

An Evaluation of Food Deserts in America

Dave D. Weatherspoon, Shelly Ver Ploeg, and Paula Dutko

JEL Classifications: I14, I32, I38

Keywords: Consumer Demand, Food Deserts, Food Stamps

This article is part of a theme set of articles on Food Deserts which explore the complexity and seriousness of food deserts, as well as presenting estimates of their magnitude and impact on consumers. Food deserts have many definitions but generally refer to locations where consumers do not have access to supermarkets that provide a good variety of quality, affordably-priced healthy foods. The authors of these articles address this issue using various types of national, state and community level data and provide an overview of the issue. The analyses in the following articles can help inform the debate on how to address this complex issue.

The first article, by Paula Dutko of the USDA's Economic Research Service, examines the definition and scope of food deserts within the United States, previously identified on the Census tract level and based on 2000 Census data and 2006 store locations. This article focuses on socioeconomic characteristics from before and after the food desert designation, identifying persistent differences between food deserts and other areas of the United States, as well as identifying which of these characteristics may be most highly predictive of whether a tract will be designated as a food desert.

The second article, by Dave Weatherspoon, James Oehmke, Marcus Coleman, Assa Dembele, and Lorraine Weatherspoon of the Agricultural, Food and Resource Economics, and the Food Science and Human Nutrition Departments at Michigan State University, discusses consumer preferences and behavior at the community level. The authors utilize a unique data set to discuss the ranking of fruits and vegetables purchased in one of Detroit's food deserts and compare them to national purchasing

Articles in this Theme:

Food Deserts Suffer Persistent Socioeconomic Disadvantage

Will Long Term Food Desert Consumers Purchase Fresh Fruits and Vegetables?

Effects of the Revised Food Packages for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) in Connecticut

Food Deserts: Demand, Supply, and Economic Theory

patterns. Then the income and own-price responsiveness by food desert consumers are compared to the national and regional study estimates. The article concludes by illuminating the constraints these consumers face that influence purchase and consumption patterns and by identifying policy options.

The third article, by Tatiana Andreyeva of the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale University, investigates the impact of the recently revised Women, Infants and Children (WIC) food program on the food offerings in poor neighborhoods in Connecticut. Upon the recommendations from the Institute of Medicine and the United States Department of Agriculture, the WIC food packages were revised to offer foods that better reflect dietary recommendations and promote healthy weight in WIC participants. The main changes included

the provision of cash-value vouchers for fruits and vegetables, new whole grain products, lower fat content of dairy foods, and reduced juice quantities. This article discusses the impact of the revised WIC packages on the provision of healthy foods in convenience and grocery stores. The author concludes by discussing the potential for improving demand for and supply of nutritious foods for all consumers by refining national food assistance programs.

The final article, by Alessandro Bonanno of The Pennsylvania State University, illustrates supply and demand conditions that could explain the existence of food deserts and the role these factors play according to different conceptual frameworks. This author concludes that several demand and supply factors may play a role in creating food deserts even when the market works efficiently and that evaluating these markets under frameworks that assume market failures may not necessarily be appropriate. This article provides further insight into the impact of supplier decisions, rather than consumer choice, on food access.

Dave D. Weatherspoon (weathe42@msu.edu) is a Professor in the Agricultural, Food and Resource Economics Department at Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan. Shelly Ver Ploeg (sverploeg@ers.usda.gov) and Paula Dutko (pdutko@ers.usda.gov) are Economists with the Food Economics Division, Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.