



Bringing Fresh Produce to Corner Stores

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A summary of *Bringing Fresh Produce to Corner Stores in Declining Neighborhoods: Reflections from Detroit FRESH*, by Kameshwari Pothukuchi, published in the Winter 2016 issue of the *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 7(1), 113-134. See the full paper at <http://dx.doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2016.071.013>

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The issue

Over the last decade, corner stores in several cities resembling Detroit (such as Baltimore, New York, New Orleans, and San Francisco) have emerged as possible resources for healthy foods in impoverished urban neighborhoods. The Detroit population has been rapidly declining, hurting its wholesale trade as well as the smaller grocery and specialty stores that relied on them. Low-income households often rely on inconvenient transportation arrangements to distant supermarkets, and on corner stores. Corner stores offer few healthy, affordable options. Residents thus experience higher food prices, fewer nutritious choices, and lower quality of available products.

Detroit FRESH is a pilot initiative developed within a broader set of community food-system collaborations led by its parent organization, SEED Wayne. This study of Detroit FRESH to identify the conditions of stores, distribution, and the community needed for successful, sustainable corner store initiatives in neighborhoods like these.

Study context and objectives

There is a lot of research on healthy food access in urban settings, but there is little research on the effects of neighborhood abandonment on corner stores' inclination or ability to offer healthy foods. This study illuminates the coordination needed to link corner stores to distributors as well as to facilitate neighborhood demand to create a self-sustaining cycle of supply.

How the study was conducted

This study used participatory action research (PAR) methodology, an approach to creating knowledge in a context of practice. Researchers worked intentionally and in partnership with practitioners and

intended beneficiaries. The researchers focused on some of Detroit's poorest neighborhoods on the east side and near west side. They developed actions in three phases, each building on knowledge acquired in the previous one. Phase I (summer 2008 to summer 2009) consisted of informal and formal community dialogues, assessment, and initial actions. During Phase II (summer 2009 to summer 2011), the project expanded and obtained data from qualified participating corner stores. Phase III (summer 2011 to summer 2012) concluded with Healthy Food Fairs that surveyed residents and emphasized healthy snacking and youth engagement.

Results and discussion

Researchers found that the vast majority of the store assessed in Phase I had little to no produce. The little that was available were of lower quality and of higher unit prices than in larger supermarkets. Almost all stores refused to participate in the project, with most saying that fresh products were not part of their business model. However, many who declined to participate still expressed an interest in joining the project if store conditions improved.

Some of the participating stores in Phase II more than doubled their variety and quantity of fruits and vegetables. Despite increased initial sales, many stores wavered in their continued participation due to the effort—including availability of personnel, time, and knowledge—required to manage fresh produce, the scant difference it made to their bottom line, and the general decline in overall sales as the project progressed. The factors in effective store participation include:

■ *Population of nearby shoppers*

A majority of stores that opted out of the program

prematurely and those that were inconsistent in their supply were in zip codes that lost population at higher rates than the city as a whole between 2000 and 2010. Most of the consistently high-performing stores were in zip codes that lost population at lower rates than the city's average.

■ **Experience and commitment of store operators**

Store operators with previous experience with fresh produce and commitment to their neighborhoods did better than others. Such operators typically had a longer history in their neighborhoods and frequently interacted with their customers. They were also willing to experiment with ways to increase sales and were more responsive to shopper requests.

■ **Size and frequency of order**

Distribution issues worked out more smoothly for stores placing larger orders and those placing orders more consistently than others. Risk-averse strategies such as sourcing from the outside resulted in too-small quantities, frustrating some residents who came to the store following neighborhood outreach only to find some products already sold out.

■ **Type of store and its major sales**

Stores that mostly sold liquor and packaged foods were both less motivated and less capable of selling fresh produce. Because shoppers were less accustomed to buying fresh foods there, such stores may not be worth the effort in future projects. Gas stations were surprisingly successful at selling fruit.

The vast majority of respondents did most of their grocery shopping in supermarkets outside the neighborhood. A majority used SNAP benefits for their food shopping, including at corner stores. Trips to the corner store tended to be for top-up needs or perishables such as bread, milk, or fruits and vegetables in relatively small quantities, and snacks such as cookies, chips, and soda. Most respondents indicated willingness to buy more produce at their corner store if varieties and quantities were increased and prices lowered. This indicates that corner store initiatives in neighborhoods experiencing significant decline cannot be sustained without ongoing subsidy.

Recommendations

The declining economy and population in Detroit is increasingly constraining corner stores from offering produce in desired quantities, varieties, and prices without subsidy or increased demand. Yet as year-

round sources, many corner stores have the potential to serve their neighborhoods fresh produce. Five recommendations are suggested to better support corner stores.

1. States should enforce the WIC program's produce stocking requirements at corner stores.
2. Agencies like the Detroit Economic Growth Corporation could award grants and other support to stores that attempt to meet Detroit FRESH's criteria.
3. Link sales from licenses for liquor, tobacco products, and lottery to a minimal healthy and fresh food inventory.
4. Form a fresh and/or healthy food distribution system to service corner stores and gas stations, such as by extending the food hub efforts undertaken by the Eastern Market Corporation in Detroit.

Detroit's current retail grocery environment—including corner stores—is a product of decades of economic and social abandonment and racial discrimination. Place-based efforts to craft an alternative food system have shown to be successful in urban agriculture and neighborhood farmers markets. However, developing year-round produce supply in neighborhoods, with available neighborhood infrastructure, requires links to elements that are more deeply embedded in the conventional food system. For such projects to effectively deliver produce year-round, bridging the gap between affordability for customers and profitability for the businesses will require greater subsidy than do other community food efforts. Thus, enabling corner stores to be better neighbors is not an effort to be relegated to neighborhood collaborations, no matter how competent or resourceful they may be.

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