

To fix food deserts, we need to address transit options and supermarket stigma

Policymakers have become increasingly concerned about the rise of ‘food deserts’ – those areas with poor access to foods that are not highly processed and nutritionally poor. While policy solutions to address food deserts tend to include introducing supermarkets selling a wider range of foods into such areas, new research from [Jerry Shannon](#) may challenge this policy. Studying the shopping habits of low-income residents of Minneapolis, Minnesota, he finds that food shopping can often extend far outside of people’s neighborhoods, covering a wide array of sources, and that local supermarkets may be unattractive due to their high prices, limited selections, and the perception that they are unsafe.



Poll any group of policy makers and local activists, and most will say that too many urban neighborhoods are food deserts. This term has become shorthand for low income neighborhoods awash in convenience stores and the highly processed, nutritionally poor foods they provide and abandoned by supermarkets that have fled to the more economically fertile suburbs. In these neighborhoods, we assume poor quality foods contribute to higher rates of obesity and other dietary related health issues.

Some recent research has questioned this term, proposing alternatives such as “food swamps” or “food mirages”, which may more accurately describe neighborhoods where reasonably priced carrots, lemons, and cabbage are rare but hot Cheetos are abundant. Whatever the metaphor, the focus of work on food deserts has been on identifying the distances between residential neighborhoods and large food stores, an approach used in the US Department of Agriculture’s own [Food Access Research Atlas](#). Community leaders and scholars use these data to propose policy solutions that incentivize the creation of stores in the hardest hit communities, oases in the food desert.

While this strategy has intuitive appeal, recent studies have questioned its effectiveness. Most notably, [a longitudinal study](#) of residents in a Philadelphia neighborhood served by a newly opened supermarket found that while residents were aware of the new store, it did little to change their dietary habits. [A study of Detroit’s residents](#) found that many individuals shopped in the suburbs rather than frequenting stores close to home, and [the USDA’s own research](#) also demonstrates that even low income households often shop miles from home. Store proximity alone is not an adequate measure, and so we must also take into consideration the everyday shopping practices of households and the environmental factors that shape them.

With this work in mind, [I worked with 38 low-income individuals in Minneapolis, Minnesota](#) to better understand how and where they got food, along with the factors that shaped their choices. Research participants tracked their daily mobility over a five day study period and took photos of places where they got food using GPS enabled smartphones. I also spoke at length with these participants about their food shopping decisions. These conversations provided several key insights into patterns of food access for low income households.





Images contributed by study participants of the stores they used and the food they purchased

First, data on participants' shopping confirmed that many of them shopped well outside their residential neighborhoods. The median distance from home to food source was 2.8 km. While convenience stores and small grocers were somewhat closer to home (0.7 km and 1.2 km respectively), supermarkets and fast food establishments were much farther (5 km and 4.4 km). This distance varied somewhat by income, with the highest income bracket (between \$2,000 and \$2,500 of household income per month) travelling farther than those with less income. In the case of fast food, located at a median of 4.4 km from home, many participants reported using these stores while on the way elsewhere, rather than as a specific destination used while close to home.

Ownership of a car made only a small difference in shopping mobility. Individuals with no vehicle used stores 2.5 km from home while this figure was 2.9 km for those with a car. During interviews, individuals with no car described how shopping could be stressful and time intensive, as many of them relied on friends or family to provide rides. For those using public transit, bus lines often determined available shopping options. Several participants travelled to stores well outside their neighborhood if this allowed them to avoid logistically complicated bus transfers. Proximity alone, then, was not the main factor shaping store choice.

Second, many participants identified clear deficiencies in their local supermarkets linked both to store quality and neighborhood stigma. The neighborhood of North Minneapolis, for example, had a major full service grocery store, and it was used by many residents. At the same time, almost all of them complained about problems with the store: high prices compared to suburban locations, poor customer service, limited produce selection and quality, and hostility from other shoppers. Despite the presence of a police substation within the store, several individuals worried about becoming the victim of a crime while doing their grocery shopping. During a final focus group, study participants accused the store of exploiting local residents—deliberately offering lesser goods and higher prices to profit from customers with limited options. This led many participants to choose stores outside their neighborhood when possible, even when this entailed higher fuel costs or other logistical complications.

Lastly, study participants used a wide array of food sources. I collected data on 217 food stops during participants' study periods. In those trips, participants used 153 unique food sources. Only 28 stores were used more than once, even though participants were concentrated in just two case study neighborhoods. Participants visited food sources of all types, including warehouse stores, food pantries, supermarkets, convenience stores, ethnic markets, restaurant supply stores, and chain discounters. They seldom used one store for all their shopping, instead targeting stores based on particular items.

For example, immigrants from Central America would use Walmart for staple goods but smaller Mexican markets or bakeries for produce, bread, and meat. Others used the chain discounter Aldi for cans and dry goods but supermarkets or butchers for meat products. Often, food shopping was tied to other daily activities—work, carpooling, or visiting friends and family—meaning that they used those stores available to them. While a single store may have been as an anchor for these individuals, meaning that many goods were purchased there, almost all of them relied on multiple food sources in their everyday activity.



What does this mean for research on food deserts? Despite the popularity of the term, this and other recent research calls its underlying assumptions into question. Certainly, a deficit of major food retailers in low income areas may be indicative of what [others have called supermarket redlining](#). Yet residents are not simply trapped in their neighborhoods, purchasing from whatever stores may be just around the corner. They actively strategize to use stores that provide the foods they want, even given limited financial resources.

This underscores the role that transit planning and mobility should play in any analysis of food access. For example, participants seldom used farmers' markets located close to their homes, which were often small and had limited hours. Many instead reported using a summer market located on Nicollet Mall in downtown Minneapolis, a transit hub where many individuals transfer buses. Several others liked this downtown area for its high level of walkability, making it easier to use than other parts of the city. Future research should better understand the intersection between urban food and transit systems. Likewise, the use of fast food while in transit points to the need to develop healthier options not just for the kitchen but for when eating at home is practically difficult.

Furthermore, while spatial research on food deserts has most often used supermarkets as a proxy for healthy foods, my research indicates that these stores may play a mixed role in low-income neighborhoods. Even when supermarkets are present, they may reflect lower levels of investment or be tainted by the stigma of economically and racially segregated areas. Put another way, new supermarkets are not inherently a solution to food deserts. Healthier and more equitable food systems are made possible not just through new stores, but through helping households obtain consistently higher incomes and better access to transit while also investing to provide safer and more equitable neighborhoods.

*This article is based on the paper, '[Beyond the Supermarket Solution: Linking Food Deserts, Neighborhood Context, and Everyday Mobility](#)', in the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*.*

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Dr. Shannon studies food access and food security, with a specific focus on urban and urbanizing communities in the United States. Using both spatial analysis and qualitative methods, his research asks how food provisioning practices are influenced by food environments and by the larger economic and social landscape of urban neighborhoods. He has a specific interest in community engaged research that works with members of impacted communities to develop more sustainable and equitable food systems and neighborhoods.



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