Food and Culture: Examining the Influence of Food Deserts in Urban Communities

Franchone Bey

Teacher, English Language Arts, West Charlotte High School

Abstract

In the Literature & Film Course, a high school English Language Arts (ELA) elective class, students learn about technical aspects of film making as well as engage in critical analyzation of films. There is a unit that focuses on race and the influence of stereotypes in the media. Extending this lesson to include cultural identity and food, I am asking the question about what ways cultural identity and food deserts intersect and the impact it has on the community. Further questioning the balance in the relationship between accesses to food and maintaining balance in the community will be investigated. It is important to understand why the relationship exists in its current state and why it is relevant. Why are certain supermarkets located in specific areas? How does that location affect the way people purchase food in the area and what impact will it have on the economic stability of the community. Connecting this to the Literature & Film course through examination of documentary film making or feature films where the marketplace has a significant role in the film as character.

Defining Food Security (USDA)

Food Security

High food security (*old label=Food security*): no reported indications of food-access problems or limitations.
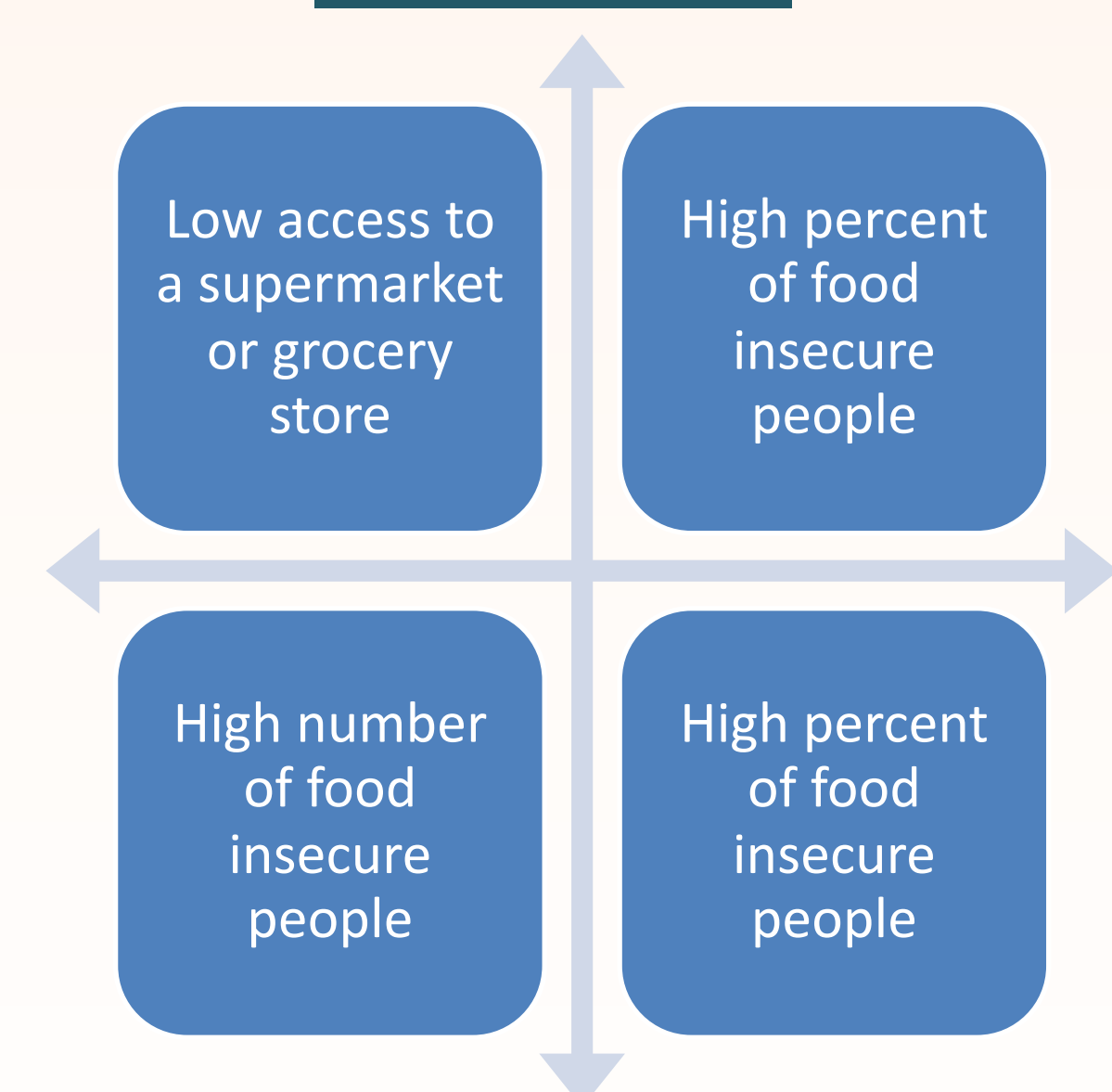
Marginal food security (*old label=Food security*): one or two reported indications—typically of anxiety over food sufficiency or shortage of food in the house. Little or no indication of changes in diets or food intake.

