

# Food and Health in Spokane County

## AN OVERVIEW



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## Introduction

**A**ccess to healthy food is essential to our lives. We need healthy food to function at our best, to work, to learn, to play, and to protect ourselves from disease. Over the past decade, the focus on where food comes from, how it is grown, how it is processed, how much it costs, the quality, and how much we are consuming has increased substantially. The attention has been driven by concerns about many issues, including the obesity epidemic, the environment, and food safety.

The Spokane Regional Health District in collaboration with the Food Access Coalition, a group of concerned citizens representing various parts of the food system (growing, processing, distributing, selling, eating, and composting), have worked together since January 2009 to gather information about access to healthy food in Spokane County. This overview is only a beginning step in understanding and improving access to healthy foods in Spokane County.

The purpose of this process is to gather and share information about the current status of access to healthy foods, food insecurity, land use planning, and the impact of these factors on the diet-related health of residents in this county. This information is meant to add to the ongoing community discussion of how to improve Spokane County's food system. Through individual citizen action, community involvement, environmental and policy changes, our youth, farmers, regulators, elected officials, city and county planners, food processors, distributors and retailers can make changes that ultimately improve the economic, environmental and human health of our county.

The project started with interviews of key community individuals, including growers, distributors, recipients of federal nutrition funding, policy makers, and consumers to determine the main concerns about our local food and food system. The two main concerns voiced repeatedly were cost and quality of food in Spokane County. Other concerns included the need for education about food preparation, low cost food outlet locations, and nutrition.

A full report is being developed. This overview was developed for the community discussion on June 7, 2011.

## Food and Health

The relationship between food and health is complex. According to the United States Department of Agriculture's "Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2010," a healthy diet is one that:

- ◆ Emphasizes fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and fat-free or low-fat milk and milk products;
- ◆ Includes lean meats, poultry, fish, beans, eggs, and nuts; and
- ◆ Is low in saturated fats, trans fats, cholesterol, salt (sodium), and added sugars.

### Obesity and Diabetes

Two major public health issues closely related to food are obesity and diabetes. Obesity and diabetes are strongly correlated. According to the *New England Journal of Medicine*, if a change is not made in current obesity trends, today's youth may live shorter lives than their parents and experience more chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, asthma and arthritis.<sup>1</sup> Diseases, such as Type 2 diabetes, that were once predominantly seen in obese adults a generation ago are now being diagnosed with more frequency in children under 18.

In Spokane in 2008:

- ◆ Approximately two in three adults and one in four youth are either overweight or obese.
- ◆ About three-quarters of diabetic adults and three in ten diabetic adolescents are either overweight or obese.
- ◆ Slightly more than 7% of adults and 5% of youth have diabetes in Spokane.<sup>2</sup>

There are many factors behind the obesity epidemic. This overview takes a closer look at the availability of healthy and less healthy foods as well as free and low cost food resources for people in need of food assistance.

### Fruit and Vegetable Consumption

Fruit and vegetable consumption is often used as an indicator of a healthy diet. A diet rich in fruits and vegetables provides many health benefits, including lower blood pressure, reduced risk of heart disease, stroke, and some cancers. Studies also show that fruits and vegetables can help control weight or help a person lose weight when replacing calorie dense foods.<sup>3</sup> The daily recommended amount of fruits and vegetables varies by age group, gender, and amount of usual physical activity (calories burned per day).

- ◆ In Spokane in 2008, one in four adults and youth ate five or more servings of fruits and/or vegetables a day, the same as the state.<sup>4</sup>

## Access to Healthy Food

Access to healthy food means being able to obtain nutritious, culturally appropriate food without physical or financial barriers. Having access to healthy food does not automatically mean individuals will purchase and consume it. However, it is a prerequisite.

### Food Insecurity

According to the expert panel convened in 1989 by the Life Sciences Research Office, food insecurity is having limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways. Food insecurity and hunger cause social, economic and public health issues in communities. Adults may experience impaired work performance leading to reduced earnings and children experience reduced cognitive development and learning capacity.

