Food deserts and food justice (Sarah Parsons - Good Magazine)

It's a long-accepted principle in the sustainable food world that folks living in food deserts—areas bereft of grocery stores, farmers' markets, and other nutritious food sources—are more likely to be obese. Because food desert residents lack access to healthy food purveyors, they're forced to buy meals from neighborhood businesses—mainly fast-food joints and corner stores. All that fried fare and processed junk makes diets hard to balance.

But two new studies are challenging this law of food justice. California's Public Policy Institute published a study in March revealing that not only do poor neighborhoods contain more fast-food restaurants and corner stores than affluent ones, these communities hold nearly twice as many supermarkets per square mile as wealthier locales. And another study from the RAND Corporation found no correlation between what children ate, their weights, and what sorts of food vendors were located near their homes. Could it be that everything we've ever assumed about food justice is wrong?

In a word, no. Regardless of the food desert puzzle, the link between poverty and obesity is a strong one. One study shows that more than one-third of adults who earn less than $15,000 a year were obese, while only 25 percent who earn more than $50,000 a year were significantly overweight. And findings from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, the most comprehensive look at Americans' nutritional status to date, revealed that low-income children were much more likely to be overweight than kids of higher socioeconomic statuses.

Understanding the culprits behind America's obesity epidemic perplexes even the most distinguished of nutritionists, but there's a very clear connection between living in poverty and being overweight. "Food deserts" as we know them may or may not play a role in that problem, but a lack of food access certainly does.

It starts with affordability. Healthy foods—namely fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and lean meats—cost significantly more than their processed, unhealthy counterparts. Four dollars can buy a package of organic romaine lettuce at the grocery store, or two packs of hot dogs. A box of generic-brand macaroni and cheese costs less than a dollar—you'd be hard-pressed to get more than two fresh apples for the same buck. Folks living on fixed incomes buy processed, packaged foods because it's what they can afford. Plopping a supermarket in a food desert helps, but if residents can only afford the store's most unhealthy fare, eating habits aren't going to improve.

The National School Lunch Program also helps strengthen the link between poverty and obesity. Nearly 20 million low-income kids receive free or reduced-cost lunches every day through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's school lunch program. While the state of school lunches has improved in recent years due to the Child Nutrition Act, pizza is still considered a vegetable and there's no limit on how often schools can serve kids French fries. The program is also chronically underfunded—it's hard to boost meals' nutritional quality without making a significant monetary commitment. Plus, it fails to include an

educational component: Give a kid a healthy meal and he'll eat well for a day. Teach him about why nutrition is so important, and you'll lay the foundation for a lifetime of good eating.

Evidence also shows that low-income neighborhoods—especially those in urban areas and near schools—have significantly more fast-food restaurants than affluent communities. Fast food's presence alone isn't fostering unhealthy eating and obesity—leave that to the targeted marketing dollars behind McDonald's, Burger King, Taco Bells, and other eateries. The fast-food industry spends a flabbergasting $4.2 billion a year on advertising. The fast food industry spends more on advertising in four days than the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the nation's leading organization fighting childhood obesity, spends on health education in an entire year.

It's not just a lack of access to healthy foods that fosters the poverty/obesity connection, either—it's also a lack of access to exercise. Unlike their more affluent counterparts, low-income neighborhoods aren't flush with playgrounds, tennis courts, parks, and gyms. Poor communities also tend to be more dangerous than those of higher socioeconomic status, so the public exercise options that are available may go unused for fear of violence.

And regardless of the latest research, food deserts could still be part of the problem. Some studies say bringing supermarkets and farmers' markets to low-income neighborhoods greatly improves healthy eating. Other research shows that even when healthy foods like fresh produce are available in low-income neighborhoods, they're of a poorer quality than those found in affluent communities. More investigation is necessary before we make firm conclusion about the connection between living in a food desert and obesity. It would be foolish to discount this potential factor based on two new studies.

Finally, time is also a factor. Cooking takes time, but low-income families are often run by parents who work really long hours. After long days, feeding the family comes down to what's quick and easy, and that's usually not a homemade meal with fresh vegetables and whole grains.

Here's what we do know, now: Obesity and its causes are varied and complex, but many of them involve a lack of *access*—whether to healthy foods, exercise, time, or funds. There's no silver bullet solution to solving the obesity/poverty link—it's going to take a comprehensive approach to bulldoze the barriers to healthy eating.

Questions:

1) List the reasons why it is difficult to eat healthy in a poor neighborhood.

Watch a video about Michelle Obama's action plan.

2) Do you think that the accessibility to / and affordability of healthy food is going to be successful in fighting obesity? Why? Why not?

3) What else could be done to tackle the issue?