

Mitigating the Effects of Food Deserts in Memphis, Tennessee

Lou Zhou, Rice University '27

Introduction

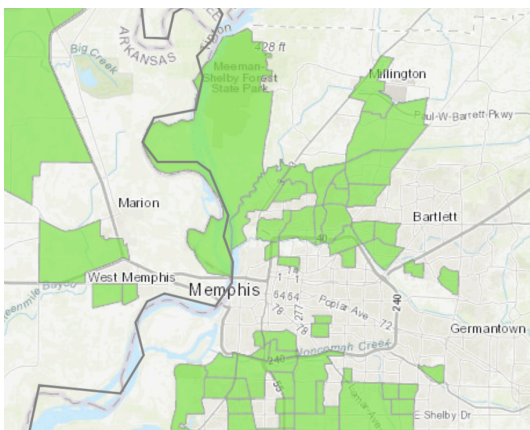
In 2021, North Memphis' only grocery store, Gordin's Foods and Butcher Shop on Jackson Avenue closed its doors for the last time,¹ leaving residents without a convenient way to get fresh groceries, and creating a **food desert**, a low-income area where at least one-third of residents live a mile or more away from a supermarket,² in its wake. Unfortunately, this story is widespread throughout the city of Memphis, where recent store closings in the neighborhoods of Orange Mound, South Memphis, and Binghampton³ have led to a city where

Over **3 in 10** Memphians live in a Food Desert, the highest among **51** Metro Areas.¹⁰



In these areas, residents are forced to choose between eating convenient and unhealthy fast food or driving for hours to the nearest grocery store to buy fresh produce.

While only a small component of an individual's food environment, food deserts are linked with obesity and diet-related diseases,⁴ where this choice between convenient, unhealthy food and inconvenient fresh produce has contributed to the city's high rate of obesity and diet-related chronic diseases, where **over one-third** of the city is obese⁵ and heart disease is the **number one cause of death**.⁶



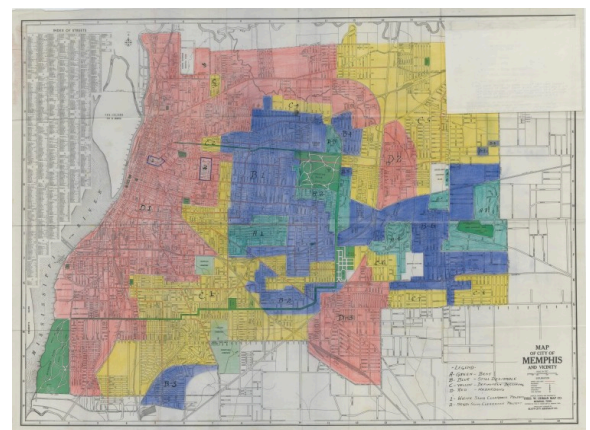
Food Deserts in Memphis, where the green areas are Food Deserts²

Furthermore, these health issues contribute to the cycle of poverty, where **health issues lead to employment issues, employment issues lead to poverty, and poverty further contributes to food insecurity and health issues**.³ This cycle of poverty also makes it less feasible for grocery stores to stay in these areas, with crime and poverty leading to lower sales and grocery stores moving to more profitable areas.

How Did We Get Here?

Notably, this problem is rooted in previous racist policies which have disadvantaged majority black neighborhoods. Past policies like **redlining**, which withheld federally insured mortgages and basic financial services in conjunction with **color-blind racist zoning policies** like only allowing occupancy to nuclear families. These policies discouraged minorities who are more likely to live with extended family, further segregating and impoverishing black neighborhoods,⁸ making it impossible to build wealth and keep grocery stores in these neighborhoods.

Therefore it is no surprise that there is heavy overlap between neighborhoods that have been previously been redlined and current food deserts in Memphis, with the redlined and poorer North and South parts of Memphis marred with food deserts, and the relatively untouched portions of Central and Midtown Memphis.



A Redlining Map of Memphis from the 1930s where Yellow and Red areas were neighborhoods determined by banks to be of high risk¹¹



Myths and Misconceptions

The Myth

Low sales, crime, and other free market factors are the **only** reason that supermarkets are not replacing departing and closing markets.

The Truth

Monopolistic practices by departing chain grocery stores to drive consumers to the chain's other, farther away locations have made it impossible for other stores to establish in food deserts.

