Food Insecurity, Health, and Public Policy: An Analysis of Michigan’s Food System

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Food Insecurity in America
About 49 million people lived in food insecure households in 2012. Roughly 15% of American households are food insecure.
• 25% of food insecure households are inhabited by Blacks.
• 23% are occupied by Hispanics.
• 33% of those in food insecure households are children.
• 35% of the food insecure households are female-headed.
• 40% of such households are below the poverty level.

Food Insecurity in Michigan
Michigan has high levels of food insecurity
• 18% of Michigan’s households are food insecure
• 25% of children in Michigan live in food insecure households
• Many Michigan residents live in areas where they have limited access to grocery stores selling healthy and affordable foods.

A Systems Approach to Studying Food Access
• Develop Neighborhood Food Access Index (NFAI)
• Agricultural Producers (farms, farmers’ markets, gardens, Community Supported Agriculture, Coops)
• Food Retailers (grocery stores and other purveyors)
• Supply Chain (processors, distributors, manufacturers)
• Restaurants (fast food, non-fast-food, ethnic)
• Other Locations of food service (schools, hospitals)
• Food Providers or Services (emergency food assistance)
• Food Policies (barriers to food production and distribution)
• Nutrition education and behavior change.

Health Impacts of Food Insecurity:
• The consumption of high-calorie, unhealthy food is linked to obesity, diabetes, and other illnesses.
• Obesity is increasing among the poor.

Why focus on Michigan?
• Michigan was ranked as the 5th most obese state in the nation in 2012 – 31.3% of the residents were considered obese.
• In 2013, Michigan ranked 9th with a 28.8% obesity rate.

Why worry about grocery stores?
• Food is cheaper in full-line supermarkets & food stores.
• Greater variety of produce available at supermarkets.
• Produce is of better quality.
• The presence of full-line grocery stores in communities is related to increased consumption of fruits and vegetables by residents.

Research Needs:
• More comprehensive studies of food access are needed.
• Such studies should examine multiple processes and actors (consumers, producers, policymakers, etc.).

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[Logos of USDA and National Institute of Food and Agriculture]
Preliminary Findings

- The most common food outlets in Michigan are ones selling either unhealthy, highly processed, or expensive foods.
  - Many Michigan residents purchase their food primarily from gas stations, pharmacies, liquor stores, bars, and convenience stores.
- Earlier studies have described Detroit as a “food desert” that lacked full-line supermarkets. But, food activists have questioned the idea that the city is a food desert.
- Our study found a more complex food environment in Detroit than previous studies have identified.
  - However, the food landscape is dominated by food outlets selling expensive, highly-processed, and unhealthy foods.
- Most of the food outlets at which the poor can use their food assistance benefits to purchase foods are those which sell few or no fruits and vegetables.
  - These food outlets tend to carry few healthy food options.

Will the Poor Purchase Healthy, Organic Foods if it is Available?

In summer 2009, a study of four farmers markets and one mobile food truck selling organic, locally-grown produce in Detroit found that:

- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) customers increased their purchase of fresh produce by 41%.
- More than 90% of the coupons distributed to SNAP customers were redeemed. All the coupons distributed by the mobile food van, Peaches and Greens, were redeemed.

Yet...

Of the roughly 1,000 farmers’ markets in Michigan in 2013:

- 142 farmers’ markets in the state accept SNAP.
- 95 farmers’ markets participate in Double Up Bucks.

Sources


Challenges to Improving Food Access:

- Farmers’ market managers report lengthy delays in getting approval to accept SNAP/EBT cards or to start the Double Up Bucks Program.
- Small food retailers and restaurants report that their orders are too small to entice farmers to service them.

Food Policies:

- Food retailers want to see a fair allocation of subsidies to entice grocery stores to locate or remain in low-income neighborhoods.
- Incentivize convenience stores, gas stations, pharmacies, dollar stores, etc. to sell more healthy foods.
- Greater monitoring needed.
- Create more opportunities for urban farming and gardening in low-income areas.