

A Desert Mirage, Myth of Detroit's Food Desert

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This piece challenges the contemporary view of the city of Detroit as a “food desert”. Despite a low number of traditional supermarkets, the city of Detroit has developed a unique web of food networks. Only 10% of Detroit qualifies as a food desert, considering these alternative modes of food viability. However, these initiatives often go unnoticed, perpetuating misconceptions and biases against the city and its residents. Detroit's relationship with food access is much more nuanced, as the city faces food insecurity along more racial lines. Although alternative food networks contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Detroit's food access, the issue of food security persists in various pockets of the city. Communities that experience food insecurity within the city are most often occupied by minority groups.

The piece highlights the unresolved issues of Detroit's issue of food security, as many of the city's minority communities struggle with food insecurity related to a turbulent past of racism and xenophobia. This paper will examine the disparity in the city's food security as well as the resulting health burden incurred by the city. Additionally, this paper will examine potential mitigation strategies in addressing this issues. Ultimately, this paper will determine the history and current status of Detroit's food insecurity, how it affects the city's residents, and potential strategies to mitigate any disparities in food security.

Keywords

Food insecurity • Alternative food networks • Urban food systems • Community food projects • Food redlining • Institutionalized racism • Mitigation strategies

Introduction

The city of Detroit is often looked at as a failed city. Dilapidating and crumbling, crippled by the exodus of the auto-industry and racial riots in the post nineteenth century. Contemporary observers

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point to a mirage of issues to illustrate this belief, the housing crisis, educational disparity, poverty, and the food desert. Yet the reality of the city is not so simple or clear cut. Detroit is often pointed to as a prominent food desert, an area that lacks outlets for the distribution of nutritionally adequate foods for its residents. This definition permeates from casual observers to journalists and researchers (“Treat Everybody right”, 2016). The reality of the situation, like much of Detroit, is a much more nuanced subject, Detroit is not a food Desert but rather presents a multifaceted food network that has unequal food insecurity rooted along racial line.

Historical Evolution

Rooted in the city's early history, Detroit's issue of food insecurity has evolved and changed just as much as the city. Beginning in the early nineteenth century, the great migration north brought a large influx of former agrarian African American, with many coming to Detroit (Sugrue, 2014). African Americans came seeking employment in the burgeoning auto industry, but instead found an institutionally racist system that relegated them to undesirable jobs and gave worse treatment and service (Sugrue). These would include lower wages as well as assignment to more hazardous jobs than their white counterparts (Sugrue). This would permeate to the food industry, with food markets actively discriminating against African Americans, by refusing them service, and often refusing to hire them (Sugrue). This would create a habitual rift between Detroit African American residents and traditional food systems like grocery stores and supermarkets, a disconnect that has led to much hesitancy for traditional food systems to work within the city of Detroit (Meyersohn, 2020).

Inextricably linked to Detroit's racist history is the connection of food insecurity to white flight. White flight refers to the mass exodus of primarily white Detroit residents to the suburbs in the middle and late nineteenth century to the suburbs (Meyersohn, 2020). White flight brought much of Detroit industry and amenities out of the city, as companies sought to follow the burgeoning suburban market. As a result primarily African American populace were left in Detroit as jobs, opportunities, and food markets left (Meyersohn). Supermarkets and grocery stores would leave the city during white flight for the suburbs, disproportionately leaving African Americans in a state of food insecurity. This mass exodus to suburbs would also serve to keep many traditional food systems from returning, as managers and company officials were hesitant to re-expand into the city which they viewed as unprofitable (Meyersohn). As a direct result there were fewer supermarkets and grocery stores within the city, leaving many great distances from the nearest food center. This issue is compounded by Detroit's layout. Detroit is organized as a spread-out city, with large spaces between buildings, paired with a lack of public transport (Fowler, 2021). Such a layout fit well for the motor city, where private cars were the primary mode of transport (Fowler). Consequently, Detroit's layout has contributed to its own food insecurity, creating great distances between residents and traditional food systems like grocery stores and a lack of public transport to mitigate said distance, leaving many Detroit residents in a difficult situation to access food (Taylor and Ard., 2015). The history of racial segregation in the food markets, has led to a mass exodus of these markets, in addition to a city layout unable to handle a scarcity in these food markets worked to create a food security issue that affects Detroit today.

Detroit is Not a Complete Food Desert

Detroit's historical evolution of food security has given many contemporary observers their justification for marking the city as a food desert. The lack of supermarkets throughout the city seems to be proof enough that the city qualifies for the title ("The History and Conflict", 2013). Yet in reality this skewed viewing ignores the truth of the city's relationship with food inequality. Detroit has evolved to form many alternative food systems to meet residents needs for food security and has worked to positively affect the problem ("The History and Conflict" Accounting for these alternative modes of food viability, only 10% of Detroit can truly be classified as a food desert (Taylor and Ard., 2015).

