

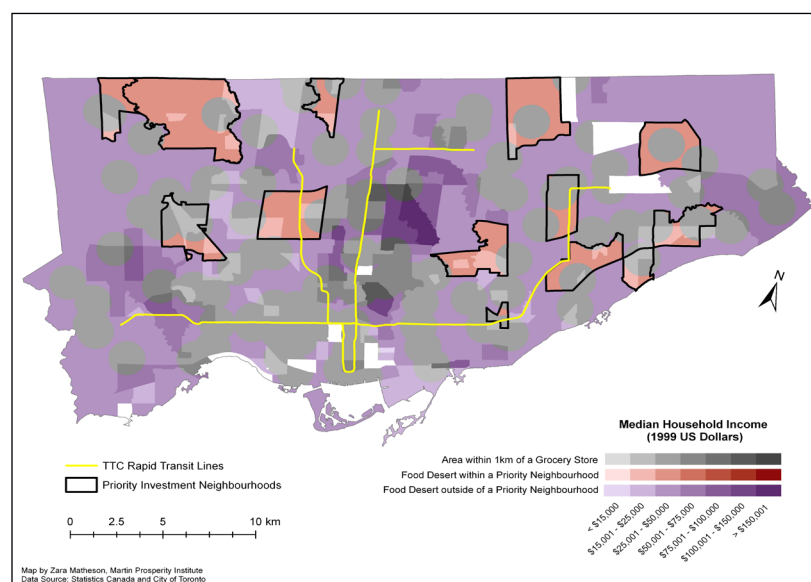
Food Deserts and Priority Neighbourhoods in Toronto

The past decade has seen growing concern regarding the state of food security and nutrition in many North American communities. Food security refers to the availability of food in an area and an individual’s access to it. While the benefits of a healthy diet on an individual’s quality of life and general health are becoming widely recognized, basic access to quality and affordable food remains a challenge for a growing number of communities. Neighbourhoods that do not have access to good quality and affordable food are labeled as “Food Deserts”.ⁱ These neighbourhoods are often considered to be socially-distressed, characterized by low average household incomes. If policy makers wish to improve the health, productivity and general prosperity of communities within their jurisdictions, addressing the existence of food deserts is an important first step forward.

In Toronto, food deserts have become a prominent feature of the city’s “inner suburbs” and Priority Neighbourhoods. The inner suburbs of Toronto are those areas of the city that fall between the old City of Toronto and the surrounding GTA communities. The inner suburbs are the direct result of more than two decades of gentrification within the inner-city and continuing urban sprawl. While the inner suburbs once provided homes to middle class communities, comfortable with their sense of opportunity and rising prosperity, today they are characterized by diverse ethnic and racial populations experiencing declining incomes and diminishing optimism for the future.ⁱⁱ The initial communities living in these suburbs also had access to a personal vehicle and as a result the communities were designed with little need for nearby commercial development in mind. Today, however, the citizens who live in these communities primarily depend on public transit or walking to access grocery stores and healthy food.

The map in Exhibit 1 demonstrates the existence of food deserts in Toronto and their location relative to the 13 priority neighbourhoods (outlined in black) and subway lines (yellow).

Exhibit 1: Food Deserts in Toronto



The grey shaded areas on the map in exhibit 1 represent the parts of Toronto that are within 1km, considered to be a reasonable walking distance, of a major grocery store.ⁱⁱⁱ Approximately 51% of Toronto's population lives within these grey shaded areas. Shades of purple and pink represent the areas of the city that do not fall within 1km of a major grocery store. These areas of the city are considered food deserts. The distinction between purple and pink highlights the existence of food deserts within the priority neighbourhoods (pink) because it is these communities that often have fewer resources for accessing healthy food outside of their own neighbourhood. This data is overlaid on income data by census tract. The darker shading of all colours indicates a higher median household income while the lighter shades are areas with lower median incomes. It is important to notice the lack of grocery stores in many of the lowest income census tracts that do not fall within the designated priority neighborhoods.

For residents who live in Toronto's inner suburbs and Priority Neighbourhoods, access to good quality and affordable food is a growing challenge. Today, many grocery stores are located either next to new commercial developments in the inner city or alongside large, retail developments in the outer suburbs. As a result, they are often a considerable distance away from those who live in these inner suburbs and Priority Neighbourhoods, making them difficult, time consuming and costly to access without a car. The importance of nearby grocery stores in the inner suburbs and Priority Neighbourhoods is that they provide easy access to a range of healthy food options, including fresh fruits and vegetables, meats, dairy and bread. As Exhibit 1 shows, while a few priority neighbourhoods do have a grocery store located within their boundaries, for many neighbourhoods, grocery stores are located at the fringe of the community, leaving the majority of their residents outside the catchment area of the store. Unable to easily access good quality food, those living in many inner suburbs are served instead by an army of corner, convenience and fast food outlets that offer an assortment of unhealthy foods high in fats, sugars and salts.

Toronto, however, is not alone in its struggle to improve access to healthy food options and eliminate the existence of food deserts. Cities of all sizes across North America face similar challenges to those in Toronto. For example, the city of Chicago also struggles to eliminate the existence of food deserts throughout its communities (See Insight: Food Deserts, Enterprise Communities and Empowerment Zones in Chicago). One of the most striking differences between Toronto and Chicago is that Chicago's priority neighbourhoods (known as Empowerment Zones and Enterprise Communities) are far more concentrated than those in Toronto. Chicago's Priority Neighbourhoods also appear to be better served by mass transit. Despite the fact that Chicago's priority neighbourhoods are more concentrated than those in Toronto, only 45% of Chicago's residents live within 1km of a major grocery store.

In 2008, the Toronto Board of Health approved the Toronto Food Strategy project. The mandate of the project's steering committee is to "help articulate a bold food vision for the city and begin to identify effective short and long term actions to implement it".^{iv} Addressing issues of equity and accessibility in building a system that provides food is an important part of Toronto's Food Strategy project moving forward. According to the report an important part in improving accessibility means thinking about food deserts in Toronto within the context of a broader set of systems, such as public transportation. Previous research has found that a person's health impacts their productivity and wages received. Improving the health of the citizens within a community through addressing issues of access to healthy food options, particularly where low-income neighbourhoods overlap with food deserts, provides an opportunity to advance productivity and prosperity. Establishing a stronger food system in cities across North America, such as Toronto, will help improve the productivity and prosperity of the local economy.

Sources:

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