

Author: Lisa Jeanine Soto

Where's the Food? Welcome To the Desert

Does ravioli come from a can? What about chicken noodle soup, or beef stew? No, it definitely does not. Well, imagine a town where access to healthy fresh foods is either limited, too expensive, or nonexistent. This description is not of a third world country. In fact, it's a brief description of many urban and rural areas in the United States—called “food deserts”. This may not be a familiar term but unfortunately, many people in urban and rural areas do not have access to fresh, homemade or organic foods. This may be an explanation as to why there is a higher rate of obesity and other ailments among individuals with lower incomes as opposed to individuals with higher incomes. For example, stores such as Bottom Dollar, Save-A-Lot, Dollar General, and Aldi's usually exist in low-income areas. With that in mind, only cheap unhealthy foods produced with additives, and preservatives are made available for local residents and their families. Furthermore, Bottom Dollar, Save-A-Lot, and Aldi stores carry a small variety of produce; however, most of the produce that they carry is genetically modified (non-organic) which is also unhealthy. Unless access to healthy, organic food improves, residents with low incomes will continue to have a higher rate of obesity which will lead to premature illness and or death.

Is it possible for low-income families living in a “food desert” to have access to healthy foods? Absolutely; as a matter of fact, community leaders can initiate an educational campaign to benefit those who live in or near these areas. For example, an educational campaign can be

structured to inform residents of the significance of eating a healthy variety of foods as well as offer guidance on selecting affordable yet healthy foods while on a budget. Think about this, while driving through certain towns of New Jersey, it is easy to see the differences between stores. For instance, the geographic area of Sicklerville, Pleasantville, Camden, and Willingboro has over 10 convenient stores such as: Pantry, E-Z Stop, BaBa's, 7-Eleven, Heritage, One-Stop-Shop, and also pharmacies and gas stations that carry heavily processed groceries. With this in mind, remember that the nearest supermarket is miles away from these particular areas. Unfortunately, it is easy to become influenced by surroundings which can ultimately trigger a pattern of unhealthy eating habits.

On the other hand, the geographic area of Cherry Hill, Marlton, Voorhees, and Mount Laurel provides healthy alternative shopping for the local residents. For example, stores such as: Whole Foods, Wegman's, Genuardi's, Zagaras, and Trader Joe's are food chains specifically delegated with an extraordinary selection of fresh organic fruits and vegetables. Let alone, these food chains demand that their shelf and prepared foods are clearly labeled for the benefit and satisfaction of their customers. Furthermore, these stores offer the highest quality of whole grains, organic lean meats, and organic fresh dairy produce. What is the reasoning behind the development of convenience stores, and fast food restaurants in geographically low-income areas? Could it be that some businesses may not want to build in certain neighborhoods? If this is the case, what does all of this mean economically?

Not to mention, several supermarkets that once operated in low-income areas, has seized business and eventually closed down. Certainly, this is a disadvantage and devastating life change for the people of these communities. In an article entitled, "When South Jersey

supermarkets close; they may leave 'food deserts' behind,” authors Tom Barlas and Wallace McKelvey states, “The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines “food deserts” as a community in which 33 percent of the population lives one mile or more from a supermarket and has a poverty rate of 20 percent or higher, or has a median family income at or below 80 percent of the surrounding areas.” This is a definite economic hardship for the residents because this means traveling in order to have access to healthy foods, but consider the current high prices of fuel. Technically, this situation is a “double whammy” for the affected communities. Barlas and McKelvey further justify the ramifications of this serious situation by interviewing a 36 year old resident named Amber Townshend of Pleasantville New Jersey. Townshend must walk home every week with armloads of groceries from the Pathmark of Egg Harbor Township. However, the supermarket is expected to close, therefore she will need to walk even farther or spend money for public transportation. Townshend states, “When they close the doors, what options do I have?” she also replied, “I can’t buy groceries at the gas station.” The “food deserts” across the United States obviously has negative impacts on communities.

In an article entitled, “Camden council advances supermarket plan,” author Julia Terruso explains that the Camden Council is moving forward with plans to build a ShopRite supermarket in Camden New Jersey which will not likely open until 2015. However, this is still a positive step toward bringing Camden back to life. Terruso discuss a conversation she had with a resident of East Camden named Tom Rapacki. He states, “A ShopRite would be positive as long as the 250 jobs associated with the store goes to Camden residents.” Actually, not only would a ShopRite store bring employment, but it will also provide access to healthier food choices which will be an advantage for a healthier community. In an article entitled, “The Fight Over Food

Deserts: Corporate America Smacks Its Way Down,” author Eric Holt-Gimenez explains that poverty in the United States stems from unemployment and poor wages. The solution to food security in America must come through a revitalized food economy—one that pays workers a living wage, that includes worker and minority owned businesses, and that keeps food dollars in local communities (Gimenez 618.) Here is a question that may be asked? What if increasing access to food in underserved areas is not enough to transform the diet and health of individuals living in “food deserts”? Quite frankly, this is easy to answer. Educational campaigns in these communities would be the perfect solution.

As previously asked, does ravioli come from a can? What about chicken noodle soup, or beef stew? Of course not; so please consider the effects that a lack of access to fresh, nutritionally balanced food can have on health as well as the economy. This is an issue that must be taken very seriously; therefore I am urgently calling for action to ensure a healthier and economically stable nation.

Works Cited

Barlas, Tom, McKelvey, Wallace “When South Jersey supermarkets close, they may leave “food deserts” behind.” *Press of Atlantic City, the (Pleasantville, NJ) 08 Feb. 2012: Points of View Reference Center.* Web. 27 Mar 2014

Holt-Gimenez, Eric “The Fight Over Food Deserts: Corporate America Smacks Its Way Down” *Elements of Argument*, Tenth addition Annete T. Rothenberg and Donna Haisty Winchell. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2012000-117. Print

Terruso, Julia “*Camden Council advances supermarket plan.*” *Philadelphia Inquirer, the (PA) 09 Oct. 2013: Points of View Reference Center.* Web. 28 Mar. 2014