These practices include **restrictive covenants**, which, when stores leave areas, prevent the land from being used as a different grocery store, and the practice of "**going dark**," where exclusivity covenants, agreements which prevent a landlord from having another grocery store in the same area, allow supermarkets to close indefinitely but continue to pay rent, **preventing a new grocery store from appearing** because of the exclusivity covenant.³

The Myth

Supermarkets are moving out of these areas because there simply is not enough demand for healthy, fresh foods.

The Truth

While there is some truth this claim,¹³ previous research has shown that when a new grocery store is established in a food desert, residents **will switch** if that store is more conveniently located.¹²

With cheaper land and a wealthier consumer base, it is **less risky** to operate in predominantly white suburban areas. Previous research¹⁴ has shown that **there is enough demand to support a supermarket in a lot of low-income areas**, but it is more profitable to operate in the suburbs.

Potential Solutions

It is important to note that food deserts in Memphis are a **symptom** of the widespread poverty epidemic hitting majority black neighborhoods in the city. There is no systemic solution to the food desert problem **without a comprehensive solution to the poverty epidemic**. Therefore, this brief advocates for two areas of policy change which mitigate the effects of food deserts: policies supporting **urban agricultural projects** in food deserts through fiscal and institutional support and policies which **expand antitrust litigation** in Memphis to prevent the anticompetitive, restrictive covenants and the practice of "going dark" as noted above to allow for other grocery stores to move into the neighborhood.

Supporting Urban Agriculture²⁵



Community gardens are able to **provide convenient fresh produce** for food deserts, cultivate a **sense of community**, providing an area for residents to gather with neighbors, **create jobs**, and generate a **centralized place** for educational programs that build healthy eating habits. In a study in Baltimore,¹⁵ it was found that urban farms provided benefits in **health, community cohesiveness, and environmental sustainability**, as well as **work opportunities**. With similar poverty rates,^{16,17} and a shared history of systemic racism,¹⁸ it is certainly feasible for these effects to be translated to a city like Memphis. In addition, previous discriminatory policies has made the value of land in food deserts drop, making it **more affordable** to buy and prepare land in food deserts.

The expansion of antitrust litigation preventing monopolistic practices like **restrictive covenants** and "**going dark**" would allow new grocery markets to move into these areas. Previously, courts have assumed that residents **will always be able to use a car to travel** to other supermarkets, meaning that these covenants do not violate antitrust law as there are still competitors within driving distance of residents.²⁰ However, these courts do not consider that it might not be feasible for residents to spend potentially hours to travel to these stores. The prohibition of these practices would open the door for other grocery stores to move into the region, **providing a new source of fresh food** for residents of food deserts.

Expanding Antitrust Litigation²⁶





Political Implications

"One of the things I have really come to realize that the government is not the answer to all of our problems that we face on a daily basis...The government has a responsibility to provide an environment, but that [nonprofit organizations] can do what the government cannot and should not do."
- Governor Bill Lee²¹

The solutions proposed in this policy brief **focus heavily on the local level** as it seems unlikely that these proposals will gain much support from state level politicians. As shown by the quote above, Governor Lee believes that the food desert problem is better targeted by nonprofit and faith based organizations, believing that **government should not try to directly deal with this problem**, but instead provide the environment for these organizations to attack the issue,²¹ and with the current Republican supermajority in both chambers of the Tennessee Legislature, it seems unlikely that there will be any policies that directly target food deserts like those advocated for in this brief would that are feasible at the state level.

Furthermore, on the national level, while the U.S. Representative for the Memphis area, Steve Cohen, **has previously introduced bills providing tax incentives** for fresh food retailers moving into food deserts,²² **the current deadlock in Congress** between the Republican controlled House and the Democratic controlled Senate means that it would be unlikely that significant policy directed specifically towards the city of Memphis dealing with food deserts would be feasible in the near future.

However, local level politicians **have continually voiced support** for policies directly dealing with the food desert issue. Both newly elected Mayor Paul Young and the Shelby County Commission have previously advocated for tax breaks and other incentives to attract supermarkets to food deserts,^{23,24} so **it would be feasible** to receive support on the local level for both urban agriculture funding and the expansion of antitrust litigation preventing anticompetitive covenants on the local levels. Nonetheless, it should be noted that it would be **much easier to pass urban agricultural funding** because of the relatively low cost compared to **banning anti-competitive policies** with the risk of **angering large grocery retailers** which bring substantial amounts of money into Memphis.

Footnotes

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