

# Combating Food Deserts: Assessing the Consequences of Healthy Food Retailers in Low-Income Neighborhoods

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The Healthy Food Financing Initiative introduces healthy food retailers in “food deserts”. Despite the multi-million federal investment in this initiative, today we see little to no improvement in access of healthy foods in these areas. While some scholars champion the ingenuity of this initiative, others argue that this initiative may bring more economic and racial disparities in healthy food access. Scholars and policy makers need to reevaluate their federal investment and explore a more locally-based alternative solution to make the basic necessity of healthy food available to all.

An issue that has often been raised in several fields of study such as food justice, public health and nutrition, and health geography is the issue of “food deserts”. Food deserts are low-income neighborhoods whose residents lack access to healthy foods because of the absence of or the distance from a grocery store or supermarket (Block and Subramanian 2). This issue has caused many low-income community members to resort to either buying groceries priced higher at convenience stores or instead buying unhealthy food at those stores (Giang 473). In an effort to combat this issue, non-profit organizations such as The Food Trust have partnered with the U.S. government to finance programs such as the Fresh Food Financing Initiative (FFFI) and the national Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI). These initiatives introduce various forms of healthy food retailers, but this paper will focus mainly on the introduction of “healthy” grocery stores (Giang 478). Some scholars, such as Tracey Giang, claim that introducing healthy grocery stores helps address the food desert problem, bringing economic benefits and improving the low-

income population’s health (473). However, scholars such as Isabelle Anguelovski and Steven Cummins conducted research that shows several drawbacks to this approach, such as an unchanged lack of access to healthy foods due to the unaffordability of these healthy foods, as well as social stratification through the displacement of the low-income minorities (Cummins 283) (Anguelovski 1209).

These drawbacks are concerning because while it appears as if the government has addressed the issue of food deserts, it has failed to address the economic and racial aspects of the issue. In effect, the government has wasted millions of dollars of federal funding on mostly ineffective initiatives, leaving low-income neighborhoods with not much improvement in access to healthy foods. While developing healthy grocery stores in neighborhoods that otherwise lack it can address food deserts to some extent, ultimately the drawbacks of this approach outweigh the benefits. In place of this single-aspect approach, I suggest reallocating federal funds from large, healthy grocery stores to pre-existing small, full-service grocery stores

so that they may more adequately supply healthy foods to local low-income communities. This would address not only the geographic barriers but also socio-economic barriers that currently prevent access to healthy, affordable food in food deserts.

How were food deserts formed in the first place? While there are various theories and factors contributing to the start of food deserts, the principal theory is that a large factor was the decline in the inner cities' population as people moved to the suburbs in the 1960s and 1970s (Giang et al. 272). In response to the demographic change, large numbers of supermarkets moved to the more attractive market, the suburbs (272). The suburbs generally had proficient land for development, as well as overall similarity in consumer choices due to the more homogeneous population (272). This resulted in food deserts, specifically, the "grocery gap" (the lack of grocery stores) in these low-income neighborhoods compared to other neighborhoods (272). Non-profit organizations, such as The Food Trust, attempted to address this issue through an advocacy campaign that increased awareness about "grocery gaps" and implemented policy change (272). As a result, the Pennsylvania FFFI was implemented in 2004 (272). It was the first statewide public and private financing initiative of supermarket development in low-income neighborhoods where the "grocery gap" existed (272). The success of the Pennsylvania FFFI caused other states, and eventually the U.S. government, to follow suit in policy changes. They too decided to implement the development of supermarkets in low-income neighborhoods by creating the HFFI through a joint partnership between three U.S. departments: Treasury Department, Agriculture Department, and Health and Human Services (U.S. Treasury Department, USDA, and HHS).

Using the success of the Pennsylvania FFFI and other initiatives modeled after it as an example, Giang and other scholars assert that these initiatives increase supermarket access for individuals in low-income neighborhoods, assuring that it improves health (Giang 473). The Food Trust first set out in 1999 to attain city-wide health data, gathering data on supermarket sales, demographics, diet-related mortality rates, and income (Giang 274). In this report, the organization found disparities in access

to food all over Philadelphia (274). After making an advocacy campaign, they managed to bring about the implementations of the financing initiatives (274). But the Food Trust was not alone in their food desert research. In another study, researchers such as Erin Caldwell et al conducted health-intervention programs, measuring results through consumer surveys and supermarket assessments in Colorado (Caldwell et al. 1743). This study showed that "greater perceived access to fruits and vegetables was significantly associated with higher increases in fruit and vegetable consumption from programme start to programme end" (1743). Caldwell and other scholars also claimed that increasing supermarket access is correlated with improved diet, therefore improving the health of the residents living there.

