

EH 101

12/12/24

Audience: United States Department of Agriculture Officials

Solving the Problem of Food Deserts

There are over 6,500 food deserts in the United States, according to mapping and research conducted by officials at the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA, 5). This research highlights the significance of the problem of food deserts in America. The U.S. Department of Agriculture should immediately take measures to address food deserts, which contribute to public health challenges and economic inequality, and ruin the well-being of communities. Without access to healthy, affordable food, residents of these areas can face an increased rate of diseases such as obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease. The lack of nutritious foods limits economic growth and opportunities for local businesses, compounding the problem of poverty. By addressing food deserts, the federal government can help these communities, ensuring that all Americans have access to healthy foods.

Food deserts contribute significantly to public health inequality, as most food deserts affect low-income and minority communities (USDA, 5). Public health inequality is an unfair difference in health among communities. In communities within food deserts, a lack of fresh, nutritious food can lead to unhealthy diets. These communities often lack grocery stores. Residents rely on convenience stores and fast-food restaurants. These foods are usually ultra-processed, high in calories, and are less nutritious. The lack of nutrition in the food at these stores leads to a dietary imbalance. According to an article by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, regarding access to healthy food, "Living in a food desert increases the risk of

poor diet and chronic diseases such as obesity, type 2 diabetes, and cardiovascular disease."(CDC,1) Due to a lack of healthy options among these communities, residents feel helpless, because there are no healthy options nearby. This sense of helplessness can negatively affect a community by reducing social engagement among residents, which can lead to a decline in mental health in the community. By addressing food deserts, the U.S. Department of Agriculture can limit the detrimental effects of food deserts and promote equal access to healthy foods.

Food deserts contribute to public health concerns and economic unfairness among affected communities. Economic unfairness is the unequal distribution of wealth among people in society. Food deserts contribute to this inequality of wealth ("Economic Inequality"). Without access to affordable, healthy foods, residents who live in food deserts are often reliant on convenience stores or fast-food restaurants as their source of nourishment. According to an analysis conducted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, "minority status and poverty are more prevalent in areas with limited access to healthy and affordable food," this pattern remained unchanged over time (USDA, 33). When the lack of availability of healthy, fresh food combined with limited access to healthcare, fitness, and recreation facilities in food deserts, the unfavorable health outcomes for these communities are magnified (USDA, 34). These conditions leave little incentive to invest in community development and infrastructure, leading to a cycle of poverty and poor health (USDA, 33-34). This may also lead to higher medical costs because of chronic diseases like diabetes. The increase in medical costs worsens the effects of poverty in the community. According to the Economic Research Service of the USDA, "Limited access to healthy food can lead to poor health outcomes and increase healthcare costs, placing a significant financial burden on families and communities" (Food Accessibility). This economic burden not

only affects individuals in the community but also the surrounding local economies. The loss of productivity at local businesses because of illnesses along with a rise in healthcare coverage can hinder economic development in those areas. The economic downturn for these communities is prevalent, but if the USDA promoted affordable healthy food, it could reduce the long-term financial burden on the community.

The negative effects on economic growth and the adverse effects on the physical health of a community in a food desert combine to affect the overall well-being of a community (Ejiogho, 9). A community's well-being is reflected by how members of a community feel. This includes factors such as their physical health and economic opportunities. The lack of nutritious food can create a sense of hopelessness as residents struggle to find healthy options. The lack of access to these foods can lead to mental health issues, such as stress. Residents of food deserts have a lower standard of living. People living in these areas often feel frustrated and stressed out, as they try to improve their family or community's nutrition (Ejiogho, 9). According to the American Psychological Association, "The lack of access to healthy food... increases psychological stress and contributes to the poor mental health outcomes of individuals in those areas." (Ejiogho et al. 5) These feelings can weaken a community and can erode social trust within the community due to their needs not being met. Addressing food deserts is vital for improving both the mental and physical health of residents. By improving access to healthy foods, the U.S. Department of Agriculture can restore hope in a community, allowing for a better quality of life for affected areas.

Addressing food deserts through federal policies presents many challenges. This includes how to incentivize retailers to move into these impoverished communities, local food cultures, and a lack of transportation that would allow residents to travel to communities to purchase

healthy, nutritious foods outside of the food desert in which they live (USDA, 34). However, this does not diminish the urgency to take action. The Institute of Medicine was charged by Congress to study the health outcomes of people living within food deserts. Through mapping, food deserts have been identified (National Academy of Sciences, 16). They found that these communities have “tragically little food security and... uncertain or inconsistent access to a wholesome, nutritious food supply” (Thomas, 22). They acknowledge that access to healthy food alone may not improve the health outcomes of these communities, especially when you consider that healthy, fresh foods are generally more expensive (National Academy of Sciences, 17). While this may not solve the problem entirely, access to better, more nutritious food is the first step toward improving communities in food deserts. Federal intervention in the form of mobile food markets would provide a short-term alternative that would boost the community. Some have also suggested that food stamps will fix the problem. However, food stamps alone will not solve the problem of food deserts, as they fail to address the root cause of limited access to affordable, nutritious food in underserved areas. Federal action is crucial to address the current overall health of these communities. Long-term solutions to increase access to healthy, fresh foods and to provide ways to make these foods more affordable will support the health and economy of communities in food deserts.

The United States Department of Agriculture must take immediate action to address the urgent issue of food deserts, as they negatively impact the public health and economics of communities, especially low-income and minority communities. Despite all the factors that contribute to food deserts, the most pressing problem remains a lack of access to affordable, healthy food. Without access to more nutritious food, these communities will continue to experience poor health outcomes, higher healthcare costs, and economic decline. Overall, these

challenges hinder the well-being of individuals in these communities. They remain in a cycle of poverty and poor health. The USDA has an opportunity to not only improve the community's physical and mental health but also improve the long-term economic health of these communities. Without the immediate action of the USDA to end the presence of food deserts in the United States, these communities will continue to suffer.

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