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# Food Deserts and Real Estate-Led Social Policy

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# – FOOD DESERTS AND REAL-ESTATE-LED SOCIAL POLICY

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## Abstract

*Since the early 2000s in the United States, food deserts—neighborhoods in which households have limited geographic access to full-service supermarkets or grocery stores—have become conceptually central in public policy research on food security. Analyzing this phenomenon from a ‘policy mobility’ perspective, this article traces the food desert’s emergence in policy discourse, locating it within an entrepreneurial social policy paradigm that privileges real estate development over direct economic relief. In the context of property-led anti-poverty efforts, the identification and mapping of food deserts catalyzes a logic that leads to subsidy to grocery store development in low-income areas (or ‘fresh food financing’), while at the same time officials are cutting programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (food stamps), which directly supplements household food budgets. The article contributes to widening critical discussion of the food desert paradigm and the policy interventions with which it is associated. It calls on urban researchers and practitioners to reframe discussions of food access and nutrition around the shortage of basic income and a need for higher wage floors.*

Since the early 2000s in the United States, food deserts—‘low income neighborhoods, both urban and rural, that have limited access to full-service supermarkets or grocery stores’ (Jiao *et al.*, 2012)—have become conceptually central to public health and health policy research on nutrition, obesity and health disparities. The image of poor people stranded at great distances from full-service food outlets due to abandonment by mainstream retailers has struck a chord, evoking a broad narrative of public health imperiled by the lack of consumer choice. An indication of the present power of the food desert metaphor in the American policy imagination is the increasing prominence of explicitly spatial interventions in food and nutrition policy. The culmination of food-desert-inspired political advocacy in the US occurred in February 2014, when the farm bill passed by Congress officially established within the US Department of Agriculture the Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI), a multi-agency effort that supports place-based interventions dedicated to improving geographic access to healthy foods, centered primarily on the development and expansion of full-service grocery stores in low-income neighborhoods, or ‘fresh food financing’ (PolicyLink, The Reinvestment Fund and the Food Trust, 2014). Unquestionably, limited spatial access to healthy food poses challenges for children and adults—more than 29 million of them in the US, according to official statistics—who reside in areas not adequately ‘retailed’ from a healthy food perspective. Yet the popularity and increasing rhetorical prominence of grocery store development finance as a tool for reducing nutrition-related public health problems obscures a broader challenge faced by unemployed and low-earning individuals: a shortage of basic income.

This article contributes to a widening critical discussion of food deserts by tracing the concept to its origins in the UK and charting its translation to the US milieu, drawing from the literature on policy mobilities, or ‘concepts on the move’. It builds on

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the work of scholars who point out that the metaphor of the food desert is an artifact of a data- and technology-led ‘spatial turn’ in public health and planning research, and who highlight the popularization of the concept by the US Department of Agriculture’s GIS-based Food Desert Locator tool in the late 2000s. It then provides evidence that the spatial metaphor of a desert, propelled forward in the context of a market-driven (specifically, property-market-driven) community development paradigm in the United States, has led policymakers and practitioners to emphasize *fresh food financing*—subsidy for the development of chain grocery stores in low-income neighborhoods—as a major response to food insecurity. The fresh food financing approach both partakes of and advances a distinctively neoliberal understanding of nutritional deprivation. It is rooted in the implied conviction that hunger emanates from inequitable geographic access to consumption opportunities, mitigatable by improved access to retail. Empirical evidence on the sources of food insecurity casts doubt on this assumption, suggesting that policymakers would do better to focus their attention on income-centred approaches to hunger, whether through income supplements or wage floors.

