

Grow Your Food and Eat It Too

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Redmond, Washington is an affluent, leafy suburb 10 miles east of Seattle. The downtown area of Redmond has 5 major supermarkets within walking distance of one another to serve roughly 68,000 residents. In contrast, New Orleans, Louisiana has 10 supermarkets across the entire city, serving about 390,000 residents. It is filled with corner markets and Dollar General stores that stock cheap and quick food like fried chicken, chips, and microwaveable dinners. This is what is known as a food desert. Food deserts are defined as poor areas where residents have limited access to affordable, varied, and healthy food (Walker et al., 2010). The median income per household in New Orleans is roughly \$39,000, according to the census bureau, while the same data for Redmond is about \$123,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). The disparity in income between the two areas correlates with the lack of large supermarkets. Evidence has shown that lacking a profit motive, grocery retailers choose not to establish new outlets in urban areas (Walker et al., 2010). That same income inequality can affect the way those who live in food deserts are able to access grocery stores on the edges of town or in nearby suburbs as they may not own vehicles or public transportation might be poor; a problem more affluent residents are not regularly faced with. One consequence of living in a food desert, where shopping choices are scant and fast-food options are plentiful, is poor health, which disproportionately affects minority communities (Walker et al., 2010). While the examples of Redmond and New Orleans are on a much larger scale than individual neighborhoods, they are nonetheless representative of the issue at hand because of the similar relative income inequality and supermarket access that one might see distributed within a single metropolitan area. The lack of access to supermarkets in low-income neighborhoods results in negative health outcomes for residents which could be addressed with government intervention, building grassroots

community involvement, and increasing education about nutrition and how to maximize the usefulness of available resources.

State or city governments could pass measures to give tax breaks to large retail grocers if they build new outlets in underserved neighborhoods. This type of incentive could potentially replace the profit motive that is missing for these companies when lower-income neighborhoods spend less money on food. However, it has been suggested that supermarkets could perform well in food deserts simply due to a lack of competition (Walker et al., 2010). Furthermore, a move like this could spark a chain reaction of economic growth for a depressed area. If a large grocery retailer were to build in an underserved neighborhood, it could attract more people to begin living there. An increase in population might lead to more small businesses making up for the tax incentive the grocery store got in the first place. Because building a new outlet and generating buy-in from a business takes time, the government could provide transportation vouchers alongside the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in the interim to address the challenges faced by residents who do not own personal vehicles. Studies from Kirkup et al. in 2004 and Lake and Townshend in 2006 showed that residents who lacked personal vehicles had more trouble accessing supermarkets outside of their neighborhoods (as cited in Walker et al., 2010). Transportation vouchers could come in the form of a bus pass or limited access to discounted Uber rides. Making transportation more affordable would provide an opportunity for those most in need to access varied and healthy food options on the edges of their neighborhood where supermarkets exist when there are none closer. Incentivizing businesses to build where they might not otherwise and creating better opportunities for low-income residents to access healthy food are two things only the government can achieve.

Government participation to minimize the prevalence of food deserts will be necessary, but equally important will be the need for community buy-in which can be addressed with the installation of community gardens. Gardening clubs can team up with governments to purchase empty or derelict lots and build places for locals to learn how to plant and harvest their own food. Although past efforts to gain access to vacant properties have shown that local governments can be difficult to work with, the success of similar programs in cities like Philadelphia (Meenar & Hoover, 2012) and Detroit (Davison, 2017) may help build momentum and minimize apprehension. Community gardens can be places of learning for families as well as a source of free or earned nutrition. With gardens in their own neighborhoods, people can learn how to grow food and begin doing so in their own yards, teaching their neighbors how to grow their own food, and be their own source of necessary nutrition, circumventing the need for a profit-driven business to provide for them. The idea of transforming derelict or empty properties into urban farms, community gardens, or community green spaces has been addressed through several studies and been shown to increase economic activity, increase property values, build stronger ties within a community, in addition to providing better access to fresh and healthy food (Meenar & Hoover, 2012). Detroit has many organizations and groups revitalizing the city with over 1,500 community gardens or urban farms (Davison, 2017). Devita Davison describes the revitalization of the Brightmoor neighborhood which has been overhauled into a neighborhood filled with small farms and a co-op for the farms to sell their food. An expansion on this idea is to turn empty tracts of grass along sidewalks and parking lots into mini vegetable gardens. If the main problem with a food desert is the neighborhood's access to healthy and nutritious food, perhaps the solution should be to turn the neighborhood into a food forest. Trees in parks and alongside roads could be spliced with fruit-bearing species. If someone were

walking down the street and saw a carrot popping up, they should be able to bend over and harvest it. If they turned the corner and were enticed by the warming aroma coming from a rosemary bush, they should be able to cut off a sprig. If they pass a mulberry tree on their way home, they could fill their pockets. Beginning with community gardens to teach people how to grow their own food could gradually turn into self-sufficient communities who have flipped a problem on its head to create abundance for themselves.

Providing access to food and creating opportunities for direct involvement are necessary steps toward eliminating food deserts, but it is important to ensure that communities know how to best utilize their new resources. Once supermarkets and community gardens are in place, it might still be a challenge to convince residents to change their habits and embrace the additions to the neighborhood. However, that challenge could be approached with health education initiatives to build community awareness. It has been shown that people choose the food that is most easily available to them (Walker et al., 2010). Sociologists believe that education occurs in two ways, through formal education and informal education. Formal education is the memorization of facts and ideas through structured programs, and informal education is the transfer of knowledge and culture through participation in society (Griffiths & Keirns, 2015). Fortunately, technology has become much more accessible these days, and many people have smartphones that can access social media, which can be used for a type of informal education or the sharing of culture. Local health networks could utilize social media and tap popular “influencers” from individual communities to be spokespeople of health campaigns and urban agriculture initiatives. Communities would likely respond better to someone they are familiar with and look up to than a government official or scientist. Local personalities like sports figures, musicians, or artists could be partnered with to spread information about the newly gained access

to supermarkets and community gardens by making cooking or gardening videos with food grown or purchased locally. Videos like the Tasty (Tasty, n.d.) cooking videos commonly found on Facebook feeds would serve a dual purpose of educating viewers on nutrition and about the new resources available in the neighborhood. To create more formal education opportunities, classes held at community gardens would teach people who are unfamiliar with gardening some of the best practices. In tandem, a greater focus on educating the youth in schools would be helpful. Cooking classes and courses on nutrition would allow students to take an active role in maintaining a healthy diet and contribute to stronger family bonds by implementing lessons into their daily lives. A two-pronged approach of teaching a community about how to best utilize their resources would work well once there are healthy options available for them to follow through on the knowledge.

Access to diverse, affordable, and nutritious food is unequally distributed between low-income neighborhoods and middle/high-income neighborhoods. Local governments should take the lead in solving this problem by incentivizing supermarket chains to build in these neighborhoods and increasing transportation options for residents to access supermarkets outside of their immediate neighborhoods. Furthermore, governments should cooperate with grassroots organizers who wish to transform disused or blighted properties in food deserts into community gardens for locals to begin providing for themselves. To maximize the effectiveness of these solutions, social media campaigns could be launched with local celebrities to ensure communities know how to take full advantage of their new resources. The prevalence of food deserts is a broad problem that could be accepting of a variety of different solutions. To be sure, though, it will require cooperation from every level of society.

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