Food Justice and Food Retail in Los Angeles

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Food justice is the notion that everyone deserves healthy food and that the benefits and risks associated with food should be shared fairly. The concept borrows its distributional equity framework from the environmental justice movement, its focus on access to food from the community food security movement, and its interest in food environments from research in the public health and food systems fields.1 Unfortunately, disparities in access and health mean that food justice is currently an aspiration rather than a reality in many low-income communities.

This article examines the food retail landscape in Los Angeles and briefly summarizes some programs that could increase food access and quality in underserved communities. In describing these opportunities, this article shows how L.A. residents, advocates, and policy makers have begun and can continue to survey their food environments, attract more supermarkets and hold food retail firms accountable; partner with corner stores to offer more healthy choices; limit fast food restaurants and improve nutrition information at chain restaurants; promote healthy mobile food vending; and establish farmers’ markets and re-envision these markets as hubs for local food distribution. Some of these efforts have been underway for years, while others are new experiments. Together they comprise a diverse set of interconnected measures to promote food justice by improving food retail in low-income areas.

TWO CITIES

In 1989, former L.A. Mayor Tom Bradley, in his fifth inaugural address, stated that, “Los Angeles cannot permanently exist as two cities—one amazingly prosperous, one increasingly poorer in substance and in hope.”2 Just a few years later, in 1992, the city erupted in violence following the Rodney

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1. For more information on the scope and implications of a justice framework on food, see ROBERT GOTTLIEB AND ANUPAMA JOSHI, FOOD JUSTICE (forthcoming 2010).
King verdict. This drew stark attention to the city’s divisions manifested in race and class—and also, as it turns out, in access to food.

REBUILD L.A.

After the civil unrest, Peter Ueberroth, chairman of the 1984 Olympics, was recruited to lead Rebuild L.A., a business-led economic development effort that operated on the assumption that, as Ueberroth phrased it, “America doesn’t solve problems unless it’s done by the private sector.” The heads of four large grocery chains held press conferences to pledge that they would establish thirty-two new supermarkets in low-income neighborhoods hard hit by the unrest. The Chairman of Vons described the commitment in a manner that suggested that the chains understood: “We concluded that there was an enormously dense population that we were not adequately serving or not serving at all....On the other hand, we realized we had been considering sites in the hinterlands with more jack rabbits than people.”

GROCERY GAP

Ten years after the 1992 riots and nine years after Rebuild L.A.’s promises, the Urban and Environmental Policy Institute (UEPI) at Occidental College sought to determine whether conditions had changed. They had not. Between 1995 and 2002, the Rebuild L.A. area gained only one supermarket. The report revealed that in the greater L.A. region, there were 3.04 times as many supermarkets per capita in upper income zip codes as in low income zip codes; 3.17 times as many supermarkets in majority white zip codes as compared to majority African American zip codes; and 1.69 times more supermarkets in majority white as in majority Latino zip codes.

FOOD INSECURITY AND OBESITY

This disparity was just one sign that communities of color experienced difficulty accessing a healthy diet. When compounded with poverty, a lack of parks and safe places to play, and inadequate access to health care, a lack of food access predictably leads to a disturbing double bind of hunger and obesity. Ample research has demonstrated a correlation between health problems like obesity and diabetes and a person’s food environment, that is, their proximity to grocery stores and healthy food retail outlets...
percent of people with incomes below the poverty line are affected by food insecurity—a lack of reliable access to enough food to meet their nutritional needs. Unsurprisingly, lower income areas of the county suffer most, and disparities are quickly increasing. Between 2003 and 2005, the food insecurity gap between predominately white and affluent West L.A. County and predominately Latino and African American and low-income South L.A. County had doubled from seven percent to fifteen percent. Obesity rates in the County also vary by race and ethnicity. In 2005, twenty-nine percent of adult Latinos and twenty-eight percent of adult African Americans in L.A. County were obese, compared to seventeen percent of adult Whites and six percent of adult Asian/Pacific Islanders.

PROJECT CAFE

To get a more detailed picture of the food environment in low-income neighborhoods in Los Angeles—and how it could be improved—our organization, the Center for Food and Justice, partnered with three community groups to map food resources, survey stores, and develop possible intervention and policy strategies. The effort was called Project CAFE (Community Action on Food Environments). Over a five-year period, residents walked the streets of their neighborhoods and mapped over a thousand food retail locations. They also completed detailed surveys of the availability, price, and quality of food in ninety of the identified food stores.

