



MARCH 2012

Access to Healthy and Affordable Food Is Critical to Good Nutrition

CELIA COLE

The ability to afford a nutritious diet and get the right amount of exercise—the two factors critical to maintain a healthy weight—is out of reach for many Texans living in low-income communities. In both urban and rural neighborhoods, a healthy diet may be hard to obtain due to a lack of supermarkets and other retailers of fresh, affordable food. And, many low-income neighborhoods offer inadequate opportunities for safe exercise, with community recreation areas on the decline. These factors are contributing to the alarming decline in the nutritional health of Texans and rising obesity rates—problems with significant health consequences and a hefty price tag for the state of Texas.

Research suggests that many people living in low-income communities have poor nutrition by no personal choice of their own; rather, they eat poorly because they live in a society that makes unhealthy food choices, default choices. The cost of healthier foods has risen, while nutritionally empty “junk” foods are cheaper and more readily available than ever. Texas has the opportunity to significantly reduce obesity and improve the health of its citizens by enacting policies that make healthy eating the default choice in our society. Improving access to healthy food is one component of this solution. This report examines the problems related to food access and affordability in low-income communities and explores potential solutions emerging in Texas and other states.

We can significantly reduce obesity and improve our health with policies making healthy eating the default choice in our state.



900 LYDIA STREET
AUSTIN, TEXAS 78702

T 512.320.0222
F 512.320.0227

Join the conversation



www.cppp.org



Texas has the largest “grocery gap,” meaning we have the fewest number of supermarkets per capita.⁵

In Measuring “Food Equity,” Access and Affordability Go Hand-in-Hand

The body of research is growing on the extent, causes, and consequences of “geographic food inequity,” which has led to the coining of the term “food desert.” Although the term food desert conjures a picture of a rural area with no grocery retailers for miles around, many of the food deserts identified in the research are in the center of cities and surrounded by plenty of food retailers.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines a [food desert](#) as a census tract in which one-third of the population lives more than one mile from the nearest large supermarket or grocery store in an urban area, and more than 10 miles in a rural area.¹ A “large” retailer is defined as a store that does more than \$2 million in sales. Some argue that all available food retailers in a neighborhood, including farmer’s markets, smaller groceries, health food stores, and convenience stores, should be counted.² However, USDA’s measure seeks to address both factors in the food equity equation—access and affordability. In other words, food equity is only achieved when the residents of a neighborhood have easy access to affordable nutritious food. Even though the cost of fresh produce and other whole foods has significantly increased over the last few decades, while the price of processed, high-calorie foods has decreased,³ large retail food outlets like supermarkets provide the greatest benefit to low-income households by having the lowest prices and the greatest range of choices.⁴ In contrast, many smaller grocers and markets do not have the purchasing power to offer the same variety of products at a similar low cost.

The “Grocery Gap” in Texas

Texas is the state with the largest “grocery gap,” meaning that it has the lowest number of supermarkets per capita of any state.⁵ A report by The Food Trust on supermarket access in Texas found that an additional 185 supermarkets could be supported by the Houston area alone, and 589 more stores across the state.⁶ Supermarkets in Texas are also unevenly distributed among the population, leaving low-income neighborhoods underserved.⁷

An Urban Exodus

The grocery gap in underserved areas has historical roots. After the Great Depression supermarkets gradually replaced public markets as the main source of food in most communities. In the 1950s and 1960s, many middle-class Americans migrated from urban to suburban areas and the supermarkets followed them. This left many inner-city communities without a major food supplier. The gap has largely been filled by fast-food, convenience, and corner store retailers that offer predominately high-calorie, highly processed foods.⁸

Rural Realities

In rural areas the grocery gap has more to do with availability than affordability. As young families move away from rural areas and the population decreases, so does the availability of nutritious food.⁹ A rural food desert is defined as a census tract in which at least one half of the population lives more than ten miles from a large food store.¹⁰ The characteristics that rural food deserts tend to share include low percentages of individuals with a high school diploma, high individual

Improving Texans' Nutrition

and family poverty rates, and a large share of older adults.¹¹ In Texas, over one-quarter (26 percent) or 67 counties were classified as food deserts in 2000 with the vast majority located in West Texas and the Panhandle.¹² This is not surprising, given that Texas has among the highest poverty rates in the nation, and ranks last in the share of Texans 25 or older with a high school degree.¹³

The Link between Food Deserts, Diet-Related Illness, and Obesity

Over time, the incidence of diet-related diseases has increased in communities classified as food deserts. Though the rate of obesity and its co-morbidities has increased for all Americans, it is disproportionately high in minority and low income groups.¹⁴ These are the groups that are more likely to live in neighborhoods with less access to large grocery stores and greater access to retailers offering limited or no health food options.

