Missouri Economy Indicators

Food Access and Insecurity

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Food access is a vital factor in economic and community health, yet disparities persist across Missouri. Data from the Grocery Gap Atlas lends insights into the structural factors shaping food access and availability at the county level. The Atlas evaluates counties across four categories—food access, grocery market concentration, socioeconomic disadvantage and residential segregation—offering a comprehensive look at the state's food access landscape.

Missouri ranks better than a third of U.S. states in food access, measured by the number and proximity of area grocery stores, but lags behind the majority (65%). Missouri's grocery market concentration falls in the middle, with 56% of states having less competitive grocery markets. Additionally, a significant portion of Missouri's population faces socioeconomic disadvantages and high residential segregation, exceeding levels in 62% and 63% of states, respectively. These factors create barriers for some communities, especially those with fewer resources, to access grocery stores and healthy food.

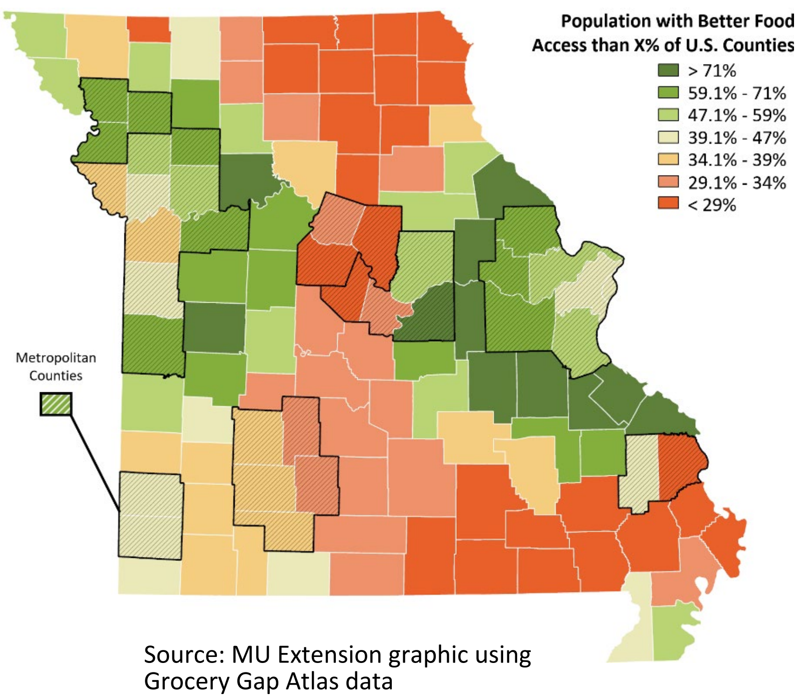
Missouri's Food Access Landscape

Food access varies widely across Missouri, with exurban counties reporting the highest levels. Pike County ranked the highest, offering better food access than 79% of all U.S. counties.

Following this trend, counties on the outskirts of the St. Louis metro area had some of the best food access, including Gasconade and Montgomery (78%), St. Francois (77%) and Ste. Genevieve (75%).

In contrast, northern counties such as Sullivan (21%), Worth and Adair (22%) and Lewis (23%) had the lowest food access in the state. Southeastern Missouri also faced challenges, with Butler and Scott (26%) and Mississippi (27%) counties ranking lowest.

Food Access (2020)



Source: MU Extension graphic using Grocery Gap Atlas data

Grocery Market Concentration and Accessibility

Missouri's grocery market landscape is highly concentrated, with four companies—Walmart Inc. (31.6%), Schnuck Markets Inc. (17.9%), Dierbergs Markets Inc. (8%) and Hy-Vee (7.6%)—controlling nearly two-thirds of all grocery sales. While dollar stores hold a smaller market share, they are often more prevalent in areas with low food access. Missouri's 12.8% poverty rate and 10.8% reliance on SNAP benefits (food stamps) further compound food access challenges. Areas facing greater food access barriers often struggle to find to fresh, affordable groceries, correlating with poorer health outcomes and reduced economic mobility.

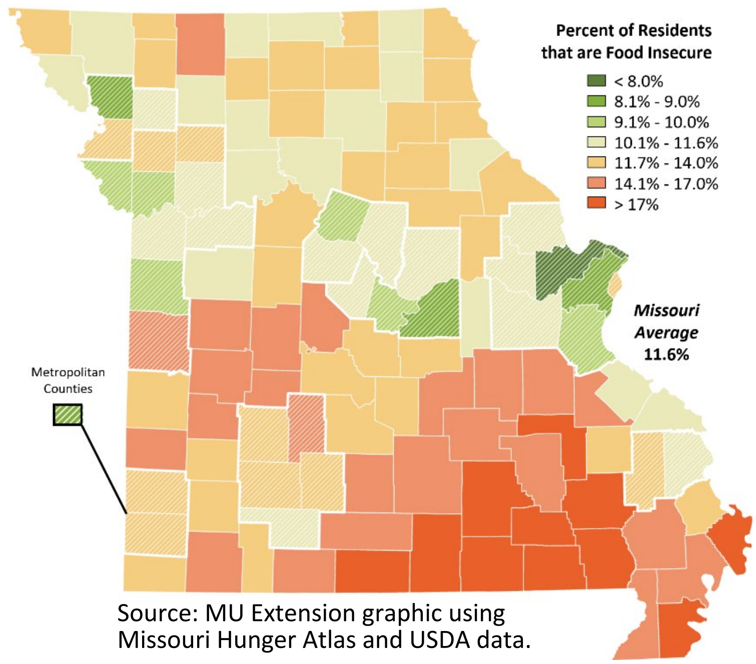
Large grocers, such as Walmart, tend to lead market shares in rural communities where they operate. Walmart's large footprint aligns with the trend of dominant grocery players thriving in concentrated markets. Meanwhile, dollar stores can operate in these same areas by offering lower-cost, convenient food options. These stores may serve as alternatives in areas with limited access to full-service grocery stores, yet typically have fewer fresh food options.

Food Insecurity

The Missouri Hunger Atlas provides an additional lens to analyze how food access differs across the state. In 2021, more than one-tenth (11.6%) of Missouri households were food insecure, meaning they lacked access to adequate food due to financial or resource constraints, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Food insecurity is most concentrated in the southeastern corner of the state, where high market concentration—often from dollar stores or local grocers—is coupled with limited food access within a short commute. This results in fewer options to meet household needs for food.

Food Insecurity (2021)



Source: MU Extension graphic using Missouri Hunger Atlas and USDA data.

However, food insecurity does not always align with low food access. For example, northeast Missouri counties have lower food access but only moderate to low food insecurity. This suggests that residents may rely on alternative sources such as farmers markets, home gardens, food pantries or community support. These findings highlight that while market trends primarily shape food access, communities can mitigate access barriers through tailored strategies that address local needs and leverage available resources.

Notes and Additional Resources

- The **Grocery Gap Atlas** provides county and census tract data on food access, market concentration and other key indicators to help communities better understand their grocery market and access landscape.
- MU Extension's **Healthy Food Financing Initiative** aims to build resilient, equitable food access across Missouri by developing a community-focused statewide food financing program. It is part of MU Extension's Food Systems Network, which offers several programs to improve food access.
- The Missouri Food Security Task Force released a report in December 2023 with additional insights on food insecurity and recommendations to enhance food access statewide.

All briefs in this indicators series and future updates will be available at http://muext.us/MissouriEconomyIndicators

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