

## **What's Missing from the Discussion of "Food Deserts"?**

**An analysis of discursive justice in "food desert" related articles in *The New York Times*,  
*Chicago Tribune* and *The Los Angeles Times* from 2008-2015**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In this study, I analyzed articles on the topic of "food deserts" from three popular U.S. newspapers, *The New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune* and *The Los Angeles Times*, from 2008-2015. I identified narrative trends within the articles surrounding issues of invisibility, racism and solution building. I also analyzed writings and talks from two food justice organizations and one food justice advocate: Planting Justice, Food First and LaDonna Redmond. Using their narrative perspectives, I examined what was missing from the discourse around "food deserts" in the news media. These contrasting perspectives and framing of "food deserts" allowed me to explore the general designation of "food desert" and its creation of place and representation of the affected community. In conclusion, I put forth some alternative ways of discussing "food deserts" and "food insecurity" in the United States and examine racism and income inequality as the core causes of these social issues. This paper is part of a larger social discussion around rebuilding our current social structure and physical infrastructure in order to build a more equitable and just society.

### **KEYWORDS**

Food insecurity, food justice, food access, social justice, racial justice, income inequality

## INTRODUCTION

never  
trust anyone  
who says  
they do not see color.  
this means  
to them  
you are invisible.

From the book salt by Nayyirah Waheed (2013)

With a sixth of the world's population going hungry and a sixth of Americans considered "food insecure", there is little debate over the fact that our food system is in need of a change (Holt-Giménez and Wang 2011). Despite this, there is significant disagreement regarding how this change should occur. Research shows that we are currently producing more than enough food for over nine billion people, yet dominant social discourse continues to call for increased agricultural productivity (FAO 2003, Patel 2012). However, more than increased food production, this implies a need for a global redistribution of food resources (Powell et al. 2006, Patel 2012, Felipe Garzo Montalvo and Zandi 2015). In the U.S., this translates into the need to reevaluate our social structures that have led to high levels of "food insecurity" in one of the richest nations in the world. For the purposes of this paper, I will use the U.S. Department of Agriculture's definition of food insecurity to frame my discussion. The USDA defines "food insecurity" as the "state in which consistent access to adequate food is limited by a lack of money and other resources at various times during the year...(Colman-Jensen et al. 2013)." In the U.S., 50 million people are considered food insecure, ninety percent of whom are people of color (Holt-Giménez and Harper 2016). Low-income communities of color, concentrated at the fringes of our most thriving urban centers, have been targeted by fast food chains and ignored by corporate grocery store chains due to the perceived lack of economic opportunity, also known as "grocery store redlining" instituted through historical zoning laws that established racial segregation (Ver Ploeg 2009, Felipe Garzo Montalvo and Zandi 2015). As a result, in many African American neighborhoods, supermarkets are often about twice as far as the nearest fast food restaurant (Gallagher 2006). This form of redlining by corporate grocery chains has aided in the construction of "food insecurity" and the rise of diet-related health issues in these

communities. Affected communities, researchers, policy makers, and others contest the meaning and representation of food insecurity in the United States, framing it through various concepts ranging from *food access (affordability and availability)* to *food justice* to *food deserts*. With rising food insecurity in the U.S., it is important to examine how various stakeholders discuss the issue, in order to better understand its cultural construction and thus the effectiveness of solutions that have been put forward to address it.

Food justice advocates, resonant with the civil rights movement and the environmental justice movement, demand equal rights, access and availability of not just food, but healthy, fresh and culturally appropriate food for all, regardless of race, income, nationality or gender (Cadieux and Slocum 2015). Food justice can be understood as the “struggle against racism, exploitation, and oppression taking place within the food system that addresses the root causes of insecurity both within and beyond the food chain (Hislop 2014).” Springing from the environmental justice movement, the food justice movement is said to have been founded after the discovery of diet-related diseases in low-income communities in the 1970s, such as diabetes, heart disease and obesity, caused by the prevalence of unhealthy and fast food options (Alkon 2014). In fact, in the 1970s, the Black Panther Party, seeing the same need for healthy food apparent today, began a *School Breakfast Program*. This program was meant to feed students in Oakland, California, who did not otherwise receive breakfast before school, acknowledging the importance of healthy food for increased brain function essential for learning (Capek 1993). Other key events that are often cited as the start of this movement include, the creation of Food First, a nonprofit addressing the injustices that create hunger, in 1975, and the rise of La Via Campesina, a grassroots peasant movement calling for “food sovereignty” in Latin America (Cadieux and Slocum 2015).

In the 1990s, a resurgence of the food justice movement was seen in the U.S. due to the rise in popularity of locally grown, organic and non-GMO foods with the establishment of the ‘Alternative Food Movement’ (Capek 1993). The ‘Alternative Food Movement’ (AFM), led by figures such as Michael Pollan and Alice Waters, advocates for consumers to begin making more ‘environmentally-conscious’ food choices. These organic and local foods are by intention more costly and therefore less accessible to low-income communities of color, shedding light on the stark inequalities of our food system. Out of this came the designation of “food deserts,” a

classification of areas/communities considered ‘food insecure’ that focuses mainly on the distance from healthy and fresh food markets: more than one mile in urban areas and more than ten miles in rural areas (Ver Ploeg 2009). The American Nutrition Association (ANA) defines the term on the basis of the official definition by the USDA as:

...parts of the country *vapid* of fresh fruit, vegetables, and other healthful whole foods, usually found in impoverished areas. This is largely due to a *lack* of grocery stores, farmers’ markets, and healthy food providers....often short on whole food providers, especially fresh fruits and vegetables, instead, they are heavy on local quickie marts that provide a wealth of processed, sugar, and fat laden foods that are known contributors to our nation’s obesity epidemic. (ANA 2010)

A 2009 Report by the USDA, found that 23.5 million Americans, including 6.5 million children, live in areas considered “food deserts” that are more than one mile from a grocery store; however, of those 23.5 million, only 11.5 million people are low-income and therefore more likely to be affected by the physical distance from healthy and fresh food (Ver Ploeg 2009, Office of the First Lady 2010). For individuals receiving food stamps, also known as SNAP (Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program), and for eligible nonparticipants of food stamps, the average miles traveled to a grocery store is 4.9 miles, compared to the U.S. national average of 0.85 miles (Ver Ploeg 2009). Additionally, African Americans are half as likely as whites to have access to chain supermarkets in their neighborhoods (NYLS Racial Justice Project 2012).

In examining popular new media discourse around ‘food deserts,’ I gained a broader understanding of the *presented* problems and solutions in combating “food deserts” and how these relate to the larger issue of food insecurity in the U.S. Specifically, I was interested in examining how news media discourses address issues of social justice, racial discrimination, white privilege and income inequality in our country. Are these conversations part of popular discussion and thus our understanding of how to eliminate ‘food deserts,’ and food insecurity? Or do presented solutions overlook these structural inequalities and merely address issues of general accessibility and affordability of food in “food desert” communities? The news media reflects society’s beliefs and ideologies, while also communicating and influencing social opinion (Andrews and Caren 2010). This position of authority provides the news media with the opportunity to explore and spark discourse around the complex social inequities present in our food system, especially in their coverage of “food deserts.” News media’s control over the

framing and meaning of stories in their articles gives them power over social movements such as the food justice movement. As a moderator of information for social movements to the broader public, the news media can either render issues invisible or bring them to the forefront of social discourse (Gamson 1993). William Gamson, Professor of Sociology at Boston College, sees this connection between movements and media as both necessary and detrimental to social movements because “the media carries the cultural codes being challenged, maintaining and reproducing them” (Gamson 1993).