### **Policy mobility as an area of inquiry**

As a subgenre in the field of critical policy studies, urban policy mobility has a growing literature dedicated to the mechanisms by which ‘explicitly place-based policies are consistently formulated with reference to particular understandings of the global context’, which is, in turn, influenced by a ‘heavily populated world of consultants, exchanges and visits’ undertaken by members of the policy and professional elite (Cochrane and Ward, 2012: 6). Examples of mobile policies include workfare, participatory budgeting and conditional cash transfers (Peck and Theodore, 2010; 2015), microfinance (Roy, 2010), harm reduction as an element of drug policy (McCann, 2008) and specific forms of project finance following on disasters or crises (Gotham, 2014; Gotham and Greenberg, 2014). Of related importance are mobile concepts: ideas or metaphors that are not policies themselves but that mold understanding of social problems, drawing policymakers and the public toward particular types of interventions. Jacobs and Lees (2013), for example, offer a convincing account of the process by which British geographer Alice Coleman, with the support of state and third sector institutions in the UK, adapted Oscar Newman’s concept of defensible space in the 1980s and 1990s. Newman’s diagnosis of the causes of social distress in New York City’s public housing—namely that ‘poor architectural design created opportunities for criminal activity’ (*ibid.*: 1566) contributed in the United States to the denigration of the very concept of social housing. Jacobs and Lees contend that Coleman, with her parallel concept of ‘design disadvantage’, provided scientific ballast for the Thatcher-era de-legitimization of council housing, which, in turn, helped to dismantle Britain’s Keynesian welfare state (*ibid.*: 1576). Much of the policy mobility literature—Jacobs and Lees is a key example—focuses on the mechanisms by which neoliberal governmentality spreads from one to multiple sites. However, some scholars have highlighted the ways in which mobile policies and concepts exert a positive, or at least ambiguous, impact on the socially and economically vulnerable (McCann, 2008; Roy, 2010).

### **Policy mobility and the food desert**

Like defensible space or harm reduction, the metaphor of the food desert is a ‘concept on the move’. The first known use of the phrase in print occurred in 1995 in a report by a subgroup of a nutrition task force commissioned by the British government’s Department of Health (Cummins and McIntyre, 2002). Follow-on food desert studies in the UK reinforced the assertion that retail proximity was a key to understanding differences in food consumption patterns by members of different socio-economic groups. The image of retail deprivation and of spatial variation in access to food outlets

that the food desert metaphor evoked gradually helped to produce a convergence of research in nutrition and health with research on retail markets and policy in the UK (see Wrigley *et al.*, 2002; 2003; 2004; Clarke *et al.*, 2004). In 2002, *Urban Studies* published a group of six articles on food access in Britain, compiled and with an introduction by geographer Neil Wrigley, who specializes in the spatial aspects of retail markets. The following year, the *International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management* devoted a special issue to the same topic, also focused on British cases. In these two symposia, 6 of 11 articles used the words ‘food desert’ or ‘food deserts’ in their titles.

As Wrigley and his co-authors note (2003: 151), the food desert was ‘a metaphor which caught the imagination of those involved in policy development, not least because it encouraged a shift in focus in health-promotion activity’. Increasing low-income households’ access to affordable retail options, and particularly to large supermarkets, became a central preoccupation of British government officials in the late 1990s and early 2000s. While the Conservative government of Prime Minister John Major produced the 1995 Health Department report that first invoked the food desert metaphor, research on food deserts intensified under Tony Blair’s New Labour government from 1997 to 2007 (see e.g. Acheson, 1998; Social Exclusion Unit, 1998). The economic logic underlying the concept was that the dynamics of imperfect retail competition had led to the decline of independent outlets, the existence of ‘fewer but larger stores’ (Clarke *et al.*, 2004: 96) and, crucially, an undersupply, from a social perspective, of stores offering a variety of healthful high-quality goods within geographic reach of low-income consumers.

The idea that poor access to markets—in this case large food retail outlets—drives adverse health outcomes resonates with the broader idea that community development efforts can mitigate social distress not by redistributing wealth but by restructuring the choices available to consumers. Policymakers in Britain began to advance retail planning as a food policy strategy, arguing that the introduction of supermarkets to neighborhoods that lacked them would change food consumption patterns among disadvantaged households. The studies they cited as sources for this claim provided only provisional empirical evidence to support the policy prescriptions that followed from them, however. In an article published in the *British Medical Journal* in 2002, geographers Steven Cummins and Sally McIntyre expressed concern that enthusiasm in Britain for retail-oriented interventions rested on unproven assumptions about the root causes of poor nutrition:

We are suggesting that food deserts are an ‘idea whose time has come’, and that somewhat slender empirical evidence has been used ... to support the idea that food deserts are widespread. Primary research can easily be over-interpreted to suit the needs of individuals or groups, and subsequently be cited in journals, at seminars, and in the media without close reference to the original source material (Cummins and McIntyre, 2002: 437).

But Cummins and McIntyre’s call for caution joined a wider fray in which the ‘food desert’ metaphor was becoming endemic, and in which supermarket development, for reasons that we will discuss further below, held appeal as a primary strategy.

