

You Can't Get There from Here: Community Food Security in Oklahoma's Food Deserts

The three most important things in real estate, the saying goes, are location, location and location. Oftentimes, the same holds true for community food security.

If the only source of food that people can get to easily and regularly doesn't carry nutritious food, or closes up shop altogether, their odds of being poorly-nourished or even going hungry will increase. That could happen, say, to a carless family in an Oklahoma City neighborhood with no supermarket near at hand, or to an elderly farm couple whose hometown grocery store goes out of business when a Wal-Mart Super Center opens up in the next county over.

That's precisely what's been happening in recent years in Oklahoma, and across the nation. As retail food stores get ever larger, with traditional mom-and-pop grocery stores and supermarkets being replaced by "warehouse clubs" and "supercenters," food sources are literally getting fewer and farther between.

Being There

This trend in the retail food industry has been evident for over a decade. Between 1992 and 1997, nine per cent of the grocery stores in Oklahoma went out of business. [1]

From then until 2002, urban Oklahoma counties gained a total of 15 new food retail stores – but the state as a whole lost 28 food stores, overwhelmingly from less-populated counties.

As smaller and more remote food stores close up shop, warehouse clubs and supercenters are taking their places. The number of these doubled during that same time period, from 26 in 1997 to 52 in 2002. [2] Most of these are opening in the suburban fringes of Oklahoma's largest urban centers.



People in both rural and urban areas are affected by the ongoing sequestration of food in the hands of a few large retail chains, as those companies locate their stores according to where consumers' incomes, rather than people's need for food, are highest.

These trends deliver the most affordable food to affluent areas, while leaving people with less wealth or mobility marooned in "food deserts," places where a quality diet can simply be too far away, or take too long, to reach. [3,4,5]

It's a Desert Out There

Lack of physical access to adequate supplies of healthy, affordable food is often seen as an inner-city issue. In low-income northeast Oklahoma City, for example, there are fewer grocery stores than in other sections of the city and selections of healthy foods in these stores are limited. [6]

While food insecurity and hunger in urban areas are relatively well-publicized, most people in the United States do not realize that a higher proportion of people go hungry in rural areas, where the food that feeds the nation is grown, than in cities. [7]



Food Deserts

In the United States, most people have physical access to some form of retail food outlet. However, the quality and affordability of the food available at those outlets is not always adequate. In particular, convenience stores charge higher prices for a smaller selection of less nutritious foods. Therefore, lack of access to supermarkets and supercenters, which offer the most affordable range of nutritionally adequate food, is considered the defining feature for food deserts in the United States.

Technically, a food desert is any place that lies farther than ten miles from a supermarket or supercenter (or fifteen miles, if part of the route follows an interstate highway). A county is a food desert county if more of its population than is normal for the region lives in a food desert. For the Southern region of the U.S., which includes Oklahoma, the median percentage of the population living in food deserts is 24%. Thus, any Oklahoma county where more than 24% of the population lives in a food desert is considered a food desert county. Severe food desert counties are those in which the county's entire population lives in a food desert. [8,9]

In the analysis described in this article, supermarkets are grocery stores with 50 or more employees. [8]

Contributing to rural food insecurity and hunger is lack of access to supermarkets and supercenters, which offer the most affordable range of nutritionally adequate food.

Thirty-two of Oklahoma's 77 counties are classified as food deserts, meaning that at least 25% of their population lives ten miles or more from a supermarket or supercenter (see sidebar). Nine of those counties are "severe" food deserts, with the entire population living that far from such sources of food. [8,9]

While lack of physical access to food can also be an issue in urban areas, the food deserts occur in rural counties.

Three-fourths of Oklahoma's food desert counties lie west of Interstate 35, including a solid tier along the state's western edge and in the panhandle. The other major concentration of food desert counties is in the extreme southeastern corner of the state (see map, p.57).