In my research, I found that the creation of ‘place’ by the media in their use of the term ‘food deserts’ does not address structural inequities and racial injustices and therefore blankets America’s understanding of the situation, creating solutions that reinforce these structural problems. The “desert imagery,” evoking an absence of life, puts emphasis on the lack of supermarkets rather than on the landscape of racial discrimination and poverty afflicting these communities (Gallagher 2006, Adams et al. 2010, Alkon 2014). However, the verb “desert” also reflects the act of leaving or no longer supporting someone in need of help, reminiscent of our country’s history of government regulated racial segregation (Gallagher 2006). Popular solution tactics to “food deserts” include government intervention and incentives for corporate supermarket chains to locate in these areas, forgetting that these same institutions were the ones that left these communities deserted and economically unstable in the first place. Mistrust of these institutions remains strong in many of these communities today, which is why food justice activists champion locally owned food outlets and urban farming as true solutions towards eliminating the need for the designation of “food desert”, focusing on community empowerment and community determination in building effective solutions. Obviously, the term “food desert” has drawn a significant amount of academic, governmental and activist attention, which is why it is important to explore the impact of the use of this term by the news media on influencing social opinion, government policies and solution building around the broader issue of food insecurity in the U.S.

## **METHODS**

Through an online search on each news media outlet's website based on the keywords of "food desert" and "food access," plus further refinement upon reading through the articles, I analyzed all articles from the *New York Times*, *LA Times* and the *Chicago Tribune*, between the years 2008-2015. I choose these three news outlets because of their physical connection to prominent "food deserts" and food insecure areas; for example, New York City has nearly 750,000 residents living in "food deserts", Chicago has about 500,000 people, mostly African Americans, living in food deserts, and, in LA County, 40% of those considered low-income are food insecure (Gallagher 2006, NYLS Racial Justice Project 2012, LADPH 2015). After identifying the articles, I conducted an analysis of the articles based on their representation of "food deserts" and "food access," looking particularly at:

1. Types of words/phrases used to describe and define "food deserts".
2. Representation of the affected community in the articles through quotes, phrases and features photographs.
3. Presented solutions to "food deserts," focusing on narrative topics most frequently covered by the articles.

These identified sub-topics then directed my analysis of the messages, patterns of problem description, solution suggestions and overall implications of the articles on discussing the issue of "food deserts" and food insecurity in the U.S. After completing this analysis, I attempted to represent the data visually by grouping the articles into broad discourse narrative trends, which I present in the following "Findings" section of the paper.

As part of my analysis of these news articles, I explored the discourse of "food deserts" by two grassroots food justice organizations and one food justice activist to get a better understanding of how communities designated "food deserts" relate to the term and how they present the issue of food access and what solutions they put forth to combat it. The three food justice advocates were LaDonna Redmond, Planting Justice and Food First, and the sources were as follows:

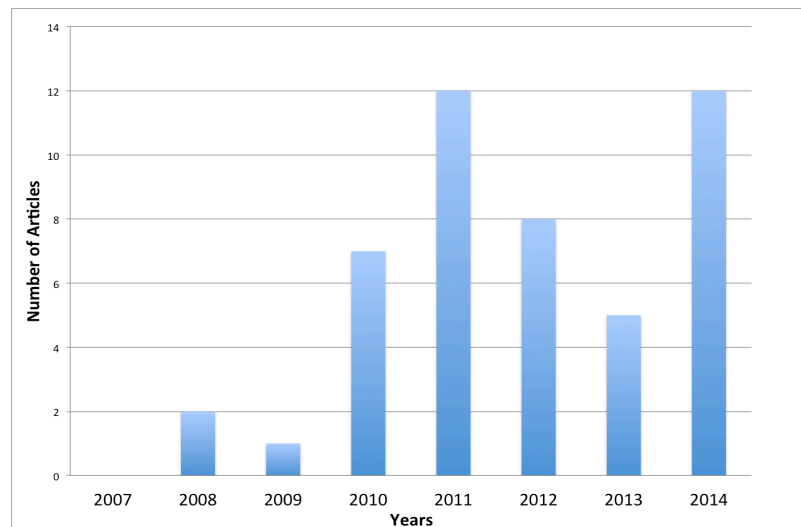
1. A speech given by LaDonna Redmond at the California Higher Education Food Security (CHEFS) Summit in January 2016.
2. An article titled "Food is Freedom" by LaDonna Redmond
3. A blog entry titled "The Modern/Colonial Food System in a Paradigm of War" from Planting Justice's website.
4. A newsletter article titled "From Mistreatment to Transformation" from the Backgrounder, a publication of Food First

LaDonna Redmond is a long-time Chicago food justice advocate, who created the Institute for Community Resource Development, the Chicago Food Systems Collaborative, on top of establishing a community grocery store, Good Food Market in 2008 (Redmond 2009). Planting Justice is a non-profit based in Oakland that works to democratize our food system by empowering communities with skills, knowledge and resources to take control of their food choices through increased environmental sustainability and economic growth (Felipe Garzo Montalvo and Zandi 2015). Finally, Food First, the Institute for Food and Development Policy, also an Oakland based non-profit, strives to empower communities through education, research and action and was referenced as one of the organizations that established the food justice movement in the 1970s (Holt-Giménez and Harper 2016). All three advocates focus their discourse and action heavily on community engagement, empowerment and sovereignty in the food system and use the “decolonization” of language to draw attention to our social structures that reinforce racism and social inequality in our food system.

Similarly to my analysis of the articles, I identified narrative trends, comparing and contrasting them to the discussions and representations of “food deserts” presented in the collected articles from the *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune* and *LA Times*. These reports help inform my discussion of the term “food deserts” as a place and community categorization, providing insight into how affected communities relate to the term, as well as criticisms of the popular social discourse surrounding the term.

## RESULTS

I identified a total of 77 articles that used the term “food deserts” published in *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times* and *The Chicago Tribune* between the years 2008-2015. I identified 30 articles from *The Chicago Tribune*, 19 from the *LA Times* and 28 from the *NY Times*. The goal was to collect 30 articles from each news source, however, with the lack of coverage surrounding “food deserts,” it was difficult to find more articles on the topic within this time period. Surprisingly, the *LA Times* had the least amount of coverage on the topic, despite the pervasiveness of “food deserts” and food insecurity within Los Angeles, with over 220,000 households considered ‘very food insecure’ within LA County (LADPH 2015).



**Figure 1. “Food deserts” articles occurrence by year from 2008-2015**

Figure 1. shows the growth of “food desert” related articles over the years of 2008-2015, with a spike beginning in 2010, potentially linked to the launch of Michelle Obama’s “*Let’s Move!*” Campaign in 2010, which prioritized exercise, healthy eating and increased food access to address the childhood obesity epidemic in the U.S. (Office of the First Lady 2010). With this campaign came the official defining of “food deserts” by the USDA, following the campaign goal of eradicating food deserts by 2017. With a definition in place, it likely became easier for news outlets to report on the topic, leading to the increase in coverage of “food deserts” by the media.

