Business Report on Food Deserts in Black Communities

Author: Basanta Baral
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Instructor: Ashley Plack O'Donnell

Executive Summary

This report explores the ongoing issue of food deserts in predominantly African American communities in the United States, focusing particularly on Washington, D.C. (Wards 7 and 8). These two wards, separated from the city's economic core by the Anacostia River, represent some of D.C.'s most underserved areas, where poverty rates are very high and grocery access is limited. A food desert is an area where residents have limited access to affordable and nutritious food options, especially fresh produce. This lack of access contributes to health issues, economic hardship, and social inequality. The report identifies underlying causes such as historic redlining, economic disinvestment, and limited transportation infrastructure and outlines community-based and policy-driven solutions, including community gardens, mobile food markets, grocery store incentives, and educational programs. The goal is to present actionable recommendations that support healthier and more equitable Black communities in Washington, D.C.

1. Introduction

Food access is a fundamental determinant of public health and economic stability. However, in many Black neighborhoods across the United States, residents continue to experience barriers to obtaining affordable, nutritious foods. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA, 2025), millions live in food deserts, with Black households disproportionately affected.

In Washington, D.C., the issue is most severe in **Wards 7 and 8**, where decades of segregation and economic neglect have left residents with few grocery stores and limited public transportation options. The purpose of this report is to examine the social and economic roots of this food access crisis and present realistic solutions that empower residents while ensuring long-term sustainability.

2. Understanding Food Deserts

Food deserts are defined by the USDA as areas where residents must travel more than one mile in urban zones or ten miles in rural areas to reach a supermarket or large grocery store. These neighborhoods often have higher poverty rates, low vehicle ownership, and inadequate public transportation. The combination of limited mobility and low-income levels restricts residents' ability to access fresh, healthy food options. As a result, people are often forced to rely on fast-food chains or convenience stores, leading to diets that are high in calories but low in nutrients. This imbalance contributes to chronic illnesses such as obesity, diabetes, and hypertension, creating long-term health disparities.

3. Social and Economic Roots of Food Deserts

Food deserts in predominantly Black communities did not emerge by accident, they are the result of systemic inequalities rooted in historical, economic, and structural factors.

- **Historic Redlining and Disinvestment:** During the 20th century, racially discriminatory housing policies prevented Black families from accessing mortgages and property ownership in wealthier neighborhoods. This forced concentration of poverty limited business development and left certain regions especially east of the Anacostia River without essential infrastructure such as grocery stores.
- **Commercial Redlining:** Many grocery chains and private investors deliberately avoided Wards 7 and 8 due to outdated perceptions of "low profitability" and higher business risk. This lack of investment has reinforced food scarcity and perpetuated economic stagnation.
- **Transportation Barriers:** Limited bus routes and metro connections between these wards and grocery-rich areas make it difficult for residents to reach affordable food sources. For those without cars, a simple grocery trip can take more than an hour each way.
- **Economic Instability:** High unemployment and underemployment rates reduce local purchasing power. Without strong consumer demand, businesses are reluctant to expand into these areas creating a cycle of disinvestment that continues to marginalize residents.

These social and economic roots show that food deserts are not simply about the absence of stores; they reflect decades of systemic neglect and inequitable urban planning.

4. Case Study: Food Deserts in Washington, D.C. (Wards 7 & 8)

Wards 7 and 8 serve as clear examples of urban food deserts. Located east of the Anacostia River, these communities have a combined population of more than 160,000 residents, yet as of 2025, only three full-service grocery stores operate in both wards combined . Nearly 51% of Ward 7 residents and 31% of Ward 8 residents live below the poverty line, making affordability a key barrier to food access.

The effects are far-reaching: families must travel long distances for groceries, pay higher prices at small convenience stores, and suffer from elevated rates of chronic illness linked to poor nutrition.

However, community-led initiatives have shown promise. Organizations such as Dreaming Out Loud and DC Greens have established urban farms, farmers' markets, and farm-to-school programs that provide affordable fresh produce while creating local jobs. The DC Food Access Fund and the Grocery Access Pilot Program (DC Health, 2025) have also worked to expand grocery delivery and subsidies for low-income families through partnerships with nonprofits and Instacart.

Still, these efforts face obstacles. Many rely on short-term grants, limited government funding, and zoning restrictions that slow the construction of new grocery stores. As a result, progress remains uneven despite good intentions and community engagement.

5. Proposed Solutions

Addressing food deserts requires a combination of short-term relief and long-term systemic change. The following four strategies are recommended to build a sustainable, community-centered food system:

1. **Community Gardens and Urban Agriculture:**
   Supporting neighborhood gardens and urban farms gives residents direct control over their food supply. It promotes self-sufficiency, fosters community engagement, and transforms unused urban lots into productive green spaces. This grassroots approach helps rebuild trust and pride in areas affected by decades of disinvestment.
2. **Mobile Food Markets:**
   Mobile food markets and produce trucks reduce immediate access barriers by bringing fresh fruits and vegetables directly into neighborhoods like Wards 7 and 8. These markets can operate weekly at schools, churches, and community centers, ensuring equitable distribution of healthy food.
3. **Incentivizing Grocery Stores:**
   To create sustainable, long-term change, the underlying economic challenges must be addressed. Offering tax breaks and grants through programs like the Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI, 2025) can de-risk investment and attract grocery chains to historically underserved areas.
4. **Education and Nutrition Programs:**
   Access alone doesn't guarantee behavior change. Implementing nutrition education through schools, recreation centers, and churches ensures families know how to cook healthy meals affordably. Teaching budgeting and nutrition literacy builds lasting habits and improves health outcomes.

Even with these solutions, sustained funding and coordination are essential. Many previous efforts failed to scale because they were short-term pilot projects rather than long-term investments. A durable solution requires stable funding, cross-agency collaboration, and strong community leadership.

6. Implementation Plan

To make a real difference, our plan must be practical. We recommend rolling out the solutions in three phases over 24 months, moving from quick relief to a permanent, lasting solution.

Phase 1: Immediate Relief & Groundwork (Months 1–6) First, we have to get food to people quickly. This phase is all about launching mobile markets on day one. At the same time, we'll start mapping the most underserved blocks and running a campaign to boost enrollment in Produce Plus benefits.

Phase 2: Scaling Up & Building Capacity (Months 7–18) Once we have immediate needs covered, we'll focus on growth. This means expanding the mobile market routes and securing major funding from HFFI and city programs. Crucially, this is when we'll train local youth for jobs in food logistics, creating a skilled workforce from within the community.Phase 3: A Permanent Community Anchor (Months 19–24) The final goal is to build something that lasts. Here, we'll focus all efforts on developing a brick-and-mortar grocery store or a community co-op. This will be funded through a smart mix of public grants, private investment, and local policy incentives.

How We'll Know It's Working
We will track our success with real-world numbers. We're looking for a clear increase in grocery access (getting it within a 10–15 minute commute for everyone), higher SNAP/WIC redemption rates at these new locations, and measurable improvements in community health and engagement. This is how we build a food system that is truly sustainable and equitable.

7. Conclusion
Food deserts in Black communities are not just logistical challenges, they reflect systemic inequities in investment and access. Addressing them requires coordinated efforts among residents, nonprofits, businesses, and government agencies. With realistic planning and equitable resource distribution, communities can break cycles of food insecurity and build long-term resilience.

8. Reflective Note on Ethical AI Use
I used AI tools to help generate an initial outline and suggest structural headings. I also used it to help edit and refine my own writing. All facts and data were verified using credible sources, and the final report was written entirely in my own words to maintain academic integrity.

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