

Food retail and access after the crash: rethinking the food desert problem

Betsy Donald[†]

Department of Geography, MacKintosh Corry Hall, D201, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada K7L 3N6

[†]Corresponding author: Betsy Donald. email: <betsy.donald@queensu.ca>

Abstract

This article reviews Neil Wrigley's significant contributions to food desert research and how his work informs current debates in the USA around unhealthy foodscapes and what to do about them. After an update on the current U.S. food policy environment, the article reviews the controversies surrounding locating big food retail in under-served areas. It argues that the food access problem can only move forward if three areas are addressed. First, economic geographers must return to a serious engagement in crucial evidence-based 'before/after' retail interventions as Wrigley and his UK researchers did almost 15 years ago. Second, current research must not be done in isolation to the context of the rapidly changing global retail environment and the multiple ways people now access their food. Third, solutions must also address the broader issues of affordability and need and the particular U.S. style governance regime that limits what personal responsibility can do.

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The collapse of Lehman Brothers in October 2008 was a pivotal point in the evolution of our economic landscape. The fact businesses can look back to that day and pinpoint a sea-change in the shopping behaviour of Western consumers makes it the most extraordinary of events.

Chris Brook-Carter (2011)

The financial crisis of 2008 was certainly a watershed moment in the evolution of our economic geography. Consumer spending, a major driver of Western economies, dropped and a period of sustained economic growth came to a grinding halt. Housing was affected most noticeably but all retail landscapes were hit, including food. Economic geographers have made important contributions to debates over the years regarding the impact of retail on the economic landscape and perhaps none better known than Neil Wrigley. More than 15 years ago, Wrigley argued convincingly that retail could no longer be viewed as the poor cousin to production, but that it was at the 'leading edge' of new developments within labour practices, the social relations of production, and the contradictory relationship that industries have with the regulatory state and local communities. He and his colleagues unleashed a series of studies on the retail sector which combined economic, cultural and political research agendas (Wrigley and Lowe, 1996; Wrigley, 2000; Wrigley et al., 2003, 2005, see also Ducatel and Blomley, 1990).

In this article, I focus on his food desert work and how it informs current debates in the USA around unhealthy foodscapes and what to do about them. The term ‘food desert’ was first used in Scotland in the mid 1990s to describe dense urban areas where residents did not have access to an affordable and healthy diet (Wrigley, 2002). Since then almost 1000 papers have been published tackling the issue from urban planning, economic, management, social work, race, cultural studies, health, nutrition and medical perspectives. One of the most widely cited is Wrigley et al.’s (2003, 151) Leeds paper which was the first study to assess the impact of ‘a non-healthcare intervention’ (specifically a retail provision intervention) on food consumption patterns in a poor retail-access community (Couzin-Frankel, 2012). The paper provided evidence of a positive albeit very modest impact of the retail intervention on diet. The authors argued for a replication of these kinds of studies in different contexts not only for large-scale retail provision intervention but also for small-scale community-based intervention, to determine similar impacts on access, diet and by extension community health. Since the Leeds study, some excellent policy papers have been published, making a compelling argument for getting healthier food into underserved neighbourhoods (Treuhart and Karpyn, 2010). Yet in the hundreds of peer-reviewed studies, surprisingly few have actually conducted any kind of critical evidence-based ‘before/after’ assessment. One of the few is the Glasgow study by Cummins et al. (2005) that did not find evidence for a net large-scale retail intervention effect on fruit and vegetable consumption; however, the authors did find improvement in psychological health for those who directly engaged with the intervention. The mixed results of those studies have brought into question the difficulty of focusing on a built-environment solution to the food desert problem.

Guthman (2011, 69) in a highly engaging book, *Weighing In*, for example, has argued that by ‘incorporating factors such as proximity to grocery stores in its measurements, many of these studies validate a policy approach that emphasizes supply-oriented issues rather than demand-oriented ones of affordability and need.’ These supply-side reports evoke the old adage ‘if you built it they will come’, or in this case, ‘if you built it they will eat better’. This is an argument I will return to in a moment, but first an update on the current U.S. food desert story.

In recent years, we have seen how the food desert metaphor has captured the imagination of U.S. policymakers, similar to the UK experience 15 years prior. It has come to epitomize urban decay and all that is wrong with American urban life. (I should note here that the term is highly contested. Many reject the image of a bleak and desolate urban landscape while others hope to dispense altogether with a term that has potentially racialized implications linking people of colour to barren environments (McClintock, 2008)). In our collective imagination, the ‘food desert’ conjures images of endless fast-food restaurants and convenience stores serving junk food to overweight people willing but unable to access fresh fruits and vegetables. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has linked food deserts to a growing weight problem that has seen childhood obesity in the U.S. triple since 1980 and the annual cost of treating obesity rise to nearly \$150 million. The USDA, the President’s budget (2012), and the 2012 Farm Bill all offer policy solutions to address the political panic over obesity. In 2011, First Lady Michelle Obama announced a \$400 million National Healthy Food Financing Initiative as part of a goal to eliminate food deserts nationwide by 2017. Part of her strategy involved teaming up with Walmart, Walgreens and other national and regional chains to open or expand more than 1500 retail stores in an effort to bring

healthier food to underserved areas. This strategy is part of a bigger change strategy in U.S. politics to get people to make healthier food choices to solve the obesity epidemic, another point I will return to in a moment.

