

Adverse Food Environments in Low-Income and Minority Communities: A Commentary

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Commentary

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ABSTRACT

In the midst of any public health crisis in the United States, there is bound to be debate among policy makers, public health officials, and the general public about the potential causes of the issue and how it should be addressed. A prime example is the obesity epidemic. Researchers often debate the primary causes and most effective way to slow the obesity epidemic in low-income and minority communities. One commonly cited cause is food deserts: communities that lack access to a grocery store. Food deserts, which primarily exist in low-income and minority communities, have received much attention from politicians and the general public, even being highlighted by Michelle Obama's "Let's Move!" campaign. However, experts have recently questioned the commonly held belief that food deserts are the leading cause of obesity in American cities, and have also challenged the practicality of proposed solutions. Alternatively, food swamps (communities where unhealthy eating options far outnumber healthy ones) have been legitimately explored - by public health officials and scholars alike - as a potential contributing factor to the obesity epidemic. This article discusses the impact of food deserts and food swamps and the steps proposed by scholars to solving food swamps in America - subsequently alleviating a significant, ongoing public health crisis.

INTRODUCTION

Food deserts, communities without convenient grocery store access, have commonly been cited as a primary cause of rising obesity rates in the United States. In such neighborhoods, residents do not have access to healthy eating options, leading to unavoidable unhealthy choices. As a result, these communities often have higher rates of obesity.

Food swamps on the other hand, are communities where unhealthy food is much more readily available than healthy food. As such, they harm low-income families by surrounding them with cheap, innutritious options. These engulfing, unhealthy restaurants are usually fast-food or convenience stores filled with junk-food, and since they are less expensive, low-income families tend to eat at these locations much more often than more expensive, healthier restaurants. Low-income and minority communities are most affected by these issues - resulting in high rates of obesity. In a study conducted in the early 2000's, researchers found that in almost all age groups tested, low-income Hispanic and Black participants were more likely to be obese compared to white participants ^[1].

In attempting to alleviate the increasing rates of obesity in the United States, food swamps, and particularly, food deserts have been at the center of the debate. Recently, however, studies have found that contrary to popular belief, food swamps are more correlated with obesity than food deserts ^[2]. Despite these findings, food deserts have garnered more overall attention (excluding most public health scholars) than food swamps have in recent years.

This article draws from existing literature to identify and describe the debate among relevant stakeholders regarding food swamps and food deserts and their effect on the obesity epidemic.

DISCUSSION

Since 2010, food deserts have been the most commonly cited cause of the obesity epidemic. The common theory, which claims that a lack of grocery stores in low-income neighborhoods is the cause of widespread obesity, even caught on in the White House. In 2010, Michelle Obama launched the "Let's Move!" campaign; it had many objectives, but its main focus was to give grants and tax incentives to grocery store owners who were willing to open in impoverished neighborhoods ^[3].

Since then, however, the simplicity of the proposed solution - opening grocery stores in impoverished neighborhoods - has been challenged by many scholars. Part of this criticism stems from the fact that there is no commonly accepted definition of a food desert [4]. Some argue that the solution is not as simple as opening up grocery stores in low-income areas and expecting drastic change. In fact, a 2009 study found that it is not rare for poor neighborhoods to have more grocery stores than wealthy neighborhoods, putting in question the idea that food deserts are a major contributor to obesity in low-income communities [5].

Additionally, time is a salient factor that is rarely considered when discussing grocery store access and the obesity epidemic in its entirety. One study mentions that time could be a deterrent to healthy habits, even if there are fresh fruits and vegetables available; if a family is struggling financially, they are much less likely to have the time to prepare healthy foods [6]. The issue of time is another reason why low-income individuals may choose unhealthy foods despite healthy options being readily available to them. For this reason, pursuing grocery store interventions to ensure low-income communities have access to fresh produce may not be as beneficial (and comprehensive) of a solution as it sounds.

The best course of action in obesity prevention is the implementation of zoning laws by local governments, which can help avoid widespread food swamps that besiege poor neighborhoods with a sea of unhealthy options and merely a pond of healthy ones [7]. These food swamps corner impoverished individuals into making unhealthy choices, which trains children from a very young age to grow accustomed to eating innutritious foods. This is a habit that fast-food companies aim to instill in the general public to elevate their profits. In order to combat their corporate greed, and in turn, combat obesity, there must be local government-mandated zoning laws that help balance the ratio of unhealthy restaurants to healthy restaurants - especially in low-income neighborhoods [8].

Although zoning laws are viable options, they should be implemented with caution. Scholars have warned that removing unhealthy restaurants from a particular area without adding healthy restaurants to replace them could be problematic [2]. If done incorrectly, zoning laws could cause food insecurity among local residents. Due to this inherent risk, it is imperative that significant policy changes, such as zoning laws, are done with meticulous planning that outline all necessary steps to prevent food insecurity. Scholars have suggested that gradually decreasing (with respect to time and severity) the number of unhealthy restaurants while simultaneously incentivizing healthy restaurants to take their spot would be a beneficial and virtually harmless solution [2]. Such cautionary measures, although time-consuming, would ensure that new policies (zoning laws) are not pernicious to the local community.

CONCLUSION

Food swamps should be studied further (through public health interventions and other forms of research) so that experts can examine the most appropriate course of action to extinguish widespread obesity. Conversely, food deserts, for some time now, have been in the public and political eye, and therefore require no further analysis. The attention (and research efforts) of scholars has shifted away from food deserts; politicians and the general public must follow suit.

Obesity prevention should be prioritized in American politics because on top of being a major public health crisis, obesity disproportionately affects both people of color and impoverished individuals. Some may argue that the policy changes required to alleviate the epidemic - through zoning laws or otherwise - are not worth the financial burden. These claims, however, are short-sighted considering that future healthcare expenses - made worse by heightened obesity rates - will cost the United States Government a great deal for generations to come.

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