

1 What We Got Wrong

In the mid-1990s, a term was born. Areas without grocery stores would be known as “food deserts.” Tucked into a British nutrition task force report in 1995, the food desert concept reached American shores a few years later, laden with an embedded argument: lack of access to healthy options was the cause of poor health among the residents of primarily poor neighborhoods. If “we” could shorten “their” distance to better food, they would eat healthier. If we failed to act, far closer convenience stores and fast-food outlets would push rates of obesity and diabetes even higher. The concept was so intuitive and persuasive that it would go from nascent public policy idea to major US federal program in less than two decades. A rare crossover, it captured the attention of both the scholarly community and the wider public. We had cracked the code of diet and geography in America. There was only one problem: We were wrong.

We were wrong because people in food deserts weren’t really complaining about their diets. They weren’t asking for help to improve *what they ate*; they were asking for help to improve *where they lived*. And we missed that. By “we,” I mean the scholars, the media, the policy advocates, and the politicians who decided that we knew best what people in urban food deserts needed. (To be clear, I am on this list. I was wrong.) We heard

people in poor, predominately Black neighborhoods complain about the lack of “healthy food” in their neighborhoods and we assumed that closer, more nutritious options would lead them to change what they bought and consumed and ultimately improve their well-being. We provided the evidence to support food desert interventions—primarily recruiting and subsidizing companies to build and operate healthy food retail—as well as the emotional anecdotes to promote them, the plans to execute them, and the funding to make it all happen. We focused on remedies that reflected *our* tastes and interests, without considering just how deeply people’s dietary practices and preferences are grounded in the other aspects of their lives. We heard what we wanted to hear. This book will explain how and why we missed what people in food deserts were actually trying to tell us.

This is a book about *retail inequality*. For better or worse, to be an equal member in American society is to have an equal ability to shop at the same venues and for the same goods as everyone else. Political fights over what can be bought and sold in a community may seem trivial, but in a capitalistic society like ours, they are not. For decades, Black communities in poor urban areas have pleaded for the sorts of retail options available in other neighborhoods and towns. They asked for help when the grocery stores left, when the pawn shops and liquor stores took their place. Yet “we” ignored “them” until the problem was reframed in terms of health and food. *That* caught our attention.

This is also a book about *race in America*. Retail inequality is not random. It is the legacy of public and private sector abandonment of poor Black neighborhoods across the country. To demonstrate this link, I document the slow degradation of retail options in adjacent neighborhoods in Greenville, South Carolina. These communities were the front lines of the civil rights movement, and their leaders helped organize some of the nation’s first lunch counter sit-ins (ironically, another battle over food access). Long-simmering tensions were exacerbated when the textile jobs began to disappear in the late 1960s. Decimated by the urban decline of the 1970s and ’80s, these communities were hollowed out by the “urban renewal” programs meant to rescue them from decades of blight and administrative neglect. Meanwhile, the government shifted its focus toward suburban development. Whites fled. Retail followed. Residential segregation and concentrated poverty became entrenched. Today, the fight is over the

future. Gentrification is “revitalizing” these once forgotten communities. But for whom?

This is also a book about understanding how and why we *misunderstood* the issue of retail inequality so that we don’t make the same mistake again. Had we listened closer, we would have heard that the food desert fight wasn’t really about food. It was about fairness.

THE UNSEEN GREENVILLE

Revitalization was also a term used only among public policy makers. It also crossed over into the common vernacular. I heard it at least a half dozen times in the course of a single Southernside neighborhood association meeting in October 2014.

This meeting was special. It was being held in a historic church situated on the very edge of Greenville. Mountain View Baptist Church, a pillar of the Black community, was founded in 1908. Its pastor, the Reverend Stacey D. Mills, was just the third to hold the title in all that time. Geographically cornered by the Reedy River and the Norfolk Southern railroad tracks, the church isn’t the sort of place you could just happen upon. You have to seek it out. In those days, the local paper had begun calling this area the “Unseen Greenville.” And given the heavy downpour that night, I had to assume the thirty-five people in attendance were awfully motivated to have their voices heard.

