



EXAMINING
THE IMPACT OF
**FOOD
DESERTS**
ON PUBLIC HEALTH
IN CHICAGO



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**Conclusions, Acknowledgements
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Author's Comments, Conclusions and Acknowledgements

For someone with a strong background in market dynamics, the study of food access as a pathway to community health might seem at first glance like a professional shift. What drives real estate development decisions? What makes a grocery store project credit worthy in the eyes of its financiers? Where are the untapped business opportunities in underserved markets? And how does food availability steal or extend productivity, time, resources, and vitality? In many minds, it is this last question that is out of place in the set. Yet as George Kaplan points out in his eloquent Foreword to this report, the life and death of any real estate deal – and the life and death of mankind – are highly impacted by three things: location, location, location.

Throughout my entire first career as a community development practitioner, I learned hard lessons about location. In fact, there is something about location itself that beckons community developers to begin with. Long ago I managed a commercial strip on the far Southeast Side of Chicago that had an unsightly, sloping, vacant lot in the heart of the district, strewn with litter and tires. A man was chased down and beaten to death there. A policeman, thinking back on the incident, shook his head and said matter-of-factly: “This is a pretty bad location.” It was. Gangs. Drugs. Violence. Commercial decay. Something had to be done. Working with the community, we turned the vacant lot into a garden. It sprouted flowers, vegetables, an art show, and even a wedding. For lots of reasons, it eventually improved on the location radar, to the extent that the land became more valuable and demand for it increased. The private sector built a storefront on the site several years later, and the garden was no more. The land returned to its intended function. In community development, and in neighborhood markets, too, the cycle of boom, bust and revival is always a local condition.

It is the same with public health. Local land use decisions are, in many respects, public health decisions. And while one plot of land does not directly cause either life or death, or community revitalization or decline, it certainly can influence those outcomes. As far back as 1926, the Supreme Court rendered an opinion that government has a responsibility to promote and protect public health, and that government can, therefore, control land use to that end, which typically happens through zoning laws. So to be a community planner and not care about health, or to be a health official and not care about the built environment, means opportunities are lost. But there is another dimension of lost opportunities: the market.

Can the market do well by doing some good? Why not? Our study identifies a half million plus people who live in a food desert with no or distant grocery stores but nearby access to fast food. A substantial number of them are single mothers and children. My guess is that women, more than anyone else, know the importance of food to stitching together the delicate continuum of life. It is ironic that these women are the most disenfranchised from the food market given that they probably value and understand it more than any other consumer group. Food is indeed our most basic common denominator, arguably more than housing or any other good. We all need food regularly to live, but our response to food as a commodity differs. The community health advocate might stress local needs and deficiencies, and nutritious food as a human right, while market proponents focus on unit prices, sales volume, profit margins, and the credit worthiness of the grocer leaseholder.

We are living in a world of biological, social and economic complexity. Robert Wright, in his fascinating book, *Nonzero: The Logic Of Human Destiny*, talks about how the best of the best, even competitors, have collaborated over time in pursuit of mutual self-interest and biological, social and economic evolution – progress, as some would call it. In this day of information, technology, and mass production, a food desert is the antithesis of progress, and the costs associated with living within one will be borne directly by those residents through their quality and length of life, and indirectly by the health care industry, by employers, by government agencies, and by others who take on the financial burden of pre-death treatments. Therefore, we might look at food markets in underserved areas through Wright’s game theory lens to see how a myriad group of actors might band together with distinct agendas to make the wheel turn in a new way. This would be progressive, as well as smart.

Grocery store locations proved in our study to be a significant factor in obesity outcomes; the farther the grocery store, the higher the obesity rate. That poor health outcomes can be moderated by access to food and to food balance is an important finding. Translation: something can be done about it. The built environment constitutes a set of deliberate choices: to develop, subsidize or finance a grocery store – or not to – happens by choice, not by chance.

One hundred billion dollars is a substantial sum of money to spend each year on obesity. If 5 percent of that were invested in grocery store development paired with local campaigns for healthy eating as an anti-obesity savings measure, that would generate \$100 million per state to enhance the sustainability of new business opportunities. Small, mid-size and independent grocers – not just chains – could be the point of focus.

Cost-benefit scenarios such as these are worthy of examination. So is the fast food industry in terms of its potential contributions to improved food access, food choice and community health. To simply demonize the fast food industry for the negative health outcomes associated with the Food Balance Effect would be to miss several key points.

