



The Hurdles to Healthy Food Access

A community food assessment from the
Health & Wellness Coalition of Wichita
Summer 2014

The Hurdles to Healthy Food Access

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Approximately a quarter of all residents living in Wichita do not have access to healthy foods. Because of this, obstacles present themselves when making food choices. Barriers such as accessibility, affordability, transportation, food quality and perceived safety are all factors that determine what food choices individuals will make. While much progress has been made in our community to increase the availability of healthy food options, significant opportunities are available to continue the momentum. The Behaviors Behind Limited Food Access report builds upon the 2013 Wichita Community Food Assessment, which identified approximately 44 square miles of food deserts within Wichita and found the cost of basic food items varied greatly across the city. In fact, many items were found to be more expensive in low-income neighborhoods.

The following report uncovers the six factors that impact those living in a low-food-access area.



COST



QUALITY



TRANSPORTATION



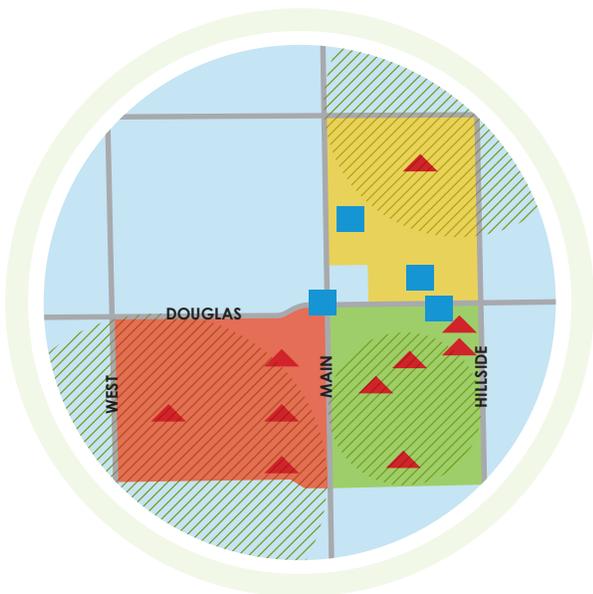
STORES



SOURCES



PERSONAL



To understand the impact of low food access on grocery shopping and eating habits, we interviewed 75 individuals and families living in the 67211, 67213 and 67214 ZIP codes.

- 67211 ZIP
- 67213 ZIP
- 67214 ZIP
- Convenience stores
- Grocery stores
- Food desert

WHAT IS A FOOD DESERT?

Traditionally, a food desert is defined as a low-income area where a significant number of residents have low access to supermarkets or grocery stores. The USDA describes low access for urban areas, like Wichita, as living more than one mile from a full-service grocery store.

Approximate square mileage of Wichita that makes up food deserts

44

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METHODOLOGY

Seventy-five individuals participated in interviews and focus groups between January and May 2014. Participants were recruited through local organizations, community liaisons, and fliers placed in the targeted areas of the city. ZIP codes 67211, 67213 and 67214 were selected based on comparatively low median-income levels, and the lack of availability of healthy and affordable food sources.



ZIP CODE STATISTICS

	67211	67213	67214
MEAN HHI	\$39,219	\$44,047	\$30,910
TOTAL POP.	21,012	22,829	15,451
POP. BELOW POVERTY LEVEL	24%	30%	39%
ETHNICITY	HISPANIC/LATINO 25%	WHITE 30%	BLACK/AFRICAN AM. 30%
STORES WITH FRESH VEG.	5	1	8

**Please see table 1 in appendix on page 22 for full ZIP code data.*

Interviews were semi-structured covering a variety of topics including individual preferences, grocery store use, food access, transportation issues and barriers to eating healthy. Interviews were conducted individually in person (except a few via telephone to accommodate the interviewee). Focus groups were conducted with a moderator and recorder. Audio recordings, notes and memos were used to record data.

The interview data collected was condensed and separated into categories based on content. Six factors were then identified explaining the experience of living in a low-food-access area. This qualitative approach enhances and supports previous studies while providing direction for future policy and environmental recommendations.

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Factor 1: Cost

Given the distance to a grocery store is farther for those in low-food-access areas, individuals spend more time and fuel to reach a full-service grocery store. These are additional costs that, when combined with the price of healthy food, make it difficult to eat healthy.

