



Kayla Rissew

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Food Access and Security

It is important to assess the demographics that are affected by poor food security and what obstacles they face in securing food. Food security often persists in socioeconomic disadvantaged communities and presents many challenges that can be solved through appropriate policy initiatives.

Scope of the Problem

Low levels of food security presents a serious issue for the Capital Region, and New York at large. The average percentage of people that are not food security in the Capital Region is 11.98%, while New York is a little higher at 13.9%. Nationally 15.4% of households struggle with food security (USDA 2015). It is important to have a thorough understanding of the specific demographics and regional areas that are affected by food security in the Capital Region in order to assess potential policy alternatives. Ethnic minorities like African Americans and Latinos face greater levels of food security issues, significantly greater than that of the national average around 26.1% and 22.4%, respectively. This may be in part because they tend to live in more urban areas that often face greater challenges to secure adequate amounts of food (USDA 2015).

Low food security is associated with chronic health problems such as diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, hyperlipidemia, obesity, and mental health issues including major depression (CDC 2014).

Inadequate access to healthy foods often precipitates greater risks of obesity. Albany and Schenectady have overweight/obesity rates above the state average (USDH 2011). This unequal access to healthy food inevitable results in higher rates of obesity and other related health problems in food deserts. Treating obesity-related illness alone costs around \$7.6 billions each year in New York (Seserman and Whalen 2011).

Generally, all of the counties of the Capital Region have experienced marginal increases food security in the last past five years (Seserman and Whalen 2011). It is important to determine the demographics of the hungry in order to assess the ability of policy to remedy the issue of inadequate food security.

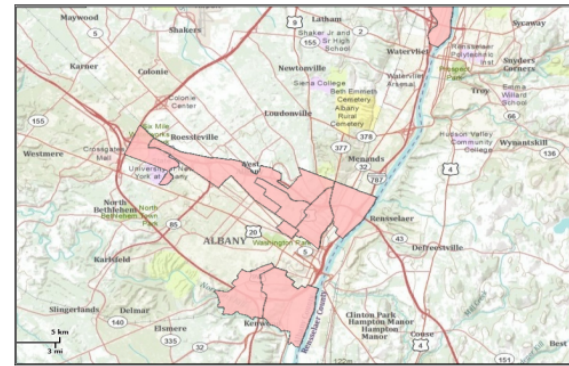


Figure 2 – USDA Food Desert Map of Albany County

Low Levels of Food Security in Socioeconomic Deprived Areas

Food Insecurity in the Capital Region				
	Population	Food insecurity rate	Estimated Population of Food Insecure	
Albany	305,279	13.30%	40,650	
Columbia	62,674	11.00%	6,860	
Fulton	55,165	14.20%	7,810	
Greene	48,928	12.80%	6,270	
Montgomery	50,019	13.50%	6,750	
Rensselaer	159,565	12.60%	20,090	
Saratoga	221,169	9.70%	21,520	
Schenectady	154,821	12.50%	19,400	
Schoharie	32,404	11.70%	3,790	
Warren	65,584	11.90%	7,830	
Washington	63,237	12.00%	7,610	
Total Foodshed	1,218,845	12.29%	148,580	
NYS Resources	19,651,127	13.90%	2,739,920	

Food Deserts

When considering policy that will increase food security, it is important to have an understanding of the obstacles that families and individuals face to secure an adequate amount of food on a consistent basis. One of the most pervasive barriers to accessing food is limited access to grocery stores. This regional diminished access to food and grocery stores is called a food desert (USDA 2015). Food deserts are often situated in low-income census tracts and are often the result of unfortunate suburban or rural planning.

Out of the 62 counties in New York State, 32 counties are identified as having food deserts (Seserman and Whalen 2011). Around 656,000 New Yorker citizens are currently living in areas that are considered food deserts. Most of the food deserts in New York are situated in urban areas, 86% to be exact. Nine census tracts in Albany County and nine census tracts in Schenectady county are classified as food deserts (Seserman and Whalen 2011). More than 40,000 people in Albany County and around 20,000 people in Schenectady county live in these food desert. NY is comparable to its neighboring states in food deserts prevalence, however, it has larger and more noticeable food deserts in the Adirondack Region where populations are more sparse (USDA 2015).

