TOWARDS EQUITABLE AND JUST FOOD SYSTEMS:

Exploring Food Justice, Food Sovereignty, and Ending Food Apartheid Policy & Practice

HEALTHY FOOD POLICY PROJECT

AUGUST 2022

Acknowledgments

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About The Healthy Food Policy Project

The Healthy Food Policy Project (HFPP) identifies and elevates local laws that seek to promote access to healthy food while also contributing to strong local economies, an improved environment, and health equity, with a focus on socially disadvantaged and marginalized groups. HFPP is a collaboration of the Center for Agriculture and Food Systems at Vermont Law School (CAFS), the Public Health Law Center (PHLC), and the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health at the University of Connecticut. This project is funded by the National Agricultural Library, Agricultural Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Healthy food access policies and racial justice go hand in hand. We at the Healthy Food Policy Project commit to educating ourselves and others about the impact of structural racism in our food systems, public policies, and institutions, and to addressing that impact in all its forms.

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INTRODUCTION

"New York: Food Justice" by CIDSE is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

We hope this resource can be useful to those who work on local food systems and healthy food access, including (but not limited to) local food policy council members, municipal policymakers, state and local public health officials, planning officials, resident groups, community-based advocates, and Tribal governments and communities.

Words matter. The words we use frame our understanding of the assets, needs, vision, value, culture and experiences of a community and shape our thinking on policy change efforts. This resource explores three important approaches or frameworks for advancing equity in the food system: food justice, food sovereignty, and ending food apartheid. It also provides policy examples that represent or embody each of these approaches. Next, this resource gives an overview of other commonly used terms (for example, food desert, food security), provides definitions, highlights strengths and weaknesses of each term, and provides examples of policies that use or relate to each term. This resource also lists several external resources and readings as additional opportunities to learn about terms' meanings and impacts. Discussion questions are listed at the end of each section to encourage conversation and reflection about what these terms mean to you, your community, and your policy partners.

The policy examples in this resource illustrate different approaches to building equitable food systems, but only represent a fraction of the creative policy options communities are pursuing. Given that terminology is imperfect, and that language and terms are constantly changing, this resource should be considered a snapshot in time of current terminology that will need to be updated to remain relevant in the future.

BACKGROUND

Nutritious food sustains us and helps us thrive. Food brings us together in a community and is an important part of our culture. For these reasons, food is fundamental to our well-being and in many places throughout the world, food is recognized as a human right.

However, stark inequities persist in access to healthy, nutritious, culturally relevant food and in the health consequences of hunger, food insecurity, and unhealthy food environments. There are also significant consequences to the concentration of ownership, wealth, and power in the food and agriculture sector, with large-scale, commercial businesses crowding out small, independent farmers, disrupting local and regional food systems, and diverting power and resources away from communities. Many food and agriculture workers are not compensated and afforded protections in ways that reflect the importance of their work. The COVID-19 pandemic worsened these inequities and brought additional attention to how structural racism[1] and white supremacy[2] have created and sustained an unjust food system. These inequities and systemic injustices impact communities' ability to grow, raise, find, obtain, transport, prepare, and eat food.[3]

Over the past several decades, there has been a shift in how different levels of government define, measure, and address food system problems and solutions, and subsequently a shift in what terms are used in policy. For example, the federal government, including the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), began using the term "food desert" in 2008 to describe low-income communities (i.e., with a poverty rate of 20 percent or more or a median family income equal to or less than 80 percent of the statewide or metropolitan area median family income) with low access to grocery stores. Here, low access means that 500 or more persons, or at least 33 percent of the population, live more than one mile from a supermarket or large grocery store (10 miles, in the case of rural census tracts).[4] However, as we will further discuss later in this resource, the term has more recently been identified as problematic, with some researchers, policymakers, and advocates shifting away from its use.

Food justice, **food sovereignty**, and **food apartheid** have emerged as approaches or frameworks to understand and address the various multi-level social, political, and commercial drivers of inequity within food systems—such as why communities with low-incomes and predominantly Black and Brown neighborhoods have high concentrations of fast food restaurants, convenience stores, and marketing for sugary drinks and other unhealthy foods, or in the case of American Indian communities and reservations, why there is such limited access to grocery stores or healthy foods in general.

These frameworks reflect long-standing work in communities to advance equity[5] and can be used to inform policy. In the next section, we talk about these frameworks and how they relate to each other.

Learn More

For more information and perspectives on the **social determinants of health** and how they impact **health equity**,[6] see the following resources:

- ■ The Praxis Project
- ■ World Health Organization
- ■ US Department of Health and Human Services

Guiding Questions

These questions are meant to guide you throughout the entire resource.

(?) As you encounter terms throughout this resource, what words, phrases, or ideas stand out to you?

(?) What do you notice?

(?) What terms or ideas do you use to talk about your experiences with improving local food systems?

(?) How did you come to use the terms you use?

ADVANCING EQUITY IN FOOD SYSTEMS:

Supporting Food Justice and Food Sovereignty and Ending Food Apartheid

Food justice, food sovereignty, and food apartheid are broad conceptual frameworks for understanding local food systems. These frameworks overlap, and they share some fundamental commonalities: they all aim to help us envision a just, ethical, and sustainable food future, and focus on the social and political systems that enable or impede this vision. At the same time, each has a unique focus and framing of the issue. Law and policy can work toward or support the goals, values, and visions of these frameworks and build equitable food systems. This section explores each of these frameworks and related policies to consider.

WHAT IS FOOD JUSTICE?

Food justice for a community will depend on the shared vision and priorities of community members. As a starting point, some common food justice themes include food access; autonomy to grow food; and equitable community participation in creating, implementing, and evaluating laws and policies that affect these areas. Achieving food justice within a community requires distinct strategies that target causes and conditions of injustice specific to that community.

