

Food Desert

A traditionally low-income, urban neighborhood in which residents have to walk more than a mile to the nearest supermarket chain is known as a food desert. Under the USDA definition, residents in a food desert do not have access to fresh, healthy and nutritious food. Typically, these neighborhoods have many fast food restaurants and convenience stores selling cheaper, unhealthy foods, instead.

Food deserts correlate with higher rates of chronic health conditions like obesity and diabetes. Some cities, like Los Angeles and New York City, have attempted to address the problems of food deserts by limiting the number of fast food restaurants or offering businesses financial incentives for serving healthier foods.¹

In the past five years, one such neighborhood has started to become gentrified. Recently, a specialty grocery has opened and is the only grocery in the area. Its prices are on average twenty percent higher than a regular grocery store.²

Sally, a low-income mother of three young children, cannot afford to shop in the new store. She does not have a car and purchases most of her groceries at a nearby convenience store that carries packaged foods. Sally and other members of the community have complained that the new, specialty grocery is too expensive for the majority of neighborhood residents. Residents have suggested the grocery store should subsidize, or lower, its prices. They argue that low-income residents need healthy options available at price points that match those charged by local fast-food restaurants and convenience stores.

The grocery store managers believe that the store will be profitable by targeting the higher-income residents and that they are responsible for alleviating the food desert. One manager of a New York store argued “Our only responsibility is to make the most money for our company and its stockholders” said one manager. “We cannot sell food to everyone at different income levels; the grocery store would not make any money.”

STUDY QUESTIONS

- (1) Do owners of stores located in food deserts have a responsibility to sell lower-cost items?
- (2) Do for-profit businesses have a responsibility to maximize their community’s well being as well as their profits?
- (3) Just because businesses have the right to charge what they like, is it always morally right for them to do so?

¹ <http://www.foodispower.org/food-deserts/>

² http://www.slate.com/articles/life/food/2014/11/whole_foods_detroit_can_a_grocery_store_really_fight_elitism_racism_and.html?wpsrc=sh_all_dt_tw_bot