A FEDERAL INVESTMENT

President Obama has made healthy food access a top priority of his administration. In 2010 he launched the national [Healthy Food Financing Initiative \(HFFI\)](#) and dedicated \$400 million to improving American's access to affordable, healthy foods. The President has continued to support and fund the HFFI in conjunction with the First Lady's Let's Move Campaign and included \$32 million in his 2013 budget proposal. The HFFI is administered through a partnership of three federal agencies:

[Department of the Treasury](#) – supports private sector financing of healthy foods options in distressed urban and rural communities through the New Market Tax Credit Program and Community Development Financial Institutions grant/loan program.

[Department of Health and Human Services](#) – supports community-based efforts to improve the economic and physical health of people in distressed areas with Community Economic Development (CED) program funds.

[Department of Agriculture](#) – supports public and private investments through loans, grants, promotion, and other programs designed to create healthy food options in food deserts across the country.

Texas—the state identified as having the largest grocery gap—had the 13th highest adult obesity rate and the seventh highest obesity rate for children in 2010. Approximately 70 percent of those overweight children will grow up to be overweight or obese adults. They will be at significant risk for Type II Diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, and cancer. These chronic diseases greatly affect state health care costs and productivity levels. The obesity crisis also affects our future economic competitiveness, since well-nourished, healthy children are more likely to attend school regularly and achieve academic success. A [2011 report by The Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts](#) found that obesity cost Texas businesses \$9.5 billion in 2009. The Comptroller projects that by 2030, obesity will cost Texas businesses \$32.5 billion per year if no action is taken.

Promising Models Offer Solutions

With the support of private and public investment, communities in Texas and across the country are experimenting with strategies to bring more grocery stores and other fresh food retailers to neighborhoods without access to healthy foods. These efforts have proven to be most successful when they take a comprehensive approach to food equity that is focused on improving health outcomes, spurring economic growth, and supporting the development of local and regional food systems. Experts emphasize the need to tailor the approach to each community, since different areas have unique needs and specific characteristics.¹⁵

THE FOOD TRUST SOLUTION

[The Food Trust](#) convened a group of leaders from the supermarket industry, government, and civic sector to examine the barriers to supermarket development in underserved communities and identify solutions.

This effort led to the creation of the Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative, a first of its kind grant and loan program to encourage supermarket development in underserved neighborhoods throughout the state.

The Fresh Food Financing Initiative is an \$85 million public-private partnership that provides funding for 88 fresh-food retail projects in 34 Pennsylvania counties, creating or preserving more than 5,000 jobs and improving access to healthy food for more than half a million people.

The Fresh Food Financing Initiative has become a model for communities nationwide committed to combating obesity and improving food access. Harvard University named the initiative one of the nation's most innovative government programs, and The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention selected the Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative to receive its Pioneering Innovation Award for the initiative's efforts toward obesity control and prevention.

Experts emphasize

innovation in store formats, food marketing, transportation, and community health promotion are all necessary to close the grocery gap.

In a state as large and diverse as Texas, determining the best course of action for increasing access to nutritious affordable food will vary greatly depending on the area. In urban areas, the Institute of Medicine and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend that state and local governments create incentive programs to attract supermarkets to neglected areas. The Center for Rural Affairs recommends using innovative ownership models to increase the number and stability of rural retailers.¹⁶ Experts also emphasize that innovation in store formats, food marketing, transportation, and community health promotion are all necessary to close the grocery gap.

Following these recommendations, cities and states across the nation have launched initiatives that seek to increase food equity, including:

- [The Food Trust's Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative](#)
- [New Orleans Fresh Food Retailer Initiative](#)
- [California FreshWorks Fund](#)
- [Illinois Fresh Food Fund](#)
- [NY Healthy Foods/Healthy Communities Fund](#)
- [NYC Fresh](#)
- [Louisiana Healthy Food Retail Act](#)
- [The Food Trusts' Healthy Corner Stores Initiative](#)
- [Kansas State University Rural Grocery Initiative](#)
- [Food for Good Farm Initiative at Paul Quinn College](#)

The success of these initiatives suggests that a strategic investment of public and private funds in retail initiatives can increase food equity while stimulating local economies. Given the geographic diversity of Texas, policymakers should explore different models to determine the best course of action for increasing food access and affordability in underserved areas.

THE CITY OF HOUSTON BLAZES A TRAIL

The City of Houston began the process of developing healthy retail options for their citizens and stimulating economic development in 2009.

[A collaborative initiative](#) between The Food Trust, the Houston Mayor's Office, and various public/private stakeholders has taken steps to assess community needs, determine barriers to retailers, and raise awareness and support around the issue.

More than 250,000 low-income Houstonians live over a mile from the nearest grocery store. These neighborhoods have higher rates of obesity, heart disease, and other diet-related health problems than communities with access to fresh and affordable retailers.¹⁹

Compelled by these striking data, the city is pressing forward with its own food financing initiative, serving as an example for the rest of the state.