Food justice policies come in many different varieties and appear across different levels of government. For example, federal, state, local, and Tribal laws and policies can advance food justice by promoting and supporting:

- restoring, supporting, and abiding by Indigenous treaty rights to land, water, hunting, gathering, and fishing
- access to land for farming and food cultivation and preservation of land access for culturally specific foods
- urban agriculture
- farmworker and food industry worker protections and rights
- farm owners of color, including black farmers
- food reclamation
- community food security
- environmental justice[7]

* The examples above are a few selected examples of related resources and do not represent the full breadth of work on these issues.

UC Merced, Library and Special Collections, "Cesar Chavez walking with farmworkers carrying strike signs," Ernest Lowe Photography Collection, Calisphere (July 2022), https://calisphere.org/item/eaa7e2e0-fb56-4e84-8788-0143518de8eb/.

- Food justice sees the lack of healthy food in poor communities as a human rights issue and draws from grassroots struggles and US organizing traditions such as the civil rights and environmental justice movements.

  - Food First

- Food justice is a holistic and structural view of the food system that sees healthy food as a human right and addresses structural barriers to that right. . . . Food justice efforts (which are generally led by indigenous peoples and people of color) work not only for access to healthy food, but for an end to the structural inequities that lead to unequal health outcomes.

  - Food Print

Policy Examples
Food Justice

Oakland, California's Department of Race and Equity integrates the principle of "fair and just" into the city's actions, planning, and policy. In applying this principle, the law specifically recognizes that "[f]ood systems that support local food production and provide access to affordable, healthy, and culturally appropriate foods for all people" are a determinant of equity.

In 2019, **Boston, Massachusetts**, established a Good Food Purchasing Program that requires city food purchases and service contracts to satisfy standards that promote justice within the food system. Additionally, in February 2022, Mayor Michelle Wu announced the creation of the Office of Food Justice which works to improve the accessibility and affordability of healthy food in Boston. These efforts as well as the Mayor's Food Access Agenda shows a deep commitment to food justice.

Boulder, Colorado, applies a portion of revenue generated from the city's sugar sweetened beverage excise tax towards city activities that improve health equity, including access to healthy foods and food and nutrition education.

Learn More About
Food Justice

Food + Justice = Democracy

Watch

- ■ "Food + Justice = Democracy"
  LaDonna Redmond discusses the food justice movement
- ■ "Reform or Transformation? The Pivotal Role of Food Justice in the U.S. Food Movement"
  Eric Holt-Giménez and Yi Wang, Food First/Institute for Food and Development Policy
- ■ Articles addressing Food Justice topics
  Civil Eats
- ■ "Food Justice"
  Food Print

WHAT IS FOOD SOVEREIGNTY?

Food sovereignty challenges the current power structures in the food system, maintaining that farmers, food producers, fishers, and communities should have control over their food, land, and water. Food sovereignty recognizes the right to healthy and culturally appropriate foods for all and acknowledges that food producers should benefit from the economic value of the food they produce. It pushes back against the corporate food regime which is controlled by a few large agribusiness companies and demands a shift to local food production by small producers, prioritizing a community's right to produce the food they need to feed themselves.

Importantly, food sovereignty movements in the US center self-determination and liberation into discussions around food justice. For example, the National Black Food and Justice Alliance describes food sovereignty as requiring a drastic change in what is currently an exploitative food system to one that is built with community self-determination at the center. Food sovereignty can only be realized by changing ownership structures across the food system, from land ownership and seed production through food distribution and retail.

Source: © Jess Hurd/reportdigital.co.uk

Food sovereignty has unique and heightened significance for Indigenous peoples in the US and around the world. The Declaration of Atitlán, Guatemala, drafted at the Indigenous Peoples' Consultation on the Right to Food, recognizes this significance, affirming that "the Right to Food of Indigenous Peoples is a collective right based on our special spiritual relationship with Mother Earth, our lands and territories, environment, and natural resources that provide our traditional nutrition [and] underscoring that the means of subsistence of Indigenous Peoples nourishes our cultures, languages, social life, worldview, and especially our relationship with Mother Earth[.]"

■ Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute, and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations.

- Declaration of Nyéléni (2007) (first global forum on food sovereignty)

For Indigenous peoples, food sovereignty and Tribal sovereignty are deeply intertwined. Disrupting Indigenous foodways has been a powerful tactic for disrupting Tribal nations and cultures, and these injustices continue to operate to this day. Applying Tribal sovereignty has been an effective strategy for Tribes in resisting and repairing these disruptions. Tribes in the United States are exercising their Tribal sovereignty to protect and restore traditional foodways by protecting traditional animals and plants, reclaiming land, and strengthening traditional food knowledge, to name just a few. In the foreword to Indigenous Food Sovereignty in the United States, Winona LaDuke writes, "Food sovereignty is an affirmation of who we are as Indigenous peoples, and a way, one of the most sure-footed ways, to restore our relationship with the world around us."

National Congress of American Indians

The Tribal Food Sovereignty Advancement Initiative of the National Congress of American Indians describes Tribal food sovereignty as "the right and availability of tribal nations and peoples to:

- freely develop and implement self-determined definitions of food sovereignty;

- cultivate, access, and secure nutritious, culturally essential food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods; and

- design and maintain food systems and enact policies that advance tribal priorities for ensuring that tribal citizens have the sustenance they need to thrive physically, mentally, socially, and culturally not just today, but for the generations to come."

"Food sovereignty is an affirmation of who we are as Indigenous peoples, and a way, one of the most sure-footed ways, to restore our relationship with the world around us."

Winona LaDuke

Policy Examples
Tribal Food Sovereignty

The **White Earth Band of Ojibwe** enacted a law recognizing Manoomin (wild rice) as having legal rights, including "the right to pure water and freshwater habitat; the right to a healthy climate system and a natural environment free from human-caused global warming impacts and emissions; the right to be free from patenting; as well as rights to be free from infection, infestation, or drift by any means from genetically engineered organisms, trans-genetic risk seed, or other seeds that have been developed using methods other than traditional plant breeding." The White Earth Band subsequently filed a case in Tribal court to enforce those rights against the state of Minnesota.