The majority of these articles were located in the “*News*” section of these three newspapers (45.5%), although a large majority was also located in the Opinion (15.6%) and Business (10.4%) sections (Table 1). This reflects the tendency for media coverage to be geared towards current events to draw in readership. In “food deserts,” current events would mean



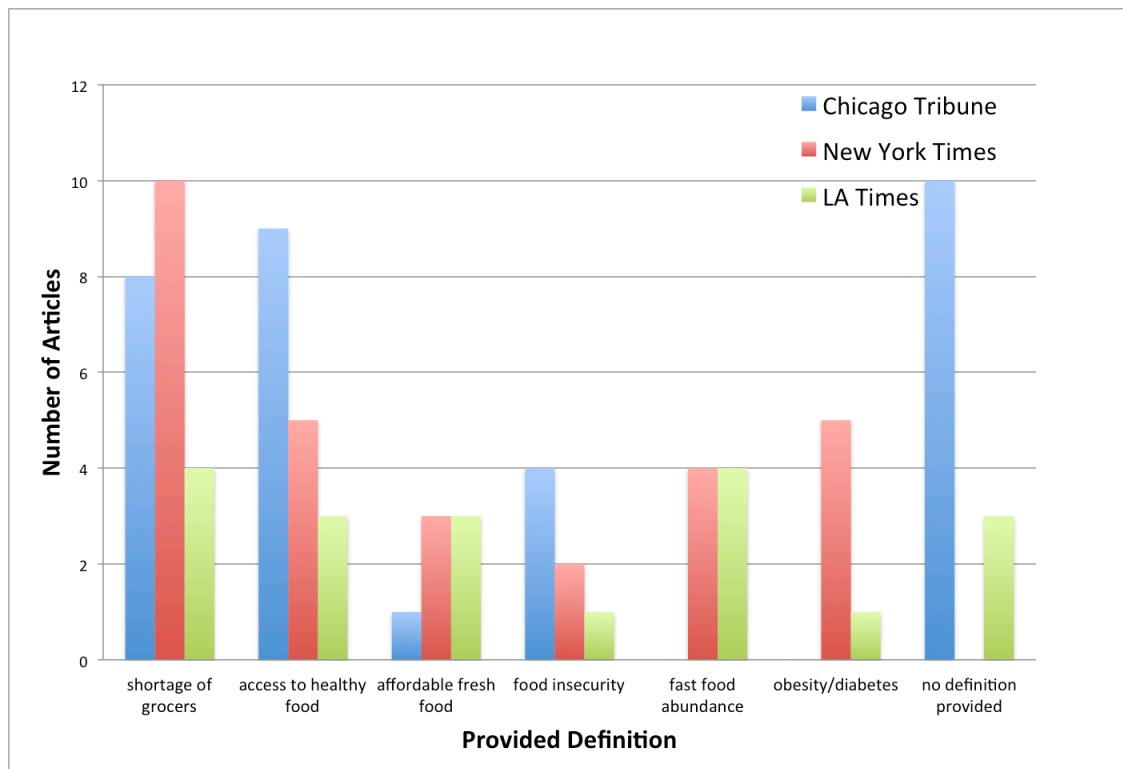
policy changes, opening or intended openings of supermarkets and other food startups, as well as the publishing of studies on food deserts, such as when the USDA released their “Food Access Research Atlas,” a mapping tool that shows low-access and low-income areas across the U.S. (Appendix A).

**Table 1. Breakdown of articles by section of paper and news outlet.**

<b>Section of Newspaper</b>	<b>New York Times</b>	<b>Chicago Tribune</b>	<b>LA Times</b>	<b>Total</b>
News	14	13	8	35
Opinion	5	5	2	12
Business	2	6	0	8
Food & Dining	0	3	2	5
Science	1	0	3	4
Politics	1	0	1	2
Other	2	3	1	6
Unknown	3	0	2	5

Newspapers tend to cover current events because of the events ability to catch a reader’s attention; large social narrative trends tend to be ignored in discussions due to media’s desire to avoid “ideological excess and social disorder (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993). The media’s ability to decide what it covers and what it does not, gives it a certain authority to whose voices are heard and whose are silenced or ignored (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993). In the 77 articles collected, 51% of the articles quoted solely authority figures such as CEO’s, government officials, and researchers members in their discussions of “food deserts,” 33% of articles quoted solely community members from communities that were being targeted for featured projects, and 16% of articles quotes both authority figures and community figures. Finally, the terms “poor” and/or “low-income” were used to describe “food desert” communities in only 42% of the articles, meaning that over 50% of the articles did not mention that these areas are mainly low-income areas. Lastly, only 22% of articles mentioned that these areas were mainly communities of color. Though this may seem obvious to some and therefore not necessarily in need of being

mentioned, the lack of discussion and even reference to this fact points at avoidance of the true landscape of “food deserts” in the United States by the news media. I hypothesize that this avoidance of social inequalities is connected to the media’s catering of their target demographic: white, educated and middle to upper class.



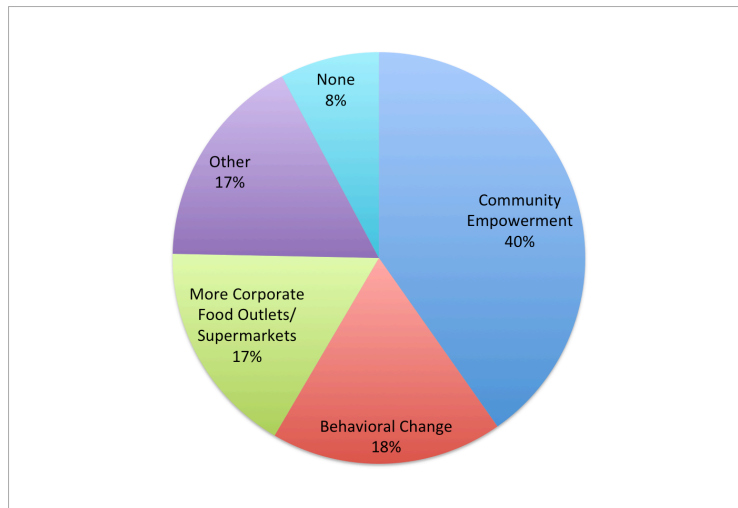
**Figure 2. Breakdown of “food desert” definitions by news outlet.**

Upon further analysis of the articles, I found that most provided a brief definition of the term “food desert” either preceding or following its reference in the article. This definition tended to shape the discussion that followed within the article. There were six main definitions of the term given by all three news sources: “shortage of grocers”, “access to healthy food”, “affordable fresh food”, “food insecurity”, “fast food abundance”, and “high rates of obesity and diabetes.” Across all three news sources, “shortage of grocers” and “access to healthy food” were

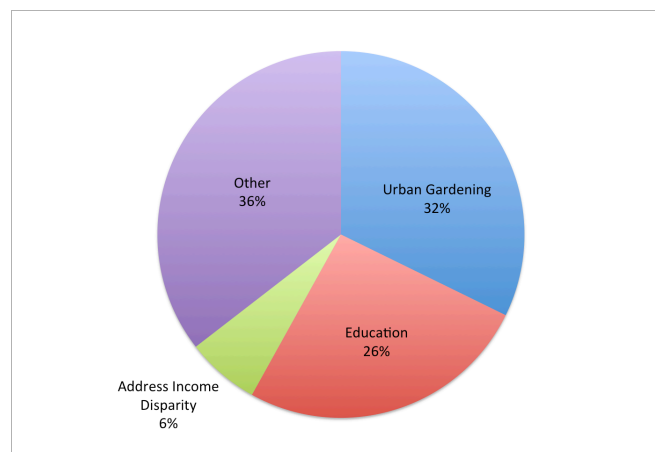
the two most common definitions provided, while the “food insecurity” was referenced by only seven articles that I collected (Figure 2).

