

From Factoid to Phenomenon

The term “food desert” first emerged in the British Medical Journal in 2002. Author S. Cummins quoted its use, 10 years prior, by a resident of a public sector housing development in the west of Scotland. Generally, the term refers to a district with little or no access to nutritious, reasonably-priced foods needed to maintain a healthy diet. Frequently, the area is serviced by plenty of ‘fast food’ restaurants.

A few short years and several definitions later, the term has grown from factoid to phenomenon, from concept to concern. It has resonated with, and found meaning for, stakeholders and researchers from a wide cross-section of professional disciplines.

Currently, stakeholders focus on two types of food deserts: on the one hand, rural agricultural regions void of retail channels providing healthy, nutritious foods; on the other hand, urban neighbourhoods serviced by restaurants of every type and description yet without grocery stores stocked with basic fresh food at affordable prices.

Access is the (In)Operative Word

The common thread amongst all definitions is inaccessibility, be it physical - insufficient grocery stores per population density, or lack of public or private transportation; financial - low income, the elderly, pensioners; or mental - a lack of shopping and cooking skills, or failure to appreciate the importance of a healthy diet.

A Multi-faceted Problem Undergoing a Multi-dimensional Review

The prestigious Institute of Medicine convened a food desert workshop in the fall of 2008, wholly sponsored by the USDA Economic Research Service. The diverse presenters illustrate the complexity of the problem. The retail sector provided both a pre and post perspective: “How do grocers site store locations?” followed with “Effect of introducing new supermarkets”. Agricultural producers stated the ‘buy local’ green option with “Developing and supporting farmers markets”. Synthesizing demographic, geo-spatial and epidemiological statistics, urban planners ask how they may circumvent food deserts in the future.

“Why?” is a reasonable question

Does Saskatoon have food deserts?
What can we do about them?



Saskatoon, population ~250k and growing, with a GDP exceeding the national average, is located in Canada’s province of Saskatchewan. For decades, Saskatchewan was the epicentre of Canada’s ‘bread basket’, a major producer of top quality Canadian wheat. Evidently, economic prosperity is not only ‘skin deep’. Today, this wealthy province generates revenue of affluent proportions from world scale extraction of precious minerals - predominantly uranium, potash, gold and diamonds, followed by others. Nevertheless, some policy advisors in Saskatoon are observant, prepared to assume responsibility, and ask cautious and delicate questions. They are not alone. Similar questions are being raised in other Canadian cities, USA cities of Chicago, Detroit and NYC to name a few, and major cities in the EU. **FF**

Some Web sites

<http://www.fooddeserts.org/images/whatisfd.htm>

<http://www.saskatooncommunityclinic.ca/pdf/CC%20Food%20desert%20sheet%20Oct%202014.pdf>

<http://www.enterprisesaskatchewan.ca/Default.aspx?DN=f7f6c170-a757-4345-b0f0-aaae9a593f2d>

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