The **Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission's** Model Food Code Project has model Tribal policy language and supporting materials designed to "assist tribal harvesters, food handlers, food processors, food managers, regulatory staff, leadership, and community members in making decisions around building a food system that includes traditional foods and provides for the sale of those food[s] within and beyond reservation borders."

The **Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative** has a Model Tribal Food and Agriculture Code Project that provides model law language and contextual information on a wide range of Tribal laws related to food and agriculture, designed to "facilitate agricultural production, food systems development, and health outcomes improvement in Indian Country."

The **Diné Policy Institute's Food Sovereignty Initiative** has used community-based participatory research methods to inform recommendations regarding avenues of growing food sovereignty in their communities. Read their report, Diné Food Sovereignty, particularly the section "Strategies and Recommendations," for various policy examples.

Policy Examples
Municipal and State Food Sovereignty

Maine's 2017 Food Sovereignty Act permits municipalities to adopt food sovereignty ordinances, such as Madison, Maine's Local Food and Community Self-Governance Ordinance. For a brief history of the Act, see the "Food Sovereignty" section of HFPP's resource, State Policy Options to Increase Access to Healthy Food.

Learn More About
Food Sovereignty

For more information on Tribal and Indigenous food sovereignty, check out:

- Conducting Food Sovereignty Assessments in Native Communities
- Indigenous Food Systems Network
- Intertribal Agriculture Council
- Intertribal Buffalo Council
- Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance
- North American Traditional Indigenous Food Systems
- Reimagining Native Food Economies
- Tribal Food Sovereignty Advancement Initiative of the National Congress of American Indians

For more information on food sovereignty, check out:

- Black Yield Institute
- Community Control of Land: The People's Demand for Land Reparations in Baltimore City by the Black Yield Institute and Farm Alliance of Baltimore
- "Food Security, Food Justice, or Food Sovereignty?" by Eric Holt-Giménez, Food First/Institute for Food and Development Policy
- La Via Campesina
- National Black Food and Justice Alliance
- U.S. Food Sovereignty Alliance

For more information about the legal strategies around the right to food and the rights of nature, check out:

- The Right to Food and Indigenous Peoples Joint Brief by the United Nations and Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
- Global Alliances for the Rights of Nature

WHAT IS FOOD APARTHEID?

At their core, food justice and food sovereignty are centered on ideas of affirmative rights and building or reinforcing systems to fulfill those rights. The term "food apartheid" instead looks through the perspective of injustice and brings squarely into focus the deliberate policy choices that have resulted in geographically linked racial inequities in healthy food access.[8] In other words, the term food apartheid helps us visualize the manifestations of structural oppression by "place" and "space." Further, food apartheid identifies white supremacy as a key driver in the policymaking process and calls attention to how communities of color have been denied the means to afford and eat healthy, culturally meaningful foods.

Food apartheid is an attempt to diminish community sovereignty and individual autonomy via physical sorting, separation, and barriers. It emphasizes the direct link between public and private policy, chronic community disinvestment, and the racial inequities we see in healthy food access. It highlights how intentional policy decisions, such as redlining, have denied communities of color the opportunity for social mobility and land access or ownership, and also exposed them to environmental toxins. By drawing the connection between policy decisions and racial inequities in food access, the term invites conversations and solutions around the root causes of inadequate access to healthy foods and food system agency in these areas and offers transformative solutions beyond attracting more grocery stores.

Karen Washington, an activist and co-founder of Black Urban Growers, began using the term "food apartheid" to highlight the intentional and systemic racial inequities in healthy food access. In her own words:

> "I coined the term 'food apartheid' to ask us to look at the root causes of inequity in our food system on the basis of race, class, and geography. Let's face it: healthy, fresh food is accessible in wealthy neighborhoods while unhealthy food abounds in poor neighborhoods. 'Food apartheid' underscores that this is the result of decades of discriminatory planning and policy decisions. It begs the question: What are the social inequities that you see, and what are you doing to address them?"

Naming these root causes invites policy, systems, and environmental solutions that address the ongoing impacts of structural racism, including racial residential segregation, redlining, chronic community disinvestment, and entrenched socioeconomic inequities. It also pushes us to move away from victim-blaming arguments that inequitable food access can explained by a community's lack of initiative. Instead, the term creates an intentional focus on how structural racism and structural inequities are rooted in a long history of slavery, colonialism, land theft, white supremacy, and anti-Blackness.

■ Communities experience food insecurity, or disruption of food intake[,] because of lack of money, resources, and food apartheid. Food apartheid results from political and economic decisions rooted in structural racism, which have inequitably led to long-term disinvestment in primarily low-income communities and communities of color.

The Praxis Project

Policy Examples
Food Apartheid

We haven't found examples of policies explicitly using the term "food apartheid." However, there are examples of policies that expressly link lack of healthy food access to systemic racism.

In 2019, **Milwaukee County, Wisconsin**, passed a law recognizing that racism has created a public health crisis in Milwaukee County and committing to use racial equity tools in developing its budget, policies, processes, and procedures. The law seeks to achieve racial health equity by "us[ing] racial equity tools to evaluate the impact of decisions on [B]lack and brown communities."

Cuyahoga County, Ohio, passed a resolution in 2020 declaring racism a public health crisis in Cuyahoga County and committing government resources to eliminating racial health disparities. The resolution recognized that structural racism has created health disparities among Black people in access to healthy food, among other areas, and created a County Equity Commission and a Citizens Advisory Council on Equity. Many other cities, towns, and counties have declared racism a public health crisis, as visualized in the American Public Health Association's map of declarations. Although not legally enforceable, these declarations are an initial step that should be followed with action such as resource allocation to create meaningful change.

