

SOUTHEASTERN SAN DIEGO'S FOOD LANDSCAPE

Challenges and Opportunities



A POLICY REPORT

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Executive Summary

- Southeastern San Diego has been described as a “food desert” (USDA 2013)
- A detailed analysis of food retailers reveals that the neighborhood is better described as a “food swamp” characterized by:
 - Multiple retailers, including small stores and independent fast food restaurants
 - Uneven access to food within the neighborhood
 - High exposure to high-calorie and low-nutrient foods and drinks
 - Limited exposure to fresh, organic and local produce
 - Higher food prices
- Although the current landscape is a threat to the health of local residents, it presents opportunities for building a healthy, sustainable and fair food environment.

GEOGRAPHY



SAN DIEGO STATE
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Suggested Citation: Pascale Joassart-Marcelli, Fernando J. Bosco, and Emanuel Delgado. 2014. *Southeastern San Diego's Food Landscape: Challenges and Opportunities*. Policy Report. San Diego, CA: Department of Geography, San Diego State University and Project New Village. Available at <http://geography.sdsu.edu/Research/Projects/FEP/>.

SOUTHEASTERN SAN DIEGO'S FOOD LANDSCAPE:

Challenges and Opportunities

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April 2014

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Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Leticia Garcia and Jared Van Ramshorst for their assistance in collecting and managing the data used in this report. Students enrolled in Food Justice – a service learning and community-based research class taught in the department of Geography at San Diego State University during the Fall of 2012 – also provided valuable research assistance. They include Steven Allison, Riley Buehler, Erica Cunningham, Ashley Davis, Leticia Garcia, Lisa Listen, Michelle Manian, Jose Miranda, Jessica Perczak, Deborah Powers, Ashley Roane, David Westfall and Lydia Wood. The class was sponsored by San Diego State University's Service Learning and Community Engagement Program.

Research for this project was supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation, Geography and Spatial Sciences and Cultural Anthropology Programs, Division of Behavioral and Cognitive Sciences, award number 1155844.

Photos by Diane Moss, Fernando Bosco and Pascale Joassart-Marcelli.

FORWARD

Project New Village would like to extend a heartfelt thank you to Professors Joassart-Marcelli and Bosco of San Diego State University for their excellent policy report entitled, ***Southeastern San Diego's Food Landscape: Challenges and Opportunities***. Their analysis of the “food landscape” confirms what many of us knew anecdotally; the current food system is broken and is a real and foreboding threat to the health and well-being of residents who reside in Subregional Area 5 of the County of San Diego known as Southeastern San Diego.

Project New Village began its journey five years ago to explore and develop strategies to address the inequities in the local food system. Our mission is to collaborate with organizations and individuals to promote personal and community wellness in Southeastern San Diego.

Following the first Growing Power International gathering in Milwaukee, we returned with a renewed commitment to move forward with an urban agricultural initiative; inspired by the work and writings of Will Allen, founder/CEO of ***Growing Power***, an urban farmer and a recipient of the McArthur Genius Award, Malik Yakini, *founder and Executive Director of the **Detroit Black Community Food Security Network*** and others who are creating models for locally based community food systems in communities of color that are successful, sustainable and committed to social justice.

The People's Produce Urban Agriculture Initiative is the signature effort of PNV. It grew out of a collective call to action among residents and other stakeholders in Southeastern San Diego to change the physical and social environment to address health disparities. It has evolved into a grassroots, neighborhood-based initiative utilizing a social determinant of health model to address inequities and to promote universal food access as a viable avenue to better health.

Our People's Produce Urban Agriculture Initiative works with community residents, student interns, academicians and other professionals to increase awareness of the impact of the current broken food system and to build an alternative sustainable food system in Southeastern San Diego and the region. Current efforts include: (1) **Community Food System Workgroup** focused on creating a sustainable supply side solution to include the development of retail farms, gardens and food related businesses; (2) **Urban Agriculture Training & Education** project aimed at increasing the number of residents involved in growing food and increasing the consumer demand for good quality locally-sourced food; (3) **Good Food Legacy Mobilization Project** which engages residents in food justice activism and advocacy as well as the sharing of food narratives and recipes; (4) **Mt. Hope Community Garden** is a hands-on opportunity for diverse folks to grow food and maintain a community food space together; and (5) weekly **Certified Farmers Market** which accepts food stamps EBT and WIC; provides a venue for urban/neighborhood growers and entrepreneurs and provides free health screenings and referrals.

Our concerns regarding the lack of food security and food access are valued and validated by this audit. Concurrently we are encouraged by the opportunities presented for local community self-determination, cross-sector collaboration and citizen participation to create healthier options. This report serves as a

seminal work, a “must read” for everyone who is interested in food justice, equity and community economic development. The data contained in this audit lays the basis for changing policy and practices at both the city and county levels of government if we are to complete the arduous task of creating an equitable food environment that benefits everyone.

In the words of *Dr. George Washington Carver*, “*The primary idea in all my work was to help the farmer and fill the poor man’s empty dinner pail. My idea is to help the ‘man farthest down’.*”

... Much kudos and respect to Professors Bosco and Joassart-Marcelli for their commitment and contribution to “helping the man farthest down”.

Diane Moss and Robert Tambuzi
Project New Village
People’s Produce Project
Southeastern San Diego
February 4, 2014



Mount Hope Community Garden Groundbreaking Ceremony
September 28, 2011

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Introduction

There is now mounting evidence that food environments have a significant impact on what people eat and how healthy they are. Numerous studies have documented the negative consequences of living in a “**food desert**” – a neighborhood without convenient access to fresh and affordable foods – or a “**food swamp**” – one characterized by an abundance of fast food restaurants and junk food retailers. These types of food environments are shown to promote unhealthy diets characterized by high calories and low nutrients and therefore contribute to obesity – a leading cause of chronic illnesses such as cancer, cardiovascular diseases and diabetes.¹ For a variety of political and economic reasons, low-income and minority neighborhoods tend to have limited availability of fresh and healthy foods.² As a result, their residents are more likely to face food insecurity and experience negative health consequences, making uneven food landscapes an important cause of **health disparities**.



In contrast, research indicates that the presence of fresh produce and healthy foods near homes, schools, and workplaces is associated with healthier food habits.³ Evidence suggest that interventions designed to increase access to and affordability of these types of foods in low-income neighborhoods can lead to **positive changes in eating behaviors**. Yet, in many instances, these interventions ignore the specific needs of residents and fail to acknowledge local resources already in place. It is in this spirit of promoting health and wellbeing by **building on existing opportunities** that we collected and analyzed data on Southeastern San Diego's food landscape and prepared this report.

