

HEALTHY FOOD ACCESS

Opening doors to healthy food in North Carolina

- ❖ **1.5 million North Carolina residents live in 349 federally recognized “food deserts,”** or areas that lack access to healthy food retailers that provide affordable fruits, vegetables, whole grains, low-fat milk, and other foods that make up the full range of a healthy diet.
 - ❖ North Carolina ranks **5th in prevalence of food insecurity** in the United States and **1 in 4 children** in the state are food insecure.
 - ❖ **Low-income residents** are particularly burdened by food deserts and may be forced to **decrease their consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables** because of the added cost of travelling to and from the store, and may forgo purchasing fresh fruits and vegetables in favor of shopping at local convenience stores.
-

What is the state of healthy food retailers in North Carolina?

Many communities across North Carolina lack access to healthy food retailers and have been classified as “food deserts.” The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food deserts as low-income census tracts (with a poverty rate of 20% or higher or median family income below 80% of the area's medium income) where a substantial number of people (500 people or 33% of the census tract) are located more than one mile from a grocery store in urban areas or more than ten miles in rural areas as food deserts. The USDA has identified 349 food deserts in North Carolina affecting over 1.5 million residents.

*Check out recommendations to improve geographic access to healthy food retailers in the **North Carolina PATHS Report**: pp. 79-83.*

What are the benefits of improved geographic access?

Lack of geographic access to healthy foods can reduce the quantity of fresh fruits and vegetables and decrease the overall quality of residents' diets. In turn, these unhealthy diets impact the rate of obesity and type 2 diabetes in the state. Improved geographic access can reverse these trends and is especially necessary in extremely rural and urban areas, where most food deserts are located.

What should North Carolina do?

1. The Legislature can **create a Joint Legislative Food Desert Zones Study Committee** to assess and offer comprehensive recommendations on increasing healthy food access in North Carolina.
2. The Legislature can leverage federal funds available to support healthy food financing and support programs aimed at **offering grants and loans for retail food operations** that open in low-access areas.
3. North Carolina can also **offer grants or tax incentives to corner stores** to offer healthy foods.
4. The Legislature can **encourage farmers markets to expand and accept SNAP (and eventually, WIC)** and develop in new areas.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:

The Center for Health Law and Policy Innovation | Email: chlpi@law.harvard.edu