In 2007, one in ten Spokane County adults cut or skipped a meal because they did not have any money to buy food at least sometimes within the last year. Among these adults, 41 percent acknowledged that this occurred every month.<sup>5</sup> Often parents will go without food so their children may eat.<sup>6</sup> One in five 8th, 10th and 12th graders who took the Healthy Youth Survey in Spokane reported that they had to skip meals because there was not enough to eat.<sup>7</sup>

Food security is influenced by many factors in addition to household income. Education, health insurance, and home ownership are all associated with food insecurity.

## Addressing Food Insecurity

### Government Programs

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) provides food assistance to low-income residents to increase their nutrition and promote health. The programs also bring millions of dollars into the community for food purchasing. The largest program is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly food stamps. According to the Community Indicator Initiative of Spokane, in 2010, the percentage of City of Spokane residents enrolled in SNAP was higher (31%) than Spokane County (23.2%)<sup>8</sup> which was higher than the state rate (18.6%). Spokane Valley SNAP enrollment (24%) is approximately the same as that of Spokane County. In 2009, 58% of infants born in Spokane County were on WIC (Women, Infant, and Children Supplemental Nutrition Program);<sup>9</sup> the program brought 9.8 million to the county for food purchasing. In the fall of 2010, 45% of Spokane County students were enrolled in the free and reduced price lunch program.<sup>10</sup> Spokane County has 11 elementary schools participating in the USDA Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Grant Program, the highest in the state. The program provided approximately \$300,000 for purchasing fruits and vegetables.<sup>11</sup>

### Food Banks and Free Meals

In 2009, Second Harvest distributed 7.3 million pounds of food, including 1.9 million pounds of fresh produce, to community programs in Spokane County. The amount of fresh produce distributed has increased substantially since 2004 when the grocery rescue program started. Emergency food banks and free meal sites, run by non-profits and churches, are the most concentrated in the poorest neighborhoods in the City of Spokane. Low-income neighborhoods with limited access to free food include Nevada/Lidgerwood and the Mead, Mt. Spokane, and Green Bluff areas.

### Food Rescue

After a banquet or at the end of the day at a restaurant, there are often trays of unserved food. Before Feed Spokane, a non-profit dedicated to rescuing prepared food, this food would often be discarded. In 2009, the organization safely redirected 38,858 meals to local free meal sites.

## Access to Fresh Produce

Mirroring the trend throughout the nation, an increasing number of Spokane County residents are growing and processing their own food and buying local produce.

### Community Gardens

Community gardens are small plots of land in urban or rural areas owned by local government or private landowners and made available for gardening. Neighbors, community members or specific groups such as schools, churches or businesses use the land to grow food for consumption, education and donation to people in need.

In 2011, Spokane County had at least 26 community gardens, including three gardens on the City of Spokane's Water Department property, four on business properties, six church gardens, five school gardens, six neighborhood gardens, and two public housing gardens. (Map 1) The first community gardens on City of Spokane Parks and Recreation property were created in 2011 at Grant Park in the East Central Neighborhood and Riverwalk Park in the Peaceful Valley Neighborhood.

### Teaching Farms

Spokane County has three farms that teach youth how to grow and eat fresh fruit and vegetables. Two of the farms are training programs for low-income youth to learn how to grow and sell food as a business or career and practice selling their produce at farmers' markets. The third teaching farm (East Farms School Garden) grows food to feed students and their families, and donates food to the school cafeteria and to local food banks.

