

Extra steps to eat: In Lawrence, nearly 18,000 live in federally designated 'food desert'

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East Lawrence resident Lane Eisenbart has heard that, once upon a time, there was a grocery store within a block of her house.

Especially those days when the single mom runs out of eggs mid-week and faces a cold bike ride in the dark to get more, she can't help but sigh, wouldn't that have been nice?

"This is my third winter without a car," Eisenbart said. "I'm really tired of hustling quite so hard for simple things like getting to the grocery store."

Eisenbart is one of nearly 18,000 northeast Lawrence residents living in a federally designated food desert. The desert — where a combination of low incomes, lack of grocery stores and lack of transportation makes it hard for some residents to get healthy food — stretches from Kasold Drive to the eastern city limits and envelops everything north of the river.

Community planners cite food deserts as a public health obstacle. But greening them up isn't that simple.

Access to healthy, affordable food emerged as a top concern in a recent survey of county residents, said Christina Holt, chairwoman of LiveWell Lawrence's [Healthy Food for All](#) committee and associate director at Kansas University's [Work Group for Community Health and Development](#).

"There was story after story," Holt said. "We had many stories of residents who live in North Lawrence who said they did their grocery shopping at Dollar General because they didn't have a car and transportation was a hardship for them... Besides the whole physical access to fresh produce, there's also a financial barrier."

Low access, low income

When it comes to food deserts, more attention seems to fall on inner-city or remote rural areas, said Shelly Ver Ploeg, an economist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, which developed the mapping tool designating food deserts nationwide.

But Lawrence — classified as urban, though it's a small city — has large swaths of them.

Four adjacent low-income census tracts have a significant number of people who live at least a mile from the nearest supermarket, according to the [USDA Food Access Research Atlas](#). Of those people, more than 3,000 are low-income, more than 2,000 are children and more than 720 are seniors. About 130 of their households don't have cars.

In North Lawrence, none of the 2,800-plus residents lives within a mile of a full-service grocery, according to the data.

Since USDA designations are based primarily on census data, they account for children and seniors but not other common factors that might hinder access to food, such as disabilities, Ver Ploeg said.

'Basket bike' v. food desert

Eisenbart hopes she'll be able to buy a car after she gets her tax return.

In the meantime, it's her and her "basket bike" versus the food desert.

Eisenbart, who lives in the 1200 block of Pennsylvania Street, occasionally takes side roads to Checkers at 23rd and Louisiana streets but does most of her shopping at Dillons at 18th and Massachusetts streets because it's closer, a mile from home.

Walking is hard to schedule because it takes so long, she said, and she's found the bus unreliable. She rides a lighter-weight bike to work at KU, but her grocery-getter has a shopping cart basket welded to the frame, a custom creation of Lawrence's [Farnsworth Bicycle Laboratory](#).

She's still exposed to the elements — darkness, icy roads, bad weather, bad drivers and just being tired — but, Eisenbart said, it's nice that her basket is big enough to hold all the groceries she can afford when she does make the trip, about every week and a half.

Eisenbart said she plans meals and shopping trips ahead and tries hard to prioritize healthy, whole foods for herself, her 7-year-old and her 12-year-old. Sometimes in the summer she walks to the downtown farmers market, just under a mile away, where she'll pay a little extra when she can for the high-quality produce there.

"It's always a balance between what's inexpensive and what's good for me," Eisenbart said. "It's especially important because of my daughters ... I want them to experience a lot of fresh foods."

An East Lawrence developer wants to bring in a grocery store of some kind on Eisenbart's street, but so far nothing has materialized.

Without one, having a car sure would make getting food easier, Eisenbart said. She'd love to be able to just — what is it people say? — "run to the store" and get those eggs.

"Every day, I'm hustling to get what I need," she said. "I'm just making it happen."

Lawrence food deserts by the numbers

The following four Lawrence census tracts are federally designated food deserts, with low access defined as living one mile or more from the nearest supermarket.

North Lawrence

Population 2,847

Low-access residents: 2,847 (100 percent)

Low-access and low-income residents: 1,231 (43 percent)

Low-access households without vehicles: 54 (5 percent)

East of Massachusetts Street, north of 19th/23rd streets

Population 6,819

Low-access residents: 1,943 (29 percent)

Low-access and low-income residents: 734 (11 percent)

Low-access households without vehicles: 34 (1 percent)

Kasold Drive to Iowa Street, Sixth Street to Interstate 70**Population 5,079**

Low-access residents: 1,753 (35 percent)

Low-access and low-income residents: 309 (6 percent)

Low-access households without vehicles: 25 (1 percent)

Iowa Street to Kansas River, Sixth Street to I-70**Population 3,227**

Low-access residents: 1,900 (59 percent)

Low-access and low-income residents: 812 (25 percent)

Low-access households without vehicles: 18 (1 percent)

Total**Population 17,972**

Low-access residents: 8,443 (47 percent)

Low-access and low-income residents: 3,086 (17 percent)

Low-access households without vehicles: 131 (less than 1 percent of total housing units)

(Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture Food Access Research Atlas, 2013, ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas)

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