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Food Deserts Effect on Syracuse University

Introduction:

Food deserts are a nationwide issue that results from the lack of diversity among food sources within a given community. My research is focused on the community surrounding Syracuse University and which food options are provided to students living off campus. The lack of resources for these off campus students is the general topic I've been researching. More specifically the effect this lack of food resources has on students' health and how their diet adapts to the resources they are provided with. This study is significant because it affects all college students who do not live directly on campus and don't access to a dining hall. Food insecurity is a significant issue within students who are adapting to living on their own while their bodies are still developing. My research question is how the prominence of food deserts within Syracuse affect the diet of females living off campus at Syracuse University. My findings prove that female Syracuse University students who live off campus struggle with accessing, paying for, and consistently consuming nutritious food. Given that Syracuse University is located in a food desert, most time and money efficient options are fast food, resulting in students resorting to unhealthy options, as that is all that they are provided.

Originally, my question focused solely on upperclassmen, because those are the people who I assumed would live off campus. During this study, I decided to change my question to students who are living off campus, because this could include data from students who are living

on south campus. South campus is a remote apartment area, students who live here are provided with a small kitchen, and there is no dining hall for this area. I conducted interviews from 3 different students, all female, on their experience with food at and around the area of Syracuse University. This influenced why I geared my research question towards solely females, as my male interviews were canceled.

Literature review:

On the topic of food deserts, people are not educated on what proper nutritional needs are within lower-income communities. The area around Syracuse University has a lower than average annual income, which can result in information about dangers of food deserts being limited and inaccurate. (Fetkin, 2022). Lower-income areas have every right to healthy food options as higher-income areas, and would greatly benefit to gain more information on the importance of eating healthy food. The idea of food insecurity as a whole is necessary to understanding the importance of having access to nutritious food. Food insecurity is when people cannot get the proper nutrition from food in order to sustain a healthy lifestyle and diet (Pediater, 2020). Within the entirety of the United States, around 10% of households face food insecurity, meaning they do not have necessary resources to live a healthy life. (Camire, 2021). The information that it is common for people within the United States to suffer from food insecurity is important to my study because it confirms that people's struggles with food are real. What I mean by this is that Universities tend to write off students' concerns as empty complaints, but proving that this is a bigger issue than just with student life, as well as issues that are created through the government, helps to support my claim. In terms of college students, the American Communities Project has found that around half- 42% of college students find themselves in a position where they have low food security. This means that they do not have a stable flow of

nutritious food that is available to them. The biggest contributing factor they found in this case is the fact that college students cannot afford to buy nutritious food, with markets being overpriced and positioned further from campuses. The distance from campus to stores with nutritious food is a large contributing factor to inability to gain healthy food as many students cannot afford a car, as well as pay for expensive transportation that is not public. (Sherwood, 2018).

In the case of Syracuse students this study provides background because it shows similar situations to college students all over the world. Not every student has a car, and not every student can afford to get new groceries every week. Winston Salem State University has conducted research by interviewing their students on what food options are available to them on and around campus. The findings of this study was that students are not fulfilled with the options that they have around campus, seeing them as unhealthy and not satisfying to maintain a healthy diet. (Railey, 2024). A similarity to Syracuse within this is the fact that both Syracuse University and Winston Salem State University are in lower-income areas. This indicates that the surrounding areas have been redlined, dividing which areas receive healthy food options, and where prevalence of fast food areas are, making both areas an intense food desert. Some of the most telling conclusions I have seen about information on this topic comes from Inside Higher Education. Findings within this study suggests that the majority of people within the United States who are suffering from food insecurity are college students. Students in specific make up for 51% of food insecurity, meaning they do not have enough nutrients in their diet. The leading cause found by this study to contribute to food insecurity is lack of resources from surrounding college areas (Mowreader, 2023). This is a similar finding within my study because it is already established that Syracuse is a food desert. Female students who I have interviewed are not satisfied with their choices in the surrounding areas of the school.

Past studies on this topic were done by mapping out physical boundaries of food deserts within the city of Syracuse as well as the entirety of Onondaga County. The Onondaga County Health Department has created maps based on their data of where the majority of fast food chains are located throughout Syracuse County. They used data of where farmers markets are located, and which income bracket they were located in. This yielded results that proved that Syracuse is sectioned off based on income brackets, which influences which type of food sources are then placed in those areas. (Health Department, 2017). This gives background to the information when studying which food sources are readily available to Syracuse students.