Healthy food costs

Every single participant named the financial cost of healthy food, especially fruits and vegetables, to be a challenge. Participants expressed that cheaper food was typically less healthy, but the price was the most important food selection criteria due to limited incomes.

“Cost is usually the deciding factor on whether or not I’m going to buy something.”

Spoiled food

Waste was considered another cost component, especially produce and meat products. By purchasing food that was processed, individuals had less risk of wasting the food.

“We eat fresh vegetables and fruit at the first of the month and then switch to canned and frozen towards the end.”

Travel time, fuel, net gain

Participants noted additional time and fuel costs needed to get to a full-service grocery store as a part of the overall cost of food. One participant was financially restricted to the distance that they could travel.

“A lot of times I can’t afford to drive to a store that is farther way.”

“By the time I pay rent and utilities, there isn’t much left over for food.”

 67211

“Nothing is worse than letting food go bad. I hate wasting food, but sometimes it happens.”

 67211

“It’s about the net gain of a trip. If I waste a bunch of gas and time to get to a store that has a little cheaper pricing, I haven’t gained anything.”

 67211

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Factor 1: Cost, cont.

STRATEGIES

Many participants described ways to eat healthy despite the cost of food such as creating a monthly food budget, planning trips to the grocery store, utilizing recipes to minimize food waste, and sharing bulk food purchases with friends and family members. It is important to note that participants are motivated and creative in overcoming cost issues and will embrace future efforts that will help them get healthy food at an affordable cost.

STRENGTHS

Participants named several community strengths that help reduce the cost of food and make it more accessible:

- WIC supplementing food and providing nutritional education and healthcare referrals
- SNAP/Vision card acceptance at majority of Wichita stores and farmers' markets
- Grocery stores offering fresh, frozen and canned produce
- Food banks and pantries

OPPORTUNITIES

- Many participants were unaware that farmers' markets accepted Vision cards. It would be beneficial to raise awareness of food sources that accept nutrition assistance benefits.
- Collaborate with growers and farmers' markets to offer fresh produce for sale at WIC and other strategic locations.
- Nationally, communities have eliminated sales tax on produce to reduce the cost of healthy food items.

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Factor 2: Quality

Food quality is very important and is consistently the deciding factor of food selection (next to cost). Food that looks appetizing, fresh, and is minimally processed is the most desirable. Packaging is often used to determine food quality.

Appearance

Quality was one of the deciding factors on whether food was going to be purchased and consumed. Individuals were discouraged from purchasing food items that didn't appear to be fresh. The majority prefer fresh produce, expressing difficulty finding quality food that looked satisfactory for purchase.

“Some produce sections just look bad.”

“Better quality - I don't like it when there are things wrong with the strawberries or bananas, such as dents or discolorations.”

 67213

Taste

The taste of food, particularly fresh produce, is important to consumers.

“Fresh food just has this natural flavor that is great.”

 67213

Source

Individuals were concerned with buying food and being unaware of its source. Organic food was preferred due to the lack of chemicals and taste but was often not possible to purchase due to a higher price or lack of availability.

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Factor 2: Quality, cont.

STRATEGIES

Labels were the most common information source for evaluating the “healthiness” of food before purchasing. Food advertised through fliers, signs, coupons, and sales were also typically sought after by many participants. Additionally, price breakdowns by ounce allowed for product comparison, making it “easier to shop smarter.”

INGREDIENTS
calories, sugar, fat,
sodium and protein
amounts were the most
sought-out facts on
food labels.

STRENGTHS

Several grocery stores have large produce sections and offer both organic and non-organic produce. Weekly sales and coupons offered by grocery stores encourage the purchase of certain food items.

OPPORTUNITIES

- **Nationally, cities have encouraged the development of partnerships between community organizations, such as family health centers and grocery stores, to increase knowledge about healthy food choices.**
- **A food labeling system would provide additional information to consumers about the healthiness of a food product and make product comparisons easier.**

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Factor 3: Transportation

Transportation is critical for grocery shopping. Grocery store commutes are significantly longer, and food types and quantity are limited, if individuals do not have access to a vehicle.

Personal vehicle

Access to a vehicle made grocery shopping trips easier. However, several participants reported owning a vehicle but not always being able to afford gas or running out of money for gas by the end of the month and having to rely on other means of transportation. Transportation was a major concern for individuals that did not own a vehicle. Distance to the store wasn't described as a major barrier for families that owned at least one vehicle. For people without a car, weather can impact transportation to the store.

