Issue Brief № 68

Food Deserts and the Rural Gap

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"My concern, as someone who represents a food desert and one of the poorest areas in the state, it's important for me that we do not legislate dignity away from Alabamians."

-Sen. Robert Stewart, D-Selma, February 2026[1]

Over the course of the Black Belt series' coverage of the region in Alabama across 20+ issue briefs, a common denominator affecting its residents in a variety of policy areas is isolation and limited access to essential services and infrastructure.[2,3] From sparsely adequate roadways connecting residents to quality education and emergency services, to the sometimes hundreds of miles between residents and their work, there is no denying the effects of isolation on mental, physical, and financial health in the region.[4,5,6] These problems extend to basic human needs beyond the Black Belt and across rural America by way of "food deserts." The 2008 Farm Bill defined a food desert as an "area in the United States with limited access to affordable and nutritious food, particularly such an area composed of predominantly lower-income neighborhoods and communities."[7]

This brief aims to break down this issue relative to Alabama, with references to similar "desert crises" across the country. While focusing on geographic distances to food, this brief will also look into other metrics contributing to poor dietary conditions across the state. The Education Policy Center recognizes that food deserts are not solely an issue for rural areas, but it is the consensus that populations in rural areas are more vulnerable to these geographic (and sometimes political) barriers that prevent them from accessing food within a reasonable distance.[8] As this series has done in the past, it will analyze the state as two distinct regions, Black Belt and Non-Black Belt, to determine if/where these disparities lie. While this is no new phenomenon, by analyzing efforts to combat these issues across the country, this brief will provide recommendations and conclusions about what the future of this issue appears to be.

Alabama's Food Profile

For perspective, approximately 48 million Americans experience food insecurity, 14.4% of the population, as of 2024. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food insecurity as a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food.[9] Indicators are broad, from worrying about running out of food to skipping meals and not eating for whole days at a time.[10] 919,160 Alabamians experience food insecurity (see Figure 2), ~17.4% of the state. When broken down into Black Belt and Non-Black Belt, **124,420 people across the Black Belt are food insecure** (the average Black Belt county would have 18.5% of its population insecure, compared to 17.2% of the average non-Black Belt county).[11]

Figure 1: Alabama's Black Belt



Data analyzed by the Education Policy Center at the University of Alabama, 2025

About Alabama's Black Belt

That the 24 counties of Alabama's Black Belt (see Figure 1) host all 11 of the state's majority-minority counties does not explain the name. "Black Belt" describes the black soil of Alabama, where slaves were imported to grow cotton.

Key civil rights history events happened here, including the 381-day Montgomery Bus Boycott that propelled Martin Luther King, Jr., to prominence, and the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The Bloody Sunday police riots at the Edmund Pettus Bridge, and the Selma-to-Montgomery march, which preceded the Voting Rights Act of 1965, happened here.

The Black Belt is characterized by searing poverty. All 24 counties were in persistent poverty in 1970; 50 years later, in 2020, 19 still were. In 2023, the Black Belt's labor force participation rate was 52%, compared to national and state rates of 63% and 57%, respectively. The rates of single-parent households in 2023 in Dallas, Perry, and Wilcox counties were 54, 72, and 59 percent, respectively. Selma's population was ~28,000 in 1960 and ~17,000 in 2025. * The Black Belt's persistent poverty is found in 180 counties and parishes across Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, & South Carolina.

* Katsinas, S.G., Bray, N.J., Till, G.A., Jacks, K.R., Keeney, N.E., and Ogunniran, M.O. (2023, October) Alabama's Prime Age Employment Gap: Addressing Persistent Poverty in the Black Belt, Issue Brief No. 61, Tuscaloosa, AL: Education Policy Center and the Center for Business and Economic Research

Figure 2. Food Insecurity Rates in Alabama, 2009 & 2024

Food Insecurity Rate	2009	2024	% CHG
Black Belt	23.3%	18.5%	−4.8%
Non-Black Belt	16.9%	17.2%	0.3%
Alabama	17.8%	17.4%	−0.5%

Table: Figure created by the Education Policy Center at the University of Alabama • Source: Map the Meal Gap • Created with Datawrapper

Developed by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation via County Health Rankings, the Food Environment Index provides a unique perspective on determining what makes a healthy food environment. Opposed to traditional metrics used in most social and economic decision-making that rely on population and/or income, the Food Environment Index equally weights indicators, largely based on geographic factors, like distance an individual lives from a grocery store, locations for healthy food purchases in most communities, and the inability to overcome cost barriers in acquiring healthy food.[12]

