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Rural Life Census Data Center Newsletter: South Dakota's Food Deserts

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South Dakota State University
College of Agriculture and Biological Sciences

RURAL LIFE CENSUS DATA CENTER NEWSLETTER



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South Dakota's Food Deserts

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For most Americans, shopping takes little time and planning. When one runs out of sugar, a trip to the nearest grocery store is quick and easy. This trip may be more annoying and inconvenient if you live in certain rural areas. Declining populations combined with the loss of jobs often leads to grocery stores serving larger areas. Communities that lack easy access to food supplies, usually because of the lack of grocery stores, are considered food deserts.

WHAT IS A FOOD DESERT?

Food deserts are areas in which all residents “have low access to large food retailers” (p. 1); specifically, each person in a food desert lives more than 10 miles away from a supermarket (Morton and Blanchard 2007).

Food deserts occur when a population is too small to support a supermarket. One author estimates that it takes over 14,000 people to support a convenience store (McCurry forthcoming). If such a minimum population threshold is no longer there, retailers, sooner or later, move or close due to limited profit.

The lack of a supermarket is a good indicator of a food desert. Our fast-paced society tends to favor quick, multi-purposed shopping trips. Many shop at larger stores for convenience. The resulting growth of large retail stores comes at the expense of rural grocery stores (Morton and Blanchard 2007). Larger retailers need only strip small percentages of customers from local grocery stores to take away a great deal of profit.

Increased rural commuting also hits rural retailers' bottom lines. Many commuters will shop in the town where

they work, then drive past their local store. Non-local shopping can be easier, the selection can be better, and the stores may be open longer.

Rural gas stations often try to fill the void of grocery stores. However, their food prices are usually higher, and their choices are fewer and less nutritional (Morton and Blanchard 2007). Convenience stores and gas stations generally carry high-calorie, processed foods such as bagged chips. Often, while they stock canned fruit and vegetables, they lack fresh fruit, vegetables, and meat.

One popular belief is that supercenters are cheaper than locally owned grocery stores. However, one Midwestern study found that while supercenters had lower prices on frozen foods, breads, cereals, and meats, smaller grocery stores had lower prices on most fruits, vegetables, and dairy products (Morton, Bitto, Oakland, and Sand 2005). Further study is needed to find out if this is true in South Dakota.

According to Blanchard and Lyson (2006), food desert residents who lack access to large food retailers are more likely to both pay higher prices for food and groceries and travel farther to gain access to certain foods.

WHERE ARE FOOD DESERTS LOCATED?

In the United States, 98% of food desert counties are rural (Blanchard and Lyson 2006). Food deserts are especially concentrated in the Great Plains region, probably due to its rural dominance. Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota include the largest land areas labeled as food deserts (Morton and Blanchard 2007).

Figure 1. South Dakota counties identified as food deserts

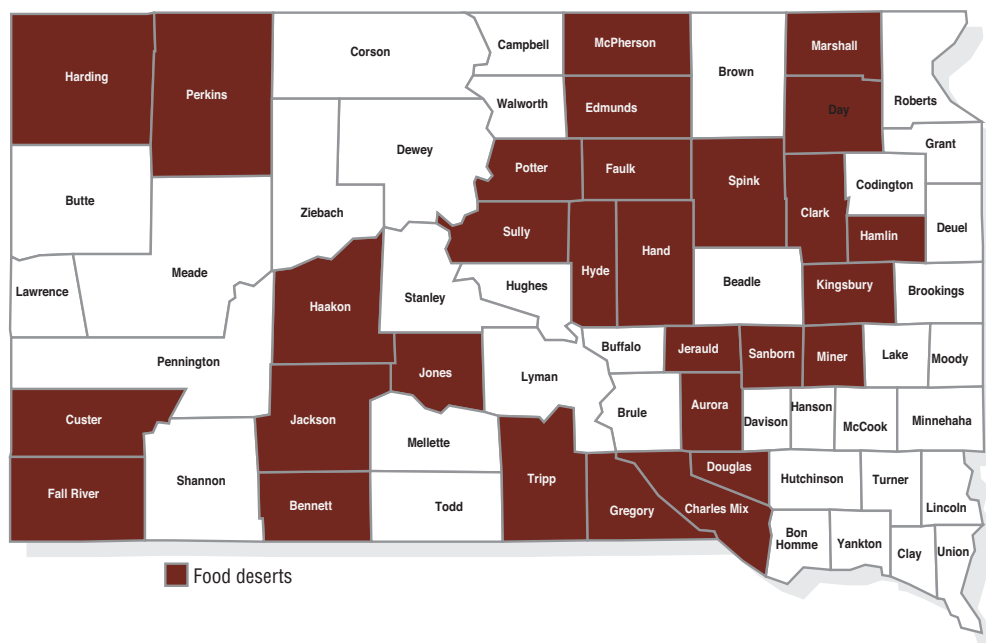


Figure 1 shows the South Dakota counties that were classified as food deserts by Morton and Blanchard's 2007 study. Almost one-half (31 of 66) of South Dakota counties were identified as food deserts.

