

# Access to healthy groceries in food deserts a fruitless effort

By ACSH Staff — July 13, 2011

How do you combat obesity in low-income neighborhoods? Increase access to grocery stores that sell fresh fruits and vegetables, many public health experts have long advised. It turns out, however, that this policy may actually have [less credibility](#) <sup>[1]</sup> than previously believed.

According to a recent study in the *Archives of Internal Medicine* led by Barry Popkin, director of the Nutrition Transition Program at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, better access to supermarkets doesn't improve people's diets. However, income and proximity to fast food restaurants do influence food choice. After analyzing the diets of over 5,000 study subjects in Birmingham, Ala., Chicago, Minneapolis, and Oakland between 1985 and 2001, Popkin and his colleagues found that easier access to grocery stores was not associated with a greater consumption of healthful foods, though living near fast-food chains was linked to a greater consumption of fast food. Other studies, however, have previously reported lower obesity rates in neighborhoods with more supermarkets and fewer fast-food restaurants.

So why, then, are supermarkets not making more of an impact on weight in low-income communities? Well, says ACSH's Dr. Ruth Kava, food prices are a huge factor. Economics outweigh anything else; the cost of produce is often higher than fast-food prices.

Just the simple act of opening more grocery stores is not enough either. People need to be better educated about how to incorporate fresh fruits and vegetables into their diets, says Dr. Kava. People are used to eating the same way for most of their lives, so there's no reason for them to change their unhealthy eating habits unless they are properly taught how to cook with these foods.

Thankfully, some programs that accomplish this already exist. For instance, the [SNAP-Ed](#) <sup>[2]</sup> and the [Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program](#) <sup>[3]</sup> provide nutrition education to families eligible for food stamps.

Many have long believed that so-called food deserts were at least partially responsible for an increase in obesity, but this study now debunks that notion, and instead demonstrates that the relationship between fast food restaurants and eating behaviors is in fact stronger, says ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross.

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**Links**

[1] <http://www.latimes.com/health/la-he-food-deserts-20110712,0,537936.story>

[2] [http://snap.nal.usda.gov/nal\\_display/index.php?info\\_center=15&tax\\_level=1](http://snap.nal.usda.gov/nal_display/index.php?info_center=15&tax_level=1)

[3] <http://www.csrees.usda.gov/nea/food/efnep/efnep.html>