The index ranges from 0 (worst) to 10 (best) to score food environments across the nation. Alabama has a score of 5.3, while the Black Belt averages 6.1, and non-Black Belt counties average a score of 7. This index proves beneficial to analysis on the state level best as it holds the state accountable for the entire ~50,000 square miles, as opposed to emphasizing the major metro pockets, with the larger concentration of grocery stores. As seen in the county breakdown in Figure 3, the four counties in Alabama with a lower score than the state as a whole are Perry (3.9), Bullock (4.4), Greene (4.5), and Wilcox (4.7); **Perry, for example, spans ~720 square miles but relies on a single Piggly Wiggly**.

Figure 3. Geography Evens the Playing Field with Alabama's Food Index

Alabama's Food Environment Index scores by County, 2022
State food index score of 5.3 highlighted with dotted line
Score from Dekalb County unreported

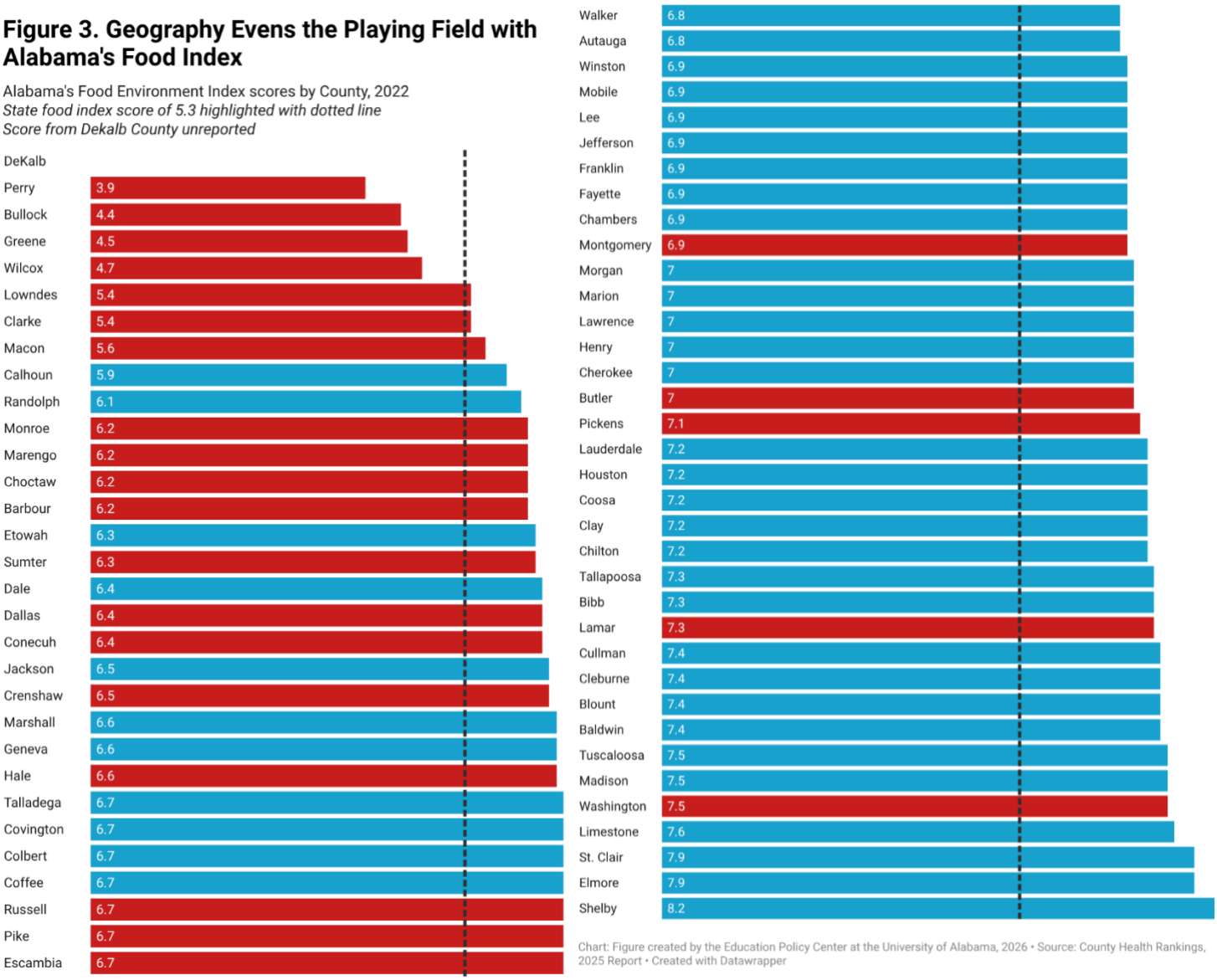


Chart: Figure created by the Education Policy Center at the University of Alabama, 2026 • Source: County Health Rankings, 2025 Report • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 4 looks at critical food metrics previously discussed in the state of Alabama, broken down by region and compared against national rates. The average cost per meal is one way to analyze the food purchasing power of individuals in the Black Belt. The average cost per meal, per Feeding America, is the average weekly dollar amount that food-secure individuals report spending on food (from the Census' Current Population Survey) divided by 21 (7 days a week, 3 meals a day). Among Black Belt counties, the average cost per meal in 2024 was $3.65. This number is more so an indicator of food costs and local taxes born to the residents of said counties, rather than the true costs to county residents, as it does not include responses from almost 20% of the average Black Belt county population as they are food insecure.

