

## **Access to Retail Markets**

Food Security depends on ready access to affordable, nutritious food at all times for an active healthy life. Access to retail markets itself is sometimes the limiting factor to food security. This topic paper attempts to outline the issue of limited access that results when there are geographic gaps in retail food markets, known as “food deserts”.

### **What are Food Deserts?**

Food deserts are geographic areas where consumers have relatively poor access to affordable and nutritious food. Food deserts may have stores with higher prices and/or limited variety and quality of foods, or they may have no stores at all. Food deserts are often distinguished as areas where food access has worsened over time, for example when a supermarket moves out of an neighborhood, or closes altogether.

Studies have found that both rural and inner city residents have more limited access to large grocery stores, as compared to their suburban counterparts. A report by Hunger Task Force of Milwaukee found that in general, stores in an economically distressed, inner-city area have fewer products and higher prices than stores outside the area. Nationally, the trend continues towards fewer but larger food stores, as large grocery stores consolidate and migrate away from inner cities. Rural residents face similar challenges. Some Wisconsin residents have few or no supermarkets within their county’s boundaries. Ironically, many rural communities that grow food for others may have limited access to retail grocery stores for themselves.

### **Implications of Food Deserts for Low Income Residents**

Limited access to large grocery stores requires consumers to either travel further, or to rely on smaller nearby food stores. Both options significantly increase the cost of access to food for consumers. Smaller neighborhood or village groceries, corner stores and convenience stores in general offer less variety and quality, fewer lower cost foods and higher prices than supermarkets. Consumers report that costs, quality and variety are barriers to shopping in their communities. The high cost or limited availability of transportation to distant supermarkets further confounds the impact of food deserts on residents with low incomes or limited mobility. Rising gasoline prices, bad winter weather and unreliable transportation are unpredictable factors that can further limit household access to quality, affordable food for many rural consumers.

Aside from cost implications, food deserts have dietary implications. Research has documented that residents living in areas with supermarkets have healthier diets. And the reverse is also true, that residents of food deserts face nutritional challenges and related negative health outcomes.

### **Examples of Promising Practices**

In Green Bay, food resource asset mapping revealed a food desert in a low-income downtown neighborhood. The local hunger prevention coalition worked to document the need for a grocery store and demographics of neighborhood residents. One component of the research involved surveying neighborhood residents about their willingness to patronize a local grocery were one

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to be sited nearby and estimates of how much money they would spend on groceries. This survey data help inform a grocery retailer who subsequently opened a store in the neighborhood.

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### **What Remains To Be Done About Food Deserts?**

- All residents need to be assured of access to affordable and nutritious food where they live. This includes access to quality food that residents can afford to pay for, as well access to food that is nutritionally and culturally acceptable.
- Food deserts have obvious negative implications for the individuals affected, but public health, economic development, environmental and social implications need further examination as well.
- Policy changes need to be considered to sustain existing and encourage new grocery stores in at-risk areas. This might include tax credits or other financial assistance from state or local governments to encourage supermarkets to locate in under-served areas.
- Further research needs to be conducted to identify existing food deserts in Wisconsin communities as well as to develop local solutions and alternatives to large supermarkets.