

Starvation Nation: Rural Food Deserts¹

The IPRO report examines state policies for combating the prevalence of food deserts in rural areas.

Definitions

Food desert: a low-income area with limited access to affordable and nutritious food, which includes fresh fruits, vegetables, whole grains, low-fat milk, and other foods that make up the full range of a healthy diet.^{2,3}

Rural food desert: A low-income⁴ area in which at least 500 persons or at least 33 percent of the population live more than 10 miles from a supermarket or large grocery store.⁵

Food insecurity: the state of not having access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life.⁶

Overview

Over the past 30 years, rural areas have gradually experienced a growth in food deserts, where residents must drive long distances to access affordable healthy food. Food production and distribution have grown increasingly concentrated among a small number of corporations, while nonmetropolitan areas continue to depopulate. As a result, large food retail chains locate in counties' biggest towns and compete heavily with smaller supermarkets. These supermarkets survive on tight profit margins in towns with small populations, and even slight downturns in sales from new competition can force them to close. Small rural towns are thus left without nearby supermarkets, and new food stores are not readily motivated to locate in places with small populations.⁷ Residents living in these rural food deserts therefore must drive long distances to the larger towns' retail food chains to maintain affordable healthy diets. Those without or with limited access to a vehicle rely heavily on smaller establishments such as gas stations and convenience stores, which typically

¹ This IPRO report was prepared by University of Iowa undergraduate students Liz Schorsch (<elizabeth-schorsch@uiowa.edu>) and Audrey Williams (<audrey-williams@uiowa.edu>).

² "CDC Features – Food Deserts." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Web. 30 Oct. 2011. <<http://www.cdc.gov/features/fooddeserts/>>.

³ States. Cong. Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008. 110th Cong., 1st sess. S 7527a. Washington: GPO, 2008. Web. 20 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-110publ234/html/PLAW-110publ234.htm>>.

⁴ The USDA, Treasury, and DHHS define "low-income" as "having: a) a poverty rate of 20 percent or greater, OR b) a median family income at or below 80 percent of the area median family income."

⁵ "Creating Access to Healthy, Affordable Food." USDA Agricultural Marketing Service. Web. 30 Oct. 2011. <<http://apps.ams.usda.gov/fooddeserts/foodDeserts.aspx>>.

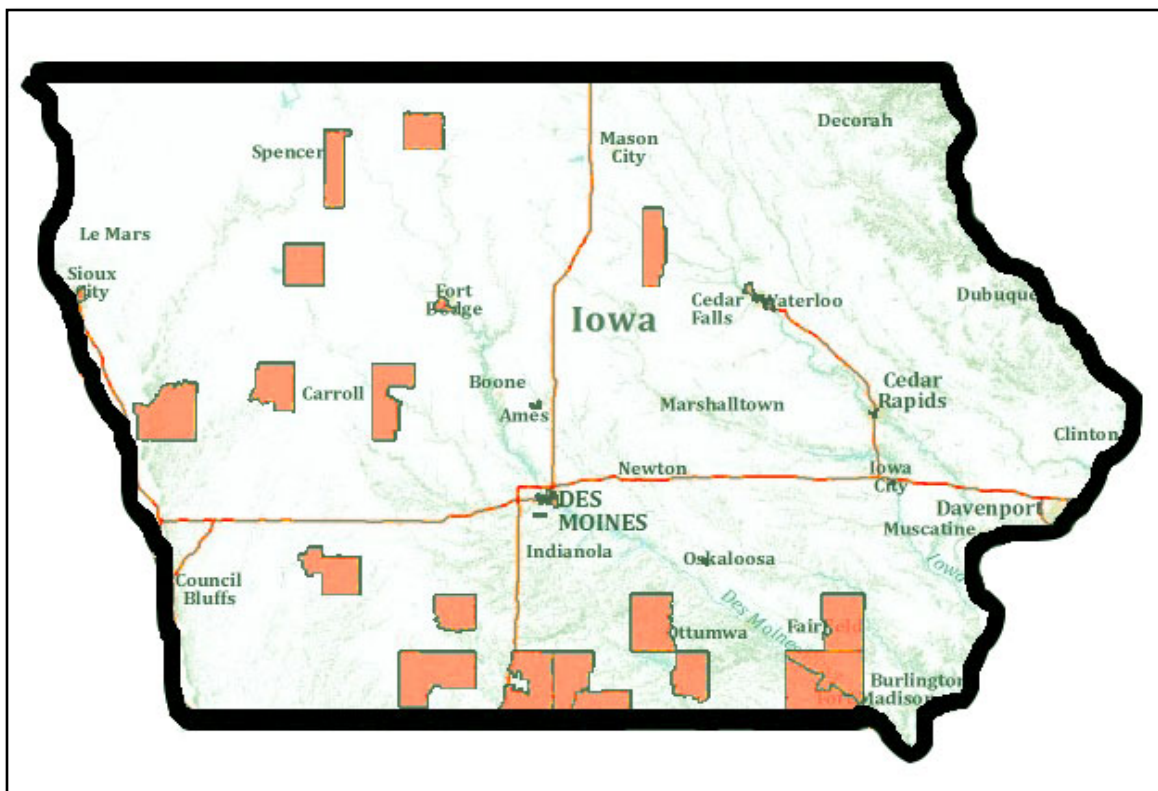
⁶ "Food Security." World Health Organization. Web. 30 Oct. 2011. <<http://www.who.int/trade/glossary/story028/en/>>.

