

# Mapping Baltimore City's Food Environment:

# 2015 Executive Summary



**#BmoreFoodMap**

June 2015



**“Our definition of a food desert is an area where the distance to a supermarket or supermarket alternative is more than 1/4 mile, the median household income is at or below 185% of the Federal Poverty Level, over 30% of households have no vehicle available, and the average Healthy Food Availability Index (HFAI) score for all food stores is low.”**

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Baltimore's residents have different levels of access to healthy food based on their specific circumstances. The 2015 Food Environment Map and Report is a culmination of years of data collection, analysis and strategizing around innovative solutions to improve access to healthy food. The Baltimore Food Policy Initiative (BFPI) and the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future (CLF) created this 2015 Food Environment Map and Report in order to better understand Baltimore's food environment and food deserts - areas where residents lack both access and sufficient economic resources to purchase healthy food - and to more proactively and effectively promote equitable access to healthy food. The materials and information contained within provide a resource to inform decision-making in policy, planning and legislation related to healthy affordable food access, and in improving health outcomes.

Baltimore City's food environment is a complex system of the built environment, marketing, advertising and social environments, all of which are influenced by government policy, cultural norms and market forces. This report primarily focuses on the retail food environment, but also considers food assistance and urban food production.

**Food Desert Definition:** An area where the distance to a supermarket or supermarket alternative is more than 1/4 mile, the median household income is at or below 185% of the Federal Poverty Level, over 30% of households have no vehicle available, and the average Healthy Food Availability Index (HFAI) score for all food stores is low.

Based on this definition, the 2015 map reveals:

- One in four of Baltimore City residents live in areas identified as food deserts.
- Children are affected disproportionately, with 30 percent living in food deserts.
- African Americans have disproportionately low access to healthy food and are the most likely of any racial or ethnic group to live in a food desert neighborhood.

**Key Methodology Updates:** To increase the accuracy of the 2015 Food Environment Map, the data were updated/enhanced or the metric was recalibrated for all four food desert factors. These changes to methodology make it inadvisable to compare this map to previous versions. The updated data sets along with the more robust methodology now set the standard for future assessments and will allow for tracking change. The following points outline the most significant changes made:

- **Access to Vehicles Threshold:** The 2012 Baltimore Food Environment Map classified an area as low vehicle access if 40 percent or more of the population lacked access to a vehicle. The data set was updated based on the 2009-2013 American Community Survey (ACS), which showed that Baltimore City neighborhoods have an average of 30.3 percent of households lacking access to a vehicle. For the 2015 map analysis, this threshold was changed to 30 percent or more to better reflect the City average. Of all the methodology updates, this change had the largest effect on the number of residents classified as living in a food desert.
- **Poverty Level:** The latest data from the ACS were used, the five-year average from 2009-2013. In general, the percent of the population living in poverty has increased by about 3.7% in Baltimore since 2005-2009 ACS data were released.
- **Enhanced Healthy Food Availability Index (HFAI) Scores:** The 2012 food environment analysis used a combination of HFAI scores: 140 stores were physically surveyed in 2008, and the remaining stores (over 700) were assigned imputed scores based on the average score of a given store type in a given neighborhoods with similar racial composition. To improve this data for the 2015 map, CLF conducted a new survey in the summer of 2012, using a streamlined tool. All 900 known stores were physically surveyed and actual scores were collected. On average, the new scores were higher than what had been imputed.
- **Supermarket Alternative:** The concept of a “supermarket alternative” was incorporated into the definition after researchers observed that some food outlets that are not traditional supermarkets can offer a market basket of healthy food options (basic whole foods for home preparation) equivalent to that of a supermarket. To capture the notable impact these food sources can have and define a threshold to strive towards, smaller groceries and public markets with an HFAI score of 25 or higher may be considered supermarket alternatives. As such, they may be included in the map in the same ways that traditional supermarkets are— in the distance measure and average HFAI scores.

