



bridging the gap
 Research Informing Policies & Practices
 for Healthy Youth

Research Brief
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Zoning for Healthy Food Access Varies by Community Locale

Introduction

A healthy diet—one that includes a variety of fruits and vegetables, whole grains and lower-fat dairy products and a limited intake of added sugars and solid fats—helps to reduce the risk of obesity and chronic disease.¹ Yet, many families do not have access to healthy affordable foods in their neighborhoods. This is especially true in lower-income communities and communities of color where convenience stores and fast-food restaurants are widespread but supermarkets and farmers' markets are scarce.^{2,3,4}

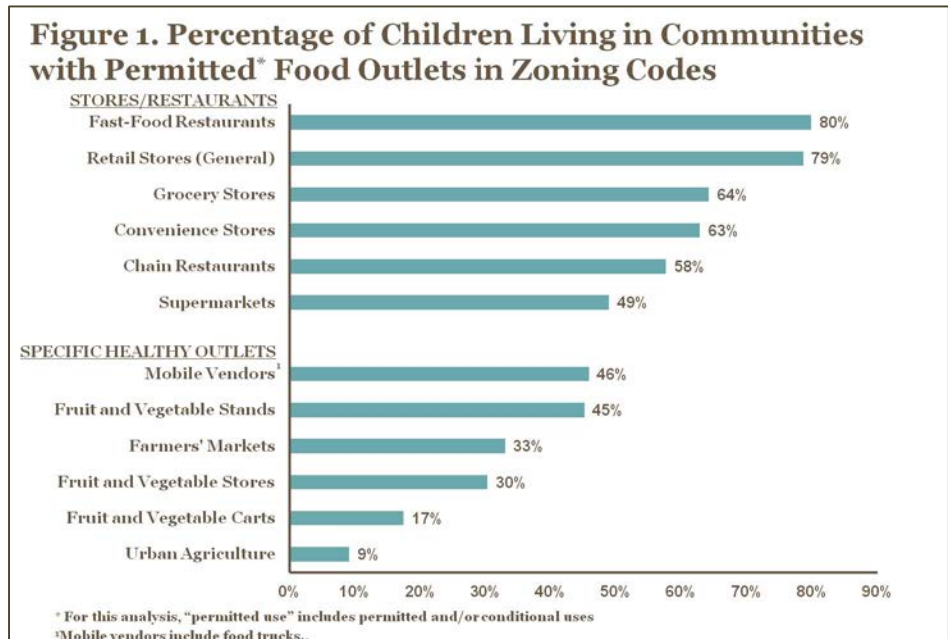
Research shows that the availability of healthy foods in our communities affects our health. People who live in neighborhoods with a supermarket or grocery store consume more fruits and vegetables and have lower rates of obesity^{5,6} than those who have limited access to healthy affordable foods.^{7,8,9}

Local governments can use their zoning authority to help encourage the development of supermarkets and other outlets that sell nutritious, affordable foods within a community. Through its zoning powers, a municipality may, for example, explicitly allow supermarkets and grocery stores; allow use of land or permits for farmers' markets, mobile vendors, produce carts, and/or community gardens;^{10,11,12,13,14} or explicitly prohibit or regulate density of fast-food restaurants within certain areas.^{15,16} Explicitly including permitted uses for supermarkets and other healthy food outlets in local zoning regulations and ordinances removes administrative barriers to establishing their use. If a zoning ordinance is silent on a specific type of use or needs to be amended, property owners who wish to request a variance to the ordinance face a long, burdensome process.^{17,18} Other strategies that can be used to control food access include allowing uses on a site-specific basis through conditional zoning, encouraging development of healthy food retailers through incentive zoning, or requiring fast food restaurants to provide a minimum amount of healthy food options through performance zoning.¹⁶

This brief examines how likely children and teenagers younger than age 18 live in communities (e.g., municipalities and towns) whose zoning ordinances permit a variety of food outlets and whether the permitted uses vary based on locale. We examined the prevalence of the provisions based on race/ethnicity, region, and median household income but we did not find any consistent patterns. The zoning ordinances were collected in 2010- 2012 from 468 catchments (hereafter referred to as "communities") made up of over 900 jurisdictions located in a nationally representative sample of public middle and high school enrollment areas. The areas analyzed were based on middle and high school enrollment areas, but results in this brief are representative of children and teenagers ages 0 to 17. The findings identify opportunities for strengthening local zoning ordinances and provide guidance for local policymakers and community advocates who are working to increase access to healthy foods.