Figure 4: Critical Food Metrics, 2024 Snapshot

Region	Food Insecurity Rate (%)	Child Food Insecurity Rate (%)	Cost per Meal (USD)
Black Belt	19	29	$3.65
Non-Black Belt	17	23	$3.81
Alabama	17	24	$3.79
US	15	21	$3.88

Table: Figure created by the Education Policy Center at the University of Alabama • Source: Map the Meal Gap • Created with Datawrapper

Children in Alabama face even larger barriers to accessing food. As discussed in our *Children of Alabama in 2025* brief, children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of poverty. The well-being of children living in the Black Belt compared to children living outside of the Black Belt highlights these effects. This includes children in Alabama who face food insecurity. Feeding America calculates the Child Food Insecurity Rate by restricting normal food insecurity rate data to just responses from households with children.

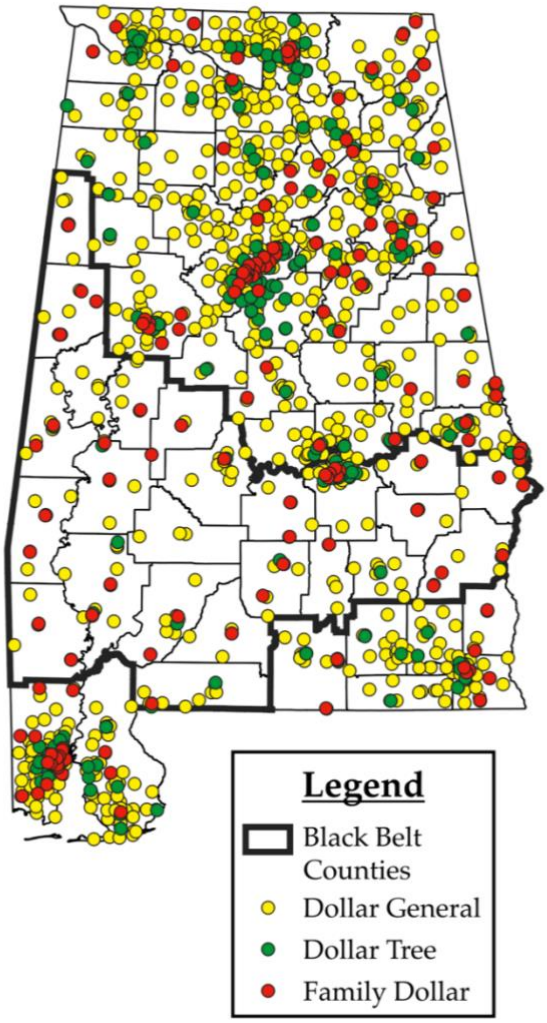
Dollar Store Diets

It should come as no surprise to Alabamians that there is no shortage of dollar stores as of late. A common criticism that came with this expansion of dollar stores was the lack of healthy food options.[13] The issue behind their expansion is not one against a free market, but rather their ability/inability to leave a positive impact on the isolated non-metro regions they move into, and whether or not they remain Low Income, Low Access. Low Income, Low Access (LILA) is defined by the USDA's Food Access Research Atlas as census tracts with at least 20% of their population in poverty and being more than 1 mile (urban) or 10 miles (rural) from the nearest large retailer. [14] Dollar stores play into this, as they are a food retailer that entered these LILA areas.[15]