Another alarming discovery occurs when looking at long term effects of college students after living in a food desert. The American Association for the Advancement of Science has conducted research on how college students' health deteriorated after attending University as a result of malnutrition. In this case, they have studied the topic of food insecurity and long term effects by speaking to doctors and performing health tests on current and past college students. Performing tests through assessment and accurate food screening tools can prove whether or not a person is suffering from effects of food insecurity (Leahy, 2023). Performing tests after the fact is beneficial because it shows how lack of resources to healthy food affects students throughout their entire life. I do not have the resources to properly scan all Syracuse upperclassmen, but looking at data that has scanned mass amounts of people can provide me with data to base my claims off of. The National Library of Medicine studied how diets have changed within adolescents once they reached a college level. They then took this data and concluded that during these transitional years into adulthood, college students were lacking in valuable nutrition in comparison to their previous diets (Dhillon, 2019). Comparing the changing of one's diet when entering college is something that I had not previously thought about when beginning my study,

but as time progressed analyzing these changes has become a component within my study. Another changing component within my study is focusing solely on females experiences with food insecurities. Research Gate conducted a study that focused on if female student athletes were reaching their dietary intake. The findings within this study was that women typically did not sustain healthy eating habits, with external social pressures contributing to weight loss. (Shriver, 2013) Although this is not directly related to living in a food desert, I believe that this study on female eating habits is significant to my study because it introduces factors such as societal pressure to maintain a lower weight. These societal pressures are experienced by women everywhere, and could be a contributing factor to my study in terms of maintaining a steady eating schedule.

My research analyzes students changing attitudes and eating habits based on the foods that they are provided with. John Hopkins medicine has studied the importance of healthy eating during developmental years. Once a person has gained more autonomy with their choices beyond just food, they have more power over the nutrition choices that they make. This can be said when people attend college, as now it is up to the individual to choose what to eat daily without the input from a guardian. John Hopkins stresses the importance of choosing foods that have positive factors to them that will help develop growing bodies and provide long lasting nutritional benefits. In addition to this, the study stresses the negative outcomes to not making healthy decisions, results that could influence potential risks of harmful diseases later in life (Hopkins Medicine, 2023). Making thoughtful decisions when it comes to food is inhibited by the fact that students are not given the opportunity to make these decisions. In order to choose healthy options, students need to have somewhere to go where healthy options are available. This proves how lacking availability to nutritious foods results in a negative impact on one's diet and

therefore future health. A study done by Healthy Children.org has provided more information on what makes a teenage diet healthy. This data has also supported this question as it stresses the importance of well-balanced meals, that are eaten 3 times a day and provide late teens/young adults with enough energy to be at their best (Committee on Nutrition, 2016). Having more information based on nutrition facts gives me an understanding on what it means to have a healthy diet. This also prompts another question that could possibly be answered by my study, which is if students are eating enough meals per day. This is another important level to health, maintaining and upkeep having a healthy diet. A large factor within my findings was around time constraints for college students. My interviewees wanted quick options for healthy eating, which resulted in them making decisions solely based on timing. The National Library of Medicine found that students at Cornell University have been experiencing higher obesity rates following students resorting to fast food and junk food options due to time constraints. This can be applied to the results of my study as this is a common struggle all college students face. Active students have packed schedules and rigorous days. This results in people wanting quicker food options, which can have a negative result if the majority of those options are processed food (Harahap & Kurniati, 2018).

Another question that could be answered by my research is if people who have lived in food deserts are likely to purchase unhealthy foods once they have gained more resources out of habit. Professor Dwight Hearn from the Chicago School of Psychology has found that there is a psychological effect on those who have spent long periods of time in a food desert. These effects range from not understanding the value of eating healthy foods, as well as gaining a habit on which foods to eat. He collected data through surveys that asked which foods people tend to get now that they have access to markets, and foods that people used to get while living in food

deserts. He then studied this data and reached a conclusion that people are affected long term in the way that they choose food. Humans are creatures of habit, and if they are taught something and get comfortable with it then they will repeat it. This helps to show another layer of long term effects of living in a food desert beyond just nutritional based.

Methodology:

Originally, I had set up a total of 6 interviews, three girls and three boys, who were living in off-campus housing surrounding Syracuse University. I was unable to successfully interview my male respondents due to scheduling conflicts, but all of my interviews with females were successful. To conduct these interviews, I reached out to friends of friends who I knew who lived off campus, as well as asked a random girl in my upper level sociology class for an interview. I decided to include south campus in my study because those students do not have access to a dining hall (unless they get an on campus dining hall meal plan), so they were valid in the study I was conducting. I chose to interview respondents at locations that were most convenient to them. I conducted my first and third interviews at the apartments of my respondents, as per their request. My second interview I held in the bird library, as both me and my respondent had just gotten out of class. I collected my data through the use of qualitative methods, I interviewed my respondents by asking them similar variations of twenty six questions. These questions did not include any follow up questions that I asked, or any side conversations me and my interviewees had. My questions were made to gauge respondents' accessibility to food and grocery stores, dietary habits, and overall interactions with food while living off campus. Given the results of my data, I analyzed my findings through the use of keywords, or codes. The key words that I focused on were expense, access, time constraints, and responsibility & nutritious food. These were some of the most repeatedly used phrases within my three interviews, and represented

common themes that I observed when analyzing my interviews. In terms of positionality, I am a female student who lives in off campus housing, so the issue of food insecurity affecting off campus student's diets has a direct effect on me. Given this fact, I was more passionate about how much food deserts affect college campuses on a global scale, and that it seems to be an issue that has not been addressed by colleges. This inspired me to conduct my own research, and possibly make an impact on Syracuse University. In addition to this, I could relate to my respondents experiences with accessing nutritious food, and maintaining a healthy and affordable diet.