St. Petersburg, Florida, passed a resolution in 2021 declaring racism a public health crisis which included the finding that Black citizens in Florida "have been limited to areas with restricted access to healthy foods, disproportionate amount of convenience and liquor stores, clean water, and other essential resources, leading to a variety of other health issues. . . ." The resolution tasked the city with advocating for policies to improve health in Black communities and take other actions to advance racial equity. A few months later, the city issued a lengthy report that explained the history and current impacts of systemic racism within St. Petersburg and how they affect access to healthy food and other aspects of health, which included additional policy recommendations.

Race Forward's report "Building the Case for Racial Equity in the Food System" provides specific policy recommendations for a more racially equitable food system (see Section VI) and includes a racial impact analysis tool to assess policies (see Appendix: Guiding Questions for Racial Impact Analysis).

Learn More About
Food Apartheid

- [Malik Yakini on Food Apartheid:](#) a short video providing an overview of food apartheid.

- [The Capital Market of 20743](#) provides access to fresh, healthy produce in a predominantly Black and Hispanic neighborhood in Capitol Heights, Maryland. The community farmers' market supports businesses and farms owned by people of color and is accessible to people without transportation, showing an investment in the community that extends beyond food.

- [Soul Fire Farm](#) in New York is an Afro-Indigenous community farm committed to food sovereignty and ending food apartheid. Their approach combines agroecology with Afroecology, "a form of art, movement, practice, and process of social and ecological transformation that involves the re-evaluation of our sacred relationships with land, water, air, seeds and food." Listen to an [interview with Leah Penniman of Soul Fire Farm](#) to learn more.

- More information about governmental declarations calling for racism to be addressed as a public health crisis can be found at the American Public Health Association's interactive [webpage](#) dedicated to this topic.

For more information and perspectives on food apartheid, check out:

- ["How Urban Planning and Housing Policy Helped Create 'Food Apartheid' in US Cities"](#)
by Julian Agyeman

- ["Karen Washington: It's Not a Food Desert, It's Food Apartheid"](#)
by Anna Brones

- ["How Corporations Buy—and Sell—Food Made with Prison Labor"](#)
by H. Claire Brown

- ["Identifying and Countering White Supremacy Culture in Food Systems"](#)
by Alison Conrad, Duke World Food Policy Center

- ["Racial Equity Tools for Food Systems Planning"](#)
by Lexa Dundore

- ["An Annotated Bibliography on Structural Racism Present in the U.S. Food System"](#)
by Rachel Kelly et al. (8th ed.)

- ["She, The People: Dara Cooper on Food Redlining, Reparations, and Freeing the Land"](#)
by Kirsten West Savali

- ["Hunger for Freedom: The Story of Food in the Life of Nelson Mandela"](#)
by Anna Trapido

Malik Yakini on Food Apartheid

[Watch](#)

Ashley Drakeford on the Capital Market

[Watch](#)

Interview with Leah Penniman of Soul Fire Farm

[Listen](#)

Discussion Questions

(?) How do the equity frameworks of food justice, food sovereignty, and food apartheid overlap? What commonalities do they share? How are they different?

(?) What terms, approaches, or frameworks best reflect or describe your experience with improving local food systems? What resonates with you? What do you disagree with? Why?

(?) Are there particular food system issues or challenges that are *not* reflected in any of the frameworks or approaches discussed above? If so, what are they?

(?) Some food justice advocates have used the term "food apartheid" to describe our current food systems as a way to reflect the role of racist systems, structures, and policies in perpetuating spaces that are concentrated with barriers to healthy food options. How does this characterization align with your experience or perspective of our current food system challenges?

Making progress towards food justice, food sovereignty, and the end of food apartheid relies on understanding multiple indicators, such as food security, food deserts, food swamps, and hunger. These indicators help identify areas of inequity, target action and investment, and track progress toward food access that is equitable and just. The following sections describe how these terms are used in food policy and research, as well as their limitations.

FOOD SECURITY

■ Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.

- United Nations' Committee on World Food Security

■ Food security includes the dimensions of 1) availability (having sufficient quantities of food available on a consistent basis); 2) access (having sufficient resources to obtain appropriate foods for a nutritious diet); 3) use (appropriate use based on knowledge of basic nutrition and care, as well as adequate water and sanitation); and 4) stability of these three dimensions.

- Vermont Farm to Plate

Food security is a desired outcome and progress indicator for food justice advocates. Definitions of food security may differ, but they generally share these elements: consistent access to food that is affordable, nutritious, and meets cultural and dietary preferences. Food security can also be described by the issues it solves, including food instability, obstacles to accessing food, hunger, and malnutrition. Communities may conceptualize and define food security differently. For example, the right to hunt, gather, and fish may be a necessary component of food security for Indigenous communities.

At the federal level, the USDA defines food security as "access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life." The USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) provides a validated survey tool for researchers to measure the household level of food security on a spectrum from high food security to very low food security. The USDA uses the classifications "high food security" and "marginal food security" to describe different levels of food security. The high food security classification means there are no indicators of food access issues. Marginal food security refers to the presence of food access issues, such as anxiety about food sufficiency or a food shortage within the household.

The USDA defines food insecurity as "a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food" and distinguishes between low food security and very low food security. Low food security means there are indicators of reduced quality, variety, or desirability of food in the diet. Very low food security means that there are disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake in the household.

However, the term food security can be limiting when positioned as an ultimate goal, rather than one of many desired outcomes, because it does not adequately address the nutritional or diet quality of available foods or any of the root cause structural issues that create inequities and food insecurity in the first place. While food security is a helpful indicator of progress towards a more equitable food system, it is one step towards food justice, food sovereignty, and an end to food apartheid.

"Delaware National Guard" by The National Guard is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

Related Terms

NUTRITION SECURITY

Consistent access to nutritious foods that promote optimal health and well-being for all Americans, throughout all stages of life. Food security is having **enough** calories. Nutrition security is having the **right** calories.

- USDA Actions on Nutrition Security

COMMUNITY FOOD SECURITY

Community food security is "a situation in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice."

