

Baltimore City

2024 Food Environment Brief



Overview

The Baltimore City Department of Planning examines Baltimore’s food environment through mapping, research, and analysis to inform the work of the Food Policy and Planning Division (FPP). FPP seeks to build an equitable and resilient urban food system by addressing health, economic, and environmental disparities in areas where residents face compounded barriers to accessing healthy food. To address equity in the food system, it is important to understand how groups of residents and neighborhoods experience diverse challenges in accessing healthy food. The Baltimore City Department of Planning worked with the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future on food environment research between 2011-2018. The following map, data, and analysis is an extension of that work and provide context to guide policymaking and place-based solutions to improve Baltimore’s food environment.

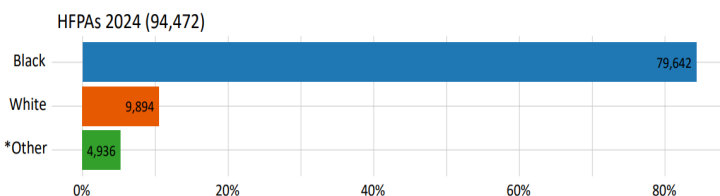
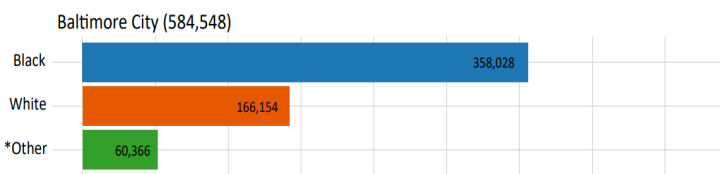
Healthy Food Priority Areas

Healthy Food Priority Areas (HFPAs) show where four food access factors overlap. These areas were previously referred to as “food deserts.”

Key Findings*

- In Baltimore City, 16.2% (94,472) of residents live in HFPAs.
- In 2018, 23.5% (146,077) of residents lived in HFPAs.
- Since 2018, Baltimore City’s population has declined by 5% (36,452 residents).
- The graph to the right shows the percentage of the population that meets each HFPFA factor.
- Certain groups of residents are affected at disproportionate rates.

Race in Baltimore City & HFPAs



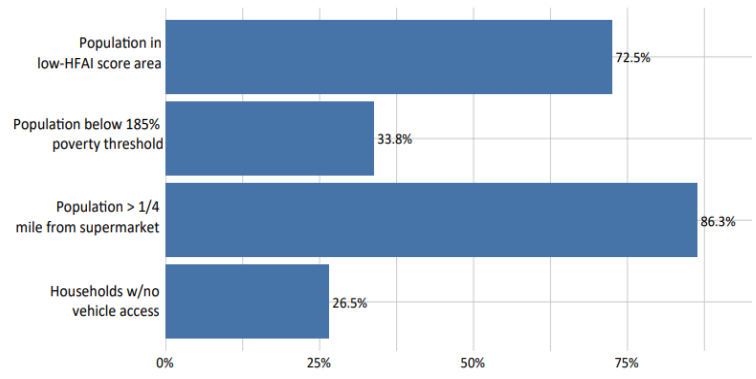
Source: ACS 2018-2022 5-year estimates, table B02001. *Other includes American Indian and Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, Other, and Two or More ACS race categories.

- Approximately 84% of residents that live in HFPAs are Black (≈80,000); approximately 10% are White (≈10,000).
- A higher percentage of children and older adults live in HFPAs than Baltimore City as a whole.

Priority Area Factors

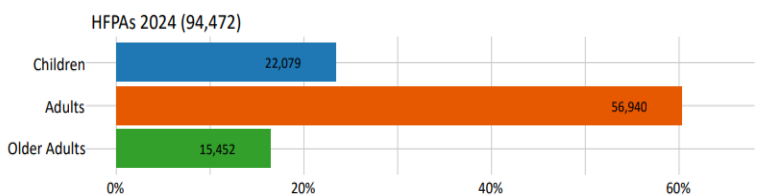
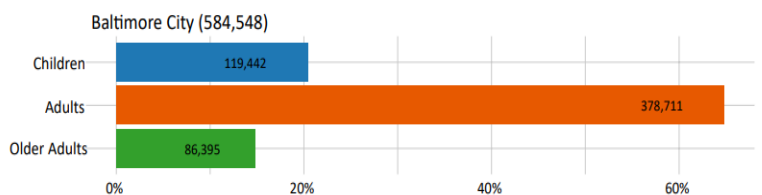
1. The average Healthy Food Availability Index (HFAI) score is in the lowest tier
2. The median household income is at or below 185% of the Federal Poverty Level
3. Over 30% of households do not have a vehicle available
4. The distance to a supermarket is more than ¼ mile

