

# Proposed Changes to SNAP-Authorized Retailer Requirements and the Availability of Staple Foods in Small Stores Located in Low-Income Chicago Communities

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## Key Findings

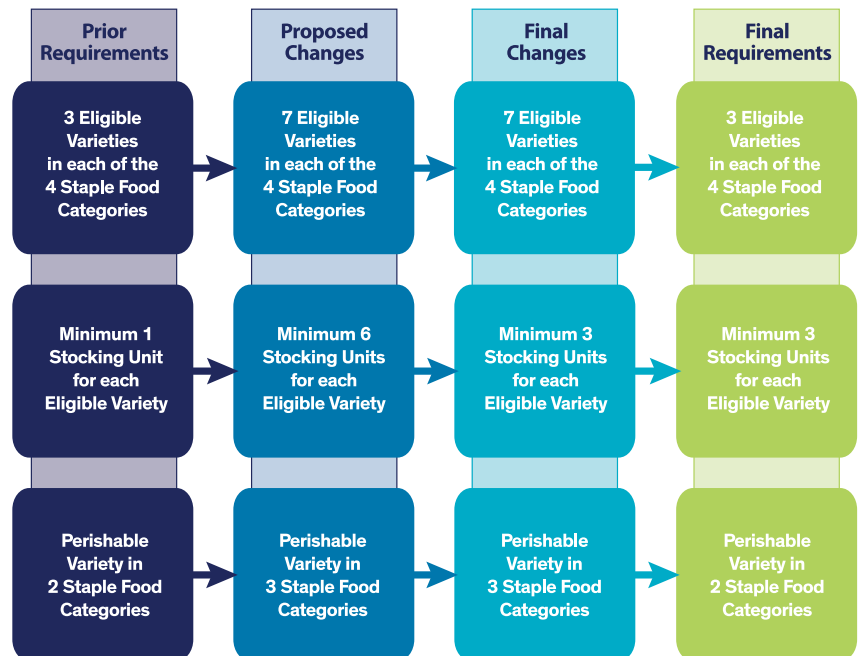
- Data were collected from 113 small food stores; 87.6% were authorized to accept SNAP benefits.
- 81.4% of small food stores met the prior SNAP-authorized retailer stocking requirements.
- 22.1% of small food stores met the proposed requirement of carrying at least seven varieties of eligible foods in all four of the USDA staple food categories.
- Seven varieties of eligible fruits and vegetables were found in 80.5% of small food stores.
- Seven varieties of eligible dairy were found in 23.0% of small food stores.
- Perishable varieties of fruits and vegetables were offered by 96.7% of small grocery stores and 59.0% of limited service stores.

In the United States, disparities in healthy food availability disproportionately impact low-income communities.<sup>1</sup> Low-income communities are less likely to have supermarkets present and more likely to have small food stores that offer a limited supply of healthy foods (e.g., convenience stores, liquor stores, dollar stores).<sup>1,2</sup>

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) requires that all food stores authorized to accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits stock a specific amount of food and beverage items in all four USDA staple food categories (fruits and beverages; meat, poultry and fish; bread and cereal; and, dairy). Despite these requirements, many small- to mid-size food retail stores who participate in the SNAP program carry a limited amount of healthy foods.<sup>3</sup>

In January 2016, the USDA released its proposal to change the SNAP-authorized retailer stocking requirements.<sup>4</sup> The guidelines specified in the proposal called for SNAP-authorized retailers to expand their offerings for staple foods and beverages.<sup>4</sup> The objective of this research study was to assess the extent to which small food stores located in 3 predominately low-income and African American communities in Chicago, IL (i.e., Austin, Englewood, North Lawndale) met the 2016 proposed changes to the SNAP-authorized retailer stocking requirements.

**FIGURE 1** An overview of the prior SNAP retailer stocking requirements, the proposed changes (published January 2016), the final changes (published December 2016), and the final requirements (enforced January 2018).



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## Prior Stocking Requirements:

### 3 Varieties per Category

- 81.4% of small food stores met the requirement of stocking at least 3 eligible varieties in each staple food category.
- All small grocery stores stocked at least 3 eligible varieties in each staple food category.
- 74.7% of limited service stores stocked at least 3 eligible varieties in each staple food category.
- While 100% of small grocery stores carried at least 3 varieties of dairy and fruits and vegetables, only 81.9% and 88.0% of limited service stores carried at least 3 varieties of these respective staple food categories.