Findings:

My main findings have focused on four different focal points. First, expense has proven to be the biggest determinant in terms of if students can afford to buy more nutritious food, and if they can afford to pay for the options that are in the surrounding area of Syracuse University. Next, access to a car, as well as access to grocery stores played a crucial role in my respondents' experiences when attempting to gather nutritious food options, and in a timely and affordable manner. Adding onto this idea is the next focal point, which is time constraints. Living off campus has proven to be difficult in the scheduling of eating meals, resulting in the purchasing of fast food as it is a quick option. In addition to this, being on campus for class leads students to explore the options that are provided by Syracuse University, which all cost money. Lastly, respondents stressed the new found responsibility they have around purchasing and consuming more nutritious food now that they cannot rely on a dining hall. These health constraints have proven through my study to impact student's experience with food while living off campus.

In terms of expense, my findings have shown that the main issue around food insecurity is students not being able to afford nutritious food. Being able to buy and sustain a healthy

lifestyle takes commitment in terms of money, whether that means physically buying ingredients, or paying for transportation to get to markets that have healthy food options. During my third interview, I had asked if my respondent was aware of any negative conversation around the struggles to healthy food options around Syracuse University. She had responded “When you're trying to get, like, fresh ingredients and things that aren't super processed, the organic stuff will always be more expensive” (3rd Interview). The takeaway from this factor is that in order to sustain a healthy lifestyle, students are expected to spend more money on nutritious ingredients. This poses an issue to students who may not be as prosperous in terms of socioeconomic status. In addition to this, most students who are in college are on a budget, as for the most part they are not financially independent. The significance of this is that students will have to cut out a bigger part of their budget in order to keep up with the prices of organic food. Another factor that influences expenses was paying money for transportation to markets if students did not have a car. First off, to be able to afford a car in itself is an additional payment that students may not have access to if they have insufficient funds. Students who do not have access to cars or any sort of transportation are forced to resort to paying for Ubers or Lyfts. During my first interview, my respondent pointed out that “If we do Uber, that's still expensive, you're spending quite a bit of money just to buy more stuff with more money. And as college students, we don't really have the ability to do all that” (1st Interview). The issue of being a college student expected to pay a surplus of money arises again within this statement. So in addition to paying more for organic groceries themselves, now students who do not have a car are expected to pay additional money for an Uber. A question that I found interesting in relation to this was when I asked my respondents if Syracuse had any buses or shuttles set up to take students to local grocery stores. None of my respondents were aware of any such school provided transportations.

Playing on the fact that students struggle to afford for transportation if they don't have a car brings in my next point, that students have limited access when living off campus. Access in this case is referring to access to a car in order to get to a grocery store in a timely manner, as well as access to food options that are on campus and available to all students. In terms of access to a car, this provides easy transportation which allows students to consistently go to the grocery store and maintain a diet of healthier food options. The other side to this are students who do not have this option. My third respondent is someone who does not have access to a car, she shared her thoughts that “Not having a car is definitely part of a challenge of accessing food and markets and stuff, just because I can't just go whenever I'm like, oh, I need this, so I have to kind of like work around that” (3rd Interview). Having the additional challenge of accessing food creates a barrier for students to gain a steady flow of groceries. In addition to this, students may be forced to limit the amount of times they get groceries as a result of having limited access. This means they will need to buy more preservable food, thus possibly resulting in not maintaining the most healthy diet. My second respondent gave a good comparison to what their life looked like in terms of access to food before they were living off campus, “When I had access to a dining hall, I ate at the dining hall, like, all the time, like breakfast, lunch and dinner, always” (2nd Interview). In this case, Syracuse provided ample access for students who live on campus and have a meal plan. This allowed for my respondent to get food at most times of the day, and have the option to eat healthily based on what was provided by the school. I believed that showing this comparison of access between living on and off campus was vital to my study because it shows how much options are limited to students when they transition to living off campus. In addition to this, students who live off campus do have options when they are on campus in terms of food, such as food at Schine center, but all of these options cost money.