**Table 2. Portion of the data collection table of “food desert” articles.** Table lists article title, year published, news source, section of paper, given definition, whether or not members of the community or authority figures were quoted in the article, a description of the feature image of the article, featured solutions to the issue of lack of food access in “food deserts” and finally, whether or not the article addresses any structural issues present in “food deserts” such as racial discrimination and income disparities.

Name	Year	Source	Section of Paper	Definition	Quotes Authority	Quotes - Community	Pictures	Solutions	Addressing Structural Issues (Race and/or Income)
The Reproach of Hunger	2003	New York Times	Book Review	None	Yes	No	None	Address real income disparity issue, not just the access issue	poverty, not a problem to be tackled in isolation — the solution to hunger may not have much to do with the supply of food.
An Urban Farmer Is Rewarded for His Dream	2008	New York Times	Business	what he calls the “food deserts” of American cities, where the only access to food is corner grocery stores filled with beer, cigarettes and processed foods.	No	Yes	Will Allen Growing Power	Grow food on a large scale without chemicals, close to the city and teach people how they can do it too!	Yes
Fast-Food Curb Meets With Ambivalence in South Los Angeles	2008	New York Times	News	“South L.A. is a food desert of massive proportions. You have a city completely divided, not only in the ways so familiar to folks but in terms of actual food access. citywide effort to encourage street vendors to bring fresh vegetables and fruit to low-income neighborhoods that have been called “food deserts” because of the	Yes	Yes	None	Los Angeles lawmakers are hoping they can legislate away the eating habits of Ms. Jackson and thousands of her neighbors. In July the City	No
Customers Prove There’s a Market for Fresh Produce	2009	New York Times	News	citywide effort to encourage street vendors to bring fresh vegetables and fruit to low-income neighborhoods that have been called “food deserts” because of the	No	Yes	POC men working at farmer’s market	In low-income neighborhoods, “we know that it takes more time to build supermarkets,” said Benjamin Thomases, the food-policy coordinator	Yes
A Plan to Add Supermarkets to Poor Areas, With Healthy Results	2009	New York Times		areas where fresh produce is scarce and where poverty, obesity and diabetes run high.	Yes	Yes	City officials	incentives to spur the development of full-service grocery stores that devote a certain amount of space to fresh	Committing structurally engrained issues..
Food politics in L.A.: Hungry for change	2010	LA Times	Food & Dining	carcity of supermarkets in neighborhoods	Yes	No	Produce	Go to the people, don’t wait for them to come to you 9th the government, to get help like food stamps	No
Learning What Food Looks Like	2010	New York Times	News	“food deserts” — neighborhoods with lots of fast food but little fresh produce or other healthy fare. Automotive High School’s students are predominantly low income, too,	No	Yes	N/A	Educate students about food system	Yes
Growing Together	2010	New York Times	News	grocery stores within city limits; more than 90 percent of food providers are places like convenience and liquor stores — I watched	Yes	Yes	N/A	new food movement is still labeled as Do It Yourself, but it’s really Do It Ourselves	No
Wal-Mart Struggles to Expand in Chicago	2010	New York Times	News	“food deserts” — neighborhoods without places to buy fresh fruit and vegetables. The term is generally used to describe urban neighborhoods where there are few grocers selling fresh produce, but a cornucopia of fast-food places and	Yes	No	Picture of a Wal-Mart	More supermarkets with better paying, living wage jobs Expanding food choices at Walgreen “creating these “food oases” is intriguing because it involves a well-known retail brand not typically	At almost six years later, the issue remains divisive, especially in the predominantly black neighborhoods where Wal-Mart wants to open five Supercenters that sell
Walgreens Tackles ‘Food Deserts’	2010	New York Times	News	urban neighborhoods where there are few grocers selling fresh produce, but a cornucopia of fast-food places and	Yes	No	None		Yes
Obesity and Sugary Drinks	2010	New York Times	Opinion	low-income neighborhoods	No	No	None	access and enhanced government nutrition programs	underpriced and oversized. They are universally available and relentlessly marketed, particularly in low-income neighborhoods.
A Fresh Oasis Thrives in a Chicago Food Desert	2010	New York Times	Unknown	poor areas that are dotted with vacant lots, dollar stores, and liquor marts, but benefit of fresh-food grocers.	Yes	Yes	N/A	Entrepreneurs from the community working with the community - better solution	Hints at structural issues..
A Start-Up Tries to Eliminate ‘Food Deserts’	2011	New York Times	Business	low-income neighborhoods lacking access to healthful, affordable food. (More than 23 million Americans live in such places,	No	Yes	white woman working at stockbox	Providing access and helping shift consumer behavior in these areas	Yes- but of term



**Figure 3. Summary of featured solutions presented by articles.**



**Figure 4. Breakdown of solutions presented by the articles in the broader “Community Empowerment” category.**

Another important aspect that I examined was how these articles presented solutions for improving conditions in “food deserts.” To analyze this aspect, I split the articles into various categories depending on what aspect of change, or type of solution, was featured in the article. In the end, I found three main “Solution” categories and one “No Solution” category. The categories were as follows: “Community Empowerment”, “Behavioral Change”, “More Corporate Food Outlets/Supermarkets”, and “Other” (Figure 3). The “Other” category included articles that featured government policies such as food stamps, expansion of fresh produce in

establish corner/liquor stores and others. The “Community Empowerment” solution category included articles featuring: childhood education, urban gardening/farming, addressing income inequalities and more (Figure 4). I will explore the categories of “Community Empowerment”, “Behavioral Change”, and “More Corporate Food Outlets/Supermarkets” in the following Discussion section of my paper.

### **Food justice advocates discourse**

In reviewing these four works by LaDonna Redmond, *Planting Justice* and *Food First*, I discovered very different narrative trends surrounding “food deserts” from the food justice advocates perspective as compared to trends in the newspaper articles I collected. In these writings and speech, these advocates focused more intentionally on both the cultural history of “food deserts” and the current socioeconomic makeup of these communities, rather than popular solution strategies such as establishing corporate supermarkets. In fact, these advocates criticized many popular discourses around “food deserts” and questioned the images provoked by the term: a landscape barren of food, people, life and opportunity (Redmond 2016). I will reference these sources in my following Discussion section to compare and contrast to the narrative trends I examined in the “food desert” articles of the *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune* and *LA Times*. After exploring the discourse of “food deserts” from these two perspectives, I will explore positive frameworks for change in both the language surrounding “food deserts” and in solution building around food insecurity as a whole in the United States.

