

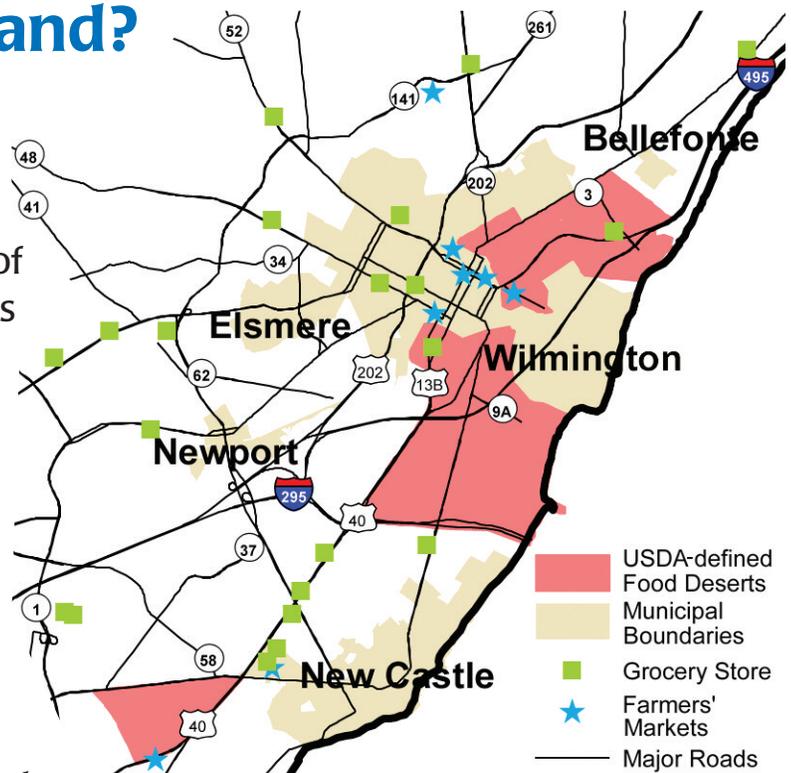
Access to Healthy Foods in the Built Environment

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What is the Issue at Hand?

Research suggests that residents who have better access to supermarkets and other fresh food retailers tend to have healthier diets and lower levels of obesity. However, for decades, millions of Americans—especially those living in low-income communities—have suffered as grocery stores and fresh, affordable food has disappeared from their neighborhoods. Without access to healthy foods, a nutritious diet and good health are unattainable. Without grocery stores and other fresh-food retailers, communities are missing the commercial centers that help their local economies thrive.



Food Deserts in New Castle County

more at www.ipa.udel.edu/healthyDEtoolkit/foods/maps.html

Many poor and rural areas do not have adequate access to healthy-food retailers. These communities often have easier access to fast-food restaurants and convenience stores, which offer a limited variety of food, most specializing in highly processed foods. Research shows that the lack of access to healthy foods is a major contributor to the country's growing obesity epidemic and only further emphasizes the importance of accessibility to healthy-food options.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "overweight" and "obese" are both labels for ranges of weight that are greater than what is generally considered healthy for a given height. An adult who has a body mass index (BMI) between 25 and 29.9 is considered overweight, and an adult who has a BMI of 30 or higher is considered obese. In Delaware, adult obesity has increased 65 percent in the past 12

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years, and there has been a tripling of overweight and obesity among children in the past decade with approximately 40 percent of Delaware’s children now overweight or obese.¹

Food Deserts

A food desert is defined as a geographical area in the United States, particularly in lower-income neighborhoods and communities, where access to affordable, quality, and nutritious foods is limited.² Nutritious foods are defined as those that follow the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which are designed to promote health and reduce the risk of major chronic diseases.

