Corner Stores Contribute to the Food Desert

THE PROBLEM

Corner stores contribute to the food desert in the City of Rochester

THE FACTS

#1 The link between race, poverty, and inequity in regional health is undeniable.

The burden of poor health is not equally shared across the region. Health disparities are evident in the City of Rochester across eight zip codes in the inner crescent of the city (Diagram 1). African American families who reside in this focus area experience worse health outcomes than the white/ non Latino population in the region (Graph 1).

The African American Health Coalition (AAHC) emphasizes the role of place as the key driver of racial health disparities. The link between race, poverty and inequity in regional health is undeniable. Individuals who live in the AAHC focus area face a level of premature mortality that is 300 percent higher than whites who live outside of this area. They are more likely to have serious, chronic and often preventable diseases.

Behavior, environmental exposure, social circumstances and healthcare are key determinants of health that contribute to the root causes of racial disparities in our region. African Americans living in the focus area face a unique set of environmental conditions that influence health behaviors and their health outcomes (e.g. violence, poverty, limited access to healthy food choices).

Graph 1:

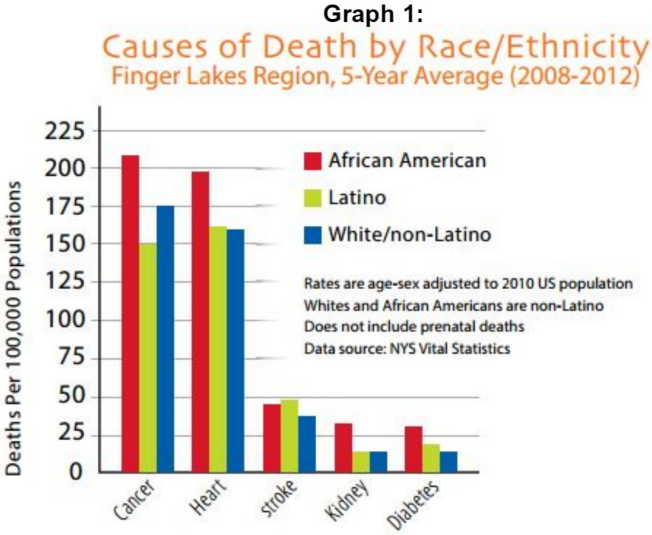
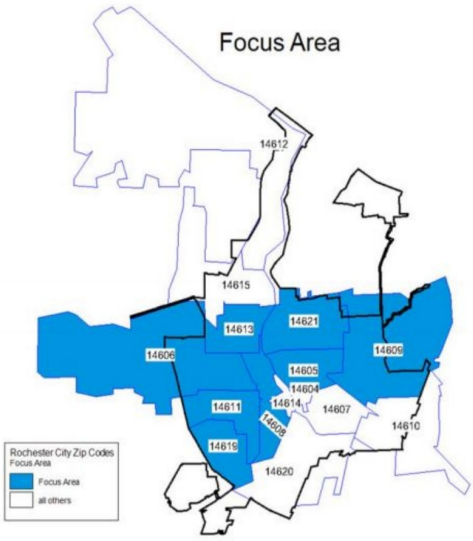


Diagram 1: AAHC Focus Area



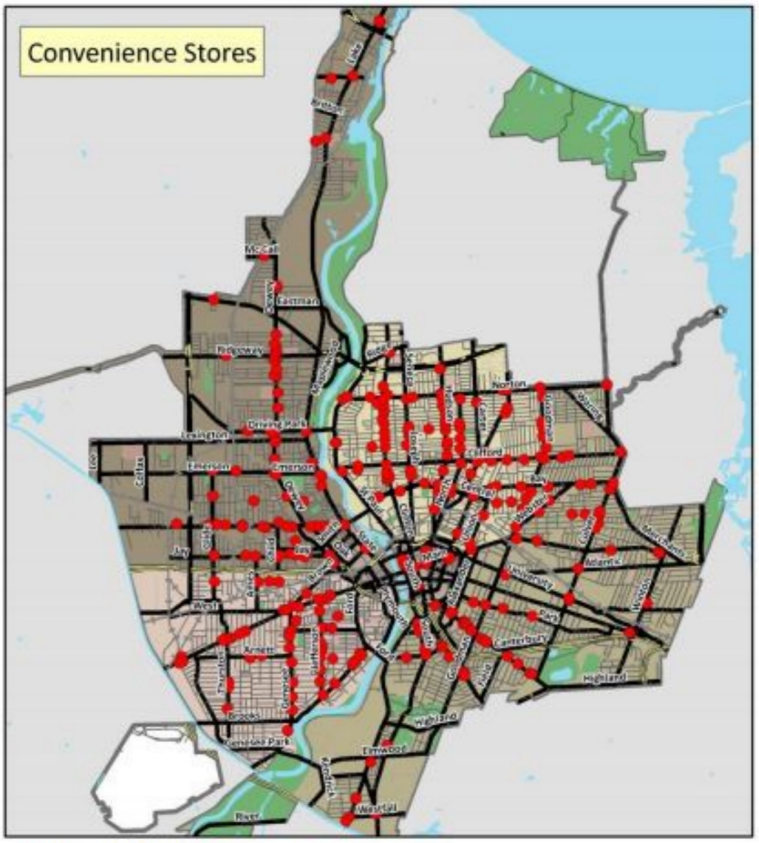
#2 Corner Stores Contribute to Poor Health Outcomes