⁷ Hinrichs, C. Clare, Thomas A. Lyson. *Remaking the North American Food System: Strategies for Sustainability*. University of Nebraska Press (2008), 201-213. Web. 4 Dec. 2011. <<http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=mILfIjh356sC&oi=fnd&pg=PA201&dq=Research+Initiation+Program+at+Mississippi+State+University+rural+food+deserts&ots=0TT3eg0Hy8&sig=eFXilnzLEZ9wTJU11eKnO0dV9ns#v=onepage&q&f=false>>.

provide fewer healthy options and higher prices.⁸ Those with access to a vehicle incur travel costs, which can nullify the cost savings at a food retail chain.⁹

Counties with rural food deserts on average are poorer, less educated, and contain greater elderly populations than counties without.¹⁰ Rural food deserts also disproportionately affect American Indian communities.¹¹ According to the Food Desert Locator, 24 Iowa counties contain food deserts, most of them in rural areas (see Figure 1).¹²

Figure 1¹³
Food Deserts in Iowa



⁸ Kaufman, Phil R. "Rural Poor Have Less Access to Supermarkets, Large Grocery Stores." *Rural Development Perspectives* 13:3 (1999). Web. 14 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/rdp/rdp1098/rdp1098c.pdf>>.

⁹ Hinrichs, C. Clare, Thomas A. Lyson. *Remaking the North American Food System: Strategies for Sustainability*. University of Nebraska Press (2008), 201-213. Web. 4 Dec. 2011.

¹⁰ Brown, David L., Kai A. Schafft. *Rural People and Communities in the 21st Century: Resilience and Transformation*. Polity 2011, 71.

¹¹ Gray, Steven. "Can America's Urban Food Deserts Bloom?" *TIME Magazine* 26 May 2009. Web. 14 Nov. 2011.

¹² "Food Desert Locator." *Economic Research Service*. U.S. Department of Agriculture. Web. 13 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.ers.usda.gov/data/fooddesert/fooddesert.html>>.

¹³ Map created using the Food Desert Locator: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data/fooddesert/fooddesert.html>

Costs

State Money

Pennsylvania and New York have developed programs that each requires \$30 million in state funds.¹⁴

No Guarantees on Consumer Choices

There is evidence that people still purchase and consume unhealthy foods even with access to supermarkets that have wider food options. One study by University of Minnesota and Iowa State University found that factors such as family influence, eating habits from childhood, and overall personal preference can affect food choice more than concerns for health.¹⁵

Big-Box Stores

Large stores containing supermarkets, such as Wal-Mart, can actually decrease a community's ability to lower its poverty rates. A study published in *Social Science Quarterly* found that counties with more Wal-Marts in 1987 had higher poverty rates in 1999 than counties with fewer or no Wal-Marts in 1987, controlling for other factors affecting poverty.¹⁶

Benefits

Health benefits

Fighting Obesity

A study published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* found that the presence of supermarkets in an area was associated with lower overweight and obesity rates and a lower hypertension rate.¹⁷

Preventing disease

The consumption of fresh fruits, vegetables, nuts, and whole grains is linked to a reduced risk of cardiovascular disease (CVD) and benefits in fighting lung and stomach cancers. A lack of these foods in consumers' diets due to limited access could contribute to higher risk of CVD, especially if foods high in saturated and trans fat are more accessible and inexpensive.¹⁸

¹⁴ New York Healthy Food & Communities Fund." Empire State Development. Web. 13 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.esd.ny.gov/BusinessPrograms/HealthyFoodHealthyCommunities.html>>.

¹⁵ Smith, Cheryl, Lois W. Morton. "Rural Food Deserts: Low-income Perspectives on Food Access in Minnesota and Iowa." *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* 41:3 (May-June 2009), 176-187. Web. 14 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1499404608007562>>.

