

Closing New Mexico's Food Gap

Introduced by the New Mexico Food and Agriculture Policy Council

How far is your local grocery store? Is it 5 miles? 10 miles? While many of us may think of a trip to the grocery store as a simple 30-minute errand, many New Mexicans are finding it harder and harder to access food.

This *Closing New Mexico's Food Gap* is a compilation of research conducted by the New Mexico Food and Agriculture Policy Council during the months of September 2005 to February 2006. This research was done through a community food security assessment of rural New Mexico's: grocery stores, transportation services, community programs, school food programs, farming practices, and traditional food. The assessment was conducted utilizing four focus group sessions and interviews in four separate counties. From the data collected the New Mexico Food and Agriculture Policy Council has developed an extensive list of recommendations that, if implemented, would be a systematic approach to increasing access to healthy, affordable, and culturally significant foods to rural underserved communities.



“A food gap is the difference between having money for food and not having enough.” ~Ria Arriba resident

According to the latest 2005 U.S. Census statistics 673,937 people out of New Mexico's 1.9 million residents live in what is classified as rural communities. Within the state there are 19 non-metro or rural counties that are classified as “high poverty” (poverty rate of 20% or higher), of which 9 are classified as “persistent poverty” counties (high poverty rates in the last three censuses). Additionally according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's 2004 report on food security, New Mexico has the second highest level of food insecurity with 15.8% of its' population identified as food insecure. Food insecurity, as defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, is a condition in which people lack basic food intake to provide them with the energy and nutrients for fully productive lives.

While poverty, hunger, and food inaccessibility are prevalent in the entire state, in rural communities these problems are exacerbated by geographic isolation, low population densities, high food prices, limited selection of healthy food, and few transportation options. A “food gap” refers to extraordinary difficulties that households face securing an adequate diet due to economic or geographic reasons. However, as described by one of the focus group participants, “A food gap is the difference between having money for food and not having enough.”

The food gap phenomena has become prevalent across the nation in lower income communities and communities of color. Dr. Kimberly Morland, an epidemiologist from Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York City, conducted a study utilizing census data to determine if there was a correlation between the location of supermarkets and the consumption rates of fresh fruits and vegetables. Her study concluded that lower income communities had less access to full service supermarkets and as a result are consuming fewer servings of fresh fruits and vegetables.

Grocery Stores

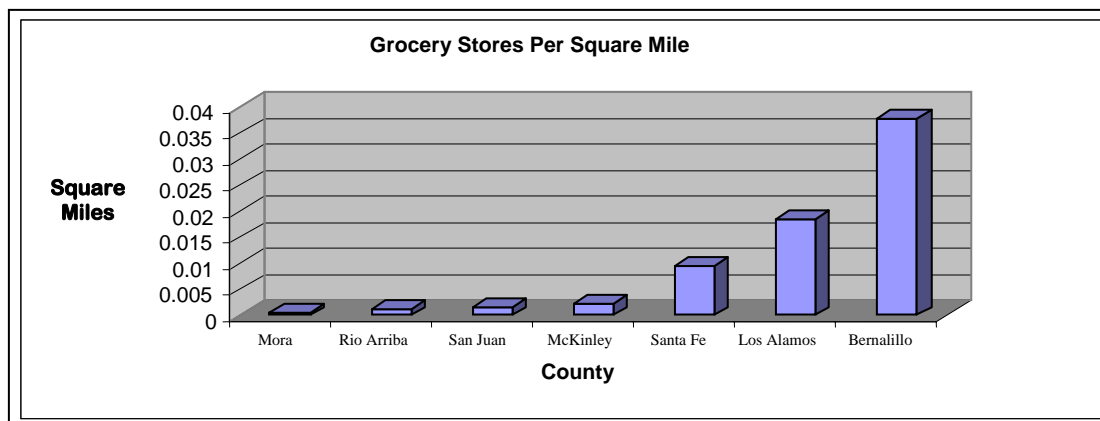
In a market basket assessment of 27 grocery stores in 18 different towns in the state, figures show that New Mexico's rural families are paying more for food. Out of 27 grocery stores surveyed, the 7 most expensive were located in towns with less than 2,000 people. Bernalillo County, which includes Albuquerque, has almost 100 times as many grocery stores as rural Mora County. In New Mexico, lower income families spend anywhere from 13-26% of their annual income on food. Families from metro areas such as Albuquerque and Santa Fe spend on average 13% of their annual income on food. This results in rural shoppers paying on average \$85 for the same basket of groceries that urban shoppers pay \$55 for.




