

# Finding Food in Chicago and the Suburbs

## The Report of the Northeastern Illinois Community Food Security Assessment

### The Project

Access to healthy, culturally appropriate food is a struggle in many Chicago area communities. Many inner-city communities, in particular, lack chain supermarkets. While these patterns are well known, they are extremely complex and dynamic. The Northeastern Illinois Community Food Security Assessment is a base-line survey of Chicago's food system, which studied these patterns at four levels. For the six-county Chicagoland region, location data was collected for: independent and chain supermarkets, as well as chain convenience stores, food pantries, farmer's markets, and chain fast-food restaurants. Chain store data was collected in both 2005 and 2007. These data were then compared to neighborhood demographics.

Six communities within Chicago were studied in depth. In Englewood, Hegewisch, Lower West Side (Pilsen), Portage Park, and Riverdale and Uptown, we completed price and availability studies of community groceries, and in five communities (all but Uptown) we conducted a series of interviews with consumers, store owners and managers, and service providers (such as food pantry managers). Finally, in Riverdale, Hegewisch, and Englewood, a series of door-to-door household surveys on hunger and access to emergency food and social safety net programs was collected. Researchers partnered with local community groups to collect data and help disseminate results.

### Conclusions

#### *Food Access Mapping:*

Lower-income African-American neighborhoods, both in the city and in the suburbs, have relatively low access to supermarkets.

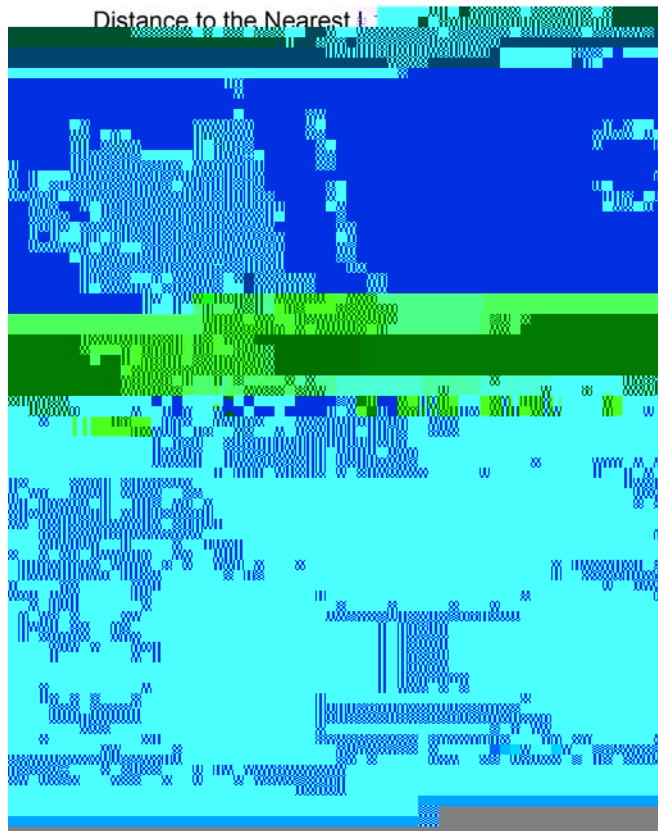
Hispanic neighborhoods have similarly low access to chain supermarkets, but have many independent stores.

Areas of poor food access were found on Chicago's South and West Sides, the

### *Door-to-door and Food Pantry Recipient Surveys:*

With only one exception, everyone surveyed who utilized a food pantry was Food Insecure. Anecdotal accounts of recipients abusing Food Pantries appear to be grossly inaccurate.

Gardening was an uncommon activity among those with low incomes. Promotion of gardening and communities could reduce food insecurity among low income households.



## **Recommendations**

1. Plans for new stores and programs should be developed as part of a general community health and retail access plan and should be community led or involve a large amount of community input.
2. When desired locations are set, incentives should be made to supermarkets to open in areas of low food access.
3. African-American oriented independent supermarkets should be encouraged to develop.
4. Existing stores in underserved communities could be a resource through which increased healthy food access could occur. However, in many communities relationships between these stores and the community must be improved for this to work.
5. In the most isolated communities, transportation is a great barrier. Developing bus lines or sponsoring alternative transportation to local stores would help these communities even if new stores are difficult to develop. Such options are also needed for the elderly and other vulnerable groups.
6. More attention should be paid to suburban areas of low food access, in particular in the southern suburbs, North Chicago, and central Aurora.
7. Alternative food access strategies such as community gardens, food co-ops, urban agriculture, and farmers' markets, should be actively pursued. These both improve access and build stronger communities.
8. Work with pantries to improve food quality and quantity from the Food Depository.
9. Residents pointed out budgeting, cooking, and food buying as skills that younger residents often lacked. Innovative techniques need to be developed to help teach these skills.

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