First, the fast food industry has invested in areas otherwise devoid of food options, whereas many grocers over the last few decades have, by contrast, deserted these areas. The fast food industry delivers a highly convenient and filling just-in-time food product at a low price and is a source of community jobs. Its competitive advantage is important considering that the food desert primarily consists of working families and, specifically working mothers, who struggle with the pressure of multiple children, multiple jobs, multiple bills and multiple life stresses. Only with great naiveté could we assume that they would spend all their time cooking elaborate healthy meals if only given access to a grocery store. Furthermore, fast food outlets have flourished in markets that other food venues and retailers have deserted or avoided. They have achieved sustainability in the pure market sense of the word. Finally, the fast food industry is evolving, albeit under pressure from books like *Fast Food Nation*, but evolving nonetheless into a new dimension of food lines that include healthier options and reduced saturated fat content. This suggests the potential for forward movement, something better, progress. Less important now is what the fast food industry has been. More important are what it is becoming, what it could become, and how to improve data systems to better gauge market opportunities and community health moving forward. As a former practitioner and now a researcher who still spends considerable time conducting market analyses and commercial site assessments, I repeatedly see the need for improved data systems and better market sizing methods. In urban micro-markets especially, “bad data” is a key obstacle to grocery store development. With the right skills, mindset and resources, this can be remedied on a market-by-market basis, but what can be done to make improved data systems more widely available across markets to actors who make development decisions and to community leaders who monitor change?

There are other strategic questions that can be explored as well:

- 1) What can the grocery industry learn from the fast food industry in order to better compete in underserved markets?
- 2) Would foundations or others provide credit enhancement to make mid-size and independent grocers more viable in areas that need them?
- 3) Can a franchise of micro-entrepreneurs mimic successful companies such as Pea Pod in the to-the-door distribution of healthy food items? What is the viability of mobile grocery stores, such as fruit and vegetable trucks and even bicycle carts that sell fresh snacks and produce?
- 4) What does the ubiquitous vending machine industry have to offer areas that suffer from food imbalance? Can publicly available vending machines dispense apples, low-fat yogurt, bags of carrots and multigrain bread, instead of soda and candy bars, and turn a profit? This is a focus now in certain public school systems across the country, but it could be an opportunity everywhere.
- 5) Individuals who work often spend more than half of their time awake each day in their employers' environs. By encouraging healthy eating and exercise in the workplace, can employers increase employee productivity and reduce the costs of employer-supported health care coverage?
- 6) Is a "food literacy" education campaign needed? Do we all know how to read recipes and food labels, measure ingredients, size food portions appropriately, cook, and maintain healthy food choices? Food literacy might be as important in some communities as financial literacy. The two could also complement each other.
- 7) What would shift our culture away from the television into the kitchen? Would busy parents, particularly time-pressured single mothers, form cooking clubs where healthy food is prepared in bulk and eaten, exchanged, or frozen for later consumption? What can community organizations do to support and encourage healthy cooking and eating habits?
- 8) Last, while education campaigns are laudable, is it dishonest to tell people to eat healthy foods if there is no realistic place nearby to acquire them? This brings us full circle to the core challenge at hand: to be able to choose healthy foods you must first have access to them. It all boils down to location.

Earlier in this narrative, I told the story of the unsightly vacant lot that harbored drugs and gang members and discouraged commercial investment. It was a pretty bad location. The community was galvanized to action, and improvements were made, but not until a man was beaten to death there.

Knowing that food imbalance steals life and vitality from communities and their residents can provide this same urgent call for action. A first breath, the final one, and the daily food that sustains life in-between, is a continuum that every mortal shares. As we all need to eat to live, food might be the unifying thread that transcends race, place, class, and outdated development models that just don't work in these underserved communities. Identifying market as well as needs-based solutions that promote access to nutritious foods and healthy food choices will require input and support from the food desert residents themselves as well as from grocers, banks, brokers, developers, planners, health advocates, educators, government, foundations – ultimately everyone – to achieve even a modest level of success.

Examining the Impact of Food Deserts on Public Health in Chicago assesses the link between food imbalance and the quality and length of life, and the quality and cause of death. This body of work, and its call for collective action and community partnership, would not have been possible without the **generous support of LaSalle Bank**. I'm deeply grateful to LaSalle for underwriting the research, the report, and the forum, for their graceful manner of opening new doors in support of the research while not interfering with it, for convening the Roundtable, and for their courage to explore and help resolve a sensitive community health issue that has relevance across urban America. LaSalle's leadership on this project in Chicago will set a new example nationwide for how a nontraditional set of actors – banks, the private sector, community development leaders, and others – can address neighborhood sustainability through the lens of community health and wellness. This will strengthen bridges across diverse disciplines and, more importantly, improve and extend lives. I am especially thankful for the contributions and team spirit provided by the following LaSalle Bank colleagues:

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We invite your feedback and participation moving forward.

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