*Market Basket
Study conducted in
January 2006*

Transportation and Distribution

Most households will pay what they have to for food; however, getting to a grocery store for most rural residents represents an even greater challenge than making the money to pay for it. In the four community focus groups conducted by Farm To Table, the average drive to the grocery store was around one-hour round trip. The longest drive was four hours round trip, with participants citing high fuel costs and difficulty affording reliable transportation as some of the primary barriers to food shopping. The 1990 study "The Evaluation of the Food Distribution on Indian Reservations" found that one out of six households reported that they "very often had difficulty getting to where they needed to go because of problems with their cars or trucks." Focus group participants that resided on the Navajo reservation reported that people often travel 30 to 70 miles to go grocery shopping. One McKinley County resident commented on his experience of how people get around in his community, "They don't have a car, but they get a ride from family members, or they call a friend or they pay someone."





Dr. Kami Pothukuchi of Wayne State University, who recently wrote the paper “Supermarkets in Indian Country: The Case of a Successful Store-Tribe Partnership” states, “For residents of many Indian reservations, a three hour long trip for grocery shopping is not at all unusual.”

Many rural communities do not provide access to public transportation, which can represent yet another hurdle to food access. Only 42% of those interviewed during the focus groups said that public transportation was available in their communities. Of the existing transportation services participants said they were generally used and appreciated, but said that more bus routes were needed and a more frequent schedule would be helpful. One Rio Arriba County commented, “We have no public transportation here...that’s a big issue [in our area].” There are limited services in San Juan County through the Red Apple Transit, but focus group participants said the current wait time is, “about an hour.”

Health Costs

Our research also linked food access to health. Throughout New Mexico many residents are facing the harsh realities of type-2 diabetes and obesity due to poor health and nutrition. Nationally, diabetes prevalence has increased some 40% in the last ten years and is expected to increase another 165% between 2000 and 2050. Diabetes is estimated to cost the U.S. \$92 billion in added medical expenses plus \$40 billion in lost productivity yielding a total cost \$132 billion annually. In New Mexico, the Department of Health estimates that diabetes costs the state \$1.1 billion a year. The Department of Health also states that according to recent research, “1 case of diabetes out of 7 could be prevented through diet and exercise.” A proper diet for New Mexico could then save the state an annual \$128 million. In addition, the obesity related health costs to New Mexico are \$324 million annually.

Recommendations

Grocery Store and Food Center Recommendations:

- Research and support strategies that develop new or enhanced food retail businesses. These strategies could include financing options, equipment and renovation packages, predevelopment costs, construction costs, workforce development, and security enhancement.
- Research viable ways of improving the nutritional quality of offerings at small stores.
- Further link grocery stores with New Mexico farmers and ranchers.

Transportation and Distribution Recommendations:

- Research strategies to increase retail food distribution to rural areas.
- Work with local transportation networks to improve current public transportation by creating additional and more frequent bus services to grocery stores and health services.
- Work with the New Mexico Passenger Transportation Association to propose state funding for rural transportation systems.

Health Recommendations:

- Continue to research the links between healthy food access and improving New Mexican’s health. .
- Encourage healthy eating habits for children by increasing the serving size of fresh fruits and vegetables for the school meal programs.



Request

The New Mexico Food and Agriculture Policy Council, the New Mexico Task Force to End Hunger and partnering agencies and organizations are requesting support from the New Mexico State Legislature and Executive Branch for a legislative memorial. The memorial will a designated task force to research and develop recommendations to increase access for New Mexicans to healthy and affordable food and transportation systems in underserved areas – both rural and urban. This Task Force will report back to the Legislature and Executive Branch upon completion of its findings with recommendations. The expected long-term impacts of this memorial are: 1) a healthier New Mexico population; 2) reduced health care costs; and 3) food related economic development.

Resources

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