Transportation Access

Many of the residents that live in food deserts in the Capital Region, also, do not have means of equitable transportation. Almost 11,500 Albany and 8,000 Schenectady County households residing in food deserts have no personal vehicles to get to a supermarket or grocery store (Seserman and Whalen 2011). Public transportation often proves to be costly and inconvenient to disadvantaged consumers that reside in food deserts.



Payment plans for monthly and weekly CDTA fares or paying expensive taxi fares are simply not affordable for many of the residents living in these areas. Some taxi services even charge for excessive luggage or bags. Simply, carrying heavy bags of groceries on public transportation is not a viable option on a consistent basis (Seserman and Whalen 2011). Families living in food deserts are, therefore, more likely to depend on closer stores for food needs. These food outlets tend to be small convenience stores and fast food restaurants. These options often offer very limited food options that tend to be more unhealthy than not. The food outlets that are within walking distance of residencies in food deserts often have little to no vegetable or fruit options.



Fast Food and Convenience Stores

Since 2007 to 2012, there has been a 12.7% increase in fast food restaurants in Albany county (USDA 2012). There has been an even more remarkable increase in Saratoga county with a 16.25% increase. A study found that travel distances to fast food outlets were at least twice as far in the least socially deprived areas compared to the most deprived areas (Pearce & Witten 2007). This over saturation of fast food and convenience stores has a disproportionate impact on urban communities. Children raised in this environment often have higher rates of sugar consumption, which can have a disconcerting impact on their health.

Capital Roots has been uniquely effective in combatting the negative effects of limited food options in the Capital Region, specifically in food deserts. Capital Roots has made an effort to increase the capacity of local convenience stores to have greater selections of healthy local vegetables and fruits through their Healthy Stores program. This program provides local convenience stores, who often have little incentive to stock fruits and vegetables, with affordable healthy foods. The Healthy Stores program aims at increasing local and affordable healthy food options at very little to no cost for local convenience stores (Capital Roots).

Policy Options

Transportation

Pass legislation that would allow for Uber to operate in Upstate New York. This would provide an affordable alternative to other more expensive or inconvenient transportation methods. This legislation is currently being debated in the state legislature.

Increase Mobile Market Programs

Mobile market programs, as seen in Capital Roots employment of the Veggie Mobile, are extremely helpful in providing more disadvantaged areas, that are often situated in food deserts, convenient and affordable access to healthy vegetables and fruits.

Attract Grocery Stores

Expand NYS Healthy Food and Healthy Community Fund for loans or offer substantial tax breaks to attract large grocers or to expand upon already existing markets in food deserts. These attractive initiatives have been successful in Baltimore, Maryland.

Key Organizations

- **Capital Roots:**

Capital Roots is an influential organization in the Capital Region in terms of food policy and food services. Capital Roots aims at building community capacity to provide healthy food to all. Capital Roots provides many needed community resources that combat unequal access to fresh and healthy foods by employing mobile market programs, as evident in their use of the “Veggie Mobile”.

- **New York State Council on Food Policy:**

NYS CFP was created with the recognition that agriculture is a critically important industry to New York State, that hunger is a serious problem facing many families; that access to affordable, fresh and nutritious food is a serious problem; and that there are significant environmental, health and economic benefits from expanding agriculture production, including locally-grown and organically-grown food (NYSCFP 2015).

- **United States Department of Agriculture:**

The USDA acts as the national leader on developing and researching agricultural policies. The USDA first aim is to promote agricultural production and the general health and welfare of the public.

Glossary of Terms

Low Levels of Food Security: Limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate foods or uncertain ability to acquire these foods in socially acceptable ways (USDA 2015).

Food Desert: Parts of the country void of fresh fruit, vegetables, and other healthful whole foods, usually found in impoverished areas (USDA 2015).

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Community Policy Institute

The Community Policy Institute builds capacity surrounding policy within the Capital Region. We provide researched-based policy information to our community partners who use the information to modify best practices and advocate for policies that will further the development and effectiveness of direct community engagement.

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Kayla Rissew

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