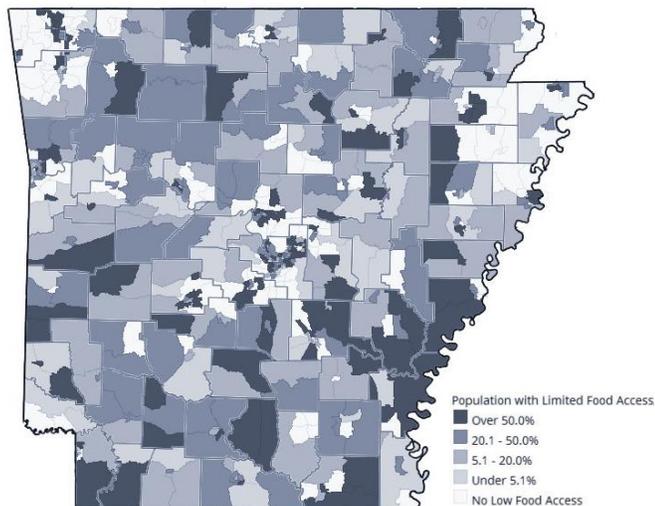


Food deserts are areas where people have limited access to affordable healthy food such as fruit, vegetables, whole grain products, and low-fat milk.¹ The areas lack supermarkets and grocery stores but may have a high number of convenience stores and corner stores that do not stock many healthy foods. In addition, existing supermarkets are located far from where people live. This fact sheet provides an overview of the scope and impact of food deserts in Arkansas and ways communities, businesses, non-profits, and government can make healthy food more accessible and affordable.

FOOD DESERTS IN ARKANSAS

Every county in Arkansas has food deserts, which are neighborhoods and communities with limited access to healthy food (see Figure 1).² The distance to a grocery store influences accessibility, especially in rural and low-income communities that have limited transportation options. Nearly 10 percent of the U.S. population lives in low-income areas more than one mile from a supermarket.³ Food deserts are a principle cause of hunger in 5.7 percent of households in the U.S.⁴

Figure 1: Arkansas Population with Limited Healthy Food Access, Percent by Census Tract



HEALTH IMPACT OF FOOD DESERTS

Studies about Arkansas's obesity epidemic have found that food deserts have an influence on children's weight. The presence of supermarkets moderately reduces the weight of low-income children.⁵ Conversely, the presence of fast-food restaurants near schools increases obesity rates.⁶

The presence of supermarkets is associated with a reduced risk of adult obesity while access to convenience stores and fast-food restaurants is associated with greater obesity risk.^{7,8} People living in areas with limited access to healthy food have a higher prevalence of diabetes and hypertension.^{8,9}

Seniors living in rural communities eat fewer fruits and vegetables the farther they live from a supermarket or other healthy food retail store.¹⁰

ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOOD – NATURAL STATE LANDSCAPE

The ability of Arkansans to purchase healthy food within close proximity to their homes has changed in the last two decades. The number of supermarkets and other grocery stores in Arkansas has had a marked decrease since 1997 dropping from 853 establishments to 495 in 2013. Forty-nine counties (65 percent) had five or less grocery stores within their boundaries.¹¹

Smaller venues for food sales, such as corner stores and convenience stores, fill in the gap where there are a limited number of supermarkets. Convenience stores are typically limited to food basics, snack items, and prepared foods, and are not a regular source of healthy foods.^{12,13}

During growing seasons fruits, vegetables, nuts, dairy products, eggs, bakery items, poultry, beef, pork and/or lamb are sold at 386 farmers' markets across the state.^{14,15} Seventy-two of the state's 75 counties have at least one farmers' market. Of the three counties without a farmers' market, two have at least one on-farm produce sales site.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

An array of options such as financial incentives for small grocery stores and convenience store enhancements, farmers' markets, mobile markets, food hubs and cooperatives can bring healthy food retail opportunities into food desert areas. Community and school gardens are additional ways to enrich people's diets. Local leadership, support, economic resources, and political will are critical to the success of increasing reliable public access to affordable healthy food.

Policy interventions to decrease food deserts have included working with supermarkets and grocery stores to determine new store sites in underserved areas, providing incentives to small-store owners to improve offerings, and encouraging the growth of farmers' markets.