Walk

Walking was often the only option to get to a store, despite the distance. One family purchased items in bulk and used a wagon to transport food back, reporting a 2.5-hour round trip to the nearest store.

 "It can be hard to walk to the store even when the weather is nice. It's really hard walking through snow or ice."

"It used to take me over 45 minutes to just get to the store, and it took even longer walking back because I was carrying groceries."

 67211

Bicycle

When available, bicycling was an alternative to walking. While bicycle transportation was often preferred over walking, purchasing strategies were changed due to the carrying capacity of the bike. A small number of participants reported using a bicycle as a regular source of transportation.

 "Heavy items can be challenging to fit on a bike."

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Factor 3: Transportation, cont.

Public services

Public transportation is difficult to navigate and inefficient for grocery shopping. Several individuals described the bus route system as being hard to use due to the lack of information at bus stops. The cost and travel time of bus routes to different areas of the city were also a barrier. Accessibility was also an issue with public transportation. Those without a personal vehicle are the minority, but they find transportation a major barrier to accessing food.

- “You have to know someone that has it already figured out in order to use it [bus service].”
- “I have a son in a wheelchair, and he can’t ride the bus, so I have to pay for a handicap accessible taxi to get to the store. It can cost as much as 60 dollars to just get to the store and back, so I go shopping once a month.”

“I used to have to go shopping five times a week when using the bus so I could manage carrying bags on the bus and while walking.”

 67213

“It costs two dollars to get on a bus and go to the central hub, then two dollars to get on another bus to go somewhere else and you still end up having to walk sometimes. Then you have to do it all over again to get back. I would rather walk than take the bus. It’s quicker and cheaper.”

 67214

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Factor 3: Transportation, cont.

STRATEGIES

For individuals without a personal vehicle, there was often support within their social networks to provide transportation. Participants used whatever means was available and developed unique strategies appropriate for their situation.

STRENGTHS

The Wichita transit system is working on more public accessibility. A policy was recently removed that limited the number of grocery bags allowed on the bus. Wichita Transit has also created new routes that intersect and provide more connection options to northwest Wichita shopping areas. Bus day passes are available at several grocery stores, and individuals are also able to purchase a bus transfer option. With the proposed Master Bicycle Plan and Master Pedestrian Plan, Wichita is creating a bike- and walker-friendly environment.

OPPORTUNITIES

- **Wichita's public transportation system could expand operating hours and include more routes near grocery stores.**
- **Educating Wichitans about new public transportation routes and policies would be beneficial.**
- **The faith community and other community partners could supplement transportation needs in some areas by providing a shuttle service to nearby grocery stores.**

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Factor 4: Stores

Grocery store characteristics impact shopping behavior, especially the layout and appearance of the store and surrounding area. Within the store, marketing and advertising influence food purchases.

Accessibility

For individuals that have difficulty moving, accessibility is crucial.

“I won’t go a particular store because it’s not accessible for someone that has difficulty moving.”

 67211

Neighborhood safety

Neighborhood perception impacts what stores people use. Loitering and the absence of police presence has a negative impact. Personal safety was often such a concern that individuals would travel farther to shop at other stores.

“It’s a short walk to my [grocery] store but I don’t want to be involved in the crime scene when I go shopping.”

 67214

Cleanliness

Clean storefronts and shopping aisles encouraged shopping.

“It’s embarrassing to go into filthy places that have bad food. I wish I could afford better options and go to any store I wanted.”

“People would feel better about their community if they had stores that were clean and you could get healthy food.”

Just because a store is in a certain area doesn’t mean that it should look like a bad place. We shouldn’t have to go outside of our neighborhood to get decent tasting food that looks nice.”

 67214

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Factor 4: Stores, cont.

Store size and layout

While there was some variation in preferences to store sizes, participants expressed difficulties in layouts of several stores and the variety of food items offered.

“A lot of the healthy food is at the back of the store, and the unhealthy stuff is up front.”

 67213

Variety

A variety of fresh, frozen and canned produce in stores is preferred.

 “I’ve noticed a difference in availability of certain items in the same stores.”

Stores in different neighborhoods offer things that are tailored to those neighborhoods; it feels like we get treated differently because of our low income status.”

