



HUNGER IS A HEALTH ISSUE

Food deserts

Many Americans are not able to buy healthy food in their communities for a number of physical and economic reasons. For one, they may live in communities with limited access to healthy, high-quality foods. These so-called “food deserts,” often found in lower-income neighborhoods, communities of color, and rural areas, offer few, if any, full-service su-

permarkets or grocery stores. In rural food deserts, there may be no food retail options available for miles. Meanwhile, urban food deserts often have many corner/convenience stores and fast food restaurants, but these offer mostly unhealthy foods (highly processed items with added sugars and fat), which is why some prefer to call such areas “food swamps.”

Eating on a budget

Even when they do live near a grocery store, many families with low incomes purchase unhealthy foods, despite preferring healthy foods. One reason is that nutrient-rich foods such as fruit, vegetables, lean meats, and low-fat dairy products are more expensive than foods high in fats, sodium, added sugars and refined grains. Another challenge is that fresh food is more expensive than processed, boxed, and canned food, and can spoil more quickly. Many parents are also hesitant to buy new or unfamiliar foods for their children out of fear that it may be rejected by the children and go to waste. Additionally, some nutrient-rich foods are less filling than high-calorie and high-sodium food.

Some parents even sacrifice the quality of their own diet to ensure that their kids can eat more healthily. For example, in households at risk of food insecurity, mothers describe how they make food last by letting the children eat first, cutting down their own portions, or skipping meals altogether.

Supermarkets also influence what shoppers buy. Most offer sales and special discounts on processed foods high in fats, sodium, sugar and refined grains, and these sales steer shoppers toward these unhealthier food choices.

Health consequences of food insecurity

Unfortunately, unhealthy diets can lead to health problems down the road. The typical American diet, which comprises a high intake of sugary desserts and drinks, processed and red meat, refined grains, and high-fat dairy products, and a lack of vegetables and whole grains, is associated with a number of chronic diseases including [type 2 diabetes](#), [heart disease](#), [some types of cancer](#), and [kidney disease](#). It also contributes to mental health problems such as [cognitive impairment \(including dementia\)](#) and [depression](#).

So when people are feeding their families on a shoestring and eating unhealthy foods as a

result, their health can suffer. For example, adults who are food-insecure¹ are [32% more likely](#) to be obese than food-secure adults. They also have a [50% greater risk for clinical diabetes](#), [27% greater risk for high blood pressure](#), and a [46% greater risk for kidney disease](#).

Children who are food-insecure are also at risk for many long-term [health](#) and [development](#) issues. They are more likely to have iron deficiency, asthma, learning difficulties (including delayed cognitive development), increased stomachaches, headaches and colds, and increased fatigue. They also might suffer from psychological challenges.

Obesity

Obesity or overweight is no guarantee of adequate nourishment. For example, a person who eats calorie-dense fast food items all day probably isn't getting enough nutrients, many of which come from fruits, vegetables, and low-fat dairy. This is especially true for food-insecure families. Families facing food insecurity may lack consistent access to healthy food, have high levels of stress, and choose inexpensive, calorie-dense foods be-

cause they don't have access to nutrient-dense alternatives. [All of these factors can lead to nutrient deficiencies and obesity](#).

Obesity in childhood and adolescence [has been linked with](#) high cholesterol, high blood pressure, asthma, some types of cancer, and an increase in type 2 diabetes. Furthermore, youth who are overweight are 50-80% more likely to be overweight adults compared to their normal weight peers.

¹ People are considered food-insecure when they lack (at any time during year) physical and/or economic access to adequate nutritious, safe, and culturally acceptable food for an active, healthy life. [Learn more here](#).

Learn more

[Chen, W., Clayton, M.L., & Palmer, A. \(2015\). Community Food Security in the United States: A Survey of the Scientific Literature.](#)

[Food System Primer: Food Environments \(2016\). Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future.](#)

[The Hunger Gap \(2016\). Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future. Lesson plan. Slides. Handout.](#)

[Treuhaft, S. & Karpyn, A. \(2010\). The Grocery Gap: Who Has Access to Healthy Food and Why It Matters. Policy Link and The Food Trust.](#)

[Zachary, D.A., Palmer, A.M., Beckham, S.W., & Surkan, P.J. \(2013\). Understanding grocery purchasing in a low-income urban environment. Qualitative Health Research.](#)

About the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future

Since 1996 the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future (CLF) has been addressing some of the most pressing issues in the food system while advancing public health and protecting the environment. As an interdisciplinary academic center within the Bloomberg School of Public Health, the CLF is dedicated to build-

ing a healthier, more equitable, and resilient food system. The CLF is a leader in food system and public health research, education, policy, and advocacy and is a trusted scientific resource for advocates, policy makers, educators, and communities.