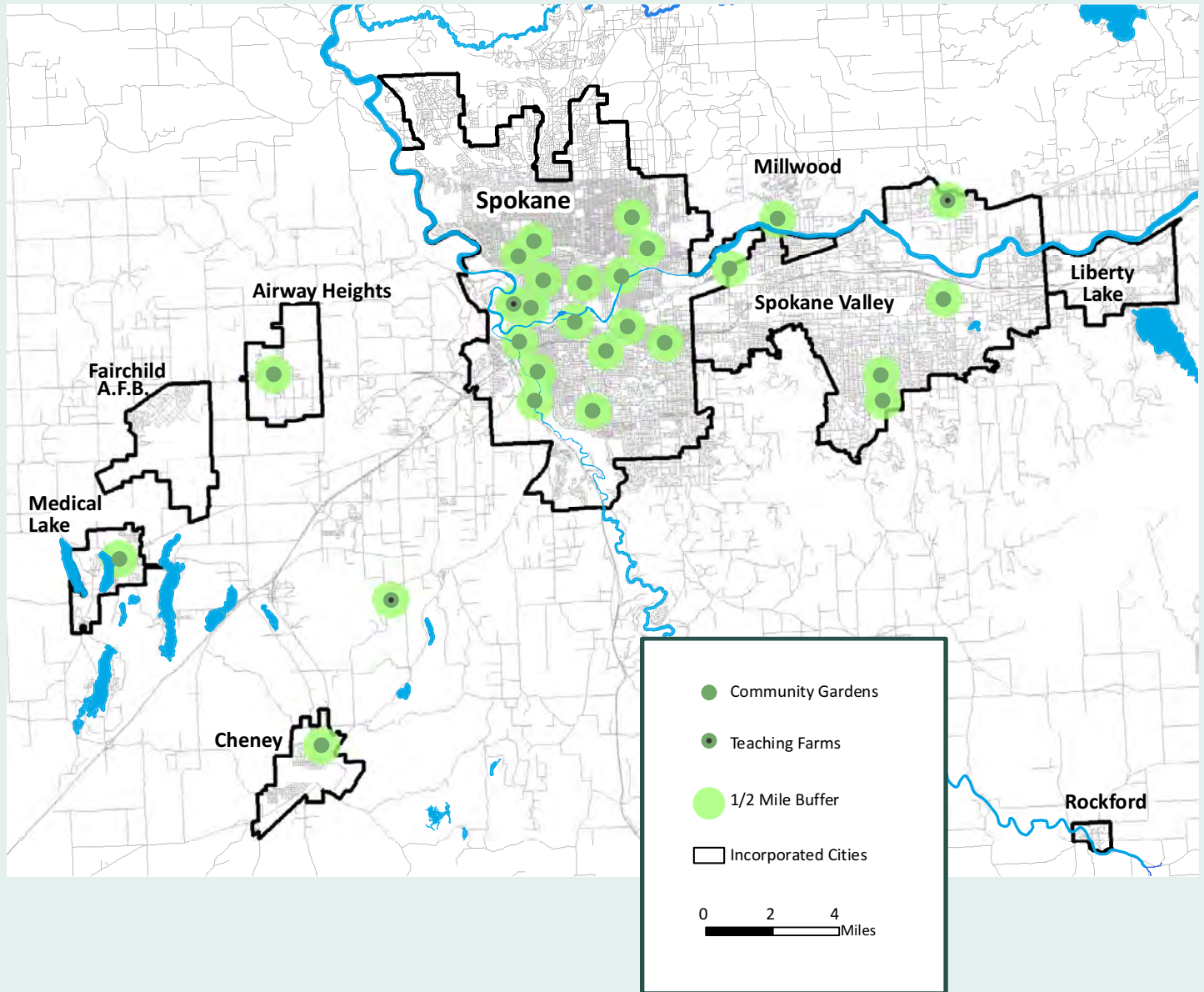


East Central Community Garden Dedication, Summer 2009



### Map 1: Spokane County Community Gardens and Teaching Farms with Half-Mile Radius

The majority of the City of Spokane's 17 community gardens were located in neighborhoods where the population is densest and poverty levels are highest. The City of Spokane Valley has five gardens and the cities of Airway Heights, Medical Lake and Cheney each have one community garden.