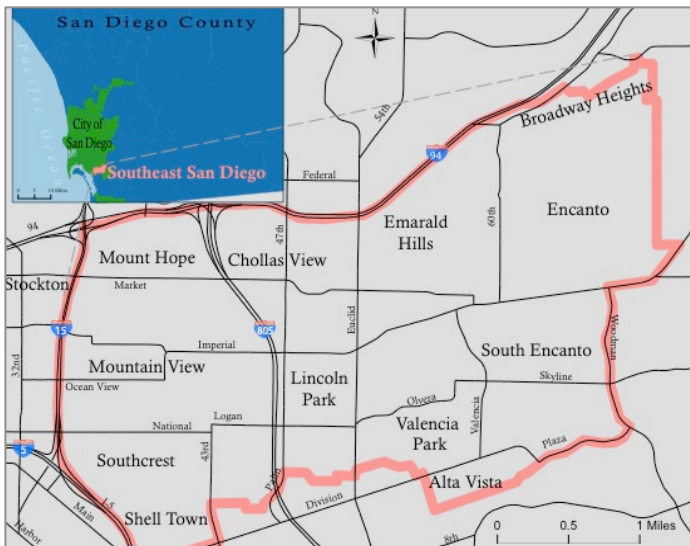
Context and Background

Although there are different definitions, Southeastern San Diego typically refers to the planning area designated by the City of San Diego's General Plan, which as its name indicates, is located just southeast of downtown. As we explain below, our study covers most of the planning area (with the exception of a few neighborhoods at the eastern and western edges). This urban area is comprised of several distinct neighborhoods, including Mount Hope, Mountain View, Southcrest, Lincoln Park, Valencia Park, Emerald Hills, Chollas View, Encanto, and South Encanto. These idyllic names hide a common **history of economic decline, violence and political neglect**, which underlie today's food landscape.

In the late 1800s, Pueblo land in Southeastern San Diego was subdivided to support residential

development and small farms.⁴ Speculators bought land and built cottages and bungalows in the early 1900s to provide housing for the growing working class population of San Diego. Several large mansions for the elite were also built at that time close to the city center in Sherman Heights and Grant Hill. The eastern part of the community saw the development of small family farms, where citrus, avocado, cucumbers and other crops were grown and chicken raised by families of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, including a small Japanese community.⁵

Figure 1: Southeastern San Diego Study Area



Map designed by Emanuel Delgado.

Note: neighborhoods located west of I-15 and east of I-5 (i.e., Sherman Heights, Stockton and Grant Hill, Logan Heights) are excluded from the study area.

In the 1920s, Black households, who had historically been restricted by local discriminatory covenants from purchasing properties in many parts of the city, began moving into Southeastern San Diego. As migration from the South and enrollment of Black soldiers in the army continued to draw a larger African American population to the neighborhood, it eventually became the heart of the Black community in San Diego.⁶ Following the Mexican revolution, Mexican immigrants and subsequent

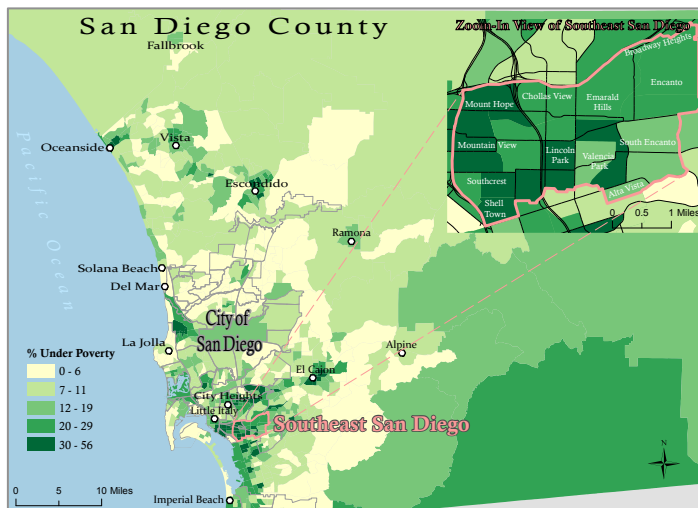
Chicano generations also settled in large numbers in the area, especially in the western part of the neighborhood.

In the 1960s, like most cities in the United States, San Diego experienced rapid suburbanization and many of its older urban neighborhoods, including Southeastern and neighboring communities, began to feel the negative consequences as wealthier residents and local businesses gradually moved out. At the same time, low-income residents continued to move in, attracted by relatively affordable housing, partly subsidized by federal urban renewal and housing initiatives. For instance, in the 1980s, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development promoted the construction of multi-family housing, attracting a large Filipino community, which had strong ties with the close-by US Navy base.⁷ With time, many single-family homes were replaced by apartment complexes, changing the character of the community, which had already been severely affected by the construction of four different freeways dissecting the area.

During that period of transition and economic decline, the neighborhood became known for its high level of poverty and criminal activity, including drug and gang related violence. Recently described as a “war zone” by a key local figure,⁸ Southeastern San Diego continues to be perceived as one of the most dangerous communities in the region. These negative stereotypes tend to overshadow the **positive changes taking place in the neighborhood** and discourage investment in the community, reproducing a landscape of despair and neglect illustrated by the concept of “food desert”.

Today, Southeastern San Diego and its adjacent neighborhoods are among the poorest in the region. As Figure 2 illustrates, there is significant **inequality** in San Diego County. With official poverty rates well over 30 percent in many of its

Figure 2: Percent of Population in Poverty, by Census Tract (2010)



Data Source: Census of Population and Housing 2010
Map designed by Emanuel Delgado

communities, Southeastern San Diego stands in sharp contrast with much of the rest of San Diego, especially coastal and suburban communities where poverty rates are below 6 percent.

Table 1 below provides descriptive statistics highlighting the fact that Southeastern San Diego is **significantly poorer and more ethnically diverse** than the rest of the county and the city. One in three residents live in poverty⁹ and median household income is almost a fourth lower than in the rest of the region. Over 10 percent of households receive Food Stamps – more than twice the rate in the county and city of San Diego. Ninety percent of the students in San Diego Unified School District E (which covers the study area) qualify for free or reduced-cost lunch, also suggesting that food security is an important concern. In addition to financial constraints, limited mobility and greater reliance on public transit raises additional challenges in purchasing fresh foods and feeding families.

The community is very diverse; the percentages of residents who are Latinos, Blacks, or Asians are significantly higher than in the rest of the region and Whites constitute only ten percent of the

Table 1: Selected Characteristics, Southeastern San Diego (Compared to City and County of San Diego)

| | San Diego County | City of San Diego | Southeastern San Diego* |
|--|------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| Socio-Economic Indicators | | | |
| Median Household Income | \$63,857 | \$63,739 | \$48,359 |
| Official Poverty Rate | 13.0% | 14.6% | 22.9% |
| Adjusted Poverty Rate (150% threshold) | 21.7% | 23.2% | 35.8% |
| Unemployment Rate | 8.9% | 8.3% | 12.5% |
| Food Stamps Recipients (percent of households) | 4.0% | 3.9% | 10.6% |
| Mobility | | | |
| Percent of Households with No Vehicle | 6.2% | 7.2% | 8.1% |
| Percent Using Public Transit to Work | 3.2% | 4.1% | 5.7% |
| Housing | | | |
| Percent Renters | 44.8% | 50.8% | 44.9% |
| Percent Detached Single Unit | 51.7% | 45.8% | 66.5% |
| Percent Built Before 1960 | 19.8% | 25.2% | 33.4% |
| Race/Ethnicity | | | |
| Percent Latino | 31.6% | 28.2% | 50.1% |
| Percent Black | 4.8% | 6.6% | 18.2% |
| Percent Asian & Pacific Islander | 11.1% | 16.0% | 19.0% |
| Percent White | 49.0% | 45.8% | 10.5% |
| Percent Other (incl. more than 1 race) | 3.5% | 3.5% | 2.2% |
| Percent Foreign-Born | 23.2% | 25.8% | 34.9% |
| Population | 2,977,884 | 1,254,520 | 148,270 |

* Southeastern San Diego based on zip codes 92113, 92114 and 92139

Data Source: American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates 2007-2011 (authors' computations)

population. Southeastern San Diego also has a higher proportion of immigrants, with over a third of residents born outside of the United States (compared to about a fourth on average in the rest of the region). As in many cities across the US where the legacies of racism and discrimination continue to shape opportunities, the racial and ethnic composition of the neighborhood has no doubt had an impact on its economic and commercial development.