All respondents recorded some level of dissatisfaction with how long it takes to properly prepare a meal. This was one of the aspects that prior to this study, I did not consider when thinking of possible preventions to students living a healthy lifestyle. In terms of living in a food desert, Syracuse has a surplus of fast food restaurants in the areas surrounding Syracuse university. This is significant because it gives college students an option that is readily available to them, and an option that is cheap. Basically, the layout of Syracuse is taking advantage of college students' situations of not having a lot of time or money. Data from my third interview contributed to this analysis, "And I'm in a time crunch. That's usually when I'm ordering fast food, because I don't have time, and I don't want to pay a lot of money, so it's easier to order fast food because it's cheaper"(3rd Interview). The prominence of fast food provides students with an easy out when they have had a busy day, and do not want to spend extra time preparing a nutritious meal. Although eating at fast food restaurants is the decision of my respondent, it is important to note that they are encouraged based on the environment they are in. If a person is constantly surrounded by fast food, they see it as an easy option, especially when they have little to no time in their day apart from school. In addition to this, my second interviewee had made an interesting point, that the distance that living off campus is compared to where campus is affects how much time you have to prepare food. My interviewee points out that "...It's harder to, like, make nutritious meals because of that, you know, it's for you. It's more of a time constraint. What you can make in a limited amount of time after being at class all day" (2nd Interview). The takeaway that I see in this statement is that living off campus is secluded in terms of options. College students have a substantial workload, and students living off campus have to make a commute both ways in addition to this course load. A possible solution that I see to this is having more options off campus that are available to students. This could lead to students indulging less

in the fast food options that surround Syracuse University. Providing this service would result in more healthy options, in addition to school provided meals being more affordable.

Lack of health constraints and nutritional value is the last major point that I have taken away from my data. For college students who this is their first year living off campus, there is a good chance that this is their first time being responsible for providing their own food. Being responsible for one's health is a big responsibility given the choices that students have been exposed to in the surrounding Syracuse area. During my first interview, my respondent expanded on which health constraints she has found challenging since living off campus, “Well, same as I kind of said, like, we're not getting groceries, so we don't really eat nutritious food in the first place. It's mostly just fast food, which is really bad, but it's fine. It's just hard to access, like nutritious food” (1st Interview). Nutritional value is vital when maintaining a healthy diet. This value is derived from maintaining balanced meals, and eating substantial amounts of satiating foods. Given the information from my first respondent, we can see that students are not meeting the nutritious expectation of a young adult. This lack of nutrition is a health constraint that is prominent within students who are living off campus and are resulting in the indulgence of fast food in order to acquire their daily meals. The significance of this data is that although students are eating food, they are not receiving the proper care to flourish as healthy individuals. This is a health concern that applies to many female students who are given limited options when living off campus.

Conclusion:

In all, my research has shown that females living off campus at Syracuse University have experienced negative dietary effects as well as negative experiences attributed to living in a food desert. My findings lined up closely with the findings of all other studies that relate to food insecurity and lack of access to food among college students. This may seem like a

generalization, but the one commonality between all studies on the topic of food insecurity among college students is that students are malnourished, and receive limited options when it comes to healthy food. Specifically, these findings within my study were that students do not have easy access to healthy food options, and that students struggle with maintaining a healthy food intake because of this. In addition to this, my conclusions aligned with Winston Salem State University's study, as accessibility was difficult for students in the event that they did not have a car. This, coupled with students' lack of time and money, results in negative effects on students' mental and physical health.

My study extended the scope of research on food insecurity within the college realm. There is a substantial amount of research that supports college students' struggles with food, and my project adds onto the first hand experiences of students who are not having their needs met by universities. Being placed in a food desert may not necessarily be a University's fault, but how they respond to these limited options is crucial in providing a healthy environment for its students. My hopes with my extended review is that Syracuse University will have more pressure on them to respond to student concern with action that will make more options to off campus students readily available.

Limitations and Reflection:

Looking back on the data that I have gathered over the course of my interview, I can reflect on areas of my study I wish I had done differently. My biggest takeaway in this aspect is that I wished I heard from a wider source of people. What I mean by this is that I have two interviews lined up with males, all of which were canceled. I believe that speaking to more different people could have resulted in my data being more applicable to the entire population of Syracuse. Given the interviewees I did collect data from, I wish that I was more specific with

some health related questions. I do believe that I gained substantial data on the health concerns of my students, but I wish I asked more questions about how they feel their mood or motivation has changed since living off campus and being in charge of their own food choices. A limitation that arises within this issue was the shorter length of my interviews. Some participants gave longer winded answers than others, and I wish I had come up with more follow up questions in these situations. This would've led to there being more information to base my study off of, more detailed responses to gain data from. Something that I did to improve my project since my proposal was when first creating my research question, I received the feedback that tracking people's diets would be too extensive, and a hard thing to accomplish. Given this feedback, I pivoted to analyzing which aspects of students' lives could affect diet. So, instead of focusing on individual diets and what foods they're eating, I now focus on the four biggest common factors that my data has shown to affect students' food choices.

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