However, while the access to supermarkets may have increased, scholars question whether or not it notably improves health in these designated food desert neighborhoods. The introduction of supermarket chain stores instead creates "food mirages" (Breyer and Voss-Andreae 131). Low-income residents are left still wanting in access to healthy foods because of their inability to afford the produce provided at these newly opened supermarkets (131). While there may be a perceived access to healthy foods, low-income residents do not actually have improved access since the prices are still unaffordable (Myers and Caruso 41). Previous studies conducted by Giang, Caldwell, and the other scholars were valuable in determining the need for low-income populations to have access to healthy foods. Ultimately, however, the policies they support and suggest do not fully consider the complexities of the food desert issue, which prompts for further research. More recent research has shown that the improvement in diet and health is not always correlated with supermarket access. In 2014, research fellow Benjamin Chrisinger conducted a study on a supermarket opened through the Pennsylvania FFFI (Chrisinger 425). Through consumer surveys and interview studies, he found that the supermarket development projects supported through the initiative did not impact weight changes in the consumers or improved diet (Chrisinger 425). Other scholars seeking to evaluate such initiatives conducted similar studies and also found no change in healthy food

intake or BMI in relation to increased supermarket access (Cummins et al. 283, 284) (Block and Subramanian 3). In light of these studies, a drawback of these initiatives is that it is not guaranteed that supermarket access leads to improvement in diet or overall health.

In spite of these studies, the Pennsylvania FFFI and other similar initiatives are still supported. Giang and other scholars claim that not only does increasing supermarket access improve the overall health of the low-income population, but also brings economic benefit, such as job opportunities, for those in the low-income communities. Unfortunately, there has been a lack of recent research on the economic benefits of supermarkets in these low-income communities. Older research such as Kameshwari Pothukuchi's study, in which she surveyed and interviewed urban and economic development planners, suggests that the absence of supermarkets results in fewer business opportunities and job openings (Pothukuchi 232). She implies that supermarkets bring economic benefits for residents and asserts that grocery stores introduced into these low-income neighborhoods receive consumer trust and considerable business (240). Various press releases have claimed that "a strong economic anchor" is created through supermarket development, and that grocery stores "create tens of thousands of jobs" (City of Chicago: Office of the Mayor) (White House: Office of the First Lady). The USDA also reported to Congress that "introduction of a supermarket...creates jobs and helps to keep money in the community" (107).

While Pothukuchi's research and the claims of the government seem logical, various studies show that those that have benefitted the most economically from supermarket developments are not the people living in these food deserts. Supermarket developments may bring about job opportunities, but they have also triggered an inflation of property prices, leading to the displacement of the lower-income minorities that can no longer afford to live there (Anguelovski 1211, 1212) (Breyer and Voss-Andreae 136). According to gentrification studies by Noah Quastel and Derek Hyra (qtd. in Breyer and Voss-Andreae), facilities that have resulted from gentrification, such as higher-end grocery stores,

have catered to the influx of middle-class residents, not only in Portland but various other cities (136). This was demonstrated in Betsy Breyer and Adriana Voss-Andreae's study on food mirages in Portland (131). Through data analysis and surveys of produce prices varying across markets, they found that food mirages were "at their most extreme" in certain parts of Portland and that low-income residents were moving out of their neighborhoods to more affordable housing elsewhere (Breyer and Voss-Andreae 136). In 2011 through 2014, another scholar, Anguelovski, conducted a case study in Jamaica Plains, Boston, which was deemed a food desert (1215). Her case covered the conflict of a new Whole Foods store that replaced Hi-Lo, a thriving local supermarket and neighborhood landmark for years (1215). In her study, she gathered data on business trends, changes in property and population, and regularly made neighborhood trips for observations and interviews (1215). She found that in the process of ecological gentrification, or urban redevelopment of these food desert neighborhoods, an influx of middle-class residents displaces low-income or minority group residents (1211, 1212). Anguelovski argues that ecological gentrification in the form of healthy supermarket chain stores also results in a gradual whitewashing of communities that were originally racially diverse with minority groups and low-income residents being increasingly marginalized (1212, 1213). The whitewashing was not immediately apparent but gradually resulted from the "Whole Foods Effect" (1221, 1222). Property prices inflated from anywhere between a few percent to 20 percent when a Whole Foods store opened in a neighborhood (1221, 1222). After the Whole Foods store opened in Jamaica Plains in 2011, displacement of the racially diverse, lower-income residents occurred due to "accelerated condoization of triple-decker houses, reduced availability of rental units (especially the few remaining affordable ones) and higher house prices" (1222). Similar gentrification effects occurred not just at the Whole Foods located in Jamaica Plains, but also in Whole Foods stores opened in other locations such as Ottawa and Brooklyn (1222). Furthermore, 50 workers of Hi-Lo, the thriving Latino market, were laid off when Hi-Lo was closed down and replaced with Whole Foods (1217). Thus, theoretically, while

