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A geo-ethnographic analysis of low-income rural and urban women's food shopping behaviors

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Abstract: Many scholars have found evidence that low-income neighborhoods contain fewer supermarkets, but there is a lack of consensus regarding whether and how this matters to residents. A few qualitative studies have asked food desert residents about their experiences of their food environments, while a small number of other studies have utilized spatial analyses to examine actual shopping behaviors. To better understand barriers to food access, this study combines the two in a geo-ethnographic analysis. This study draws on data from a USDA-funded project about families and food to combine quantitative geographic data with qualitative interview data of 100 rural and urban low-income mothers of young children. For each participant, the nearest supermarket, as well most-frequented supermarket, was mapped, and distances to stores were calculated. On average, participants traveled more than twice as far as their nearest supermarket to reach a preferred store. Interviews with participants were conducted to assess the motivations and strategies of shoppers, in particular why they chose to bypass their nearest supermarkets. They shared a variety of reasons for doing so; foremost to find lower prices of food in order to stretch income and SNAP benefits. Access to transportation also played a major role in determining where people shopped for food. This research challenges scholars, policymakers, and health practitioners to look beyond proximate food environments to consider the lived experiences of food desert residents. Efforts to address poor food access should aim to increase household income, in addition to providing targeted food and nutrition assistance.

Keywords: Food access; food deserts; geographic information system (GIS); mapping; mixed methods; food shopping

Declarations of interest: None.

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