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Food Deserts

Many of the serious health concerns in modern America can be linked to poor diet. People who regularly consume foods high in sodium, sugar, and saturated fats not only increase their chances of obesity, but also increase their risks of developing heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, and several types of cancer. Although some people who regularly consume unhealthy foods do so knowingly, there is also a significant portion of the population that remains undereducated about proper nutrition. What is more, individuals who live in food deserts—areas in low-income neighborhoods that lack easy access to healthy, affordable food—may not even have the opportunity to obtain nutritious food. Although there have been some recent government efforts to reduce the number of food deserts, more community-based efforts should be encouraged and supported.



Food deserts are located in high-poverty areas, such as sparsely populated rural areas or densely populated, low-income urban centers. Food deserts most often develop when major supermarket chains either relocate out of these areas or simply refrain from building stores there in the first place. Major food retailer chains tend to limit their store locations to wealthier urban or suburban neighborhoods. This means that those who live in high-poverty areas often also live miles away from the fresh meats, dairy products, and produce available at supermarkets. Residents of these areas who do not have cars are thus forced to travel long distances on public transportation to do their grocery shopping, or else they are limited to the food available at local convenience stores and gas stations. These types of food retailers often only sell packaged, processed foods that offer little nutritional value.

Furthermore, fast food restaurants are disproportionately concentrated in low-income areas; recent estimates suggest that those living in the poorest areas of a city experience 2.5 times more exposure to fast food restaurants than the wealthiest inhabitants of the city. Because individuals who live in food deserts tend to get their meals from fast food restaurants or convenience stores, they often suffer from a variety of health issues. Research has found that individuals who live in low-income neighborhoods are much more likely to develop problems with obesity, diabetes, and hypertension than those who live in more affluent neighborhoods.

A solution to the problem of food deserts seems obvious: more supermarkets should be built in low-income neighborhoods. The problem with this solution, of course, is that it is difficult to lure supermarket chains into poor areas. Because poorer people have less money to spend on food, supermarket chains do not consider them to be attractive customers. One way that the government can help to offset this issue is by offering tax breaks or other incentives for supermarkets in low-income areas. In 2010, the Obama administration implemented the Healthy Food Financing program, which is a set of initiatives designed to help bring grocery stores into areas currently designated as food desert.

While this federal program is a commendable effort to improve low-income residents' access to healthy food, local initiatives often have a stronger and more immediate impact. Community gardens, independent food stores, co-ops, and farmers' markets are all examples of local initiatives that can substitute for or supplement the opening of a major chain supermarket. Despite the time, dedication, and funds required for community members to initiate such programs, these efforts can be incredibly beneficial, not only in providing people with access to healthier foods, but also in instilling a sense of community in the residents of these neighborhoods.