marketing of unhealthy food to children, and cultural appropriateness of neighborhood food choices.

3. Healthy food retail stimulates economic activity.

Healthy food retail outlets can serve as drivers of economic activity. Even during times of economic downturn and amid threats to established business models, the supermarket and grocery store industry is a powerful economic entity that can create jobs and stimulate growth. For instance, it is estimated that 24 new jobs are created for every 10,000 square feet of retail grocery space, so a very large market can generate between 150 and 200 full- and part-time jobs.

Governmental food benefits for low-income consumers, spent at retail outlets, represent an additional dimension of local economic impact. Studies have quantified the economic effects of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). As one example, every \$5 in new SNAP benefits generates \$9 in local spending at supermarkets, grocery stores, and other approved SNAP-accepting retailers.

Innovative Approaches Working to Improve Healthy Food Retail

The report finds that, in recent years, there have been a growing number of innovative approaches to bring healthy food retail into communities that have limited access. The best known large-scale innovation is the highly successful Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative—a statewide public-private effort that helped develop or improve 88 supermarkets, smaller independently owned grocery stores, farmers' markets, and other fresh food outlets in urban communities, small towns, and rural areas throughout Pennsylvania.

The national Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI), established in 2011 and drawing lessons from the Pennsylvania model, has, in three years, distributed more than \$500 million in grants and tax credits to improve access to healthy food in communities across the country. The President has proposed to expand the program further in 2014. Thousands of jobs have been created, and hundreds of thousands of people have new access to healthy food.

Implications for Policy and Research

The evidence published in the last two decades, and the past three years in particular, shows that access to healthy food continues to be a critical factor for improving both the physical and economic well-being of communities. This review led to the following policy and research recommendations:

- Comprehensive equity-oriented approaches to improving food retailing and access, that take economic, social, and environmental contexts into account, are needed to improve health.
- Strategies should focus on those most in need—low-income people and communities of color.
- Research that examines local lived experiences and uncovers lessons about the implementation of recent initiatives to improve food retailing in underserved communities will be critical to understanding how healthy food can be accessed by all.

To read the full report, please visit <http://www.policylink.org/healthyfoodaccessmatters>.

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