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Unjust Deserts

Finding quality fresh food is a daunting task for thousands of Memphians.

by [HANNAH SAYLE](#)



In January, a study conducted by the Food Research and Action Center gave Memphis the unenviable distinction of "hunger capital of the United States."

Since then, a swell of interest and concern over urban "food deserts" — places where there are few or no options for fresh foods and produce — has brought issues of food access for underserved communities to the fore.

"This is a real hot-button issue — food deserts and food insecurity," says Josephine Williams of GrowMemphis and the Mid-South Peace and Justice Center. Williams is part of a group which came together in April to coordinate efforts in the realm of food accessibility and the development of a viable urban food system. Williams and the other members expect to turn the working group into a full-fledged Memphis and Shelby County Food Policy Council by 2012. It would be one of a number of such groups that have sprung up to address food-access issues in cities all across the nation.

Williams says that one of the biggest reasons to move toward an organized Food Policy Council is that so much is happening all of a sudden. In addition to the Consortium for Health Education, Economic Empowerment, and Research (CHEER), a group performing health-disparities research at the University of Tennessee Health Science Center, this summer saw the whirlwind development of Urban Farm in Binghamton and a spike in the number of area farmers markets, with four new markets this season alone, including one in South Memphis.

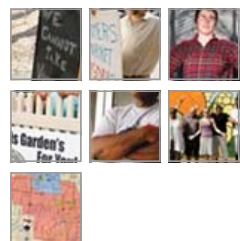
In zip codes like 38126 — the poorest in the city with a median income of \$12,000 — small corner stores and convenience stores abound, but a supermarket could be miles away. Stocked with little or no produce and priced out of range for many residents, convenience stores do not provide viable access to fresh foods. From a lack of full-scale grocery stores in their neighborhoods to inefficiencies in existing nutrition-assistance programs, Memphians in low-income areas are struggling with a food system that is failing them.

In an especially ironic twist, SNAP benefits, or food stamps, are allocated according to national food averages, based on prices at supermarkets that do not exist in food deserts. Thus, many citizens who depend on food stamps the most can't buy adequate food with the assistance they receive.

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Justin Fox Burks



"We went into 38126 and did some food store evaluations," says Brandi Franklin, project manager of CHEER. "What you'll find in abundance on the shelves are snacks and soda. Sundry stores carry some limited supplies of household staples, typically dry goods, but you'd be hard-pressed to find canned fruits."

Curtis Thomas of The Works, Inc., community development corporation in South Memphis also did an informal survey of corner stores in the area and found a gallon of milk could cost as much as six or seven dollars. Shoppers at the South Memphis Farmers Market added security issues at corner stores to the complaints of prohibitive prices and meager selection. "People just hang out there," says Donna Owens, housing program coordinator at The Works, Inc., and a resident of South Memphis. "I don't feel safe."

The new farmers market in South Memphis also struggles with red-tape barriers around the Federal Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP). Over the past several weeks, anywhere from 50 to 100 senior citizens have walked or taken the bus to the new farmers market on South Parkway. With no other fresh food options in their neighborhoods and sometimes traveling miles in the blistering August heat, the seniors arrive only to be turned away because the SFMNP vouchers are not accepted by any of the market's vendors. Currently, there are only 11 vendors at local farmers markets who are approved to accept the vouchers.

"One woman walked all the way from Glenview with her small wire cart and only the vouchers to shop with," says Kenneth Reardon, a market organizer and director of the graduate program in city and regional planning at the University of Memphis. "We tell them where they can find those who accept the vouchers, but many residents don't have cars. Knowing that there are vendors at the Cooper-Young market doesn't help them much."

The consequences of this dysfunctional food system are unsettling. In the city of Memphis, 34 percent of adults and 16 percent of high school students are obese. Though limited access to food seems at odds with weight gain, studies show that food insecurity can lead to obesity, because the least expensive food available is usually high in calories, energy-dense, and nutrient-poor.

"There's a connection," says Shelley White-Means, director of CHEER. "If we could address the hunger issue, then we could reduce the cost of providing the care that's needed — the treatment for diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, kidney failure — they're all linked to food access."

Programs, Policies, and Possibilities

"The idea of food policy councils is to bring together diverse stakeholders from the food system," Williams says. Representatives from Memphis and Shelby County Health Department, Christ Community Health Services, and the University of Memphis' graduate program in city and regional planning, as well as community members at-large, are part of the food policy group Williams calls the "democracy of doers." While they are still in the planning phase, the group also is taking on smaller projects.

"You don't get a lot of credit for planning for two years," Williams says. "So while we're working [toward 2012], we're also trying to work on some policy issues that are immediate that we feel can be successful."

One such success can be found in the pages of the Unified Development Code (UDC) passed by the Shelby County Commission on August 9th and by the Memphis City Council the next day. This comprehensive overhaul of zoning codes includes streamlining the process for starting a farmers market, approving neighborhood gardens as a principal use in almost every zone, and permitting citizens to raise chickens in residential areas. Though Williams points out that many of these activities were going on before, the official recognition is crucial to a new urban food system.

"It's a great progressive zoning policy that we needed," Williams says, "promoting dense communities where amenities are where people are."

They aren't stopping there. By the end of this year, the Office of Planning & Development will clean up the final UDC, and the food policy group has submitted suggestions.

"We feel like farmers markets should be permitted anywhere convenience stores are," Williams says. "Convenience stores are permitted in residential areas. If you can have a place that sells malt liquor and cigarettes, why can't you have a place that sells tomatoes and peppers?"