- Michael Hamm & Anne Bellows, Community Food Security and Nutrition Educators

FOOD ACCESS

"Food is accessible when it is affordable and community members can readily grow or raise it, find it, obtain it, transport it, prepare it, and eat it."

- Healthy Food Policy Project

FOOD SYSTEM RESILIENCE

Food system resilience is "the capacity to provide food security over time and despite disturbances."

- Danielle Tendall, Jonas Joerin, Birgit Kopainsky, Peter Edwards, Aimee Shreck, Quang Bao Le, Pius Kruetli, Michelle Grant, & Johan Six, Food System Resilience: Defining the Concept

The Five Dimensions of Food Access

Another way to think about food access is using a five dimensional framework described by Caspi et al. in "The local food environment and diet: A systematic review":[9]

1 Availability:
the adequacy of the supply of healthy food

2 Accessibility:
the location of the food supply and ease of getting to that location

3 Affordability:
food prices and people's perceptions of worth relative to the cost

4 Acceptability:
people's attitudes about attributes of their local food environment, and whether the given supply of products meets their personal standards

5 Accommodation:
how well local food sources accept and adapt to local residents' needs

Detroit, Michigan's Food Security Policy, drafted by the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, identifies eight areas for improving food security in Detroit, including: 1) access to quality food; 2) hunger and malnutrition; 3) impacts/effects of an inadequate diet; 4) citizen education/food literacy; 5) economic injustice within the food system; 6) urban agriculture; 7) the role of schools and other public institutions; and 8) emergency response.

Dacono, Colorado, exempts certain purchases of food made with federal nutrition program assistance benefits or funds from the city sales tax on food.

Federal Way, Washington, allows urban agriculture, such as community gardens and urban farms, as a permitted use in any zone throughout the city, and lists "increasing local food security" as part of the purpose of the policy.

San Francisco, California's Healthy Food Retailer Incentives Program offers grants, technical assistance, and other incentives to "healthy food retailers" meeting specified requirements to increase access to healthy food in underserved areas.

Learn More About
Food Security

"Reach" by Lucie Cooper and Ava Davis

Watch

- "Reach" by Lucie Cooper and Ava Davis: a mural series in Jackson, Mississippi depicting inequities in the ease/difficulty for people and communities in accessing healthy food

- "Household Food Security in the United States in 2020": an annual report produced by the USDA Economic Research Service that covers household food security, food expenditures, and use of federal nutrition assistance programs

- "The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World": an annual report produced by United Nations agencies to monitor international progress towards food security

- "Food Systems Resilience: Concepts & Policy Approaches" by Jenileigh Harris & Emily Spiegel, Center for Agriculture and Food Systems at Vermont Law School

FOOD DESERT

The term "food desert" has been used by local, state, and federal governments, including the USDA, to describe areas with low access to grocery stores. The USDA Economic Research Service initially analyzed 2000 and 2006 census data on locations of supermarkets, supercenters, and large grocery stores to identify the first "food deserts" in the US. The Food Access Research Atlas (formerly called the Food Desert Locator) is a mapping tool that visualizes more recent data from 2019.
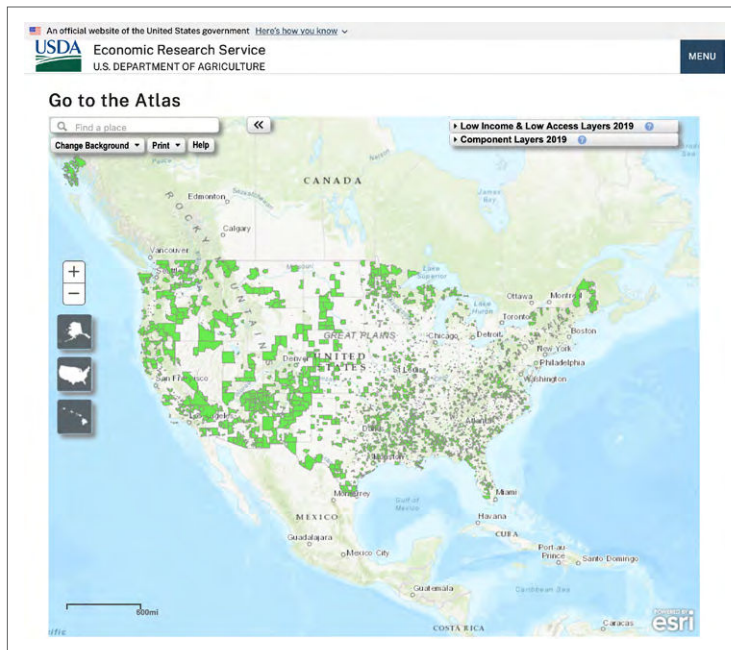
After identifying food deserts as areas of low access to grocery stores, the US government launched the Healthy Food Financing Initiative[10] (HFFI) as a coordinated federal program to increase healthy food access and eliminate food deserts by providing grant funding and technical assistance to eligible fresh, healthy food retailers and enterprises in low-income communities. In 2019 and 2020 alone, the HFFI awarded $4.4 million in targeted grants to 30 projects designed to improve access to fresh, healthy food through food retail.

However, the term food desert is being phased out of use at the federal level, including the HFFI, and the USDA now refers to food deserts as "low-income and low-access areas" in their Food Access Research Atlas. Given that the term food desert has been in use by the federal government since at least 2008,[11] it is still commonly found in policy language, grant applications, and market research among grocery store companies. For example, the New Jersey Food Desert Relief Program uses the term to identify priority areas eligible for certain funding.

Although the term food desert highlights the spatial relationship between people and grocery stores, it is problematic and has been critiqued for several reasons. Food desert has a negative connotation, implying that neighborhoods with low access to healthy food are barren and desolate landscapes. The term also suggests that the problem of low access to healthy food is naturally occurring, and that the solution is simply to increase healthy food retail options, such as grocery stores, healthy corner stores, and farmers' market programs. It also does not acknowledge that people are willing to travel to get quality, affordable food, including low-income households.

