



# **Access to Affordable and Nutritious Food: SNAP Lessons**

---

Carol Olander, Ph.D.  
USDA, Food and Nutrition Service  
Office of Research and Analysis

Understanding Food Deserts  
ERS Symposium  
October 9, 2008



# Access to Affordable and Nutritious Food: SNAP Lessons

---

- Context
  - SNAP the foundation of U.S. nutrition safety net.
  - Benefits targeted to purchase food for use at home.
  - Commercial retail distribution the vehicle used to buy food.



# Access to Affordable and Nutritious Food: SNAP Lessons

---

- Ability to meet SNAP health & nutrition goals tied to available channels of trade.
- Optimally stores need to offer products:
  - high quality
  - reasonably priced
  - sufficient variety
  - culturally appropriate
- Important that access to such stores not impose recipient burden.



# Access to Affordable and Nutritious Food: SNAP Lessons

---

- Where can SNAP participants use benefits?
  - Authorized retailers must meet SNAP eligibility criteria.
  - Currently more than 170,000 authorized stores.
  - 23% superstores, supermarkets, or large grocery stores.



# Access to Affordable and Nutritious Food: SNAP Lessons

---

- Concern about access in low-income urban & rural areas.
- FNS research focus in 1990s:
  - analysis of store characteristics by area;
  - proximity of SNAP families to full-line stores;
  - survey of participant & eligible non-participant shopping options;
  - analysis of nationwide EBT transaction data; and a
  - review of strategies for improving access in underserved areas.



# Food Retailer Characteristics and Service

---

- Study Focus
  - Market basket analysis for nationally representative sample.
  - Linked all authorized stores to demographic data by ZIP code.



# Food Retailer Characteristics and Service

---

- Supermarkets & large groceries supply, on average, more variety & lower prices.
- Few in either general population or population in poverty lack access to supermarkets or large groceries.
- Small groceries more prevalent in high-poverty urban & rural areas.
- Cost & quality don't vary by area poverty; small difference in selection.



# Retailer Characteristics and Proximity to SNAP Clients

---

- 9 large areas –each with multiple communities -- chosen to represent three levels of population density.
- GIS software mapped store & client addresses to determine proximity.
- Benefit issuance & redemption amounts compared within zip codes to examine where participants shopped.



## Retailer Characteristics and Proximity to SNAP Clients

---

- Median distance to large grocers & supermarkets increased as area population declined.
- With single exception > 90% of SNAP households live within 5 miles of supermarket or large grocer.
- SNAP participants used benefits outside of zip code of residence.



## **Store Access: Participants and Low-income Nonparticipants**

---

- Nationally representative survey samples of SNAP recipients, eligible nonparticipants & near-eligible.



## Store Access: Participants and Low-income Nonparticipants

---

- Almost 90% of three low-income samples use supermarkets as main type of store.
- For participants, average distance to nearest supermarket is 1.8 miles.
- Average miles to most often used store is 4.9 for participants & eligible non-participants.



## Store Access: Participants and Low-income Nonparticipants

---

- Average round trip travel time to most-often used store is 23-24 minutes for all three groups.
- Car most usual form of transportation; for participants more likely to ride with others.
- Participants more likely to have out-of-pocket costs.



## Nationwide Shopping Patterns: FY2003 EBT Transaction Data

---

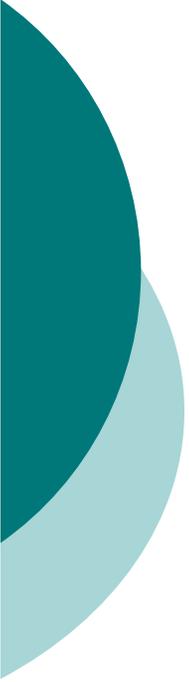
- Almost 89% of SNAP benefits used in supermarkets or large groceries.
- 72.4% of all SNAP purchases in supermarkets or large groceries.
- 5.7% of SNAP households made no purchases in supermarkets.



## SNAP Benefit Redemptions: FY2007 Administrative Data

---

- 87% of benefits redeemed in super stores, supermarkets, or large grocery stores.
- 4.3% of benefits redeemed in convenience stores.
- 4.4% of benefits redeemed in small or medium grocery stores.



# Strategies to Improve Food Access in Underserved Areas

---

- Ideas culled from conference, literature review & survey of experts, for example:
  - partnerships between Community Development Corporations & grocers;
  - food policy councils as advisors or advocates to local government; and
  - creation of store alternatives, like farmers' markets & food cooperatives.



## Lingering Questions

---

- How do we reconcile these rather consistent findings with the strong views about food deserts?
- Does the approach change if store access is a problem in some but not most low-income urban & rural areas?



## For More Information on Research

---

[http://www.fns.usda.gov/oane/  
MENU/Published/recentreleases.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/oane/MENU/Published/recentreleases.htm)