

How can we measure access to healthy foods and the impact that fresh food access has on low-income communities?

Goal

Governor Gina Raimondo has set a target of reducing food insecurity in Rhode Island from the current rate of 12 percent to below 10 percent by 2020. RIPL is measuring if low-income communities have equal access to fresh foods so that we can develop fact-based, successful policies to fight hunger.

Assessment

Traditional metrics of food access may not generate sufficiently reliable facts. Many measures use secondary data sources to infer food availability. Some look at store size, or group stores into broad categories (e.g., large grocery stores and small corner stores). This can be misleading, with “small stores” becoming a proxy for having little fresh food.

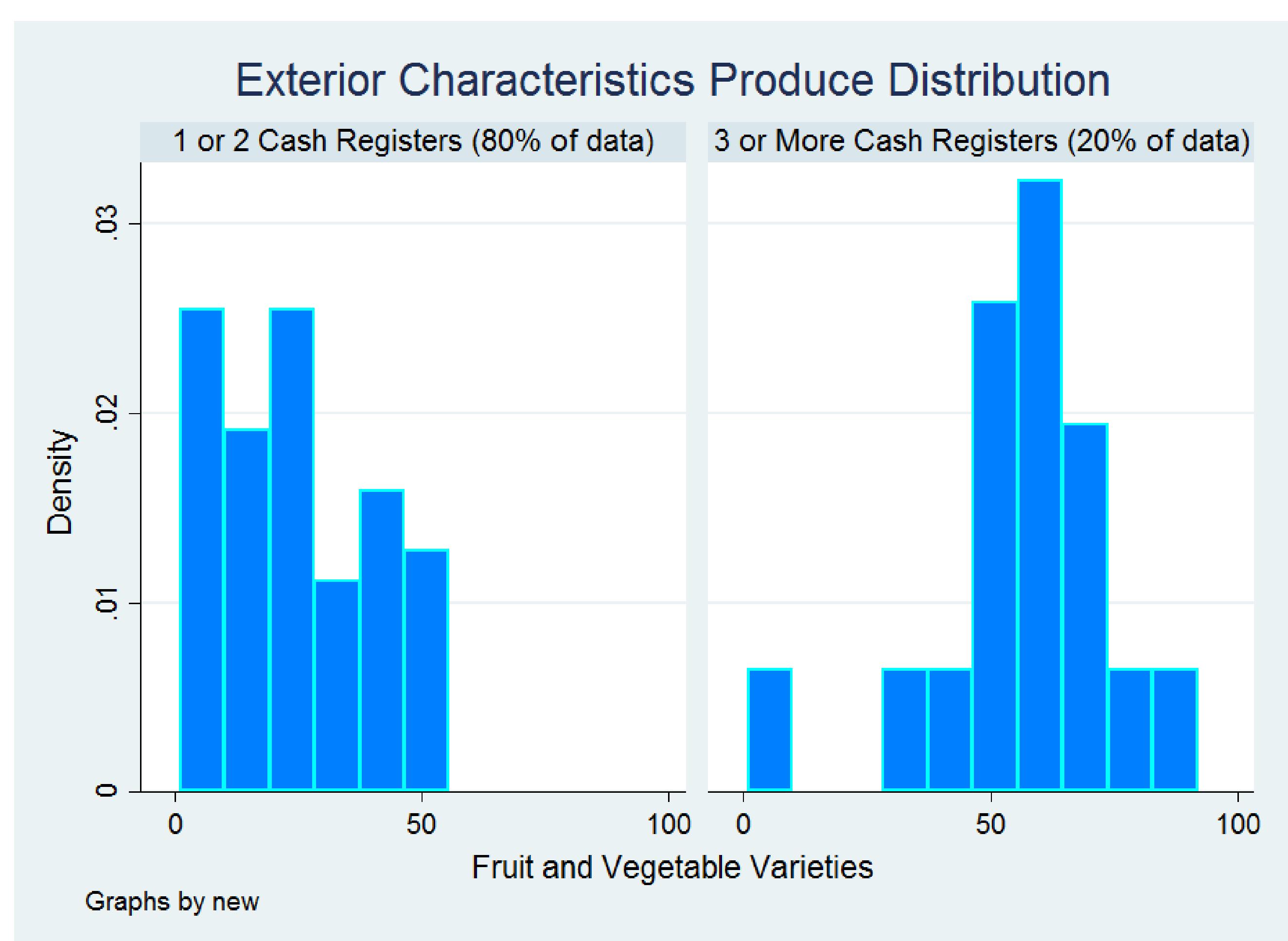


Figure 1: Store characteristics are not perfectly correlated with how much produce a store has available

Empirical Design

We set out the most accurate measure possible. To overcome reliance on secondary data, we surveyed every store in Rhode Island that accepts Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) payment. We conducted detailed in-store measurements, “ground-truthing” our measures with accurate, first-hand data on food accessibility.