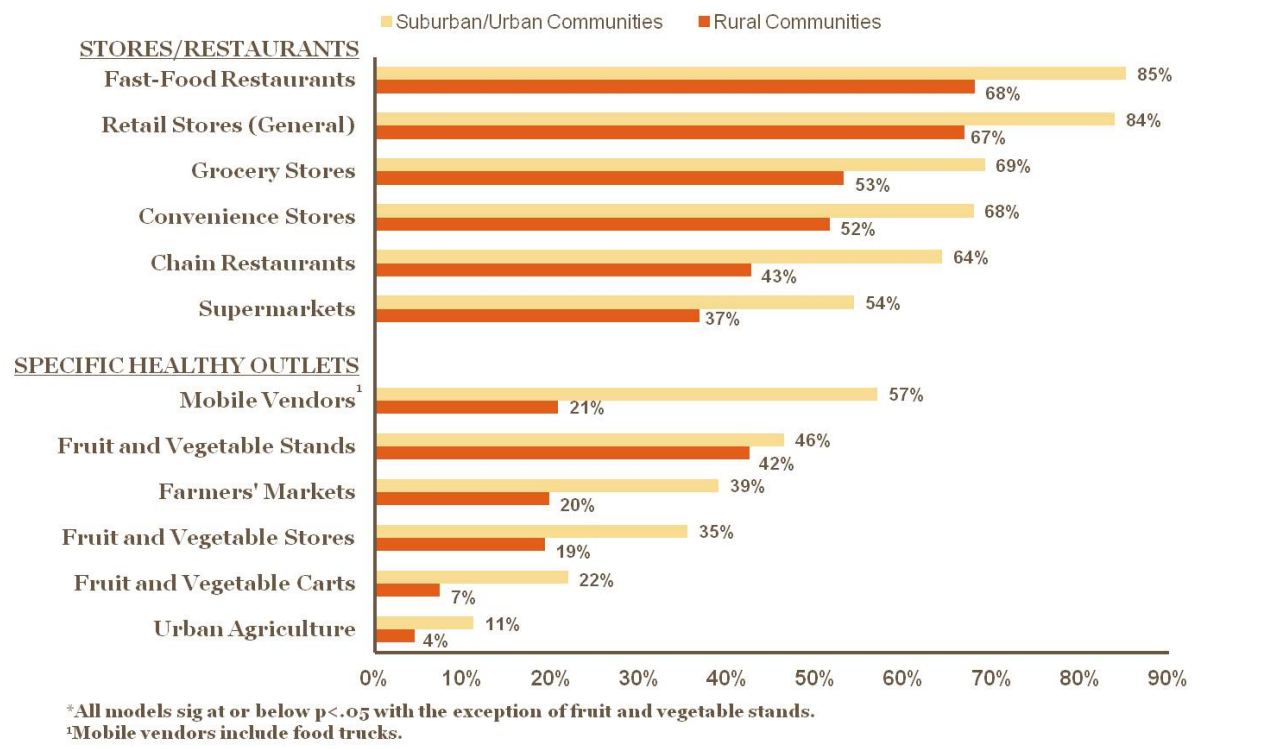
Key Findings

Children were more likely to live in communities with zoning ordinances that permit traditional food outlets such as supermarkets, grocery stores, convenience stores, fast food restaurants, and retail stores than specifically healthy food outlets, such as farmers' markets, fruit and vegetable carts, and urban agriculture (i.e., community gardens) (see Figure 1).



Additionally, across the board, children living in rural areas were less likely to be exposed to zoning codes that permitted food stores and other food outlets than children living in suburban/urban areas (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Percentage of Children Living in Communities with Permitted Food Outlets by Community Locale



Conclusions and Policy Implications

Children were more likely to live in communities that have zoning ordinances that permit the establishment of fast food restaurants and general retail stores than ordinances that specifically permit supermarkets and fruit and vegetable stores. Children were also less likely to live in communities with zoning ordinances that permit specific healthy food outlets such as farmers' markets, fruit and vegetable carts, and urban agriculture (i.e., community gardens), which are low-cost ways to increase residents' access to healthy foods. Children living in rural areas were less likely to live in areas with zoning codes that permitted food outlets and other food stores than children in suburban/rural areas because the zoning codes in rural areas are less comprehensive. Local governments have a number of policy options to help make healthy foods more accessible:

- Local governments should review their existing zoning policies and ordinances and consider including permitted uses for grocery stores and supermarkets, as well as for alternative food outlets, such as farmers' markets, community gardens, produce stands and mobile vending. Including permitted uses in local ordinances for these outlets removes administrative barriers to establishing their use and protects their existence.^{12,13,15}
- State and local policymakers can implement programs that provide support for the purchase of wireless electronic benefit transfer (EBT) devices at farmers' markets to increase sales among EBT card users, including those who participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC). They also can require that all new farmers' markets accept EBT cards to increase healthy food access to low-income individuals.¹⁰
- Local policymakers may consider adding specific language to their comprehensive plans to identify grocery stores as an important consideration for developing and redeveloping neighborhoods.¹⁹
- Municipalities may adopt ordinances that prevent property owners from restricting the future development of food stores on their land. For example, Chicago, IL,²⁰ and Madison, WI,²¹ adopted ordinances to prohibit restrictive covenants tied to grocery stores to help increase residents' access to food retailers.
- Local government officials can encourage convenience store and bodega owners to provide affordable healthy options by offering incentives.
- Local governments can create incentive programs to attract supermarkets and grocery stores to underserved neighborhoods through tax credits, grants and loan programs.¹⁸

Endnotes

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For more on this Research Brief, contact:
Emily Thrun
Ethrun2@uic.edu
www.bridgingthegapresearch.org

Bridging the Gap is a nationally recognized research program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation dedicated to improving the understanding of how policies and environmental factors affect diet, physical activity and obesity among youth, as well as youth tobacco use. For more information, visit www.bridgingthegapresearch.org and follow us on Twitter: [@BTGResearch](https://twitter.com/BTGResearch).