## **DISCUSSION**

*The New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune* and *LA Times* use the term “food deserts” with little acknowledgment of the history and current social structures that have led to and reinforced their persistence in particular communities. These news media outlets reinforce racial and income inequities in their discourse around “food deserts” through their language, representation and presented solutions to the so-called “food desert” problem, following in the footsteps of many academics, government leaders and even many non-profit leaders working in the realm of

food justice. All three news outlets overlooked the general state of food insecurity of many Americans when categorizing the problem to be within “food desert” areas, emphasizing the “lack” of access to fresh produce and “shortage” of grocers. This framing decision may not be conscious, yet in my preliminary research, I found that searching keywords such as “food justice” and “food insecurity” within these three news outlets, generated few articles, most of which viewed these issues through a ‘food desert’ lens. By focusing on this narrow narrative lens of “food deserts,” the basic problems of poverty, income inequality and racial discrimination in our food system, and in society in general, are not addressed. To quote LaDonna Redmond in her CHEFS speech:

Food deserts are another one of those cute terms, masking the harm of the food system in my community...I was not digging in the dirt on the west side of Chicago thinking, “I sure will be glad when that Wal-Mart comes and builds that store there!” (Redmond 2016)

This prevalence expands beyond “food deserts” to even neighborhoods with an abundance of supermarkets, farmer’s markets and other healthy food outlets (Leete et al. 2012). ‘Food deserts’ may be easy to cover in popular news media because of their connection to specific areas even more because of their concentration on a seemingly basic and easily mendable structural issue – a lack of healthy affordable food in these communities. The definitions of “food deserts” presented by these articles, mainly suggest that quick fix solutions are viable, such as increasing corporate grocery stores or bringing affordable fresh produce to local corner stores. These “quick fix” solutions assume that distance-based measurements of food access in “food deserts” are good determinants of food accessibility (Leete et al. 2012); when the actual measurements and designations of what constitutes ‘adequate access’ is complicated to determine due to the numerous factors that should be taken into account such as: access to a personal vehicle, access to public transportation, access to food outlets near school and/or work, food preparation time, travel time, income, etc. (Adams et al. 2010). In fact, a 2009 Report by the USDA to Congress showed that low-income individuals spent 19.5 minutes traveling to a grocery store, compared to the national average of 15 minutes (Table 3); however, this calculation did not take into account the difference between rural and urban travel times which has the potential to alter the average

travel times (Ver Ploeg 2009). This example hints at the complexities in determining “adequate access” to healthy and fresh food from area-based measurements.

**Table 3. Average time spent in travel to grocery shopping on an average day by access to grocery stores.** From the 2003-2007 American Time Use Survey data, Current Population Survey sampling frame from Census Bureau and found in the 2009 Report “Access to Affordable and Nutritious Food: Measuring and Understanding Food Deserts and Their Consequences” from the USDA.

Average time is one-way, not total travel time (based on the shortest one-way time). Pooled 2003-2007 American Time Use Survey data						
	Average minutes per day of travel related to grocery shopping, for those who grocery shopped	Average % engaged in travel related to grocery shopping (on an average day)	Average minutes, 90% CI min	Average minutes, 90% CI max	Average percent, 90 CI min	Average percent, 90% CI max
	<i>Minutes</i>	<i>Percent</i>				
<b>Total population, age 15+, 2003-07</b>	15.0	14.0	14.7	15.3	13.7	14.3
<b>Low-income areas</b>						
Low access	19.5	12.1	18.1	20.9	11.1	13.1
Medium access	14.1	13.5	13.0	15.1	12.5	14.5
High access	15.5	12.3	14.3	16.7	11.3	13.4
<b>Not-low-income areas</b>						
Low access	15.9	14.4	15.2	16.5	13.7	15.1
Medium access	12.5	14.7	12.1	12.9	14.1	15.3
High access	13.3	16.3	12.6	14.1	15.4	17.3

Food insecurity and the persistence of so-called ‘food deserts’ in the U.S. is the manifestation of our continued racial discrimination that has left non-white communities without power due to inaccessibility of not just food, but education, jobs and equitable treatment, which I will further elaborate on in the following sections of my Discussion.

## Framing

The use of the designation ‘food desert’ by these three news media outlets lays a landscape of community disempowerment by creating an image of absence and deficiency in these neighborhoods. In the 77 articles I collected, I examined the usage of words that designated “food deserts” from a deficiency lens, finding that 52% of articles used the terms “deprived”, “devoid”, “absence”, “bereft”, “scarce” and/or “lack” of healthy food and/or grocery stores to frame the issue of “food deserts” (Figure 4.). These terms construct the “ecology of absence” present in these articles, a phrase used by Emmanuel Pratt, a community activist from Chicago and an Urban Planning Ph.D. at Columbia University, in his speech at the 2013 Creative Time



Summit (Pratt 2013). I discovered that “lack” was the most highly used “deficiency” term, likely because of its use by the ANA in its definition of “food deserts,” stating that the persistence of “food deserts” was “largely due to a *lack* of grocery stores, farmers’ markets, and healthy food providers” (ANA 2010). The ANA also used the phrase “*vapid* of fresh fruit, vegetables, and other healthful whole foods” in their definition. The term “vapid” is defined by Merriam Webster Learner’s Dictionary as “not lively or interesting; lacking liveliness, briskness or force” (“Vapid Definition” n.d.). The use of this term in this sentence seems out of context, giving more of a description of “place” than of the “lack of healthy food”, hinting that these communities lack force or life, better known as a lack of power. This lens of deficiency mislabels “food deserts” as being *void* of both healthy and diverse food resources, as well as of socially empowered communities. This framing often overlooks the fact that many of these communities are flooded with unhealthy food options through high concentration of fast food establishments. Unhealthy and fast foods are easily obtainable in food deserts, leading to increased levels of obesity, heart disease and other health problems in these communities (Gallagher 2006). Redmond seeks to reframe the discussion by putting forth terms such as, “food swamp” or “food mirage” to contrast the imagery of “food deserts” in order to create a more realistic picture of the situation in these communities. A common misconception is that these communities are “hungry” in the same way that people are “hungry” or are malnourished in developing countries, when food insecurity in the U.S. is slightly different. In the U.S. many food insecure households are “swamped” by unhealthy, cheap and quick food options in the neighborhoods, creating a “mirage” of an abundant and thriving food landscape (Redmond 2016). Redmond acknowledges that the current labeling of “food desert” is clearly an outsider’s perspective of the problem and that these alternative phrases more accurately reflect her personal experience of living in the “food deserts” of Chicago.

In a personal interview with Ruben Canedo, UC Berkeley’s Research & Mobilization Coordinator from the Centers for Educational Equity and Excellence (CE3), Canedo shared a similar perspective on the term from growing up in agricultural communities in the literal deserts of Southern California and Mexico, remarking that, to him, “food thrives in a desert,” giving the term the feeling of “imposing a reality” that didn’t fit with his understanding and experience (Canedo 2016). For Canedo and Redmond, the popular language used to describe and discuss

“food deserts” was inaccessible and lacked context. Julie Guthman explores this issue in her 2008 paper, “Bringing Good Food to Others: Investigating the Subjects of Alternative Food Practice,” acknowledging that popular discourse surrounding food justice and the Alternative Food Movement (AFM) are intertwined with white cultural identity, where good intentions aimed at improving disadvantaged communities, build a separation between “us”, white, and “other”, non-white. This separation creates problematic social structures that reinforce racism and social disparities, such as in the evocation of the image of “food desert” as a place beyond repair that requires outsider assistance (Guthman 2008). Redmond criticized the use of the term “food desert” in her speech at CHEFS, saying that the term “describes lack in a way that indicates the solution is outside the community (Redmond 2016). This, in turn, impedes efforts to build an inclusive and sustainable food system by perpetrating injustice in order to continue the cycle of generosity of white saviors, reinforcing their racial superiority (Shattuck et al. 2011). This outsider’s perspective, often from academic and educated communities, becomes the authority on the place labeled a “food desert” often without visiting, living in or experiencing the place itself.