 67214

Customer service

Knowledgeable and friendly staff helped with purchases of food. Poor customer service and employees having “absolutely no idea where things are” made shopping experiences challenging.

Marketing

Advertisements, sales and labeling influenced purchasing decisions. Marketing of unhealthy food items toward children was also discussed as a challenge.

“There is a point system [Box Tops] for kids that encourages purchasing of unhealthy food.”

 67211

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Factor 4: Stores, cont.

STRATEGIES

Despite the challenges experienced within the grocery store, there were several strategies that assisted grocery store navigation. To avoid unhealthy temptations, individuals are planning shopping trips around the location of the healthiest, highest quality and most affordable items.

STRENGTHS

Wichita grocery stores range from corporate stores to local ethnic stores. The presence of these stores and the variation in store type, customer base and location provide a diversity of food products and options that can potentially enhance the food environment.

OPPORTUNITIES

Collaboration between grocery stores and local organizations in other communities has led to redesigning produce sections, the general layout and the food labeling system. These collaborations can encourage an increase in business and the purchase of healthy food items.

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Factor 5: Sources

Most participants shopped regularly at grocery stores. Farmers' markets, gardens and ethnic food stores were sometimes used to supplement groceries but were not described as reliable means of getting food. For low-income individuals, food banks were critical in obtaining food.

Grocery stores

The majority of the stores used as major food sources were either grocery store chains or supermarkets that offered food in addition to other household necessities.

Ethnic stores

Ethnic food stores were used for a few select items, but most participants did not routinely visit them, with several citing cultural differences as a rationale.

Convenience stores

Despite their prevalence in low-food-access areas, convenience stores are not a source for groceries. A few participants occasionally visited convenience stores for snacks, but not for bulk purchases.

Farmers' markets

Participants discussed farmers' markets as a potential food source with an appealing atmosphere, but cited high prices and inconvenient hours and locations as a barrier. Produce consistency and year-round availability were also mentioned as problems.

“My children love those farmers' markets, but there aren't many around.”

“I like going to farmers' markets, but it's much more expensive. Sometimes I go with a friend, and we split the cost and food.”

 67211

Gardens

Personal and community gardens were identified as supplemental food sources, but many participants felt they didn't have enough yard space and worried about logistical issues with community gardens. Even in the summer, no one was able to adequately supplement fresh produce from farmers' markets or gardens.

“It's always an issue of who pays for water.”

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Factor 5: Sources, cont.

Food banks

For individuals that had limited financial resources, food banks and pantries were critical for obtaining food. While food banks were identified by some participants as supplemental sources of food, a small number of people used food banks as the only reliable source of food. For several individuals that had limited means of transportation, neighborhood food banks were the sole source of food.

“Food stamps don’t always last all month, so I have to use food banks to feed my family.”

Impact of closings

Grocery store closings in Wichita have had a significant impact. When smaller neighborhood grocery stores closed, participants described a negative impact on the community and a reduction of neighborhood food sources. Several participants said they used to walk to a nearby store but have switched shopping strategies due to store closings.

“I wouldn’t survive without food banks...I can’t go anywhere else for food.”

 67211

“Neighborhood stores used to promote a sense of community. When I first moved here, there were stores all around. Now most of them have closed.”

 67211

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Factor 5: Sources, cont.

STRATEGIES

The majority of participants were open to the idea of shopping at new stores and trying different tactics to purchase more healthy food at an affordable price.

STRENGTHS

Wichita has a variety of supplemental food sources that can be utilized to provide food in low access areas.

- Food bank and pantry system is accessible throughout Wichita, particularly in low-income areas.
- Wichita Independent Neighborhoods, along with other groups, work in conjunction with the K-State Extension Office to set up 20+ community gardens of various sizes that are currently operating in Wichita.
- Farmers' markets provide healthy food that is grown locally.

OPPORTUNITIES

- While there are a number of farmers' markets and community gardens in Wichita, creating more could improve healthy food access.
- A community food assessment of local food production and distribution would provide an idea of where supplemental food sources would be most useful.
- More support for food banks (via food donations or assistance with operating expenses like freezers and refrigerators) may be needed to provide healthy food to this vulnerable population.
- There are entrepreneurial opportunities for smaller grocery stores in low-food-access areas, particularly where grocery stores have recently closed. Several cities across the country have provided incentives for property and community development in underserved areas.

