

POLICY INTERVENTION BRIEFS > NUTRITION INTERVENTION: FRUIT & VEGETABLE ACCESS

- The following brief reports the effects of fruit and vegetable access policies on the reduction of childhood obesity prevalence in the state of Louisiana, from an evidence-based modeling program.
- The fruit and vegetable access policy intervention refers to policies and built environment improvements that increase a local population's accessibility to affordable fruits and vegetables.

Policy Goals

- Increase fruit and vegetable consumption by ensuring that all residents have access to fresh, good-quality, affordable produce.
- Encourage *replacing* unhealthy food options with fruits and vegetables.
- Support schools and food stores who increase the accessibility and affordability of fresh fruits and vegetables in their communities.
- Eliminate food deserts and stimulate economic development in these areas.

What Does the Research Tell Us?

- An evaluation of Louisiana children's eating habits gave the state a "D-" for Fruit and Vegetable Consumption, as only 5.9% of youth eat ≥ 4 fruits and 11.7% eat ≥ 3 vegetables per day, which is the recommended amount.¹¹¹
- A diet high in fruits and vegetables is associated with a decreased risk of serious chronic diseases, including some types of cancer and cardiovascular disease.^{112,113}
- Replacing foods of high caloric density with foods of lesser density, such as fruits and vegetables, can be a significant part of an effective weight management strategy.^{114,115}
- Supporting increased access, availability, and reduced price are key strategies to increase fruit and vegetable consumption and thus improve nutrition.^{116,117}
- Gaining additional fruit and vegetable access is estimated to reduce the likelihood of a fruit and vegetable-poor diet by about 40%¹¹⁸ and within a range of 11–32% in cases where affordability may be an issue.¹¹⁹

Current Policy Environment in Louisiana

- Louisiana currently authorizes the inclusion of fruits and vegetables in the state's Special Supplemental Nutrition Program (SNAP) and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) programs.¹²⁰
- The Louisiana Healthy Food Retail Act promotes financing for healthy food retailers like grocery stores (non-restaurants) in underserved communities in an effort to increase healthy food accessibility and promote the sale and consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables.¹²¹
- In 2010, the state established a Sustainable Local Food Policy Council with "the purpose of building a local food economy benefitting Louisiana by creating jobs, stimulating statewide economic development, preservation of farmlands and water resources, increasing consumer access to

What is a Food Desert?

Food deserts are areas where people have limited access to a variety of healthy and affordable food. These areas are more likely to have high poverty rates; small populations (rural); high rates of abandoned and vacant homes; and residents with lower levels of education, lower income, and higher unemployment rates.¹²²

Across Louisiana, 10% of residents are low income and do not live close to a grocery store.¹²³



WAYS TO SUPPORT

Fruit & Vegetable Access

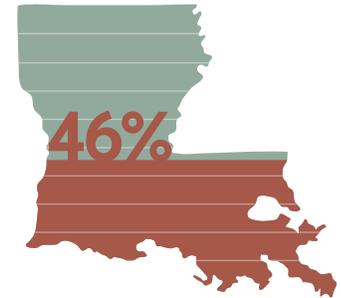
- Improve fruit and vegetable availability in corner or convenience stores.
- Increase the percentage of local farmers markets that accept WIC, EBT, and SNAP.
- Discount or subsidize fresh produce for all WIC, EBT, and SNAP programs.
- Establish and maintain community/school gardens.
- Implement policies for farm-to-school, -worksite, -hospital, and -restaurant programs.
- Enforce nutrition standards in school nutrition programs.
- Utilize mobile fresh food delivery units for areas with low accessibility.

fresh and nutritious foods, and providing greater food security for all Louisianians".¹²⁴ In 2012, among other proposals, the Council recommended increasing the amount of sustainable local foods available through school and public assistance nutrition programs and promoting home and community gardens to increase access to fresh fruits and vegetables.¹²⁵ However, to date no related bills were passed as a result of the Council's findings, and the Council is currently disbanded.

- School policy in Louisiana also established specific legislated guidelines regarding nutrition, restricting both the sales and availability of food "minimal in nutritional value" during school hours, as well as authorizing the Louisiana Department of Education to implement the regulations of the US Department of Agriculture's (USDA) nutritional programs.¹²⁶

Achieving Maximum Intervention Results

- Many Louisiana residents have access to affordable fruits and vegetables,^{115,127} but not all students may have optimal access in schools.^{115,128,129} The initial conditions level was set to reflect the overall level of children's access, which amounted to 46%.
- The maximum intervention conditions (100%) within PRISM represent an expanded presence of supermarkets and produce stands; increased access in worksite, school, and restaurant settings; and price discounts for low-income populations.



Projected Effect on Louisiana's Childhood Obesity Prevalence

PRISM Results: Can a Policy Intervention that Increases Fruit and Vegetable Access Reduce the Prevalence of Childhood Obesity?				
Policy Strength	Maximum (100%)	Maximum (100%)	Moderate (50%)	Moderate (50%)
Year Implemented	2013	2016	2013	2016
% Change [ROU^]	0%	0%	0%	0%

[^] ROU refers to the Range of Uncertainty determined by the PRISM sensitivity analysis.

Note: The symbol ↓ signifies that the percent change is negative, and the percent represents a decrease.

- PRISM estimated no effect of policies to increase access to fruits and vegetables, reflecting current research that demonstrates that increased access to fresh produce alone does not decrease the prevalence of obesity unless concurrent measures are taken to reduce junk food intake.
- Adding fruits and vegetables to a diet will not improve the energy density of a diet unless healthy food calories **replaces** junk food calories.

Implementing the Policy

Although it seems counter-intuitive that policies aiming to increase residents' access to affordable fresh fruits and vegetables are not predicted to make an impact on the prevalence of obesity, these findings are consistent with the most up-to-date data. This suggests that access to fruits and vegetables does not guarantee that the fruits and vegetables are affordable, of good quality, or prepared in a way that preserves and retains their nutrition.¹¹³ Access is just one piece of the puzzle in terms of promoting a well-rounded nutritious diet.

Louisiana has already enacted policies that promote fruit and vegetable consumption in schools and for low-income residents receiving SNAP benefits. Schools must adhere to the United States Department of Agriculture guidelines for providing fruits and vegetables to students enrolled in breakfast, lunch, and summer meal programs. Schools also limit the types of competitive foods sold outside of meal programs. Additionally, SNAP benefits are accepted at some farmers markets and produce stands, which can assist low-income families to obtain fresh produce.

! "The evidence is clear that many communities - predominantly low-income, urban communities of color and rural areas - lack adequate access to healthy food, and the evidence also suggests that the lack of access negatively impacts the health of residents and neighborhoods... policy interventions to increase access to healthy food in 'food deserts' will help people eat a healthy diet, while contributing to community economic development."¹³⁰ ~The Grocery Gap, 2010

With the knowledge that improving access cannot ensure that all of Louisiana's residents are meeting recommendations set by the USDA Dietary Guidelines for Americans, community organizations are increasingly incorporating multi-faceted plans that not only tackle the issue of access, but also teach residents how to prepare unfamiliar produce and adjust unhealthy recipes to make them more nutritious, help set up school and community gardens, and provide educational classes and materials to help families eat better.

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To view and download the full report, please visit: www.pbrc.edu/prism