**Application of the Food Environment MAP and next steps:** The Food Environment Map is an effective tool for illustrating the need for improved access to healthy food. This report, however, goes beyond the main map and contains an in-depth analysis and strategic approaches to help plan and implement the strategies and policies needed to address the urgent healthy food access issue. Baltimore has come a long way in understanding the challenges and solutions related to healthy food access and will continue to refine its analyses. Among the many ongoing programs and policies mentioned in the report, next steps include:

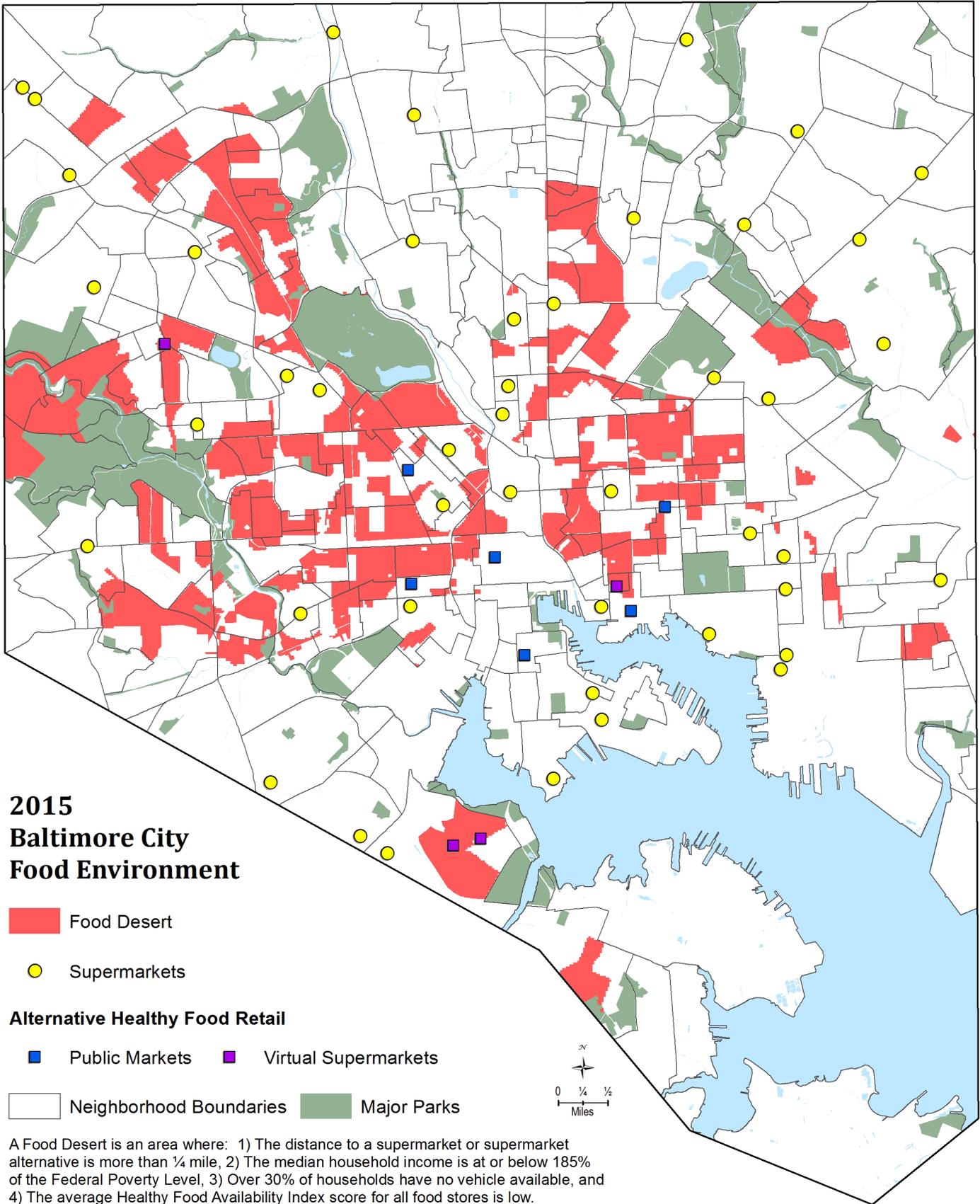
**Food Desert Retail Strategy:** Most people in Baltimore shop at supermarkets for the majority of their groceries, even if they have to travel beyond their neighborhoods to do so. However, improving supermarket access is not the only solution to increasing access to healthy staple foods. BFPI developed a comprehensive strategy to support many types of retail, considering additional factors such as population density and zoning. The Food Desert Retail Strategy will reduce the number of people living in food deserts and grow the economy using five key approaches: 1) expand and retain supermarkets, 2) improve non-traditional grocery retail options, 3) improve healthy food availability in the public market setting, 4) expand Homegrown Baltimore to serve food desert neighborhoods, and 5) develop a transportation strategy.

