

Linking food and transportation

Takeaways from the December 2019 Policy Forum Live Session

One common assumption policymakers have about food access is that most people shop at the grocery store nearest to their house. But recent research in Baltimore found that assumption is false.

The study, a collaboration between Associate Professor Celeste Chavis of Morgan State University and food access planner Alice Huang in Baltimore, found that transportation is a major factor in peoples' choice in grocery store.

In a Policy Forum Live Session on Dec. 6, the researcher-practitioner duo said that more than half of survey respondents do not shop at their nearest store, though people without vehicles were more likely to do so. Huang and Chavis said the findings reveal the importance of considering choice and preferences when evaluating food access.

"Even if there's a store you can walk to, that isn't necessarily choice in grocery access," Chavis said.

Chavis and Huang worked together to design the survey, which received more than 500 responses. Both said the partnership worked because each brought different expertise to the table in designing the survey: Huang knew how to design food access questions, while Chavis could design transportation questions.

The survey asked participants whether they shopped at their nearest grocery store, the frequency of grocery visits, the number of different grocery stores visited per month and the type of store visited. They found that food choice depends heavily on access to transportation.

Huang said one of the major findings was that people need or prefer access to vehicles for grocery shopping, particularly for the return trip home with heavy bags of food. In addition to the survey, the research surveyed drivers of informal taxis, known in Baltimore as hacks, about the customers getting rides to the grocery store.

The results indicate that food access is more complicated than the traditional conception of "food deserts" (known in Baltimore as healthy food priority areas).

In the food desert framework, food access and health are directly related to distance from the nearest grocery store. A 2018 article in the *Fordham Urban Law Journal*, "Let Them Eat Kale," by Nathan Rosenberg and Nevin Cohen, disputes that theory, citing research showing that simply drawing a new grocery store to a struggling neighborhood does not improve health outcomes.

“Let Them Eat Kale” argues that rather than addressing symptoms, policymakers working to improve health should focus on “upstream” solutions that address the root causes of obesity and poor health like poverty and poor access to education and social capital.

In Baltimore, Huang said the research is leading to more consciousness of the link between food choice and transportation. As a result of their findings, the city is now launching a pilot program partnering with [Lyft](#) to provide subsidized weekly rides to grocery stores for 200 households.

One possible tool that could be available in future years is delivery and online ordering. In Anchorage, Ala., city chief innovation officer and Policy Forum member Brendan Babb said Walmart has started accepting SNAP and WIC for online ordering for store pickup. That option is not yet available in every city, but could be important in future years as online grocery delivery becomes more common.

Key takeaways

- **Work across sectors.** Huang and Chavis emphasized that food access has many causes and many solutions that do not neatly fit in the boundary lines of any particular sector’s expertise.
- **Be open to new findings.** The researchers found results that do not neatly line up with existing ideas about food deserts. Policymakers who are open to new ideas about common problems are more likely to address them effectively.
- **Think about new ways to solve old problems.** A few decades ago, nobody could have predicted that ridesharing apps and online ordering could become solutions to hunger. Keep looking for new partnerships and strategies.