As an older inner ring suburb, Southeastern San Diego has a fairly old housing stock, with a third of homes built before 1960. The majority of homes are owned by their occupants, many of whom have lived in the neighborhood for a long time. Despite its close proximity to downtown, the neighborhood retains a residential feel with many more small single-unit detached homes dotting the landscape than in the rest of the city. As we discuss in the next section, this medium density built environment presents both a challenge to attract commercial development and an opportunity for gardening and growing food locally.

Given the socio-economic characteristics of their neighborhood, it is perhaps not surprising that

residents of Southeastern San Diego suffer from **worse health than county residents do on average** (see Table 2). Obesity is an important concern, with almost a third of adults with a body-mass-index (BMI) of 30 or higher. The incidence of many chronic diseases, which have been linked to diet and other health behaviors, is significantly higher in Southeastern San Diego. This is especially true of diabetes – a major health concern in the US today. While the causes of these diseases are complex and multiple, there is mounting evidence that diets high in saturated fats, sugar, and empty calories found in much processed foods constitute an important risk factor. To the extent that diets are shaped by what is available around us, **the food environment itself is a contributing factor to chronic disease and poor health in general.**

Far from being victims of the larger processes that led to the economic decline of their neighborhoods, Southeastern San Diego residents have actively drawn attention to their needs and sought solutions to address them. In recent years, these have included a number of initiatives designed to ameliorate the local food environment and increase access to fresh and healthy foods. For instance, Project New Village

Table 2: Selected Health Indicators, Southeastern San Diego, Compared to San Diego County

| | San Diego County | Southeastern San Diego |
|---|------------------|------------------------|
| Selected Chronic Disease Hospitalizations (per 100,000) | | |
| Asthma | 70.3 | 137.5 |
| Coronary Heart Disease | 282.7 | 329.3 |
| Diabetes | 134.3 | 236.6 |
| Colorectal Cancer Deaths (per 100,000) | 13.8 | 19.8 |
| Obesity (percent of adult 20 and older) | 22.1% | 29.3%* |
| *data for Central San Diego (which includes downtown, Mid-City, and Southeastern San Diego) | | |

Data Source: County of San Diego. 2013. *Non-Communicable (Chronic) Disease Profile*. Health & Human Services Agency, Public Health Services, Community Health Statistics Unit; UCLA Center for Health Policy Research. 2009. *California Health Interview Survey (CHIS)*.

through its People's Produce Project begun hosting a centrally located weekly farmers' market at the corner of Market Street and Euclid Avenue and recently opened a community garden in Mount Hope. Working with the California Department of Public Health and the County of San Diego's Health and Human Services Agency, Lincoln Park residents worked to have their community designated as one of several *Communities of Excellence in Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity Prevention* (CX³).¹⁰ Following a gloomy assessment of the quality of food retailers in that neighborhood, health advocates and residents began working with retailers to increase the sale of fresh produce in Lincoln Park through a variety of incentive programs. Other local organizations like Chollas Creek Groundwork and the local YMCA also support gardens and youth outreach programs focused on nutrition and the environment. Efforts have also focused on bringing together and educating local residents about the benefits of urban agriculture and sustainable growing techniques, promoting the use of yard space for food production, and supporting healthy local food producers and retailers.

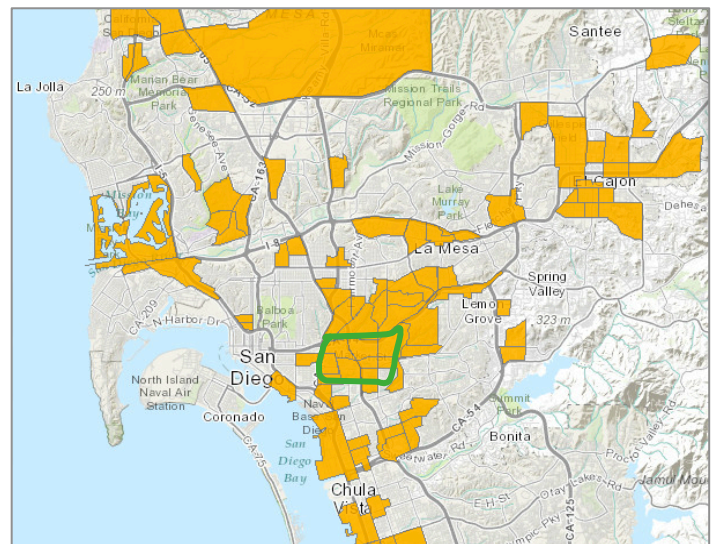
A Food Desert?

The USDA defines a food desert as a low-income neighborhood (or Census tract) that does not have a supermarket within 0.5 mile (if located in an urban area). Based on these criteria, as shown on Figure 3, **most of the Census tracts in Southeastern San Diego are considered food deserts**, because poverty rates are usually above 20 percent and there is only one supermarket in the overall community that meets the USDA definition of reporting at least \$2 million in annual sales and containing all major food departments of a traditional grocery stores (i.e., fresh produce, fresh meat and poultry, dairy,

dried packaged foods, frozen foods).¹¹ This area located East of the Interstate 15 Freeway and delineated by a green boundary on Figure 3 is the focus of this policy report.

The USDA definition of food desert and the associated *Food Access Research Atlas* are useful tools to quickly assess community food security, but unfortunately they tend to oversimplify the issue by ignoring other elements of urban food

**Figure 3: USDA Urban Food Deserts:
Low Income and Low Access to Supermarkets**



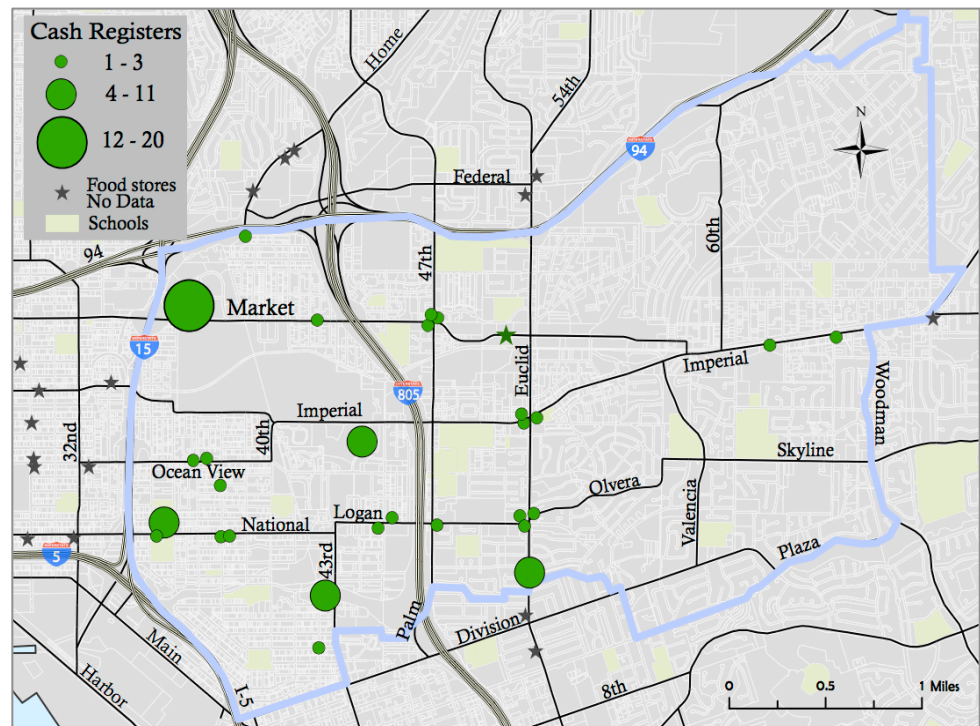
Source: USDA. 2013. Food Access Research Atlas. Economic Research Service. http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/go-to-the-atlas.aspx#.Um_1pRaLia