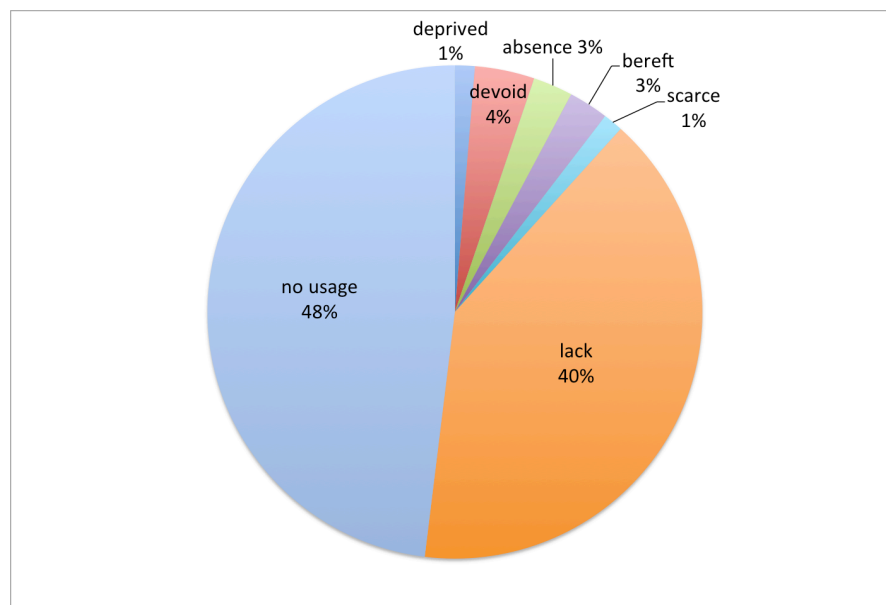


Figure 5. Percentage of articles that used various terms reflecting absence in “food deserts.”

This top-down understanding of the problems and solutions associated with food deserts is a central narrative in these three news outlets, ignoring the option of community empowerment and community determination in dealing with local issues of food insecurity.

## Invisibility

The 77 articles I collected also lacked representation of the affected communities as I laid out in my *Findings* section. This lack of representation of the landscape of poverty and racial determinants that designate “food deserts”, despite the USDA’s reference to these areas as “impoverished”, means that these news outlets, consciously or not, are removing the community from the conversation. This reflects many analyses of mainstream media as being known to avoid critical discourses on race because of their divisive nature (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993, Powell et al. 2006, Andrews and Caren 2010). In my analysis of the articles, I found a stark lack of community representation in the quotations, photographs and featured projects, with only 49% of articles quoting affected community members, only 39% of articles featuring photographs with people of color (Table 4) and only 40% of articles featuring community determined solutions to local food insecurity, such as cooperative supermarkets, locally-owned businesses, non-profits startups, education, and urban gardening.

**Table 4. Summary of images presented by the articles in their featured photograph.**

<b>Featured Photograph Representation in Articles</b>	<b>Number of Occurrences</b>
Positive imagery of non-white community members	11
Negative imagery of non-white community members (people of color outside liquor stores, etc.)	4
Imagery of white community members or white “authorities” (government officials, CEOs, children, etc.)	15
Imagery of non-white authority figures (most commonly Michelle Obama)	5
Other image represented (supermarket, garden, food, landscape, fast food, Starbucks)	16
No Featured Image	26

By removing the communities from the discussion of “food deserts” in the framing of “food deserts” by these news outlets, these news sources avoid addressing the established structures and systems that have reinforced these disparities in food access, leaving the underlying issues of inequity and racism in our society invisible. By rendering these aspects of our society invisible, presented solutions tend to address solely the physical structural issue of lack of food access in an area. In the U.S., racism is often used to blame an individual “racist” rather than the collective society that supports our racially unjust structures that build individual “racist” morals (Powell et al. 2006). Many Americans, especially before the rise of the Black Lives Matter Movement in 2014, believed that our society was “beyond racism” because of the increased number of non-whites in authority positions, often citing the election of our first black president in 2008, Barack Obama (Billings and Cabbil 2011). Unfortunately, the truth is that nothing in our society escapes race and discrimination because of its rooted nature in our country’s history dating back to the colonization of the Americas by Europeans and the establishment of slavery and land grabbing (Billings and Cabbil 2011, Felipe Garzo Montalvo and Zandi 2015, Holt-Giménez and Harper 2016). Our country was built on slave labor that was founded upon the belief of biological inferiority of non-white people. For the purposes of this argument, I will focus on the history of African slave labor in the U.S., although I would like to acknowledge that all non-whites were considered inferior and that many non-white races were used for slave labor, indentured servitude or similar purposes over the course of our country’s history and into present day. These “racial castes” allowed for the institution of the classifications of designation of “black” and “negro,” colonial terms for the enslaved people brought to the North (Holt-Giménez and Harper 2016). These terms were used to categorize people from culturally and ethnically different regions of West Africa, in order to erase their history and humanity, making them appear all the same and thus expendable (Holt-Giménez and Harper 2016). The term “white” was built in contrast to “black” to classify those of the “superior” white race, also in spite of the many cultural and ethnic differences of European colonials. These terms “white” and “black” are now ingrained in our modern language, constantly reinforcing this social hierarchy still present today. Planting Justice discusses this colonial history in their blog post stating, “the linearity of modern history occludes its own power through erasure” (Felipe Garzo Montalvo and Zandi 2015). The labeling of communities

as “food deserts” is a similar act of erasure, removing the history of a place and the disparities attached to it. In the way that European colonialists named places they visited by their cultural perceptions of place, whites are now naming communities based on these similar cultural constructs in our history, creating an “invisibility of whiteness” and white power over these spaces (Guthman 2008, Redmond 2016). Despite the good intentions we have in acknowledging the lack of food access in the communities, our controversial history of racism causes us to remove this important issue from our discussions and problem solving. This lack of understanding of our history stems from the lack of critical analysis of power and privilege available in schools and institutions, forcing us to believe that being “colorblind” is more progressive than a “collective understanding” of our cultural histories. This social denial harbors the silent racism still present in our society today (Billings 2011). With the news media’s position of authority as an influencer of social opinion, these news outlets have the power to address this dearth of discussion and ignorance around structural racism in relation to “food deserts” and society in general, but have yet to step up to the task.