Increasing Access to Healthy and Affordable Food is Just One Piece of the Puzzle

Researchers acknowledge that adding a large supermarket to an urban neighborhood, or a weekly farmer's market in a rural area, is just part of a broader solution to improve nutrition and reduce obesity within a community. These interventions alone won't reduce the rate of diabetes or obesity in a neighborhood, given that obesity is the result of the interaction of environmental, behavioral, and genetic factors.¹⁷ However, when combined with other interventions, increasing food equity in underserved areas can play a role in improving the nutritional health of our citizens.¹⁸

A COMMUNITY SOLUTION IN SOUTH DALLAS

Michael Sorrell, President of Paul Quinn College, decided to turn the university football field into a garden as an economic development strategy to bring healthier foods to the communities surrounding the school. Fifteen zip codes in Dallas have been designated as food deserts, and residents have to drive as far as 6 miles to the nearest supermarket.

Since developing the farm, PepsiCo has partnered with Paul Quinn College and helped to fund the project as part of its Food for Good campaign. The farm serves local residents and businesses through scheduled market hours and is planning to open a grocery store on campus.

Conclusion

Over the past decade, Texas has enacted significant legislation to improve child nutrition, increase opportunities for physical education in our schools, and create healthy communities. These policies have improved health outcomes in many communities and attracted the attention of policymakers, practitioners, and advocates in other states, who often look to Texas as a model for best practices in the battle against obesity. The success of anti-obesity interventions in Texas demonstrates the positive role government can play in improving the nutrition and health of its citizens. With existing initiatives to improve food access and affordability starting to show the potential for success, Texas policymakers should make food equity in underserved areas a priority, explore policies to replicate, and invest in bringing successful interventions to scale.

Resources

- [The Center for Public Health Nutrition, University of Washington](#)
- [The Food Trust](#)
- [Food Marketing Institute](#)
- [United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service](#)

More Information

CELIA COLE
cole@cphp.org
512.320.0222, ext. 110

JEANIE DONOVAN
*Public Policy Intern
also contributed to
this report.*



900 LYDIA STREET
AUSTIN, TEXAS 78702

T 512.320.0222
F 512.320.0227

Join the conversation



www.cphp.org

Endnotes

- 1 Drownowski, A, et al. "The Supermarket Gap; How to Ensure Equitable Access to Affordable, Healthy Foods," The Center for Public Health Nutrition, University of Washington, May 2010. Accessed at <http://depts.washington.edu/uwcphn/reports/cphnbrf051910.pdf>
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Cawley, John. "The Economics of Childhood Obesity," Health Affairs, March 2010, Volume 29:3: 364.
- 4 Ver Ploeg, M. et al., Access to Affordable and Nutritious Food, USDA Economic Research Service, Administrative Publication No. (AP-036) 160 pp, June 2009
- 5 Per capita figures derived from: Trade Dimensions International, Inc., 2009 Marketing Guidebook, Wilton, CT, US Census Bureau (2000).
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Manon, Giang, Treering, Food for Every Child: The Need for More Supermarkets in Houston, The Food Trust, December 2010.
- 8 Sean C. Lucan et al., "Storing Empty Calories and Chronic Disease Risk: Snack-Food Products, Nutritive Content, and Manufacturers in Philadelphia Corner Stores," Journal of Urban Health, 2010, 87 (3): 394-409.
- 9 Morton, L. Blanchard T., "Starved for Access: Life in Rural America's Food Deserts" Rural Realities, Volume 1, Issue 4, 2007. Accessed at: <http://ruralsociology.org/StaticContent/Publications/Ruralrealities/pubs/RuralRealities1-4.pdf>
- 10 Treuhaft, S. Karpyn, A., The Grocery Gap: Who Has Access to Healthy Food and Why It Matters, Policy Link & the Food Trust.
- 11 Morton, L. Blanchard T., 2007.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Assets and Opportunity Scorecard, CFED. Accessed at: <http://scorecard.assetsandopportunity.org/2012/measure/high-school-degree>.
- 14 Larson et al., "Neighborhood Environments: Disparities in Access to Healthy Foods in the United States," American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 2009.
- 15 Food Marketing Institute, "Access to Healthier Foods: Opportunities and Challenges for Food Retailers in Underserved Areas," July 2011.
- 16 Bailey, Jon, "Rural Grocery Stores: Ownership Models that Work for Rural Communities," Center for Rural Affairs, October 2010.
- 17 Morland et al., "Supermarkets, Other Food Stores, and Obesity: The Atherosclerosis Risk in Communities Study," American Journal of Preventive Medicine, April 2006.
- 18 Manon, Giang, Treering, December 2010.
- 19 "Where the Grocery Stores Aren't," UH's Community Design Resource Center, February 9, 2011. Accessed at: <http://swamplot.com/where-the-grocery-stores-arent/2011-02-09/>



CPPP CENTER for PUBLIC POLICY PRIORITIES

WORKING FOR A BETTER TEXAS™

For 25 years, the Center for Public Policy Priorities (CPPP) has been a nonpartisan, nonprofit policy institute committed to improving public policies to better the economic and social conditions of low- and moderate-income Texans. To learn more, visit us at:

- www.cphp.org
- www.facebook.com/BetterTexas
- www.twitter.com/CPPP_TX
- www.youtube.com/CPPPvideo