

## **Urban Collaborators Sponsored Mini Grant Update - Food Deserts: Myth or Reality? Project Partners: Zeenat Kotval-K (SPDC), Kendra Wills (MSUE)**

### **Project Description and Purpose**

The USDA designates food deserts as a geographical area where 33% or more residents are living beyond one-mile from a grocery store/supermarket within an urban area and more than ten-miles in a rural area. This research investigates census tracts identified as food deserts in Grand Rapids, Michigan followed by further enquiry into the perceived barriers to accessing fresh and healthy food items for household consumption. Using a combination of approaches that include spatial analyses and interviews with residents from the food desert-designated census tracts, we aim to understand the true nature of food deserts and how accessibility plays a part in shaping these areas.

### **Partners and Cities Involved**

This project focused on the City of Grand Rapids, Michigan. Kendra Wills was the MSU Extension partner on the project and helped arrange venues and participating hosts to enable data collection within the census tracts designated as food deserts. Interviews were conducted at Palmer Elementary School and New Branches Charter Academy. Additionally, door to door surveys/interviews were also conducted in the food deserts identified during the study. Spatial analyses were also conducted to assess the overall accessibility of residents in food desert-designated census tracts to existing food retail outlets.

### **Results**

The study conducted 63 interviews and collected responses to questionnaires distributed through neighborhood canvassing, and project tables set up at two schools during their parent teacher conferences and family fun nights during between November 2018 and March 2019.

Results show that census tracts identified as food deserts increased from two in 2010 to seven in 2015. Participants living in food deserts travelled marginally longer on average to access food stores than those outside the food desert. The expenditure on grocery shopping, purchasing prepared meals and eating out was higher on average for participants living in food deserts. Majority of the non-white populations faced greater barriers to access fresh and healthy foods, and affordability was the most common perceived barrier.

The project results have been presented at the annual conference of the American Association of Geographers (AAG) in Washington D.C. in April 2019, the upcoming Urban Affairs Association annual Conference in Washington D.C. in April 2020, and we are in the process of finalizing a manuscript for publication.

### **Impacts (Next Steps)**

The research recommends community level policies to alleviate barriers to healthier diets for people living in the food deserts. Additionally, awareness of food retail options and programs such as farm to table for non-white and economically weaker population should be incentivized to improve community health.