## Prior Stocking Requirements: Perishable Variety in 2 Categories

- 94.6% of small food stores met the requirement of offering a perishable variety in at least 2 staple food categories.
- Perishable varieties of dairy, bread and cereal, and meat, poultry and fish were found at 95.6%, 94.7% and 94.6% of all stores, respectively.
- Only 69.0% of all stores carried a perishable variety of fruits and vegetables.
- While 96.7% of small grocery stores carried a perishable variety of fruits and vegetables, only 59.0% of limited service stores carried a perishable variety of fruits and vegetables.

FIGURE 2 Percentage of small food stores meeting the prior SNAP-authorized retailer requirement of stocking 3 varieties in each staple food category by store type, Chicago, IL, 2016.

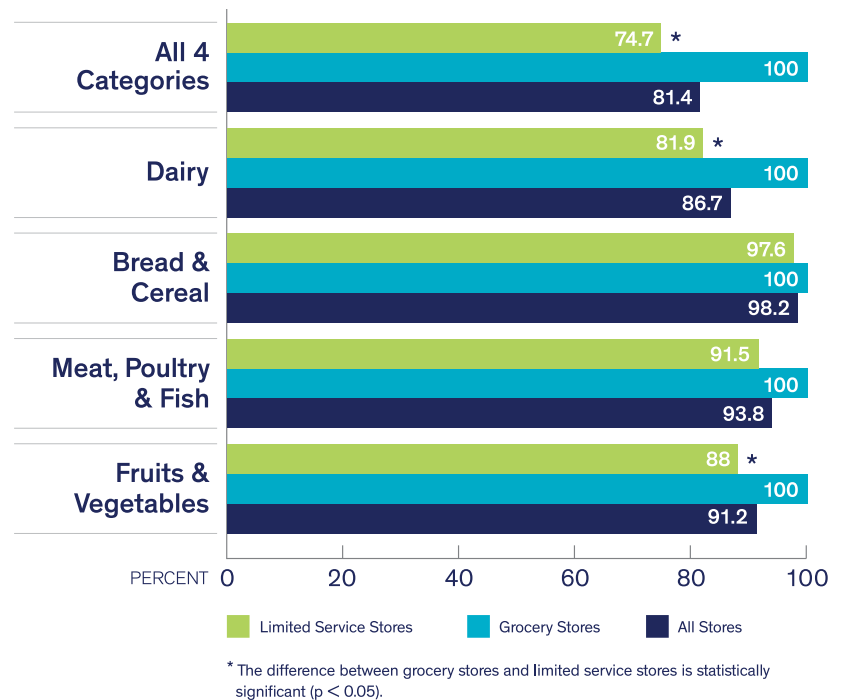
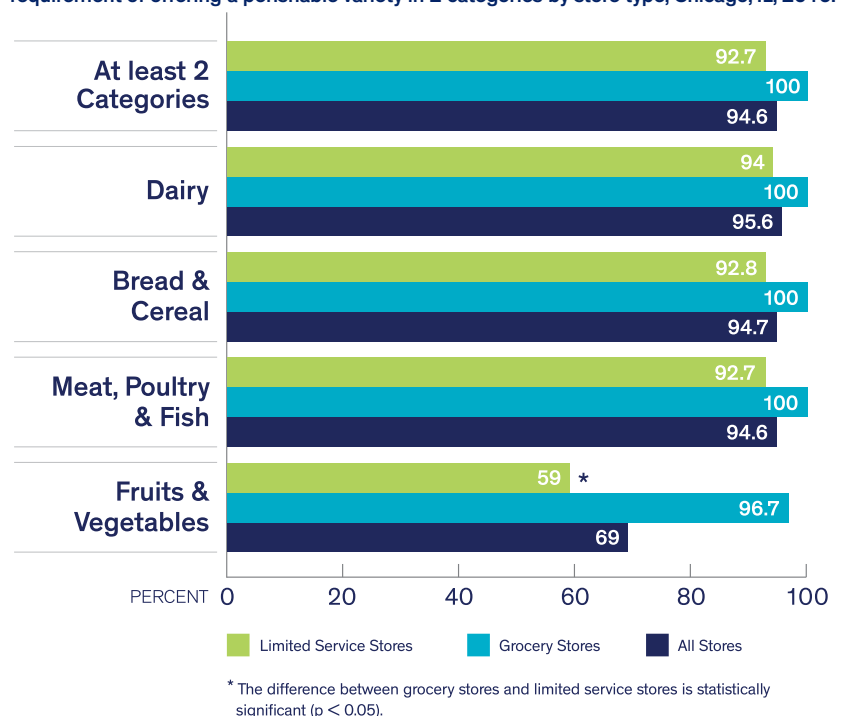


FIGURE 3 Percentage of small food stores meeting the prior SNAP-authorized retailer requirement of offering a perishable variety in 2 categories by store type, Chicago, IL, 2016.