¹⁶ Goetz, Stephan J., Hema Swaminathan. "Wal-Mart and County-Wide Poverty." *Social Science Quarterly* (June 2006) 87: 2. Web. 1 Dec. 2011. <<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1540-6237.2006.00377.x/abstract>>.

¹⁷ Morland, Kimberly et al. "Supermarkets, Other Food Stores, and Obesity: The Atherosclerosis Risk in Communities Study." *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 30:4 (2006), 333-339. Web. 14 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0749379705004836>>.

¹⁸ Ver Ploeg, Michele. "Access to Affordable and Nutritious Food: Measuring and Understanding Food Deserts and Their Consequences: Report to Congress." DIANE Publishing (2010). Web. 15 Nov. 2011.

Ensuring proper childhood health and development

Food insecurity affected by limited access to affordable, healthy food can contribute to overt hunger, nutrient deficiencies, and poor growth in children. These problems can lead to delayed cognitive development and decreased resistance to infection.¹⁹

Economic Benefits

Jobs

Creating new supermarkets in areas where they are scarce creates or retains jobs related to the industry. Pennsylvania's Fresh Food Financing Initiative (detailed below) created nearly 5,000 jobs between 2004 and 2009.²⁰

Fiscal

New supermarkets provide local governments with more tax revenue. In addition, these stores capture local dollars that would otherwise be spent outside the community, thus recycling money within the local economy. In addition, these supermarkets "generate increased foot traffic" and become a draw for "retail stores that sell complementary goods and services."²¹

State Action

Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania established the Fresh Food Financing Initiative (FFFI) in 2004 as part of a partnership with the non-profit The Food Trust to increase the number of supermarkets and grocery stores in underserved communities across the state. It partners the state with private organizations to provide one-time grants and loans for the start up of qualified food retail enterprises in needy communities.²² Pennsylvania committed \$30 million to this initiative, and partners such as The Reinvestment Fund have provided more than \$120 million.

These start-up grants and loans aid supermarket operators with predevelopment costs including land acquisition financing, equipment financing, capital grants for project funding gaps, construction and permanent finance, and workforce development. Operators are often hesitant to commit such substantial funds to a supermarket in economically depressed areas, because they believe the return will not justify the investment. FFFI works on the assumption that food deserts in fact can provide enough demand for supermarkets to succeed.²³

¹⁹ Glasglow, Nina et al. "Critical Issues in Rural Health." Wiley-Blackwell (2004), 102-104. Web. 18 Nov. 2011. <http://books.google.com/books?id=vglX3R7DOzMC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Critical+Issues+in+Rural+Health&hl=en&ei=piTcTsnZFIX30gHN1tTVDQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CDgQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

²⁰ "Evans' Fresh Food Financing Initiative goes national." State Representative Dwight Evans. Spring 2010. Web. 30 Oct. 2011. <http://www.pahouse.com/pr/203_Winter_NL_2010.pdf>.

²¹ Flournoy, Rebecca. "Healthy Foods, Strong Communities." *NHI: Shelterforce*. Fall 2006. Web. 3 Dec. 2011. <<http://www.nhi.org/online/issues/147/healthyfoods.html>>.

²² Stores eligible for FFFI grants and loans must: A) be located in low- to moderate-income census tracts, B) provide a full selection of fresh foods, C) locate in areas that are currently underserved.

²³ "Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative." American Planning Association, Pennsylvania chapter. August 2008. Web. 30 Oct. 2011.

<http://www.planningpa.org/presentations08/fresh_food_financing.pdf>.

As of June 2010, FFFI received 206 applications from across Pennsylvania and approved 93 for funding, providing over \$73 million in loans and over \$12 million in grants providing over 400,000 state residents with better access to healthy, affordable food. These projects as of 2009 created more than 1.5 million square feet of fresh food retail space.²⁴

FFFI has supported start-up supermarkets in 26 counties excluding the Philadelphia area. Approved stores in rural areas are usually family-owned businesses ranging from 12 thousand to 22 thousand square feet, with 10 to 94 full- and part-time employees.²⁵

New York

In 2009, New York created the Healthy Food & Healthy Communities (HFHC) initiative. The initiative's fund is a \$30 million statewide program that gives grants and loans for predevelopment costs to eligible supermarket operators who wish to locate in needy areas.^{26, 27} The fund also receives investment from capital partners: \$20 million from Goldman Sachs and \$10 million from the New York State Health Foundation.²⁸

The first recipient of HFHC funds was the Conklin Reliable Market in Conklin, New York, a rural town of about 6000 people. The family-run market, which serves a low- to moderate-income area with limited fresh food options, received a predevelopment grant in 2010 to initiate a doubling in size of its existing store. The expansion would increase Conklin Reliable Market's perishable food department and implement energy efficiency improvements.²⁹