The term food desert is rooted in deficit. As such, it does not accurately reflect the vibrancy of communities experiencing low access to healthy food. As well, by implying that scarcity of healthy food is a natural phenomenon, it masks the deliberate policy decisions that have created this scarcity. Further, the term does not recognize the resulting racial disparities and how they fall disproportionately on people of color, and does not emphasize the need for systemic solutions.

Lastly, to create effective systemic and policy solutions to increase healthy food access, it is important to understand why food deserts may exist in the first place and their root causes. In rural areas, food deserts may exist for various reasons such as rural communities losing their small and independent grocers as bigger supercenters and large retailers offer more affordable food options, though they may be located farther away. In urban areas, post-World War II suburbanization patterns shaped the food system, with many supermarkets relocating from low-income and inner-city neighborhoods to white suburbs, leaving food desert areas with limited access to grocery stores.[12] The Federal Housing Administration's Home Owners Loan Corporation developed maps that ranked residential neighborhoods with grades "A" through "D", based on the highest ("A") to the lowest ("D") ratings, with "D" areas marked in red on the maps.[13] This practice known as redlining led to spatially organized and distributed poverty based on race, which led major food retailers to leave these neighborhoods because they supposedly had higher operating expenses and lower profit margins.[14]

Policy Examples
Food Desert

There are many examples of the term "food desert" used in laws and programs that seek to facilitate greater access to healthy food.[15] However, because this term is now considered by many to be problematic, we are providing one example of a city that has shifted away from using this term to use alternatives such as "healthy food priority areas":

■ **Baltimore, Maryland**, has shifted away from using the term food desert and now refers to these areas as Healthy Food Priority Areas. Elsewhere, the city has previously defined "food desert incentive areas" in a law that provides a personal property tax credit for qualifying supermarkets.
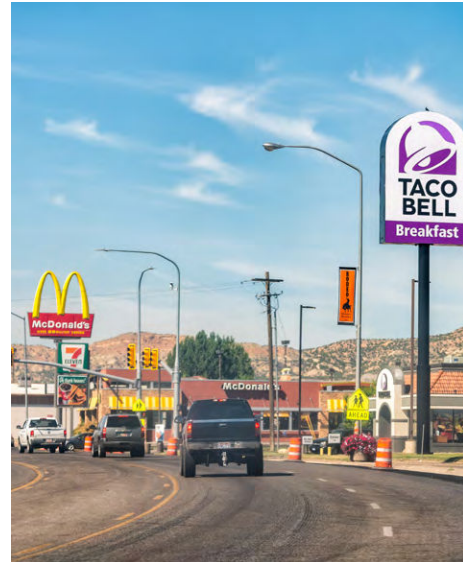
FOOD SWAMP

The term "food swamp" refers to an area with a high density of food outlets that tend to feature low cost, unhealthy foods, such as convenience stores, fast food establishments, and gas stations. The term highlights how the relative abundance of cheap fast food and junk food options may influence health more than access to outlets that sell healthier food. In fact, some research has shown that living in an area classified as a food swamp is a better predictor of adult obesity inequities than living in an area classified as a food desert.[16] Research has also shown that food swamp environments are more common in low-income neighborhoods, and particularly impact Black communities.

As the term suggests, food swamps exist when there is an imbalance in the local food environment, where unhealthy food outlets outnumber those that sell healthy food, driving poor health. Like food desert, food swamp can be used as a measurement tool looking at healthy food access and the food environment. However, the term takes a different perspective by focusing on the food access challenges of those who are navigating a food environment filled with the types of unhealthy food outlets that show up when supermarkets and grocery stores are not present.

Some of the same forces mentioned in the previous section that created food deserts are also responsible for food swamps too, including historical redlining, white flight, transportation inequities, barriers to lending and entrepreneurship for local residents, concentrated poverty, and outdated zoning rules.[17] These factors are important to understand and consider because interventions and policy solutions must consider the root causes in order to alleviate existing food swamps and prevent new swamps from emerging.

Communities aiming to alleviate food swamps can begin by organizing with neighbors and other community stakeholders to identify specific issues, express their needs, and discuss community-driven solutions. Putting pressure on business owners to increase healthy food offerings may be one approach. However, it is worth noting that organizing together with neighbors, elected officials, and other community stakeholders to collectively put pressure on food business owners will have a greater impact than any of those groups individually. Elected officials who are in a position of power should also work with and empower the community (See Food Access Policy Change through Resident Engagement) in developing policy solutions.

■ Food swamps are "areas in which large relative amounts of energy-dense snack foods inundate healthy food options."

- Donald Rose, J. Nicholas Bodor, Chris Swalm, Janet Rice, Thomas Farley & Paul Hutchinson, Deserts in New Orleans?: Illustrations of Urban Food Access and Implications for Policy

Communities may also consider mapping neighborhood-level food store access to identify food swamps, which then can be prioritized for interventions that restrict or disincentivize retailers primarily selling unhealthy or high fat/sugar/salt foods through zoning, licensing, minimum stocking standards (like the Minneapolis Staple Foods Ordinance) and other local policies, especially those that would apply to new retailers. To achieve a more equitable and balanced neighborhood food environment, communities should simultaneously incentivize existing retailers to carry more fresh fruits and vegetables, which may require technical assistance and equipment to support these efforts.

Although the term seems to provide a better measurement tool than food desert, some critique food swamp as they do food desert, noting that it does not emphasize or adequately highlight the root causes of limited access to healthy food in these areas.[18,19] Instead, they suggest that food apartheid may be a better descriptor because it highlights how structural and institutional racism led to the current food landscape that we see in these areas.

Policy Examples
Food Swamps

Arden Hills, Minnesota, requires that any fast food restaurant be located at least one-quarter mile from another fast food establishment, and at least 400 feet from schools, churches, public recreation areas, and residentially zoned property.

Tulsa, Oklahoma's Healthy Neighborhood Overlay District establishes dispersal requirements of one mile between small box discount stores (such as dollar stores), exempting stores that use at least 500 square feet for the sale of fresh produce. Read this article to learn more.