A sleepy ex-textile town no longer, Greenville’s property values were going up and high-end retail stores were moving in. The city center was thriving, but this neighborhood felt left out. The meeting’s agenda featured a question being asked in similar communities across the United States: “When is *our* side of the city going to be revitalized?” At this forum, “our side” meant the poorer side of town. The Black side of town. As rain beat down on Mountain View Baptist Church, neighborhood residents pressed elected officials and municipal representatives on what it would take for the green shoots of prosperity to sprout where they lived, for this bit of Greenville to remain unseen no longer.

The meeting began on a hopeful note. The pastor informed the crowd that his church had acquired a sizable amount of land and wanted input

from the neighborhood association about how it should be developed. A local community organizer stood behind the pastor with a flip board and a Sharpie, ready to jot down the residents' ideas and needs. When Reverend Mills opened the floor to suggestions, Shirley's hand shot up.¹ "What we need is a grocery store!"

A Black woman in her seventies, Shirley was not a native, but a transplant to Greenville. She grew up in New York, visiting Greenville to see her relatives over the years. Then she retired here. She lived in a senior housing project in Southernside and was the president of its tenant association. A few months later, I would interview her at her kitchen table. I came to learn that she walked two miles a day for exercise and, when her car was in the shop, took the bus to the grocery store. She loved to prepare meals and lamented the way southerners cooked their vegetables—*overcooked* in her opinion. Shirley's dissatisfaction with the food options near her apartment was formed by her past experiences: she knew another way was possible.

The pastor listened with the patience and compassion cultivated by his profession. He clasped his hands and lowered his chin to his chest. Others in the room nodded. Calls for a grocery store on this side of town were common at neighborhood meetings like these—especially since the closure of the nearest one a few years earlier. As local media outlets had been reporting, the west side of Greenville was officially a "food desert" (Callum-Penso 2014). Journalists and local news features documented the distances poorer residents of Greenville would have to travel to get healthy food, and just a few months before this meeting, the city's hired consultants returned a "Economic Development Analysis" recommending a "public-private" partnership to recruit a grocery store to the area. Seeing "NEED GROCERY STORE" in bold, capital letters at the top of the flip board here at Mountain View was hardly a surprise to anyone.

Reverend Mills acknowledged Shirley's concerns, but also noted the facts working against them: Compared to the city center, this area of town was sparsely populated. Vacant lots were common. People were starting to return to the neighborhood after decades of leaving it, but density (and a viable consumer base for a sizeable grocery store) would take time. Enticing a national chain grocer to the "other side of the tracks"—literally and metaphorically—would be a difficult task. Shirley seemed momentarily

satisfied with Reverend Mills's response. But after a pause, she asked, "But what about the City, why can't they do something about this?"

The administrator of the City of Greenville Community Development office, Ginny Stroud, stood to respond. The City, Stroud said, had been trying for over a year to lure a grocery chain to the west side. It had even purchased a run-down strip mall in Southernside some years before, hoping it could be their bargaining chip: land as leverage. The City put out a request for proposals from developers across the country (City of Greenville 2014). It cleared the land to make it cheaper to build on. It dangled tax incentives. Not a single proposal had come in. With a hint of exasperation, Stroud stated that she *wished* a grocery store would contact her office. And then she sat back down.

All eyes then turned back to Reverend Mills, who clearly wanted to move on. By 2014, I had been attending neighborhood meetings in Southernside for two years. I knew that talk about grocery stores—or lack thereof—could take up the entire meeting; Mills seemed to know this, too. He had invited people to the forum to discuss other uses for the land the church owned: affordable housing, job training, youth mentoring, recreational activities. When he asked the audience to think of other ideas, the poster sheet began to fill with bullet points. The man holding the Sharpie flipped to a clean sheet. Again, Shirley's hand popped up.

Reverend Mills tried to appease Shirley by raising the idea of a small sundries store, staffed by local residents. This would increase nearby purchasing options, keep money in the neighborhood, maybe even provide a few jobs. He framed his suggestion as a more practical and reasonable goal than a fully stocked grocery store, but Shirley wasn't having it. "If not a grocery store, then a supermarket!" Laughs rose from the audience. It wasn't the first time Shirley had spoken out about this issue, and everyone knew it wouldn't be the last.

