

# FOOD DESERTS IN ARKANSAS

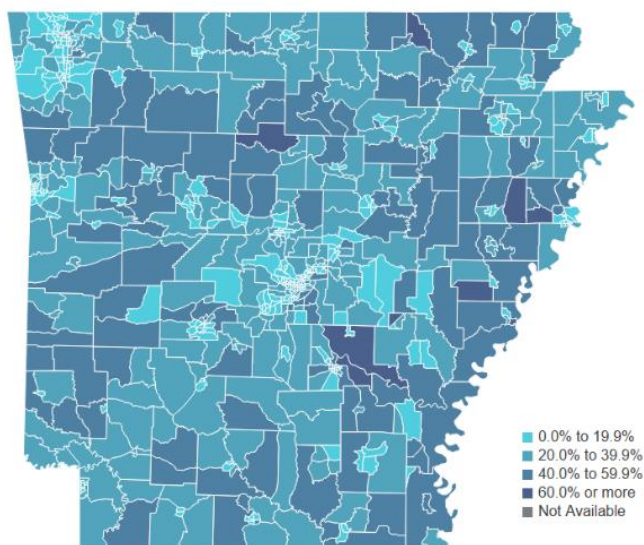
## Introduction

Food deserts are low-income areas where people have limited access to affordable healthy foods such as fruit, vegetables, whole grain products, and low-fat milk.<sup>1</sup> The areas lack supermarkets and grocery stores but may have high numbers 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 explainer 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 a food desert, and there are 10 census tracts in which 60% or more of the population has limited access to healthy food sources (see Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> The distance to a grocery store influences accessibility, especially in rural and low-income communities that have limited transportation options. Food deserts contribute to food insecurity and are a principal cause of hunger.<sup>3</sup>

FIGURE 1: PERCENTAGE OF POPULATION WITH LIMITED HEALTHY FOOD ACCESS IN 2019, BY CENSUS TRACT



## Health Impact of Food Deserts

Studies about Arkansas' 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.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, the presence of fast-food restaurants near schools increases obesity rates.<sup>5</sup>

The presence of supermarkets is also associated with a reduced risk of adult obesity, while access to convenience stores and fast-food restaurants is associated with greater obesity risk.<sup>6,7</sup> People living in areas with limited access to healthy food have a higher prevalence of diabetes and hypertension.

Seniors living in rural communities eat fewer fruits and vegetables the farther they live from a supermarket or other healthy food retail store.<sup>8</sup>

## Access to Healthy Food — Natural State Landscape

The ability of Arkansans to purchase healthy food within proximity to their homes is limited. In 2019, there were only 1.7 grocery stores or produce vendors per 10,000 people in Arkansas, below the national average of 2.1 per 10,000.<sup>9</sup>

Smaller venues for food sales, such as corner stores and convenience stores, fill in the gap where there are limited numbers of supermarkets. Convenience stores are typically limited to food basics, snack items, and prepared foods, and are not a regular source of healthy foods.<sup>10,11</sup>

Arkansas has at least 112 farmers markets operating in 60 counties across the state.<sup>12</sup> The Arkansas Farmers Market Association, a coalition of farmers markets throughout the state whose mission is to improve access to healthy local foods, lists 41 member farmers markets on its vendor guide as of June 2022.<sup>13</sup>

## Opportunities for Action

Farmers markets, mobile markets, food hubs, and cooperatives can bring healthy food retail opportunities into food desert areas. Financial incentives can help entice small grocery stores to establish locations in food deserts and can support convenience store enhancements to allow wider varieties of foods to be sold. Community and school gardens can also 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 reduce the number of food deserts have included working with supermarkets and grocery stores to determine where new store sites are needed for underserved areas, providing incentives to small-store owners to improve offerings, and encouraging the growth of farmers markets.

