



Health Priority Policy Brief

Healthy Food Access

What Is Healthy Food Access?

Healthy Food Access refers to the availability, affordability, and proximity of nutritious food options for all communities regardless of socioeconomic status. It encompasses efforts to ensure that individuals and families in low-income communities have equitable access to fresh, healthy foods that are essential for maintaining optimal health and well-being.

Healthy Food Access Disparities in the South

Thirteen percent of southern households' experience food insecurity, which is higher than northern states, on average. This food insecurity hurts children and families, and contributes to underperformance in health outcomes and equity, including low birthweight, obesity, diabetes, and disparity in health status based on high school education.

Additionally, eight out of the ten states with the highest percentage of their population living in a food desert are located in the South (Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, Georgia, Texas, Alabama, South Carolina, and Tennessee). Whether an area is considered a food desert is evaluated through analysis of a number of factors, including access to food measured by distance to a store or the number of stores in an area, and neighborhood resources such as the average income of the neighborhood and access to public transportation.

Lack of access to healthy food is particularly pronounced for African Americans, as their food insecurity rate (48%) is almost twice as high as white (25%) households. Black communities often have limited access to full-service grocery stores and are more likely to have excessive access to dollar stores and liquor stores that provide nutrient-poor, inexpensive food items.

How Healthy Food Access Can Advance Equity in the South

As with many other issues, improving access to health foods can advance race and class equity by addressing the systemic inequalities that contribute to health disparities among marginalized communities. As set forth above, many low-income and minority neighborhoods in the South are classified as food deserts and this limited access leads to higher rates of diet-related health issues. Providing access to healthy food will improve equity in the South because it would lessen the disparity of food insecurity between Blacks and whites. It would also increase the availability of healthy foods in low-income areas and reduce chronic diet-related diseases that

African Americans disproportionately suffer from, like obesity, high blood pressure and hypertension.

States and municipalities can address food insecurity and decrease the footprint of food deserts through measures such as tax incentives for retailers, mobile farmers markets and food trucks, community development grants to support urban farms and community gardens, and through legislative measures that address the root causes of food deserts, such as zoning laws and economic development policies. Additionally, improving access to healthy foods can enhance educational and economic opportunities for marginalized communities. Proper nutrition is crucial for cognitive development and academic performance, which affects and influences long-term educational achievement and prospects for career and job placement later in life. Adults also stand to benefit cognitively from improved health outcomes through increased productivity and reduced healthcare costs, providing more bandwidth to participate and contribute to both family and community. By addressing food insecurity and ensuring equitable access to healthy foods, public policy can help to break down the barriers that lead to a cycle of poverty and provide a foundation for a more equitable and healthier South.

Efforts Related to Expanding Healthy Food Access

1. **West Virginia:** House Bill 4169 sought to establish a two-year pilot program to provide residents of food deserts in West Virginia with access to fresh and affordable produce. The bill failed to be enacted into law prior to the adjournment of the 2024 legislative session.
2. **Mississippi:** House Bill 877, co-sponsored by Unum Fellow Rep. Zakiay Summers, would have required the Mississippi Department of Health to track food deserts and provide an annual report identifying the location of these deserts and health issues associated with their existence. Unfortunately, the bill died in committee. It is important to note that Mississippi ranks as the state with the highest percentage of its overall population living in a food desert.
3. **North Carolina:** House Bill 1050 would create a grant program to support non-profit organizations working to address food insecurity in North Carolina. The bill was referred to the Committee on Appropriations on May 6, 2024.