

ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOOD

THE PROBLEM

Accessing affordable, high-quality, and healthy food is a challenge for many Americans, particularly those living in low-income neighborhoods, communities of color, tribal communities, and rural areas. The United States Department of Agriculture estimates that 29.7 million people live in low-income areas more than 1 mile from a supermarket.¹ The same communities without supermarkets and grocery stores often feature fast food, liquor, and convenience stores selling unhealthy, high-fat, high-sugar foods. Low-income zip codes have 25 percent fewer supermarkets and 1.3 times as many convenience stores as middle-income zip codes.² Predominantly Black zip codes have about half as many supermarkets as predominantly White zip codes, and predominantly Latino areas have only a third as many. Many of the residents living in these underserved communities also lack reliable transportation. Nearly one-third of the U.S. population cannot easily access a grocery store, work, or other basic personal and family needs via personal or public transportation.³ This is particularly a challenge for people of color and low-income people.⁴ Accessing healthy food can mean multiple bus rides while carting groceries and children or scrambling to find someone with a car who is willing to drive to the nearest market. The absence of healthy food retailers doubly impacts low-income communities because these areas are often in great need of the jobs and economic activity that grocery stores and healthy food retail can provide.

THE SOLUTION

Over the past 20 years—with more than 300 studies completed—research shows that people who live in neighborhoods with better access to healthy food also tend to have better nutrition and better health.⁵ Efforts to expand fresh food options also provide opportunities to bring good neighborhood jobs and revitalize disinvested communities and struggling business districts. Working with residents and community partners, local governments have pursued a number of strategies that

improve both the economic and physical health of cities and their residents. Promising strategies include healthy food retail financing initiatives and incentives, targeted land use and planning regulations, local procurement, and entrepreneurship development.

POLICY ISSUES

HEALTHY FOOD RETAIL FINANCING: Healthy food retail such as grocery stores, corner stores, and farmers' markets provide important access points for a neighborhood. However, they are complex, capital-intensive businesses that operate on thin profit margins. Retail operators cite lack of financing as one of the top barriers to the development of stores in underserved areas, particularly for independent and regional operators who are more likely to consider locating their business in a disinvested community. High development costs, competition with large chain stores, and meeting the needs and preferences of the local customer base are also key factors in the success of a retail endeavor.

Building upon the success of state and federal programs like the Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative (FFFI) and the Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI), a number of cities and metropolitan areas have launched their own local healthy retail financing programs.^{6 7 8} **Houston, Washington DC,** and **New Orleans** have all created programs to expand or incentivize healthy food retail development in target neighborhoods. The New Orleans Fresh Food Retailer Initiative, launched in 2011, offers financial assistance and forgivable and/or low-interest loans, and helped to re-open the iconic Circle Food Store in the city's Seventh Ward that was devastated by Hurricane Katrina.⁹ In **Baltimore**, the city council recently approved legislation to offer 10-year tax incentives to attract and retain supermarkets located in or nearby designated food desert areas. **Los Angeles** and **Minneapolis** have also initiated programs to help corner stores, convenience stores and liquor stores convert into healthy food retail outlets.

DISTRIBUTION AND SUPPLY CHAIN: Agricultural and market consolidation has contributed to disconnected regional food supply chains, making it difficult for fresh produce grown by small and mid-sized local farms to reach independent grocers, institutional buyers, and low-income residents in greatest need. New models such as “food hubs,” which aggregate, distribute, and market food from local and regional producers, are emerging to link local producers and consumers in ways that spark job creation and small business development. Based in **Philadelphia**, Common Market has emerged as a regional food hub, connecting farmers to more than 150 public and private schools, colleges, universities, hospitals, workplaces, grocery stores, nonprofits, and faith institutions throughout the Delaware Valley.¹⁰ **Cleveland** worked with health care and education and foundation partners to launch the Evergreen Cooperative, including the Green City Growers Cooperative that supplies fresh produce to the city’s major retailers, wholesaler, and institutions. Public institutions that serve meals to vulnerable populations have also leveraged their procurement policies to improve healthy food access and revitalize local economies. The city of **Los Angeles** and **Los Angeles Unified School District** both adopted the Good Food Purchasing Program, a set of values-driven purchasing guidelines the center on sustainably-produced food and valued workforce created by the Los Angeles Food Policy Council.

PLANNING AND TRANSPORTATION BARRIERS: In addition to the transportation challenges described above, many existing zoning and planning regulations make it difficult for farmers’ markets, mobile vendors, community and urban gardens, and grocery stores to locate in an underserved community. Cities can take action to remove these barriers and expand food access. In Minnesota, the city of **Duluth** and the **Duluth Transit Authority** created the “Grocery Express,” new bus route that connects neighborhoods without access to fresh and healthy food to a network of nearby grocery stores.¹¹ In Tennessee, **Knoxville’s** area transit agency created the “Shop & Ride” program, which offers free return bus tickets for customers making a minimum \$10 purchase at partnering grocery stores. **Fresno** and **Minneapolis** removed zoning restrictions that prohibit farmers’ market development, and **New York City’s** Green Cart initiative authorized thousands of new permits for street vendors to sell healthy food options in low-income neighborhoods, many of which are operated by immigrant entrepreneurs. Cities have also supported urban agriculture by identifying and providing land and resources, such as city of **Seattle’s** efforts to inventory public land available for community gardens, and programs in **Madison, Cleveland,**

and **Boston** that offer grants for start-up and operation costs related to urban agriculture projects.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: Engaging community and food system stakeholders and is critical to ensure that healthy food access projects are responsive to the needs and context of a neighborhood. Key stakeholders may include community organizers and resident leaders, food access organizations, industry leaders, government and policy leaders, financial sector representatives, community development leaders, and public health leaders. Hundreds of cities have launched food policy councils to coordinate policymaking efforts, garner high-level political support, and conduct activities designed to solidify community backing. Visit the Food Policy Council Directory to learn more.¹²

LANDSCAPE AND RESOURCES

Visit the Healthy Food Access Portal, a one-stop online hub of data, information, and resources to support the successful planning and implementation of policies, programs, and projects to improve access to healthy foods in low-income and communities of color.¹³ The Portal is managed by **PolicyLink**, **The Food Trust**, and **Reinvestment Fund**. **Access to Healthy Food and Why it Matters** compiles and reviews the latest research on the health, economic, and community impacts of healthy food retail. **Economic and Community Development Outcomes of Healthy Food Retail** details the connections between healthy food retail and economic and community development outcomes.

NOTES

- 1 www.ers.usda.gov/publications/err-economic-research-report/err143.aspx
- 2 www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16997358
- 3 www.apha.org/-/media/files/pdf/factsheets/at_the_intersection_public_health_and_transportation.ashx
- 4 urbanpolicy.berkeley.edu/pdf/raphael.pdf
- 5 www.healthyfoodaccess.org/resources/library/access-to-healthy-food-and-why-it-matters-a-review-of-the-research
- 6 healthyfoodaccess.org/policy-efforts-and-impacts/state-and-local/pennsylvania
- 7 healthyfoodaccess.org/policy-efforts-and-impacts/federal
- 8 healthyfoodaccess.org/funding/healthy-food-financing-funds
- 9 healthyfoodaccess.org/resources/library/profile-circle-food-store-new-orleans-louisiana
- 10 www.healthyfoodaccess.org/resources/library/common-market-case-study
- 11 www.mprnews.org/story/2015/09/02/grocery-express
- 12 www.foodpolicynetworks.org/directory/online/index.html
- 13 healthyfoodaccess.org/

Co-authored by **PolicyLink**