

# Availability and Quality of Healthy Foods Vary by Store Participation in SNAP and WIC in Low-Income California Neighborhoods

Research Brief – March 2025

## Background

Healthy eating, including plentiful fruit and vegetable consumption, is essential for reducing chronic disease risk, yet only about 10% of U.S. adults meet recommended intake levels. Food access and affordability shape dietary behaviors, with income-related disparities limiting healthy intake for many individuals. Small markets and convenience stores are often more accessible to low-income households than large grocery stores but tend to offer higher-priced, lower-quality produce, contributing to inequities in fruit and vegetable access and disparities in consumption.<sup>1</sup> Federal nutrition assistance programs like WIC and SNAP aim to improve the availability and quality of healthy foods in participating stores.

Researchers at NPI examined how SNAP and WIC participation influences the availability, quality, and marketing of healthy foods in small markets and convenience stores in California neighborhoods where the majority of residents have low-incomes.

## What We Evaluated

Researchers measured availability and quality of healthy grocery items such as fresh produce, milk, and whole grains.

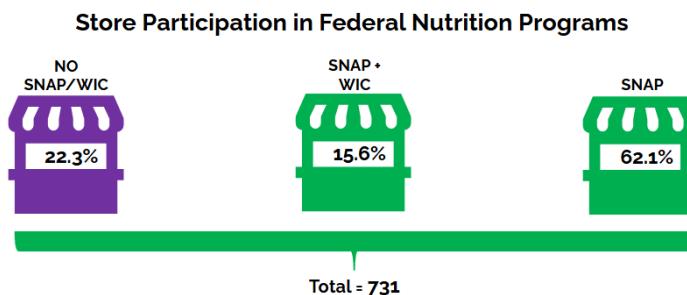
### Retail food environment was evaluated through six markers:



The study population included communities where 50% of residents live at or below 185% of the federal poverty level.

The final sample included 731 stores categorized as either small markets or convenience stores across 29 counties in California.

Store participation was categorized as neither SNAP nor WIC, both SNAP and WIC, or only SNAP, as no stores participate in WIC but not SNAP.



## What We Found

This study found that store participation in SNAP and WIC is associated with a healthier food retail environment. Additionally, small markets scored higher than convenience stores across all six categories of healthfulness, particularly in availability of high-quality fresh produce.

### Fruits and vegetables

Stores participating in both SNAP + WIC have significantly higher fruit and vegetable availability and quality scores than all other stores.

### Other healthy food

Stores participating in both SNAP + WIC offered a greater availability of healthy foods and higher-quality fresh produce compared to stores that did not participate in either program. While stores accepting SNAP only also had more healthy food options, the benefits were less notable than those observed in SNAP + WIC stores.

### Nutrition information

Stores participating in both SNAP + WIC were more likely to display health promotion signs within the store.

### Marketing

Stores participating in both SNAP + WIC had less exterior marketing but similar interior marketing compared to all other stores.

## Implications for CFHL Program Delivery and Future Research

The study findings for program delivery and future research suggest:

- Expanding the participation of convenience stores and small markets in WIC and SNAP could improve community access of fresh and nutritious foods<sup>1</sup>.
- Convenience stores often have a more limited supply of healthy food items compared to small markets. Therefore, participation in WIC and/or SNAP may be more impactful on improving food availability in convenience stores than small markets.
- Strengthening WIC and SNAP stocking standards and nutrition requirements may enhance retail food environments in low-income communities which lack healthy food options.

## For More Information

- ✓ Read the full [peer-reviewed research article](#)
- ✓ Learn more about our [CFHL evaluation research](#)
- ✓ Contact us at [EvaluateSnapEd@ucanr.edu](mailto:EvaluateSnapEd@ucanr.edu)

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<sup>1</sup>Gosliner, W., Brown, D. M., Sun, B. C., Woodward-Lopez, G., & Crawford, P. B. (2018). Availability, quality and price of produce in low-income neighbourhood food stores in California raise equity issues. *Public Health Nutrition*, 21(9), 1639–16