## Proposed Stocking Requirements:

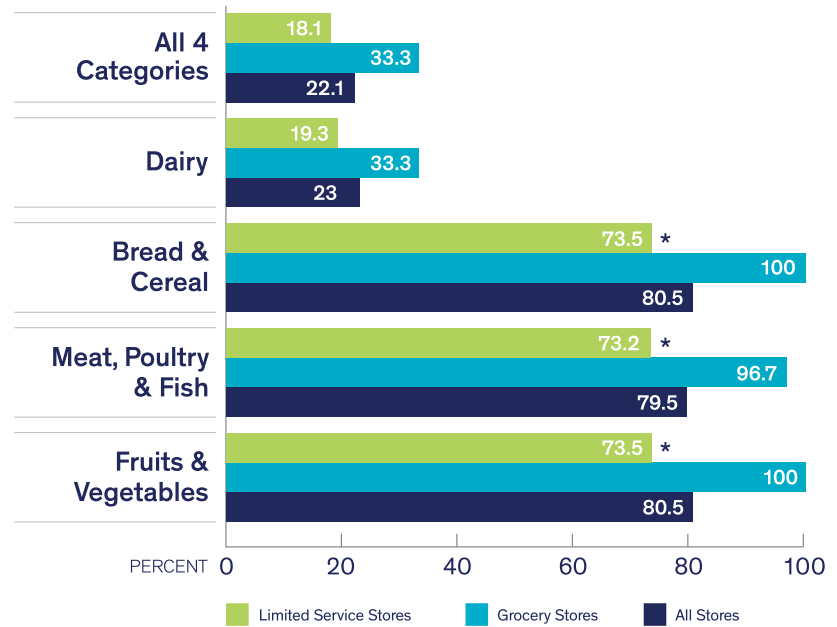
### 7 Varieties per Category

- 22.1% of all small food stores met the proposed requirement of stocking at least 7 eligible varieties in each staple food category.
- Only 23% of all stores offered at least 7 varieties of dairy, and such offerings were low in both grocery (33.0%) and limited service (19.3%) stores.
- The percentage of stores carrying at least 7 varieties significantly differed by store type for fruits and vegetables; meat, poultry, and fish; and bread and cereal.

## Proposed Stocking Requirements: Perishable Variety in 3 Categories

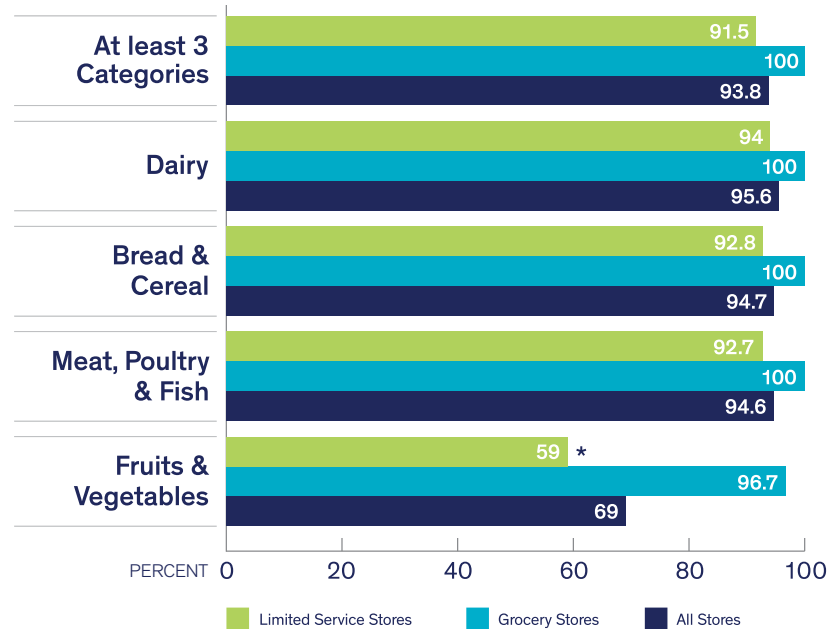
- 93.8% of small food stores met the proposed requirement of offering a perishable variety in at least 3 staple food categories.
- All small grocery stores and 91.5% of limited service stores carried a perishable variety in at least 3 categories.
- Limited service stores were significantly less likely than grocery stores to carry perishable fruits and vegetables (59.0% versus 96.7%).

