

# **Access to Healthy and Affordable Foods**

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**Food and Nutrition** – U.S. food security, food and nutrition assistance programs, food choices and health outcomes, food access and store proximity, food retailing and marketing, and food prices.

**Food Safety** – societal benefits associated with reducing food safety risks, economic impacts of food hazards, and potential results of regulation or industry decisions.

**Global Markets and Trade** – major markets and competitors, economic impacts of exports and imports, trade barriers, and potential trade agreements.

**Resources and Environment** – economic impacts of conservation programs, efficacy of policies designed to protect the environment, and enhancing agricultural competitiveness through technology.

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## **Introduction and Background**

Food store access is important because limited access to retailers selling healthy and affordable food may impede the ability of some Americans to achieve a healthy diet and food security.

Determinants of food access include distance to sources of healthy and affordable food, access to a vehicle or other form of transportation to travel to a store, or limited resources to pay for food. These factors could affect the choice of stores to shop for food, the time and monetary costs of travel to shop, and the frequency of shopping.

Upon request from the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008, ERS published a report that estimated the extent of food access limitations in the United States. To help understand how many people and communities may be affected by limited food store access, ERS created an online interactive mapping tool called the Food Access Research Atlas (FARA). The Atlas allows users to investigate access to food stores at the census-tract level using measures of income, distance to stores, vehicle access, and other relevant indicators and provides maps and data on food access indicators for populations that can be viewed, downloaded, or printed. In

addition, with the help of the FARA, Federal, State, and local policymakers, community planners and researchers can identify communities that have limited food access and help target where programs or policies may be most needed.

### **Measures of Access used in the FARA**

Food access is measured at the level of the census tract, which is a subdivision of a county. There are two components to ERS's census tract food access measure: low-income (LI) and low access (LA). Census tracts that are both are low-income and low access (LILA) tracts.

The criteria for identifying a census tract as LI are from the Department of Treasury's New Markets Tax Credit (NMTC) program. This program defines a low-income census tract as any tract where: the tract's poverty rate is 20 percent or greater; the tract's median family income is less than or equal to 80 percent of the State-wide median family income; or the tract is in a metropolitan area and has a median family income less than or equal to 80 percent of the metropolitan area's median family income.

In the FARA, low access to healthy food is defined as being far from a supermarket, supercenter, or large grocery store. These are retail food stores that offer a full range of food products—including fresh meat and poultry, produce, dairy, dry and packaged foods, and frozen foods—and that have at least \$2 million or more in annual sales. The term “supermarket” will be used throughout this testimony to refer to the three store types combined. A census tract is considered to have LA if a significant number or share of individuals in the tract is far from a supermarket. Three measures of food access based on distance to a supermarket are provided in the Atlas:

1. Low-income census tracts where a significant number (at least 500 people) or share (at least 33 percent) of the population is greater than one-half mile from the nearest supermarket, supercenter, or large grocery store for an urban area or greater than 10 miles for a rural area.
2. Low-income census tracts where a significant number (at least 500 people) or share (at least 33 percent) of the population is greater than 1 mile from the nearest supermarket, supercenter, or large grocery store for an urban area or greater than 10 miles for a rural area.
3. Low-income census tracts where a significant number (at least 500 people) or share (at least 33 percent) of the population is greater than 1 mile from the nearest supermarket, supercenter, or large grocery store for an urban area or greater than 20 miles for a rural area.

A fourth and slightly more complex measure incorporates vehicle access directly into the measure, delineating low-income tracts where a significant number of households are located far from a supermarket and do not have access to a vehicle. This measure also includes census tracts with populations that are so remote, that even with a vehicle, driving to a supermarket may be considered a burden. Under this measure, a tract is considered low access if at least 100 households are more than one-half mile from the nearest supermarket and have no access to a vehicle; or at least 500 people or 33 percent of the population live more than 20 miles from the nearest supermarket, regardless of vehicle access.

Information on the location of food stores was obtained from two directories—(1) USDA, Food and Nutrition Service’s Store Tracking and Redemption System (STARS), which lists stores authorized to accept benefits from USDA’s Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and (2) TDLinx, a Nielsen directory containing an annual snapshot of stores that are open on June 15 of each year, with information on supermarkets, supercenters, superettes, convenience stores, and other types of stores/outlets. Data on the population were obtained from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau’s 2010 Decennial Census. Information on household vehicle availability and income was obtained from the Census Bureau’s 2010-14 American Community Survey (ACS).

### **Prevalence of Low-Income and Low-Access Tracts in the U.S.**

Estimates from the FARA reveal that the number of census tracts classified as low-income in the United States decreased from 2015-2019. This reflects improvements in household income, whereas from 2010-2015, the number of LI census tracts increased. The number of low-access 1- and 10-miles tracts increased slightly from 2015-2019. When vehicle availability and proximity to a supermarket are considered together (LILA Vehicle Access and 20 Miles), estimates show a slight decrease in the share of tracts that are low access, from 2015-2019. When LI and LA are compiled together, the number of LILA tracts at the 1- and 10-miles measure increased slightly, whereas the LILA vehicle access and 20 miles measure decreased.

### **Prevalence of Low-Income and Low-Access Tracts and Population by State**

Maps show that States with the highest share of LILA tracts are in the southern part of the United States. In Georgia, 23 percent of tracts are LILA at the 1- and 10-miles measure, making it the State with the 6th highest share of LILA tracts in 2019 and virtually unchanged from 2015. In those LILA census tracts lives 22 percent of Georgia’s population, making it the State with the 5th highest share of its population in LILA 1- and 10-miles tracts and a very small decrease since 2015. Also, 26 percent of tracts in Georgia are LILA using vehicle access and 20 miles, making it the State with the 2nd highest share of LILA tracts at that measure. Of the population that lives more than 1 mile from the nearest food store in Georgia, 63 percent are white, 24 percent are Black, and 6 percent are Hispanic or Latino. Additional access measures and data, such as access for population subgroups by age, income, and SNAP participation status can be found on ERS’s FARA mapping tool and can be downloaded from the ERS website.

### **Prevalence of Low-Income and Low-Access Tracts and Population by county in Georgia**

Georgia’s counties with the highest share of LILA 1- and 10-mile census tracts are Baker, Glascock, and Taliaferro County with 100 percent of their tracts being LILA. There are several counties with no LILA tracts at this measure. Maps show that most counties with a high share of LILA vehicle access census tracts are in southwest Georgia.