



## Ohio's Food Desert Crisis: Recognizing a Food Desert

When John Pekar began as the superintendent of the Vinton County Board of Developmental Disabilities in 2008, there was one grocery store, one drug store and no fast food restaurants in the entire county. In 2013, the single grocery store closed down, leaving 13,000 people in a food desert for the next four years.

"It was big news in Vinton County when the store was closing," said Pekar, the superintendent of both the Vinton and Fairfield County Boards of Developmental Disabilities. "It was like, 'Oh my god.' We maybe had one doctor's office; it has virtually nothing."



Vinton has a low population density and a large population of senior citizens. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 20.7% of the county's residents live below the poverty line. When the community lost the SuperValu market, those without a vehicle lost virtually all access to fresh, nutritious food.

Hundreds of thousands of Ohioans currently face food accessibility and security issues, largely in minority communities and sparsely populated rural areas. Underserved communities, including senior citizens and individuals with developmental disabilities, are particularly vulnerable when multiple barriers to food access compound.

Generally, areas are considered food insecure when they have limited access to healthy, fresh and affordable foods, including fresh fruits and vegetables. The U.S. Department of Agriculture classifies this in terms of distance and income. In rural areas, food deserts exist where grocery stores are more than 10 miles away. In Vinton County, many residents live more than 20 miles from the nearest grocery store. According to a 2007 study conducted at The Ohio State University, 24% of rural Ohioans do not live within a 10-minute drive of a retail grocery store. Urban areas are considered food deserts when there are no supermarkets within one mile.

In 2009, the USDA submitted a report to Congress focusing on food deserts. The report identified both urban and rural problems, including racial segregation and income inequality in cities and a lack of transportation and infrastructure in rural areas. Ultimately, areas with low average incomes and a low population density are underserved in a variety of ways, and they are extremely risky investments for grocery retailers.

"These grocery stores make razor-thin profits, even the best ones," said Mark Willis, the director of the Hall Hunger Initiative in Dayton. "In low-income areas, they just aren't going to make the money they need. They're going to leave. We're going to be stuck with places like the dollar stores, with no apples, no greens, no healthy food – everything there's high in sodium."

 24%

**of rural Ohioans do not live within a 10-minute drive of a retail grocery store of any size.**

In rural areas, food deserts exist where grocery stores are more than 10 miles away.

The problems associated with food accessibility aren't always immediately recognizable, and some businesses can still be attracted.

"After the grocery store closed, [Vinton] County got its first McDonalds, which was a shared space with a gas station across the street from the high school," said Pekar. "It was like, 'Hey, we got a McDonalds!' But nobody talked about how the food's really unhealthy."

It's not just that specific communities and areas have an absence of fresh food options; they also typically have an abundance of processed sugars and fats available at convenience and corner stores. Fast food restaurants are also commonly found in food deserts, offering empty calories at unbeatable prices.

"In America, there's not a hunger problem, precisely," said Willis. "There's a poverty problem."

Food access in America is deeply connected to race and socio-economic status. Underserved communities across the country are facing the tangible effects of years-old systemic policy. For individuals with developmental disabilities, there is also an increased risk of poverty, which is interconnected with nutrition and healthcare issues. For these communities, problems with food access are compounded by disinvestment, mobility issues and income disparities. According to Michelle Kaiser, an associate professor at The Ohio State University and member of its Food Innovation Center, there's been pushback against the term "food deserts" as an over-simplification of a complex issue that involves real people.

"To me, even if the numbers change by percentage points, we still have people who are experiencing poverty," said Kaiser. "We have people who can tell stories after stories of their experiences, and we need to listen first of all to the people who are experiencing food insecurity. We need to move beyond just percentages, and numbers, and parsing out who is and isn't food insecure – and actually hear people experiencing that."

In 2017, a small grocery store, Campbell's Market, opened in Vinton County after months of community efforts. The store's opening made fresh, healthy foods available for McArthur, the county seat, but many see it as a first step in solving the larger problems of accessibility and affordability.

"It's handy for people in McArthur because that's where the store is located, and that's the central part of the county," said Pekar. "But if you're in an outlying part of the county, you're still riding a ways [to get groceries]. I'd say it's a small oasis in the middle of a very large food desert."

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## About This Article

The Ohio DD Council presents *Ohio's Food Desert Crisis*, an article series that aims to educate and inform people about the impact of food deserts, which are areas around the state in which it is difficult to buy affordable or good-quality fresh food, on Ohioans with developmental disabilities.

A food desert is a geographical area that has limited access to affordable and nutritious food, usually in impoverished areas in both urban and rural settings. These areas do not have grocery stores, farmers' markets, or health food providers that provide fresh foods. Instead, these areas often just have convenience stores and "dollar" stores that provide processed foods that are not nutritious or healthy. Many times for people with developmental disabilities, other barriers add to this issue, such as lack of transportation services.

There are four topics covered in this series. We encourage you to read each one and share the information with others. You can access them here: <https://ddc.ohio.gov/ohios-food-desert-crisis>



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