



## ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOODS

Research shows that programs that increase access to healthy food—including local grocery stores, corner markets, farmer’s markets and food vendors—can help improve health.

Research suggests that communities with access to healthy foods, particularly to fresh fruits and vegetables, have better eating habits and better health outcomes than do communities with limited access to such foods, often referred to as “food deserts.”<sup>1</sup> Locally available healthy foods is one part of a strategy to improve community health and fight obesity.

Healthy eating and positive health outcomes—including lower rates of obesity and chronic diseases linked to obesity—are tied to higher quality of life,<sup>2</sup> lower medical expenditures,<sup>3</sup> improved educational outcomes,<sup>4</sup> and more productive workers.<sup>5</sup>

### Supermarkets and grocery stores

Opening a new retail supermarket or grocery store in a food desert has the greatest potential impact, in terms of number of residents reached, of any intervention intended to increase access to healthy, affordable foods.

- Outcomes associated with the presence of a neighborhood grocery store include an increase in residents’ fruit and vegetable consumption,<sup>6</sup> suggesting healthier diets, and lower levels of obesity.<sup>7</sup>
- In a study of the relationship between food store access and dietary habits of recipients of food stamps, researchers found that individuals with easy access to a grocery store increased their consumption of fruit by 84 grams per day, or approximately one-fifth the recommended daily intake of fruits and vegetables.<sup>8</sup>

Technical assistance resources have been created<sup>9</sup> to address challenges in developing new stores, which can include attracting retailers, site selection and high cost.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, recognizing the potential market opportunities in urban communities, large retail stores are increasingly opening smaller-scale versions.<sup>11</sup>

Creative financing mechanisms developed in recent years have spurred development of new stores in low-income communities. The Fresh Food Financing Initiative—developed

and first implemented in 2004 in Pennsylvania and replicated across the country and by the federal government—helped fund the development of 80 new grocery stores that reached more than 450,000 new residents by 2010.<sup>12</sup>

## Corner store improvement initiatives

Residents of low-income communities without a supermarket often rely on small-scale corner stores.<sup>13</sup> Such stores typically offer minimal fresh and low-fat products.<sup>14</sup> Children who purchase snacks at corner stores on their way to and from school typically select high-caloric, low-nutritive products, contributing to higher rates of obesity of children in low-income communities.<sup>15</sup>

Corner store improvement initiatives that partner with owners to increase the availability of healthy options<sup>16</sup> have cropped up across the country in recent years, including in the San Francisco Bay Area,<sup>17</sup> Hartford,<sup>18</sup> New York City,<sup>19</sup> Philadelphia,<sup>20</sup> Washington, DC,<sup>21</sup> Baltimore<sup>22</sup> and New Orleans.<sup>23</sup> The 300-member Healthy Corner Store Network offers technical assistance and peer-to-peer learning opportunities for its members ([www.healthycornerstores.org](http://www.healthycornerstores.org)).

- Corner store improvement interventions are feasible to implement and have the potential to improve the quality of dietary intake for residents of poor and minority communities.<sup>24</sup>
- In Baltimore, researchers at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health found that stocking and promoting healthy foods in corner stores in low-income communities resulted in increased sales of foods such as low-sugar cereals and low-fat salad dressing.<sup>25</sup>
- Residents in New Orleans who lived within 100 meters of a corner store that sold fresh vegetables consumed nearly one additional serving per day as compared with residents who lived further from such stores.<sup>26</sup>
- A study of New York City's Healthy Bodega's program found that 45 percent of the stores reported an increase in low-fat milk sales and 32 percent of stores reported more customers bought fruit. The study also reported that it helps to provide store owners with training and technical support, as well as marketing materials and other promotional support.<sup>27</sup>

## Farmers' markets

Although they occupy a relatively small market share of food sales,<sup>28</sup> farmers' markets are widely recognized as an important venue that offers high-quality fresh fruits and vegetables directly from local farms. Many farmers' markets reach low-income families through their acceptance of public benefits, including Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) access cards and Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) vouchers.

- In a survey of customers at farmers' markets in low-income communities in three different cities, more than 70 percent of respondents indicated that they shopped at the market because prices were better compared to alternative local retail food outlets.<sup>29</sup>
- Due to competition, the introduction of a farmers' market in one former food desert decreased the price of groceries in the neighborhood by 12 percent over three years.<sup>30</sup>

Coupon programs have been created to enhance the purchasing power of low-income families. An extensive network of farmers' markets in Philadelphia offers a \$2 coupon toward additional market purchases for every \$5 spent on an EBT card.<sup>31</sup> New York City offers a similar program, where a \$5 purchase leverages a "Health Buck" coupon.<sup>32</sup>

## Mobile vending

Mobile vendors, whether in vehicles or street carts, are a relatively new outlet for expanding healthy food options in low-income communities. Several jurisdictions, including Oakland, New York City, Kansas City, Los Angeles and Chicago, have amended their laws to create an incentive for mobile vending operators to sell healthy foods.<sup>33</sup> New York City's Green Cart program, which allows vendors to sell only uncut fruits and vegetables, includes more than 500 carts located in food deserts throughout the city's five boroughs.<sup>34</sup>

- After the addition of a Green Cart to a New York City neighborhood classified as a food desert, the percentage of surveyed adults who consumed 5 or more servings of vegetables in the previous day increased by 3.3 percent.<sup>35</sup>

This Research Overview is part of a series that summarizes academic studies on the relationship between community development and health, education, and other aspects of community well-being.

**For more information on these health studies and others, visit [www.instituteccd.org/health](http://www.instituteccd.org/health).**

## ENDNOTES

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