While for the identification of food deserts counties are discrete and complete units, these data should be interpreted with caution. Mapping limitations may create errors in identifying grocery stores, especially when considering that several of South Dakota's towns are in two or more counties. Also, using the number of grocery stores as a criterion for identifying food deserts may be a problem.

For example, a small grocery store may have adequate food supply, but with the current definition, the county would be falsely labeled as a food desert. This is the case in parts of South Dakota, where some small towns have been successful in keeping a well-stocked grocery store. Despite these limitations, the data do suggest that large portions of South Dakota have limited access to supermarkets and are potential food deserts.

CHARACTERISTICS OF FOOD DESERTS IN SOUTH DAKOTA

Food desert counties in South Dakota are rural and are isolated from larger cities. Most of South Dakota's food deserts have experienced population decline from 1990 to 2005, and are projected to lose population in the future (Census 2000; Morton and Blanchard 2007). People aged 18–29 leave rural counties more than any other age group (Census 2000; Johnson 2003). Because of the exit of young adults, food desert counties tend to have a higher

portion of elderly residents, and this is true for South Dakota food desert counties (Census 2000; Morton and Blanchard 2007).

The population living in South Dakota's food deserts tends to have lower educational attainment. Most of South Dakota's food desert counties have a higher-than-average percentage of residents who have not earned a high school diploma. Consequently, the median household income is lower and poverty higher in food desert counties. Also, food desert counties do not have a major interstate highway; this makes it difficult for supply trucks to deliver requested groceries.

ECONOMIC AND HEALTH CONSEQUENCES OF FOOD DESERTS

Food deserts may experience negative economic and health consequences. When grocery stores leave rural areas, people must travel to complete their shopping. What once may have been an effortless trip to the grocery store now takes money, time, and transportation. Gas prices tend to be highest in rural areas, which may further reduce access to some grocery stores.

The elderly, the poor, the disabled, the rural, and single parent households and their children are more vulnerable to reduced food access (Accent Health 2007). People in these groups may substitute foods that lack essential nutrients for fresh fruit, produce, and other healthy foods.

Food desert residents consume less protein, fruits, and vegetables, and they are less likely to eat balanced meals (Morton et al. 2005). Low food access may be a possible

contributor to poor eating behaviors and may contribute to obesity (Farm and Food Policy Project 2007).

Getting enough protein, fruits, and vegetables is crucial for the healthy growth and development of children and youth. In 2005, less than 17% of South Dakota youth (aged 12-21) ate the recommended five or more servings of fruit and vegetables per day (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2007). Nationally, 20.1% of youth consumed the daily recommended value of fruit and vegetables. South Dakota's youth also trail U.S. averages in green salad consumption (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2007).

POLICY IMPLICATIONS: WHAT CAN BE DONE TO HELP FOOD DESERT COUNTIES?

Some things can be done to help the food desert population. One option is to focus on rural economic development (Morton and Blanchard 2007). Economic activities that attract young, skilled workers would benefit small grocery stores. Instead of losing the young population, rural counties might gain an influx of new workers. Also, by increasing rural jobs, commuting would diminish, thereby encouraging more local shopping.

In addition, an aging population needs easier access to grocery stores. Some have suggested supporting an elder-

ly transport system that provides service rides to the nearest town (Morton and Blanchard 2007).

CONCLUSION

Many South Dakota residents lack easy access to food. A number of demographic characteristics, such as population loss and an increased elderly population, help predict where South Dakota's food deserts might be located. Economic and health consequences may occur when people lack easy access to healthy food. Future policy change should focus on economic development and helping elderly people gain easier access to food.

Finally, clearer criteria for identifying South Dakota's food deserts may help us better understand food access. Future studies plan to use Extension educators to identify food availability and quality in South Dakota's rural counties.

For more information on South Dakota's food deserts, contact Trevor Brooks or Mike McCurry in the Rural Life/Census Data Center. The email address is sdsudata@sdstate.edu. The phone number is (605) 688-4899. You can also learn more by looking at the Rural Life/Census Data Center website at <http://sdrurallife.sdstate.edu/>.

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