According to the United States Department of Agriculture's *Access to Affordable and nutritious Food: Measuring and Understanding Food Deserts and Their Consequences*, walking access measures a range of distances for which it is feasible to walk to a supermarket. A walking speed of two miles per hour was assumed; thus, "high" access would equal a 15-minute walk, or one-half mile in distance.<sup>12</sup>



Community Roots Farmers' Market in Hillyard provides access to fresh, locally grown produce for the community, including WIC families, seniors, and SNAP-EBT participants.

### Farmers' Markets

The downtown Spokane farmers' market was the only market prior to 2000. Eleven years later there are twelve unique markets in Spokane County. Of these, seven are within the City of Spokane. Access to fresh produce for low-income individuals has increased as the number of markets accepting SNAP-Electronic Benefit Transfer and WIC and Senior Nutrition Farmers' Market Nutrition vouchers increased to 11 of the 12 markets in 2010.

### Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)

CSA has become a popular way for consumers to buy local, seasonal food directly from a farmer. A farmer offers a certain number of "shares" or memberships to the public and the customer receives a box each week throughout the farming season. CSA boxes are not restricted to produce; they can also include farm fresh eggs, meat, cheese, homemade bread, etc. In 2011, Spokane had at least 15 CSAs.

### Food Retail

Spokane County has more than 581 superstores, supermarkets, grocery stores, specialty food stores, convenience stores, and fast food restaurants.<sup>13</sup> The types of food outlets and how they are distributed throughout the community, particularly in low-income areas, is of concern when analyzing access to healthy food. A question that has arisen in communities across the country that are focusing on food access is whether there is a "food desert" in the community.

Food deserts are low-income areas with limited access to a grocery store or supermarket.<sup>14</sup> While these stores are not the only ones able to sell healthy foods, their presence or absence is used as a proxy for access to healthy foods. Access to less healthy

foods sold at convenience stores, drive-through food establishments, and some other quick food resources also impact access to healthy foods.

Most of the superstores, supermarkets, grocery stores, and specialty food stores in the City of Spokane and the City of Spokane Valley are on arterials where zoning and commute patterns create favorable business opportunities. (Map 2) The majority of grocery-type food outlets are located in the City of Spokane where there is approximately the same number of small grocery stores as supermarkets. There are twice as many convenience stores as there are grocery stores and supermarkets.