There were (and are) lots of problems facing the west side of Greenville and similar poor, Black neighborhoods nationwide. They need a lot of help. The items on the flip board gave me a visible sense of the cumulative downsides of uneven growth and redevelopment in urban areas. Gentrification was well under way in Southernside. Signs emblazoned "WE BUY HOUSES! FAST CASH!" shouted from utility poles on quiet residential streets. Rising rents threatened to displace long-time residents.

Good-paying manufacturing jobs had disappeared, and few people here had the training to apply for newer jobs (or the transportation to get to them if they were hired). The list goes on and on.

Yet I learned something from Shirley that night. At that early stage of my research, I had come to the meeting seeking evidence that bringing a nutritious food option to the neighborhood would help the residents on this side of town eat better. But I sensed I wasn't seeing the whole picture. Shirley's persistence hinted that *something else* was going on in the Unseen Greenville. No matter how hard Reverend Mills had tried to steer the discussion away to other projects or ideas, the topics of health and food had traction. Demanding "We need a grocery store," caught the attention of the public officials in the audience. It got them to act. Neighborhood residents knew that getting a grocery store was a long shot, but they could sense that they had stumbled on a powerful talking point.

The concept of food deserts has had a consistent presence on community agendas across the country for over a decade at this point. But why exactly did *this* problem attract so much attention? Past efforts to get people to eat better have clearly failed, so what is the real reason food deserts keep coming up in the national conversation? These are the questions that *Retail Inequality* aims to answer.

THE FOOD DESERT PROBLEM

It's still remarkable that the term *food desert* made the jump from policy forums to neighborhood meetings. Scan today's headlines and you'll find heartfelt accounts of people living in geographic areas that lack easy access to healthy foods. In 2014, the term was most often applied to urban areas with high percentages of Black residents, like Detroit and Philadelphia. Yet the concept was reportedly coined by a resident of public housing in Scotland in the early 1990s, then picked up in a 1995 report, issued by a UK Department of Health nutrition task force (Cummins and McIntyre 1999, 2002).

At the time, Britain and the United States were each decades into a dramatic transformation in how food was sold; specifically, neighborhood grocers had disappeared, as superstores on the edges of cities came to offer

astonishing arrays of products at cut-rate prices, with parking as far as the eye could see.² The reasons for this “suburbanization of large-scale retail food outlets” (LeDoux and Vojnovic 2013: 2) are grounded in the changing nature of the industry. Innovations in transportation and distribution enabled supermarkets and “big-box stores” to sell a wider range of products on a much larger scale. Lower profit margins per item could be offset by higher volumes of overall sales. Suburban locations offered cheaper land, lower insurance rates, and affordable utility costs. Their locations were more easily accessible to highways and could feature loading docks suitable for tractor trailer deliveries (Martin et al. 2014). Consequently, smaller stores in urban centers with higher real estate costs found themselves unable to compete and began to close their doors.

This transition was especially painful for people living in small cities like Greenville.³ Big cities may grab the most headlines, but the combined population of all small cities in this country (those with populations between fifty thousand and a hundred thousand) equals the combined total of people in the biggest ones (with populations of seven hundred fifty thousand and above).⁴ And these plentiful small cities were particularly ill-equipped for the arrival of big-box stores. First, these municipalities, often dependent on single industries, had been particularly hard hit by the loss of manufacturing employment in the 1970s and ’80s. Not a lot of capital was left, especially when it came to household budgets. Second, small cities lacked the population density to support the smaller food retail venues like bodegas and green grocers that still thrive in megacities. And third, as retail moved outward in search of bigger lots, small city residents without cars found themselves unable to access that retail. Their local governments, as cash-strapped as many residents’ families, could not readily scale up accessible, economical, and efficient forms of public transportation.