these initiatives are meant to improve the health of the low-income population, and specifically minority groups, in practice they end up whitewashing these racially diverse neighborhoods while displacing the low-income population, often minority groups.

Since these initiatives may not be the best at fully addressing the issue of food deserts, I propose that the government should allocate HFFI funds from larger grocery stores to pre-existing small, full-service grocery stores (which are also included in the stated purpose of the HFFI) so that they can continue offering produce at affordable prices.<sup>1</sup> A study by Julie Guthman and other scholars demonstrates that investing in small grocery stores does not result in as many consequences as building large supermarkets (Guthman, Short and Raskin 354). The research for their study was focused on three San Francisco Bay Area neighborhoods: The Mission, Bayview, and Central East Oakland (Guthman, Short and Raskin 355). The research was measured through produce price (by basket) analysis across various small grocery stores within these neighborhoods, as well as observations and interviews conducted on site (354). In this study, they found that produce prices were “relatively affordable” and were “considerably lower than those at nearby chain stores”; moreover, foods sufficient for a healthy diet were also offered (358, 359). Many of the CEOs of these small grocery stores were willing to stock produce, acknowledging that although they might not profit much from it, they did it because “the neighborhood needs it” (361). Their willingness to provide healthy foods helped these small grocery stores “build a loyal customer base that knows they can patronize their store for all their grocery needs” (361). Furthermore, these small grocery stores also seemed “especially well[-] suited to serving the needs of immigrant shoppers” because culturally acceptable foods were sold at a lower price in comparison to larger grocery stores (359). However, this study realizes that although produce offered at these small grocery stores were deemed “relatively affordable” in comparison to other stores, it does not mean that all people of low-income neighborhoods would be able to afford it

(Guthman, Short and Raskin 362). It should also be acknowledged that this case study may not reflect the effectiveness of this solution on a large-scale basis but may be a solution that shows promise. Funding small grocery stores such as these requires less funds, and also keeps the business among the locals, therefore “strengthening the local economy” (Barber and Weingaertner 1668).

In summary, the U.S. government and non-profit food justice organizations have made efforts to combat the food desert issue by financing initiatives that introduce supermarkets to these food deserts. However, low-income residents living in those food deserts have suffered more consequences than they have benefits. The Pennsylvania FFFI and various others like it have created food mirages, leaving low-income residents with minimal to no improvement in access to healthy foods or overall health. Additionally, the influx of the middle-class population into these low-income neighborhoods has displaced the low-income residents who are unable to afford living there due to the inflation of property prices. While the proposed solution of investment and funding in small, full-service grocery stores is one that can be further researched, it is a promising solution to consider.

Another potential solution that should be further researched is the opening of resident-run (or family-run) grocery stores within food deserts. This would not only economically strengthen the low-income residents living there, but also give them opportunities to offer healthy produce, as they would best know the needs of the community they have lived in for so long. With so many low-income populations in want of access to healthy food, it is imperative that we actively seek to find solutions. There may be no easy solution to the issue of food deserts, but that should not stop us from actively seeking to make the basic necessity of healthy food available to all.

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<sup>1</sup> As stated in the Treasury Department’s press release, the purpose of the HFFI is to “promote a range of interventions that expand access to nutritious foods, including developing and equipping grocery stores and other small businesses and retailers selling healthy food in [food deserts]” (U.S. Treasury Department, USDA, and HHS).

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