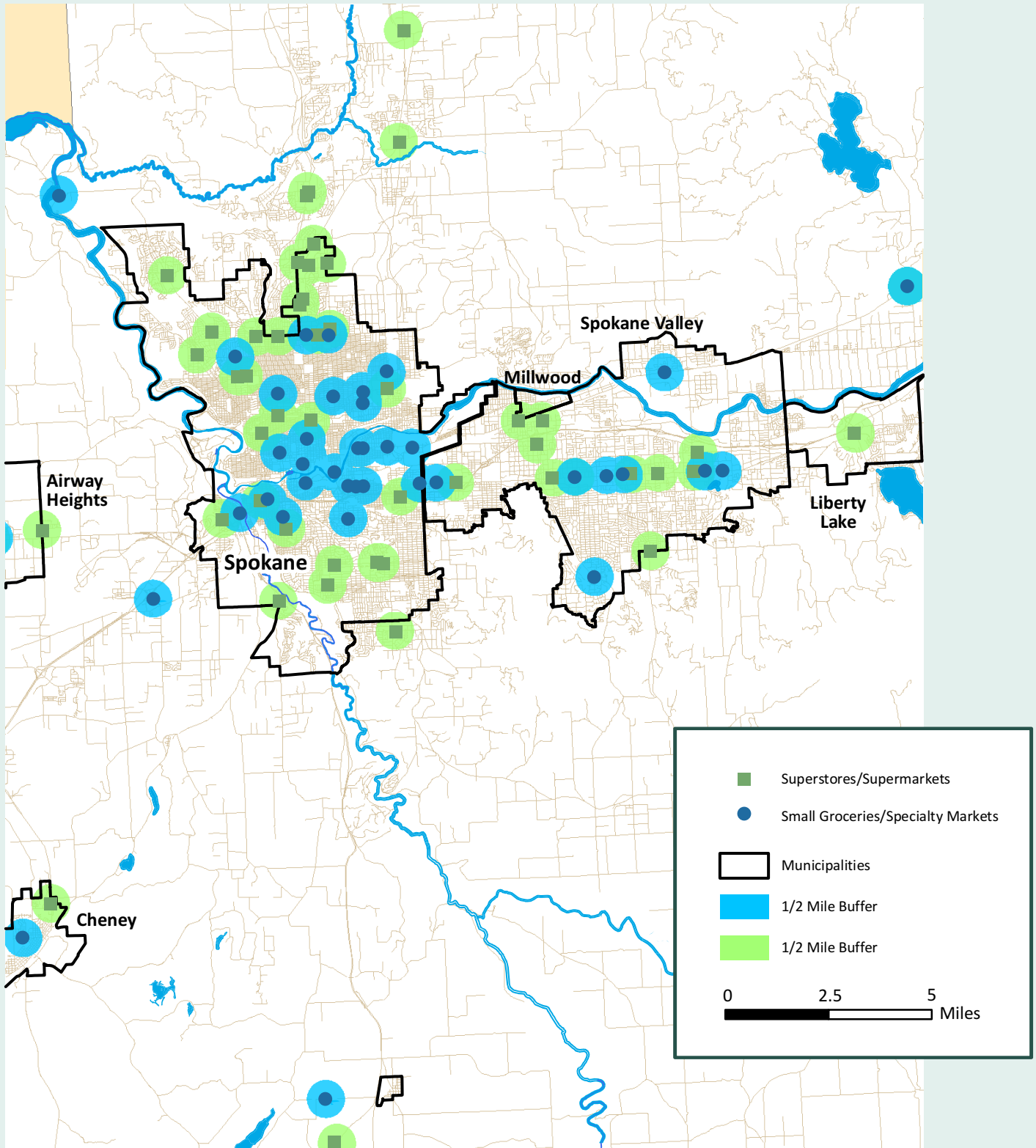
Access to grocery stores and supermarkets in low-income areas in the City of Spokane is fairly evenly distributed with the exception of the West Central and Riverside (downtown) Neighborhoods. Approximately 40% to 50% of residents in these two neighborhoods receive SNAP benefits (food stamps). These two areas lack a supermarket or grocery store accessible to low-income individuals. Convenience stores are the only neighborhood retail option for purchasing food in West Central. In contrast, residents from other low-income neighborhoods such as Nevada/Lidgerwood, Whitman, Bemiss, Logan, and Chief Garry have relatively good access to supermarkets or grocery stores.

In the City of Spokane Valley, supermarkets and grocery stores are located along arterials; Sprague Avenue has five supermarkets within approximately 2.5 miles of each other. Access to healthy foods through supermarkets and grocery stores is more sparse for low-income residents living north of the freeway and away from Argonne Road.

Access to supermarkets and grocery stores via a transit system is difficult for those carrying multiple or heavy bags of food. For small and light items, bus access is more doable and the routing is good. Spokane Transit Authority designs routes to connect as many destinations and origins as possible while still providing logical routing. Grocery stores and supermarkets are an important consideration and useful to have on every route to reduce the number of buses people need to catch while transporting groceries. The one exception to grocery stores and supermarkets accessible by transit routes is on Trent highway extending north of Liberty Lake. Newman Market is the closest small grocery store for residents living in this rural area and is not bus-accessible.

