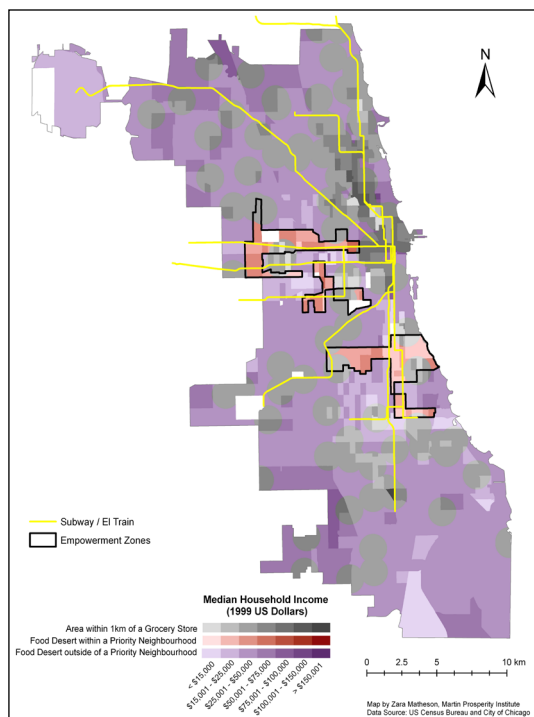


Food Deserts, Enterprise Communities and Empowerment Zones in Chicago

The past decade has seen growing concern regarding the state of food security and nutrition in many North American communities. Food security refers to the availability of food in an area and an individual's access to it. While the benefits of a healthy diet on an individual's quality of life and general health are becoming widely recognized, basic access to quality and affordable food remains a challenge for a growing number of communities. Neighbourhoods that do not have access to good quality and affordable food are labeled as "Food Deserts".ⁱ These neighbourhoods are often considered to be socially-distressed, characterized by low average household incomes. If policy makers wish to improve the health, productivity and general prosperity of communities within their jurisdictions, addressing the existence of food deserts is an important first step forward.

Exhibit 1: Food Deserts in Chicago



In Chicago, food deserts have become a prominent feature of the city's "first suburbs", Enterprise Communities and Empowerment Zones. The first suburbs of Chicago are those areas of the city that fall between the old City of Chicago and the outer most communities. The first suburbs are the direct result of more than two decades of gentrification within the inner-city and continuing urban sprawl. While the first suburbs were once home to middle class communities, comfortable with their sense of opportunity and rising prosperity, today they are characterized by diverse ethnic and racial populations experiencing declining incomes and diminishing optimism for their future.ⁱⁱ The initial communities living in these suburbs also had access to a personal vehicle and as a result the neighbourhoods were designed with little need for nearby commercial development in mind. Today, the residents who live in these communities depend primarily on public transit or walking to access grocery stores and healthy food.

The map in Exhibit 1 demonstrates the existence of food deserts in Chicago and their location relative to the city's Enterprise Communities and Empowerment Zones (outlined in black) and subway/el lines (yellow). The grey shaded areas on the map in exhibit 1 represent the parts of Chicago that are within 1km, considered to be a reasonable walking distance, of a major grocery store.ⁱⁱⁱ Approximately 45% of Chicago's population lives within these grey shaded areas. Shades of purple and pink represent the areas of the city that do not fall within 1km of a major grocery store. These areas of the city are considered food deserts.

The distinction between purple and pink highlights the existence of food deserts within the Enterprise Communities and Empowerment Zones (pink) because it is these communities that often have fewer resources for accessing healthy food outside of their own neighbourhood. This data is overlaid on income data by census tract. The darker shading of all colours indicates a higher median household income while the lighter shades are areas with lower median incomes. It is important to notice the lack of grocery stores in many of the lowest income census tracts that do not fall within the designated priority neighborhoods.

For residents who live in Chicago's first suburbs, Enterprise Communities and Empowerment Zones, access to good quality and affordable food is a growing challenge. Today, many grocery stores are located either next to new commercial developments in the inner city or alongside large, retail developments in the outer suburbs. The locations of new grocery stores are often a considerable distance away from those who live in these first suburbs, Enterprise Communities and Empowerment Zones, making them difficult, time consuming and costly to access without a car. The importance of nearby grocery stores is that they provide access to healthy foods including fresh fruits and vegetables, meats, dairy and bread, all considered integral to a healthy diet. As Exhibit 1 shows, while some neighbourhoods do have a grocery store located within their boundaries, for many neighbourhoods, grocery stores are located at the fringe of the community, leaving the majority of their residents outside the catchment area of the store. Lacking easy access to good quality food, those living in many inner suburbs are served instead by an army of corner, convenience and fast food outlets that offer an assortment of unhealthy foods high in fats, sugars and salts.

Chicago, however, is not alone in its struggle to improve access to healthy food options and eliminate the existence of food deserts. Cities of all sizes across North America face similar challenges to those in Chicago. For example, the city of Toronto also struggles to eliminate the existence of food deserts throughout its communities (See Insight: Food Deserts and Priority Neighbourhoods in Toronto). One of the most striking differences between Chicago and Toronto is that Toronto's Empowerment Zones and Enterprise Communities (known as Priority Neighbourhoods) are far more dispersed across the city. In addition to this, Toronto's Priority Neighbourhoods are not as well served by subway lines as they are in Chicago. However, despite the fact that Toronto's Priority Neighbourhoods are far more dispersed throughout the city, 51% of Toronto's population resides within 1km of a grocery store.

Chicago appears to have a long way to go in improving access to grocery stores and healthy food throughout its Enterprise Communities, Empowerment Zones and lower-income neighbourhoods. While there is a growing body of work examining local issues concerning food in Chicago, mostly from community interest groups, the City of Chicago has not yet developed a comprehensive plan to address the existence food deserts and improve neighbourhood access to affordable and quality food. Steps the City of Chicago has taken include the grocery-anchored retail loan program that provides developers financial capital with favourable conditions to build mixed use developments that include grocery stores in identified food deserts in the city.^{iv} The loans made by the city also have the potential for partial debt forgiveness. Previous research has found that a person's health impacts their productivity and wages received. Improving the health of the citizens within a community through addressing issues of access to healthy food options, particularly where low-income neighbourhoods overlap with food deserts, provides an opportunity to advance productivity and prosperity. Establishing a stronger food system in cities across North America, such as Chicago, will help improve the productivity and prosperity of the local economy.

Sources:

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