This community-based research confirmed the abundance of fast food, corner stores, and liquor stores. It also highlighted the scarcity of supermarkets, produce stands, and farmers markets. As a result, many community members must shop at convenience stores that offer a very limited selection of healthy foods and charge high prices.

Exposing these barriers presents an opportunity to devise solutions for overcoming them. The partners of Project CAFE, along with nationwide health advocates, community advocates, and policy makers are working on ways to attract healthy food stores, to make it easier for people to grow food locally, to


9. Id. at 2, Table 1.
10. Los Angeles County Office of Health Services, Los Angeles County Health Survey, 2005.
11. The community partners were the Healthy School Food Coalition (active near MacArthur Park), Esperanza Community Housing Corporation (based near the University of Southern California), and Blazers Youth Services Community Club (located south west of the intersection of the 10 and 110 freeways).
integrate food access and health goals into land use, transportation, and economic development decision making, and to make public assets, like schools, hubs for healthy eating.

FOOD RETAIL IN LOS ANGELES

The landscape of the grocery industry in Los Angeles continues to evolve. Because of Los Angeles’s car culture, the region has long been served primarily by large chain supermarkets rather than greengrocers or public markets. Consolidation of the major grocery chains and flight from “inner-city” areas has exacerbated the issue. In 2004, a bitter lockout and strike between the big unionized chains and the United Food and Commercial Workers disrupted the sector, weakening the four major chains and allowing new format stores to make inroads.

Super-centers, or big box stores containing what are essentially full-size supermarkets along with other products, represent one of these new types of food retail. However, in Los Angeles and Inglewood, labor-community resistance and legislative setbacks for Wal-Mart have meant that super-centers have been slower to penetrate the L.A. region than other parts of the country.

Smaller-format grocery stores provide a counter trend, and, with some changes, may offer promising opportunities for areas with limited access to fresh healthy food, known as “food deserts.” Since plots of land large enough to build new full sized supermarkets are scarce in many urban areas, these smaller grocery markets may provide realistic solutions. The British retailer Tesco has opened dozens of small-format Fresh & Easy Neighborhood Market stores in and around Los Angeles. However, a UEPI report on Tesco’s European operations and U.S. plans found that stores were built mainly in middle-income areas. Only one or two of the first hundred sites where Fresh & Easy stores were opened or planned were true food deserts. Trader Joe’s and Whole Foods are already popular in the region, however these chains have been mostly unwilling to locate in or near underserved low-income areas. A final trend in food retail is that “ninety-nine cent” stores are selling more fresh food. These discounters may play a growing role in increasing access to fresh foods because shoppers can buy a few cheap items multiple times a week. This fits with the buying habits of many low-income, public-transit dependent, immigrant residents of Los Angeles.

17. Id. at 29–31.
MORE GROCERY STORES: THE PENNSYLVANIA PLAN

Attracting new stores to underserved areas and overhauling existing stores to offer healthy items requires a comprehensive strategy, regardless of the mix or format of grocery stores. The Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative (FFFI) is one promising model. The FFFI started with $30 million in state funds, which was intended to leverage an additional $90 million in economic development and private funding. This $120 million was allocated to start or improve food markets in areas with an insufficient number of healthy food retail outlets. To date, the initiative has invested in over fifty projects ranging from constructing 69,000 square-foot supermarkets to renovations of a 900 square-foot minimarket in Philadelphia.18

MORE AND BETTER GROCERY STORES: THE L.A. WAY?

In Los Angeles a different approach has been taken. The Alliance for Healthy & Responsible Grocery Stores (the Alliance) formed in response to the 2003 supermarket lockout/strike. Its creation was prompted by concerns over the regional entry of Wal-Mart supercenters as well as interest in attracting supermarkets to low-income areas and improving existing stores.19 The Alliance has sponsored hearings on the health and economic costs of supermarket loss. Its members care about food quality and job quality—how stores operate as well as where they locate. They are developing a checklist of standards for calculating how incentives are distributed to supermarkets. Under this model, stores “earn points” in three areas in order to gain priority in requests for public subsidies. Point allocation is based upon (1) offering healthy food and locating in underserved areas; (2) promoting economic sustainability, through good wages, benefits, unionized workforces, local hiring, and other strategies; and (3) furthering environmental sustainability in the construction, operation and supplying of stores. The Alliance is seeking city government support for an ordinance aimed at advancing these goals.

