

## DESCRIPTION

The benefits of eating healthy food, including fruits and vegetables, are widely known. When healthy foods are available and affordable, people can make healthy choices. Conversely, when there is less access to healthy food it is more difficult to make healthy choices, which can have negative impacts on health.<sup>1</sup> Geographic areas with limited availability of fresh fruits, vegetables, and other healthy whole foods are referred to as “food deserts.”<sup>2</sup> Food deserts lack grocery stores, farmers markets and other healthy food providers, and often have an overabundance of fast food and convenience stores which have largely processed, unhealthy foods.<sup>3</sup>

## HOW WE ARE DOING

In 2015, there were 111,305 residents of Ramsey County with low access to grocery stores (21.9 percent).<sup>4</sup> About 25,000 (5 percent) were children under 18. In Ramsey County, food deserts are most prominent in the Greater Eastside and Dayton’s Bluff neighborhoods of Saint Paul and in the suburban cities of Maplewood and North St. Paul.

## BENCHMARK INDICATOR

Healthy People 2020<sup>5</sup>: Increase the proportion of Americans who have access to a food retail outlet that sells a variety of foods that are encouraged by the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

U.S. Target: This target is currently under development.

## DISPARITIES

The presence of food deserts impacts healthy food access. Food deserts are often found in communities of color and low-income neighborhoods, where residents often don’t have cars. The failure of grocery chains that offer healthy foods to locate stores in inner-city communities has been referred to as food “redlining” (the inability to access loan products and insurance based on the neighborhood rather than on other factors).<sup>6</sup>

Studies show that wealthy neighborhoods have three times as many supermarkets as poor ones, and that white neighborhoods have about four times as many supermarkets as predominantly black neighborhoods.<sup>7</sup> Grocery stores in African-American communities are usually smaller with less selection. While both price and distance are barriers to healthy food access in Ramsey County, price is the primary factor.<sup>8</sup> Affordability has a greater impact than increasing stores.<sup>8</sup> Healthy foods are often limited at food shelves and other meal programs for the poor. These programs often depend on donations, and as one organization said, “It’s not healthy, but it’s free.”<sup>9</sup> In addition, Ramsey County lacks culturally-specific markets and has limited availability of culturally-specific foods in larger grocery stores.

<sup>1</sup>Overweight and Obesity. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/strategies/healthy-food-env.html>. Accessed August 2018.

<sup>2</sup>CDC Features. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/features/fooddeserts/>. Accessed August 2018.

<sup>3</sup>USDA Defines Food Deserts. American Nutrition Association. <http://americannutritionassociation.org/newsletter/usda-defines-food-deserts>. Accessed August 2018.

<sup>4</sup>United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service. Food Atlas. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-environment-atlas/go-to-the-atlas.aspx>. Accessed July 5, 2018.

<sup>5</sup>Nutrition and Weight Status. 2020 Topics and Objectives. Healthy People 2020. <https://www.healthypeople.gov/node/3502/objectives>. Accessed June 2018.

<sup>6</sup>Wright Edelman M. Urban food deserts threaten children’s health. Huffington Post. [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/marian-wright-edelman/urban-food-deserts-threat\\_b\\_410339.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/marian-wright-edelman/urban-food-deserts-threat_b_410339.html). Published January 4, 2010. Updated May 25, 2011. Accessed June 2018.

<sup>7</sup>Food Deserts. Food Empowerment Project. Food is Power. <http://www.foodispower.org/food-deserts/>. Accessed June 2018.

<sup>8</sup>Mattessich P, Rausch E. Healthy Food Access, a view from the landscape in Minnesota and lessons learned from healthy food financing initiatives. Amherst H. Wilder Foundation. [https://www.wilder.org/sites/default/files/imports/Healthy%20Food%20Access%20Study\\_Final%20Report\\_April%202016.pdf](https://www.wilder.org/sites/default/files/imports/Healthy%20Food%20Access%20Study_Final%20Report_April%202016.pdf). Published April 2016. Accessed June 2018.

<sup>9</sup>Saint Paul – Ramsey County Public Health. Ramsey County Healthy Meals Coalition baseline report. [https://www.ramseycounty.us/sites/default/files/Health%20and%20Medical/Public%20Health%20Initiatives/RCHMC\\_Final\\_Baseline\\_Report\\_KH.pdf](https://www.ramseycounty.us/sites/default/files/Health%20and%20Medical/Public%20Health%20Initiatives/RCHMC_Final_Baseline_Report_KH.pdf). Accessed July 2018.

## Information to note

- Most food deserts in Ramsey County are in Saint Paul.
- Both price and distance are roadblocks to healthy food access in Ramsey County but price is the primary barrier.

## Community voice

*“Too easy access to bad/unhealthy foods, hard to access healthy food options.”*  
- Black/African American, Female, age 15-19

Accounting for 66% of the responses, 1420 expressed the importance that food and nutrition has on overall health .

Within these responses, there were 491 mentions of food access, and its impact to their family’s and community’s health.

