

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE FOOD DESERT STUDIES

This memorandum provides information regarding food desert studies conducted by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).

According to the USDA, a rural food desert is an area where at least 500 people, or at least 33 percent of the population, live 10 or more miles from a full-service grocery store. The USDA has documented a higher incidence of obesity and diabetes in food deserts. Both the Institute of Medicine and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention independently have recommended increasing the number of supermarkets in underserved areas would help reduce the rate of childhood obesity.

In the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008, Congress directed the USDA to conduct a 1-year study to assess the extent of the problem of limited access to nutritious food, identify characteristics and causes, consider the effects of limited access on local populations, and outline recommendations to address the problem. In 2009 the USDA Economic Research Service published a report on the study's findings. The report, as well as a summary of the report, can be found here: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=42729>. One of the findings of the study determined some consumers have limited access to affordable, nutritious food because the consumers live far from a supermarket or large grocery store and do not have easy access to transportation. The study found 2.3 million households in the United States, or 2.2 percent, live more than a mile from a supermarket and do not have access to a vehicle. The study also found:

- Supermarkets and large grocery stores have lower prices than smaller stores;
- Low-income households, when possible, shop where food prices are lower; and
- Understanding the market conditions that contribute to differences in access to food is critical to the design of policy interventions that may be effective in reducing access limitations.

The USDA Economic Research Service published an updated report in 2012 using data from the 2010 Census to provide population estimates of spatial access to affordable and nutritious food. The report, and a summary of the report, can be found here: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=45035>. The updated report found there was little change in the distance to the nearest supermarket between 2006 and 2010 overall; however, vehicle availability for households more than 1 mile from a supermarket improved. The study also found, in rural areas, low-income people and people in low-income areas are farther from supermarkets than moderate and high-income areas.