The physical environment is a key component that supports healthy behaviors. Chronic diseases can be reduced through active lifestyle, good nutrition and reduced exposure to toxic conditions.[1] The built environment matters. Similarly, the retail environment affects health outcomes.[2] Access to fresh fruits, vegetables and other healthy foods is associated with a decreased risk of obesity and related chronic conditions.[3] Studies also demonstrate that when individuals have access to healthy foods they are more likely to consume them.[4] Access to healthy foods is important to improving health outcomes.

The focus area of the AAHC is a food desert. Food deserts are areas without comprehensive supermarkets or other sources of affordable, high quality, nutritious foods.[5] Full service grocery stores are not present in the high need zip codes of the city. Instead, the community must rely on an overabundance of convenience stores as their primary food vendor. These stores sell mainly inexpensive high fat, high sugar processed foods, alcohol, tobacco and lottery products. Without access to healthy and nutritious food, and limited access to private transportation, residents in the focus area rely on calorie-dense foods with little or no nutritional value.[6]

Prevalence of convenience stores in Rochester

- Records identify 350 convenience stores within the city limits.
- There are approximately 10 stores in every square mile of the city
- There are no full-service grocery stores in the AAHC focus area.
- The closest major grocery store from the center of the Southwest quadrant is approximately 3 miles away.
- In the Southwest quadrant, residents rely on 53 stores ranging from convenience stores to mom & pop grocery stores. 85% of these stores do not offer fresh fruit; 76% of these stores offered only white bread; and 65% offered either whole milk or no milk at all.[7]
- Members of the Beechwood Neighborhood Coalition count 24 corner stores within a ½ mile radius in their neighborhood.



Source: City of Rochester

NEW CITY REGULATIONS: A CALL TO ACTION

Residents and community members in the City of Rochester have expressed concerns about the high concentration of corner stores in their neighborhoods. With increasing pressure from residents, the city passed legislation to improve the management and oversight of corner stores and create a healthier neighborhood environment for families living in the city.

The legislation made changes to the zoning code, modified the business permit process, and improved enforcement. The changes to the zoning code prohibited new high-impact business from opening in residential areas or in commercial areas that are close to residential areas. This means, stores cannot sell two or more of the following products: alcohol, lottery, and tobacco; and can no longer open in residential communities. This change seeks to diversify the neighborhood food environment by encouraging new business and full line stores to open in the community.

Secondly, the modifications to the business permit process means certain types of business (such as drug stores or laundromats) who chose not to sell alcohol, lottery or tobacco are not required to apply for a permit. This modification provides an incentive for new business to come into neighborhoods. Additionally, a Good Neighbor Agreement signed by storeowners specifies expectations and facilitates relationship building between the city, storeowners and the community.

Finally, these changes have allowed the city to use existing resources to improve enforcement of the retail environment by focusing attention on high-impact stores. Increased enforcement will lead to citations that may force businesses to close if they are in violation.

The city's three-pronged approach to improving the food desert in the city is working. The changes to the zoning code and permit process have been successful in curtailing the expansion of high-impact stores. Two years after the implementation of this legislation, only 4 new high-impact stores have been established, and 5 full line food stores have been created. Prior to these changes, the city created on average, 44 new high-impact locations per year.

In order to improve the food desert and health outcomes in the city of Rochester, it is essential to ensure the city remains diligent in its approach towards high-impact stores. There is a need for the community to support the city in its efforts to eliminate food deserts and create healthier neighborhood environments.

Support the city's three-pronged approach to high-impact stores!

ENDNOTES

1. Institute of Medicine. (2002). The Future of the Public's Health in the 21st Century. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
2. Walker RE, Keane CR, Burke JG.(2010) Disparities and access to healthy food in the United States: A review of food deserts literature. Health & Place.16(5):876–84.
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6. Farley, T.A., Rice, J., Bodor, J.N., Cohen, D.A., Bluthenthal, R.N., Rose, D. (2009). Measuring the food environment: Shelf space of fruits, vegetables and snack food in stores. Journal of Urban Health, 86(5), 672-682.
7. Michaud, M. (2007). Survey: Healthy food absent from city convenience stores. University of Rochester Medical Center. Online Access.

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