- Regional examples include the New Orleans's Fresh Food Initiative,¹⁶ the Louisiana Healthy Food Retail Act, Dallas providing \$3 million to construct a grocery store in an underserved area, North Carolina's healthy corner store program,¹⁷ and Alabama's Healthy Food Financing Act.^{18,19}
- The federal Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI) provide grants, loans, tax credits, training and technical assistance to eligible fresh, healthy food retailers.²⁰ Arkansas awardees include Winrock International²¹ and Fayetteville.²²

Healthy food retail fuels financial activity. Across the U.S., grocery stores and supermarkets account for 90 percent of food and beverage store sales.²³ Their estimated annual sales for 2014 were near \$574 billion.²⁴ In Arkansas, 2012 sales reached \$3.2 billion, and grocery stores employed nearly 16,200 people with an annual payroll of \$299 million.¹¹ Although limited in healthy options, convenience store sales for the first half of 2016 were nearly \$50,000 for grocery/milk, \$55,000 for snacks, and \$120,000 for prepared foods.

Federal food programs such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) and SNAP have shown they stimulate the economy. WIC provides specific food items to low-income pregnant and breastfeeding women, and children under the age of five who are found to be at nutritional risk. SNAP provides financial support to low-income people to help them buy groceries. Each SNAP dollar generates nearly twice its value in employment and business.^{25,26} In Arkansas during 2015, there were 408 WIC authorized vendors²⁷ and 2787 SNAP authorized firms.²⁸ WIC participants spend nearly \$50 million in annual grocery purchases,²⁹ and SNAP redemption tops \$656 million.²⁸

Stores accepted into federal programs must meet specific food criteria. SNAP requirements include four broad food group categories whereas WIC requires specific items for infant and adult participants in each food group. Food standards impact the grocery options for all individuals who shop in approved stores. A study found that corner stores that are WIC vendors are healthier than non-WIC stores while stores that are SNAP only (not in WIC) are less healthy than non-SNAP stores.³⁰

To increase healthy food access for communities in which SNAP-certified vendors are located, the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service has updated its rules to redefine staple foods, increase requirements for the four staple food groups, and define accessory foods. The new SNAP regulations require vendors to offer at least seven varieties of items in each of four staple groups, including perishable foods in three of the four staple categories. Accessory foods are: 1) snacks and desserts, 2) do not count toward the required food items, and 3) include items such as chips, candy, and carbonated beverages. All current SNAP-certified vendors have until January 17, 2018 to comply with the new stocking requirements. New applicant stores must be compliant by May 17, 2017.³¹

Grocery access via online purchasing with home delivery is growing across the country. Companies such as Kroger³² in Georgia and Texas and Price Cutter³³ in select Missouri cities are offering this service. Amazon is providing this service to Prime members through AmazonFresh³⁴ in select regions and Prime Pantry.³⁵ The USDA has initiated a two-year pilot program in seven states that allows SNAP recipients to order online and use their benefits to pay for their groceries. The goal is to develop this into a national option for SNAP participants.³⁶

Efforts to Erase Food Deserts and Promote Healthy Food in Arkansas

Financial Support – Farmers' Markets

- Addresses farmers' markets planning, training, implementation, promotion, and sustainability
- Projects of the Arkansas Coalition for Obesity Prevention and Blue & You Foundation for a Healthier Arkansas

<http://arkansasobesity.org/initiatives/growing-healthy-communities/history.html>
<http://www.blueandyoufoundationarkansas.org/our-focus/grants-awarded/>

"Fresh2You" Mobile Farmers Market

- Brings fresh produce to people living in food deserts in Pulaski County.
- Accepts SNAP and provides twice the amount of produce per dollar through the Double Up Food Bucks program.
- A project of the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance

<http://www.arhungeralliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Fresh2You-Mobile-Market-Launch-1.pdf>

Church and Community Gardens

- Helps establish gardens within Hispanic and Marshallese communities in northwest Arkansas
- Works to create community linkages
- A project of Feed Communities

<http://www.feedcommunities.org/community-gardens-and-food-access/>

CONCLUSION

State and local governments and community members can improve food access in their neighborhoods. Establishing a community garden and organizing local farmers markets are two efforts in which community members can participate. Government entities can provide zoning code flexibility and offer economic or tax incentives to improve existing or engage new retailers with healthier food offerings. They can also improve transportation such as bus routes to allow for easier access to established markets.

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