The city of Detroit has taken action to address its issues of food insecurity, ranging from food stamp programs to community agricultural projects, farmers markets, and other food assistance programs (Dorsey, 2016). These alternative food projects have been implemented throughout the city and provide for much of the nutritional needs of the city's residents, mitigating the effects of a lack of traditional food systems like supermarkets within the city. Programs such as the Green-grocer project which has been distributing economic incentives to food providers within the city (Bastian and Napieralski, 2016), as well as local urban gardening projects like the Garden Resource Project Collective, which sponsored local urban growing and farmers markets to sell grown produce throughout the city (Taylor and Kerry, 2015). These programs and incentives make up a large proportion of the city's food network yet are often unaccounted for when the city's food adequacy is inspected ("The History and Conflict", 2013).

While these programs have been effective and have been sustaining the city, they are often not observed by causal and professional observers to the city or are often discounted as unviable ("The History and Conflict, 2013). Combined with the lack of traditional food systems that are the primary source of nutrition for the suburbs creates a misconception that Detroit is a desolate waste (Dorsey, 2016). This misunderstood legacy is entirely detrimental to the city of Detroit and has a lasting impact on the city and its residents, contributing to Detroit's reputation as a failing city, a city unable to adequately feed its people (Dorsey). Further it ignores and undermines and mitigates the ingenuity of Detroit residents who have worked to better their community, portraying them as impoverished and struggling to feed themselves (Dorsey). Subsequently, such a belief works on what is described as "color blind" racism directed towards the cities African American populace. Color blind racism coined by Eduardo Silva, describes an informal mode of racism by criticizing a race or ethnicity indirectly by broadly criticizing their conditions (Krause, 2021). The perception of Detroit's food insecurity fits this, as many use this criticism of the city as a thinly veiled expression of their racist prejudices of the African American residents as failing (Dorsey). While this misconception of Detroit as a complete food desert is inflated, it is not entirely unmerited. There are certain zones within the city that do struggle with food insecurity, but like most of the city's issues there is much more nuance to this issue which must be further examined to understand the issue.

The legacy of the city's food insecurity is rooted in a fundamental misunderstanding of the city's food system. Oftentimes researchers examine Detroit's food systems like many other cities, classifying areas without traditional supermarkets and grocery stores as desert zones, devoid of food availability ("The History and Conflict", 2013). While this examination may be justified in other contemporary American cities, it fundamentally ignores Detroit's unique food network, discounting the food programs, urban farming, and individual agency of food providers throughout the city (Dorsey, 2016). Changing the perception and understanding of Detroit's relationship with food insecurity would encompass recognition of these alternative food systems both from the casual and professional observer. Enhanced

media focus would serve both to change the cities perception and further to bring more attention to the city's alternative food networks and work to grow into a more mainstream term ("Treaty Everybody Right", 2016). Beyond recognition economic investment into these programs as a solution to the city rather than the current fixation on traditional food systems would create a plausible solution to the cities areas that remain in a state of food insecurity (Bastian and Napieralski, 2016). Growing the existing infrastructure within the city and working with the city's residents and local business rather than looking to the food systems that abandoned the city could prove to be a upstream and plausible solution to a problem that has often eluded traditional solutions (Bastian and Napieralsk).

While Detroit is Not Entirely a Food Desert, Food Insecurity Disproportionality Affects African Americans

The city of Detroit cannot be called a complete food desert, much of the city has access to nutritionally adequate foods through alternative means of food acquisition. However, the city does have a food security issue, which is an issue that disproportionately; affects African American residents in the city (Taylor and Kerry, 2015). The region has had a long-lasting history of racial discrimination, that extends into the food systems of the city. Traditional supermarkets and grocers have long document histories of discrimination, both by refusing services as well as often refusing to hire African Americans (Sugrue, 2014). This longstanding history has served to create a permanent rift between African American residents and the chain stores, contributing to the decisions of many of these companies to leave the city during the period of white flight (Meyersohn, 2020). As a result there are a disproportionately fewer amounts of supermarkets and grocery stores in areas that have higher African American population demographics. In a phenomenon often referred to as "food redlining", predominantly African American neighborhoods experience limited access to affordable and health food options (Taylor and Kerry). Combined with the lack of public transport within the city, creates a situation where African Americans residents in Detroit have an inordinately low access to nutritionally adequate foods then other racial elements (Taylor and Kerry). However, as previously discussed, the city has alternative routes of food access such as urban farming collectives and food programs which provide an alternative route for food access (Dorsey). Yet even these route are not fully open to the city's African American residents, due to their limited scope, prevalence and inability to effect change on the entirety of the city, compounded by the lack of infrastructure for the transport and storage of perishable fruits and vegetables creates a difficult situation in reaching African American residents (Taylor and Kerry). Further other socio-economic factors pertaining to African Americans that prevent them from fully accessing these resources, both in a lack of public transport to them, and in their often-high prices (Taylor and Kerry).

