

Grocery Gap

June 14, 2023

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. When kids live in households that do not have adequate access to grocery stores or other food retailers that offer nutritious foods, they are more likely to get sick and miss school, which could lower academic performance and test scores.
2. The introduction of healthy food retailers in food deserts can help revitalize neighborhoods and their surrounding communities by spurring economic growth and creating jobs.

Grocery Gap is the lack of access to nutritious, affordable, and higher quality foods in many low-income communities due to a lack of grocery stores in the community. (1)

- People living in areas lacking grocery stores, also known as food deserts, are more likely to experience food insecurity. (2)
 - Food insecurity is defined as the lack of consistent access to enough food for every person in a household to live an active, healthy lifestyle. (2,3)
- Food deserts are more common in lower-income and rural communities. These communities are less likely to have large supermarkets in the area, but more likely to have smaller stores with limited healthy food choices. (1)
 - Lower-income zip codes have 30% more convenience stores in their areas than zip codes with higher incomes. (1)
 - In addition, low-income communities tend to have more fast-food options than healthy food purveyors, which is often referred to as a "food swamp."



TRANSIT DESERTS
ARE AREAS THAT HAVE A HIGH
DEMAND FOR TRANSPORTATION
SERVICES BUT FEW OR
INSUFFICIENT PUBLIC TRANSIT
SYSTEMS.

*References 4 & 5

- Lack of transportation access to many stores, especially in rural and lower-income areas, exacerbates food insecurity for many residents. Living in an area with limited public transportation forces residents to rely on their own transportation to and from grocery stores. (4)
 - Food deserts can be caused by a lack of public transit systems. (4,5)
- Living in food deserts is frequently associated with higher rates of individuals experiencing food insecurity, and with chronic, diet-related diseases such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and obesity. (6)

How to Eliminate the Grocery Gap

- Developing retail outlets like farmers' markets, farm stands, and public markets can increase fresh food purchases and consumption. (6)
 - Incentive programs for small store owners to sell healthy foods and accept nutrition assistance program funding can improve access to fresh produce. (6)
 - Support of farmers' markets to grow and sell products in food desert areas can improve community access to fresh produce and support local farmers. (6)
- Improving transportation in lower-income and rural communities can increase access to larger supermarkets where residents can access nutritious foods. (7)
 - Adjusting the motor vehicle value limits that determine eligibility for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) will allow working households to have reliable transportation without losing their SNAP eligibility. (4)
 - Texas is currently one of 8% of states that do not exempt the value of at least one vehicle when determining SNAP eligibility. (4)
 - Starting September 2023, the vehicle asset limits in Texas will change. A family's vehicle cannot exceed the value of \$22,500 (previously \$15,000) and additional vehicles cannot exceed the value of \$8,700 (previously \$4650).
- Availability of healthy foods alone will not incentivize people to buy and eat these foods, especially if healthy foods remain more expensive than less healthful foods. (6)

Two programs may help bridge grocery gaps:



Double Up Food Bucks

A program to support healthy eating initiatives (8)



Produce Prescription Programs

programs to support the purchase and consumption of healthier foods (2)

Limited Food Access Affects Individuals and Communities

- In a study examining Central Texas 21-1 calls for emergency services in 2018, 11% of the calls were about food needs. People who lived in semi-rural or rural zip codes without a supermarket had greater odds of calling 2-1-1 services about food needs compare to those who lived in a zip code with a supermarket. (9)
- For every 1% increase in the number of Texans experiencing food insecurity, annual healthcare costs increased by \$400 million. (10)

Impact of Food Insecurity on Children and School Outcomes

- In 2020, 13.7% of Texas households experienced food insecurity, including approximately 22% (1.6 million) children. (11-13)
- Children spend a large portion of their waking hours at school, making school an integral setting for providing and promoting healthy foods to students. (7)
- Students who experience food insecurity, regardless of whether they live in a food desert, are 57% more likely to be absent from school due to an increased likelihood of illness. (13,14)
 - Poor attendance impacts students' academic performance, lowers test scores, and increased the rate of grade retention/repetition. (13-15)

TEXAS
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OF
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IN THE NATION

*References 11-13

Moving Forward

- Implementing free, federally funded meal programs during school hours, such as National School Lunch Program and Community Eligibility Provisions (CEP) helps to provide nutritious meals to students each day. (7)
- Screening tools can be used to identify food insecurity in physicians' offices and may enable the development of targeted programs, amplifying efforts to address nutrition and food insecurity. (13)
 - For more on screening tools, see the TX RPC Project Food Insecurity Brief.

Additional Resources

[Community Eligibility Provisions](#)

Food Insecurity in Texas brief (upon request)

School Meal Program brief (upon request)

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