**America’s Worst 9 Urban Food Deserts**

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“Food desert” is a term commonly used to describe communities with little or no access to healthy food, including fresh fruits, vegetables, meats and dairy products. Millions of Americans — mostly poor, many African-Americans — live in these areas. In fact, the United States Department of Agriculture reports that about 23.5 million Americans currently live in food deserts, including 6.5 million children. Typically, food deserts are defined by: 1) the lack or absence of large grocery stores and supermarkets that sell fresh produce and healthy food options; and 2) low-income populations living on tight budgets. These food deserts are also signified by high levels of obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular diseases in the community, which result from residents buying their food from corner stores that sell processed foods, and plentiful fast food options.

**1) New Orleans, LA**

With Hurricane Katrina wreaking havoc on some of New Orleans’ poorest communities, a lack of access to healthy foods has become even more of an issue for the city’s poorest residents. As of 2006, New Orleans ranked 8th nationally for the percentage of its population living in poverty. And according to change.org, some 60 percent of New Orleans residents say they have to choose between a buying food and paying utility bills. Researchers at the Congressional Hunger Center report that there are **only 20 grocery stores in New Orleans, compared to 30 before Katrina**, which means the average grocery store in New Orleans serves 16,000 people — twice the national average. Not having a full service grocery store in neighborhoods ultimately costs these communities millions of dollars in “grocery leakage,” money people spend outside the community for food. A study commissioned by O.C. Haley Boulevard Merchants and Business Association, estimates that New Orleanians spend nearly $915 million on grocery purchases, about $383 million spent by residents outside their own neighborhoods.

**2) Chicago, IL**

In Chicago, it is estimated that some 600,000 people live in areas that are considered food deserts, according to a report authored by Mari Gallagher Research & Consulting Group. Nearly one-third of these residents are children. **In a typical Black neighborhood in Chicago, the nearest grocery store is roughly twice as distant as the nearest fast food restaurant.** The study also found that Black Chicagoans travel the farthest on average to reach any type of grocery store (0.59 miles). Among those living in neighborhoods with the worst access to fresh food, ten of every 1,000 people die from cancer. And while a host of factors such as poor health care and stress also contribute to these numbers, the comparison is more chilling when it comes to deaths from cardiovascular disease, afflicting 11 people per 1,000 in the hardest-hit neighborhoods, compared with fewer than six per 1,000 among the best off.

**3) Atlanta, GA**

In Atlanta, the prevalence of food deserts appear along class as well as racial lines. According to a report sponsored by the Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University, Atlanta’s more affluent neighborhoods have more than three times as many supermarkets as its poor neighborhoods. When examined along racial lines, researchers found that there are **four times as many supermarkets in predominantly white neighborhoods as in black neighborhoods.** The study also found that only 8 percent of African Americans live in a census tract with a supermarket, compared to 31 percent of whites.

**4) Memphis, TN**

As of 2010 a Gallup poll ranked Tennessee second in the nation for states lacking access to healthy foods in low-income neighborhoods. The poll also ranked **Memphis #1 for hunger in the country with a startling 26 percent of people in the Memphis Metropolitan Statistical Area saying they couldn’t afford to buy food for their families in the last 12 months**. “What we know about Tennessee is that almost 13 percent of the census tracts are considered food deserts, both in inner-city urban areas as well as rural areas,” Ellen Holtzman head of Tennessee’s Food Trust. A 2010 Mid-South Food Bank survey found that 83 percent of those served by the bank had to choose between buying food and paying utilities. And 32 percent had to choose between buying food and paying rent or mortgage.

**5) Minneapolis, MN**

Since 1995, Minnesota’s rate of obesity has increased from 15 percent to 25 percent, bringing the total to roughly 1.3 million Minnesotans. Researchers say **food deserts, which covered about one-half of Minneapolis and nearly one-third of St. Paul** as of 2006, are largely to blame. In 2009, city authorities discovered that 36 percent of local corner stores did not have any fresh produce and the rest had produce that was limited. “Distance is compounded by the fact that for many people in these areas, a trip to the supermarket is costly and time consuming, ” economist Robert King, director of the University of Minnesota’s Food Industry Center said in an article published by the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis. “Low-income people are often less mobile than higher-income people.”

**6) San Francisco**

San Francisco has a fairly large food desert located in the Bayview, Hunters Point and Visitacion Valley neighborhoods – some of the poorest in San Francisco. In San Francisco, a staggering 150,000 people, 20% of the city’s population forsakes buying food in order to pay their bills. **In Hunters Point, some 40,000 residents travel miles to the nearest grocery store.**Most turn to nearby high-fat, high-sodium fast food. “The dollars spent by the fast-food industry far outnumber any resources that we as a city could spend on outreach and education.” San Francisco Supervisor Eric Mar told CNN. “No amount of physical activity can undo the harms of unhealthy eating.” Other Bay Area food deserts include neighborhoods in Oakland and Richmond. And each is not unlike many cities in California. Eight five percent of the states food deserts are found in urban ares.

**7) Detroit**

Myths that Detroit does not have one grocery store paint a rather bleak picture of a city once known for its vibrant automobile industry. According to estimates by the Detroit News, the city has 155 full-service grocery stores, compared to its more than 1,000 convenience stores – and gas stations that sell some type of food. Data from Mari Gallagher Research & Consulting Group, reports **more than 550,000 Detroit residents live in areas defined as food deserts**. Most residents live twice as far from the nearest supermarket than a fast food restaurant. Unsurprisingly, Detroit also has one of the nation’s highest obesity rates. According to the Michigan Department of Community Health, 70 percent of Detroiters are obese or overweight.

**8) New York**

The United Food and Commercial Workers Union claim only 550 full service remain in the city. A 2008 study conducted by the New York Department of City Planning estimates that as many as **three million New Yorkers live in communities without enough access supermarkets**. “Many people in low-income neighborhoods are spending their food budget at discount stores or pharmacies where there is no fresh produce,” Amanda Burden, the city’s planning director told the New York Times. Experts list neighborhoods in the Harlem, the South Bronx and Brooklyn  as some of the city’s various food deserts. In the impoverished Hunts Point section of the Bronx, home of the Northeast’s largest fresh food wholesale markets, the irony is that the neighborhood surrounding it boasts not one supermarket. Experts such as Susanne Freidberg an associate professor of geography at Dartmouth University claim small profits margins, space constraints, landlords’ preferences for tenants that don’t attract vermin, a perceived lack of demand and rising rents keep companies from full-service supermarkets in these areas.

**9) Camden, NJ**

A recent study by the Reinvestment Fund, a Philadelphia-based nonprofit group that researches urban issues claims more than 900,000 or more than 10 percent of New Jersey’s population lack adequate access to supermarkets with fresh fruit, vegetables, meat and dairy products. **Camden, which consistently ranks among the poorest and most violent cities in the U.S., has just one major supermarket,** a Pathmark near the city’s eastern border with Collingswood, and a smattering of other farmer’s markets, according to Phiilly.com Camden. Researchers say Camden residents lack both large supermarkets and the mass transportation needed to get to far-away stores.