

Food Access and Food Waste

1. Obesity

Obesity and health concerns related to obesity are a significant problem in the contemporary United States. The problem is complex and there isn't a simple causal story. But what are some of the relevant factors?

Accessibility:

“Food desert” is a term commonly used to describe communities with little or no access to healthy food, including fresh fruits, vegetables, meats and dairy products. Millions of Americans — mostly poor, many African-Americans — live in these areas. In fact, the United States Department of Agriculture reports that about 23.5 million Americans currently live in food deserts, including 6.5 million children.¹ Typically, food deserts are defined by: 1) the lack or absence of large grocery stores and supermarkets that sell fresh produce and healthy food options; and 2) low-income populations living on tight budgets. These food deserts are also signified by high levels of obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular diseases in the community, which result from residents buying their food from corner stores that sell processed foods, and plentiful fast food options. <http://newsone.com/1540235/americas-worst-9-urban-food-deserts/>

Cost:

The dominant constraint in the lives of low-income people is lack of money. From 1985 to 2000, the prices of fresh fruits and vegetables rose 40 percent while prices of fats and soft drinks decreased by about 15 and 25 percent, respectively... Researchers have found that energy-dense foods (those that contain the most calories per gram, which is to say sweets and starchy foods) — are far less expensive than low-energy and nutritious foods like fruits and vegetables. In fact, measured on a per-calorie basis, they are one *tenth* the price.

<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/25/time-to-revisit-food-deserts/>

Pleasure:

...as Abhijit V. Banerjee and Esther Duflo observe in their excellent book, *Poor Economics*, poor people “choose their foods not mainly for their cheap prices and nutritional values, but for how good they taste.” Being poor or near poor in the United States means being exposed to a million luxuries that are beyond your reach. Even simple things most Americans take for granted — like taking the kids to a movie — are unaffordable. But a tasty meal is not. Junk foods that combine fat, salt and sugar in proportions that make them highly desirable, maybe even addictive — foods that hit the so-called “bliss point” — are never too expensive or far from reach.

<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/25/time-to-revisit-food-deserts/> (See also the article we read, “[More than one billion people are hungry in the world, but what if the experts are wrong?](#)”)

Culture:

Dr. Freedman moves across the crowded 11th floor surgical ward to where a 59 year-old Anne Manning is being treated for colon cancer. The feisty patient volunteers that she eats soul food “most every day,” including pigs feet, pork ribs and fried chicken. “Lately, I come to find out that it’s not so good,” she admits. “But I won’t lie, I haven’t stopped. I was brought up on it. I ate it all my life and I like it.” Alix Freedman, “Amid Ghetto Hunger, Many More Suffer Eating Wrong Foods.”

¹ Note that the criteria for designating something a “food desert” are controversial and difficult, and has a significant effect on the numbers. See <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/25/time-to-revisit-food-deserts/> for a few observations on the issue.

Education:

...just as the problem of obesity is connected to poverty; it is connected to education.

<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/25/time-to-revisit-food-deserts/>

As shown in Gary Taubs' lecture on Monday, many people – even nutritionists – are ignorant or confused about the causes of obesity and healthy diets.

At the same time, huge amounts of healthy food – including fresh fruits and vegetables – is wasted. Is there a moral or political problem here?

II. Capitalism, Liberty and Well-Being

From the readings we have considered, it is plausible that food producers and retailers are partially responsible for:

- a) Lack of access to healthy food in food deserts.
- b) High cost of healthy food.
- c) Gross amounts of waste.

Is there a political or moral wrong here?

Worker blame: Perhaps the individual shopkeepers or agricultural workers are morally blameworthy for stocking what the customer wants, or disposing of what the customer won't buy. But they are (usually) individuals doing their best within a system. And often they don't have a choice of what job to get – they are lucky to have the job they do.

Corporate blame: Well, but what about the companies that produce unhealthy food, e.g., Hostess, Little Debbie, McDonalds, Burger King, ConAgra, etc? Perhaps they are morally or politically responsible for the problems of access and waste. But an argument could be made that they are acting freely to pursue their own interests (and profit) within a capitalist economy. What is wrong with that? Wouldn't a system that prevented them from making a profit however they can be violating their liberty?

Consumer blame: Perhaps the consumers are to blame for their poor choices. But as we've seen there are reasonable explanations of the choices: they live far from a grocery store and don't have a car, they can't afford the healthier food, they are entitled to some pleasures or cultural meanings in a life that is otherwise bleak.

The problem seems to be broader and more systematic. Individuals are doing reasonable things within a system, but is the system reasonable? How might it be changed?

Structural solutions:

- i) Capitalist solution: Promote businesses that make a profit from solving the problem, e.g., fresh fruit push-carts in food deserts. Gleaning businesses.
- ii) Regulation/State solutions: impose health standards on fast food, offer free shuttles (etc) to food resources, subsidize farmers' markets in urban areas.
- iii) Organize communities: empower communities to educate themselves and create solutions specific to their needs.
- iv) More radical solutions? What does justice require? How should a just society be organized?

Challenge the conception of liberty that supports (unregulated) capitalism. Remember:

“Negative liberty is the absence of obstacles, barriers or constraints. One has negative liberty to the extent that actions are available to one in this negative sense. Positive liberty is the possibility of acting — or the fact of acting — in such a way as to take control of one's life and realize one's fundamental purposes.” (Ian Carter: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/liberty-positive-negative/>)

What would an economy look like that too as its fundamental value collective and individual well-being rather than liberty?

NewsOne Staff, “America's Worst 9 Urban Food Deserts.” newsone.com, September 22, 2011.

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Bornstein, David. “Time to Revisit Food Deserts,” *New York Times*, April 25, 2012.

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