Smaller grocers with consistently healthier options find themselves in tight financial situations or have gone out of business entirely, unable to compete with dollar stores' low operating costs.[16] A 2025 study of how the expansion of dollar stores exacerbates these problems found that **markets lost one grocery store for every three dollar stores that moved in**, as well as that these stores are not helping the problem;

"fresh produce consumption and grocery access decrease most for consumers who initially tend to eat less healthfully and have higher transportation costs—low income, older, from minority groups, without access to a vehicle."[17] Those communities experiencing food insecurity and low/limited access to healthy food were not better off once dollar stores entered their communities. An ongoing debate looms concerning access to nutritious options for individuals receiving SNAP benefits, following a ban earlier this year in Alabama on sugary foods for SNAP recipients.[18] The prevalence of dollar stores is in step with the population distribution, as the Black Belt represents ~13% of the state's population, as well as 20% of the state's dollar store locations, shown in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5. Alabama Has Over 1,300 Dollar Stores. Fewer Than 1 in 5 Are Located in the Black Belt



Source: All The Places. (2026). Dollar General, Dollar Tree, and Family Dollar store locations [Data set; Dollar General run of October 10, 2026; Dollar Tree and Family Dollar runs of October 17, 2026]. https://www.alltheplaces.xyz. Map created by the Education Policy Center at the University of Alabama, 2026.

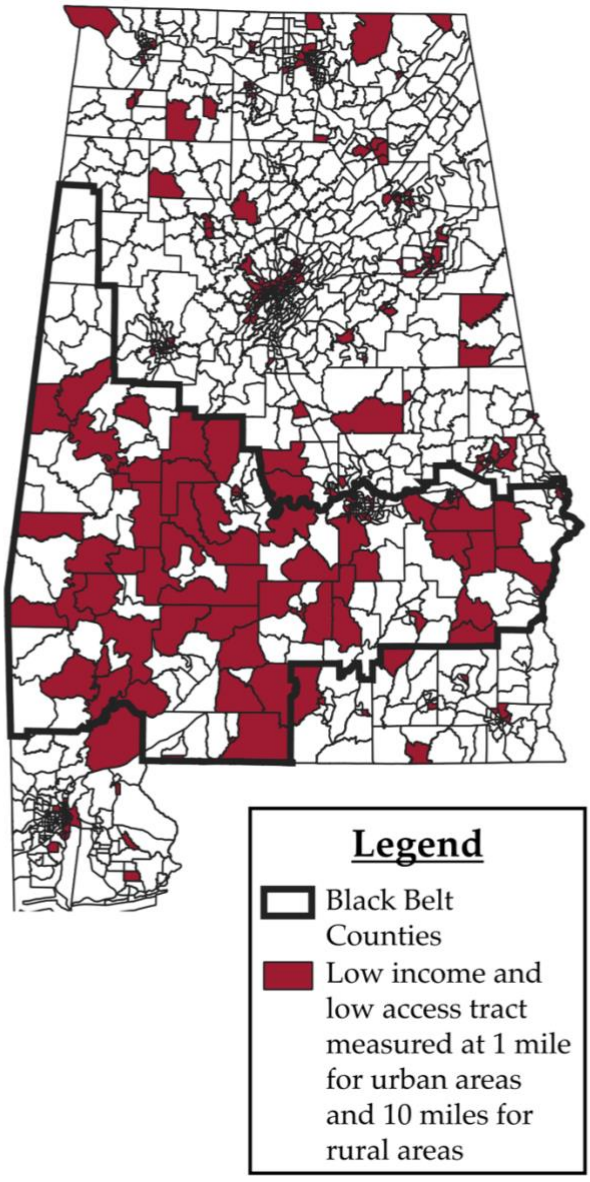
Much is left to the imagination for the future of dollar stores. There have been efforts made to improve their selection and quality, with Dollar General introducing ~125 items in their house brand "Good & Smart," as well as their new DG Markets, stores with the company's goal of providing customers with "closer access to fresh and healthy foods."[19] This new goal is aimed at making up for this gap, having opened ~5,000 DG Markets nationwide as of mid-2024.[20] Dollar stores have increased their efforts and market share greatly since 2008; **as grocery stores lose ~8% of rural household expenditures, it is made up by convenient dollar stores and cost-effective supercenters**.[21] Dollar stores as a whole have a great opportunity being so close to the homes and wallets of people in the Black Belt and LILAs across the country.