Food Insecurity

Low food security (*old label=Food insecurity without hunger*): reports of reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet. Little or no indication of reduced food intake.

Very low food security (*old label=Food insecurity with hunger*): Reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake.

What Does Food Insecurity Look Like Around the Country

- Low access to a supermarket or grocery store
- High percent of food insecure people
- High number of food insecure people
- High percent of food insecure people

Objectives

- Identify the major sources of food in densely populated areas of Charlotte, NC
- Identify location of major food sources in densely populated areas of Charlotte, NC
- Identify the major source of food supply in less populated areas of Charlotte, NC
- Identify location of major food sources in less populated areas of Charlotte, NC

Observations

Access to food is important for every community and the location of that access is key, especially in areas where transportation can be an obstacle to obtaining healthy choices. People who live in food deserts have more access to inexpensive fast food restaurants. These affordable options are convenient but offer more unhealthy options. In my research, I observed that food access varies by household income. Additionally the food environment is affected by many factors and can change depending on the community. A research study using data from the American Chamber of Commerce Researchers Association (ACCRA) revealed that food availability in densely populated urban areas is challenged by lack of grocery store or supermarkets. It also highlighted significant differences in access. African-American populations had half as much access to chain supermarkets as whites. Hispanic populations had one-third the access to chain supermarkets as non-Hispanics. Lower-income neighborhoods overall had less access to chain stores than middle- and upper-income neighborhoods. And, independent, non-chain stores were more prevalent in predominantly African-American and Hispanic communicates than in pre-dominantly Caucasian communities. (Whitaker, Tsai, Mulligan 13)
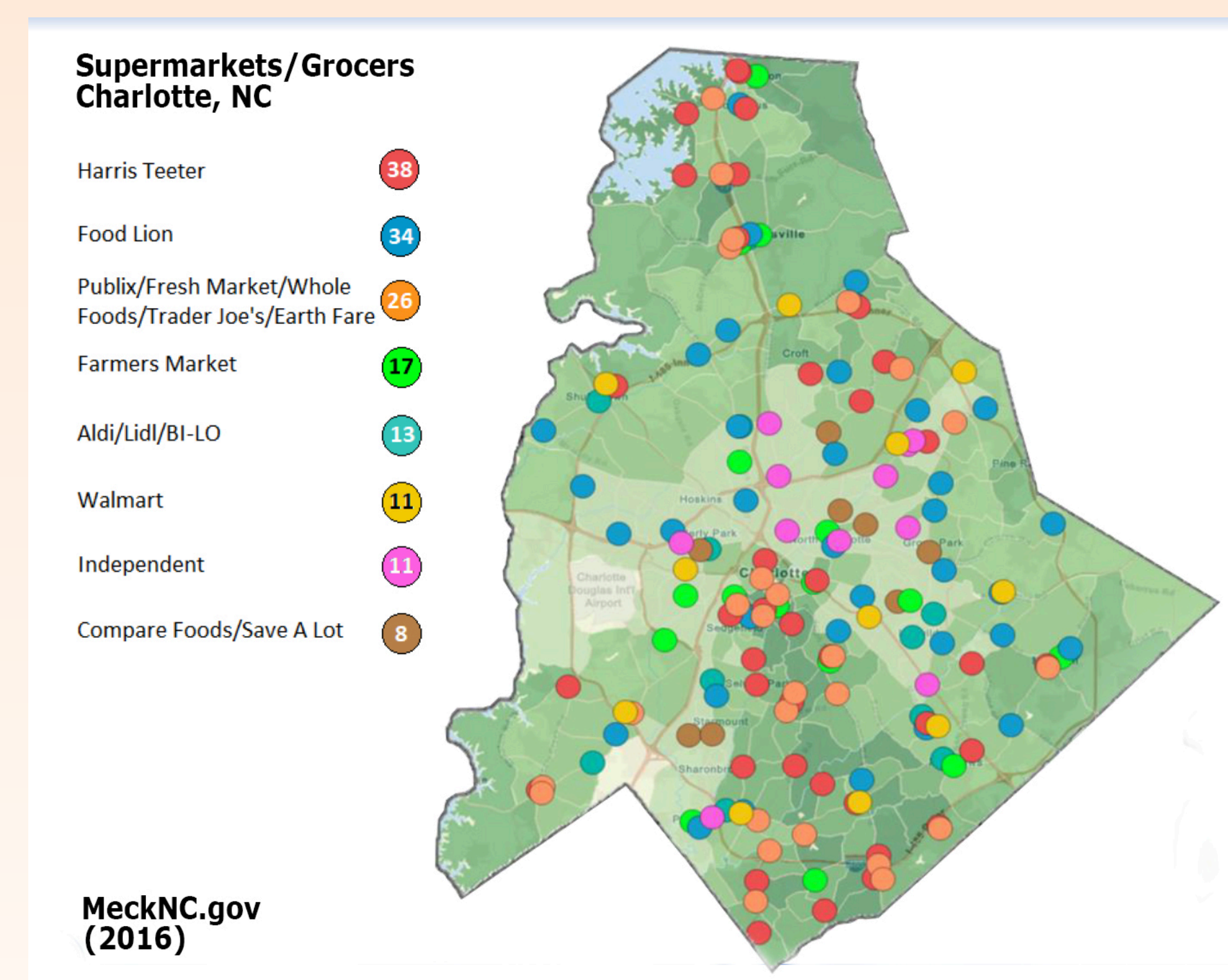

