

Boston Food Desert Forum Survey Report

Released in September, 2009, in honor of
National Food Desert Awareness Month

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Overview

In May of 2009, a forum was held in Boston, Massachusetts entitled “From Food Desert to Food Oasis: Identifying Challenges and Solutions.” The forum was sponsored by the MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning, the Harvard School of Public Health and the Interdisciplinary Consortium on Urban Planning and Public Health. Mari Gallagher of Mari Gallagher Research & Consulting Group and the National Center for Public Research was the presenter.

The forum attracted about 100 participants from around Massachusetts and nearby states. As part of this project a survey was conducted in advance of the forum.

This Code Book shows the results of that survey.

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Introduction & Update

September is National Food Desert Awareness Month! To highlight issues relevant to food deserts we are releasing responses from a spring 2009 food desert survey conducted in concert with a forum held last spring at MIT: *From Food Desert to Food Oasis* (see below). We are also hosting a Boston-area poster contest for youth ages 18 and younger. Details will follow shortly. Stay tuned!

In the spring of 2009, the MIT Martin Luther King Jr. Visiting Professor Fellowship, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation supported a seminar series entitled: *Towards a more equal geography of opportunity for children: The roles of Urban Planning and Public Health*. This series explored how experts, such as urban planners and public health professionals, might collaborate to create a better and more equal geography of opportunity for all children.

Nearly half of children in the 100 largest U.S. metropolitan areas live in "majority-minority" metros; that is, places where racial/ethnic minority children make up more than half of the child population. The landscape of diversity and opportunity in metropolitan areas has a substantial impact on the wellbeing of America's children. And, in turn, the health and development of these children will have a strong influence on the economic and social prospects of these regions. However, the geography of opportunity is far from being a level playing field where all children have the same opportunities to thrive.

In May 2009, Mari Gallagher of the National Center for Public Research, joined us to present a community forum entitled: *From Food Desert to Food Oasis: Identifying Challenges and Solutions*. As Ms. Gallagher, researcher and former community development practitioner explains, food deserts are large geographic areas with no or distant grocery stores, high concentrations of “fast” and other “fringe” food, and worse diet-related health outcomes after controlling for other contributing factors. Academics, professionals, government representatives, foundations, civic and community organizations, students and other interested individuals came together to raise awareness, make connections, share resources, and discuss community action. The forum both acknowledged that many talented and energized individuals and organizations are already making great strides at the community level, championing many local solutions that take many distinct forms – while at the same time the forum highlighted new issues and opportunities for research and action. It provided a variety of opportunities for attendees to engage in discussion of new perspectives on the issues, exploring strategic ideas and learning about common goals and strengths.

Here, we present results from an open survey that was circulated prior to the forum. This survey asked individuals and organizations about food desert issues. We have examined the responses and coded the themes. We are happy to present the responses at the start of Food Desert Awareness month in efforts to further discussion and action on issues related to food desert and food imbalance issues. We welcome your feedback and look forward to further work together.

Survey Summary

Table 1. 27 people responded to the survey in late April/early May 2009. 74% of them worked for an organization - in a variety of fields, including public health (63%), community-based programming (47%), research/academia (32%), urban planning (21%), and “other” (26%).

Table 2. Survey responders reported working with a variety of groups: community (83%), public health (72%), educators/school administrators (50%), city politicians (39%), parks and recreation (28%), state politicians (28%), urban planning (28%), environmental agencies (17%), land use agencies (17%), transportation (6%), and other (33%). 11% reported not working with any of these groups. Survey responders also reported a desire to collaborate with a variety of groups: community (81%), urban planning (75%), public health (69%), city politicians (63%), educators/school administrators (63%), land use agencies (50%), state politicians (50%), transportation (44%), environmental agencies (44%), and other (12%).

Table 3. Of 17 responders answering, 37% answered that their organization is involved in research related to food, while 53% said their organization is not related in research related to food. Of 9 responders answering whether their organization is involved in research of any type related to food access issues, we learned that the following research topics are being examined: 44% (4) food access in neighborhoods, 11% (1)

were involved in school meals, and 11% (1) were involved in general food systems. 33% (3) were not involved but interested in this area of research. Of 14 responders answering whether their organization is involved in research related to improved healthy food access and public health, we learned the following research topics are being examined: 31% (4) were involved in CBPR (community-based participatory research), 5% (1) were involved in cognitive health and food deserts, 5% (1) were involved in procurement and distribution, and 5% (1) were involved in social class, moral privilege and farmer's markets. When we inquired about the types of research or information that responders felt were missing or needed in the arena of food access work, 10 responders talked about the following: assessment (40%, or 4), data/information (30%, or 3), relationship between policy and access (20%, or 2), and implementing food research (10%, or 1).

Table 4. When we inquired about the current projects responders are working on which involve improving healthy food access and public health, 13 responders talked about the following: food environment (31%, or 4), food and health outreach (31%, or 4), urban farming (8%, or 1), farm-to-school (8%, or 1), and 23%, or 3 reported not working on any projects of this type. When we inquired about the #1 project or action that responders are working on to improve food access and public health, 12 responders talked about the following: policy (25%, or 3), vulnerable populations (25%, or 3), alternative food sources (17%, or 2), community gardens/markets (17%, or 2), and healthy living (17%, or 2). When we asked about partners whom responders would recruit to work on this project, 19 responders talked about the following entities: government agencies (32%, or 6), food producers (16%, or 3), nonprofit organizations (16%, or 3), academic institutions (11%, or 2), community development corporations (11%, or 2), food industry (11%, or 2), and grass root organizations (5%, or 1).

