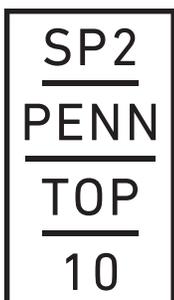


**SUPERMARKETS ARE NOT THE ONLY
SOLUTION FOR POOR FOOD ACCESS IN
UNDERSERVED COMMUNITIES**

AMY HILLIER, PHD
BENJAMIN CHRISINGER



Food deserts: poor, urban areas with limited access to supermarkets. Food deserts were a popular subject of social policy research in the U.S. over the last decade that linked limited supermarket access with high rates of diet-related diseases like obesity, diabetes and hypertension. The research findings awakened a public consciousness about the issue and started an imperative to intervene across the nation.

The concept of food deserts drew attention to racial and economic inequalities in accessing healthy, affordable foods. It resonated with a variety of stakeholders and motivated coalitions to bring new supermarkets into poor urban communities. The concept, however, implied only one solution to the problem of limited food access: more supermarkets. This missed a variety of other impacts on a person's ability to get healthy food. Despite considerable investment over the years, we are in a situation now where we must develop a more holistic approach to truly address the challenges that have come to light as part of the food desert phenomenon.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Through the study of food deserts in the Philadelphia, Pa., area we've learned that common assumptions about food shopping that are part of the food desert model are actually incorrect. The success of opening supermarkets in food deserts is limited by a number of factors related to how people shop in these communities. For example:

- All supermarkets are not the same
- Most low-income people do not shop at the closest supermarket
- Most people shop at multiple stores
- People shop at different types of stores for different types of food products

Underlying the research is the fundamental principle that low-income shoppers want the same shopping experience as middle-income and upper-income shoppers. They want, and will pursue, fresh products, clean stores and good customer service.

WHY IS THIS ISSUE IMPORTANT?

Current "food desert" policy does not fully resolve nutrition-related health issues in underserved communities. The approach does not impact actual food costs and it does not reflect trends in how low-income people shop for their food. Paying for food has gotten more difficult for many low-income households as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits have been reduced over the past two years. Low-income households have responded by relying more on food cupboards, getting help from family and friends, buying different foods and reducing the size of meals for themselves and their children. Without using additional health-promoting strategies, new supermarkets alone will not reduce health issues in our food deserts.

NEW SOLUTIONS

To be successful, new policies must recognize that human health behaviors don't change easily and supermarkets, or lack thereof, are only part of the issue. Policy must respect that people deserve to make choices for themselves and low-income households want what all households want: options. Any policy that restricts what and where people can redeem benefits such as SNAP, or limits what foods they can buy, will not help solve the problem. New policies should:

- Have local, state and federal entities helping to finance new supermarkets where private investment is lacking
- Align investment in place-based resources like supermarkets with investment in assistance programs
- Subsidize the purchase of healthy foods and create incentives for low-income households to buy foods like produce
- Get the support of the supermarket industry
- Get the support of the food and beverage industries to create and market healthier foods

Beyond issues of nutrition and chronic disease, the way people acquire food relates to our broader sense of identity as consumers and providers for our families, as well as our sense of pride in our community. Food shopping and eating are integrated into the rest of our lives—socially, culturally and economically. Holistic thinking about health and well-being that extends beyond financing supermarkets is essential to address the challenges that have gained attention as part of the “food desert” phenomenon.