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Defining Low-Income, Low-Access Food Areas (*Food Deserts*)

In the Food Conservation and Energy Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-246, §7527), Congress directed the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to identify "characteristics and factors causing and influencing *food deserts*"—referred to as an area "with limited access to affordable and nutritious food, particularly such an area composed of predominantly lower-income neighborhoods and communities." USDA identifies areas of low food access based on certain *low-income* and *low-access* criteria. These criteria base food access largely on the distance to a supermarket, consistent with the 2008 farm bill's Statement of Managers calling on USDA to identify "geographically isolated neighborhoods and communities with limited or no access to major chain grocery stores" (**Figure 1**). Despite references in the 2008 farm bill, *food desert* currently is not defined in statute.

Researchers have criticized USDA's methodology to identify low-food-access areas, and some community food advocates want to discontinue use of *food desert* and adopt alternative terminology.

Congressional interest continues in regard to access to healthy foods in the United States. The Healthy Food Access for All Americans Act (H.R. 1313/S. 203), reintroduced in the 117th Congress, would establish tax credits and grants to certain food providers in areas considered to be food deserts (as defined therein). Other proposed legislation in the 116th Congress would have established state revolving funds to provide loans for establishing and operating grocery stores in underserved communities (H.R. 8531) or supported the expansion of salad bars in schools in food desert communities (H.R. 2688). Some of these bills would define a food desert using a geographic basis similar to the 2008 farm bill.

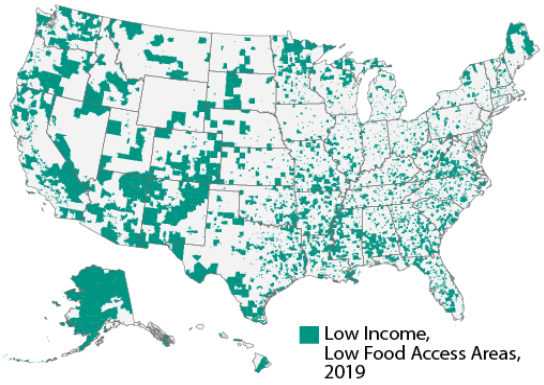
USDA's Food Access Data

USDA's data and methodology for identifying geographic areas that may have limited food access have evolved since the 2008 farm bill. Although the 2014 farm bill (P.L. 113-79, §7517) repealed the 2008 farm bill provision (§7527), USDA continues to develop and report such data. Current USDA estimates for 2019 are available in its *Food Access Research Atlas* data. USDA data are for populations within *census tracts*, which are statistical subdivisions of a county, with a population size between 1,200 and 8,000 people or an average of 4,000 people. Criteria for low-income and low-access census tracts shown in **Figure 1** reflect

- **low-income (LI):** poverty rate of 20% or greater, or median family income at or below 80% of the statewide or metropolitan area median family income; and
- **low-access (LA):** a low-income tract with at least 500 people or 33% of the tract's population living more than 1 mile (urban areas) or more than 10 miles (rural areas) from the nearest supermarket or grocery store. (USDA LA data are also available assuming different measures of distance, ranging 0.5 miles to 20 miles.)

Figure 1 shows 2019 data for low-income, low-access (LILA) areas that are LI areas in urban census tracts where urban residents live more than 1 mile and where rural residents live more than 10 miles from a supermarket. These data suggest that 6% of the U.S. population (about 19 million people) live in LILA areas and that every U.S. state and the District of Columbia has LILA areas.

Figure 1. Low-Income, Low-Access Areas, 2019



Source: CRS using *Food Access Research Atlas*. Green= low-income census tracts where urban residents live more than 1 mile or rural where residents live more than 10 miles from a supermarket.

Notes: County-level data are at https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/download-the-data/.

USDA's earlier effort—*Food Desert Locator* series—referenced *food deserts*. Although USDA's *Food Access Research Atlas* does not explicitly reference *food deserts*, various stakeholders continue to use these data for research and work related to food deserts. USDA data often differ compared with other independent, more localized mapping initiatives in terms of identifying areas considered to be low income and to have low food access.

Criticism of USDA's Methodology

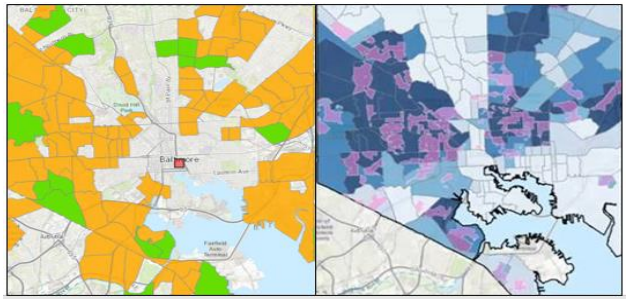
Some academic researchers have raised concerns about USDA's LILA criteria and the use of these data to depict food access. In 2012, the U.S. Conference of Mayors Food Policy Task Force noted that USDA's methodology did not "capture the reality" of food access in many cities. Some researchers have also been adopting alternate data and methodologies to more precisely estimate food access. USDA's use of income and distance to nearby supermarkets as the leading indicators of food access using available census tract data may omit other factors that some cities and communities may regard as important under alternative definitions, such as race or local geographic conditions.