Table 5. When we invited responders to discuss the #1 opportunity/asset to improving healthy food access and public health in their community, or in the area they serve, 13 responders discussed the following: existing institutions (54%, or 7), desire for change (23%, or 3), human resources (15%, or 2), and community collaborations (8%, or 1). On the other hand, 18 responders discussed the #1 challenge/obstacle to improving healthy food access and public health as: lack of communication/collaboration (33%, or 6), planning (17%, or 3), vision/focus (17%, or 3), lack of funding (11%, or 2), policies (11%, or 2), and poverty (11%, or 2). Lastly, when we asked responders about current research in which they might be involved related to improving healthy food access and public health, 14 responders provided the following topic areas: community-based participatory research (31%, or 4), cognitive health and food deserts (5%, or 1) procurement and distribution (5%, or 1), social class, moral privilege, and farmer's markets (5%, or 1), and no research being conducted (54%, or 7). Research and information which responders feel is missing or needed in this area of food access work was described as follows: assessment (40%, or 4), data/information (30%, or 3), relationship between policy and access (20%, or 2), and implementing food research (10%, or 1).

Survey Results

Table 1. Affiliations	% (n)
Total	100% (27)
A) Do you work for or with an organization?	
Yes	74% (20)
No	26% (7)
B) Nature of your organization	
Community-based programs	47% (9)
Public Health	63% (12)
Communications	5% (1)
Government	0% (0)
Research/academia	32% (6)
Transportation	5% (1)
Urban Planning	21% (4)
Architecture	5% (1)
Business sector	5% (1)
Other	26% (5)
C) Organization level of operation	
Individuals/small groups	37% (7)
Community level	68% (13)
Policy level	47% (9)
Other	21% (4)

Table 2. Collaborative Partners	% (n)
Total	100% (27)
A) What groups do you work with?	
Community	83% (15)
Transportation	6% (1)
Educators, School Administrators	50% (9)
Environmental agencies	17% (3)
Land use agencies	17% (3)
Parks and Recreation	28% (5)
City Politicians	39% (7)
State Politicians	28% (5)
Public Health	72% (13)
Urban Planning	28% (5)
Do not work with any of these	11% (2)
Other	33% (6)
B) Who would you like to collaborate with?	
Community	81% (13)
Transportation	44% (7)
Educators, School Administrators	63% (10)
Environmental agencies	44% (7)
Land use agencies	50% (8)
Parks and Recreation	50% (8)
City Politicians	63% (10)
State Politicians	50% (8)
Public Health	69% (11)
Urban Planning	75% (12)
Do not work with any of these	0% (0)
Other	12% (2)

Table 3. Research	% (n)
A) Is your organization involved in research related to food? (n=17)	
Yes	37% (7)
No	53% (10)
B) Is your organization involved in research of any type related to food access issues? (n=9)	
No, but interested	33% (3)
Food Access in Neighborhoods	44% (4)
School Meals	11% (1)
General Food System	11% (1)
C) Are you currently involved in any research related to improved healthy food access and public health? (n=14)	
No	54% (7)
Community-Based Participatory Research	31% (4)
Cognitive Health and Food Deserts	5% (1)
Procurement and Distribution	5% (1)
Social Class, Moral Privilege and Farmer's Markets	5% (1)
D) What types of research or information do you feel are missing or needed in the arena of food access work? (n=10)	
Data/Information	30% (3)
Assessment	40% (4)
Relationship between Policy and Access	20% (2)
Implementing Food Research	10% (1)

Table 4. Current and Future Projects	% (n)
A) Current projects to improve healthy food access and public health. (n=13)	
None	23% (3)
Food Environment	31% (4)
Food and Health Outreach	31% (4)
Urban Farming	8% (1)
Farm-to-School	8% (1)
B) What is the #1 project or action that you work on to improve healthy food access and public health? (n=12)	
Healthy Living	17% (2)
Vulnerable Populations	25% (3)
Alternative Food Sources	17% (2)
Community Gardens/Markets	17% (2)
Policy	25% (3)
C) List the partners with whom you would recruit to working on this project with you. (n=19)	
Academic Institutions	11% (2)
Community Development Corporations	11% (2)
Food Industry	11% (2)
Food Producers	16% (3)
Government Agencies	32% (6)
Non-Profit Organizations	16% (3)
Grass Roots Organizations	5% (1)

Table 5. Assets and Barriers	% (n)
A) What is the #1 opportunity/asset to improving healthy food access and public health in your community or in the area you serve? (n=13)	
Human Resources	15% (2)
Community Collaborations	8% (1)
Existing Institutions	54% (7)
Desire for Change	23% (3)
B) What is the #1 challenge/obstacle to improving healthy food access and public health in your community or the area you serve? (n=18)	
Lack of Communication/Collaboration	33% (6)
Planning	17% (3)
Policies	11% (2)
Vision/Focus	17% (3)
Poverty	11% (2)
Lack of Funding	11% (2)
C) Are you currently involved in any research related to improved healthy food access and public health? (n=14)	
No	54% (7)
Community-Based Participatory Research	31% (4)
Cognitive Health and Food Deserts	5% (1)
Procurement and Distribution	5% (1)
Social Class, Moral Privilege and Farmer's Markets	5% (1)
D) What types of research or information do you feel are missing or needed in the arena of food access work? (n=10)	
Data/Information	30% (3)
Assessment	40% (4)
Relationship between Policy and Access	20% (2)
Implementing Food Research	10% (1)

Thank you!

Thank you to everyone who participated in this survey, and thank you to the forum attendees. Thank you also to those who participate in food access work! We are happy to share these results and we look forward to future collaboration.

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