



THE COMMUNITY BEAUTIFUL

Little Seeds for BIG CHANGE Campaign

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THIS EDUCATIONAL DOCUMENT WAS DEVELOPED IN SUPPORT OF
SEPTEMBER: NATIONAL FOOD DESERT AWARENESS MONTH
Sponsored by the National Center for Public Research

What are Food Deserts? Mari Gallagher Research & Consulting Group (MG) defines Food Deserts as large geographic areas with no or distant grocery stores. Often, they also have an imbalance of food choice, meaning more nearby fringe food such as fast food, convenience stores, and liquor stores. While these communities are without enough mainstream grocers, many do have community assets, disposable income, appropriate sites for sustainable grocery stores, and talented community leaders working to improve healthy food options. **Why it matters:** findings from our studies reveal that residents of Food Deserts suffer worse diet-related health outcomes, including diabetes, cancer, obesity, heart disease and premature death.

What is food insecurity? Food insecurity is defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to be "limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods." One in eight U.S. households with infants (12.5 percent) reports being food insecure, according to a new analysis by Child Trends (July 2007). In Food Deserts, there is often food insecurity. **Why it matters:** MG contends that hunger needs to be redefined in the Food Desert, where while there might be an abundance of food, little of it is fresh, nutritious and low in salt, fat or sugar. Some have said, for example, that when you are hungry, cupcakes are better than nothing. Would you agree or disagree?

What are mainstream and fringe food venues? A mainstream grocer is a place where you can support a healthy diet on a regular basis. A fringe food location is the opposite; it is not inherently bad, but if it were the primary source of acquiring food, local diets and public health would likely suffer. Mainstream grocers, while not necessarily "full service" stores, sell an assortment of foods – including fresh produce – that can contribute to a healthy diet. Fringe food venues include convenience stores and fast food restaurants, as well as gas stations, liquor stores, department stores, discount bakeries, pharmacies and a multitude of other retailers that sell ready-made, fast, boxed, canned, and other types of food products but for whom food is not the primary line of business. **Why it matters:** Fringe retailers do provide consumer options, but when they are the only or dominant option, there can be negative consequences. MG cites other industry examples of mainstream and fringe retailers, such as banks (mainstream) and currency exchanges (also called check cashers) and pawnshops (both fringe).

What is Food Balance? In a community with Food Balance, residents can access healthier types of food – such as a salad or fresh chicken, typically available at a mainstream grocery store – as easily as they can access fringe food products – such as highly processed food or food high in fat, salt and/or sugar. Fringe food is typically available at venues such as fast food restaurants, liquor stores, convenience stores, and other similar locations. A community with easy access to fringe food retailers and limited access to mainstream grocers would be considered out-of-balance.

Why it matters: MG has identified statistically significant relationships between improved access to mainstream food options and better diet-related public health outcomes. In short, where there is a greater access to mainstream grocery stores, premature death and suffering from diet-related diseases decreases. These effects are independent from other contributing factors such as income, race, and education.

What is the Food Balance Score and Food Balance Effect? MG developed a unique measure to test our core theory that Food Balance contributes to diet-related health outcomes. In essence, this ratio score is the distance to any grocer divided by the distance to any fringe food venue. We call this ratio the Food Balance Score, and we call its impact the Food Balance Effect. These measures were developed exclusively by MG as part of our work on food access and its impact on public health.



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