

Prevention Policy Brief

From the Prevention Research Center at Tulane University



Food Availability: Proper nutrition is often a question of access

The Problem

Americans do not consume an adequate supply of fruits and vegetables on a regular basis, a fact that has a detrimental effect on health. Research shows that healthy diets rich in fruits and vegetables may reduce the risk of cancer and other chronic diseases. Poor nutrition is even more prevalent in low-income neighborhoods, where residents are more significantly impacted by chronic health conditions.

Here are the facts:

- 25% of heart attacks, strokes, cancers, and diabetes cases can be attributed to an unhealthy diet.¹
- Nationally, 77.3% of adults do not consume the minimum recommended servings of fruits and vegetables; In Louisiana, that figure is 82.8% of adults.²
- The average 6 to 11 year old eats only 3.5 servings of fruits and vegetables a day, achieving only half the recommended seven servings per day for this age group.³
- Even when children do consume vegetables, fried potatoes, including French fries and potato chips, make up 46% of the vegetable servings consumed by children.⁴

Income also plays a role in consumption:

- 40% of Americans making less than \$15,000.00 per year eat two or fewer fruits and vegetables on an average day.⁵
- That figure rises to 50% of those in Louisiana making less than \$15,000.00 per year⁵

The Causes

Access to fresh produce is limited in many low-income neighborhoods. A trip to the supermarket often requires a car, which many households do not possess. While some supermarkets are located on bus routes, shoppers can only purchase as much as they can easily carry onto the bus. Cab rides only increase the cost of groceries, which are already more expensive in urban areas. As a result, household groceries in low-income neighborhoods are often purchased from corner stores, where fresh produce is severely limited, if sold at all. Alternatively, these stores primarily stock unhealthy snack foods, processed foods, sugary beverages, and alcohol.



Here are the facts:

- 20.3% of households with annual incomes of less than \$25,000 do not own a car.⁶
- In one study, encompassing four states, only 8% of black Americans lived in a census tract with at least one supermarket.⁷
- Among black Americans, fruit and vegetable consumption increased by 32% for each additional supermarket in a census tract. Supermarkets in urban areas typically charge higher per unit prices than suburban stores.⁸
- Another study focused on pregnant women showed that those living greater than four miles from a supermarket had a poorer diet than those who lived in close proximity to a supermarket.⁹

The Solution

Everyone deserves equal access to healthy and nutritious foods. Communities across the country are finding creative ways to increase the availability of fresh produce in low-income, inner-city neighborhoods.

- The Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative (FFFI) is a public/private partnership that encourages development of supermarkets in underserved communities. The initiative provides much-needed financing to grocers who choose to open stores in low-income neighborhoods. In only its second year of existence, the program has changed the food access landscape of the state and has been recognized by the Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation for its pioneering approach.
- In San Francisco, the “Good Neighbor Program” brought together Literacy for Environmental Justice and the San Francisco Department of Public Health to provide economic incentives for corner stores in Bayview-Hunters Point to stock healthy foods. Several stores have taken advantage of the program and have since cut back on alcohol, cigarettes, and junk food to make way for fresh produce and organic milk.

Making it Happen

Louisiana communities need targeted policies and plans designed to improve resident access to healthy foods. We recommend the following methods to change the nutrition landscape and encourage healthier eating:

- A Food Policy Commission should be convened to complete a community food assessment and promptly make recommendations that will help improve access to nutritious foods.
- The Legislature in conjunction with the Louisiana Office of Public Health should create incentives for grocers and corner stores in low-income areas to increase retail space for affordable fresh produce. Incentives should include both financial assistance and the physical or technical assistance to make it happen
- The Legislature and the Office of Public Health should also provide a bonus value for food stamp recipients who use their benefits to purchase fruits and vegetables.
- The Regional Transit Authority should be encouraged to offer subsidies for passengers who use public transportation to travel to the supermarket. This could be facilitated through the use of return trip vouchers available at food stores.

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7. Morland K, Wing S, Roux AD, Poole C. Neighborhood Characteristics Associated with the Location of Food Stores and Food Service Places. *Am J Prev Med* 2002; 22(1):23-29.

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