landscapes and making assumptions about the quality of food offered by various types of retailers. For instance, **Southeastern San Diego is home to multiple ethnic and convenience stores that do not fit the definition of a “healthy source of food”**. Although there are numerous reports documenting the lower quality, limited variety, and higher prices of food in these types of stores, there is at least some evidence that these smaller businesses can play an important role in supplying fresh, affordable, and culturally appropriate foods to local residents – a pillar of community food security. Therefore, we cannot simply ignore these small retailers and assume that they only

contribute negatively to the food environment. A better assessment of the local food landscape requires that we collect detailed information in all types of food retailers – not just large supermarkets. A comprehensive approach is especially important since many residents of low-income neighborhoods regularly purchase food in convenience stores, gas stations, liquor stores, and other small shops to feed their families. If we are to improve access to fresh and healthy food, we ought to learn to work with the resources available locally.

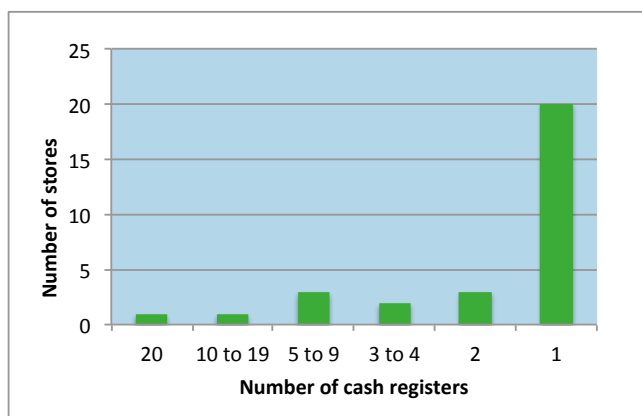
As shown in Figure 4, **there are multiple food retailers in Southeastern San Diego, although only one is considered as a traditional supermarket**, according to the definition used by the USDA. Between November and December 2012, as part of a research project funded by the National

Figure 4: Stores Selling Food in The Southeastern San Diego Study Area, by Size



Data Source: Joassart-Marcelli and Bosco. 2013. *Food, Ethnicity, and Place Project*. Map designed by Emanuel Delgado.

Figure 5: Number of stores per Size (i.e., number of cash registers)



Data Source: Joassart-Marcelli and Bosco. 2013. *Food, Ethnicity, and Place Project*.

Science Foundation and entitled *Food, Ethnicity and Place*, we canvassed the entire area demarcated by the light blue boundary. With the assistance of a team of geography students at San Diego State University, we conducted comprehensive audits in all food retail outlets located within the area. We also gathered addresses of food stores located within a half-mile buffer outside of the study area. The stores' locations are shown on Figure 4, with the size of the dots proportional to the number of cash registers (a proxy for size). The largest dot on the northwest corner along Market Street is a very large membership warehouse store. It is not considered a typical supermarket because it requires a membership fee, sells items in bulk-package, and therefore primarily serve businesses and large families, including many from outside the community.

Four medium size grocery stores were found in the study area including a new branch of a regional Hispanic supermarket chain, two discount stores, and an older grocery store. The twenty-five remaining stores were much smaller and the majority only had one cash register (see Figure 5). In fact, the average store size in Southeastern San Diego has 2.8 cash registers, but **the median or typical store only has 1 register**. The latter represents the norm in the neighborhood and suggests that small businesses may play a potentially critical role in shaping access to food and influencing food behaviors. These small businesses include gas stations, liquor stores, corner stores, and specialty shops, many with distinctive ethnic affiliation, reflecting the diverse demographic composition of the neighborhood.

According to the Figure 6, most Southeastern San Diego residents have access to at least one small food store within a half-mile distance from home (including stores marked by a small star in surrounding communities). This finding challenges the argument that the neighborhood is a “food desert.” Nevertheless, the map reveals that **there are numerous blocks where food retailers are not accessible without a car**, especially on the eastern side of the community in Emerald Hills, Encanto, South Encanto and Valencia Park. Given the relatively high level of poverty and limited car ownership in these communities, the absence of food stores raises concern regarding people’s ability to purchase fresh and healthy food.

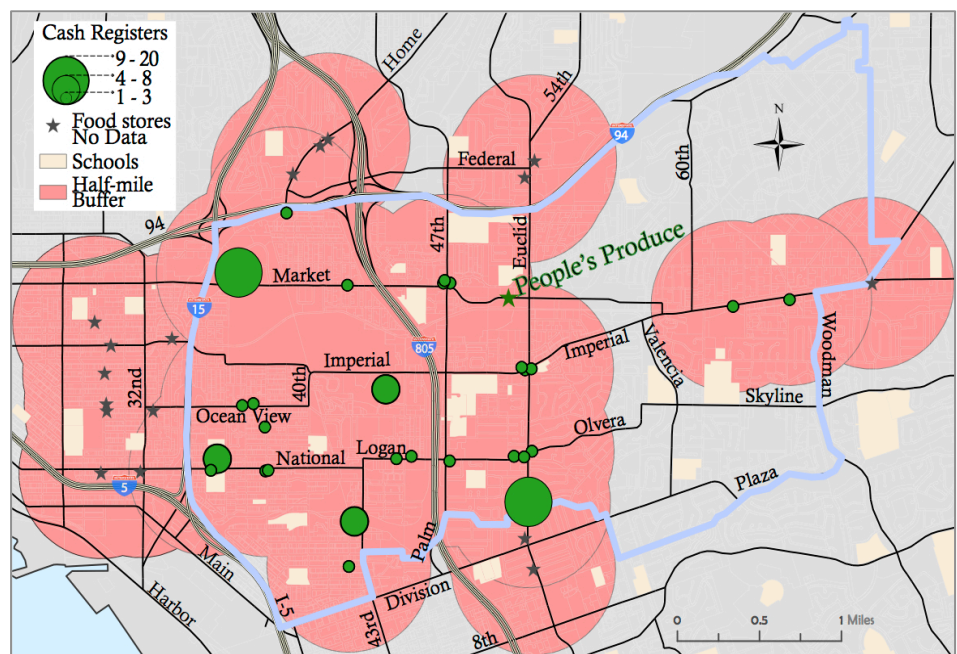
These maps draw attention to **the important role of small**

A Food Swamp?

Recent research suggests that the presence of unhealthy food in a neighborhood may be as equally damaging to its residents’ health as the absence of food. Landscapes characterized by numerous fast food restaurants, liquor stores, and markets that primarily sell highly processed and so-called “junk” food have been described as “food swamps.” In contrast with “food deserts” where food retailers are presumably absent and therefore obtaining food is challenging for residents, the main concern here is the **constant exposure and significantly easier access to foods that are unhealthy** because of their high fat and sugar content and their limited nutritious value. Does the swamp metaphor accurately describe the food landscape of Southeastern San Diego?