Another criticism is reliance on the use of census tracts, which might be too large of a measurement scale and could result in inaccuracies—possibly under- or overcounting LILA areas. Another limitation is considering only supermarkets, supercenters, and grocery stores as providing

access to food. This may discount the role of other food sources, such as convenience stores, farmers' markets, food banks/pantries, community gardens, bodegas, or other retail food outlets. Undercounting where people might purchase healthy food might overestimate the number of LILA areas and reduce the efficiency of targeted responses. A related criticism is measuring food access based on distance only (e.g., 1 or 10 miles from a grocery store depending on if it is an urban or rural area), which might not reflect the true distance a person would travel to purchase food. In some cases, there may be food outlets near where a person works or where their child attends school or where they may (or may not) have access to public transportation or personal use of a vehicle. This approach also does not account for the actual travel time necessary to get food. USDA's LILA approach also does not explicitly take into account if the available food is nutritious and affordable.

Figure 2 illustrates how other data and methods employed may yield different outcomes than USDA, using Baltimore City as an example. As shown, USDA LILA data for Baltimore do not readily match up with results identifying Healthy Food Priority Areas (HFPAs) obtained by the Baltimore Farm Alliance and Johns Hopkins University. HFPA criteria differ from USDA: HFPAs are based on measures of median household income at or below 185% of the federal poverty level and distance to a supermarket of more than a quarter of a mile. HFPA data also include criteria from surveys used to obtain a Healthy Food Availability Index score for all food stores. **Figure 2** shows how use of alternative data and criteria applied on a smaller, more targeted scale might better identify areas known to have low food access. It also shows that USDA data may be identifying areas not considered to have low access to food.

Figure 2. USDA 2019 LILA Areas and 2018-Reported Healthy Food Priority Areas (Baltimore City)



Source: Map on left (CRS from USDA's Food Access Research Atlas, https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/); and map on right (Baltimore Farm Alliance, Story Map and Report, December 2018, https://farmalliancebaltimore.org/a-farm-alliance-webinar-briefing-farmers-feeding-baltimore/).

Notes: Map on left: green = LILA at 1 and 10 miles; orange = LILA at 0.5 and 10 miles. Map on right: blue = concentrations of African American population; pink = Designated Healthy Food Priority Areas.

Criticism of *Food Desert* Terminology

Some community food advocates have become increasingly critical of the term *food desert* to describe areas of low access to affordable, nutritious food, arguing for the adoption of alternative terminology. They argue *food desert* does not adequately capture all the factors related to food access and has negative connotations. They say other terms better describe low-income and low-access areas. The **text box** presents selected criticisms regarding the current use of *food desert* terminology.

Criticisms of Food Desert Terminology

Negative Connotation, Implying Barren Landscape. Some claim the term *food desert* views an area through a "deficit" lens, focusing only on what a community lacks and evokes an image of a place barren of food, people, and life.

Not a Natural Occurrence, Implying Intentionality. Some argue *food desert* implies a natural phenomenon rather than a social and economic occurrence and fails to acknowledge underlying structural inequities that led to unequal access, such as racial discrimination and poverty.

Overemphasis on Distance, Implying the Need for More Grocery Stores. Some claim policies designed to address food access tend to rely on distance to food as the leading determinant of food access, which "overemphasizes space" and oversimplifies access. Some have raised concerns that this contributes to policy solutions focused on providing for more supermarkets, rather than attention to other policy options (e.g., expanding domestic food program benefits or incentives for farmers' markets or addressing nonspatial barriers such as income, employment, education, and mobility).

Some researchers are rethinking use of *food desert* and are adopting alternative terminology in an effort to acknowledge diverse perspectives and aspects of the problem. Some local governments have adopted alternative language (e.g., Baltimore City government refers to such areas as HFPAs). Some community advocates call for alternative terminology that takes into account not only income and geography but also perceived social and racial inequalities and discriminatory systems that make it difficult for people in low-income areas to access healthy affordable food.

Some communities prefer terms that focus on access to supermarkets and grocery stores. One term—*supermarket redlining*—highlights the concern that, in some areas of the country, major chain grocery stores may be relocating from urban to suburban areas and divesting in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color. Some communities are using the term *food apartheid*, which draws attention to structural conditions that limit food access (including access to land and resources) and emphasizes discriminatory conditions (such as predatory marketing). Other terms include *food mirage*, *food swamp*, and *food hinterland*. These terms refer to areas with limited access to healthy, affordable food that do not match USDA's methodology or account for other factors (such as prices) or differential access within a community.

Considerations for Congress

Food desert is commonly used to describe areas with populations that lack access to healthy, affordable food. When debating policy related to food access, Congress may consider critiques of USDA's methodology for estimating the number and locations of such areas, as well as criticism of the use of *food desert*.

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