## Map 2: Superstores & Supermarkets, Grocery & Specialty Stores Within a Half Mile Walk Radius

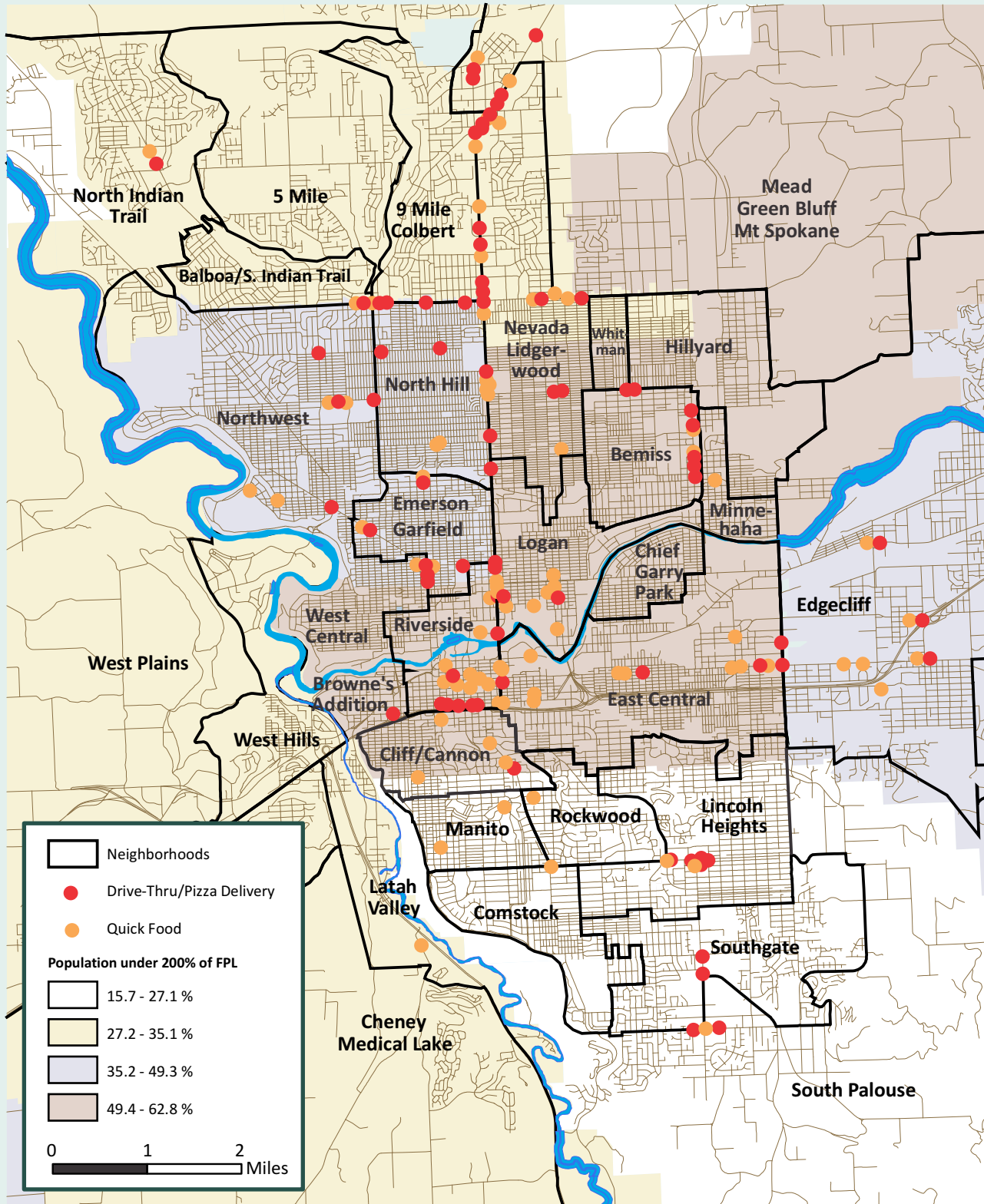
This map provides a visual representation of Spokane food access inventory and shows areas in the City of Spokane lacking a grocery or supermarket within a half mile radius. Access is primarily along the main arterials with a few stores serving the residential and rural areas to the North and South.





