

Finding Food in Chicago and the Suburbs

The Report of the Northeastern Illinois Community Food Security Assessment

The Project

Access to healthy, culturally appropriate food is a struggle in many Chicago area communities. Many inner-city communities, in particular, lack chain supermarkets. While these patterns are well known, they are extremely complex and dynamic. The Northeastern Illinois Community Food Security Assessment is a base-line survey of Chicago's food system, which studied these patterns at four levels. For the six-county Chicagoland region, location data was collected for: independent and chain supermarkets, as well as chain convenience stores, food pantries, farmer's markets, and chain fast-food restaurants. Chain store data was collected in both 2005 and 2007. These data were then compared to neighborhood demographics.

Six communities within Chicago were studied in depth. In Englewood, Hegewisch, Lower West Side (Pilsen), Portage Park, and Riverdale and Uptown, we completed price and availability studies of community groceries, and in five communities (all but Uptown) we conducted a series of interviews with consumers, store owners and managers, and service providers (such as food pantry managers). Finally, in Riverdale, Hegewisch, and Englewood, a series of door-to-door household surveys on hunger and access to emergency food and social safety net programs was collected. Researchers partnered with local community groups to collect data and help disseminate results.

Conclusions

Food Access Mapping:

- Lower-income African-American neighborhoods, both in the city and in the suburbs, have relatively low access to supermarkets.
- Hispanic neighborhoods have similarly low access to chain supermarkets, but have many independent stores.

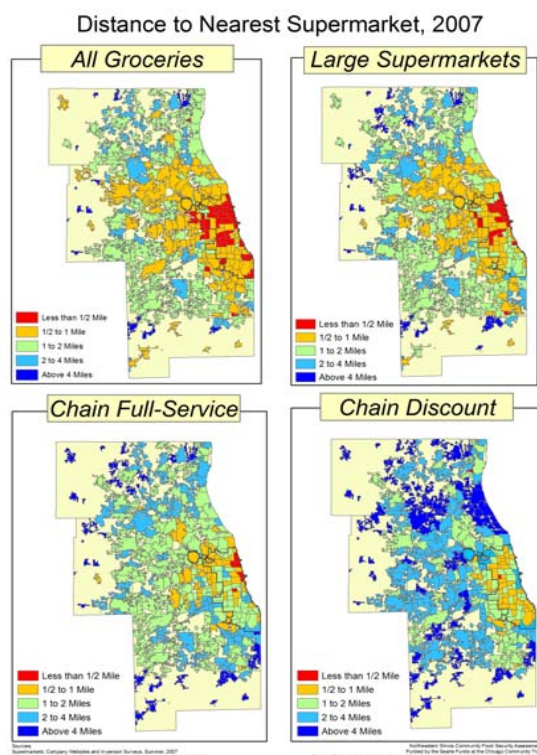
- Areas of poor food access were found on Chicago's South and West Sides, the southern suburbs, central Aurora, Maywood, North Chicago and southern Waukegan, and the Round Lake area.
- New areas with low access to full-service chain stores appeared between 2005 and 2007, particularly in the Austin/West Humboldt Park area of Chicago and the southern suburbs.
- More full-service chains, such as Jewel and Dominick's closed than opened between 2005 and 2007. Discount chains, such as Aldi and specialty chains such as Whole Foods have opened many new locations. Except discount chains, few stores are opening in predominantly African-American neighborhoods.

Consumer and Retailer Interviews:

- Inadequate transportation is a barrier to getting to food.
- Consumers felt small stores in their communities were dirty and unkempt, sometimes with rude and disrespectful staff.
- Many retail food owners feel they offer healthy foods, but also cited some barriers to doing so.
- In several communities, food insecurity was seen as being made worse by increasing gentrification.
- Particularly vulnerable groups included older adults, and unemployed, disabled, and homeless individuals.