Image: The number, type, and location of supermarkets, grocers, and farmer markets locations throughout Charlotte, NC. (MeckNC)
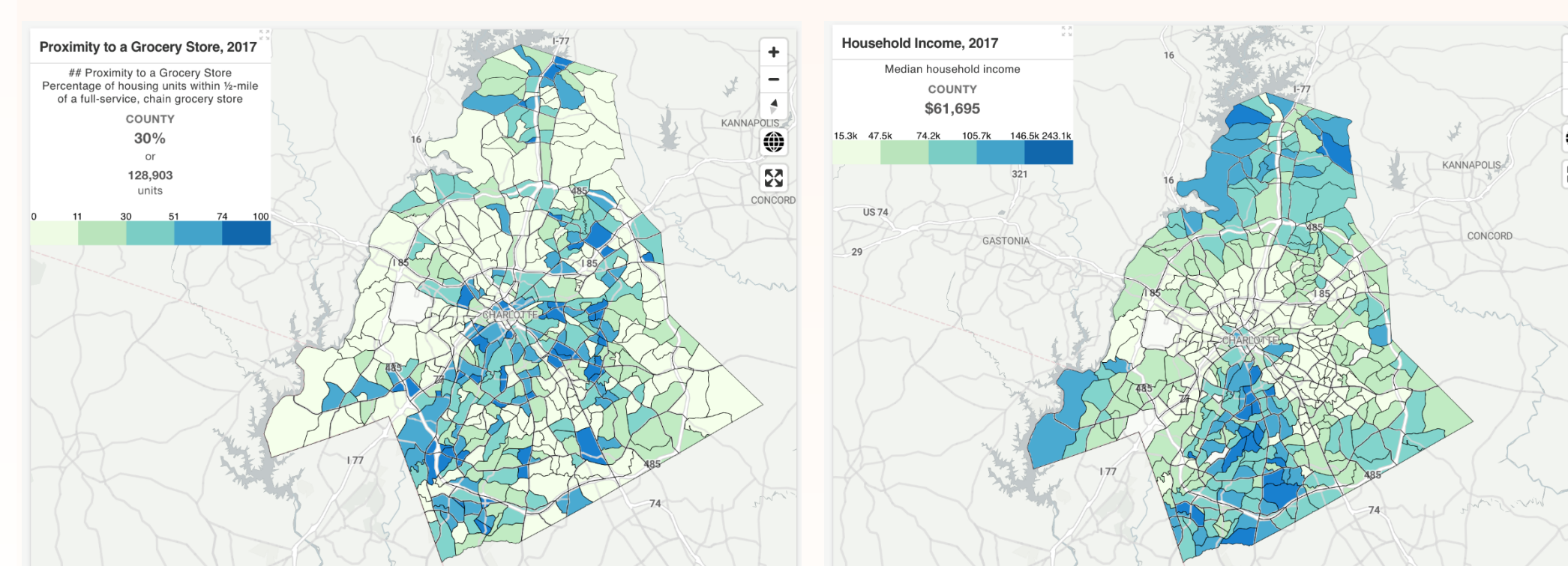