Calistoga, California, prohibits drive-thru windows at food service establishments and bans fast food, or "formula" restaurants, to protect the "small-town" character.

South Los Angeles created a one-year moratorium on permits for new fast food restaurants. However, it is worth noting that this policy has been critiqued because it has not produced the intended results and has not reduced obesity in the city.

Prince George's County's Food Equity Council has pursued multiple policy approaches to address inequities in the food system associated with food swamps. "Food Access and Equity in Prince George's County" includes a map of fast food establishments and other restaurants (see page 17) and identifies healthy food access priority areas.

Learn More About
Food Swamps

Fertile Ground

Watch

- Fertile Ground:
  a documentary discussing food swamps, food insecurity, and community resilience in Jackson, Mississippi.

- "Food Swamps Predict Obesity Rates Better Than Food Deserts in the United States"
  by Kristen Cooksey-Stowers, Marlene Schwartz, and Kelly Brownell

- "How Latina Mothers Navigate a 'Food Swamp' to Feed their Children: a Photovoice Approach"
  by Uriyoán Colón-Ramos, Rafael Monge-Rojas, Elena Cremm, Ivonne Rivera, Elizabeth Andrade, and Mark Edberg

- "Racial Differences in Perceived Food Swamp and Food Desert Exposure and Disparities in Self-Reported Dietary Habits"
  by Kristen Cooksey-Stowers, Qianxia Jiang, Abiodun Atoloye, Sean Lucan, and Kim Gans

- The City Planner's Guide to the Obesity Epidemic: Zoning and Fast Food
  by Julie Samia Mair, Matthew Pierce, and Stephen Teret

- Informational and Behavorial Cues in the Food Environment and Their Effect on Diet Behavior – Developing a Valid and Reliable Food Swamp Environments Audit (FS-EAT) Tool: Spatial Patterns and Implications for Land Use Zoning Policies
  by Kristen Cooksey-Stowers et al.

- "U.S. county "food swamp" severity and hospitalization rates among adults with diabetes: A nonlinear relationship"
  by Aryn Z. Phillips & Hector P. Rodriguez

- Relationships between Vacant Homes and Food Swamps: A Longitudinal Study of an Urban Food Environment
  by Yeeli Miu et al.

HUNGER

Hunger is a general term used to describe the condition when a person does not consume enough food to meet their body's nutritional needs. It is often used interchangeably with the terms "undernourishment" and "malnutrition" to describe a potential consequence of food insecurity. Hunger can cause a wide range of health and developmental consequences, particularly for children, if experienced for a prolonged period.

Hunger occurs at the individual level, which makes it more difficult to assess compared to household-level indicators like food insecurity. This is why many national surveys and health targets (such as Healthy People 2030) have used food insecurity as a proxy for assessing hunger. In some instances, the term hunger has been used to describe data that in fact measured food insecurity. Hunger is a more simple term, which may be why it is more commonly used in public opinion polling. However, the conflating of hunger and food insecurity has drawn criticism, including from the Committee on National Statistics, which recommended that USDA stop using the term hunger to describe food insecurity indicators.

- Hunger is "an uncomfortable or painful physical sensation caused by insufficient consumption of dietary energy. It becomes chronic when the person does not consume a sufficient amount of calories (dietary energy) on a regular basis to lead a normal, active and healthy life."

  - Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

Related Term

MALNUTRITION

Malnutrition refers to deficiencies, excesses, or imbalances in a person's intake of energy and/or nutrients. The term malnutrition covers two broad groups of conditions. One is 'undernutrition'— which includes stunting (low height for age), wasting (low weight for height), underweight (low weight for age) and micronutrient deficiencies or insufficiencies (a lack of important vitamins and minerals). The other is overweight, obesity and diet-related noncommunicable diseases (such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and cancer).

- World Health Organization

- Hunger is "a potential consequence of food insecurity that, because of prolonged, involuntary lack of food, results in discomfort, illness, weakness, or pain that goes beyond the usual uneasy sensation."

  - Committee on National Statistics of the National Academies

Policy Examples
Hunger

Many localities designated food banks and other entities providing food to economically disadvantaged individuals as "essential businesses" during the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools were also typically exempt from stay-at-home orders during the pandemic and leveraged new regulatory flexibility in USDA's School Meal programs to address hunger and food insecurity in their communities. Visit the Healthy Food Policy Project's Municipal COVID-19 Food Access Policies database for policy examples.

Prince George's County, Maryland, created a program to help farmers' markets acquire and use the technology needed to process benefits under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

Learn More About
Hunger

- Hunger's Wall: Tell It Like It Is: a mural created during the Poor People's Campaign of 1968 in Resurrection City on the National Mall; now housed at the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC

- Hunger Through My Lens: a multimedia advocacy platform organized by Hunger Free Colorado for Coloradans experiencing hunger to share their stories through photography, writing, and voice recordings

- Witnesses to Hunger: a program organized by the Center for Hunger-Free Communities at Drexel University that facilitates policy advocacy by people who are affected by hunger, including participants from Washington, DC, Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Massachusetts, and Connecticut

- "Hunger and Poverty in America" by Food Research Action Center (FRAC)

- "Hunger and food insecurity are not the same. Here's why that matters – and what they mean" by Simran Sethi

Hunger's Wall: Tell It Like It Is

Watch

Hunger Through My Lens

Watch

Witnesses to Hunger

Watch

Discussion Questions

(?) What terms or ideas best reflect or describe your experience with improving local food systems?

(?) What resonates with you, and why?

(?) What terms do you find confusing or problematic, and why?

(?) How do the equity frameworks of food justice, food sovereignty, and food apartheid make you think differently about the food system and policy solutions?

(?) How do the common terms and indicators such as food insecurity, hunger, food swamps, and food deserts make you think differently about the food system and policy solutions?