These are areas where population is dwindling (see table, p. 63), poverty is rampant, and farm income commonly accounts for 30% or more of total earnings. [8]

In food desert counties in the South as a whole, studies have found that fewer households own vehicles, more people suffer from disabilities, and the Hispanic population is double that in non-food desert counties.

The counties where those trends are most exacerbated are Oklahoma's severe food desert counties; again, they are located in the western parts of the state – with the exception of Hughes County, barely more than an hour's drive from the capital. [8,9]

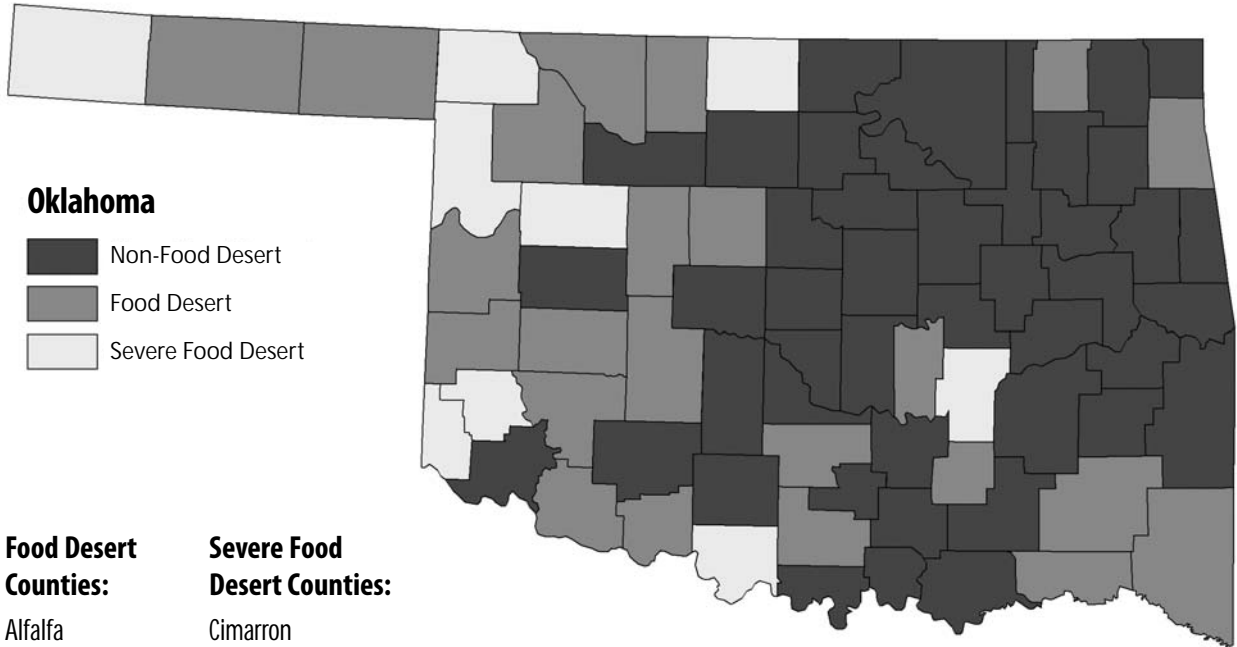
These food deserts are forming due to shifts in the kinds of food stores, the types of food that they sell, and where they sell it. Smaller grocery stores are in decline everywhere, and in about the same proportion.

But the larger supermarkets, while also disappearing, are vanishing fastest from rural areas - and taking their fresher produce, larger selections, and lower prices with them (see figure, p.57). [9]

Their replacements – supercenters and warehouse clubs – are strikingly absent from the most remote rural areas, where no comparably diverse and affordable source of food is appearing to take the place of the grocery stores and supermarkets (see figure, p.57).