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Factor 6: Personal

In addition to the environment, personal factors such as food knowledge, cooking skills, past experiences with food and family circumstances had an influence on food purchases and preparation.

Current diet

Many participants were satisfied with their current diet, and a large number of individuals reported eating healthy most days.

“I don’t eat healthy to avoid some negative health thing in the future; I eat healthy because I notice the immediate benefits. I just feel better.”

 67211

Cooking skills

Cooking at home was the most common food preparation method, but many participants emphasized the importance of easy and quick recipes. Most participants expressed an interest in improving their cooking skills and experimenting with new foods. Cooking shows, the Internet and social networks were described as useful resources for learning recipes and skills.

“I get a lot of exposure at work that helps me decide what to get for home.”

 67211

Recipe availability

The lack of simple and healthy recipes made cooking a challenge. Frequently, there was a desire for recipes using simple ingredients that were healthy and cost-effective.

“It would be great to have a recipe, sample and promotion of food items in a store.”

 67213

 **“It would be great to coordinate items [at the store] that you can make a meal out of.”**

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Factor 6: Personal, cont.

Family dynamics

Individuals in charge of food shopping for the family were sometimes hesitant to purchase items not knowing if they would be eaten. However, several family conversations around healthy food were reported.

“Parents have the opportunity to control kids’ diet and perception of food.”

 67211

Knowledge and experience

Past exposure to food and family history influenced current diets. Past experience and the general knowledge of food were interrelated. While some participants reported eating very similar to “what my parents ate,” a variety of resources were used to learn about recipes, cooking and purchasing food.

 “I love every type of food, so free samples are important to see if it tastes good.”

STRATEGIES

The majority of participants were motivated to purchase and eat healthy food, even if it required extra time and money. There was an interest in providing a greater variety of healthy food at home by improving cooking skills and learning new recipes.

STRENGTHS

There are a variety of public and private organizations and foundations available that have been providing health and wellness programs for years. Combined with the resources of several government-sponsored programs, there are many ways that information about healthy food choices is distributed in Wichita.

OPPORTUNITIES

Organizations should continue to provide educational opportunities about healthy food choices and nutrition to individuals and families, particularly those living in low-food-access areas. Partnerships between these organizations and local grocery stores would provide opportunities to increase business and encourage healthy food choices.

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Summary

Factors	Strategies	Strengths	Opportunities
 COST	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Budgeting Planning shopping trips Minimizing food waste with recipes Splitting bulk purchases with family/friends 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> WIC SNAP/Vision at farmers' markets Food banks and pantries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Education about Vision card acceptance at farmers' markets Local growers at WIC Eliminate sales tax on produce
 QUALITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reading labels Shopping sales and using coupons Checking price per ounce 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organic and conventional produce Weekly sales and coupons 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Family health centers partnering with grocery stores Food labeling system
 TRANSPORTATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Utilizing social network support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accessible transit with new routes Master bike and pedestrian plans 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand public transit routes Transit education Faith community
 STORES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shopping multiple stores Only shopping certain sections to avoid unhealthy temptations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Store format variety providing diverse food product options 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Redesigning store layout and food labeling system
 SOURCES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shopping new stores with affordable, quality health food 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Food banks and pantries Wichita independent neighborhoods K-State Extension Office Farmers' markets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More farmers' markets and community gardens Community food assessment Food bank support Incentives for neighborhood grocery stores
 PERSONAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learning new recipes Improving cooking skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public and private foundations and organizations Government-sponsored programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partnerships between organizations and local grocery stores

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Key findings and conclusion

The results of this study suggest that individuals living in the 67211, 67213 and 67214 ZIP codes face additional challenges to eating healthy – usually a combination of environmental factors and personal situations.

The environmental barriers (cost, store distance, food and store quality) are consistent with national studies about low-food-access areas, and despite personal motivation, still restricted individuals' ability to purchase healthy food.

