

“Lotta Food, No Money”: Syracuse’s Poor Have Challenges that are Much Bigger than Food Access

Katie Mott

Food access is a central target for addressing poor health in low-income communities nationwide. The popularized metaphors of ‘food deserts’ or ‘grocery gaps’ highlight the lack of access to affordable, fresh, healthy foods in low-income neighborhoods.¹ These terms emphasize food insecurity but do not question whether the primary concern among the extremely poor is actually access to food.

The recent closure of a small family-run grocery store in one of Syracuse’s poorest neighborhoods provided an opportunity to find out what struggles the extremely poor face. In this brief, I report the results of my research in a low-income urban neighborhood in central New York and show that people living in extreme poverty do not find food access to be the most pressing challenge in their lives, as most residents depend on charity and emergency food systems for food. Rather, their days are consumed with finding safe and affordable housing, navigating the social welfare system, and securing reliable employment. Although many other neighborhood residents’ access to food was hindered through the grocery store closure, including the store’s regular customers, the poorest residents had more pressing concerns. Access to adequate employment, housing, economic support, education *and* food should be considered together to develop a more comprehensive approach to improving population health

KEY FINDINGS

- The recent closure of a local family grocery store was a major concern for local elected officials and leaders of nonprofit agencies.
- However, people living in extreme poverty do not view food access as their most important health challenge.
- Finding safe and affordable housing, navigating the social welfare system, and finding employment are seen as larger concerns.

among the poor. People do not have the luxury of worrying about physical access to or the nutritional value of food if they cannot afford to purchase the food, do not have proper facilities for cooking, or do not have a permanent residence.

The Closure of a Locally-Based Grocery Store

As a post-industrial city, Syracuse, New York is one of many U.S. cities that has struggled to recover from massive declines in manufacturing, white flight, and suburban sprawl over the past 50 years. The city of Syracuse has among the highest poverty rates in the U.S., with particularly high rates among blacks (41.0% poverty in 2017) and Hispanics (45.1% poverty)². Median household income for the city of Syracuse was \$34,716 in 2017, compared to \$57,652 nationally. Table 1 illustrates the many byproducts of poverty that West Side residents face in comparison to the city of Syracuse and the United States.

Table 1. Syracuse's West Side is More Economically Disadvantaged than the Overall City of Syracuse and the U.S.

	West Side	Syracuse, NY	U.S.
Poverty	48.5%	32.6%	14.6%
In Poverty, Did Not Work in the Past Year	60.3%	44.9%	22.5%
Median Household Income	\$20,202	\$34,716	\$57,652
Home Ownership	18.6%	38.3%	63.8%
Received Bachelor's Degree or Higher	3.7%	27.4%	30.9%

Note: "West Side" refers to data from Census Tract 40.

Data Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey 5-year estimates, 2013-17

In October 2017, Nojaim Brothers Supermarket (Nojaim's), Syracuse's last independently owned full-service grocery store, went out of business. Located in the city's West Side - a low-income, predominantly African American and Hispanic neighborhood - Nojaim's provided direct employment, supported several community events, and implemented healthful food initiatives to try to meet the most pressing needs of neighborhood residents. The now vacant grocery store provided food, but it also served as social infrastructure - a site of cultural intersections and community engagement.³ One former member of a nonprofit organization that partnered with Nojaim's noted that, "While the food has been lost, the heart of that neighborhood has been lost in a way, too. And that is not easily, if ever, replaceable."

Food is the Least of their Worries

Understandably, members of nonprofit organizations and elected officials have been distraught that residents lost access to their neighborhood grocery store. A former member of a nonprofit organization working in the West Side reflected on Nojaim's closure and the future of food access in the West Side, stating that residents "had something that worked so well for them. I don't think there's any quick fix to this."