The HFHC Fund also provided a grant in 2011 to supermarket operators to open MyTown Marketplace in Highland Falls, New York, a small town of about 5,000 people. Highland Falls was left without a fresh food store when its only supermarket closed in 2010. Mayor Joseph D'Onofrio had to negotiate with the Town of Highlands and Orange County to provide weekly bus service to a grocery store 11 miles away. The new MyTown Marketplace is 12,000 square feet and includes a more expansive perishable foods department than the original supermarket.³⁰

²⁴ "Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative." The Reinvestment Fund. Web. 13 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.trfund.com/financing/realestate/NFFFI.html>>.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ "New York Healthy Food & Communities Fund." Empire State Development. Web. 13 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.esd.ny.gov/BusinessPrograms/HealthyFoodHealthyCommunities.html>>.

²⁷ Supermarkets eligible to receive these grants or loans must locate in underserved areas, defined as one of the following: 1) A low- or moderate-income census tract, 2) A census tract with below average food market density, 3) A food market site with a customer base of 50% or more living in a low-income census tract.

(from "New York Healthy Food & Communities Fund." Empire State Development. Web. 13 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.esd.ny.gov/BusinessPrograms/HealthyFoodHealthyCommunities.html>>.)

²⁸ "Governor Paterson Launches Public-Private Partnership To Expand Grocery Stores In Underserved Neighborhoods." *The Street*. Web. 13 Nov. 2011 <<http://www.thestreet.com/story/10875384/governor-paterson-launches-public-private-partnership-to-expand-grocery-stores-in-underserved-neighborhoods.html>>.

²⁹ "New York Healthy Food & Healthy Communities Fund Announces First Grant Recipient." *The Gov Monitor*. Web. 13 Nov. 2011. <http://www.thegovmonitor.com/world_news/untied_states/new-york-healthy-food-healthy-communities-fund-announces-first-grant-recipient-44209.html>.

³⁰ "Mid-Hudson Valley Community Celebrates New Supermarket & New Jobs." Press Releases – Low Income Investment Fund. Web. 13 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.liifund.org/news/post/mid-hudson-valley-community-celebrates-new-supermarket-new-jobs/>>.

Alternative Policies

Mobile Grocery Stores

In April 2011, MoGro—a mobile grocery for the Native American community of Snato Domingo Pueblo, New Mexico—was created. MoGro is dedicated to providing “healthy, affordable food to under-served communities.”³¹ The mobile grocery was well-received by 100 customers—double the projections—and “[c]ustomer receipts reflected the majority of items purchased were produce, reinforcing MoGro’s mission to bring healthy, fresh, affordable food to Pueblo Communities.”³² MoGro has since suspended operations to expand the variety of products available to its customers.

While MoGro has been a civilian initiative, the discourse on mobile groceries as a tool for addressing food deserts has been growing. The United States Department of Agriculture has been considering the possibility of innovative delivery options in urban and rural food deserts.³³ Chicago also has its own mobile grocery: Fresh Moves, which began operations in May 2011.³⁴

The Rural Grocery Store Sustainability Initiative

Kansas State University currently has in place an initiative to “identify and develop models to sustain retail sources of food for rural Kansas citizens.”³⁵ The initiative has currently identified “200 grocery stores in rural towns across Kansas with populations under 2,000.”³⁶ The overarching goal of the initiative is to create a forum for rural grocers and to provide research and best practices to those grocers.

This report was prepared in December 2011 by the Iowa Policy Research Organization (IPRO), a non-partisan public policy undergraduate group at the University of Iowa. For additional research on this or other issues, please visit our website at <http://www.uiowa.edu/~ipro/> or contact rene-rocha@uiowa.edu.

³¹ *MoGro: mobile Grocery*. MoGro, LLC, *n.d.* Web. 14, Nov. 2011.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Gustafson, Katherine. “Can USDA Mobile Grocery Store Eliminate Rural Food Deserts?” *Change.org*. Change.org Inc, 12 May 2010. Web. 14 Nov. 2011. <<http://news.change.org/stories/can-usda-mobile-grocery-stores-eliminate-rural-food-deserts>>.

³⁴ Guzzardi, Will. “Fresh Moves Mobile Grocery Store An Innovative Solution To Food Deserts.” *The Huffington Post* 16 June 2011. Web. 14 Nov. 2011. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/06/16/fresh-moves-mobile-grocer_n_878414.html>.

³⁵ “About the Initiative.” *Rural Grocery Store Sustainability Initiative*. Kansas State University, 23 May 2008. Web. 14 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.k-state.edu/cced/initiatives/grocerystore/>>.

³⁶ *Ibid.*