### **The uptake of food deserts as an organizing principle for US nutrition policy**

The food desert metaphor has also gained traction in the US, both reflecting and testifying to the power of spatial concepts and metaphors in shaping policy thinking, as well as to the increased availability of spatial data. With advances in geographic information systems, global positioning and computer cartography, research in epidemiology and public health has taken a ‘spatial turn’ there in the past decade (Richardson *et al.*, 2013; Shannon, 2014). This paradigm articulates well with the vast social

science literature on neighborhood effects (or area effects as they are known in Europe), which seeks to statistically specify the ways in which living in a low-income or racially segregated area drives adverse social consequences for individuals independent of their individual-level attributes (see Duncan *et al.*, 1997; Atkinson and Kintrea, 2000; Sampson *et al.*, 2002; Sampson, 2012). Sociologists and policy scholars working in the social ecology tradition have tested the independent effects of people's neighborhood environments on academic achievement (Garner and Raudenbusch, 1991; Galster *et al.*, 2016), employment status (Elliot, 1999) and income mobility (Friedrichs, 1998; Rothwell and Massey, 2015). Similarly, public health researchers have adopted that approach in work on mortality, heart disease and low birthweight (Diez Roux, 2001). As occurred in the UK, increased attention to ecological/spatial explanations for health outcomes has prompted researchers and policymakers in the US to focus on neighborhood phenomena—poor walkability, limited access to outdoor recreation, and lack of access to healthy food—as sources of health problems, particularly those related to obesity.

Food desert research in the academic realm entered into dialogue with studies and reports commissioned by philanthropies and government agencies in the United States during the mid-2000s (see Table 1). As attempts to identify and map food deserts and to link their existence to indicators of population health became common in scholarship on nutrition and the social determinants of health, the Food, Conservation and Energy Act of 2008 (aka the Farm Bill) directed the Secretary of Agriculture to sponsor research on food deserts' incidence, prevalence and effects, and to recommend initiatives for addressing them. Complying with the bill's mandate, analysts at the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) designed and published a Food Desert Locator, which they later modified to reflect the role that automobile ownership plays in access to full-service grocery stores, (Jiao *et al.*, 2012). The Department of Agriculture's mandate also led to publications in 2009 by the National Academy of Sciences and by the USDA Economic Research Service, and to several food desert studies produced at the National Poverty Center at the University of Michigan. These reports cemented a consensus definition for a food desert ('a rural or urban low-income neighborhood or community with limited access to affordable and nutritious food', per the National Academy of Sciences). They also reviewed evidence on the effect of access to healthy food on health outcomes and discussed the potential of interventions designed to mitigate the 'desert' effect in local food environments. An assessment of the retail climate is in fact 'baked in' to the food desert's conceptualization and measurement, as the USDA Food Desert Locator tool measures access to affordable and healthy food explicitly in terms of a household's distance from the nearest full-service grocery store.

With the problem of food access framed as one of a need for healthy food retail in geographic proximity to poor households, federal, state and local policymakers moved to encourage strategies consistent with this framing. A trailblazer in this effort (running from 1999 to 2004) was the Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative (PA-FFFI), which emerged from an advocacy campaign led by the Philadelphia-based Food Trust (Giang *et al.*, 2008). PA-FFFI developed a model by which equity investments derived from US Treasury-authorized New Markets Tax Credits, leveraged by other governmental and philanthropic grants, created incentives and subsidies for super-market developers who agreed to locate outlets in low-income neighborhoods. Local officials drew upon Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds, state and local tax credits, tax increment financing (TIF) and revolving loan funds, but the New Markets Tax Credit (which will be further discussed below) was the primary source of financing. Important vectors moving property-led food policy between the local, state and federal governments in the early 2000s included philanthropic foundations and The Reinvestment Fund (TRF), the Philadelphia-based community development financial institution whose staff pioneered the complex layering of subsidies and tax credits that made fresh food financing deals feasible. Although fresh food financing projects

