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Finding: Food & Nutrition Assistance

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Prices Play Greater Role Than Access in Food-Purchase Decisions for SNAP Households

by **Biing-Hwan Lin** and **Michele Ver Ploeg**



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Lack of access to full-service grocery stores and other sources of healthy food options has been thought to be linked to obesity and other diet-related diseases. Some communities are engaged in efforts to attract supermarkets and farmers markets to underserved neighborhoods. Such increased access will save travel and time costs, lowering the “shopping cost” of healthier food choices. A recent analysis by ERS researchers and colleagues found that prices play a larger role than access in determining how participants

in USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) allocate their food budgets.

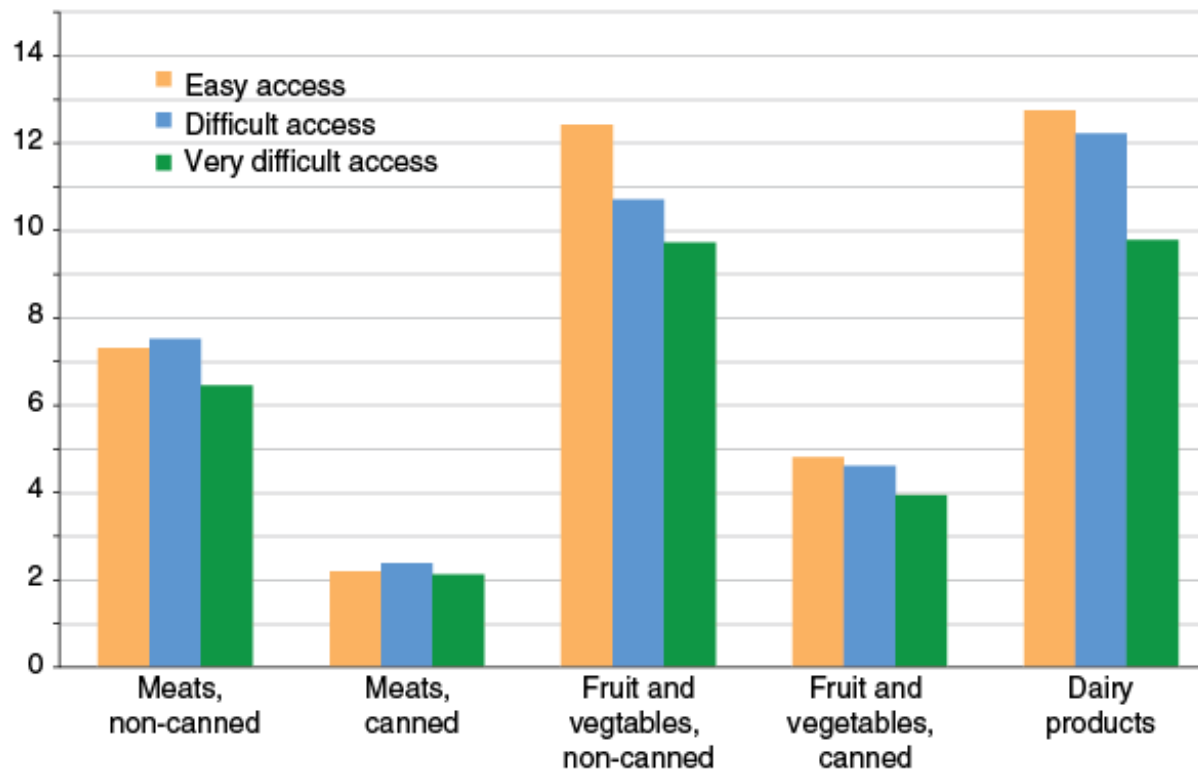
The researchers used quantity and expenditure data from a 1996-97 survey of SNAP participants—the most recent national survey that contains both food quantity and expenditure data and includes measures of food access. While comparative measures of food access in 1996-97 versus today are not available, car ownership for low-income areas has grown from 82.1 percent in 2000 to 84.8 percent in 2010, suggesting that travel time and the associated shopping cost might have declined over time for low-income households. For this reason, any relationship between access and food purchases likely would have been stronger in 1996-97 than in more recent years.

The researchers hypothesized that SNAP households with limited access to supermarkets would spend proportionally less of their food budget on perishable foods, such as fresh fruit, vegetables, meats, and dairy products, than households with better access to supermarkets. SNAP households were categorized into three access groups: easy access (those who shopped for food mainly at a supermarket and traveled less than 20 minutes to the store), difficult access (those who shopped mainly at a supermarket but traveled 20 minutes or more to the store), and very difficult access (those who did not shop mainly at a supermarket). Sixty-five percent of the 882 SNAP households analyzed had easy food access, 25 percent had difficult access, and 10 percent fell into the very difficult access group. As expected, SNAP participants with very difficult access purchased smaller amounts of perishable foods than shoppers with easy access.

Access, however, was not the main driver of purchase decisions. Instead, prices and demographic factors (income, household size, etc.) held more sway. When price and demographic factors were accounted for, the effects of food access were quite small or negligible; of the 13 food groups, very difficult access was associated with purchases of just 2 of the food groups (beverages and canned meats), and difficult access was associated with purchases of only 1 food group (non-canned fruits and vegetables). In contrast, price increases led to statistically significant declines in purchases by SNAP households for all 13 food groups. If prices for a food group rose by 10 percent (and other prices did not change), purchased quantities were predicted to fall—ranging from a 6.1-percent drop for non-canned meats to 12.4 percent for beverages. These findings suggest that strategies to help low-income people improve their food choices may need to focus more on affordability than accessibility.

Before adjusting for prices and demographic factors, households with very difficult access to grocery stores purchased the least amount of fresh meat, fruit, vegetables, and dairy products

Average purchases by SNAP households, pounds per week



Note: Purchases are unadjusted for prices, household income, household size, and other factors.
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the 1996-97 National Food Stamp Program Survey.

This article is drawn from...

“The roles of food prices and food access in determining food purchases of low-income households” by Biing-Hwan Lin, Michele Ver Ploeg, Panagiotis Kasteridis, and Steven T. Yen, *Journal of Policy Modeling*, 36, pp. 938-952, 2014



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