Instead, gas-station convenience stores and "quick marts" are spilling into the void. These kinds of food stores offer little in the way of fresh fruits and vegetables, whose scarcity in Oklahomans' diets already contributes to so many of the state's health problems, and they

Food Deserts in Oklahoma



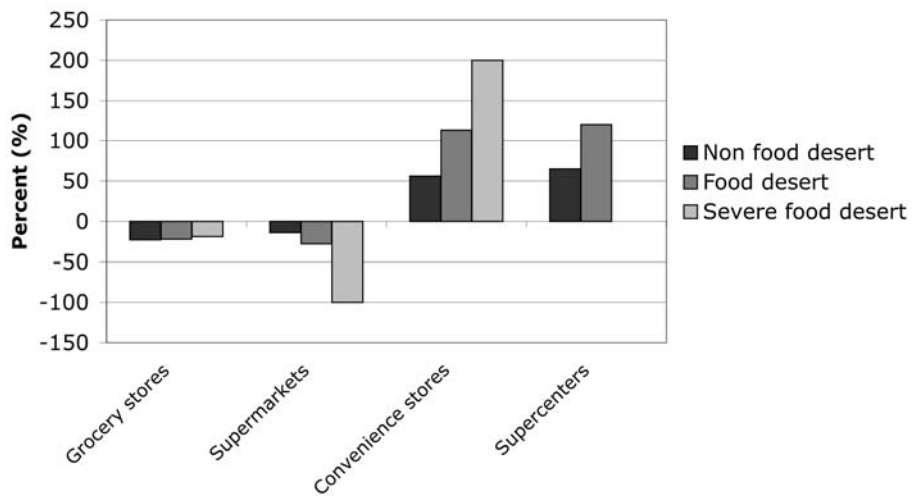
Food Desert Counties:

- Alfalfa
- Beaver
- Beckham
- Blaine
- Caddo
- Carter
- Choctaw
- Coal
- Cotton
- Delaware
- Garvin
- Kingfisher
- Kiowa
- McCurtain
- Nowata
- Pushmataha
- Roger Mills
- Seminole
- Texas
- Tillman
- Washita
- Woods
- Woodward

Severe Food Desert Counties:

- Cimarron
- Dewey
- Ellis
- Grant
- Greer
- Harmon
- Harper
- Hughes
- Jefferson

Percent Change in Number of Food Stores 1998-2002





Driving a Hard Bargain

In neighboring New Mexico, one study found that small grocery stores were 70% more expensive than larger stores. Stores located 20 miles or more from any other grocery store were 31% more expensive than those in regional population centers. Both small and isolated grocery stores were also missing around 20% of the items surveyed. Thus, as the report concludes, rural residents “have a choice of paying a 31% premium for groceries or traveling at least 40 miles round-trip.” [11]

Nationally, in poorer sections of major cities, supermarket food prices are higher than in more affluent suburbs – if a supermarket can be found at all. More common sources of food in such neighborhoods are convenience stores and minimarts, where selections of healthy, nutritious items are slimmer, and prices higher yet. [6,12,13,14]



Change in Numbers of Food Store Types by Food Desert Status 1998 -2002.

	Non food desert	Food desert	Severe food desert
Grocery stores	-64	-80	-4
Supermarkets	-6	-44	-1
Convenience stores	+63	+163	+8
Supercenters	+17	+6	0

charge higher prices for the little fresh produce that they do carry. [9]

Like the loss of supermarkets and small grocery stores, this trend is present both in urban centers and rural areas, but it is most exaggerated in the most isolated stretches of the countryside (box, above, and figure, p. 57).

Making the Desert Bloom

In principle, defining food deserts based on how far they are from supermarkets and supercenters seems like an approach with a built-in bias, assuming as it does that such stores are the only source of an affordable, nutritious, quality diet.