**TABLE 1** Selected food accessibility and food desert studies published in the United States, 2005–2012

Author	Year	Title
PolicyLink and California Endowment	2005	<i>Healthy food, healthy communities: improving access and opportunities through food retailing</i>
Zenk, S.N., A. Schulz, B.A. Israel, S.A. James, S. Bao and M.L. Wilson	2005	Neighborhood racial composition, neighborhood poverty, and the spatial accessibility of supermarkets in metropolitan Detroit ( <i>American Journal of Public Health</i> 95.4, 660–67)*
Mari Gallagher Consulting and Research Group (commissioned by the LaSalle Bank, Chicago)	2006	<i>Examining the impact of food deserts on public health in Chicago</i>
Apparicio, P., M.S. Cloutier and R. Shearmur	2007	The case of Montréal's missing food deserts: evaluation of accessibility to food supermarkets ( <i>International Health Geographics</i> 6, Art 4)*
Franco, M., A.V. Diez Roux, J.A. Nettleton, M. Lazo, F. Brancati, B. Caballero, T. Glass and L.V. Moore	2009	Availability of healthy foods and dietary patterns: the multi-ethnic study of atherosclerosis ( <i>American Journal of Clinical Nutrition</i> 89.3, 897–904)*
Odoms-Young, A.M., S. Zenk and M. Mason	2009	Measuring food availability and access in African-American communities: implications for intervention and policy ( <i>American Journal of Preventive Medicine</i> 36.4 (Suppl), S145–50)*
Larson, N.I., M.T. Story and M.C. Nelson	2009	Neighborhood environments: disparities in access to healthy foods in the US ( <i>American Journal of Preventive Medicine</i> 36.1, 74–81)*
Institute of Medicine and National Research Council	2009	<i>The public health effects of food deserts: workshop summary</i>
Rose, D., J.N. Bodor, C.M. Swalm, J.C. Rice, T.A. Farley and P.L. Hutchinson, National Poverty Center, University of Michigan	2009	<i>Deserts in New Orleans? Illustrations of urban food access and implications for policy</i>
Bitler, M. and S.J. Haider, National Poverty Center, University of Michigan	2011	An economic view of food deserts in the United States ( <i>Journal of Policy Analysis and Management</i> 30.1, 153–76).
US Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service	2009	<i>Access to affordable and nutritious food: measuring and understanding food deserts and their consequences</i>
Karpyn, A., M. Manon, S. Treuhaft, T. Giang, C. Harries and K. McCoubrey	2010	Policy solutions to the 'grocery gap'. <i>Health Affairs</i> 29.3, 473–80*
US Department of the Treasury, Community Development Financial Institution Fund,	2012	<i>A summary of searching for markets: the geography of inequitable access to healthy and affordable food in the United States</i>

\*Indicates study published in a peer-reviewed academic journal

have included such facilities as farmers' market sheds and culinary incubators, a substantial majority of the funding has been dedicated to the construction of supermarkets in low-income areas.

In 2010 President Obama introduced the Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI), a \$400 million federal effort based on the Pennsylvania model. With the passage of the 2014 farm bill, the HFFI gained a formal identity within the US Department of Agriculture. The initiative is portrayed by the Administration, and others, as its cornerstone effort to eliminate food deserts (PolicyLink, The Reinvestment Fund and the Food Trust, 2016; US Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Under both federal and state-based programs, according to a national landscape assessment by Chrisinger (2016b), over \$500 million in public and tax-privileged private funds has been committed since 2004 to the development or refinancing of 2.9 million square feet of supermarket retail space in low-income neighborhoods. Chrisinger identifies 126 distinct projects across the country, 90 complete and 36 planned or in development.

Many of the studies listed in Table 1 were nuanced, both in their interpretation of their findings and in their claims about those findings' implications for policy. Their authors acknowledged the complexity of neighborhood retail environments and of choice and preference patterns among consumers. They encouraged farmers' market



programs, support for small stores and direct assistance to the poor in addition to chain grocery store development. And they evinced concern ‘for those who are too poor to buy food regardless of how accessible it is’ (US Department of Agriculture, 2009: 4). Nevertheless, in its conceptualization and measurement, the food desert is closely identified with the core idea that the absence of a particular type of retail—a full-service supermarket—is a main source of nutritional deprivation in low-income neighborhoods. An article published in the journal *Health and Place* in 2010 bears this out. ‘Disparities and access to healthy food in the United States: A review of food deserts literature’ (Walker *et al.*, 2010) reviews 31 articles addressing empirical questions about disparities in food access and consumption in urban and rural communities in the US. Only a handful of the included articles include the words ‘food desert’ in their titles. Yet the authors’ prominent foregrounding of this particular ‘concept on the move’ in the paper’s title is significant, as is the prominent place devoted to supermarket attraction in the section on policy implications. The paper is one of *Health and Place*’s most cited articles of all time.<sup>1</sup>