In order to fully understand and categorize the severity of food deserts, the USDA measures the accessibility to healthy foods by the distance from consumers’ residences to the nearest food retailer that offers healthy and affordable foods. Three categories of access (high, medium, and low) were created for two types of access—walking access and driving access.² Descriptions for the categories are provided below:

Walking Access

| Level of Access | Distance from Supermarket |
|-----------------|---------------------------|
| High | within 1/2 mile |
| Medium | between 1/2 and 1 mile |
| Low | more than 1 mile |

Driving Access

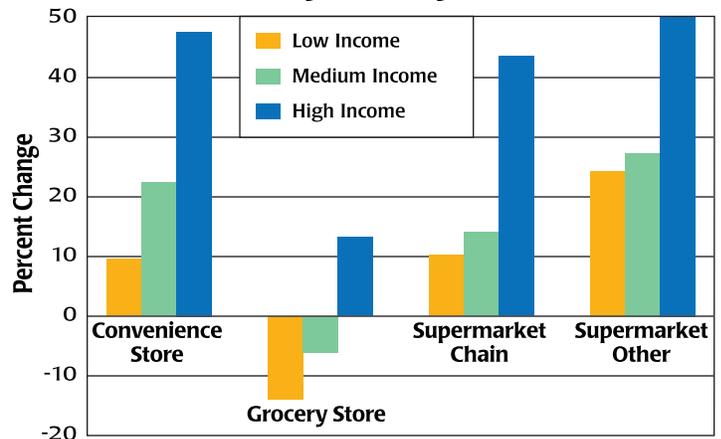
| Level of Access | Distance from Supermarket |
|-----------------|---------------------------|
| High | within 10 miles |
| Medium | between 10 and 20 miles |
| Low | more than 20 miles |

Issues and Implications

In 2009, 23.5 million Americans lacked access to a supermarket within a mile of their home. An additional 3.4 million households lived less than a mile away from a

supermarket but were still limited in vehicle accessibility.² Low-income and predominately minority communities are most affected. One nationwide study found that 1) zip codes comprising lower-income households have 25 percent fewer supermarkets than do zip codes comprising higher-income households and 2) African-American populations had half as much access to chain supermarkets as do Caucasians, controlling for other factors.³ An additional longitudinal study comparing the changes of food availability in 1997 versus 2008 showed that lower-income and predominantly African-American neighborhoods had the smallest growth in overall access to food stores and the largest decrease in the number of grocery stores since 1997⁴.

Access to Healthy Foods by Income Level



Source: Lisa M. Powell, ImpacTeen Project, University of Illinois at Chicago. Data drawn from Dun & Bradstreet, 1997 and 2008

Delaware’s communities reflect similar food-access issues. Of the 215 census tracts in Delaware, 142 census tracts (or 61% of the population) lack a grocery store. An additional 56 census tracts (or approximately 27% of the population) have only one grocery store in the area.

To further compare access to healthy foods in Delaware among other U.S. states, it was determined that Delaware ranks 15th in the nation for the percentage of census tracts with access to healthy-food retailers within one-half mile. Delaware also ranks 27th in the nation in the number of farmers’ markets per 100,000 residents, with an average of 1.8 farmers’ markets per 100,000 people.⁵ Farmers’ markets

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can be an integral part in improving access to healthy foods, because they allow consumers to have access to locally grown, farm-fresh produce while enabling farmers the opportunity to develop a personal relationship with their customers. And, unlike most states, Delaware has a low percentage of farmers' markets that accept food-assistance vouchers. For example, none of Delaware's farmers' markets accept Electronic Benefit Transfers (EBTs), and only 6.3 percent accept WIC and FMNP coupons⁴.

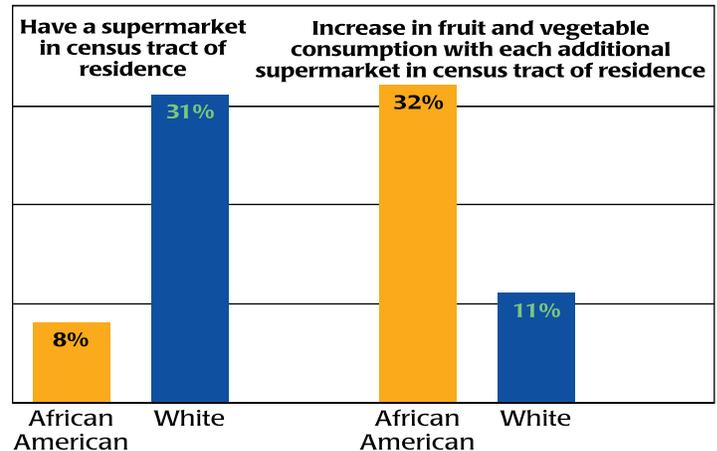
Additional information relating to access to healthy foods in Delaware can be found in the online Toolkit for a Healthy Delaware (www.ipa.udel.edu/healthyDEtoolkit). This site contains:

- GIS maps illustrating the availability of grocery stores and farmers' markets located in Delaware and layers of population data to illustrate the complexity of the issue.
- Information on transportation, land-use, and economic-development initiatives underway in other states.
- Additional resources to help provide a greater understanding of the issue.