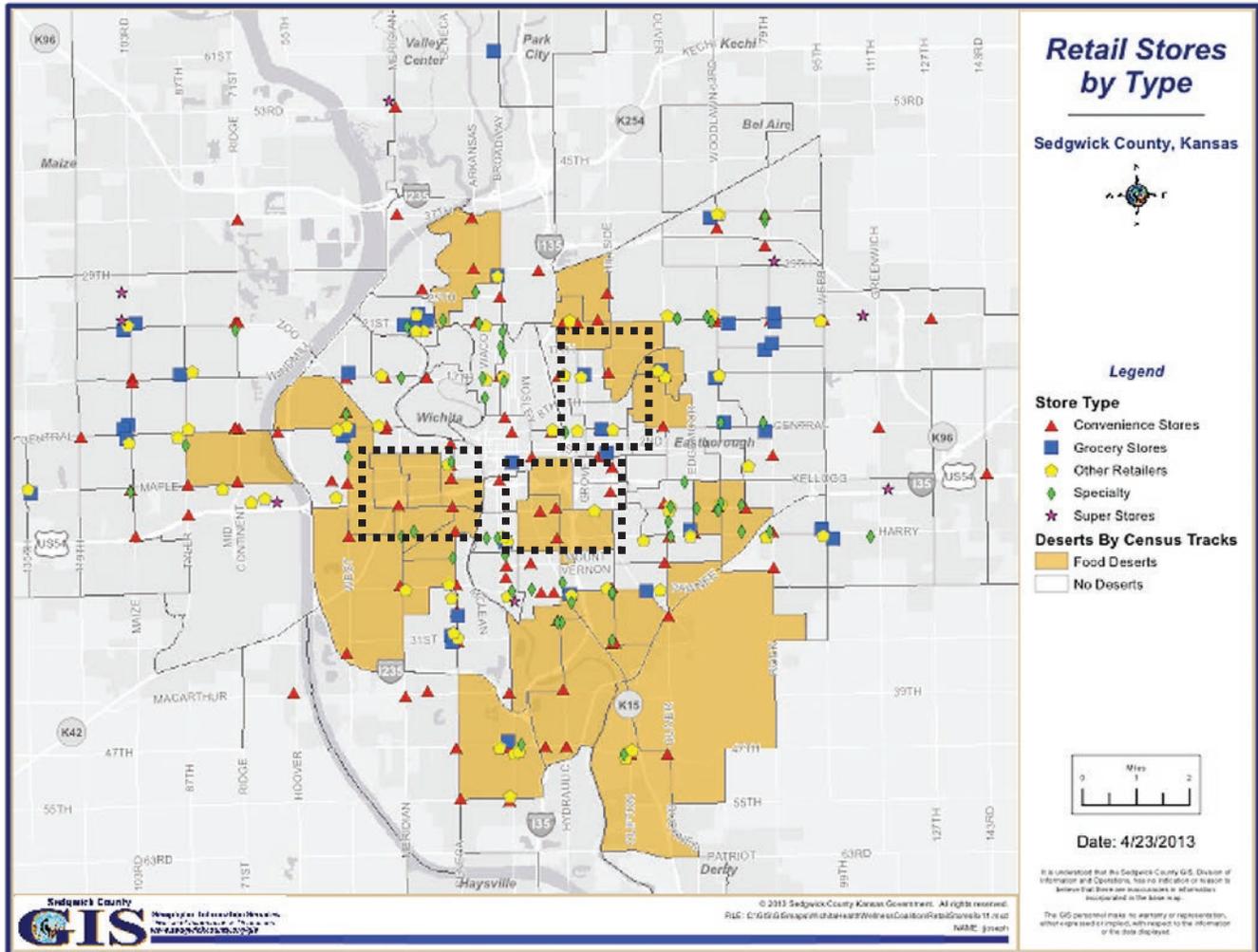
Recent local grocery store closings have a negative impact on community perception and how individuals access food.

For low-income individuals, food pantries and food banks are critical for survival, suggesting food security is still an issue for many.

The majority of participants were motivated to eat healthy and were aware of how diet impacts overall health. For parents, there was a pronounced desire for their children to eat healthy.

Awareness of the behaviors of individuals in their food purchasing habits as well as collaboration among community partners will ensure the success of future initiatives. The Health & Wellness Coalition of Wichita, along with community partners, will discuss action steps based on the report findings to help improve access to healthy foods.

