Supermarket opening in a food desert has not had the desired effect | yet

By ACSH Staff — February 5, 2014

According to the USDA, about 23.5 million Americans live in areas known as food deserts areas lacking access to fresh fruits and vegetables. In response to the obesity epidemic and specifically hoping to address this issue, the Obama administration sought to fund stores in food deserts that would stock fresh produce. Currently published evidence shows that not much has changed in terms of consumption or obesity rates in those areas where these supermarkets opened, according to [1] a report published in Health Affairs although it's still too early to determine whether or not these efforts will work in the future.

Researchers from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and Penn State University's departments of sociology, anthropology and demography studied two Philadelphia neighborhoods. They studied one neighborhood just before a supermarket opened there, and again three years later, and compared parameters of health to the other neighborhood lacking a supermarket. In the area in which the supermarket opened, researchers did not observe improvements in BMI, increased fruit and vegetable intake or perceptions of accessibility to food when compared to the other.

Researchers suggest that those behind this Healthy Food Financing Initiative think about pairing these supermarkets with educational efforts in those areas. According to the Philadelphia Department of Health, after implementing nutrition education for all children on food stamps, making changes to school food and creating wellness councils at schools, obesity rates declined by five percent.

Mark Winne, food-policy expert and former Hartford Food System executive director, opined about what he believed the government initiatives should focus on, Access, affordability, education would probably be the three legs of the stool. Regulation of the food industry would be a fourth leg, particularly in advertising to children and in location of fast-food restaurants so that they're not close to schools.

ACSH’s Ariel Savransky says, It's only been three years since the government began these initiatives to increase access to healthy food in so-called food deserts. It's going to take a lot more
time to see an effect, especially since eating habits are so ingrained. It not only involves changes in access to fruits and vegetables, but also changes in mindset. As for regulation of the food industry, clearly educational efforts should be implemented well before resorting to such measures, if ever.