

TRANSPORT FINDINGS

How do Unincorporated Communities get Groceries? Results from Interviews and Oral Histories in a Low-income Community in Dallas-Fort Worth

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Findings

Via interviews and oral histories, we examine food access in a low-income, unincorporated community in Dallas County, Texas. We find that car owners and non-owners patronized similar types of stores (primarily big-box stores) for groceries. While owners drove themselves more often than they carpooled as passengers, over 90% of residents used cars to buy food. Yet in-depth interviews and oral histories reveal that measuring transportation resources alone obscures the complexity of community access to food. Despite widespread auto use, many residents had only intermittent access to stores, and some relied on a local food pantry. Some residents also struggled to cook food as they lacked access to electricity and did not own refrigerators or stoves.

1. QUESTIONS

Many low-income neighborhoods lack full-service grocery stores, forcing residents to patronize smaller, high-cost stores and often experience food insecurity (Clifton 2004). Research suggests that automobile access can mitigate food insecurity for low-income travelers (Clifton 2004). Meanwhile, unincorporated areas are growing in the U.S., and low-income ones often face compounded accessibility challenges due to (1) spatial isolation from economic opportunities, (2) lack of municipal services, including public transit and utilities, and (3) poor quality road infrastructure (Bejleri et al. 2018).

Using the case study of an unincorporated community in Dallas-Fort Worth, we address three questions:

1. Does automobile ownership influence the types of food stores that unincorporated area residents access?
2. *How* do people with (and without) access to automobiles obtain food?
3. How do qualitative methods — oral histories and open-ended interview questions — deepen or complement findings from structured interview questions on automobile ownership and food access?

2. METHODS

We rely on interviews and oral histories with residents of an unincorporated community in Southeast Dallas County. This community, which we call Springville for privacy purposes, is a former Freedmen's town located about 20 miles from downtown Dallas. In 2025, 125 people lived in Springville. Virtually all respondents had low incomes, 39% were over age 65, and 67% were employed. Among workers, 79% were employed informally. Table A1 in the Supplemental Information file provides additional demographic information.

From 2021 to 2025, we conducted interviews with 75 people, asking about transportation and mobility, energy use, water access, and housing conditions (Reyes et al. 2026). We asked all respondents the same core questions; those without a car skipped only vehicle-specific questions (e.g., year, make, model). Interviews lasted 30 to 45 minutes. We also conducted follow-up oral histories with an additional 15 people. Oral histories center participants' own words, often surfacing perspectives underrepresented in traditional accounts and firsthand, place-based knowledge unavailable through written records (Thomas 2004; Thomson 2007). The oral histories we conducted were longer and less structured than the interviews.

We coded interview and oral history transcripts thematically, beginning with levels of automobile access, primary source of food, and mode of access to grocery stores; two researchers coded each question and discussed cases of disagreement. As we iteratively refined themes, we realized that transportation resources were only one factor that influenced food access for Springville residents. Individual names used below are pseudonyms.

3. FINDINGS

Findings from Interviews

While 89% of Dallas County residents had at least one vehicle available over the study period (U.S. Census Bureau 2024), only 57% of interview respondents owned working automobiles. The nearest store to Springville – a gas station – was 2.5 miles away.

We hypothesized that, due to the mobility cars offer, automobile owners would visit larger, lower-priced stores offering greater variety than corner and dollar stores (Leung and Li 2021). However, store type visited did not differ significantly by automobile ownership ($\chi^2 = 6.94$, $df = 4$, $p = .139$): most residents in both groups shopped primarily at big-box retailers or full-service grocery stores (81% combined). Full frequencies appear in Table A2 in the Supplemental Information file.

Table 1. Primary Travel Mode Used for Grocery Shopping Trips by Automobile Ownership Status

Mode of access to grocery store	Lacks working car	Has working car	Total
Drives alone	3 (9%)	33 (77%)	36 (48%)
Carpools	23 (72%)	10 (23%)	33 (44%)
Bicycles	4 (13%)	0 (0%)	4 (5%)
Walks	1 (3%)	0 (0%)	1 (1%)
Take public transit	1 (3%)	0 (0%)	1 (1%)
Total	32 (100%)	43 (100%)	75 (100%)
Pearson's chi-squared	35.27		
Degrees of freedom	4		
p	<.001		

Note. Cells include counts with percentages in parentheses.

[Table 1](#) shows the use of travel modes to reach groceries by automobile status: automobile owners usually drove alone to grocery stores, while non-owners carpooled (significant at $p < .001$). Regardless of ownership, over 90% of respondents used cars to get groceries; this agrees with previous findings on the relevance of car access even for non-owners in the U.S. (Blumenberg and Agrawal 2014; Paul 2024).

Qualitative Findings from Oral Histories and Open-Ended Questions

While [Table 1](#) shows associations between auto ownership and travel mode, oral histories and open-ended responses reveal that grocery store access was not always strictly related to transportation.

Intermittent Access: Though most residents patronized mainstream grocery stores, responses revealed that automobile access and Springville's relative isolation affected the *frequency* of access to food. For example, Lisa, a retiree, did not own a car and carpooled to stores. She explained, "I got people [in Springville] who can take me to the grocery store. Or I'll call my brother sometimes, not most of the time [...] I don't have a car." In response to questions about grocery stores, several respondents explicitly commented on the difficulty of regularly getting groceries, even with automobile access, due to Springville's isolation and the high costs of car travel.

Two additional oral histories highlighted limited healthy options near Springville: even residents who usually patronized full-service grocery stores also shopped at closer stores selling mostly frozen and processed foods.

Selective Access to Food Bank: Open-ended questions also revealed a food bank located in a Springville church that offered items like canned goods and dried lentils. While not the primary source of food for most residents (see Table A2 in Supplemental Information), the pantry was an important supplementary resource; we estimate that almost half of residents patronized it.

However, access was not universal. Juan Pablo, an undocumented immigrant from Latin America, mentioned that the church's pastor asked for his ID to verify legal status, which made him and some other residents avoid the pantry.

Compounding Energy Insecurity and Food Access: Energy insecurity in the informal community – a theme we have explored in previous scholarship (Reyes et al. 2025) – compounded the challenges of access to healthy and affordable food. Due to a lack of municipal electricity and natural gas, many people relied on generators. Some households lacked refrigerators, about a third used electric heaters for cooking, and over half primarily used hot plates to cook meals. Many households could not store perishable food or cook in bulk, which would have been more economical.

Our qualitative analysis details how a low-income, unincorporated community confronted unique spatial challenges, and that questions about primary grocery store use obscure the complexities of food access for impoverished communities. In Springville, informal strategies and uneven institutional access shaped outcomes as much as car ownership did.

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

Supplemental Information File

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