### Map 3A: Drive-Thru, Quick Food and Poverty - Spokane Area West

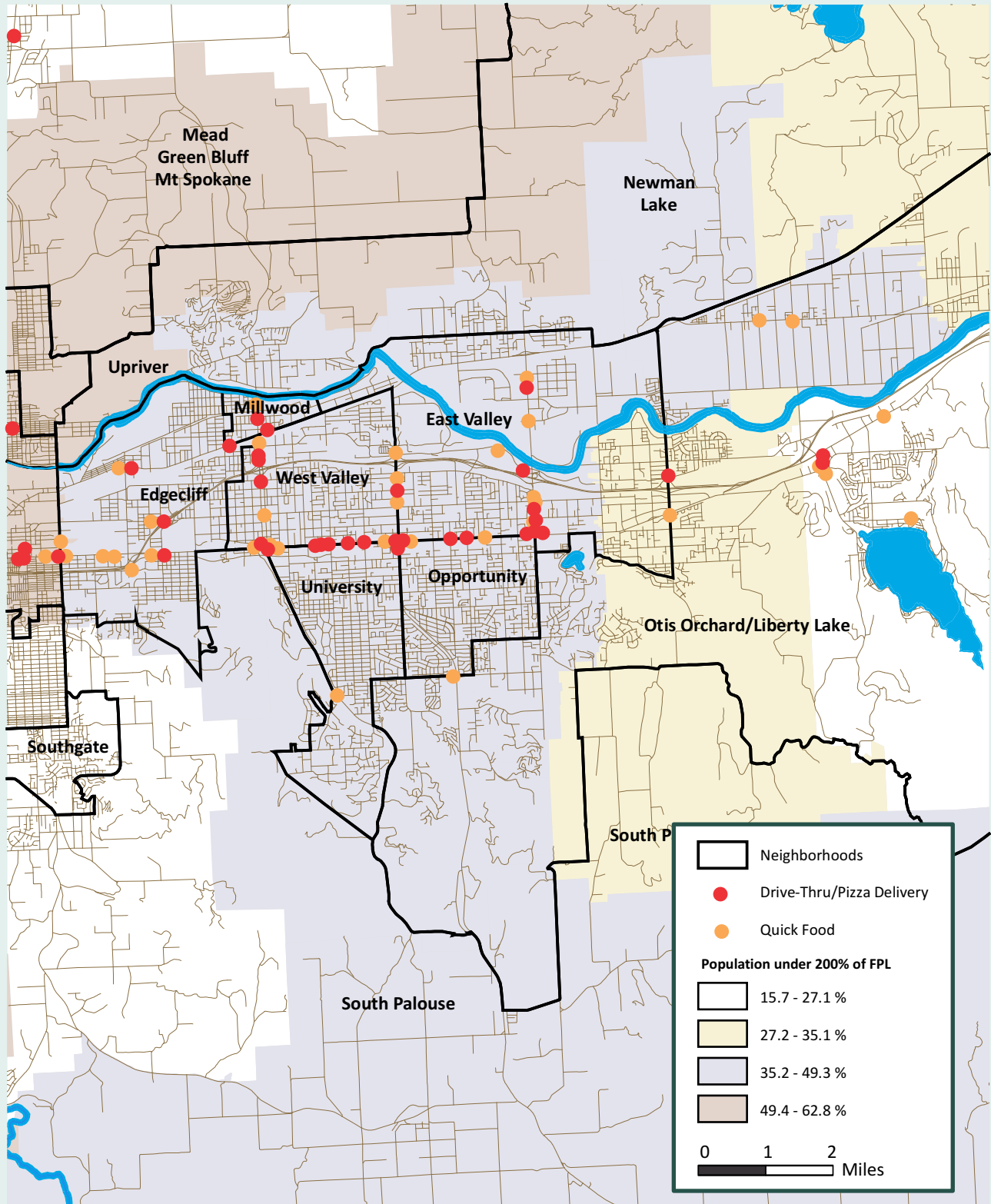
Drive-thru food is the fastest of prepared food options as indicated by its window service. Pizza (delivery) is grouped in this category because of its convenience as well as popularity. These food stores are primarily located on large north/south and east/west arterials in Spokane (Division, Market, Argonne, Pines, Francis, Sprague, Third), along the freeway and in areas zoned for business. More drive-thru food outlets are found in the lowest income areas of the City of Spokane.