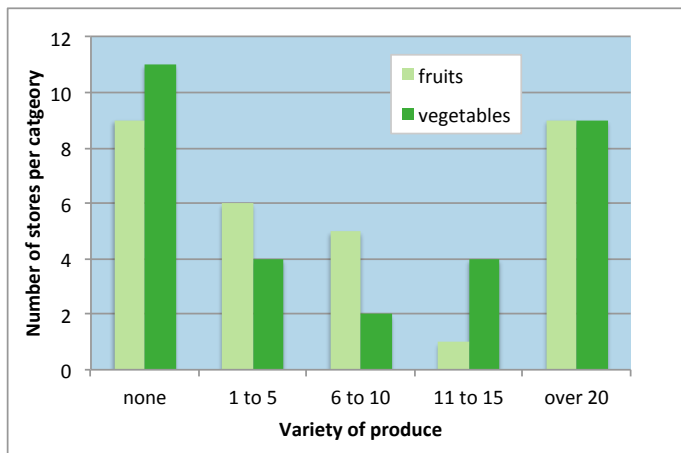
Our audits indicate that **70 percent of local food stores sell fresh fruits and 63 percent sell**

Figure 6: Access to Food Stores: Half Mile Buffer



Data Source: Joassart-Marcelli and Bosco. 2013. *Food, Ethnicity, and Place Project*. Map designed by Emanuel Delgado.

**Figure 7: Produce Variety:
Number of Stores by Level of Fruit
and Vegetable Variety**



Data Source: Joassart-Marcelli and Bosco. 2013. *Food, Ethnicity, and Place Project*.

fresh vegetables. However, the average **variety** is 9 different fruits and 8 vegetables, suggesting that customers do not have a wide range of produce to choose from in the majority of stores. In fact, as shown in Figure 7, in approximately half of the stores, there is **either no fruits or vegetables or a very limited selection of five or fewer items.**

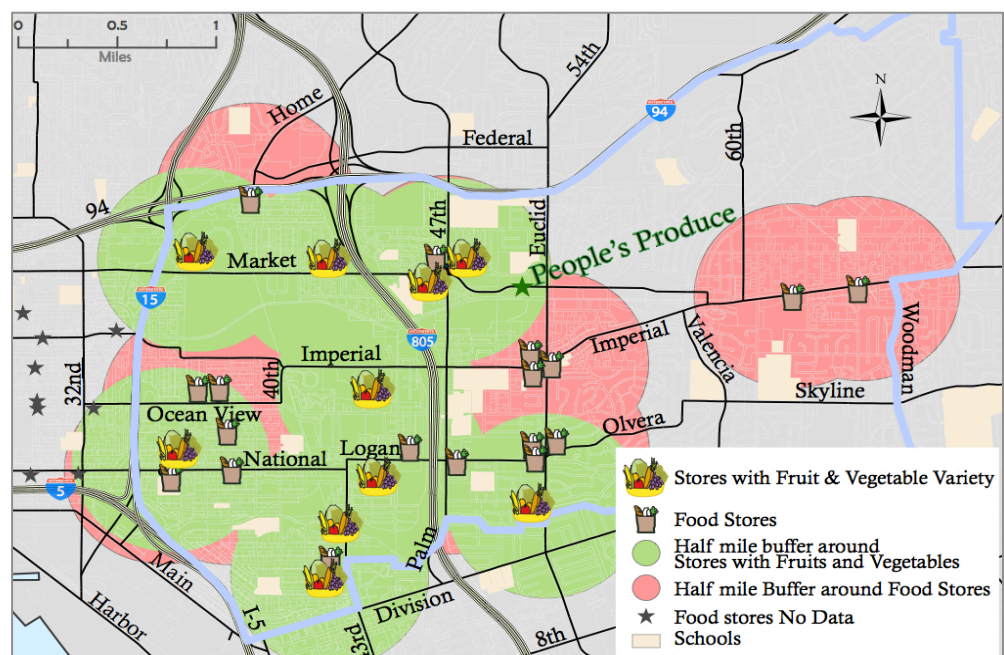
Some liquor stores only had lemons and/or limes available – more likely to be used in alcohol-based mixed beverages than as an ingredient for a healthy meal.

In the entire neighborhood, **only two stores offered organic produce.** Given that organic food is often linked to healthier diets and better environments than conventionally grown food, the lack of such produce in Southeastern San Diego likely reflects the commonly held perception by many retail managers (including those working

for large corporate chains as well as those operating independently-owned businesses) that consumers in low-income neighborhoods are not interested in this type of food. Indeed, many Southeastern San Diego residents, especially those below the federal poverty income level, find it difficult to afford organic produce at the prices at which it is sold in the majority of grocery stores. This, however, does not imply that people do not desire such produce.

Reconsidering food access in light of these findings, we find that although most residents have access to a store (as shown above in Figure 6), access to a variety of fresh produce is less common. Figure 8 displays all stores selling food in the study area, distinguishing between those with a variety of fruits and vegetables and others that have either a limited selection or no fresh produce at all. The green buffers that surround stores with a higher variety of produce identify areas with relatively good access to these types of stores. The map reveals many more “gaps” than Figure 6 did and suggests that **approximately**

**Figure 8: Access to Stores with Produce Variety
with half mile buffer**



Data Source: Joassart-Marcelli and Bosco. 2013. *Food, Ethnicity, and Place Project*. Map designed by Emanuel Delgado.

half of the neighborhood lacks access to the sort of produce selection typically available in mid-size grocery stores. This is especially problematic in communities located East of Euclid (e.g., Encanto, South Encanto, Emerald Hills and Valencia Park) where the few stores serving the area have very limited selections of fresh produce, making it difficult for local residents to consume fresh, nutritious, diverse and balanced meals.

Other indicators of the quality of the food environment relate to the presence of undesirable elements, including **“junk” food** (i.e., snacks high in sugar, fat and calories and low in nutrients), soda, and alcohol. Constant and disproportionate exposure to these types of food and drink is likely to encourage consumption, which in excess has been linked to major health concerns.

Our audits reveal that every food retailer in the area offered at least some **junk food** and sodas. In over two-third of the stores, the variety of junk

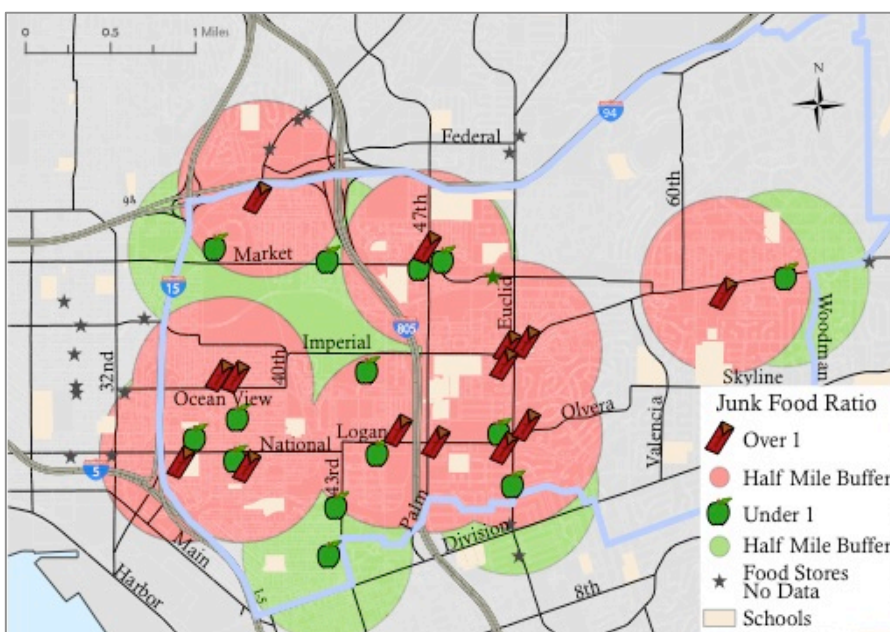
food offered was higher than the variety of fresh produce. It is not uncommon to see entire aisles dedicated to various types of chips, cookies, candy bars, sweets and other low-nutrition snacks, with only a small display of fresh produce in a corner or at the back of the store. Unfortunately, these types of shops, where the ratio of junk to fresh produce variety is greater than 1, tend to be located near schools, attracting many young students on their way home (see Figure 9). The junk food readily available near schools often competes directly with food provided in school or brought in from home, effectively sabotaging efforts encouraging children to adopt a healthy diet.