Work is ongoing in all five categories of the Food Desert Retail Strategy:

- 1) Baltimore City will create financial incentives to address the comparatively high costs of personal property tax, workforce development, and security that supermarkets face when locating and renovating in the city. As a retailer retention strategy, BFPI will work with state leadership to extend the disbursement period for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits from 10 to 20 days to even out the current highly concentrated business cycles. This issue has been prioritized by retailers, as a longer disbursement period for SNAP benefits would ensure steadier sales throughout the month, more consistency in store stocking, and more consistency in staffing.
- 2) Most food deserts occur in residential areas, where locating a large supermarket may not be appropriate. With this in mind, BFPI created strategies to improve non-traditional grocery retail. These include, expanding the Virtual Supermarket and continuing the work of the Healthy Corner Stores program to provide healthier options in food desert neighborhoods.
- 3) BFPI will work with two public markets to elevate their healthy food offerings to the level of a supermarket alternative.
- 4) Baltimore City recently streamlined the process for farmers market permitting, and will look to a farm stand strategy for neighborhoods that cannot support a full farmers market.
- 5) BFPI will develop a transportation strategy to determine ways to bring food to people and bring people to food. Solutions could take the form of community-run shuttles, modified bus routes or mobile markets. BFPI will research best practices and work with specific neighborhoods to develop targeted transportation solutions.

- **Council Maps:** One of the innovations in this report is showing the Food Environment Map by council district to display greater detail on a smaller scale. In Baltimore, as in other cities, where a person lives impacts his or her health. These maps help show the spatial relationship of food deserts to food retail, food assistance locations and urban agriculture and examine disparities to suggest neighborhood-specific solutions to make healthy food more accessible to residents.
- **Community Food Planning:** BFPI will work with groups of neighborhoods and community planners to incorporate a food lens into existing planning processes such as master plans. The maps in this report will help frame the conversation, and BFPI will engage community leaders, planners and residents in planning processes to identify additional resources and barriers, and create practical, implementable plans that are driven directly by community input and commitment to increase access to healthy food. These plans will play an important role in shaping the food environment on the neighborhood level.

**Conclusion:** Baltimore is an innovator and leader in the food policy arena, and has made important progress toward increasing equitable access to healthy food. More than 200 households in neighborhoods classified as food deserts no longer have to invest a disproportionate amount of time and resources to travel to a supermarket, because the Virtual Supermarket brings groceries directly to their housing complexes. New supermarkets are scheduled for construction in food desert neighborhoods. Through the Healthy Stores program, corner stores in West Baltimore have made healthier items available and have been joined in this effort by a cadre of youth trained as Neighborhood Food Advocates. Urban farmers now have long-term land security to farm City-owned land. The City began an annual Food Justice Forum in 2014 to bring together residents and organizations to discuss community-empowered food access. There is momentum in Baltimore. The analyses and strategies contained in this report will help to move the City's food policy agenda forward in the most productive and impactful ways possible.



# 2015 BALTIMORE FOOD ENVIRONMENT

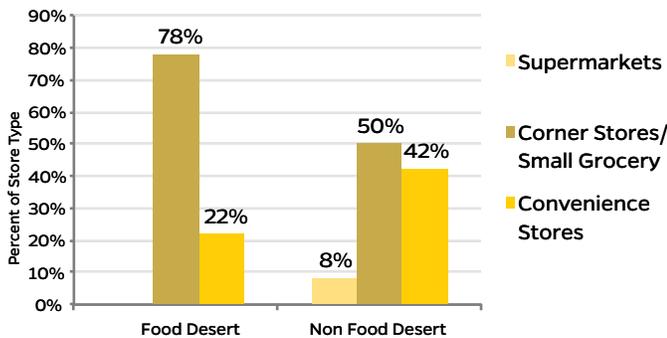
## WHAT IS A FOOD DESERT?