### Questioning the food desert

Outside the academic and policy mainstream, researchers have questioned the utility of the food desert metaphor, attributing it in part to the overreliance by researchers on ecological and neighborhood effects frameworks in public health and policy science. As Shannon (2014) argues, food desert research may be considered as a subset of a larger body of social/ecological research on ‘obesogenic environments’, or neighborhoods with features that work against healthy weights among those who reside in them. A focus on the local environmental factors that shape health outcomes among low-income households is a welcome departure from approaches that attribute pathogenic behavior to individuals. Nevertheless, food desert studies and the interventions that flow from them remain coded by race and class in ways that counteract the move away from atomistic, decontextualized models of food consumption behavior; neighborhoods tagged as problematic tend to be poor and of color and to carry the same social stigmas as the individuals who inhabit them (Guthman, 2011). Further, policy responses designed to improve obesogenic environments focus on neighborhood features such as walkability, open space and retail availability while bracketing structural elements that shape places, such as economic and racial segregation (Shannon, 2014: 252).

Researchers have also questioned the presentation of new grocery store development as a front-line strategy for mitigating health disparities. Short, Guthman and Raskin’s (2007) pilot study of food access in the Bay Area for example, concluded that small full-service markets can and do provide nutritionally adequate and culturally acceptable foods, often at lower prices than full-service grocery operations. Raja *et al.* (2008: 478) identified ‘an abundance of small grocery stores, convenience stores, and fruit and vegetable markets’ serving poor neighborhoods in Buffalo, New York. Further, studies directly investigating shopping behavior among residents of low-income areas reveal that their decisions about where to shop are much more complex than food desert research tends to assume. Spatial proximity to stores is of less significance than retailer characteristics such as price, produce quality, friendliness of staff, and the racial and ethnic similarity of other shoppers (Hillier *et al.*, 2011, Cannuscio *et al.*, 2014).

Alkon *et al.* (2013) provide further evidence of the multiple factors informing low-income people’s food shopping decisions. After speaking to or surveying 581 people in Chicago and Oakland with the aim of directly investigating the ‘foodways’ of urban poor households, these researchers concluded that ‘the primary barrier to obtaining desired foods was lack of income’ (Alkon *et al.*, 2013: 133), a finding supported by earlier studies (Powell *et al.*, 2009). While Alkon *et al.*’s respondents problematized the

1 See also Treuhaft and Karpyn (2010).

necessity of traveling long distances to reach full-service grocery stores, they reported getting to stores offering a suitable combination of price and quality by relying on friends and family with cars, via careful transportation planning, and through the expenditure of time (see also Chrisinger, 2016a). Income barriers to the purchase of healthy food were more difficult to overcome than those based on spatial factors. This conclusion is consistent with a lack of evidence to date that the development of full-service supermarkets contributes to the adoption of new shopping or eating behaviors on the part of residents of food deserts (Cummins *et al.*, 2013; Dubowitz *et al.*, 2015; Elbel *et al.*, 2015; Sanger-Katz, 2015).<sup>2</sup>

### **The threat to supplemental nutrition assistance**

Scholarship that draws attention to income insufficiency as a cause of food insecurity is particularly trenchant in the United States given Congressional assaults on the federal government's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), better known as food stamps. The food stamp program, which provides food vouchers to households with incomes up to 130% of the federal poverty threshold, was piloted as a relief program during the New Deal, between 1939 and 1943, and revived during the War on Poverty era in the 1960s to address persistent household malnutrition (see Moran, 2011; Almond *et al.*, 2011).<sup>3</sup> Administered by the US Department of Agriculture, it is the nation's largest cash or near-cash means-tested transfer program, assisting 45.8 million people in 2016 (US Department of Agriculture, 2016). Significantly, SNAP supplements the food budgets of low-wage workers as well as unemployed or disabled heads-of-household. Rosenbaum (2013: 5) estimates that '[a]mong SNAP households with at least one working-age, nondisabled adult, more than half work while receiving SNAP—and more than 80 percent work in the year prior to or the year after receiving SNAP'.

