It is remarkable what is taken for granted or considered trifling by those of us who have a little money, but may be critical to the lives of poor people.

You may, for example, like the old-fashioned friendliness and personal attention of a mom-and-pop grocery, or the all-night hours of a convenience store.

But when it comes to cheaper prices and greater selection of fresh and healthy foods, we all know that a supermarket usually is the place to go. Unfortunately, a supermarket is a place where a lot of poor, inner-city Americans cannot go easily. And that's bad news for both the residents of those areas and taxpayers in general.

In the first national study of its kind, the University of Connecticut Nutritional Policy Center, together with the Public Voice for Food and Health, a nonprofit organization specializing in food issues, examined 6,000 supermarkets in 21 metropolitan areas across the United States. They found that the number of supermarkets per capita was 30 percent lower in the lowest-income ZIP codes.

In addition, supermarkets in the inner city have about 60 percent less floor space than those in wealthier neighborhoods. The number and size differences were even greater when the comparison was made between areas with the fewest and the most families on public assistance.

"The research confirms what most of us have long suspected: that there is an unacceptable grocery store gap in America," says University of Connecticut agricultural economist Ronald Cotterill, who headed the study.

In many cities, he noted, there are two food distribution systems: one for people who have access to suburban outlets and one for people who don't. The latter tend to be the elderly, families on public assistance and families with small children.

The lack of nearby supermarkets is compounded by the fact that poor inner-city residents often are not able to travel to areas with big markets. As a result, they must shop in small grocery and convenience stores where prices tend to be higher and the selection not as fresh and nutritious.

The grocery store gap causes "triple trouble" for low-income families, says Mark Epstein, president of Public Voice for Food and Health. It increases their food bills, causes their diets to suffer and can threaten the economic viability of their communities.

In addition, Epstein says, all Americans are affected indirectly because government food programs for the needy don't go as far as they could. He estimates that food stamps may lose $500 million to $1 billion a year in purchasing power because recipients don't have access to competitively priced foods. Yet politicians dwell mostly on losses through fraud.

This issue takes on added significance in the face of current efforts in Congress to cut back federal food programs for the poor.

Supermarkets began pulling out of the inner cities about 35 years ago, ostensibly because of an increase in violence and theft that boosted security costs and a decrease in affluent families that cut sales. But some cities in the study have bucked the trend, including Boston, Chicago, Cleveland and New Orleans.

Some of the cities with the biggest gaps in number or size of supermarkets were New York, Philadelphia, Minneapolis and Wichita, Kan.

In a society already divided by an income gap, a health care gap, an education gap and a housing gap, we hardly need a "grocery gap" to make life even tougher and more unfair for one segment of the population.

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