

Supermarkets' power desertifies our diets

April 18 2008

Urban food deserts – areas where people have low or no access to food shops – exist in major cities, according to research published in the open access publication *International Journal of Health Geographics*, with important implications for public health policies. In an exploration of food deserts in the Canadian city of London, Ontario, Kristian Larsen and Jason Gilliland of The University of Western Ontario Geography Department mapped and compared supermarket locations in the city in 1961 and 2005 and assess the changing levels of residents' access.

Gilliland explained: “More and more supermarkets are building in newer suburbs and smaller food shops are disappearing from older neighbourhoods leaving food deserts in their wake. Poor people with no car can be severely adversely affected by living in food deserts and are more likely to suffer from bad health and low quality of life with diseases such as heart disease, diabetes and cancer. Poor inner city residents have the poorest access to supermarkets and Central and East London were the worst affected.”

The researchers assessed people's access to shops by foot and public transport. Geographic mapping techniques were used to map and analyze grocery store locations. Residents of several areas of the city had limited access to one of the city's 28 supermarkets. Those people living in food deserts paid almost double the price as their supermarket shopping counterparts for supplies from small local convenience stores.

Historical analysis showed that inner city areas were not always food deserts even though the city population has doubled in the 50 years.

Whereas in 1961 over 75% of the population of the urban core had easy access to a supermarket, fewer than 20% of core residents have access today.

“The bottom line is people need supermarkets and vice versa,” concluded Gilliland. “London should actively encourage supermarket development in food desert areas. We still need to find out from these desert residents what are the psychological, economic and personal effects. After all, the continued closure of supermarkets will lead to more unemployment and devastating affects on the health of an already vulnerable population.”

Source: BioMed Central

Citation: Supermarkets' power desertifies our diets (2008, April 18) retrieved 1 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2008-04-supermarkets-power-desertifies-diets.html>

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