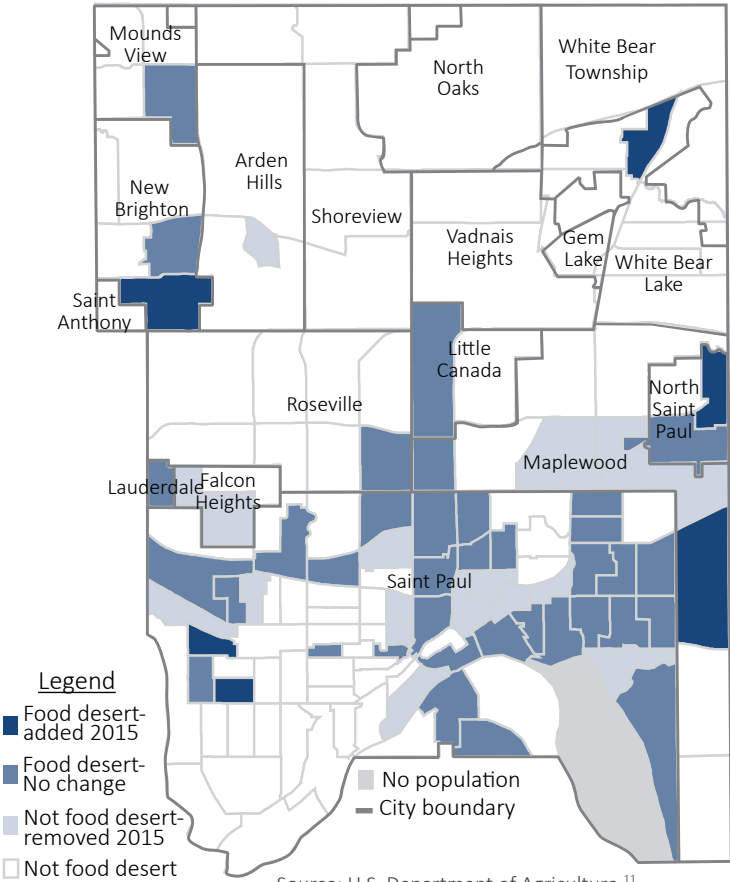
RISK FACTORS

Low-income and populations of color have higher rates of obesity, Type 2 diabetes, early high blood pressure in children, as well as other food related conditions than the general population. Limited access to healthy foods over time is one reason.<sup>10</sup>

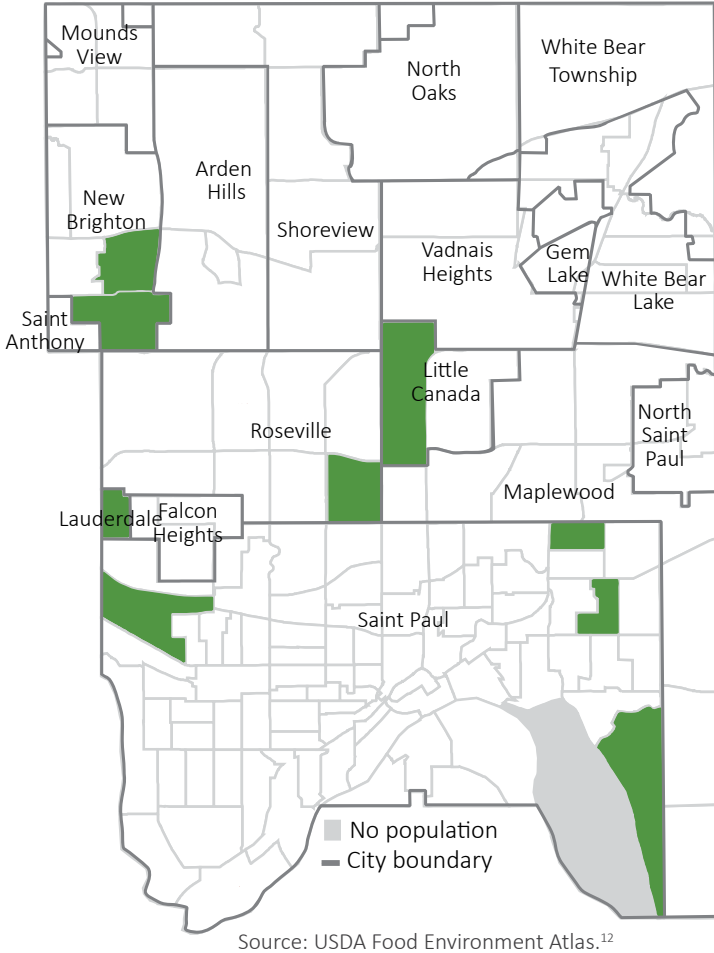
WHAT RAMSEY COUNTY GOVERNMENT IS DOING

Saint Paul - Ramsey County Public Health’s Statewide Health Improvement Partnership (SHIP) improves healthy options at food shelves, increases the use and accessibility of farmers markets, and partners with worksites, schools and community organizations to improve their food environments. Examples include creating community and school gardens, improving vending machine offerings, increasing healthy food availability in corner stores, and encouraging healthy food acceptance through taste-testing. Other initiatives include healthy food access policy development with the Ramsey County Food and Nutrition Commission and the inclusion of healthy food access in the Ramsey County Comprehensive Plan.

Food Desert Change by Census Tract, Ramsey County, 2015



Low Income, Low Access to a Vehicle & Low Food Access by Census Tract, Ramsey County, 2015



<sup>10</sup>USDA Defines Food Deserts. American Nutrition Association. <http://americannutritionassociation.org/newsletter/usda-defines-food-deserts>. Accessed August 2018.  
<sup>11</sup>U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, USDA- Food Access Research Atlas (FARA): 2010-2015. Released 2017. Accessed June 2018.  
<sup>12</sup>USDA Food Environment Atlas. Web site. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-environment-atlas/>. Released 2017. Accessed June 2018.