CORNER STORE CONVERSIONS

While most attention has been focused on saving, attracting, and improving traditional supermarkets, there is also a movement underway to transform corner stores. Small corner stores, liquor stores, and convenience stores are often the only places that offer groceries in low-income neighborhoods. These stores tend to have a limited selection of healthy items.20

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20. For example, the corner stores surveyed by Project CAFE did not offer most of the foods recommended by the United States Department of Agriculture’s Thrifty Food Plan. Azuma, supra note 12, at 7.
They often receive free display racks from junk food distributors or manufacturers in exchange for prominently displaying snack and soda displays towards the storefronts. The challenge is to work with the owners to overcome these incentives and replace junk food with more fruits, vegetables, lean meats, and whole grains.

Organizations interested in health issues have tried pilot projects aimed at shifting the mix of what is offered in small stores. These programs range from small-scale efforts to bring regular boxes of produce to stores to expansive remodeling plans that add refrigerated cases, improve store layout, and conduct social marketing to educate residents about healthier offerings. In Los Angeles there has been at least one full-scale “corner store conversion.” The store, owned by the uncle of a participant in the South Los Angeles Healthy Eating Active Living Collaborative, received a grant to remodel its layout, feature healthy items, and conduct social marketing.21 A national Healthy Corner Store Network connects individuals working on renovation efforts and provides training, in-person business development, and mini-grants.22

RESTAURANTS: FAST FOOD MORATORIUM

The flip side of the lack of grocery stores in some low-income neighborhoods is the super-saturation of fast food restaurants in these same areas. A study by Community Health Councils, for example, found 73 percent of restaurants in South Los Angeles were fast food establishments, compared to 42 percent of restaurants in West Los Angeles.23

The mix of food retail in neighborhoods is more than a matter of convenience. A 2008 study of California food retail locations and health indicators revealed that individuals who “live near an abundance of fast-food restaurants and convenience stores compared to grocery stores and produce vendors have a significantly higher prevalence of obesity and diabetes regardless of individual or community income.”24

To deal with the health consequences of the saturation of fast food in parts of Los Angeles, the L.A. City Council, led by Councilperson Jan Perry, recently passed a moratorium on new fast food restaurants in South Los Angeles.25 This effort was supplemented by a revision to the definition of fast food in city planning codes to “any establishment which dispenses food for consumption on or off the premises, and which has the following

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characteristics: a limited menu, items prepared in advance or prepared or heated quickly, no table orders, and food served in disposable wrapping and containers.\footnote{26}{Id. at § 1.}

This effort to limit fast food was the first major use of zoning rules in the United States motivated by health rather than aesthetic or historic preservation objectives. Critics in Los Angeles argued that it was paternalistic to limit food choices for local residents. They also argued that fast food restaurants are concentrated in these areas because people there simply like to eat fast food. The first argument is ironic since residents who are surrounded only by fast food restaurants only have one choice, which is between different brands of fast food. The second argument is more pernicious and verges on racist. Readers of Eric Schlosser’s \textit{Fast Food Nation} will recall that the drive-through fast food restaurant model was invented and perfected in Southern California \textit{for white working and middle-class people, and for suburbs as well as cities}.\footnote{27}{ERIC SCHLOSSER, \textit{FAST FOOD NATION: THE DARK SIDE OF THE ALL-AMERICAN MEAL} 13-28 (2001).} The preponderance of fast food in low-income minority communities is the legacy of a nationwide model of food service supported by massive corporate advertising. It fails to constitute evidence that certain ethnicities or neighborhoods want fast food chains as their only restaurant options.

The moratorium was an important but largely symbolic step motivated by the desire of leaders and citizens to make it easier for residents of underserved neighborhoods to live healthy lives.