Other recommendations include lifting the restrictions on farmers market hours and removing onerous special-use and facilities requirements for produce trucks. The food policy group also hopes to facilitate the use of Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) machines at farmers markets and address the inadequacies of the SFMNP and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) vouchers system by getting more Tennessee farmers to apply for approval.

Whether Williams' group will become an independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit or work as an advisory arm of the city council and county commission is still up in the air. A number of models such as those in Detroit, New Orleans, and Hartford, Connecticut, are being looked at, according to Williams. Detroit is a particularly salient model for a Memphis food policy group. "[Memphis and Detroit] have a strong equity focus, a racially diverse group, and similar issues with disinvestment in urban core areas, vacant land in the city, and health outcomes that fall on racial and economic lines," she says.

Trusty Sidekicks

In 2009, an annual obesity report ranked Tennessee as the fourth-fattest state in the nation. This year, Tennessee jumped to second place.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation — committed to ending the childhood obesity epidemic — responded with funding for The Food Trust, a national nonprofit model, to begin a Tennessee project. The hope is that the Tennessee project will replicate the successes of other states and cities — in particular, the success of the Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative.

The Fresh Food Financing Initiative is a public-private partnership through which The Food Trust and a community development financial institution leveraged government seed money at a three-to-one ratio. With a pool of \$120 million, the program gave one-time grants and loans to supermarket operators and developers to overcome barriers and open supermarkets in underserved areas across Pennsylvania.

"To date, there have been approximately 82 successful projects," says Ellen Holtzman, who heads up the Tennessee project. "We estimate that the Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative has created 1.5 million square feet of fresh food retail, has created or retained 5,000 jobs, and is estimated to have served 400,000 residents of the commonwealth of Pennsylvania."

So far, The Food Trust has worked closely with community groups across the state and gathered information about the specific barriers to supermarket development in Tennessee. They will issue a report of their findings this fall.

"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," Holtzman says. "Memphis in particular has significant areas that are food deserts."

The development of a Fresh Food Financing Initiative has not come a moment too soon. "The [Obama] administration has allocated \$400 million in the 2011 budget for federal aid for supermarket development," Holtzman says. "If and when supermarket federal money becomes available, the states that have the infrastructure will be better positioned to receive the money."

Focusing on supermarkets and grocery stores instead of urban farming and farmers markets is also a strategic choice.

"Supermarkets are the most consistent, reliable source of healthy food," Holtzman explains. "Supermarkets provide good jobs with benefits and upward mobility; supermarkets most often hire from the immediate area; supermarkets act like anchors and can bring other businesses into a neighborhood; and supermarkets can increase property values in the homes within a quarter- to a half-mile distance of the new development."

At the end of 2012, The Food Trust hopes to issue a set of policy recommendations and start the process of giving grants, loans, and incentives to new markets.

A Free Market

Jeffrey Higgs, executive director of the LeMoyne-Owen College Community Development Corporation, hopes to see a supermarket in his South Memphis neighborhood long before 2012. The Soulsville Towne Center on McLemore is already built and has space for a 27,000-square-foot grocery store. Some residents are wondering why a market isn't already in place.

"We're trying our darndest to get someone to come in and operate as a grocery," Higgs says. "It's built to the new urban code. The entrance comes right up to the sidewalk." Both Aldi and Save-A-Lot have looked at the space but turned it down.

It's also in a community that studies have shown to be capable of supporting one, if not two, grocery stores. Both CB Richard Ellis and Associated Wholesale Grocers (AWG) have done comprehensive studies on the economic viability of a supermarket in the center. In December 2009, the University of Memphis finished a similar study for the South Memphis area, showing that roughly 40,000 square feet of additional grocery retail space would be feasible for the 38106 zip code.

"Yes, it's a poor area," says U of M's Reardon, "but it has a fairly high density, so if you've got more lower-income people on an acre, and you put their combined purchasing power together, it's substantial."

Still, most grocery chains fear low profit margins and extra security costs in high-crime neighborhoods. Reardon admits that the relationship between the supermarket and the community would have to be a unique one.

"We want a service-rich supermarket. We want one that studies the community and brings in the products that the people need at a price they can afford. We also take into consideration that many of our families work a lot of hours. You might have to have an extended-hours supermarket or co-op. We also have a significant number of families that are on public assistance and social security-funded income, so we're going to have to have a supermarket that enthusiastically participates in all the state and federal food programs."

Bottom-Up Efforts

Regardless of whether a supermarket succeeds, Reardon hopes to continue the farmers market in South Memphis, especially since it began as an alternative to the supermarket. "We sent a copy of our supermarket report to location consultants for regional and national [supermarket] firms that operate in our area," Reardon says. "We got an anemic response."

So far, the South Memphis Farmers Market has been very successful, even earning a nod on the White House blog. When the summer season ends, market organizers hope to move to a permanent location, start accepting EBTs and vouchers, and expand their vendor list.

Urban Farm in Binghamton, which is open to the community Tuesday through Friday from 7 to 11 a.m., has been successful as well, turning funding from the Kresge Foundation into a multiple-acre farm in the heart of another food desert, in Midtown. They were also the most recent farmers market to be approved by the City Council, ensuring a community outlet for the Urban Farm produce as well as produce from other farmers.

"It's a very complicated issue," Williams says. "There's not a one-size-fits-all solution. It's going to be a convergence of factors."