(Re)Defining Food Deserts

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Conceptualizations of Food Deserts

First appearance of term:¹

• Writing about public housing in Scotland in the 1990s
• “poor urban areas, where residents cannot buy affordable, healthy food”

Subsequent major conceptual frames:²

1. Access to supermarkets
2. Differences chain & non-chain grocery stores
3. Racial/ethnic disparities
4. Socio-economic disparities

Current USDA Definition (mid 2000s)

By Census Tract (~4000 people):
1. Low income (LI)
   • >= 20% poverty OR median family income (MFI) <= 80% of state or metro MFI
2. Low access (LA)
   • At least 500 persons and/or at least 33 percent of the population lives
   • Euclidian distance (as bird flies) to full-service grocery store
     • Green >= 1 mile
     • Orange >= ½ mile

Grocery store
• Proxy for sources of healthy and affordable food
• > $2 million in annual sales
• Containing all the major food departments
Food Brownfields & Swamps

Osorio, A.E., Corradini, M.G. & Williams, J.D. (2013) “Remediating Food Deserts, Food Swamps, and Food Brownfields: Helping the Poor Access Nutritious, Safe, and Affordable Food.” *Academy of Marketing Science Review*
Implications

Food deserts as a concept are problematic.

Can overstate causal relationship between physical access to grocery stores and health outcomes

- Original proponents of term urge caution\(^3\)

Better to view food deserts as one puzzle piece in the larger problems of food insecurity, poverty, and racism