Retail's push into underserved areas is not an altruistic one but rather part of a new competitive strategy that rests on big retail's ability to adapt its older retail format to different and rapidly changing consumer landscapes. Currah and Wrigley (2004) have called this 'the hybridized model of retail globalization' wherein retail transnational corporations (TNCs) employ a variety of mechanisms of knowledge management to share innovative capabilities arising out of particular localities. For these TNCs and other retailers, the U.S. market is a challenging one. Since the financial crisis of 2007–2008, the U.S. market continues to be a tough place to do business. Food companies are not doing a lot of hiring and national unemployment is still over 8%. More people are on food stamps than ever before (USDA, 2011).¹ According to the chief financial officer at Heinz, 'value means different things to different people. For some people, value means lower cost per ounce. For others that are really struggling, it is that entry level price point. At all levels of the socioeconomic ladder, we're going to be innovative to meet those needs' (Watson, 2012). For Heinz, this means making smaller packs which are targeted at dollar stores, a retail channel which has performed much better than the big superstores since the economic recession. Market share data show a levelling off of supermarket and superstore food sales since 2008. By contrast, food retail market share has been growing for dollar stores and alternative retail channels such as warehouse clubs, small format, discounters, e-commerce, department stores and drug stores. Channel blurring makes it even more difficult to assess food access (Planet Retail, 2012).

A review of corporate data from sources such as IBIS, PassportGMid and Planet Retail reveals that some of these U.S.-based TNC retailers are questioning whether their switch to small-box urban formats will succeed. The U.S. food retail market is highly competitive. Even within the small-box format, U.S.-based TNCs face stiff competition from European-based ones with a much longer history of innovation in the small-box healthy food access format. UK-based Tesco's recent entry into California's inner-city markets through its Fresh and Easy Neighbourhood Market banner is a case in point (Lowe and Wrigley, 2009).

For some food activists and planners, getting grocery stores back into these underserved neighbourhoods is a step in the right direction. Whether or not people will choose to eat healthy is not so much a priority as is the psychological and community benefits that come with a full-service grocery store. After all, the full-service grocery store is an American invention and a symbol of middle-class life (Patel, 2007). Civic leaders in places such as Philadelphia, New York, Louisiana and Detroit (see for example the work reported on by Pothukuchi (2005, 2011a, 2011b and the Philadelphia Food Trust) have moved mountains to eliminate barriers² and develop strategies for

1 The Food Stamp name was changed to SNAP in 2008. Some notable changes of SNAP households between 1990 and 2010 are that the primary form of income among SNAP participants has shifted from welfare to work. In 1990, 42% of SNAP households received cash welfare benefits and only 19% had employment earnings. In 2010, only 8% received cash welfare while 30% had employment earnings (USDA, Office of Research Analysis, Characteristics of SNAP Households, Fiscal Year 2010).

2 These barriers include lack of financing, higher costs for land assembly, construction, workforce training, security and complex regulatory environments.

stimulating supermarket development (Pothukuchi, 2005, 2011a, 2011b; Karpyn et al., 2010). Some of the policy tools include removing and limiting restrictive covenants, implementing fast food control ordinances, improving transport services to grocery stores (New York City uses school buses, for example), and employing tax and financial incentives for new and existing infrastructure (Sanders and Shattuck, 2011). Their successes—particularly the Food Trust’s Philadelphia story—have been crucial to Obama’s National Healthy Food Financing Initiative.

Herein lays the problem. Recall that there is still little empirical evidence that if you build food retail outlets, people will buy healthy food. Good quality, fresh healthy food is generally more expensive than junk food and more people either simply cannot afford it or choose not to (Drewnowski, 2009). This is evident in our bifurcated retail landscape where we see growth in the whole foods market on the high end and dollar store food on the other (Planet Retail, 2012).

To illustrate the difficulty for planners who subscribe to the notion that the built environment will lead to healthier food choices, a case in point is the current controversy in New York City concerning Walmart’s plan to break into the five boroughs with smaller format stores. Early in 2012, Walmart sweetened the pot to gain acceptance to enter the five New York City boroughs by donating \$5 million dollars to the City’s Summer Youth Employment program, which would help provide summer jobs for thousands of teenagers. But many of New York’s planners, elites and food activists did not want Walmart’s contribution because of the company’s association with low prices, intense cost pressure, low wages, fierce opposition to unions and aggressive expansion, etc. As Christopherson (2007) and others have made clear, it is a firm that has evolved within a particular U.S.-style market governance regime that facilitates strong cost-reduction strategies on all levels. This case was also made in a recent report by Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer who argues that Walmart’s entry into Harlem will be detrimental to Harlem’s healthy food retail landscape. His report not surprising unleashed a wave of criticism by actors who claim that, on the one hand, the city cannot evoke the argument that Harlem is a healthy food mecca that Walmart might undermine while on the other hand claim that the area’s lack of supermarkets and full-service grocery stores are the reason for its high rates of obesity and diabetes.³ Similar political battles have erupted regarding Walmart’s entry into a South Central Chicago neighbourhood and Kroger’s bid to locate in an underserved neighbourhood in Oakland.