Image: Charlotte/Mecklenburg County residents proximity to Grocery Store and Charlotte/Mecklenburg County residents income.
(Charlotte/Mecklenburg Quality of Life Explorer(mcmap.org))

USDA's research:
The USDA used census data as a tract to analyze food deserts and found that food access is influenced by income, vehicle availability, and access to public transportation. The study found that areas with higher levels of poverty are more likely to be food deserts and that residents in the northeast are less likely to live far from a store than their counterparts in other regions of the country with similar income levels. With healthy eating initiatives and campaigns like First Lady Michelle Obama's Lets Move!, there has been a national effort to address the challenges people have with accessing nutritious foods in areas of low access. Farmers' Markets are positioned alternatives. When there are not a lot of full-service supermarkets that offer a wide variety of affordable healthy foods, people may turn to alternative sources, which could include convenience stores and fast-food restaurants. These stores tend to have mostly unhealthy food options.

Lesson

Learning Objectives:

- Define food insecurity & food security and explain the differences between them.
- Analyze and interpret community food availability maps using various sources
- Describe the components of a food desert
- Identify community efforts to address food insecurity and food deserts

Essential Questions:

- How does food insecurity affect people in a community?
- How can we reduce food insecurity and reduce food deserts in a community?

Lessons

Lesson 1 – Students will identify one food desert area in the local community.
- Create an online chart to include the locations of food desert areas
- Include a key, a brief description of the chart that reflects the population of the area, the average income of people in that location, and the type of food access within a 1-mile radius of the main supermarket/grocer location
- Students will create maps of their own communities, with all food sources, (grocery stores, supermarkets, restaurants, fast food locations, community gardens) and the distances between them and where they live.

Lesson 2 – Students will create an infographic about the causes and effects of food insecurity and food deserts
- Students will first, list the causes of food insecurity, then identify the potential effects. From research students should think about the system-level causes
- Students will look at those specific causes like poverty, lack of grocery stores offering healthy options, and access to transportation
- Students will also look at the potential effects of food insecurity, like health issues including diabetes, obesity, and nutrient deficiencies

Questions

Deeper issues around the connection of health and food insecurity introduces many questions. Based on research the proximity of food access has direct correlation to health. Does it matter what kind of food sources exist in areas of poverty or wealth? I visited two supermarkets located in different areas of Charlotte. Harris Teeter and Food Lion prices vary tremendously. Name brand items in Harris Teeter are priced considerably higher than at Food Lion. What influence does higher priced items have on the consumer's ability to access food in that location? Is it intentional to price items higher to deter groups of people from patronizing the store? How are stores like Walmart affecting access as they are very often placed in areas that are more distanced from the community.

Health concerns and food access also connect when food insecurity limits the ability to find healthy alternatives to eating healthy fresh foods. Questions about the amount of fast food restaurants, convenience stores and pop up food vendors arise. Why are there more fast food restaurants in densely populated area where income levels are low? I am curious as to why there are so many more dollar store vendors and gas stations with food options in these same areas.

Farmers' markets have been positioned as alternatives for healthy eating options, however, these spaces are not always accessible for those with transportation barriers. Additionally, farmer's markets are designed to support healthy eating, and due to location and price perception-seemingly higher priced produce, they appear to have a base of higher income consumers. How can farmer's markets close the gap to food insecurity in urban locations?

Conclusions

Food insecurity is a problem that affects everyone, regardless of their position in the community. And it's important that everyone work together to find solutions to supporting the community at-large. Farmers' Markets and community gardens are excellent contributions to the food landscape but much more needs to be done. There are many health issues that disproportionately affect low-income people in connection to not having healthy options for food in closer proximity to them. In looking at the research, it was revealed that income is also a factor in accessing healthy options. Lower income comes with challenges in transportation, ability to pay higher prices for quality products, and access to information about healthy eating.

Image: Infographic. Food Deserts *(NewHopeNetwork)*

References

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Acknowledgements