Price and Availability Study:

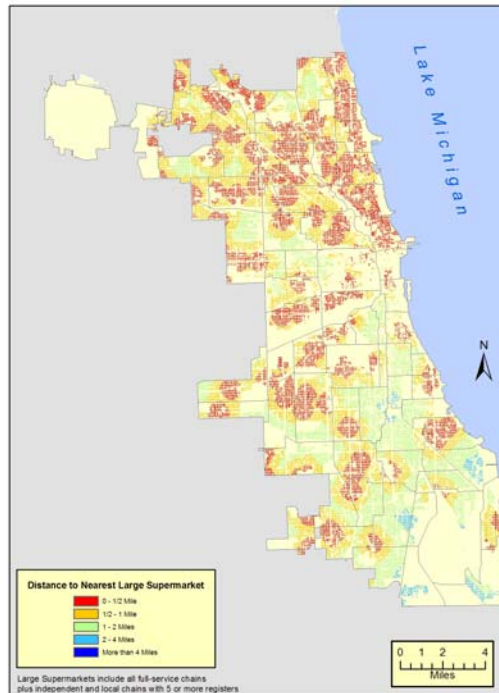
- Full-service chain supermarkets carried by far the most grocery items, followed by discount and independent supermarkets.
- Discount supermarkets were by far the cheapest of the store types, but often carried few items specific to the dominant ethnic group in a community.



Door-to-door and Food Pantry Recipient Surveys:

- With only one exception, everyone surveyed who utilized a food pantry was Food Insecure. Anecdotal accounts of recipients abusing Food Pantries appear to be grossly inaccurate.
- Gardening was an uncommon activity among those with low incomes. Promotion of gardening and communities could reduce food insecurity among low income households.

Distance to the Nearest Large Supermarket
Chicago, 2007



Sources:
Supermarkets: Company Websites and In-person Surveys, Summer, 2007
Other Map Items: US Census Bureau, 2000; Chicago Metro Agency for Planning, 2001

Northeastern Illinois Community Food Security Assessment
Funded by the Searle Funds at the Chicago Community Trust
Map and Foreword Compiled by
Chicago State University, Neighborhood Assistance Center
January 2008

Recommendations

1. Plans for new stores and programs should be developed as part of a general community health and retail access plan and should be community led or involve a large amount of community input.
2. When desired locations are set, incentives should be made to supermarkets to open in areas of low food access.
3. African-American oriented independent supermarkets should be encouraged to develop.
4. Existing stores in underserved communities could be a resource through which increased healthy food access could occur. However, in many communities relationships between these stores and the community must be improved for this to work.
5. In the most isolated communities, transportation is a great barrier. Developing bus lines or sponsoring alternative transportation to local stores would help these communities even if new stores are difficult to develop. Such options are also needed for the elderly and other vulnerable groups.
6. More attention should be paid to suburban areas of low food access, in particular in the southern suburbs, North Chicago, and central Aurora.
7. Alternative food access strategies such as community gardens, food co-ops, urban agriculture, and farmers' markets, should be actively pursued. These both improve access and build stronger communities.
8. Work with pantries to improve food quality and quantity from the Food Depository.
9. Residents pointed out budgeting, cooking, and food buying as skills that younger residents often lacked. Innovative techniques need to be developed to help teach these skills.

Acknowledgements

This project was completed by Chicago State University's Neighborhood Assistance Center in partnership with the University of Illinois at Chicago School of Public Health. Dr. Daniel Block of CSU coordinated the study as a whole and led the geographic analysis. Dr. Judy Birgen CSU led the door-to-door survey. Dr. Noel Chavez of UIC led the qualitative research and the price and availability study, assisted by Dr. Nancy Bates. Elizabeth McLennan collected and helped analyze the GIS data and Jennifer Hebert-Beirne helped analyze the qualitative reports. Veronica Tuner helped draft this flier. We would also like to thank the numerous other students who helped with the research.

The investigators were assisted by community groups including Imagine Englewood If..., the Hegewisch Community Committee, People for Community Recovery, Alivio Health Center, the Six Corners Chamber of Commerce, Healthy Southeast Side, and the Portage Park Neighborhood Association. We would also like to thank all of the members of the advisory council.

The Northeastern Illinois Community Food Security Assessment was funded primarily by a grant from the Searle Funds at the Chicago Community Trust. Result dissemination was funded by a grant from the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation through the Consortium to Lower Obesity in Chicago Children at Children's Memorial Hospital.

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