These cases demonstrate the need to focus on two important research priorities. First, the food desert problem will not be advanced without a large-scale effort to replicate the kind of critical evidence-based ‘before/after’ assessments that Wrigley and his UK researchers did in the 1990s and early 2000s. Without evidence that either large-scale or small-scale community-based retail intervention improves diet and by extension health in the community, it will be hard to advance built-environment solutions. Second and more fundamentally, the current discourse that frames the problem as one primarily of inaccessibility to local fresh foods endorses solutions by which some people bring

3 See for example, Office of the Manhattan Borough President, 2011 ‘Food for Thought: a case study of Walmart’s Impact on Harlem’s healthy food retail landscape’; New York’s Department of City Planning, 2008, ‘Going to Market: New York City’s Neighborhood Grocery Store and Supermarket Shortage’. New York City’s Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, 2007, ‘Eating Well in Harlem: how available is healthy food?’

nutritious ‘good’ food to others and teach those people how to eat it. This is Guthman’s point. These solutions do not address the broader issues of affordability and need or the dynamics of the agro-industrial food system that limits what personal responsibility can do. Food system activists, for instance, have tended to focus more on consumption than production, and more on markets than policy. Policy at all spatial scales—from agricultural subsidies to particular regulatory, labour and land-use planning laws—have created the conditions for the existing, highly processed, highly unhealthy food system. The food economy mirrors the larger U.S. economy in that industry depends on low wages and slim margins. Consumers have come to depend on low-cost food products just to make ends meet.

These macro issues suggest the need to step back from the built-environment thesis and focus on the broader political and economic conditions that have led to the choices people make. The recent U.S. Task Force on the Middle Class (2010) brought forth many public submissions, including a master’s graduate who spoke eloquently about how public sector austerity measures meant that her high-school teaching wage had been cut back by \$10,000/year. She and her family could no longer afford not to shop at Walmart and dollars stores for cheap food. The challenges of the food desert reflect those facing the USA generally: stagnating wages, rising job insecurities, increasing levels of low-income work and further socioeconomic polarization. As Guthman (2011), Patel (2007) and others have made clear, the U.S. political economy produces and makes most readily available low-cost and nutrient-poor food while creating a culture that blames these same people for their food choices.

So how do we move forward on the food access problem? Neil Wrigley’s prolific research on retail would tell us three things. First and most urgently, economic geographers must engage in evidence-based research on the food shopping behaviours of differing consumer classes and cultures in a before/after retail environment. This evidence-based research needs to occur regardless of the retail context (that is whether small-scale, locally owned shops, a farmers’ markets or community gardens, or large-scale corporate retail intervention). Because food deserts are high on many policy agendas, it should not be difficult for researchers to set up before/after assessments in particular neighbourhoods or communities, drawing on the kind of careful survey work conducted in the Wrigley et al.’s Leeds study.

Second and closely related, these before/after assessments cannot be done in isolation but only in the context of research on the competitive and changing nature of the global retail food environment. In the late 1990s, Wrigley explored the rise of global retail, documenting the major mergers and acquisitions to paint a picture of an increasingly consolidated retail landscape dominated by only a few big retail players such as Walmart, Carrefour and Tesco. He predicted Walmart’s aggressive entry into the grocery retail and distribution market. Today the climate is once again different. Retail forecasts globally have been revised downwards as uncertainty reigns, particularly in parts of the European Union. Emerging markets grow in importance as developed markets are hit hard. Partly as a result of the changing economic landscape, the shopper and market are also changing. Small grocery store formats are on the rise as shoppers favour proximity, convenience and smaller average basket size while hypermarkets look to suffer sluggish growth (Planet Retail, 2012). The rise of alternative retail channels such as e-commerce, warehouse clubs, dollar stores, drugstores and department stores not to mention channel blurring are other developments. All these trends will further affect how the food desert is understood and assessed.

Third and finally, Wrigley has always explored these retail trends with an eye to the complex institutional and localized geographies. He and his colleagues never viewed capital retail strategies in isolation but within the embedded nature of a particular institutional context and the mutually reinforcing sets of national institutions and cultures. In the case of the USA, we learn about the new food desert policy environment that is part of a bigger change strategy in U.S. politics to get people to make healthier food choices. But getting people to eat better is not an easy task. Any policy solutions will be hard to implement without addressing either the sources of affordability or the particular dynamics of the U.S.-inspired agro-industrial food system that limits what personal responsibility can do. The long history in the USA of making available cheap food through a complex series of national institutions and regulatory cultures has formed complexes that are going to make it very difficult to change this—even one meal at a time.

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