### Map 3B: Drive-Thru, Quick Food and Poverty - Spokane Area East

Quick food is paid for at the counter, service is efficient, and the menu is more varied and potentially healthier than drive-thru options. Sandwich shops and delis along with quick ethnic foods make up this category. Maps 3A and 3B show quick food also clustering along arterials, next to the freeway and in the downtown Riverside neighborhood.





Children serving themselves fresh fruit at “Feed Cheney” a once-a-month free meal and healthy grocery distribution program.

### Accessing Food from Low-Income Neighborhoods

Results from focus group interviews with 49 low-income residents from the Greater Hillyard (Hillyard, Whitman and Bemiss neighborhoods), East Central and West Central neighborhoods include:

- ◆ Free food from nonprofit agencies was the most common way to obtain food for their families.
- ◆ Fast food establishments were the most popular place to eat out with some participants stating, “fast food is one of our food resources.”
- ◆ The primary means for getting fresh fruit and vegetables is from grocery stores and supermarkets in their neighborhood.
- ◆ More than half of participants stated that they traveled one mile or less from their home to purchase or obtain food for their family.
- ◆ Four in 10 participants used their own vehicle to get groceries, one in 10 walked, 15% carpooled or had a friend drive them, and the remainder used public transportation.
- ◆ The three main factors that influenced what participants purchased were price, health and children’s preferences.
- ◆ Health issues included diabetes, being overweight and having “nutrition restrictions.”
- ◆ Participants said they read labels and purchased foods that were lower in sodium, fat and sugar.

In conclusion, focus group participants valued low price, convenient location, and nutrition as key factors when accessing food in low-income neighborhoods.

### Urban Planning and Zoning and Food Access

Local governments regulate aspects of food production, processing, access, and waste through comprehensive plans and zoning ordinances. Comprehensive plans are intended to reflect a community’s vision of what it wants to be decades down the road with values, goals, and strategies.

Zoning ordinances put the language of the comprehensive plans into action through laws. Zoning regulations are meant to protect the general welfare of the public by avoiding conflicting land use such as a landfill site bordering a residential neighborhood. Within a zoning ordinance there is specific language that regulates the actual use of the land such as farming, construction of supermarkets and grocery stores, and where processing and waste management activities can take place.

## Improving Access to Healthy Foods

Access to healthy foods is one component of creating a healthy community. In the urban areas of Spokane County, most neighborhoods have physical access to supermarkets and grocery stores. With the variety of foods carried in these stores, it is assumed there is nutritional access to healthy foods through them. Several low-income neighborhoods are limited in their physical access and financial access to healthy foods.

Improving access to healthy foods requires action on multiple levels ranging from policy to individual changes and through a variety of sectors of the community. Notable steps have been taken by other communities to increase access to healthy foods through policy, community, institutional, family and individual changes. There are a wide variety of possible improvements, some are listed below.

### **Policy changes include:**

- ◆ Creating food enterprise zones to attract healthy food stores to low-income areas
- ◆ Changes to zoning to allow grocery stores or expansion of smaller stores
- ◆ Developing farmland protection policies
- ◆ Allowing community gardens on public lands

### **Community changes include:**

- ◆ Rescuing and redirecting prepared food to free meal sites safely
- ◆ Streamlining permitting processes for farmers' markets
- ◆ Developing a comprehensive approach to local or regional food planning

### **Institutional changes include:**

- ◆ Improving access to healthy foods at schools, businesses, hospitals, parks, events, and other locations
- ◆ Increasing healthy food options in vending machines

### **Family level changes include:**

- ◆ Establishing guides for snack foods and healthy eating
- ◆ Shopping at farmers' markets
- ◆ Eating at home at the table together

### **Individual changes include:**

- ◆ Choosing healthy foods whenever possible
- ◆ Learning more about cooking nutritious foods
- ◆ Giving nutritious foods as gifts



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