

Food Insecurity, Health, and Public Policy: An Analysis of Michigan's Food System

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Food Insecurity in America

About **49 million** people lived in food insecure households in 2012. Roughly **15%** of American households are food insecure.

- **25%** of food insecure households are inhabited by Blacks.
- **23%** are occupied by Hispanics.
- **33%** of those in food insecure households are children.
- **35%** of the food insecure households are female-headed.
- **40%** of such households are below the poverty level.

Food Insecurity in Michigan

Michigan has high levels of food insecurity

- **18%** of Michigan's households are food insecure
- **25%** of children in Michigan live in food insecure households
- Many Michigan residents live in areas where they have limited access to grocery stores selling healthy and affordable foods.

A Systems Approach to Studying Food Access

- Develop Neighborhood Food Access Index (NFAI)
- Agricultural Producers (farms, farmers' markets, gardens, Community Supported Agriculture, Coops)
- Food Retailers (grocery stores and other purveyors)
- Supply Chain (processors, distributors, manufacturers)
- Restaurants (fast food, non-fast-food, ethnic)
- Other Locations of food service (schools, hospitals)
- Food Providers or Services (emergency food assistance)
- Food Policies (barriers to food production and distribution)
- Nutrition education and behavior change.

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Health Impacts of Food Insecurity:

- The consumption of high-calorie, unhealthy food is linked to obesity, diabetes, and other illnesses.
- Obesity is increasing among the poor.

Why focus on Michigan?

- Michigan was ranked as the 5th most obese state in the nation in 2012 – 31.3% of the residents were considered obese.
- In 2013, Michigan ranked 9th with a 28.8% obesity rate.

Why worry about grocery stores?

- Food is cheaper in full-line supermarkets & food stores.
- Greater variety of produce available at supermarkets.
- Produce is of better quality.
- The presence of full-line grocery stores in communities is related to increased consumption of fruits and vegetables by residents.

Research Needs:

- More comprehensive studies of food access are needed.
- Such studies should examine multiple processes and actors (consumers, producers, policymakers, etc.).

Preliminary Findings

- The most common food outlets in Michigan are ones selling either unhealthy, highly processed, or expensive foods.
 - Many Michigan residents purchase their food primarily from gas stations, pharmacies, liquor stores, bars, and convenience stores.
- Earlier studies have described Detroit as a “food desert” that lacked full-line supermarkets. But, food activists have questioned the idea that the city is a food desert.
- Our study find a more complex food environment in Detroit than previous studies have identified.
 - However, the food landscape is dominated by food outlets selling expensive, highly-processed, and unhealthy foods.
- Most of the food outlets at which the poor can use their food assistance benefits to purchase foods are those which sell few or no fruits and vegetables.
 - These food outlets tend to carry few healthy food options.

Will the Poor Purchase Healthy, Organic Foods if it is Available?

In summer 2009, a study of four farmers markets and one mobile food truck selling organic, locally-grown produce in Detroit found that:

- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) customers increased their purchase of fresh produce by 41%.
- More than 90% of the coupons distributed to SNAP customers were redeemed. All the coupons distributed by the mobile food van, Peaches and Greens, were redeemed.

Yet...

Of the roughly **1,000** farmers’ markets in Michigan in 2013:

- **142** farmers’ markets in the state accept SNAP.
- **95** farmers’ markets participate in Double Up Bucks.

Sources

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Challenges to Improving Food Access:

- Farmers’ market managers report lengthy delays in getting approval to accept SNAP/EBT cards or to start the Double Up Bucks Program.
- Small food retailers and restaurants report that their orders are too small to entice farmers to service them.

Food Policies:

- Food retailers want to see a fair allocation of subsidies to entice grocery stores to locate or remain in low-income neighborhoods.
- Incentivize convenience stores, gas stations, pharmacies, dollar stores, etc. to sell more healthy foods.
- Greater monitoring needed.
- Create more opportunities for urban farming and gardening in low-income areas.