By mainstream policy evaluation standards, SNAP is effective, directing a majority of benefits to households well below the poverty line and keeping millions of households from descending below poverty or into deep poverty (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2017). Economists using quasi-experimental methods have found that adults who lived in SNAP households as children experience significantly better health and economic self-sufficiency outcomes than adults who did not have access to the program (Hoynes *et al.*, 2012). Yet, despite the program's efficacy and administrative efficiency,<sup>4</sup> legislative efforts to undermine SNAP have been aggressive. Welfare reform legislation in the mid-1990s imposed time limits on benefits for unemployed adults not disabled or raising minor children (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2016). While the program was expanded in 2009 as part of the post-crisis federal stimulus, Republicans in the House of Representatives sought in 2014 to cut \$40 billion, roughly 5% of the program's projected spending, over 10 years. Negotiations in conference averted that outcome, but ultimately the program was cut by 1%, or \$8.6 billion. The House of Representatives budget proposal for Fiscal Year 2017 cut the program by an additional \$150 billion from 2017 through 2026 (Bolen, 2015; Rosenbaum and Keith-Jennings, 2016). Again, the cuts were restored in the reconciliation of the House's proposed

2 It is too early to measure the long-term effects of supermarket development, and researchers acknowledge the need for multi-pronged interventions of which grocery store development is just one component (Chrisinger, 2016a; 2016b). Further, there are reasons aside from food access to favor the development of grocery stores in low income neighborhoods, such as job creation, revenue generation and the provision of anchors around which additional private investment may occur (The Reinvestment Fund, 2006; Goldstein *et al.*, 2008; Chapple and Jacobus, 2009; New York City Economic Development Corporation, n.d.).

3 Notably, Moran's (2011) history of the food stamp program argues that its architects were intent on casting low-income households as consumers or proto-consumers rather than citizens receiving a service from the government. This historical advancement of consumerism as a democratic ideology is completely consistent with the contemporary framing of food poverty as a problem of access to retail.

4 SNAP has one of the most rigorous payment error measurement systems of any public benefit program. It also has one of the best records of accuracy in providing benefits only to eligible households (Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, 2017).



budget with that of the Senate, and SNAP received level funding in the Fiscal Year 2017 budget. It seems unlikely, however, given antipathy to the program in both the executive and the legislative branches of the government, that SNAP will escape deep cuts in the coming years.

In comparison with the Food Stamp program (whether in a fully funded or diminished form), the fresh food finance initiatives currently dominating food policy discussions make minor claims on federal or state fiscal resources. Because they involve tax expenditure rather than direct appropriations, they do not play a significant role in the budget politics surrounding the social safety net. Resources dedicated to grocery store development in low-income areas are not overtaking supplemental nutrition assistance in scope or fiscal significance. But this makes the prominence of food deserts and fresh food financing in the policy literature all the more confounding. On 7 February 2014, the day after the passage of the 2014 Farm Bill, the think tank and advocacy group PolicyLink circulated a bulletin focused primarily on the inclusion in the bill of \$125 million in funding for the Healthy Food Financing Initiative, the program to spur food access largely by subsidizing grocery store development. ‘This has been a great week’, said the announcement (now no longer accessible online), ‘for healthy food access and equity champions’. Even as a *New York Times* report cited anxiety among service organizations about a spike in hunger as food stamp funding declined (Nixon, 2014), fresh food financing advocates were focused on the announcement of the retail development subsidy.

### **Accounting for fresh food financing as property-led anti-poverty policy**

As other critics of the food desert metaphor have noted, the concept’s tenacity in the public imagination and its mobility in policy space is attributable, at least in part, to the influence of spatial analysis and neighborhood effects frameworks in public health and social science research. The ascendancy and popularity of fresh food financing as a ‘fix’ for the problems plaguing food desert geographies, however, originates in the sphere of anti-poverty practice. For several decades in Western Europe and the US, political responsibility for social protection and poverty alleviation has devolved from central government control to state and local governments and to institutions of ‘governance beyond the state’ (Swyngedouw, 2005). At the same time, the social state has come under sustained political attack (Jessop, 1995; Pinch, 2002), with austerity politics intensifying—and further devolving socio-economic dilemmas to the local policy realm—since the financial crisis of 2008 (Peck, 2012). While most of the scholarship on this phenomenon has been concerned with Western Europe (where the welfare state was more expansive and more centralized to begin with), US scholars have identified it as well (see Katz, 2013). Under the ‘community development’ paradigm for fighting poverty that has evolved in American urban policy since the 1960s, the most common structure for intervention is one under which neighborhood-serving not-for-profit organizations and the local state collaborate to facilitate private investment in low-income areas—investment which might or might not redound to the benefit of low-income residents (DeFilippis *et al.*, 2010; Wolf-Powers, 2014). The spatial targeting of tax relief has been criticized for delivering benefits to the wealthy under the banner of helping poor places (Gotham, 2014; Gotham and Greenberg, 2014), but these practices have become increasingly prevalent.