The vast majority of retailers (88 percent) offer what can be called **convenient processed foods** (i.e., canned soup, instant noodles or frozen meals). Such foods are typically high in sodium, additives and preservatives, and lower in healthy nutrients than freshly prepared foods due to the very high level of processing. Yet, they can be easily prepared and, unlike fresh produce, can be

kept for extended periods of time, in some cases without any refrigeration.

A very similar pattern exists regarding the availability and distribution of **sugary drinks** with low or no nutritious content. In addition to soda drinks, these also include fruit juices with added sugar, and energy drinks, which have recently become very popular and have been highly criticized by public health experts as an unsafe source of sugar and caffeine. As Figure 10 indicates, every store located in Southeastern San Diego sold soda and above 80 percent of stores had twenty or more types of soda available for sale.¹² Ninety-three

Figure 9: Ratio of “Junk Food” Variety over Fresh Produce Variety with half mile access buffer



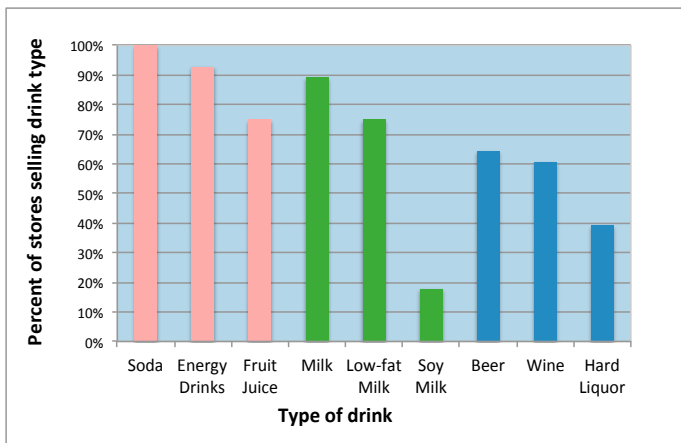
Data Source: Joassart-Marcelli and Bosco. 2013. *Food, Ethnicity, and Place Project*. Map designed by Emanuel Delgado.

percent of stores also sold energy drinks. In most cases (82 percent), sodas and energy drinks were presented in large refrigerated sections, typically located towards the front of the store and promoting immediate consumption.

In contrast, low-fat **milk** is less readily available than any of the drinks mentioned above, with only about 75 percent of stores selling it. Soymilk, which is often considered a healthy alternative for people who suffer from lactose intolerance, is only available in one out of six stores. The average price of a gallon of milk is \$4.15, about 15 percent above the average price of \$3.62 for the City of San Diego.¹³ This finding supports the argument that food in low-income neighborhoods tends to be more expensive.

Many of the stores serving the community are

Figure 10: Drink Availability, by Type

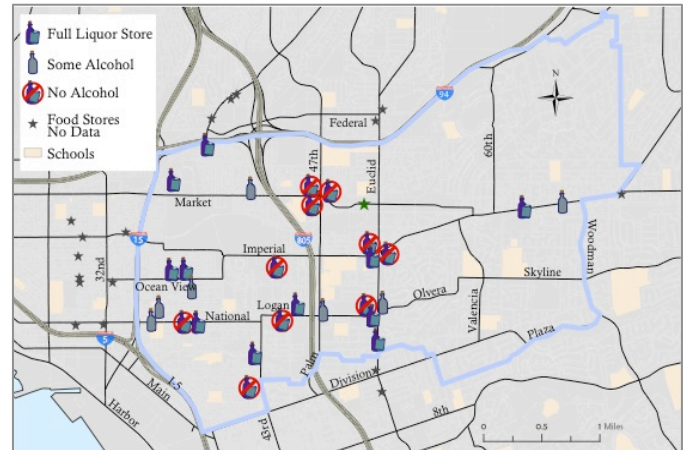


Data Source: Joassart-Marcelli and Bosco. 2013. *Food, Ethnicity, and Place Project*.

considered **liquor stores** and offer a very wide selection of beer, wine and hard liquor (see Figure 11). Sixty four percent of local retailers sell liquor, including beer, and forty percent supply hard liquor, which requires a special permit issued by the City of San Diego. In many of these liquor stores, the variety of alcohol offered far exceeds the variety of fresh produce and other nutritious food. Liquor stores are often located in

close proximity to **schools**, exposing children and young adults to alcohol on a daily basis.

Figure 11: Liquor Stores



Data Source: Joassart-Marcelli and Bosco. 2013. *Food, Ethnicity, and Place Project*. Map designed by Emanuel Delgado.

In addition to the stores analyzed for this report, fast food and other local restaurants also represent an important source of food for many residents. In fact, there are **more fast food restaurants in Southeastern San Diego than there are stores selling fresh food**. Yet, a growing number of studies document the negative impact of fast food on people's health, including geographically concentrated effects on people who live in neighborhoods with large numbers of fast-food restaurants.¹⁴ Our research identified 61 restaurants in Southeastern San Diego, including 47 (or more than three-fourth) that can be classified as "fast food" to the extent that they provide quickly prepared and relatively inexpensive food with limited or no table service. Many of these are small independent taco shops, pizzerias and burger stands, as reflected in the small average number of tables (i.e., seven tables), often located outdoors. Less than a third of restaurants located in Southeastern San Diego are part of a larger corporate chain, underscoring the importance of restaurants for local entrepreneurship and economic livelihood.

While providing economic opportunities, these restaurants are often complicit in producing a food landscape dominated by unhealthy food, which is the definition of a food swamp. For instance, 90 percent of audited restaurants served fried foods, only 35 percent offered main course salads, and less than 25 percent offered healthier side substitutions (e.g., salad, vegetables or steamed rice instead of fries). The data we collected allowed us to estimate that a main course dish in these restaurants cost between \$3.66 (average price of lowest priced entrée) and \$12.08 (average price of most expensive entrée). This suggests that it is possible to obtain a meal for less than \$5 – making fast food restaurants an attractive option for those with limited budgets, time, resources and/or motivation to cook.

The exposure to less desirable types of foods and drinks – what some have called a “toxic food environment” – is further exacerbated by **advertising**, which glamorizes and encourages the consumption of soda, alcohol and unhealthy foods.¹⁵ According to our audits, 79 percent of stores displayed ads for liquor, soda or cigarettes on their property (including inside the store). In contrast, only 39 percent of stores showed any advertising or public health campaign materials encouraging the consumption of fruits or vegetables (i.e., “five-a-day” initiative) in any language.