Food Access and Dietary Habits

Obesity is not caused by one particular factor. Rather, it is often tied to a combination of environmental, behavioral, and genetic factors. It may be counterintuitive to think that lack of access to food is related to obesity. However, because some populations don't have access to fresh, locally grown foods, they rely on inexpensive, high-calorie, energy-dense options that lead to excess weight gain. Given the research that shows a positive relationship between the number of grocery stores located in a community and the consumption of fruits and vegetables, it is important to identify appropriate policies that can help promote healthier eating habits and lifestyles. For example, in a study of 10,230 adults living in 208 urban, suburban, and rural census tracts in four states, it was determined that for every additional supermarket located in the census tract, consumption of fruit and vegetables rose 32 percent among African Americans and 11 percent among whites.⁶

Access to Supermarkets and Consumption of Fruits and Vegetables by Race, 2002



Source: Morland et al., 2002

Current and Future Initiatives

Innovative programs and policies designed to reduce the effects of limited access to affordable and nutritious foods have been considered and implemented nationally. Successful programs demand involvement at the local, state, and federal level and focus on using an array of approaches. Some successful solutions include streamlining the development processes for potential grocery stores, offering technical assistance to corner stores stocking healthy-food options, introducing farmers' markets and community gardens to urban areas, expanding food-assistance policies, and using alternative planning approaches to effectively reduce access problems in the built environment.

Effective local programs, such as those implemented in Pennsylvania by The Food Trust and in New York City by the New York City Health Department, provide evidence of well-targeted financial and technical assistance that can help businesses in providing better options among communities that have limited access to healthy foods. These investments not only improve food options but can also create jobs and help revitalize distressed communities.⁷

Identification of investments and programs already underway in other states may provide appropriate models for Delaware's lawmakers,

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community groups, and state agencies. For example, Delaware recently became the third state to launch “cyber-crop” and “cyber-shop” programs. These websites are modeled after projects developed by the Environmental Finance Center at the University of Maryland’s National Center for Smart Growth Research and Education.⁸ Economically, these programs are beneficial both to farmers and consumers alike, because consumers are able to purchase local, seasonal produce while helping farmers better understand its supply and demand. Additionally, the Delaware Department of Agriculture (DDA) and the state’s Government Information Center (GIC) recently released a new mobile application for locating *Delaware Fresh* produce at all on-farm and farmers’ markets in the state. The app is free to iPhone users and provides information about market locations, contact information, and a description of available items.⁹

In May 2011 a forum, organized by and in collaboration with the Delaware Coalition for Healthy Eating and Active Living (DE HEAL), Delaware Division of Public Health, Delaware Chapter of the American Planning Association, and the University of Delaware’s Institute for Public Administration, addressed the issue. The goal of the forum was to bring together agencies, organizations, and community leaders to discuss innovative, sustainable policy options that can lead to a healthier Delaware.

In addition, with President Obama’s 2011 budget proposal calling for more than \$400 million to establish a national Healthy Food Financing Initiative, it is hoped larger-scale solutions will only be further developed in the future.⁶

Summary

While the United States boasts one of the most abundant food supplies in the world, disparities in access, affordability, and quality have continued to plague communities and

neighborhoods throughout the country. With millions of Americans without access to healthy foods, the alarming rates of obesity and diet-related diseases will continue to increase. However, it has recently been demonstrated through promising programs and policies that the challenges to increasing access to healthy foods in underserved communities can be resolved. Delaware continues to be involved in the discussion surrounding this important issue and by utilizing the resources available in the online Toolkit (www.ipa.udel.edu/healthyDEtoolkit), those involved are provided the necessary tools to do so.

It is hoped that continuing research on the issue will encourage local, state, and national attention and allow policymakers, community leaders, and advocates to explore solutions that address the role that access to healthy foods plays in promoting healthy economies, healthy communities, and healthy people.

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