This legacy of systemic racism and discrimination prevails today and has a lasting effect on Detroit's African Americans population. The issue of food discrimination is a major impediment on the health of the city's African American residents. Compared to other racial demographics within the city African Americans are much more likely to develop food related diseases like obesity and heart disease ("Treat Everybody Right", 2016). This has created major public health complications in the city, as many of these residents have limited access to proper medical care within the city (Bopido-Memba, 2007). Per one hundred people, city residents will lose a combined eleven years of life due to food insecurity, compared to seven years of life lost in metro Detroit residents (Bopido-Memba). Outside of health issues this legacy has created hesitancy for growth amongst

modern grocery stores and food markets (Meyersohn, 2020). Many executives view investment into the city's food market as unviable, quoting a lack of community capital as a reason for hesitancy for investment (Meyersohn, 2020). Executives' historic relationship of the city's residents and traditional food systems also plays a role, as market executives are hesitant to re-engage in a situation that was once deemed untenable (Meyersohn). These factors have contributed to an estimated 30,000 Detroit residents lacking access to a full-scale grocery (Bopido-Memba). These factors have contributed to a reliance on convenience stores and fast outlet food in predominantly African American communities, which while cheaper are less nutritious and contribute to negative health outcomes (Bopido-Memba). Nonetheless, some recent reengagement by chain markets have occurred in the city, such as the building of a Whole Foods Market and Meijer (Taylor and Kerry, 2015). These markets opened with considerable tax incentives with Whole Foods receiving five point nine million dollars in grants and tax incentives and Meijer received an estimated few million dollars. (Taylor and Kerry). This exorbitant price tag only brings in two markets to the cities and has received criticism from local residents, as such large chains have traditionally failed the city, rather than investing in local market alternatives (Taylor and Kerry).

Managing this long-lasting legacy will require addressing generational problems that are rooted in the cities institutionalized racism, and cooperation between state and local government and African American residents. Economic investment should be moved into growing and expanding local initiatives such as the Greengrocer projects into areas that have large African American population (Dorsey, 2016). Projects like the Greengrocer provide funding to locally owned small stores to expand operations, modernize their stores and provide advertising for their business. These alternative food systems have proven to be an effective solution to food instability, but they lack the necessary infrastructure to effectively reach the city's most underserved residents (Taylor and Kerry, 2015). Investments into these alternative systems would further work to create job opportunities in the city, as many of these projects are based and run by local residents seeking to impact change on the city (Taylor and Kerry). Further funding should be reorganized away from traditional food systems like Whole Foods who historically have a weaker efficacy and have underserved the community (Taylor and Kerry). In addressing this legacy policy makers and activists should work in conjunction with African American residents in the city. Historically, solutions to the cities food insecurity problem have ignored and worked independently of the African American population, and subsequently ignored the underlying racial issues of the problem ("Taylor and Kerry). Alternatively solutions have treated Detroit African Americans as an impoverished group and presented solutions in a paternalistic manner ("Treat Everybody Right", 2016). As a result these solutions have never truly combated the problem and have proven to be ineffective ("Treat Everybody Right"). Future attempts to fix the issue of disproportionate food security upon Detroit African Americans should look to invest and build local groups and business, and work in conjunction with local African American communities ("Treat Everybody Right").

Conclusion

The city of Detroit faces a myriad of issues, controversies, and misconceptions. One of the city's most prevalent issues is food insecurity, the belief that large portions of the city of Detroit lack access to nutritionally viable foods. The reality of the situation is much more complex. Much of the city has worked to foster and grow alternative food systems outside of the traditional method

of supermarkets and grocery stores (Dorsey, 2016). These systems are often ignored when observing the city yet provide a substantial route of access to nutritional foods for city residents (“The History and Conflict”, 2013). This long-term effect skews the perception of the city's inhabitants as impoverished (Dorsey, 2016). Yet the city still does have a food security issue centered around race. Stemming from a history of racial inequality Detroit's food insecurity disproportionately affects African American residents (Taylor and Kerry, 2015). Solving the issue surrounding generational inequality would require the growth of alternative food mechanisms that have proven to work for much of the city into these predominantly African American areas that are the most effected by food insecurity. This growth of industry would need to be created with dialogue of the local residents the industry seeks to benefit (“Treat Everybody Right”, 28).

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