HFPFA Factors Across Baltimore City

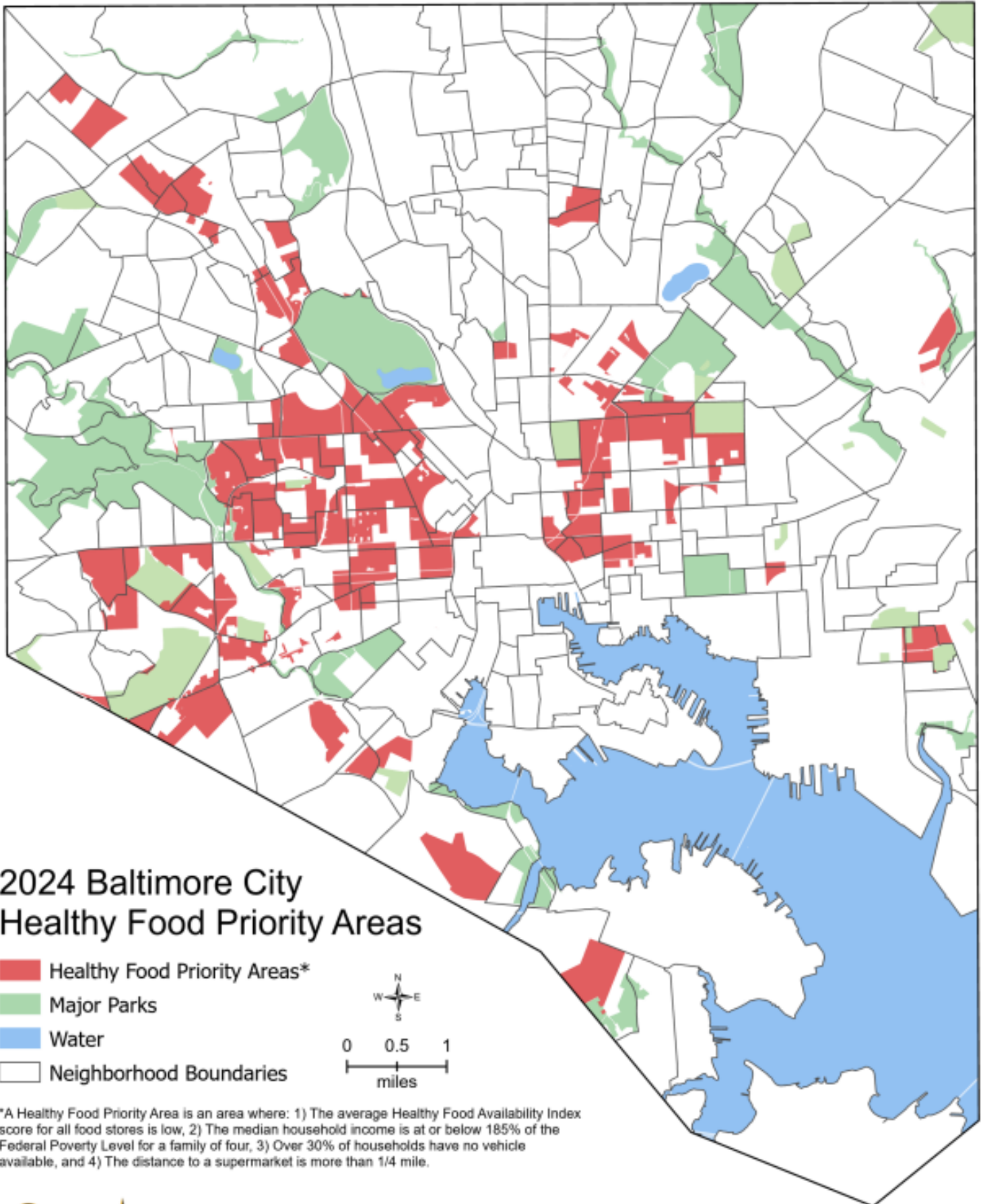


Source: ACS 2018–2022 5-year estimates, tables B01003, B08201, and C17002.

Age Groups in Baltimore City & HFPAs



Source: ACS 2018–2022 5-year estimates, table B06001.



*A Healthy Food Priority Area is an area where: 1) The average Healthy Food Availability Index score for all food stores is low, 2) The median household income is at or below 185% of the Federal Poverty Level for a family of four, 3) Over 30% of households have no vehicle available, and 4) The distance to a supermarket is more than 1/4 mile.






