

Study: Urban sprawl creates food deserts

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Shima Hamidi, director of UTA's Center for Transportation Equity, Decisions

and Dollars, published "Urban sprawl and the emergence of food deserts in the USA" in *Urban Studies Journal*. Credit: UT Arlington

Urban sprawl has led to the creation of food deserts in metropolitan areas across the United States, according to a published study by a researcher at The University of Texas at Arlington.

Shima Hamidi, director of UTA's Center for Transportation Equity, Decisions and Dollars, published "Urban sprawl and the emergence of [food](#) deserts in the USA" in *Urban Studies Journal*.

"We believe the analysis is one of the first national attempts to account for urban sprawl and other built-environment and socioeconomic characteristics of a neighborhood," Hamidi said. "This study found that, in addition to socioeconomic characteristics, urban sprawl at both neighborhood and regional levels increases the likelihood of a neighborhood becoming or having a food desert.

"More compact [neighborhoods](#) are likely to support a greater number of grocery stores and have healthy food stores in [close proximity](#)."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines a food desert as a low-income area where a significant number of residents live more than one mile in [urban areas](#) or more than 10 miles in rural areas from a supermarket, big-box supercenter or other healthy grocery [store](#). About 20% of residents in Dallas and Tarrant counties live in food deserts with no access to healthy food options.

Hamidi said the study reveals that increasing the housing density increases the chances of a neighborhood landing stores that provide good, healthy food. More compact regions reduce racial and income

segregation, thus allowing for a greater opportunity of stores offering healthy food to enter the community.

Her research shows that while [financial incentives](#) might prove effective in the short term, more systematic, longer-range solutions—such as increasing housing density, making communities more walkable and allowing a diversity of land uses—are far more beneficial to a neighborhood in luring a supermarket.

Duane Dimos, UTA vice president for research, said Hamidi's study reflects UTA's focus on Sustainable Urban Communities, one of the themes of the University's Strategic Plan 2020.

"Urban sprawl is not unique to Dallas—it exists throughout the nation," Dimos said. "Many U.S. [metropolitan areas](#) suffer from the maladies associated with it. We have an opportunity through Dr. Hamidi's research to combat urban sprawl with techniques that translate to many, many metropolitan areas. Being smarter and thinking outside the box will serve us well in building and rebuilding America's urban areas."

In another published study, Hamidi linked [urban sprawl](#) to decreased life expectancy. And in *The Costs of Sprawl*, a book she wrote in 2017, Hamidi shows how sprawl affects health and other quality-of-life outcomes.

More information: Shima Hamidi, Urban sprawl and the emergence of food deserts in the USA, *Urban Studies* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/0042098019841540](#)

Provided by University of Texas at Arlington

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