Appendix

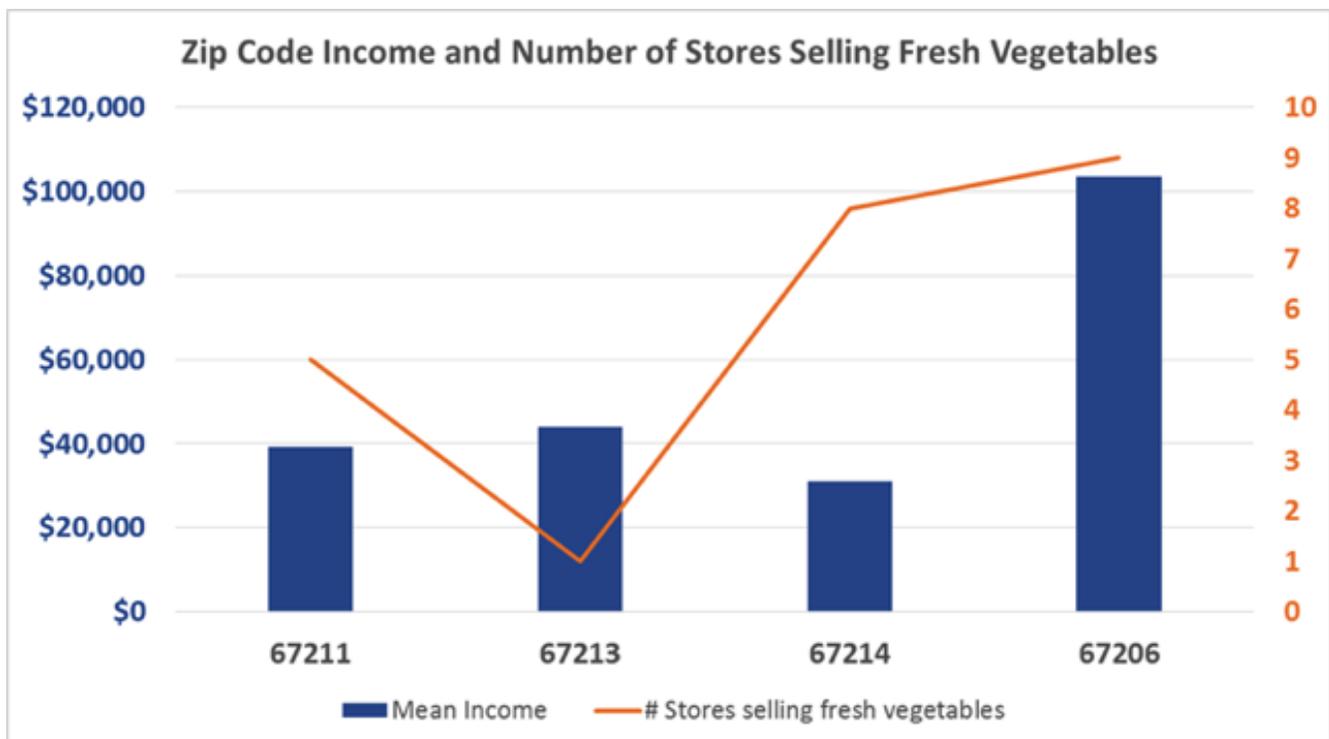


Appendix

Table 1. Zip Code Demographic Data

Subject	67211 Estimate	67213 Estimate	67214 Estimate	67206 Estimate
Total population	21,012	22,829	15,451	15,587
Median age (years)	32.2	30.6	31.7	44.0
White	72.3%	79.5%	32.1%	82.9%
Black or African American	7.5%	6.6%	49.9%	5.7%
American Indian and Alaska Native	1.2%	1.6%	0.6%	0.3%
Asian	5.1%	2.1%	3.9%	6.7%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.3%
Some other race	9.0%	4.5%	6.3%	1.6%
Hispanic or Latino (of any race)	24.7%	19.1%	20.7%	6.8%
Not Hispanic or Latino	75.3%	80.9%	79.3%	93.2%
Total housing units	9,932	10,115	8,007	7,592
Median household income	\$31,654	\$30,381	\$22,202	\$64,594
Mean household income	\$39,219	\$44,047	\$30,910	\$103,649
Percent high school graduate or higher	76.9%	79.9%	75.7%	95.1%
Population below poverty level	23.7%	29.5%	39.2%	9.1%
Number of stores selling fresh vegetables	5	1	8	9

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2008-2012 American Community Survey & 2013 Community Food Assessment



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2008-2012 American Community Survey & 2013 Community Food Assessment