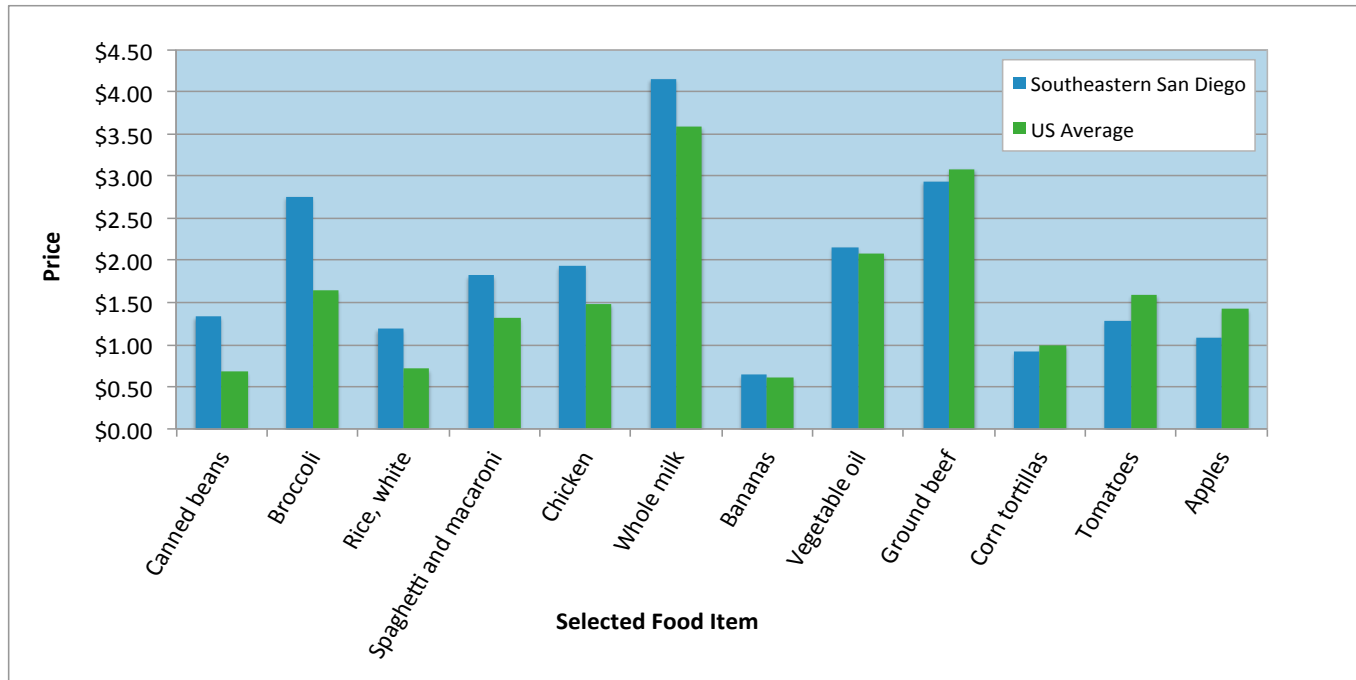
As noted above regarding milk, the **price of food** in Southeastern San Diego tends to be higher than in the City of San Diego and the US on average. This finding is consistent with previous research that shows higher food prices in low-income urban neighborhoods.¹⁶ Figure 12 compares the retail price per pound of a few basic commodities, ranked from those with disproportionately higher prices in Southeastern San Diego to those few items with slightly lower prices. Of the 12 food items selected to represent a “typical” food basket, 8 were more expensive in the study

area.¹⁷ Canned beans, a fairly inexpensive, commonly used and convenient food staple, were on average twice as expensive in the study area. Broccoli, one of the most common green vegetables found in stores within the study area, was also significantly more expensive (68 percent). Making matters worse, several auditors reported that the quality of fresh produce was often wanting, with many fruits and vegetables bruised or wilted. White rice and pasta were also on average less affordable in Southeastern San Diego stores.

Apples and tomatoes were found to be slightly less expensive in Southeastern San Diego. These two items tend to be easier to preserve and have longer shelf life than other fresh produce like lettuce and berries. It is therefore not surprising that these may be more readily available and affordable. So-called ethnic stores, especially those specializing in Mexican foods, were likely to offer tomatoes and other affordable produce for sale.

The price of ground beef, a frequent source of protein, was statistically similar to the US average. However this lack of significant price difference may be related to quality variations, such as a higher fat content, which was indeed reported in many stores. Unfortunately, consumption of red meat (especially cuts high in saturated fats) is associated with greater incidence of obesity and heart disease. Recent studies have also highlighted the environmental impacts of meat consumption.¹⁸ Yet, if ground beef is the most accessible source of meat in the neighborhood, it is likely to be an important component of households’ meals, especially for those on a tight budget. As figure 12 illustrates, chicken – a typically healthier source of animal protein – tends to be about 45 cents more expensive per pound in Southeastern San Diego. Seafood is much less available in the neighborhood, with only a handful of stores

Figure 12: Prices of Selected Food Items, Southeastern San Diego Compared to US Average



Data Source: Southeastern San Diego Prices: Joassart-Marcelli and Bosco. 2013. *Food, Ethnicity, and Place Project*. US Averages: US Bureau of Labor Statistics, Average Food Retail Prices of Selected Items (December 2012)

selling fresh fish.

This **price disparity** is partly due to the fact that convenience stores and small grocers rarely supply food in large-size packages. For example, canned food is often sold in sizes ranging between 7 and 16 ounces, instead of larger sizes (like 28 ounces). Fruits are sometimes sold by the piece. For example, several stores sold bananas at 75 cents each. Similarly dried goods, such as rice and pasta, are sold in smaller packages too, which lead to a higher average price per pound than bulk items. In addition, small independent businesses, which dominate the neighborhood, do not benefit from the same economies of scale as large corporate chain stores do and must therefore charge higher prices in order to cover their costs and remain profitable. Small stores also rarely carry generic brands and favor more expensive popular branded items.

There is also some evidence that certain retailers take advantage of the lack of mobility among local residents to charge higher prices, knowing that

competition is limited. Such **price gouging** also appears to occur for items designated for the Women, Infant and Children Program (WIC). In California, this federally funded program provides low-income pregnant women, mothers and their children up to age five with WIC checks allowing them to purchase specific food items.¹⁹ Stores participating in the program usually display tags with a WIC logo on qualifying items (e.g., milk, juice, eggs, breakfast cereal, whole-grain bread). In several instances, project auditors noticed that WIC-labeled items were priced significantly higher than other similar items. While not representing a direct cost to individual participants, this differential pricing generates larger reimbursements for shop owners. Such practices have also been uncovered in other places.²⁰ To the extent that funds allocated to WIC are limited, this sort of price gauging ultimately limits the amount food which women and their children may be able to obtain through the program. In addition, artificially raising the price of WIC items may contribute to overall price

inflation, both for WIC and non-WIC items, indirectly affecting low-income households not eligible for WIC.

Most local businesses participate in **public food assistance programs** and typically advertise it prominently outside the building. Among the 45 stores in the study area, 39 accepted the Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card used primarily for SNAP²¹ and 19 (or 42 percent) accepted WIC checks. Studies have shown that building incentives into these programs might be an effective way to simultaneously increase the consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables and the availability of these types of food in participating stores.²² Yet, authorized stores in Southeastern San Diego do not necessarily carry a wide variety of fresh produce and healthy foods. In fact, some are primarily liquor stores, with a small selection of questionably nutritious items on the side.



