



Understanding Low-Income and Low-Access Census Tracts Across the Nation Subnational and Subpopulation Estimates of Access to Healthy Food

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What Is the Issue?

Accessing affordable and nutritious food is a challenge for many Americans. In 2015, an estimated 12.7 percent of U.S. census tracts fit the category of low-income, low-access (LILA). “Low-income” is defined by the poverty rate and median family income of a tract. “Low-access” means a significant number or share of the population in the tract had limited access to a food store (supermarket, supercenter, or large grocery store)—i.e., they lived more than 1 mile from a food store in urban areas or more than 10 miles in rural areas. Previous ERS research contained national estimates of access to these stores for 2015, but did not provide State- and local-level estimates or break down the estimates for subpopulations. This report expands on this research by providing estimates of distance to the nearest and the third-nearest food store by age, race, ethnicity, income, vehicle access, and participation in USDA’s Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) for both individuals and households.

States and localities are some of the most frequent users of ERS’s Food Access Research Atlas (FARA), as they try to understand food access in their communities, compare their areas with other States and localities, and monitor change over time. This report also offers FARA users data estimates to compare store access across different States and metropolitan/micropolitan statistical areas.

What Did the Study Find?

In 2015, 40 percent of the U.S. population lived more than 1 mile from a food store (versus 41 percent in 2010); 30 percent lived within 0.5 mile; and 30 percent lived between 0.5 and 1 mile away. Examining the 2015 data by subpopulation shows general estimates of distance to the nearest food store that resembled the 2010 estimates:

- Most racial and ethnic minorities were closer to food stores than Whites, reflecting rural/urban differences in the distribution of racial and ethnic groups.
- People with low incomes were closer to supermarkets than those with moderate and high incomes at the 20th, median (0.69 mile for low versus 0.88 mile for moderate/high incomes), and 80th percentiles. This is consistent with previous findings from ERS.

ERS is a primary source of economic research and analysis from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, providing timely information on economic and policy issues related to agriculture, food, the environment, and rural America.

- SNAP-participating households were more likely than non-SNAP-participating households to be within 0.5 mile of the nearest food store and less likely to be more than 1 mile from the nearest store.

ERS researchers estimated the distance to the third-nearest food store as a proxy measure for having access to a choice of food stores that offer a full range of food products.

- The median distance to the third-nearest food store for the overall populations was 1.67 miles in 2015.
- Moderate- and high-income people resided farther than low-income people from the third-nearest food store in 2015.

Low-income (LI) and low-access (LA) status of census tracts was measured and discussed separately, and the overlapping LILA tracts (those that were both LI and LA) were also researched. Summarized by State, metropolitan, and micropolitan areas, foodstore access was as follows:

- Between 2010 and 2015, the number of low-access (LA) census tracts increased in only 12 States, even though the number of low-income (LI) census tracts increased in almost all States and the District of Columbia (reflecting slow income growth in 2010-14, after the Great Recession).
- States with the highest shares of LILA census tracts were mostly in the South in 2015.
- The prevalence of low-income and low-access areas and population varied considerably in both metropolitan and micropolitan areas in 2015.

When LI and LA determinations were reviewed separately:

- More than a third of census tracts were considered LA-only—i.e., not LI—in six States (West Virginia, Mississippi, Alaska, Louisiana, South Carolina, and Georgia) in 2015.
- A majority of States saw their number of low-income (LI) census tracts increase while their number of low-access (LA) census tracts decreased between 2010 and 2015.

How Was the Study Conducted?

Estimates of LILA census tracts use a list of supermarkets, supercenters, and large grocery stores from 2015 as proxies for the complete set of stores that sell a wide variety of healthy foods at affordable prices. This list is generated from two independent directories of stores—(1) Store Tracking and Redemption System (STARS), which contains stores authorized to accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, and (2) stores in TDLinx (a proprietary source), which contains information on individual store characteristics. Data on income and vehicle access are from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau's 2010-14 American Community Survey, and population data are from the Census Bureau's 2010 Decennial Census.