These three factors, combined with this country’s history of discriminatory housing and transportation policies, crushed many small cities’ Black communities. Their lack of “consumer buying power” today is inexorably linked to state and federal disinvestment trends that began decades ago. Segregated and ghettoized, these communities watched as urban decline pulled down their property values and cut off opportunities to build intergenerational wealth. Urban renewal projects intended to ameliorate the situation resulted instead in widespread depopulation and displacement.

Dilapidated homes were cleared to make way for government-funded housing and roadway projects. Public monies were siphoned away to suburban development, fostering an era of “white flight.” New subdivisions offered a fresh start to build equity, but only for those allowed through the gated entrance of neighborhood covenants and discriminatory home-lending practices.

This is how there came to be widespread blight in urban Black neighborhoods across the country. We have yet to undo—even effectively come to terms with—its consequences. Even though the civil rights movement did yield many legal victories that prohibited outright discrimination, racial inequality persists in these parts of town. How? “Color-blind” racism still operates under the surface (Bonilla-Silva 2014).

Even though explicit and overt racism is now illegal and, to varying degrees, politically untenable, the public and private sectors still manage to produce unequal outcomes by race. Unlike Jim Crow-era edicts, the policies that ultimately created food deserts were written in race-neutral language. The business decisions to abandon these neighborhoods were explained away as being decisions about profit, not race. And the people defending these choices and practices may have firmly believed their intentions were good and unbiased—*color-blind*. But racism doesn’t hinge on what people say or personally believe. The real-world effects of race and racism don’t disappear because people say, earnestly, that they “don’t see color.” In fact, we don’t need to accuse any individual of being a racist to acknowledge that racism is to blame for the damage done to many urban Black communities across the country. To see color-blind racism in its true form, we need to ignore the rhetoric used to justify institutional practices and focus instead on the consequences of their implementation. *Who keeps getting the short end of the stick?*

For decades, outsiders were indifferent as corner hardware stores and shoe repair shops and corner markets disappeared from poor Black neighborhoods in small cities across the county. Whiter, richer neighborhoods lost small-scale retail, too. The difference is that wealthier neighborhoods were able to retain some nice options and—more importantly—keep *unsavory* retail at arm’s length. Why? Retail inequality. Retail inequality is the result of purportedly “color-blind” practices that stripped urban Black neighborhoods of the collective wealth necessary to support “good retail” in

a transformed retail environment. It is marked by an excess of “bad retail” options—the kinds of places that disproportionately exploit the poor (e.g., pawn shops, payday lenders, blood plasma centers) and cater to vice (i.e., selling alcohol, nicotine, and lottery tickets). And for decades, neighborhood complaints about the festering rise of retail inequality were dismissed as an unfortunate but inescapable function of the marketplace. “Supply and demand don’t see color,” outsiders would say. It seemed the problem of retail inequality was only capable of evoking a collective, apolitical shrug.

Then came the “food desert” concept. Economists started referring to the lack of grocery stores in these areas as a “market failure” (Bitler and Haider 2011), while activists used more politically loaded terms, like supermarket “redlining” (Eisenhour 2001; D’Rozario and Williams 2005) and, more recently, “food apartheid” (Reese 2019). Whatever you call it, the lack of high-quality food in these areas—and the health problems we thought this caused—became a problem worth solving. Calls for the return of grocery stores had a sort of moral authority. “Healthy food” got the attention of scholars, the media, policy advocates, and politicians. All we needed was evidence.

A Subfield Is Born

By academic standards, the pace and proliferation of food desert research since the start of the new millennium has been impressive. Between 1966 and 1989, only seven peer-reviewed articles—vetted by other experts in the field—studied the relationship between geographic access to healthy food and health outcomes (Beaulac et al. 2009). The term *food desert* did not appear in a title of a peer-reviewed academic article until 2002.⁵

That year was an important milestone for food desert research. It saw the first published assessment of the impact of a retail intervention: the opening of a new supermarket in Leeds, England. Testing whether a new store can change diets is hard for public health researchers. Supermarkets can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to build. However, when the new store announced its intention to open in a food desert, a team of scholars designed a study around it. This is called a “natural experiment”: researchers did not install a store, but wrapped a study around its opening.⁶ Residents were surveyed about their diets before and after the store