After all, farmers’ markets, CSAs, and home and community gardens can all offer higher quality food, often at a better bargain, than large food retail outlets. [10]

In practical terms, though, this definition of food deserts still works for Oklahoma, because these local alternatives to giant food retail corporations are just as tightly clustered around the state’s urban centers (see map, p. 60). [8]

Traditional grocery stores’ and supermarkets’ departure has forced rural residents to make longer drives for affordable, nutritious food – though the drive is long enough that the cost of gas may cancel any savings on food prices. [9] The alternative is to stay put and contend with a wave of convenience stores selling poor quality food at inflated prices (see sidebar).

The irony in this situation – lack of access to food while food is being grown all around – is epic and without much mirth. Still, it carries the seeds of its own solution. If community food security initiatives such as farmers’ markets, community gardens, and farm-to-school programs find their way from Oklahoma’s urban areas into its countryside, that countryside can increasingly come to produce food for the people currently struggling to get by in today’s food deserts.

Coupons Worth Clipping

Farmers' markets increase public access to high quality fresh produce, and when located accordingly, can also be effective at providing better food choices for low-income populations.

Case studies of successful farmers' markets within food-insecure communities across the nation have found these markets greatly increase the availability and quality of fresh produce. This is especially so when these markets participate in the USDA's Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP). [1]

Since 1992, this national program has helped provide fresh locally grown fruits and vegetables to women, infants and children eligible for WIC benefits. More recently, low-income seniors were added to the list of recipients.

The FMNP distributes coupons to eligible participants through federal grants to states and tribal nations. These coupons, often in \$2 or \$5 denominations, can be redeemed at approved farmers' markets, roadside farm-stands, and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs, in exchange for locally grown fruits and vegetables.

Participating farmers can then simply deposit the government-backed coupons in their bank account, as they would a personal check.

In Oklahoma, the Osage and the Chickasaw tribal nations have successfully applied for and utilized these federal funds. In fact, 85% of the participants in the Chickasaw Nation's WIC Farmers' Market Program indicated they ate more fresh produce than they did before they participated (see sidebar). [2]

Because four counties (Carter, Coal, Garvin and Jefferson) within the Chickasaw Nation are considered food deserts, anything to help increase the availability and consumption of fresh produce could be worth its weight in home-grown tomatoes.

As part of the Chickasaw Nation Farmers' Market Nutrition Program, a variety of educational activities take place in conjunction with farmers' markets in Ada, Ardmore, Durant and Purcell.

These efforts include on-site cooking demos and samples using produce from participating farmers, printed recipes distributed at the markets, special events around National 5-A-Day Month and National Farmers' Market Week, and cooking classes at nutrition centers in Ada, Ardmore and Purcell. [3]

"All of our nutrition education programs really seem to help people be more comfortable eating fresh fruits and vegetables," says Jennifer



In Summary:

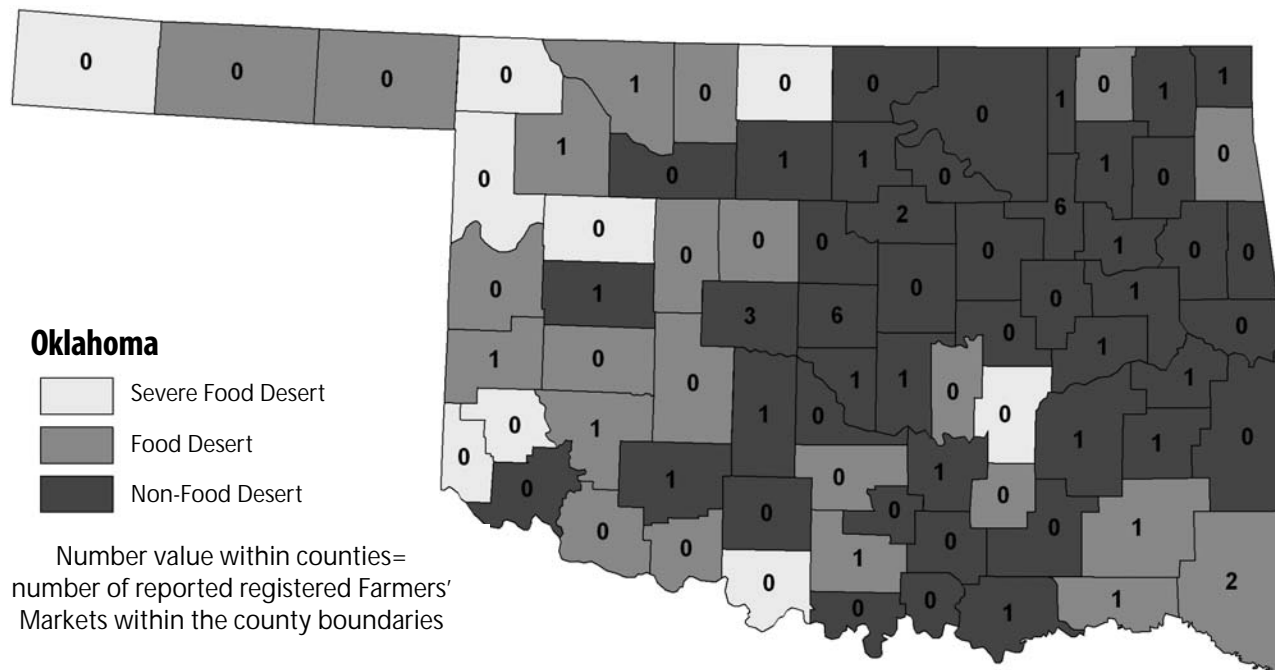
Chickasaw Nation FMNP [5]

- Seven farmers' markets, 41 farm-stands, 95 farmers
- 4,590 voucher recipients
- Participating seniors receive fifty \$2 coupons for use May through November.
- Participating WIC mothers receive six \$5 coupons.
- \$163,390 in coupons were redeemed by Oklahoma farmers in 2004.
- 70% redemption rate

WIC (Women, Infants, and Children program) recipients surveyed said: [6]

- 85% ate more fresh produce than before.
- 35% had never been to a farmers' market before participating in the FMNP.
- 97% indicated produce quality at markets was as good as or better than at their local grocery store.
- 45% bought a fruit or vegetable they had never tried before.
- 46% spent money at the market in addition to their FMNP coupons.
- 80% will continue to shop at farmers' markets, even without coupons.
- 93% plan to eat more fresh produce all year round.

Food Deserts and Farmers' Market Access



Percentage of Oklahomans eating five or more daily servings of fruits and vegetables:

All Adults:	15% [7]
Seniors:	22% [8]
Youth:	14% [9]
Children:	27% [10]

Hayes, Chickasaw FMNP Coordinator. "A lot of what we do is just showing simple ways to prepare these delicious and nutritious foods."

Three other farmer's markets outside the tribal Nation (Noble, McAlester and OSU-Oklahoma City) also have farmers who accept the Chickasaw Nation coupons. Between all seven participating farmers' markets, over \$160,000 of produce was sold through this program in 2004. "By encouraging our people to eat healthier," Hayes says, "we're also helping our farmers, too."

Despite the tremendous success of these programs, Oklahoma itself is not currently one of the 42 states participating in either the WIC or Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Programs.

In 2005, these 42 states received grants totaling nearly \$39 million for distribution as coupons redeemable only for fresh locally grown produce. Some of Oklahoma's neighboring states who applied for and received 2005 FMNP grants include: Arkansas - \$331,000; Kansas - \$176,000; and Texas - \$1,650,000. [3,4]

The Oklahoma Department of Human Services, Aging Services Division tried in 2004, but was unsuccessful in their first attempt to receive a grant for starting a statewide Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program.

There are some farmers' markets that are not registered with the Oklahoma Dept. of Agriculture, Food and Forestry; these have not been included on the maps in this report. New markets are formed every year; check in your community.