Low Income, Low Access

The USDA's LILA measure provides an accurate depiction of census tracts that are most susceptible to food insecurity, as they battle lower income, as well as greater distances to shop for food. Figure 6 recreates the USDA's Food Research Atlas Large Retailer Access Map, focusing on the state of Alabama, with an outline of our 24-county Black Belt overlaying. This is a **clear rural issue**, with most urban areas being within the 1-mile parameter. For the sake of this analysis, the Large Retailer Access Map is preferred over the SNAP-authorized Retailer Access Map (SRAM) due to the above implications of less healthy options and ongoing debates surrounding SNAP eligibility.[22]

LILA hits at the heart of these Black Belt series: revealing areas where residents have to navigate long distances, lacking resources and infrastructure. While more centralized areas can benefit from grocery delivery, this is typically unavailable to rural residents. These populations, who are also many times financially unstable, have to overcome barriers like owning and maintaining reliable transportation to even access rural-focused resources.

Figure 6. Low Income, Low Access: The Rural Problem



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. (2019). Food Access Research Atlas. https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/. Map created by the Education Policy Center at the University of Alabama, 2026.

This metric as well as the Food Environment Index are excellent examples of keeping state and federal agencies honest, sharing foundational principles with the largest rural caucus: The U.S. Senate. **Geographic analyses and metrics like these justify investment in the region, as while it is only ~13% of the population, it is still roughly a fifth of the state's land area and requires due attention.**

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

To address the disparities in food accessibility between Black Belt and non-Black Belt counties, we recommend the following policy action:

1. **Expand Funding for Grocery Stores in Food Desert Areas**
   Illinois' Grocery Initiative provides grant funding for reopening recently closed grocery stores, creating grocery stores in food deserts, and upgrading equipment for existing grocery stores.[23] This initiative has distributed $19 million in funding since its implementation in 2024. A similar, comprehensive program addressing the sustainability of current grocery stores and the recent closing of grocery stores would reintroduce healthy foods to rural areas. This funding may reduce inequities in food accessibility for Alabama's Black Belt residents.
2. **Support & Expand Community and College Food Pantries:**
   The existence of food deserts makes accessing healthy food a daily struggle for Alabamians. To address that daily necessity, we recommend the support of existing and expansion of community food pantries. For many rural, high-poverty communities across the United States, the community college acts as an anchor institution. These are large, place-based organizations that could not relocate without drastically altering their missions, and in rural America, they go above and beyond, acting as hubs for civic engagement. A study of poverty-alleviating services offered by community colleges in rural, high-poverty areas found that in a random sample of 30 community colleges, 22 were found to house and operate a food pantry open to their students and community.[24] Food pantries partner with local retailers and community members who donate grocery items. The pantry is open to any members of the community facing financial hardship and food insecurity. Food pantries aimed at college students can reduce the inaccessibility that many individuals in the Black Belt may face while paying for school.
3. **Renew USDA Household Food Security Report**:
   The USDA cancelled its 30-year old annual Household Food Security Report on September 20, 2025. The press release announcing this was cited as having said that the reports "failed to present anything more than subjective, liberal fodder."[25] The press release was quick to dismiss this survey, citing it as a Clinton administration move to support SNAP eligibility and benefits allotment.[26] Since its inception, this survey has cost less than $1 million annually

to report more than $100 billion in nutrition funding from SNAP to school meal programs and everything in between.[27] The USDA tracks census data regarding food insecurity as well as data to compile the Food Access Research Atlas, which focuses on access to supermarkets and other large grocery retailers. This data was last updated in 2021 using data collected in 2019. The USDA's Eating and Health Food Module tracks eating patterns, nutrition, and grocery shopping. This module has only been fielded three times: 2006-2008, 2014-2016, and 2022-2023. This federal data tracking is key to understanding food access and nutrition disparities. Efforts by non-profits are consistent and accessible, but the cancellation of this data has stalled their efforts, and it is the duty of the USDA to provide leadership on food and nutrition, as federal agencies are best positioned to hold policymakers accountable. Restarting and updating this data frequently and consistently will provide the most comprehensive picture of food access in Alabama, informing future decisions.

The inequities in food access between Black Belt and non-Black Belt counties reflect broader trends of food deserts in rural areas. This brief examines Alabama's food profile, implications of dollar stores and superstores, and the specific disparities in Alabama's Low Income, Low Access areas. Alabama's Black Belt ranks worse on the Food Environment Index, relies more heavily on the increasing presence of dollar stores, and faces underinvestment and geographic isolation. Increasing funding for comprehensive grocery support programs, supporting and expanding community-based food pantries, and renewing food access data collection could help reduce these barriers to healthy food access.

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