\textbf{NUTRITION LABELING IN RESTAURANTS}

One way to influence eating habits in restaurants is to create consumer awareness about the nutritional value of the food that they buy. A new California law will require chain restaurants with twenty or more locations in the state to provide nutrition labeling on menus by 2011.\footnote{28}{S.B 1420 (Cal. 2008). The Governor signed the bill outside of a Chili’s restaurant. It is worth noting that an order of the Texas Cheese Fries with Jalapeño-Ranch Dressing, the Smokehouse Bacon Triple-The-Cheese Big Mouth Burger® with Jalapeño-Ranch Dressing, and a slice of Chocolate Chip Paradise Pie® with Vanilla Ice Cream (washing your meal down with water, since they do not provide online nutritional data about their drinks), translates into 5,710 calories. Brinker International, Chili’s Nutrition Menu, http://www.brinker.com/gr/nutritional/chilis_nutrition_menu.pdf (last visited April 13, 2009).} While some are skeptical that labeling alone can transform dietary habits, a health impact assessment by the Los Angeles County’s Department of Public Health on a similar proposal in the County estimated that ten percent of customers informed by labeling would reduce their orders by 100 calories.\footnote{29}{SIMON, PAUL ET AL., \textit{LOS ANGELES COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH, MENU LABELING AS A POTENTIAL STRATEGY FOR COMBATING THE OBESITY EPIDEMIC: A HEALTH IMPACT ASSESSMENT} 1 (2008), \textit{available at} http://www.publichealthadvocacy.org/printable/CCPHA_LAPHlaspotentialstrategy.pdf.} This would prevent

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\item \footnote{26}{Id. at § 1.}
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over one-third of the 6.75 million pound average annual weight gain in the County’s population aged five and up.\textsuperscript{30}

**MOBILE FOOD VENDORS**

Los Angeles is home to tens of thousands of mobile food vendors including taco trucks, produce trucks, three-wheeled ice cream carts, and people selling snacks and drinks out of grocery carts. Largely unregulated and mobile, these vendors represent both a challenge and an opportunity. Mobile vendors of sweets, sodas, and fried snacks often wait outside school campuses at the end of the school day. Their sales to students can counter the progress being made inside health-conscious school cafeterias. Added tension arises from the fact that vendors are often parents of students in the schools.

On the other hand, fruit and vegetable carts and trucks can be important sources of good food. Because there are so few places to buy healthy and affordable produce in many neighborhoods, these convenient mobile vendors are often the only realistic source of fresh produce.

Los Angeles may be able to learn from the Green Cart Program, a program in New York City designed to encourage healthy vending.\textsuperscript{31} Food vending in New York City is more strictly regulated than in Los Angeles. In New York, their City creates incentives for vendors by issuing five hundred new cart permits a year for a two year period only to vendors who sell fruits and vegetables. A modified healthy vending program might work in Los Angeles if it gave permits to existing unlicensed vendors who sell healthy items, thereby providing healthy food vendors with some legal recognition.

**FARMERS’ MARKETS IN LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES**

Farmers’ markets can be a tremendous resource. They offer healthy, fresh and locally grown food that can be affordable when in season. As community gathering spaces, they give residents a chance to meet farmers and cultivate urban-rural connections. Furthermore, they support local small-scale agriculture. Farmers’ markets can help create a healthier food environment in areas underserved by supermarkets and sit-down restaurants. The challenge is that the spending habits and economic resources of low-income people may fail to attain the level of spending needed to support farmers’ markets. Recent immigrants in Los Angeles tend to spend a few dollars at a time several times a week when they shop, rather than loading a hundred dollars worth of groceries into a car like some suburban shoppers. Even if there is foot traffic through a market, there may be insufficient monetary expenditure to entice farmers who could be selling at more profitable markets. When fewer farmers show up, fewer people shop. This downward spiral can doom the market.

\textsuperscript{30} Id.

One strategy to promote the success of farmers’ markets in low-income areas involves partnering with community groups and institutions that know how to promote the market. Markets can be located in areas that host frequent visitors, such as school campuses. Locating a market in an edge neighborhood straddling low-income and middle-income areas can also yield an economic profit. Finally, creating opportunities for farmers to sell beyond the market can sustain farmer participation. For example, UEPI has proposed a farmers’ market hub model. Under this model, the market manager assists farmers who sell at the market with aggregating their produce to sell to institutional customers like restaurants, schools, or small- to medium-sized produce distributors. These scaled-up sales provide an extra source of income to farmers and make it more likely that farmers could continue to participate in farmers’ markets based in low-income areas.32

CONCLUSION

At its best, food brings people together while celebrating the social diversity and natural wealth of a region. Fairer, healthier—and more just—food retail in Los Angeles would go a long way towards repairing the divide that has kept Los Angeles separated into two cities.