



## *Food Stands: An Underutilized Alternative for Food Mirages*

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A summary of **Choosing and Siting Food Access Interventions: Food Mirages and Produce Stands in Portland, Oregon**, by Love Jonson, published in the summer 2016 issue of the *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 6(4), 87–102. See the full paper at <http://dx.doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2016.064.011>

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### **The issue**

Portland, Oregon, is a city with a growing presence of local and sustainable food markets. The city is currently facing many demographic and cultural changes through an influx of young urban professionals. This gentrification has pushed many underprivileged Portlanders out to eastern and northern regions of the city. Many of these displaced residents include ethnic minorities and those with low incomes and lower education levels. Many of the community's residents are of color, who exhibit significantly greater rates of diet-related chronic diseases, and many of these health disparities stem from the residents' lack of access to fresh produce.

Portland exemplifies a “food mirage,” an area in which residents have geographic access to food sources but lack the economic or cultural means to take advantage of them. (This is to be distinguished from a food desert, which is characterized by a lack of geographical access to grocery stores.) Many of the underprivileged residents find themselves traveling outside their neighborhoods to purchase groceries at a lower cost. This is especially a challenge for residents without a personal automobile, because the lack of transportation routes extends pedestrians' travel time to a grocery store. The author explores the alternative of produce stands as a pedestrian-scale approach to address gaps in grocery store accessibility for those without transportation.

### **Study context and objectives**

Other cities facing food access problems similar to Portland's have started to offer produce stands. Produce stands operate at a smaller scale than a supermarket and feature only nutritious foods. The benefits of food stands include low prices for fresh produce due to their low infrastructure and overhead

costs, accessibility and convenience for both pedestrians and nonpedestrians, and potential job creation for residents. The study examines and identifies the most ideal areas in Portland for food stands as well as the implications for food access intervention in other food mirages in North America.

### **How the study was conducted**

The study utilized data from the Portland-area Coalition for a Livable Future's Regional Equity Atlas (REA), the Oregon Metro, Esri Business Analyst, and the city of Portland Bureau of Transportation. Using spatial analysis, the author examined areas with the greatest influx of people displaced by gentrification, bus stop service areas and transit coverage, and proximity to grocery stores.

She incorporated these three factors into geographic information systems (GIS) to calculate and determine areas in which to site produce stands in Portland, Oregon. She made separate calculations for (1) the proximity from supermarkets and other grocery stores, and (2) the proximity from fruit and vegetable markets in order to further test the idea of a food desert and a food mirage.

### **Results and discussion**

The author found the following trends across different regions of Portland:

#### ■ **Displaced residents primarily reside in North and East Portland**

Central parts of the city showed an increase in median household income from 2000 to 2010. However, the steepest declines occurred on the east and west ends of the city and, to a lesser degree, in North Portland. Northeast Portland showed the highest percentages of households in

poverty. Gentrification-driven displacement was primarily concentrated in North and East Portland.

■ **Gaps in bus stop service are found in parts of East Portland**

Most of the city had sufficient coverage by bus lines, but gaps existed in some parts of the east side.

■ **While there is equal access to grocery stores, access to fruit and vegetable markets varies.**

Most of Portland does not represent a traditional urban food desert, in which people must travel over one mile (1.6 km) to reach a grocery store. However, access to fruit and vegetable markets showed significant differences. These markets existed primarily on the inner eastside, and sporadically across the rest of the city. However, most of the city was not served by fruit and vegetable markets within a one-mile radius. More importantly, most of the city was not served by fruit and vegetable markets within a walkable quarter-mile radius. These areas have ideal locations for on-street produce stands.

■ **Residents of East Portland can benefit most from food stands.**

No gaps in grocery store coverage exist according to the studied parameters. This further supports the concept of the food mirage, in which issues of food access do not stem from geographic gaps in grocery store coverage. When examining the proximity to fruit and vegetable markets, locations in North and East Portland could benefit the most from on-street produce stands.

It is important to note that North Portland houses mostly industrial and large-scale retail entities, leaving a potential produce stand without a significant customer base. On the other hand, all the selected areas in East Portland contain residential neighborhoods. This suggests that pedestrian traffic to and from schools or parks could likely support a produce stand.

## Conclusion

Mounting evidence suggests that low-income and long-time residents are left behind as the cultural and economic foodscape changes around them. Many are left without proper access to fresh and nutritious produce. The author posits that the city could support on-street produce stands as a method to partner with local farms with a mission to expand

access for vulnerable Portlanders, especially those displaced by processes of gentrification.

The author encourages food justice activists to incorporate the methodology outlined in this paper in order to increase access to affordable produce in urban neighborhoods across the country. The methodology consists of determining areas of need; accounting for assets of the built environment, such as the relationship among sidewalks and residences; and identifying assets of a community's food system, such as nonprofit urban or peri-urban farms.

The author also suggests topics and directions for future research, including effective funding mechanisms for food access programs, ideal operating hours for food stands, and expanding the product mix beyond fresh produce to include staple grains and sources of protein.

Additionally, the author points out the need to account for cultural contexts. Diet-related health inequities may stem cultural practices, because they determine the extent to which fresh produce becomes successfully incorporated into the diet. Further research could dive deeper into cultural barriers contributing to health inequities and their spatial determinants.

Finally, she emphasizes that to prove effective, any intervention to increase access to nutritious food among underserved residents should emerge from the community itself, empower community leaders to steer the process, and attend to the cultural practices and desires of those it serves.

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