

New supermarket in food desert may trigger economic and health gains, study finds

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Opening a new supermarket in a low-income neighborhood may improve residents' economic well-being and health, even if residents don't necessarily buy healthier food from the store, according to a new RAND Corporation study.

Studying a low-income neighborhood in Pittsburgh where a new [supermarket](#) opened after decades of absence, researchers found that residents reported improvements across a number of economic and [health](#) benchmarks a year after the store opened, as compared to residents of a similar neighborhood that did not have a supermarket.

For example, 12 percent fewer people reported facing [food](#) insecurity as compared to the similar neighborhood a year after the store opened and about 10 percent fewer new cases of high cholesterol also were reported, according to the study published online by the *Annals of Epidemiology*.

"Our findings suggest that locating a new supermarket in a low-income neighborhood may trigger health and economic improvements beyond just having access to healthier and more-plentiful food offerings," said Andrea Richardson, the study's lead author and policy researcher at RAND, a nonprofit research organization. "Policymakers should consider these broad impacts of neighborhood investment that can translate into improved health for residents in underserved [neighborhoods](#)."

Responding to concerns about neighborhoods considered to be food

deserts, the federal government created the Healthy Food Financing Initiative to encourage full-service supermarkets to locate in low-income areas that have limited access to fresh produce and other food items.

Advocates say that in addition to improving access to healthy foods, new full-service supermarkets may foster community economic development by introducing employment opportunities, generating tax revenues and increasing customer traffic to support other businesses.

The RAND study is a part of an ongoing project that is following two low-income, predominately African American neighborhoods in Pittsburgh that long had been considered food deserts.

One neighborhood—the Hill District—saw a new, full-service supermarket open in 2013, about 30 years after the last supermarket closed. The second neighborhood—Homewood—remains without a full-service supermarket.

Researchers surveyed 831 residents from the two areas both before the supermarket was constructed and again about a year after the store opened. They were asked a wide array of questions about their food consumption, health issues and economic status.

Residents of the Hill District - where the new supermarket opened - reported better results across a number of measures of economic well-being and health as compared to residents of the Homewood neighborhood.

Participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program dropped by 12 percent among residents of the Hill District as compared to residents in Homewood, while new cases of arthritis were 7 percent lower among residents in the Hill District compared with new cases in Homewood.

Researchers also found suggestive evidence that incomes increased more in the Hill District neighborhood and that the prevalence of diabetes increased more slowly in the Hill District as compared to the Homewood neighborhood.

Previous examinations done as a part of the Pittsburgh project found that the diets of Hill District residents improved after the full-service supermarket opened, but that the improvements were not necessarily related to use of the new full-service supermarket.

"Our study provides evidence that supermarkets may improve aspects of [residents'](#) lives beyond diet for low-income African Americans," Richardson said. "While our findings suggest that supporting the opening of supermarkets in low-income neighborhoods may have widespread benefits, more work needs to be done to understand how the changes take place."

Provided by RAND Corporation

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