**FIGURE 4** Percentage of small food stores meeting the proposed SNAP-authorized retailer requirement of stocking 7 varieties in each staple food category by store type, Chicago, IL, 2016.



\* The difference between grocery stores and limited service stores is statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ).

**FIGURE 5** Percentage of small food stores meeting the proposed SNAP-authorized retailer requirement of offering a perishable variety in 3 categories by store type, Chicago, IL, 2016.



\* The difference between grocery stores and limited service stores is statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ).

## Results Summary

Data were collected from 113 small food stores: 30 small grocery stores and 83 limited service stores. Approximately 85.5% of limited service stores were convenience stores and 14.5% were a liquor store, pharmacy, or dollar store. Overall, 81.4% of stores met the prior requirement of stocking at least 3 eligible varieties in each of the staple food categories. Only 22.1% of stores met the proposed requirement of carrying at least 7 eligible varieties in each of the staple food categories. Approximately 33.1% of small grocery stores and 19.3% of limited service stores carried at least 7 eligible varieties of dairy.

## Data and Methods

In August 2016, trained fieldworkers audited all small food stores found within a one-square mile area in three Chicago communities: Austin, North Lawndale, and Englewood. Each area lacked a supermarket at the time of data collection, had > 90% African American residents, and > 40% of residents below 130% of the federal poverty level. The Illinois Prevention Research Center NOPREN Food Store Observation Tool was used to assess store characteristics and availability of food and beverage items that counted toward the proposed changes in SNAP-authorized retailer requirements.<sup>5</sup> Prior SNAP-authorized retailer guidelines (under Criterion A) required food stores to carry 1) at least three varieties of food in each of the four USDA staple food categories (fruits and vegetables; meat, poultry, and fish; bread and cereals; and, dairy), and 2) a perishable variety in at least two categories.<sup>6</sup>

The 2016 proposed rule aimed to strengthen the eligibility criteria for SNAP-retailer authorization by increasing the minimum number of required staple food varieties from three to seven and the required number of categories with perishable varieties from two to three.<sup>4</sup> A “variety” is defined as a specific kind of product; for example, apples and bananas are considered different varieties of fruit. However, different types (e.g., Red Delicious versus Granny Smith) or preparations (e.g., apple sauce versus fresh apples) are considered as one variety. Fieldworkers counted varieties available (up to seven) for each staple food category in each food store. Perishable and non-perishable items were counted separately. Additional information collected included store type (small grocery vs. limited-service store) and SNAP-authorized retailer status. Two-sample t-tests for proportions were used to test differences in the percentage of stores meeting the requirements between grocery (i.e., those that sold fresh meat) and limited service (i.e., other stores) stores.

## Discussion

This study found that 77.9% of small stores included in this assessment would have needed to expand their staple food offerings to meet the 2016 proposed changes to the SNAP-authorized retailer stocking requirements. Results suggested that dairy would have needed the greatest expansion. These findings are consistent with the USDA Food and Nutrition Service assessment that 88.6% of small stores would not meet the new variety criteria with the greatest challenge for dairy.<sup>7</sup> Key limitations of this study are that it focused on one city and assessed staple food variety availability but not depth of stock. The final requirements (enforced in January 2018), requires that retailers carry at least three stocking units of three eligible varieties in each of the staple food categories and at least one perishable variety in two categories.<sup>8,9</sup> Results suggest that future changes aligned with the 2016 proposed changes to increase SNAP-retailer stocking requirements may generate increased store offerings in small food stores. Stronger retailer regulations for food assistance programs have the potential to increase staple food availability in small stores.<sup>10,11</sup> A multi-site study across urban and rural areas of the US would further inform on the potential increases in staple food availability that could be generated from increased stocking requirements.

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## SUGGESTED CITATION

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