Together the data presented in this section point to the existence of a food landscape that threatens the health of local residence by failing to provide them with the foods needed for a healthy, diverse, affordable and culturally appropriate diet – the four pillars of food security. Instead of a typical food desert, the local food retail environment may be better described as a food swamp in which

residents are primarily exposed to unhealthy foods and drinks. In the next section, we turn our attention to the positive elements of Southeastern

Opportunities

Despite some challenges, Southeastern San Diego presents opportunities to contribute to a sustainable, affordable and fair food system that meets the needs of its residents and fosters healthy lives. We identify several community resources and ongoing activities that have the potential to transform the food landscape of Southeastern San Diego.

First, the neighborhood provides opportunities for **urban agriculture**. The relatively high proportion of detached single unit homes and the low to medium housing density mean that many households could grow food in their yard. The presence of vacant lots – a result of deindustrialization and economic decline – also lends itself to community gardening.

Indeed, in the past few years, efforts have been made to encourage urban agriculture on both private lots and public land. Of course, this is contingent upon **zoning regulations and a permitting process**, which in recent years has been streamlined thanks to advocacy efforts from many organizations and gardeners throughout central San Diego. Mount Hope Community Garden broke ground in September 2011 on a half-acre empty lot along Market Street, providing plots for local residents and garden volunteers to grow food. Other gardens have been planted in schools or are currently developing. Project New Village also facilitated the formation of a Growers' Group, which gathers people growing and sharing food in southeastern San Diego.

A crucial element of these initiatives is the **education programs** that provide residents with the necessary information to grow and prepare healthy food. Nonprofit community organizations are at the forefront of these initiatives, working in

collaboration with Healthy Works and other programs sponsored by San Diego County's Health and Human Services Agency, local schools, colleges and universities. For instance, Groundwork San Diego has partnered with the San Diego Unified School District to create the EarthLab, where students and their families can learn about gardening in addition to environmental science. Project New Village designed and taught a continuing education course entitled "Redesigning Farming." The course, which was taught at the Educational Cultural Complex in Southeastern San Diego, introduced participants to the history and technologies of urban farming and its contribution to healthy living.

Even when empty lots are available and secured, **environmental remediation** is often a necessary step in an environment where heavy industries and waste disposal have polluted the soil and created a threat to agriculture. A number of organizations, including Victory Garden, Project New Village and the University of California San Diego, have been involved in facilitating soil testing and clean up through a variety of methods, including sustainable plant remediation.

Farmers' markets are another fruitful approach to improve access to fresh, healthy and affordable foods. Since 2012, Southeastern San Diego has been home to the People's Produce Certified Farmers Market. In addition to providing local



growers with opportunities to sell their produce, the market also supports small entrepreneurs involved in food preparation. It accepts **EBT, WIC and Senior Nutrition Vouchers** and aims to serve low-income residents. Greater linkages between these public programs and farmers' markets are likely to stimulate the demand for healthier foods from low-income families and sustain farmers' markets for all.

The limited mobility of the local population suggests an opportunity for retailers to tap into the **neighborhood's purchasing power**. Although poverty is widespread and median household income are lower than elsewhere in the city and county of San Diego, the sheer number of households represent a rarely acknowledged economic opportunity. Yet retailers often ignore the needs of local residents, choosing instead to sell "cheap" processed food based on racist assumptions and outdated business models. With some outreach and assistance, incentives may be put in place to expand the sale of fresh and healthy foods.

For instance, the "Cilantro to Stores" program of Healthy Works created **incentives for convenience stores** in Chula Vista (just a few miles south of Southeastern San Diego) to display and sell fresh produce grown at local farms. A similar program is being considered in Southeastern San Diego through the Communities of Excellence program. Many stores are struggling financially and face steep competition against corporate chains. Addressing the growing demand for fresh produce and healthy food by building relationships with local farmers and food producers is likely to help raise revenue, thereby promoting **local economic development** and reducing economic leakage outside the community. Technical assistance and financial incentives are instrumental in achieving these goals.

In areas where stores are absent and food access is therefore limited, there are opportunities to develop **new models of food retail**. The federal

government and the state of California, with assistance from Philanthropy, have supported the development of new markets in underserved areas through loan guarantees, new market tax credits, and grant programs. In particular, the **California FreshWorks Fund** and the **California Healthy Food Financing Initiative (CHFFI)**, which was signed into law by Governor Brown in 2011, have been at the forefront of promoting new ways to finance access to healthy food. Yet, funding is always competitive and requires planning and grant writing capacity, which many small nonprofits and community organizations often lack.

For instance, Northgate Gonzalez Market benefited from financial support from the California FreshWorks Fund as well as other public and private partners. This new market, located on 43rd street near the southwestern tip of the study area, offers a wide variety of fresh produce, meat and prepared food targeted primarily to a Latino customer base. The success of this store speaks to the potential of “ethnic” stores in meeting the needs of local residents. Similar stores, that appeal to the various ethnic communities of Southeastern San Diego and surrounding neighborhoods, could fill the gap we have identified in the eastern sections of the region, including Emerald Hills, Encanto, South Encanto and Valencia Park.

Given the potential of urban agriculture, it may be very useful to establish mechanisms that allow small producers to sell their crops to larger



institutions, including restaurants, schools, existing stores and large workplaces. Yet, the unpredictability and limited quantities of crops grown by urban gardeners make it difficult to meet demand in a timely fashion without a centralized **distribution system** that would even out lapses in production and make purchasing from local producers more attractive to larger institutional buyers. Similar results may be achieved through collaborative **Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)** schemes that would bundle together produce from different small growers (instead of a single farm) to provide CSA members with a box of seasonal and diverse local produce on a weekly or bi-weekly basis.

Initiatives to improve the food landscape ought to address simultaneously healthy food imperatives and **community economic development** needs. Food has historically been a major source of income. Supporting a vibrant food economy in Southeastern San Diego, including farming, catering, processing and retailing, will not only provide healthy food to local residents, it will also create jobs and sustain a sense of community.

Several cities, including San Francisco, New Orleans, New York and Philadelphia, have adopted their own municipal program to foster greater access to healthy food. A **Food Policy Council**, with strong leadership from municipal and/or regional governments and representation



from communities, would provide the structure and resources necessary to foster a sustainable food system for San Diego that would address multiple critical issues including hunger, health,

economic development and job creation, education, and environmental sustainability.

S U M M A R Y

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 food security

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 marketing healthy food.
- Civic participation and active community-based organizations already involved in food justice projects, including:
 - community gardens
 - a farmers’ market
 - educational outreach
 - environmental remediation
- Availability of land for urban agriculture
- Potential of food-related entrepreneurship to generate jobs and income
- History of farming and diverse food-centered cultural traditions
- Proximity to downtown and other densely populated residential areas
- Growing interest in promoting a sustainable food system at local, state and federal levels of government through:
 - revision of zoning regulations
 - new healthy food financing initiatives (including low-interest loans, grants, loan guarantees and tax credits)
 - food policy councils
 - technical assistance
 - EBT and WIC related incentives.

Endnotes

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- ¹⁰ See Lincoln Park, CA Neighborhood Analysis: <http://voiceofsandiego.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/51362a6e8641a.pdf.pdf>
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GEOGRAPHY



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