Northeast Oklahoma City's "Grocery Gap"

Food journalist Shaun Chavis recently completed a Master of Liberal Arts degree in Gastronomy at Boston University. In this article, she returns to her Oklahoma City stomping grounds for a look at what residents of the city's northeast quadrant can and cannot find in grocery stores in their own neighborhoods.

The 45,000 people who live in the northeast quadrant of Oklahoma City have fewer options for buying fresh meat, fish, and produce than their counterparts in other parts of the city. British sociologists might call the northeast side a "food desert" – a rural or urban area where people have poor access to fresh food. Others might use the term "grocery gap."

Grocery stores are plentiful enough in other parts of Oklahoma City that residents who can't find items in one store are just a short drive away from another. People living near Putnam City North High School, for example, can choose from Crest, Wal-Mart Neighborhood Market, Aldi's, and two Albertson's stores, all within an eight minute drive.

In northeast Oklahoma City, though, there are only two grocery stores: Otwell's Food Store and Hometown Market. They are fairly close to each other; Hometown Market, one of three in the state, is at 23rd and Martin Luther King Avenue. Otwell's, a family-owned independent store, is at 11th and Martin Luther King Avenue.

People who want to eat a varied, healthful diet have limited choices in either store, according to surveys conducted in August 2005.

Both stores had gallon containers of pre-sweetened punch and iced tea where one might expect to see cartons of national brand (Minute Maid or Dole) fruit juices.

There were no organic products to choose from: no organic milk or free range or organic eggs. Only a small portion of the bread choices were whole grain.

These products are not simply status symbols for the elite. Hormone-free milk or eggs that may also have a lower cholesterol profile are health choices that northeast residents don't have an opportunity

to make if they shop within their own community.

Hometown Market sold fish filets and whole fish (heads removed) wrapped in plastic on styrofoam trays. Neither store carried fresh tuna or fresh salmon – fish which the American Heart Association recommends eating twice a week for the beneficial omega-3 fatty acids they contain.

There were no cheese counters, no manned butcher or fish counters. Fresh fruit and vegetable choices were limited in both stores.

Both stores carried food products that could be considered specialty items— foods that play a significant role in African American culture. (According to the 2000 Census, the northeast quadrant's population is 61% black.)

Collard greens were a significant item in the produce sections of both stores. Otwell's sells meats that may be hard to find in other area stores – chitterlings, beef kidneys, beef tripe, and hog mauls. Both Otwell's and Hometown Market sold items such as pig's feet, pig's tails, neck bones, turkey necks, and salt pork.

What these two stores sell is just as telling as what they don't sell. On one hand, it seems the choices are few and limited. On the other hand, the products are, perhaps, a reflection of the community itself. Even a mom-and-pop store has to compete for dollars in a fierce business with a tight profit margin, so there is no room on the shelf for things that don't sell.

The lack of grocery stores in the northeast quadrant is not just an issue of access to a needed service. Though researchers are still developing methodologies to measure health against access to fresh foods, many advocates believe there is a correlation between a lack of grocery stores and disease – making "grocery gaps" a public health issue as well.

Access to Good Food

Goal: Easy access to fresh fruits and vegetables, emphasizing locally grown, for Oklahomans of all income levels.

Public Policy Priorities:

Poor access to fresh fruits and vegetables is a public health issue. Make improved access to fresh, locally-grown fruits and vegetables part of the “Five in Five campaign (see Chapter 1) with the goal of 75% of Oklahomans eating five or more servings of fruits and vegetables per day in by 2012 (five years from now).