CONCLUSION

We hope this resource inspires the passion, creativity, and determination of the many, many healthy food advocates who are working tirelessly to transform community food systems to achieve a world where everyone can get and eat all the good food they need and want. We also hope it encourages reflection, supports wider understanding, and motivates discussion on the frameworks and terms provided, particularly regarding how they are used in policy. Using certain terms in policy may have broad implications especially at the federal level, and they can have a significant impact over a long period of time. Even if the term is ultimately understood to be problematic, it may take a long time to transition away from its use. It is therefore crucial to engage authentically with the community when choosing terms to use in public policy to ensure terms are appropriate and community driven, not rooted in deficit and covering up systemic inequities.

ENDNOTES

1   "Structural Racism in the U.S. is the normalization and legitimization of an array of dynamics – historical, cultural, institutional and interpersonal – that routinely advantage whites while producing cumulative and chronic adverse outcomes for people of color. It is a system of hierarchy and inequity, primarily characterized by white supremacy – the preferential treatment, privilege and power for white people at the expense of Black, Latino, Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American, Arab and other racially oppressed people."
- Keith Lawrence & Terry Keleher: Chronic Disparity: Strong and Pervasive Evidence of Racial Inequalities (2004)

2   "A political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings." - Ansley, F.L. (1997) 'White Supremacy (And What We Should Do about It)', in R. Delgado and J. Stefancic (eds) Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror, pp. 592–55. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press. (Cited in David Gillborn: Rethinking White Supremacy: Who Counts in 'WhiteWorld' (2006))

3   See the Health Food Policy Project definition of "access" in the context of access to healthy food: "Food is accessibility when it is affordable and community members can readily grow or raise it, find it, obtain it, transport it, prepare it, and eat it." https://healthyfoodpolicyproject.org/about/key-definitions

4   Ver Ploeg, M., Nulph, D., & Williams, R. (2011, December 1). Mapping food deserts in the United States. Retrieved June 14, 2022, from https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2011/december/data-feature-mapping-food-deserts-in-the-us/#:~:text=Low%2Dincome%20census%20tracts%20with,are%20defined%20as%20food%20deserts.

5   "This is equity: just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential. Unlocking the promise of the nation by unleashing the promise in us all."
- PolicyLink: The Equity Manifesto (2018)

6   "Health equity means that everyone has a fair and just opportunity to be as healthy as possible. This requires removing obstacles to health such as poverty, discrimination, and their consequences, including powerlessness and lack of access to good jobs with fair pay, quality education and housing, safe environments, and health care."
- Robert Wood Johnson Foundation: What Is Health Equity? (2017)

    "Health equity is defined as the absence of unfair and avoidable or remediable differences in health among population groups defined socially, economically, demographically or geographically."
- World Health Organization: Social Determinants of Health

7   "Environmental Justice—a set of principles and a grassroots-led movement—arose in response to the disproportionate exposure of communities of color and low-income communities to harmful pollution, toxic sites and facilities, and other health and environmental hazards. . . . In the simplest terms, achieving Environmental Justice means making sure all people have the opportunity to live the healthiest lives they possibly can."
- Environmental Justice Health Alliance

8   "Apartheid" signifies a system of intentional, government-enforced race-based discrimination and, as implemented in South Africa, has been recognized as unlawful under international law and as a crime against humanity (see, Dugard, John. "Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid" United Nations, 1973, https://legal.un.org/avl/ha/cspca/cspca.html)

9   Caspi, C. E., Sorensen, G., Subramanian, S. V., & Kawachi, I. (2012). The local food environment and diet: a systematic review. Health & place, 18(5), 1172-1187.

10 HFFI is a public-private partnership administered by the Reinvestment Fund on behalf of USDA Rural Development was established by the 2014 Farm Bill and reauthorized in 2018 to improve access to healthy food in underserved areas. Only projects located in Low Income, Low Access census tracts (formerly called "Food Deserts") are eligible for HFFI funding. For more information see here: https://www.investinginfood.com/about-hffi/

11 P.L. 110-246, Title VI, §7527.

12 Joyner, L., Yagüe, B., Cachelin, A., & Rose, J. (2022). Farms and gardens everywhere but not a bite to eat? A critical geographic approach to food apartheid in Salt Lake City. Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development, 11(2), 67–88. https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2022.112.013

13 Rhodes, Jason. "Geographies of Privilege and Exclusion: The 1938 Home Owners Loan Corporation "Residential Security Map" of Atlanta." Atlanta Studies. September 07, 2017. https://doi.org/10.18737/atls20170907. See "Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America" https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/#loc=5/39.1/-94.58

14 Joyner, L., Yagüe, B., Cachelin, A., & Rose, J. (2022). Farms and gardens everywhere but not a bite to eat? A critical geographic approach to food apartheid in Salt Lake City. Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development, 11(2), 67–88. https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2022.112.013

15 See the Healthy Food Policy Project Policy Database for examples: https://healthyfoodpolicyproject.org/policy-database?_policies_search=food%20desert

16 Cooksey-Stowers, K., Schwartz, M. B., & Brownell, K. D. (2017, November 14). Food Swamps Predict Obesity Rates Better Than Food Deserts in the United States. PubMed Central. Retrieved June 14, 2022, from https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5708005/

17 Johnson, B. (2022, April 21). U study in north Minneapolis asks: Do we eat more fast food because we want it or because it's there? StarTribune. https://www.startribune.com/do-we-eat-more-fast-food-because-we-want-it-or-because-its-there-u-study-asks-in-north-minneapolis/600166722/

18 Agyeman, J. (2021, March 9). How urban planning and housing policy helped create 'food apartheid' in US cities. The Conversation. https://theconversation.com/how-urban-planning-and-housing-policy-helped-create-food-apartheid-in-us-cities-154433

19 Sevilla, N. (2021, April 2). Food Apartheid: Racialized Access to Healthy Affordable Food. Natural Resources Defense Council. https://www.nrdc.org/experts/nina-sevilla/food-apartheid-racialized-access-healthy-affordable-food