We recorded total shelf space for produce, and created a standardized measure for the variety of produce, relative to shelf space, allowing comparisons across stores. This allows us to capture important fresh food sources at corner stores and bodegas. This adds important nuance to traditional measures that simply rely on total counts of fruits and vegetables and which therefore favor, large, full-scale grocery store presence.

Results

RIPL's preliminary results show that, contrary to expectations and perceptions, smaller stores also carry large amounts of fresh food, on a per square-foot basis. As expected, large, full-scale grocery stores carry the most produce overall. Rhode Island corner stores and bodegas provide, within walking distance, many urban families and individuals access to produce.

Smaller stores often offer types of produce not found in large grocery chains, leading to a diverse network of fresh food offerings. These data suggest that access in urban areas, at least in Rhode Island, may be more widespread than previously believed.

Conclusion

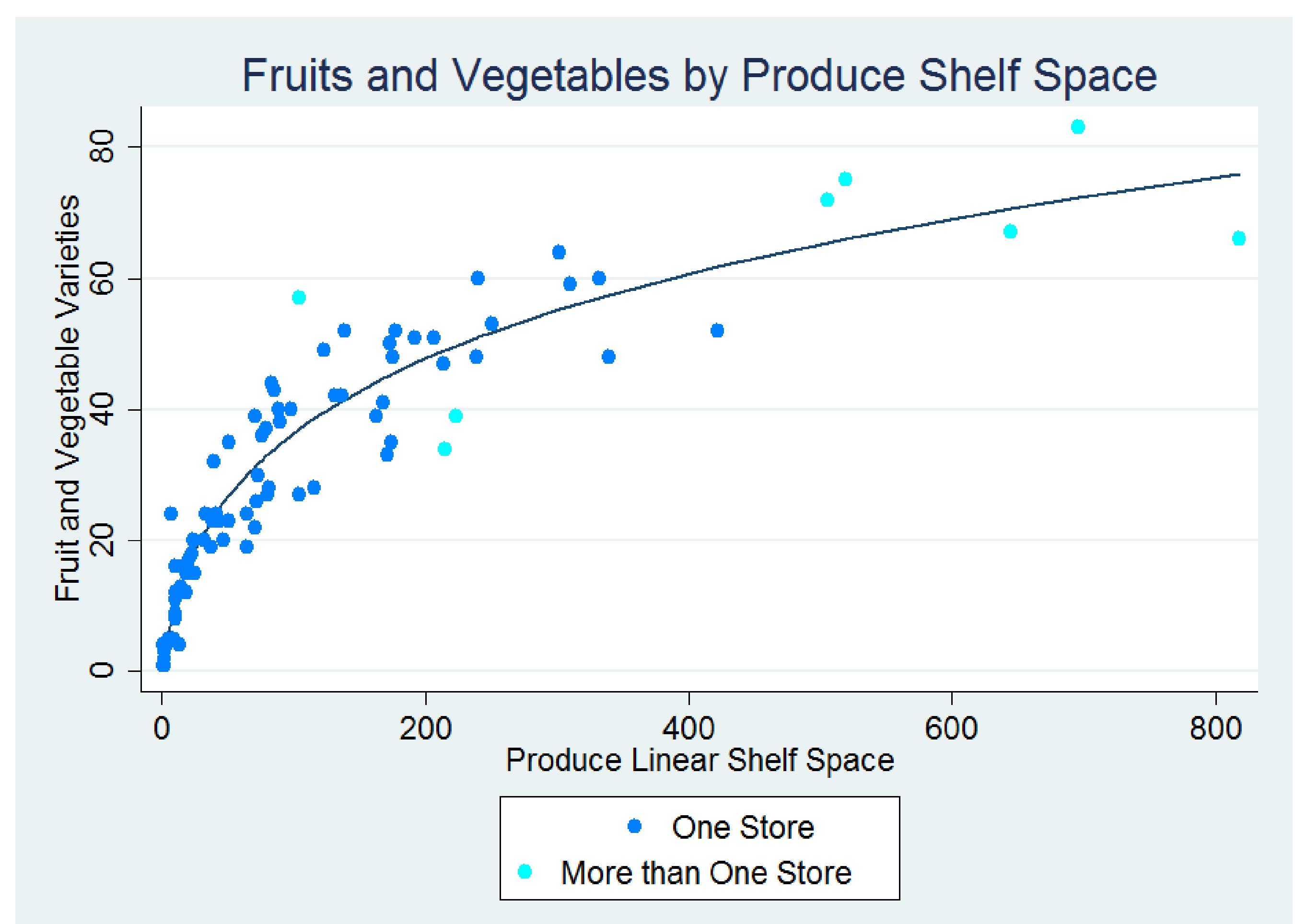


Figure 2: Stores add produce quickly at first, and then slow down. Small stores have higher proportions of produce in relation to the dedicated space than do large, full-scale grocery stores.

RIPL has gathered on-the-ground data to create a unique and granular map of food access in Rhode Island to help policymakers as they develop policies to ensure all Rhode Islanders have access to healthy food.

By understanding how and where individuals and families access food, RIPL provides valuable information to policymakers and industry experts to move towards a healthier state and nation.