Particularly as the political will for direct relief spending ebbs on the liberal left in American politics, tax-privileged private investment in property deals has grown into a key instrument of US social policy. Under both the Low Income Housing Tax Credit (established in 1986) and the New Markets Tax Credit or NMTC (established in 2000), low-cost financing extended to private non-profit or (increasingly) for-profit developers is deployed in distressed real estate markets. This produces both ‘qualified’ buildings in deprived areas—low-cost or mixed-income housing, community facilities,

or retail and commercial complexes—and tax benefits for investors. The process rests on foregone state revenue, but is intermediated by non-profit organizations and community development financial institutions with expertise in a complex and highly specialized universe of tax-advantaged development underwriting. The prominence of the property-led model in food policy is evident in the 2012 publication *Searching for Markets: A Geography of Inequitable Access to Healthy and Affordable Food in the United States*, in which the Treasury Department makes real estate finance (as opposed to hunger or poor nutrition) the subject of its first sentence. ‘Financing the construction of new supermarkets and the expansion of existing stores has emerged as a strategy for increasing access to sources of healthy food’ (US Department of the Treasury, 2012: 1).

Short *et al.* (2007: 363) assert that fresh food financing may have assumed such prominence in the fight against food insecurity ‘simply because it represents the clearest or easiest path to action’. The treasury document provides insight as to why. Given the national state’s unwillingness to sustain policies that transfer income and resources from wealthier to poorer people and places, policy advocates and local practitioners have come to accept as inevitable *realpolitik* that advocating for expanded NMTC and other development tax credit programs is the surest way to secure new resources for disadvantaged populations. The emphasis on grocery store development, while responding to extensive empirical research on food deserts, also owes much to the fact that subsidized real estate development is politically palatable, inasmuch as it decreases the tax liability of individuals and corporations. To directly address income insufficiency among the urban poor, in contrast, would require increasing that liability. This option has been viewed as ‘off the table’ in American political discourse for several decades. State-subsidized property deals have long been a staple of local economic growth policy (Healey and Davoudi, 1992; Wolf-Powers, 2005). With the increasing dominance of an entrepreneurial governance paradigm in US cities (see Harvey, 1989), development subsidy also represents an increasing proportion of expenditures taken in the name of improving public health and reducing poverty.

## Conclusion

Socio-economic status and environment have long been established in the public health literature as interactive co-determinants of obesity and poor health (Reidpath *et al.*, 2002). Poor people are more likely to live near fast food outlets and far from full-service grocery stores. Poor people are also more likely to have obesity-related health problems. The prevalence of the food desert—and consequently of fresh food financing as a policy recommendation—in recent discussions about urban nutrition and food security cannot be explained, however, solely with reference to these facts. While the metaphor of the food desert arose—first in the UK, then in the US—from the recognition of a genuine scarcity of retail options in low-income neighborhoods, it has shaped perceptions of food insecurity, as well as prescriptions for how to address it, in ways that are conditioned by current norms in community development. These norms, which accept tax-privileged real estate development as a primary mechanism for extending government resources to poor households, are in turn informed by a perception that direct government-led redistribution schemes, even those that work efficiently and produce demonstrated results, are outmoded or (in any case) futile politically.

This article provides evidence that, in the domain of efforts to increase nutrition and decrease hunger, the recent prevalence of the food desert, as a ‘concept on the move’, has led to the dominance of fresh food financing, a mobile policy intervention. Following in the tradition of research on mobile policy, it implicitly argues for critical re-evaluation of both concept and intervention. Widening critical discussion has helped to problematize aspects of the food desert paradigm, and this discussion needs to be amplified. First, scholars and activists need to continue to emphasize empirical data

showing that income insufficiency, as opposed to a lack of proximate retail, remains the chief barrier to healthy food access. Building from this knowledge base, we must fight cuts to a program that, with proven success, has historically stabilized the health of poor households by augmenting their food budgets. Finally, we must lend support to active labor market policies, wage floors and other programs that boost earnings among disadvantaged households and reduce spatialized economic inequalities. Successful efforts in 2016, in 19 states and a number of cities, to establish sub-national minimum wages brought millions of low-wage workers closer to economic self-sufficiency. Higher wages, by increasing the incomes of people living in poorer areas, may well succeed in reducing the disparities in retail market coverage which food desert research decries.

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