### **Solution building**

The news media’s discussion of potential solutions to the “food desert” issue represented another important area of analysis in my research, as this discourse represented the actual actions being taken to combat food insecurity and food inaccessibility in these communities. To analyze this aspect, I categorized the articles based on their featured “solution” or focus area within the “food desert” discussion, finding that the categories of “Community Empowerment”, “Behavioral Change” and “More Corporate Food Outlets/Supermarkets” were the most commonly featured solutions (Figure 3). With around 47 million people living below the poverty line in the United States, of which less than 10% are whites, the lack of discussion around race and income inequality is startling (Holt-Giménez and Harper 2016). However, instead of discussing what is lacking from the discussion here, I want to address the actual solutions presented by these articles within both the “Behavioral Change” category, which represented 18% of the solutions featured, and the “More Corporate Food Outlets/Supermarkets” category, which represented 17% of the solutions featured.

*Behavioral change and neoliberalism*

The prevalence of behavioral change as a presented solution by these 77 articles, reflects the neoliberal framing of solution building that has sprung from the AFM in addressing “food deserts” and food insecurity. Neoliberalism is a political and economic philosophy that asserts that a thriving and just society can be achieved through the free-market with little to no intervention from the state (Alkon 2014). I want to briefly again acknowledge that many food insecure communities mistrust the government because of their historical and present-day racist tendencies, questioning why State intervention would be beneficial in fixing State created problems (West 2011). This in many ways supports this neoliberal philosophy; however, this movement away from government control towards “laissez-faire” economics reflects the basic pillars of the mirage of the ‘American Dream,’ creating problematic social perception. This narrative of the ‘American Dream’ and “pulling yourself up by your bootstraps”, meaning that hard work will pay off towards climbing the social ladder, disregards the ingrained disadvantages of people of color that are discriminated against in nearly every one of our country’s social institutions. In the articles, 18% of featured projects emphasized the need for “behavioral or habit changes” in the food choices of those living in “food deserts.” From my research, this narrative of the need for personal habit changes to combat health issues in “food deserts”, stems from the growth of the AFM, which emphasizes consumer choice and localism in order to “fix our broken food system” (Allen et al. 2003, Guthman 2008, Hughes 2010). The AFM, dominated by white middle class activists and consumers, is often looked to as an authority on achieving food security and food justice, despite their main goal of making food more ‘ecologically sustainable’ rather than more accessible and affordable for all. Michael Pollan’s preaching’s of “voting with your fork” exemplifies a “white privilege” narrative of power and control in the food system, of which many people of color do not relate to because of their history of being marginalized and without power in society (Holt-Giménez and Wang 2011, Redmond 2016). This white centric movement often sees food justice as an opportunity for charitable work, providing donated food and other help to local food banks and beyond, while avoiding addressing structural causes related to hunger, food insecurity and unhealthy dietary habits (Hughes 2010). This focus on the

need of a ‘savior’ exterior to the community, referenced previously in my research, implies that social defect and/or bad luck is the basic issue instead of the broader social disparities in income and access to education within our society (Powell et al. 2006). Food justice activists, though in support of the AFM ideals, find the language of the AFM inaccessible and laced with white cultural codings that ignore social disparities, and thus activists call for the “decolonization” of language surrounding the movement (West 2011). The emphasis on social defect and/or bad luck as the basis of the persistence of “food deserts” further removes the blame from the racially discriminatory tendencies of our society and thus allows the news media and others to discuss solutions focused on the “fixing” of consumer purchasing and eating habits. However, when fast food options are abundant, cheap and quick and healthy options are scarce, expensive and time consuming, the image of “consumer choice” becomes much more complicated. Furthermore, few studies have shown a direct link between limited food access and lower intake of nutritious foods, due to the many complexities surrounding diet and socioeconomics (Ver Ploeg 2009). Despite this obvious inconsistency, the dominant group (whites) tends to naturalize the idea of uneven development in society, believing that it reflects an “organic” or “natural” breakdown of society, instead of a socially constructed inequity, referring back to the concept of alleged white superiority (Powell et al. 2006, Felipe Garzo Montalvo and Zandi 2015, Holt-Giménez and Harper 2016). The news media’s focus on this narrative of solution building reflects societies misunderstanding of social inequities and allows for the establishment of simplistic solutions that most often reinforce the same structural inequities moving forward, just as their emphasis on establishing supermarkets reinforces corporate control over the food system.

### *Establishing corporate supermarkets*

The media’s focus on the establishment of corporate supermarkets presents them as a positive solution to the “food desert” problem without giving much explanation as to how they address food insecurity and hunger in areas labeled as “food deserts.” The articles that referenced the establishment of supermarkets in “food deserts” cited job creation, lower prices and increased food options and accessibility as positive benefits for increasing community health and economic growth. Although studies have found that supermarkets do maintain prices for comparable fresh

foods that are 10% lower on average than those of small liquor or convenience, it is important to acknowledge that currently only 2-3% of food purchases by low-income individuals are made at liquor and convenience stores because of these high prices (Ver Ploeg 2009). Also, as of the 2009 USDA Report to Congress, 61.8% of low-income individuals had high or medium access to supermarkets, greater than individuals of higher income, meaning that supermarkets are within walking distance of their homes. This makes sense as high-income individuals have greater access to personal vehicles and thus can live farther from supermarkets. However, only 3.6% of American households (0.9 million) do not have access to vehicles and live more than a mile from supermarkets (Ver Ploeg 2009).

From the three food justice advocates that I reviewed, “corporate” supermarkets seem problematic in combating “food deserts” because of the low-income and poverty jobs provided by large supermarket chains, rather than ‘living wage’ jobs that would more positively benefit the community (Redmond 2016). Despite the call for more locally based solution building, As an example, Michelle Obama’s *Let’s Move* Campaign has invested \$400 million in tax breaks since 2010 for corporate supermarkets, such as Wal-Mart, to open up in food deserts (Office of the First Lady 2010). Corporate-owned supermarkets, like Wal-Mart and Safeway, tend to drive out locally owned businesses in surrounding neighborhoods, removing money from the local economy to line the pockets of businessmen outside its borders, potentially leading to increased levels of poverty and lack of power in a community (Hughes 2010, Alkon 2014, Cadieux and Slocum 2015). The narrative of “food sovereignty,” an ideal of procedural justice resulting in local control and determination of food choices and community solutions to ‘food deserts’, is nearly absent from the articles, removing agency and independence from these communities, which is necessary for reversing the current systematic marginalization of these communities.

## Limitations

First, I think it is important to acknowledge that my personal background as a white middle class woman studying food justice and discursive justice related to “food deserts” somewhat limits my understanding and analysis of the need for ‘decolonizing’ our language. As an outsider of the “food desert” issue, I can only reflect and expand upon the expressed need, by food justice



advocates and others, of discursive justice in our discussions of “food deserts” and “food insecurity” in the United States. Furthermore, this study analyzes a limited amount of newspaper articles, leaving much to be desired in the goal of representing the larger issues surrounding the use of the term ‘food deserts.’ My research question centered on how the term “food deserts” was used by the media and, in turn, how this framed food insecurity and reflected the current situation of “food desert” communities. Unfortunately, I did not interview non-advocate/activist members of communities labeled as “food deserts.” Without their direct perspective on the situation and term, including: whether or not they feel as if certain presented solutions such as behavioral change and increasing corporate supermarkets would create or has created positive changes, I have committed the same offence as the news outlets that I have criticized in my research on the discourse of “food deserts.” Although my research represented the perspective of food justice advocates, it is hard to know whether or not these advocates accurately represent the opinions of the majority of “food desert” inhabitants. In this way, my thesis may actually be reinforcing the problem since; however, I believe that the research that I have done to this point has laid a strong groundwork for understanding the broad social and historical connections of communities to the usage of this term, a necessity before trying to connect with and understand a community’s connection to its use and position in our white centric language.