- Regional examples include New Orleans' Fresh Food Retailers Initiative,<sup>14</sup> Illinois' Health Foods Access Program,<sup>15</sup> and the North Carolina Healthy Food Retail Designation program.<sup>16</sup>
- The federal Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI) provide grants, loans, tax credits, training, and technical assistance to eligible fresh, healthy food retailers.<sup>17</sup> St. Joseph Center in North Little Rock was a small grant awardee in 2021.<sup>18</sup>

Healthy food retail fuels financial activity. Across the U.S., grocery stores and supermarkets accounted for 92% of food and beverage sales in stores in 2019.<sup>19</sup> Grocery stores' and supermarkets' estimated annual sales for 2019 were near \$653 billion.<sup>20</sup> In Arkansas, food and beverage sales in stores reached approximately \$3.4 billion in 2019.<sup>21</sup>

Federal food programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) have been shown to stimulate the economy. WIC provides specific food items to low-income pregnant and breastfeeding women and to children under the age of 5 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.<sup>22,23</sup> In Arkansas during 2021, there were 360 WIC-authorized vendors and 2,584 SNAP-authorized firms.<sup>24</sup> Total food costs for the WIC program in Arkansas totaled nearly \$23 million in 2021, and SNAP redemption topped \$925 million in 2021.

Stores accepted into federal programs must meet specific food criteria. SNAP-authorized stores are required to provide "staple foods," which include foods that are prepared at home to be eaten as a meal. Staple foods include four broad categories: vegetables or fruits; dairy products; meat, poultry, or fish; and breads or cereals. WIC requires specific items for infant and adult participants in each food group. Food standards in approved stores impact the grocery options for all individuals who shop there.

To increase healthy food access for communities in which SNAP-certified vendors are located, the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service finalized rules in 2016 that



enhanced the standards for retailers to participate in the program, including increasing the requirements for providing staple foods and defining “accessory foods.” SNAP regulations now require vendors to offer at least seven varieties of items in each of the four staple groups, including perishable foods in three of the four categories.<sup>25</sup> Accessory foods are snacks, desserts, and beverages — e.g., chips, candy, and carbonated drinks — that supplement meals and do not count toward the required food items.<sup>26</sup>

Grocery access via online purchasing with home delivery or store pickup options are growing across the country, including in Arkansas. The state participates in the SNAP Online Purchasing Pilot, which allows program recipients to purchase food items from eligible online retailers with their SNAP benefits. After being tested with a pilot program in New York in 2019, the program was expanded nationwide during the COVID-19 pandemic, with approximately 4% of SNAP redemptions made through online purchases.<sup>27</sup> As of June 2022, there are 11 online retailers participating in Arkansas, including Amazon, Walmart, and Harps Food Stores.<sup>28</sup>

The SNAP program also played a key role in supporting low-income Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic. Early in the pandemic, the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) was established under federal relief efforts. Through the program, eligible school children received temporary nutrition benefits loaded onto cards that could be used to purchase food. P-EBT also assisted younger children in SNAP-eligible households when daycare facilities closed or operated with reduced hours.<sup>29</sup> Including P-EBT benefits, SNAP benefit redemptions nationally were over \$125 billion in fiscal year 2021, a 61% increase from the prior year.<sup>28</sup>

## Efforts To Erase Food Deserts and Promote Healthy Food in Arkansas

### DOUBLE-UP FOOD BUCKS PROGRAM AND ARKANSAS FARMERS MARKETS PARTICIPATION<sup>30</sup>

- The Double Up Food Bucks (DUFB) program matches SNAP benefits spent on fruits and vegetables from eligible retailers and farmers markets.
- The Arkansas Coalition for Obesity Prevention provides information and program education to interested and participating Arkansas farmers market vendors.
- In 2022, 13 farmers markets across the state participated in the DUFB program.

### **ARKANSAS HUNGER RELIEF ALLIANCE AND SNAP OUTREACH<sup>31</sup>**

- The Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance, a statewide nonprofit collaborative network of hunger relief organizations across the state, provides SNAP outreach and education services.
- The alliance operates the state’s SNAP call center, providing information on eligibility and benefits.

### **COMMUNITY GARDENS SUPPORT — UAPB<sup>32</sup>**

- The sustainable food systems project at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff assists eight community garden sites in central and southern Arkansas.
- The goal of project is to provide resources and information to local gardens while also bringing healthy foods to areas in food deserts.
- Community sites include churches, community centers, and retirement homes.

## **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 financial or tax incentives to enhance existing retail options or engage new retailers with healthier food offerings. Governments can also improve transportation such as bus routes to provide easier access to established markets.

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