



Promoting smart, fair food policy for New York

Food Policy Center Research Brief

Searching for (Just) Food:

A qualitative case study of the food environment in a low-income micro-neighborhood in
Long Island City, NY

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An aerial view of Queensbridge Houses

Problems of food access, food insecurity and hunger are linked to numerous adverse health outcomes including increased rates of illness and death due to diet related diseases. Obesity is a central focus of diet related health outcomes in current health discourse, policy and literature. In New York City, for example, it is estimated that more than half of the adult population is overweight or obese, which is associated with reports of poorer health (New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, 2005). At the same time, hunger in the US has reached all time highs including nearly 3 million New Yorkers reporting as food insecure (City Harvest, nd). Furthermore, inequities associated with food access highlight matters of social justice, such as spatial segregation and neighborhood deprivation within the larger food system – the conventional retail infrastructure, which supplies food to the general public. This project explores the links between food systems, access, and food practices among low-income residents living in an underserved food environment.

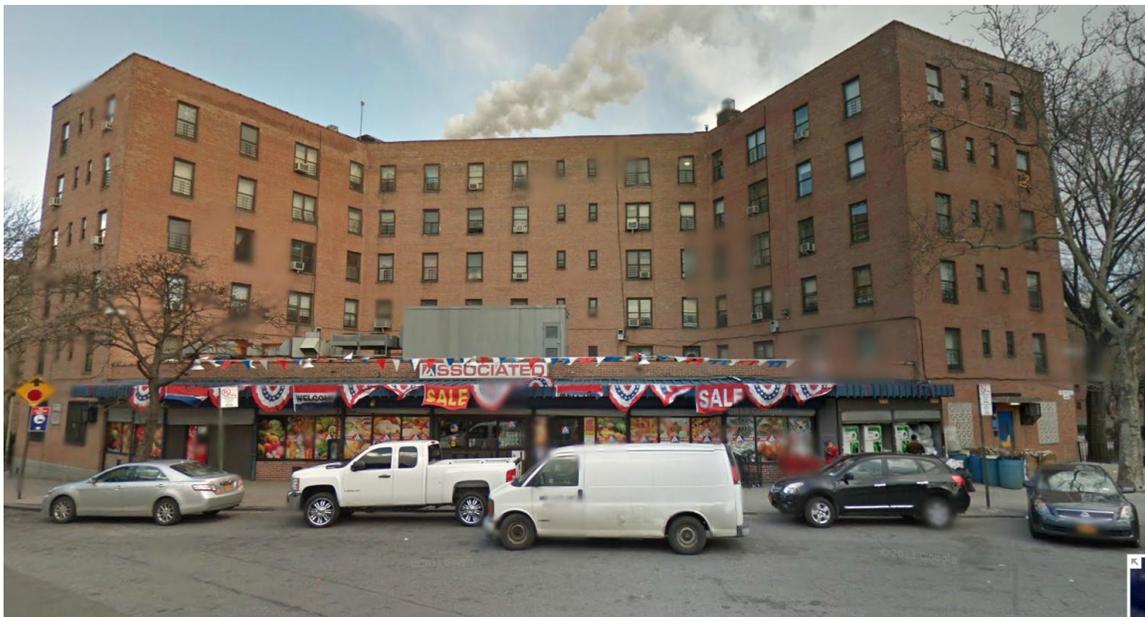
This project focused on the Queensbridge micro-neighborhood located within the larger neighborhood of Long Island City, in Queens, NY. Given the complexity of the issues surrounding the food system and how it impacts people across various socio-economic statuses differently, the aims of the research study included gaining a better understanding of the issues and processes involved among low-income community members related to the ways in which they source and consume food in the conventional and alternative food systems. The primary research questions informing this project were: what are participants' perceptions of their food environment(s), particularly around the areas of quality, value, and taste of available products? What are the socio-cultural factors present in the micro-neighborhood that gets inscribed into the food environment, and how do these characteristics influence purchasing decisions? And, what is the level of awareness, attitudes toward and use of alternative food networks (AFNs) among community members?

I addressed these questions through conducting a qualitative case study utilizing ethnographic research methods. The main methods utilized were participant observation conducted over the course of two years, in-depth interviews, and archival research with members of the Long Island City Food Action Board (LIC FAB), as well as community members living in and around the Queensbridge micro-neighborhood, and staff members and volunteers of area community-based organizations that serve low-income residents in this community. Community participants in this study were predominantly women of color, and ranged in age from early 20s through late 60s. Most participants have lived in the community for decades with the shortest tenancy at nine years.

Findings from this dissertation research focused on participants' perceptions and experience of the food environment in this community utilizing a food justice framework to raise questions about the forms of race and class based differences that undergird residents' food practices. First, the food environment in this micro-neighborhood is presented in relation to the concept of food deserts, which is currently the dominant way of thinking about neighborhood food in public health and food policy (Caspi et al., 2012). Through the food justice framework it emerged that distribution of food resources, and supermarkets in particular, do not sufficiently address issues of access and instead highlight complications and other modes of marginalization in this food environment. Most saliently, issues of quality and perceptions of the social and physical environment in food retail spaces are important influences on food practices among community members interviewed for this study.

In addition, participants' experiences were examined through the approach of "food voice" to highlight the challenges of sourcing food in this locale. Engaging food voice involves looking at food practices to better understand the conditions that intersect with food related experiences, including socio-structural issues of race and class. In the case of many participants in this study the experiences of deprivation and oppression in their food environments served to profoundly mute their food voice and constrain their relationship to food.

Finally, the Long Island City Community Supported Agriculture (LIC CSA) was utilized as a site to explore and illustrate the role of AFNs and the obstacles and possibilities for expanding food access through these channels among low-income residents. This was examined along with and against explicitly food justice oriented rhetoric deployed by the CSA, as is common for many AFN schemes. Findings suggest that while there is a strong intention for the CSA to expand food access, a number of barriers remains that inhibit utilization for the larger low-income community in which the site is located.



A supermarket in Queensbridge Houses

Policy Implications

There are numerous implications suggested by these findings. Primarily, the concept of food desert is challenged by a re-examining of the spatial role of food resources such as supermarkets, in the presence of structural constraints of race and class that shape the food practices and experiences of community members supposedly served by these resources. Distance to the supermarket becomes secondary in this case where community members in Queensbridge who have a chain supermarket located within their housing development are literally so repulsed by the social and physical environment of the store and the poor quality and variety of the food that many refuse to shop there. Moreover, community and staff participants of this study identified these conditions as exploitative as there are a number of community

members, namely the elderly and disabled, who have little choice to shop elsewhere due to challenges around mobility. This suggests further research is needed to examine the experiences low-income and other minority community members have of their local supermarkets, as supermarkets are identified as a proxy for food access in many studies. Yet, as this project indicates, locale is insufficient for access if community members refuse to shop at a given store or feel oppressed doing so.

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