### **Future directions**

To further this study, I would increase the number of newspaper articles collected by expanding my search to more newspapers, including more local newspapers within Chicago, Los Angeles and New York and beyond. By increasing the number of articles collected and expanding the search beyond national newspapers, I would get a more rounded understanding of the discourse surrounding “food deserts,” examining how local communities discuss the problem from the grassroots/community level. I would also survey and conduct interviews with community members living in so-called “food deserts” to obtain a better understanding of the usage of the term and its direct affect on residents, using their opinions as the main source of *authority* on the topic. In the interviews and surveys I would conduct upon further research, I would give community members the opportunity to name their own neighborhoods and discuss

their view of potential positive solutions. I think it would be interesting to observe if ‘regular’ residents are proponents or opponents of the term “food deserts” and its framing affect on solution building that emphasizes the establishment of corporate supermarkets. On the connection to the media, I think that more research could be done on how news outlets discuss “food deserts”, looking beyond text to news broadcasting, social media representation and more. As this critical discourse analysis is meant to prompt popular social discourse change, I would also reach out to these news outlets to understand why the narratives surrounding “food deserts” are presented in certain ways. Finally, I hypothesize that local newspapers would more liberally cover the issues of ‘food deserts’ in their local areas, sparking increased discussion of the structural inequities underlying food deserts.

## **CONCLUSION**

Despite the popular and frequent usage of the term “food deserts” in the news media and other popular discourse, including within food justice organizations themselves, other terms and frameworks may be more beneficial for creating a deeper understanding of structural inequities that have created widespread “food insecurity” in the United States. Redmond put forth in her speech the term “food poverty,” while Food First and Planting Justice put forth the term “food apartheid” to reflect a more accurate image of the food landscape in these low-income communities of color, in place of the inaccurate imagery and discourse surrounding “food deserts” (Felipe Garzo Montalvo and Zandi 2015, Holt-Giménez and Harper 2016, Redmond 2016) With 50 million Americans considered food insecure and only 11.5 million low-income people living in neighborhoods designated “food deserts” in the U.S., it is clear that we need to shift our conversation away from “food deserts” and towards addressing the greater structural issues of racism and income inequality (Ver Ploeg 2009, Holt-Giménez and Harper 2016). In representing the food access problem according to these terms, we could shift to incorporate a structural framework of analysis that could lead to more positive solution building (Powell et al. 2006). In moving beyond “food deserts” and towards addressing food insecurity, “food sovereignty” becomes an important framework to explore. “Food sovereignty” places communities affected by food insecurity into the active participants of change, unlike with the

categorization “food deserts.” Food sovereignty focuses on self-determination, global uneven development and ecological degradation and dispossession, creating a holistic understanding of the failings of our food system for those that at most affected by the unequal distribution of power in our society (Cadieux and Slocum 2015). As previously mentioned, La Via Campesina, a grassroots peasant movement that began in Latin America, made popular the use of the term “food sovereignty” in order to bring decision making back to local indigenous communities that had been removed from their land during European colonization of the Americas and continue to be removed with the expansion of agriculture and grazing land to cater to the high protein diets of Americans. This call for community control over the production, processing and distribution aspects of the food system acknowledges the issue of unequal food distribution apparent in our global food system today and aims to address it through localization and the “distancing of global” (West 2011). For La Via Campesina this means a “re-cognition” of the relationships between humans, animals and the land, calling for the “decolonization” of our language and diets (West 2011). In the U.S., “food sovereignty” proponents champion urban gardening, cooperative buying, community supported agriculture (CSA) and placing power back in the hands of local communities to create their own solutions and not be removed from the discussions around their own futures.

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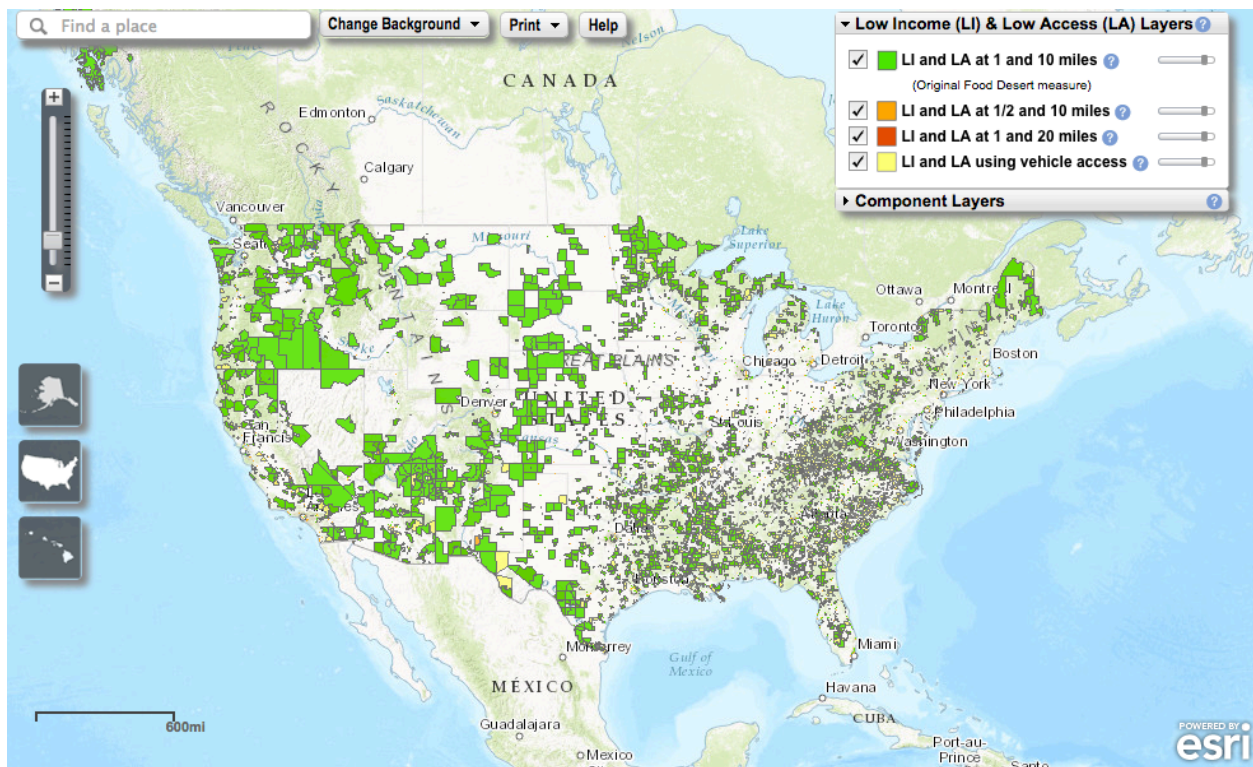
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## APPENDIX A: Food Access Research Atlas



**Figure A1. Image of low income and low access areas in the continental United States generated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Access Research Atlas.** This mapping feature is publically available and allows people to examine food access issues in order to gain a better understanding of the issues of food insecurity across the U.S.