- Commission a detailed study of food access throughout Oklahoma, with particular emphasis on known food desert counties and urban communities/neighborhoods known to have few supermarkets, to identify areas where food access is most limited.
 - Based on this research, create a map of grocery stores, farmers markets, emergency food locations and community gardens in each county.
 - Based on this study, identify barriers to establishing local food sales outlets (e.g. farmers' markets, CSA farms, farm stands), barriers to accessing them and also barriers to farmer participation in counties or communities with limited food access.
 - Target interventions to overcome these barriers to accessing affordable, nutritionally adequate, locally produced foods.
- Expand the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program to communities statewide as a public health priority.
 - Push for the state of Oklahoma's participation in the federal Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Programs. Identify barriers (such as lack of staffing) to participation, and fund solutions.
 - Encourage tribes to participate in the federal Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Programs.



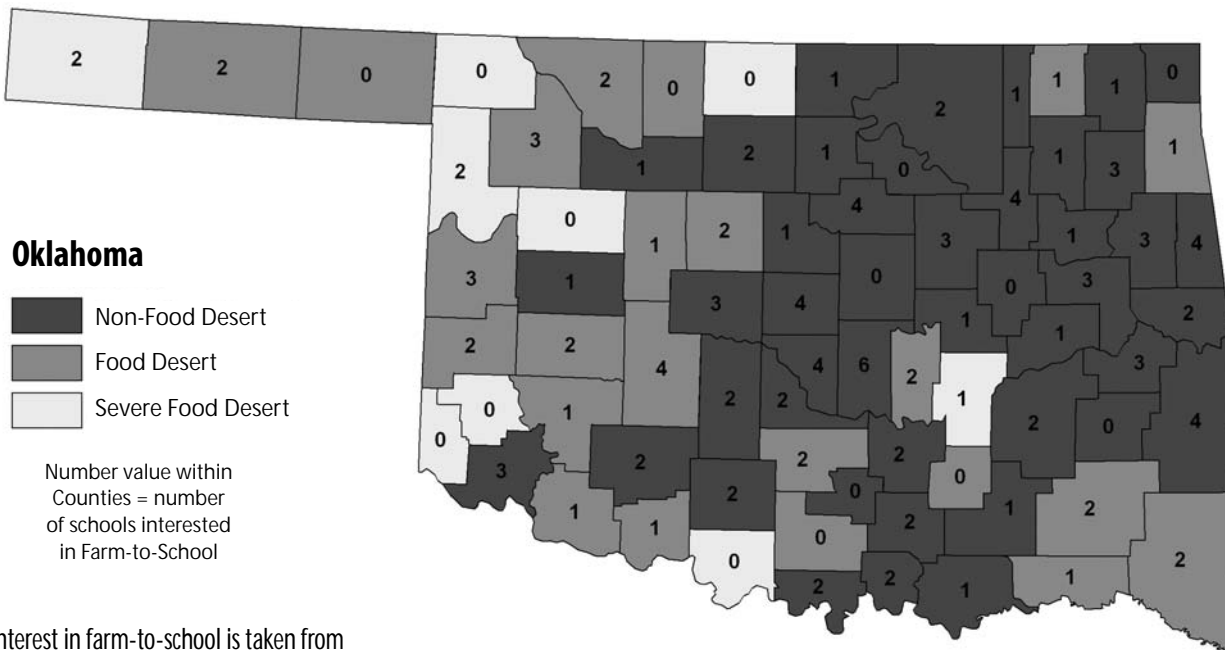
- Evaluate and adapt the model of Maine's Senior Farmshare Program, in which Maine's state agriculture department, in cooperation with other state agencies, uses federal Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program funds to purchase \$100 worth of fresh produce for each of over 7,500 seniors, from 178 Maine farms.
- Provide grants to farmers' markets to enable their farmers to accept food stamps.
- Recruit existing farmers' market vendors or farmers with produce stands to set up "mini" markets near sites where food program participants get their food assistance instruments (e.g. Food Stamps, WIC coupons, etc.) and/or near county health departments and senior centers.
- Introduce locally grown produce into senior meal programs (e.g. senior centers that host non-residents for the noon meal; Meals on Wheels; etc.).
- Link local food sources (e.g. community gardens, CSA farms, farmers' markets, etc.) with emergency food programs - as in the example of the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma's community garden network.
- Improve public transportation to grocery stores and farmers' markets in rural and food desert counties, as well as in urban areas with limited access to food.
 - Institute farmers' market ride programs, such as those piloted by CNEP in spring 2006.
- Make areas with limited food access a priority for expansion of the state's Farm-to-School Program.

