

# SOUTHEASTERN SAN DIEGO'S FOOD LANDSCAPE

## Challenges and Opportunities

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Southeastern San Diego has been described as a **“food desert”** (USDA 2013) – a neighborhood characterized by insufficient access to grocery stores, which research shows is associated with **poor health outcomes**.
- A **comprehensive analysis of food retailers** in Southeastern San Diego was undertaken by faculty and students in the Department of Geography at San Diego State University in an effort to document the various components of the local food landscape and identify challenges to a healthful life as well as opportunities for building a better food environment.
- The data analyzed in this report reveal that the neighborhood does not fit the traditional food desert concept, but is more appropriately described as a **“food swamp”** characterized by:
  - **Multiple retailers**, including small stores, ethnic markets and independent fast food restaurants;
  - **Uneven access** to fresh food within the neighborhood;
  - Disproportionate exposure to **high-calorie and low-nutrient** foods and drinks in most outlets, including those located near schools;
  - Limited exposure to **fresh, organic and local** produce;
  - Higher **prices** for food, including basic necessities, fresh produce and items subsidized by public programs.
- Although the current landscape poses a **threat to the health** of local residents, it presents opportunities for building a healthy, sustainable and fair food environment through urban agriculture, innovative retail, educational outreach, and business opportunities.
- **Ongoing efforts** by community-based organizations would benefit greatly from the leadership and assistance of a citywide or regional **food policy council**, similar to those established in Oakland, San Francisco, New Orleans and Philadelphia. San Diego is missing out on an opportunity to foster a sustainable food system that addresses multiple critical issues including hunger, health, economic development and job creation, education, and environmental sustainability.
- Southeastern San Diego has much at stake in the adoption of coordinated policies designed to improve the availability of fresh and healthy food. Yet, the potential benefits go well beyond the neighborhood's confines by strengthening the food system to **meet regional needs today and in the future**.



# CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

## Challenges

- High poverty, unemployment and limited mobility
- History of neglect and disinvestment
- Food desert stigma, yet neighborhood better described as “food swamp”
- Few traditional supermarkets
- Limited access to food stores in eastern parts of the area
- Limited variety of fresh produce:
  - less than 5 items in about half of stores
  - practically no organic produce
  - most stores have greater selection of “junk” food than fresh produce
- Great exposure to soda and other high-calorie/low-nutrient drinks
- Liquor stores found throughout neighborhood and in proximity to schools
- More fast food restaurants than fresh produce retailers
- Higher retail price for many food items (especially highly perishable) and questionable quality
- Current environment threatens community food security and health.

## Opportunities

- Rising demand for fresh, seasonal and healthy food
- Underestimated local purchasing power
- Multiple vendors, including ethnic stores and small independent businesses, which may be instrumental in making healthy food available.
- History of farming and diverse food-centered cultural traditions
- Availability of public and private land for urban agriculture and recent policy changes facilitating its use for this purpose
- Potential of food-related entrepreneurship to generate local jobs and income
- Proximity to downtown and other densely populated residential areas
- Civic participation and active community-based organizations already involved in food justice projects, including:
  - community gardens
  - a farmers’ market
  - educational outreach (e.g., STEAM, K-12, connections with local universities, adult education, growers’ group)
  - environmental remediation
- Growing interest at the local, state and federal levels of government in promoting a sustainable food system through:
  - revision of zoning regulations
  - new healthy food financing initiatives (including low-interest loans, grants, loan guarantees and tax credits)
  - technical assistance through public education and extension programs
  - EBT and WIC related incentives.

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