However, my research shows that the residents themselves "do not have the privilege to dwell

on [the closure]." According to the residents living in deep poverty with whom I spoke, access to and awareness of appropriate, healthful, and affordable foods should remain a priority, but their problems are bigger than food. Emergency food is partially responsible for shaping residents' priorities, as all residents I spoke with regularly attended both a food pantry and soup kitchen in the neighborhood. Most residents briefly reminisced on times when they had shopped at Nojaim's but were quick to steer conversations back towards more pressing issues in their lives. Consider the following examples from the lives of West Side residents I interviewed in my research:

Denise⁴, a 58-year old African American woman, said she was sad to see Nojaim's had closed and that she shopped there when she could afford to. She lives directly across the street from the store. She has had steady employment throughout her life, from working as an assistant at a doctor's office to working as a cook in a restaurant. After moving to Syracuse to take care of her grandchildren in 2015, Denise was diagnosed with a chronic foot injury and major depressive disorder. Denise stopped working in October 2015 to begin the process of filing for Social Security Disability Income (SSDI). Denise does not qualify for food assistance through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and currently lives in public housing. Although Denise qualifies for and has taken the

appropriate steps to access social welfare programs, her application has been denied multiple times. She remains fully reliant on food pantries and donated clothes, waiting indefinitely for state support. Denise told me that once she receives her SSDI, then she'll start to think about shopping for food again.

Charles, a 55-year old African American long-time Syracuse resident, used Nojaim's as a place to return bottles and cans that he had collected in affluent neighborhoods. He uses the container deposits to buy food. Charles is unable to find steady employment or permanent housing. He often attends job fairs that are geared towards people who have struggled to find work due to past drug and/or alcohol addictions, previous convictions, or mental illnesses. Charles spends most nights in a faith-based homeless shelter. He has applied for subsidized housing placement, but due to lengthy waiting lists and few housing options, he will likely remain on the waiting list for years. As for Nojaim's closing, Charles was most upset that he no longer had a close place to return bottles and cans on the West Side.

As Charles noted, people who are extremely poor tend to have a "lotta food, [but] no money." Emergency food programs, such as soup kitchens and food pantries, appear to be one of the most consistent aspects of West Side residents' lives. Longtime resident Walter,

below, calls attention to the lack of jobs that pay livable wages, limiting people from rising out of poverty:

"I get tired of scuffling from one month to the other. But there ain't no way out for me, because my income ain't gonna change. The only way out for me [is to get] another subsidized place and that's gonna take time because some [places] have three to five year long waiting lists. And can't no poor person afford that. Now they've got places you can go, but you've gotta pay unsubsidized costs. So, who can afford that? Poor people can't afford that. I retired a long time ago - I had no choice. My income ain't that much. After I pay [electric], my rent, and buy me a little food, [my money] is gone 'til the next month. And, you know, I be scuffling like that."

Residents' concerns go far beyond the lack of a grocery store to the multiple challenges imposed by living in poverty. Daily tasks of buying affordable, healthy foods are overshadowed by more pressing needs - finding a place to sleep for the night, applying for a job or state financial support, or figuring out how to pay the electric bill. To truly address poor health in low-income neighborhoods, we must move beyond food access to highlight other much more pressing difficulties faced by people living in poverty.

Data

Data came from 30 formal and informal interviews conducted in 2018 with members of nonprofit organizations, members of foundations, and West Side residents, as well as an 8-month participant observation of residents living in deep poverty in a low-income neighborhood in Syracuse's West Side. All demographic data presented are from the United States Census Bureau's 2013-17 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates.

Endnotes

1. United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service. 2009. Access to Affordable Nutritious Food: Measuring and Understanding Food Deserts and Their Consequences. Washington, DC: USDA. **and** Gottlieb, Robert and Anupama Joshi. 2011. *Food Justice*. Cambridge, MA and London, England: The MIT Press.
2. United States Census Bureau. 2018. *2013-17 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates*.
3. Baker, Chris. 2017, Sept. 13. Nojaim Brothers Supermarket to close shop in Syracuse after 98 years. Syracuse.com. Retrieved from http://www.syracuse.com/news/index.ssf/2017/09/nojaim_brothers_supermarket_to_close_shop_in_syracuse_after_98_years.html.
4. All names of West Side residents are pseudonyms.

About the Author

Katie Mott is a Graduate Fellow with the Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion in the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs and a master's degree student in the Food Studies Program in Falk College of Sport and Human Dynamics at Syracuse University. (klmott@syr.edu).

The mission of the Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion at Syracuse University is to improve population health through applied research and evaluation, education, engaged service, and advocating for evidence-based policy and practice change.