A food desert is an indicator for low access to healthy food. It is an area where residents lack both access and sufficient economic resources to obtain healthy food.

### Food Desert Definition:

An area where the distance to a supermarket or supermarket alternative is more than 1/4 mile, the median household income is at or below 185% of the Federal Poverty Level, over 30% of households have no vehicle available, and the average Healthy Food Availability Index (HFAI) score for all food stores is low.

## PERCENT OF FOOD STORES IN FOOD DESERTS AND NON FOOD DESERTS



## FOOD DESERT RETAIL STRATEGY

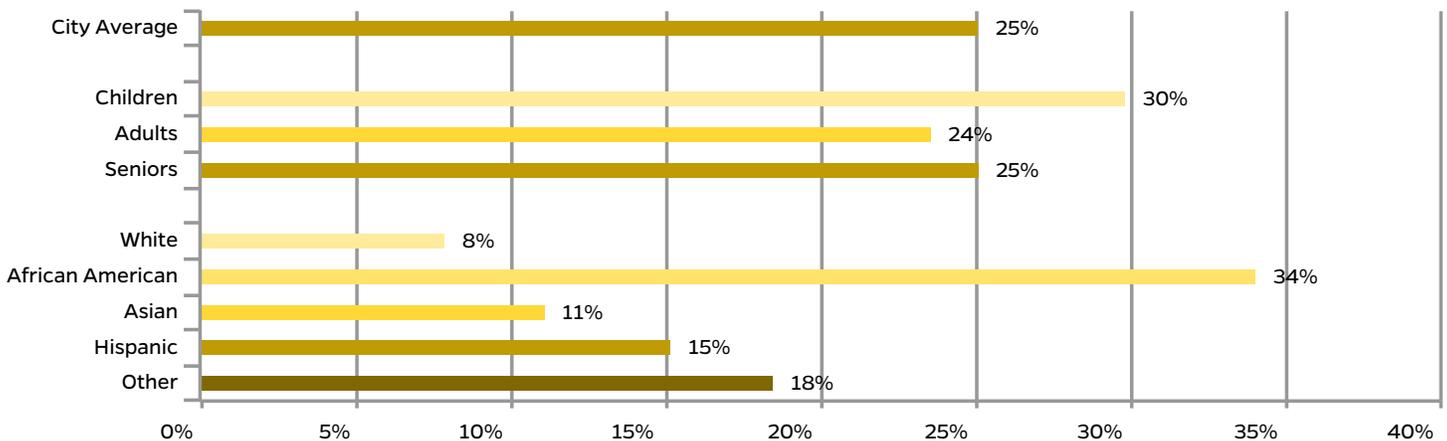
B'More Fresh: Baltimore's Food Desert Retail Strategy is one part of the city's comprehensive agenda to reduce the number of people living in food deserts and grow the economy, using five key approaches:

1. Expand and Retain Supermarkets
2. Improve Non-Traditional Grocery Retail Options (i.e. small grocery stores, corner stores, pharmacies, Virtual Supermarket)
3. Improve Healthy Food Availability in the Public Market Setting
4. Expand Homegrown Baltimore to Serve Food Desert Neighborhoods
5. Transportation Strategy

## FOOD RETAIL ENVIRONMENT

TYPE	NUMBER
SUPERMARKETS	45
SMALL GROCERY AND CORNER STORES	435
CONVENIENCE STORES	300
FARMERS MARKETS	17
PUBLIC MARKETS	6
VIRTUAL SUPERMARKETS	4

## PERCENTAGE OF EACH POPULATION GROUP LIVING IN FOOD DESERTS



For more information, see <http://mdfoodsystemmap.org/2015-baltimore-city-food-access-map/> and <http://archive.baltimorecity.gov/Government/AgenciesDepartments/Planning/BaltimoreFoodPolicyInitiative/FoodDeserts.aspx>.

Contact: Holly Freishtat, 443-928-3477, [Holly.Freishtat@baltimorecity.gov](mailto:Holly.Freishtat@baltimorecity.gov)

Amanda Behrens Buczynski, 443-287-4760, [abehren4@jhu.edu](mailto:abehren4@jhu.edu)