Neighborhood Groceries: New Access to Healthy Food in Low-Income Communities

Report prepared by
Ed Bolen & Kenneth Hecht

January 2003
**Neighborhood Groceries: New Access to Healthy Food in Low-Income Communities**

I. The Problem of Access to Nutritious Foods

Despite an abundance of food in this country and particularly in California, increasing numbers of Americans suffer from hunger or food insecurity.¹ For most Californians with limited incomes, food insecurity is a long-term condition of poverty and usually takes the form of skipped meals, limited portions or poor quality foods. The consequences of a chronic lack of food are chilling — more frequent and severe sickness, reduced ability to concentrate and learn, and impaired social functioning.² At the same time, many of the people who are experiencing hunger or food insecurity also are caught in the newly recognized and rapidly intensifying obesity epidemic. According to the United States Surgeon General, more than 60 percent of the U.S. adult population is obese or overweight.³ And UC Berkeley’s Center for Weight and Health reports that approximately 1 in 4 California children is overweight or at risk of being overweight.⁴ The consequences of obesity are very significant as well — exorbitant costs and dislocations to our society, a distressing proliferation of illnesses, and lost opportunities for the victims.⁵

The numbers of people suffering from food insecurity are staggering. The California Health Interview Survey estimates that in California at least 2.24 million adults below 200 percent of the federal poverty line are food insecure.⁶ The United States Department of Agriculture finds that approximately 5.1 million people, including over two million children, are food insecure and lack the resources to obtain nutritious food.⁷ Food insecurity — and, at times, even hunger itself — is prevalent in inner cities, in households with children, in female-headed households, and among African-Americans and Latinos.⁸ This section explores some of the factors that lead to a lack of access to nutritious and affordable food in many low-income neighborhoods and the consequences of a lack of wholesome foods.

What is Causing Food Access Problems?

Poverty, or the lack of resources with which to acquire food, is the primary source of food insecurity in the United States. However, extensive documentation shows that the lack of access to food in low-income urban neighborhoods — the simple inability to buy it there — is an important additional factor. Compared to people living in higher-income areas, residents of low-income urban neighborhoods have very limited access to high quality food, enjoy fewer options in the variety of goods that are available to them, and pay higher prices for their groceries when they are available. Recent economic development studies also demonstrate that
a lack of inner-city markets has resulted in lower sales and property taxes as well as increased blight for local governments, lower revenues and profits for retailers and fewer real estate possibilities for developers.

This paper is concerned with identifying market-based, financially self-sustaining solutions to the unique problems created by inadequate access to nutritious food in low-income communities. Several common problems, described below, have emerged as major contributors to the lack of access that, in turn, exacerbates the food insecurity caused by poverty.

**Supermarket Flight**

The disappearance of supermarkets over the last 40 years from the inner cities has been well documented.\(^{15}\) In the 1960s and 1970s, supermarket chains began to leave the inner cities because urban populations shifted to the suburbs — leaving lower densities and reduced purchasing power in the central cities.\(^{16}\) The new supermarkets — and their requisite large parking lots — necessitated both expansive land parcels that often are not available in inner-city neighborhoods and easy automobile access for a significant portion of their customers. Crime and the perception of crime also led supermarket chains to abandon their inner-city stores.\(^{17}\) This trend continued in the 1980s and 1990s as the major chains, faced with low profit margins, expanded the size and format of their suburban stores to increase sales volume and developed new profit centers within their stores, such as banks, pharmacies, bakeries, deli counters, and prepared meals, that typically generate higher profit margins than conventional groceries.

The result of these changes in the supermarket industry is fewer supermarkets in low-income communities. A report issued in 2002 by the Urban and Environmental Policy Institute at Occidental College found middle- and upper-income neighborhoods to have 2.26 times as many supermarkets per capita than in low-income neighborhoods.\(^{18}\) Similarly, a 1995 nationwide study by the University of Connecticut found 30 percent fewer supermarkets per capita in the lowest-income zip codes than in the highest-income zip codes.\(^{19}\)

**Transportation Barriers**

An excellent new report, *Roadblocks to Health: Transportation Barriers to Healthy Communities*, published by the Transportation and Land Use Coalition of Oakland, available at [www.transcoalition.org](http://www.transcoalition.org), provides an extremely helpful analysis of the inadequacy of transportation access to nutritious food that residents of low-income neighborhoods experience. Examination of walking access to a supermarket in three California counties — Alameda, Contra Costa and Santa Clara — shows that only 52 percent of the people living in low-income areas lived within a half mile of a supermarket. Public transit was found to be meager. Besides the obvious deficiencies of buses for transporting large, heavy bags of groceries, buses ran infrequently, often at 30 to 60 minute intervals, during the evenings and weekends when working families had the time to shop. The report’s mapping analysis also confirmed the paucity of other (than supermarkets) grocery stores in low-income communities and the problems detailed in the present report of reliance upon corner stores (see, in particular, pages 37-46 of the *Roadblocks* report).
In addition, supermarket sites that are near freeways and in suburban centers have made food access more difficult for inner-city residents who do not have cars or do not drive. Low-income families have much lower rates of automobile use and access to autos than higher-income families. In California, more than one in five households with incomes under $25,000 does not have a car for work-related travel. In the Bay Area, 69 percent of households without a car have annual household incomes below $17,500. The problem of limited automobile access for the elderly poor is even more severe. In the lower-income Fruitvale district in Oakland, for example, 30 percent of the seniors do not have a driver’s license, and most of the license-holding seniors do not drive due to mobility limitations or safety concerns.

Inner-city residents without cars must depend on public transit, taxis, or friends to travel to grocery stores if there are no stores in the immediate neighborhood. This limits the frequency of their trips and thus their opportunities to purchase fresh produce and other nutritious perishable foods. Even when available, public transit, taxis, and friends are inferior methods of travel for food shopping. Residents using bus transit can manage only limited quantities of groceries on their return trips, particularly when they are accompanied by young children, when transfers between bus lines are required, or when the walk to their residence after disembarking the bus is long. Taxis are expensive and often difficult to procure in many low-income neighborhoods. Friends are not always available or reliable. Moreover, whenever children are involved, the additional time required for car-less grocery shopping could be a serious barrier. For seniors and others who must walk to bus stops, safety concerns often make food shopping unattractive.

**Restricted Shopping Options**

At the same time that supermarket access has become more difficult for inner-city residents, many corner grocery stores in their neighborhoods — which used to feature meat, dairy, produce, and other foods — have become primarily alcohol, cigarette, and convenience food outlets. The shift in the nature of these corner stores has occurred for a variety of reasons. Many small storeowners find it difficult to sell fresh foods because they lack sufficient experience with produce or other perishables. Corner stores also rely more on non-perishable foods that have long shelf lives because their stock turnover is generally slower than in larger markets that draw customers from a wider area. These same items require little sales experience, too — they do not spoil and they do not need care. Moreover, corner stores with limited space must focus on selling products that have the strongest demand — and unfortunately alcohol, tobacco and snack foods are high on the list.

**Additional Factors**

Other factors contribute to the general lack of access to nutritious and affordable food in low-income communities. For example, a report issued in 2002 by the Urban and Environmental Policy Institute found 52 fast food restaurants but only one sit-down restaurant in a two-mile radius in one South Central Los Angeles neighborhood. While the abundance of fast food restaurants in low-income neighborhoods may provide a source of convenient and relatively cheap food, these establishments typically do not offer nutritious foods such as fresh fruit and vegetables. Similarly, while inner-city neighborhoods are becoming more ethnically diverse, residents often find few stores that offer culturally appropriate foods.