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# Where Do Americans Usually Shop for Food and How Do They Travel To Get There? Initial Findings From the National Household Food Acquisition and Purchase Survey

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## What Is the Issue?

Food shopping patterns of food assistance program participants and other low-income households are of great policy interest because there is concern these households may not have enough resources to consume a healthy diet. Some low-income households may not have access to a full-service grocery store or other sources of healthy and affordable food. These households may either have to travel farther to access food, and perhaps, shop less frequently, or rely more on smaller stores with fewer affordable and healthy options. The National Household Food Acquisition and Purchase Survey (FoodAPS) is the first survey to collect comprehensive data about household food purchases and acquisitions, both for at-home and away-from-home consumption, and for a sample that is nationally representative and representative of SNAP participating and other low-income households. This report summarizes estimates of the types of food stores at which respondents shop, the usual mode of transportation they use to get to their primary food store, and average distances from home to the nearest and primary retail outlets. These estimates are examined overall and for three sets of subgroups:

- SNAP and three non-SNAP income groups (equal to or above Federal poverty threshold (FPL), 185% FPL, >185% FPL);
- WIC and categorically eligible nonparticipants in two income groups (<=185% FPL, >185% FPL);
- Food-insecure and food-secure households.

## What Did the Study Find?

The vast majority of households, 88 percent, use their own vehicle to get to the store where they do their main grocery shopping. The percentage of SNAP and food-insecure households who use their own vehicle to get to the grocery store is lower.

- While 95 percent of higher income, nonparticipating households (above 185 percent of the Federal poverty line) use their own vehicle to get to the store where they usually shop for groceries, only 66 percent of SNAP households use their own vehicle. About 21 percent of SNAP households use someone else's car or ride with someone else, compared with 2 percent of higher income households. Another 13 percent of SNAP households walk, bike, or take public transit or a shuttle to the store.

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- Similarly, 92 percent of food-secure households use their own vehicle to get to their primary food store but only 69 percent of food-insecure households use their own vehicle.
- Eighty-six percent of WIC participating households use their own vehicle to do their grocery shopping. This is less than the share of higher income, nonparticipating households that use their own vehicle (98 percent).

Despite differences in transportation modes, households do not necessarily shop at the store that is closest to them.

- Overall, households are, on average, 2.2 miles from the nearest SNAP-authorized supermarket or supercenter, but their usual store is 3.8 miles away.
- Even households that do not drive their own vehicle to shop for groceries tend to shop around. Those who usually walk, bike, or take public transit or another mode of transportation shop at stores farther from their house than the nearest store. These households are, on average, 0.5 mile from the nearest SNAP-authorized supermarket or supercenter, but do their primary shopping at a store that is 0.9 mile away, on average.
- SNAP households are, on average, just under 2 miles from the nearest SNAP-authorized supermarket or supercenter but travel 3.3 miles, on average, to the store where they do their primary shopping. About 89 percent of households do their primary grocery shopping at supermarkets or supercenters. The types of stores used for food shopping do not vary by SNAP or WIC participation or food security status.

## How Was the Study Conducted?

This report uses FoodAPS data on the types of stores Americans visit to conduct their primary and secondary (or alternate) food shopping, the travel mode used to get to those stores, and the distance to those stores and other stores near the household. Primary and alternative food shopping stores are categorized into four categories: (1) supercenters, other mass merchandise stores, and club stores; (2) supermarkets, large grocery stores, and commissaries; (3) smaller stores that include convenience stores and pharmacies; and (4) unknown store types. Travel modes are classified as (1) a vehicle owned by a household member; (2) a vehicle owned by someone outside of the household; and (3) walk, bike, public transit, shuttle, or other type of travel mode. The straightline distance from each household to the primary store was estimated using geocoded data on store and household locations. Similarly, distances from the household to the nearest SNAP-authorized supermarket or supercenter were also estimated using geocoded information on SNAP-authorized supermarket and supercenters. This information was used to compare the distances traveled to the primary shopping store relative to the distance to the nearest store. Estimates are presented for the total U.S. population and by subgroups of interest: (1) SNAP participants compared with nonparticipants of different income levels, (2) WIC participants compared with nonparticipants of different income levels, and (3) food-insecure compared with food-secure households.

The FoodAPS is a nationally representative survey of non-institutionalized households in the continental United States and for four subpopulations: SNAP participants and nonparticipating households in three income groups—income less than the Federal poverty threshold (FPL) for family size, between 1.0 and 1.84 of FPL, and greater or equal to 1.85 of FPL. FoodAPS is unique in that it contains data on food-at-home and food-away-from-home purchases and foods acquired for free, collects item expenditures and quantity data, and includes rich data about the sample households. The survey includes data on where foods are purchased and acquired—the types of food retailers, how far away the retailers are from the respondent’s home, and information on other food retailers in the neighborhood. The survey’s design also provides a unique source of information on low-income and SNAP households. Administrative data on SNAP participation and purchases with SNAP were linked to the survey responses to improve the quality of collected data. A total of 4,826 households, comprising 14,317 individuals, participated. Data were collected from April 2012 to January 2013.