

## What is a Book Desert?

Bright Star Books, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization working to increase book ownership and access among limited-resource children, primarily in the Northeast Ohio region. We believe the reasons a lack of book ownership exists among the families we serve are complex, the result of a myriad of factors.

While individual household purchasing decisions and attitudes towards reading certainly are a factor, Bright Star Books adopts a structural perspective (and, thus, solution) to book ownership and access – one that considers the broader economic, social, cultural, and political factors impacting the presence of books in a community, as well as in individual households.

**We adopt the term “book desert” in discussing the importance of and motivation for our work.**

Many may be familiar with the term “food desert,” which has become popular in recent years, used to refer to geographic areas that lack access to high-quality, affordable, nutritious foods. Mapping food deserts provides one way for community advocates, non-profits, public health workers and policy makers to discuss the importance of access to high-quality foods (like fresh fruits and vegetables) to the health and well-being of community members.

Similar in reasoning, Bright Star Books uses the term “book desert” to refer to communities where books – in our case, children’s books – are lacking. Specifically, we define a book desert as:

**Book Desert /noun/ – a geographic area that lacks *consistent* access to *high-quality, affordable, print children’s books*.**

This definition is broad, and begs further examination; you may be wondering:

**1. What does “high-quality” children’s literature look like?**

The use of the term “high-quality” in our definition of a book desert acknowledges the varying quality of children’s books and attempts to begin to differentiate between any given print source for children (e.g. activity/sticker books, coloring books, dollar-isle board books with little content) and higher-quality stories that teach children skills critical to emergent literacy. The highest quality books include those that focus on repetition of sound, rhyming, numeric or alphabet recognition, or phonetic awareness. These are often the types of books found in the largest retailers of books, and often at the highest-cost.

**2. What does an “affordable” children’s book cost?**

The use of the word “affordable” in our definition of a book desert acknowledges that for many – even those in the middle class – the cost of high-quality print children’s books prohibits families from establishing a diverse and robust collection of books to promote emergent literacy skills. We want to highlight through our definition of a book desert that simply the availability of high-quality children’s books is not enough if families cannot afford to purchase them.

**3. What does “consistent access” mean”?**

The use of the word “consistent” in our definition of a book desert acknowledges that access to high-quality, affordable books must be a stable part of the community. In many low-income areas, books can be found in discount or dollar stores, thrift shops, and in corner stores; yet the quality of these books is often low, and selection of titles varies widely as stock rotates. Therefore, we do not consider these retail stores as dependable sources of high-quality children’s books.

**4. Why do you consider only print materials? What about e-books and books available in other formats?**

Research on the impact electronic books (or e-books) to literacy development is promising, with more research being conducted every year. However, the best long-term data and the most conclusive research indicates that it is print books – specifically a library collection of at least 50 different titles – that remains the best predictor of reading fluency and academic success for children. Additionally, many limited-resource families lack consistent access to technology – to computers, smart phones, e-book readers, tablets and adequate wireless service – to fully utilize electronic media. As for consumer purchasing, a wide variety of children’s titles are readily available for purchase online, often cheaper than in many retail stores; however, limited-resource families may have difficulty in purchasing books in this way, including those without a credit card, those who are highly mobile, those who lack a permanent mailing address, those with limited English proficiency, or those with limited technological literacy. Therefore, at this juncture, we consider physical access to print resources to be the best indicator of availability upon which to base a definition of a book desert.

**5. What about libraries?**

The public library system in our county is strong, and fills a much needed void in ensuring high-quality children’s books are available to community members. This availability, no doubt, serves as a mitigating factor in many areas with limited access to books, providing access to many individuals who otherwise would be lacking. There are many individuals, however, that face significant barriers in fully utilizing library services, and low-income areas in the county without libraries nearby remain. We believe, therefore, that access to books for ownership continues to play a critical role in creating a culture of literacy in the home.