December 2024

Food Retail

Healthy Food Availability Index (HFAI)* scores show the quantity and variety of staple food groups and healthy options. Scores range from 0-28.5. The HFAI awards points based on the presence of a market basket of staple foods and whether healthy options of common foods are available (e.g. whole grain bread).

HFAI Score Range:

 (19.1 - 28.5)	High
 (9.6 - 19)	Medium
 (0 - 9.5)	Low

*The Healthy Food Availability Index (HFAI) tool is derived from the Nutrition Environment Measures Survey for Stores (NEMS-S). Public markets were evaluated using an adapted NEMS-S to assign an HFAI score for each market.

Store Categories

**Citywide
Number**

**Avg HFAI
Score**

The retail food environment includes various store types, and stores of every format can serve as sources of healthy and affordable food.

Small Grocery and Corner Stores

428

9

The 428 independently owned and operated stores vary widely in the foods they stock. The average HFAI score is 9, which is low enough to trigger a Healthy Food Priority Area. Corner store density varies across Baltimore City, with some neighborhoods having few stores and others an overabundance.

Convenience Stores

275

9.1

This category includes 127 chain convenience, 69 discount stores, and 46 pharmacies. The majority of stores in this category are chains or franchises, so corporate decisions influence stocking. On average, HFAI scores are low.

Public Markets

5

10.8

Because markets differ in size, and number and type of vendors, the HFAI scores for the five public markets vary greatly. The redevelopment of Lexington, Hollins, and Avenue Markets seeks to increase the amount of staple healthy foods and decrease the amount of processed foods.

Supermarkets

53

27.7

Supermarkets provide the widest variety of healthy staple foods. The 53 supermarkets are run by 22 different operators. While similar in basic stocking (leading to similar HFAI scores), stores may vary significantly in features not scored or measured by this analysis, such as quality or affordability.

Federal Nutrition Benefits

Federal nutrition benefits are an essential driver for retailers, and this analysis found that accepting benefits is a predictor of a store carrying more healthy food. However, many stores have substantial opportunities to improve and utilize benefit programs as a mode to increase the availability of healthy food.

SNAP: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly food stamps)

- SNAP is a federal assistance program that provides financial aid to low-income individuals and families to purchase food.
- In 2024, on average, 27% of Baltimore City residents were enrolled in SNAP.
- SNAP has fewer nutrition-based restrictions compared with WIC but requires retailers to stock specific quantities and varieties of staple foods.
- Small grocery, corner, and convenience stores that accept SNAP have higher HFAI scores by approximately 30%.
- A total of 479 (out of 703) small grocery, corner, and convenience stores accept SNAP, yet most only carry the minimum stocking requirements and serve primarily as places for snacks and drinks.

FPP's [SNAP Dashboard](#) showcases participation, demographic, and geographic SNAP data. Combined with the HFFA data, it creates a more comprehensive analysis of food insecurity and food access.

WIC: Women, Infants, and Children

- WIC is a federal assistance program that provides healthy foods, nutrition education, and support to pregnant women, breastfeeding mothers, postpartum women, infants, and children up to age five.
- In 2024, on average, 3% of Baltimore City residents were enrolled in WIC.
- WIC stores must adhere to strict stocking requirements that ensure a consistent availability of approved nutritious foods, including specific quantities, sizes, and brands.
- Stores that accept WIC have higher HFAI scores by approximately 40%.
- Out of 428 small grocery and corner stores, only 19 accept WIC and SNAP benefits. In 2018, 103 stores accepted SNAP/WIC. This decline was likely influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic and store closures, though further research is needed.

Healthy Food Environment Strategy

Over the last 15 years, residents, government agencies, nonprofits, academia, and the private sector have made innovative accomplishments in healthy food access across Baltimore. However, significant work remains to ensure all residents have equitable access to healthy and affordable food. Food environment mapping and analysis guide FPP's work. The 2018 food environment analysis led FPP to update its Healthy Food Environment Strategy. Through inter-agency collaboration, the City implements the following strategies:

- Support resident-driven processes to guide equitable food policy, priorities, and resources
- Improve small grocery, corner, and convenience stores
- Retain and attract supermarkets
- Increase the ability of the public markets to anchor the healthy food environment
- Implement supply chain solutions that support healthy food distribution and small businesses
- Maximize the impact of nutrition assistance and meal programs
- Support urban agriculture, emphasizing historically disenfranchised populations and geographies
- Address transportation gaps that impact food access

For More Information

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2018 Food Environment Brief:

https://planning.baltimorecity.gov/sites/default/files/City_FoodEnv_Brief_2018.pdf

Food Policy and Planning Division Website:

<https://planning.baltimorecity.gov/baltimore-food-policy-initiative>