Rural Counties, Population Change, and Food Access

Counties in bold are food desert counties.

County	% population change...		
	1940-2000	1990-2000	2000-2005
Cimarron	-13.80	-4.60	-10.00
Tillman	-55.30	-10.60	-8.30
Beaver	-32.30	-2.80	-8.20
Harmon	-67.20	-13.40	-7.70
Grant	-60.80	-9.60	-7.10
Harper	-44.80	-12.30	-7.00
Jackson	25.20	-1.10	-6.80
Alfalfa	-56.80	-4.80	-6.20
Woods	-39.10	-0.20	-6.00
Jefferson	-54.90	-2.70	-5.20
Coal	-52.90	4.30	-4.80
Beckham	10.70	5.20	-4.60
Dewey	-60.40	-14.60	-3.70
Kiowa	-55.20	-9.90	-3.70
Custer	13.30	-2.80	-3.60
Roger Mills	-68.00	-17.10	-3.60
Kay	2.10	0.10	-3.30
Okfuskee	-55.00	2.30	-3.20
Ellis	-51.90	-9.40	-2.70
Greer	-58.30	-7.60	-2.60
Johnston	-34.10	4.80	-2.40
Major	-36.80	-6.30	-2.40
Hughes	-51.50	8.80	-2.30
Noble	-23.00	3.30	-1.80
Garfield	27.10	1.90	-1.50
McCurtain	-16.70	2.90	-1.20
Ottawa	-7.40	8.60	-1.00
Latimer	-13.60	3.50	-0.50
Seminole	-59.30	-2.00	-0.50
Stephens	38.90	2.10	-0.50
Cotton	-48.70	-0.60	-0.40
Choctaw	-45.90	0.30	-0.30
Washita	-48.30	0.60	-0.30
Texas	103.20	22.50	0.00
Garvin	-12.60	2.30	0.10
Pushmataha	-40.10	6.10	0.20
Caddo	-27.50	2.00	0.30
Washington	60.30	1.90	0.30
Pontotoc	-11.70	3.00	0.60
Craig	-29.10	6.00	0.90
Payne	89.10	10.90	1.40
Pittsburgh	-10.30	7.30	1.60
Muskogee	5.40	2.00	1.70
Murray	-8.80	4.80	2.00
McIntosh	-19.30	16.00	2.60
Kingfisher	-10.80	5.40	2.70
Nowata	-33.00	5.80	2.80
Mayes	77.10	15.00	2.90
Carter	5.40	6.30	3.30
Haskell	-31.90	7.80	3.30
Love	-22.80	13.40	3.30
Woodward	13.60	-2.60	3.30
Bryan	-4.20	13.90	3.50
Atoka	-25.80	8.60	4.20
Pottawatomie	20.50	11.50	4.20
Adair	33.50	14.20	4.50
Cherokee	102.20	24.90	5.10
Delaware	99.40	32.10	5.60
Blaine	-35.40	4.40	7.40
Marshall	6.50	21.70	9.70

Food Deserts and Farm-To-School Interest per County



Interest in farm-to-school is taken from the *2003 Oklahoma Institutional Food Service Survey*, published in the Kerr Center's *Oklahoma Farm-to-School Report*. See Chapter 3.

Food Desert Counties with Schools Participating in Farm-to-School Program	
School District	County
Sayre	Beckham
Binger-Oney	Caddo
Tupelo	Coal
Arnett-Ellis	Ellis
Pond Creek - Hunter	Grant
Kingfisher	Kingfisher
Mooreland	Woodward