

NAVIGATING NUTRITIONAL NECESSITIES: EXPLORATION OF FOOD DESERTS IN U.S. COLLEGE ENVIRONMENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Food deserts are areas where there is limited access to healthy and affordable food. This research project aims to comprehensively investigate the presence and implications of food deserts on college campuses, focusing on understanding the unique challenges faced by students in accessing nutritious and affordable food options.

OBJECTIVE

Examine the socio-economic factors affecting students' food choices and access to nutritious foods. Identify the extent of food deserts on college campuses, considering both urban and rural contexts.

RELATED LITERATURE

Dutko, Paula, Michele Ver Ploeg, and Tracey Farrigan. Characteristics and Influential Factors of Food Deserts. ER8-140, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, August 2012.
Sogari, G., Vainaz-Angumede, C., Gómez, M., & Mora, C. (2018). College students and eating habits: A study using an ecological model for healthy behavior. *Nutrients*, 10(12), 1823. <https://doi.org/10.3390/nu10121823>
Dhillon, J., Diaz Rios, L. K., Aldaz, K., De La Cruz, N., Vu, E., Asad Asghar, S., Kase, Q., & Ortiz, R. (2019). We don't have a lot of healthy options: Food environment perceptions of first-year, minority college students attending a food desert campus. *Nutrients*, 11(4), 816. <https://doi.org/10.3390/nu11040816>

METHODOLOGY

The study is based on the analysis of 102 surveys completed by currently enrolled college students living in the United States to gather data on their grocery budget, dietary habits, accessibility to grocery stores, means of transportation, and experiences with food delivery services.

FINDINGS

Although many universities & colleges around the country have made healthier food options more accessible on campus, affordability and accessibility still remain an issue in many schools.

The nearest grocery store on average is 2.34 miles away from students surveyed. The average distance for their preferred grocery store nearly doubled to 4.19 miles.

ANALYSIS

Diet

- Students are not consuming the daily recommended intake of fruits and vegetables but over 90% have indicated they would like to increase their intake.

Accessibility

- 88% of students have to purchase groceries off campus.
- 43% of students on campus have a vehicle while 57% have to use other means of transportation to get to their nearest grocery store.

Affordability

- Most students indicated that they select their meals based on affordability. This is followed by taste, convenience, then accessibility.
- 42% of students find that the cost of grocery delivery services is too high.
- Although 81% of students receive financial support from their parent(s), students selected food cost as the second highest factor that makes it challenging for them to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables. The number one factor was limited time to prepare meals and the third was distance from grocery stores.

CONCLUSION

This research project contributes to the broader understanding of food deserts within the unique context of college campuses, shedding light on the roadblocks faced by students in their pursuit of healthier diets. Limited time to prepare meals, limited access to healthy food options, and rising cost of food disproportionately affects students.

For future research, it may be worthwhile to investigate the role of campus food pantries, initiatives, dining facilities, meal plan flexibility, markets, and vending machines, in shaping students' dietary behaviors.

