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Healthy Food Access in Milwaukee: Policies to Improve Physical Access to Healthy Foods

SUMMARY:

Healthy food is essential for good health, but individuals living in lower income zip codes in Milwaukee have a more than 9 times greater risk of reduced access to healthy food than individuals living in high SES zip codes. Key factors that contribute to poor access to healthy foods include transportation, cost of healthy food options, and the distribution of healthy food sources in the community. This policy brief introduces the current status of healthy food access in the city of Milwaukee and identifies three policy alternatives that could improve healthy food access for Milwaukee residents.

These policy alternatives address different challenges to healthy food access and include: 1) Corner store subsidies for the sale of healthy food products; 2) Small business grants to support urban agriculture business and employment development; and 3) Incentives to create and expand school and community gardens.

Introduction

Healthy food is critical for good health, but individuals living in lower income zip codes in Milwaukee have a more than 9 times greater risk of reduced access to healthy food compared to individuals living in high SES zip codes.¹ In the recent Elevate MKE Survey conducted by the City of Milwaukee Health Department, 40% of residents chose “Access to affordable and healthy food” as a top priority for the city. Public health research and advocacy organizations such as the County Health Roadmap also identify healthy diets as an important cornerstone of healthy lifestyles and healthy communities.²

Without adequate access to affordable and healthy food, Milwaukee residents are facing a preventable health disparity. Healthy foods such as fresh fruits and vegetables are important features of nutrient-dense, balanced diets.³ Diets high in fruits and vegetables and low in added sugars and fats are associated with lower rates of many chronic diseases including cardiovascular disease, cancer, and diabetes.^{4,5} However, without access to affordable and appropriate healthy foods, individuals can’t take advantage of the protective benefits of a healthy diet.

American cities like Milwaukee often have fewer supermarkets in their central cities than they do in suburban regions.⁶ Some urban neighborhoods with few if any local supermarkets also face challenges like low levels of car ownership and lower average incomes,⁷ compounding the effects of limited access to retailers with fresh, healthy, and affordable food. Small markets and corner stores available to many residents often do not provide affordable, high quality produce in these same areas.⁸

Healthy Food Access Barriers

Poor access to healthy food in urban centers, such as Milwaukee, can be attributed to a number of key causal factors. These factors include lack of available transportation, cost of healthy food options, and the distribution of healthy food in the community. Individuals living in communities characterized by multiple factors are more likely to have less access to healthy food options.

Individual Physical Barriers

- Physical or mental disability
- Lack of personal transportation

In 2014, 14% of individuals living in the City of Milwaukee had a disability.¹ In the U.S. in 2010,

Healthy Food Access in Milwaukee, 2016

there were an estimated 2.1 million households who did not own a vehicle but lived more than a mile from their nearest supermarket.⁹ In the City of Milwaukee alone in 2014, 18% of households did not have access to a private vehicle.¹⁰ These individuals must therefore rely on food outlets being within walking distance of their households; relatives or other community members providing transportation; mobile food/delivery services; or public transportation networks for obtaining healthy food options.

Economic Barriers

- Competitive pricing of healthy foods compared to non-healthy alternatives
- Household/individual poverty

Healthy food is often more expensive compared to foods containing refined grains, sugar, and fat.¹¹ Due to the lack of competitive pricing of healthy food options, individuals living with higher levels of poverty are less likely to be able to afford healthy foods. In 2014, approximately 25% of households in the City of Milwaukee lived under the poverty threshold and 9% of households in which the householder had a full-time job also lived below the poverty threshold.¹⁰ In order to supplement food costs for these families, 30% of households in Milwaukee received support from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).¹⁰ Individuals living in poverty are not only less likely to be able to afford healthy food options, but also lack the resources to travel to healthy food outlets.

Structural/Environmental Barriers

- The number/distribution of healthy food retail locations
- The presence or absence of reliable transportation networks

There are approximately 22.9 grocery stores per 100,000 residents in Milwaukee County, but these are not evenly distributed among high and low SES neighborhoods.¹² Residents of an estimated 68% of low-income census tracts do not live within 0.5 miles of a full-service supermarket.¹³ People living in low-income and/or minority neighborhoods are more likely to have poorer access to private vehicles and public transportation to reach full-service grocery stores.¹⁴

Current Policies & Programs

Preexisting policies that specifically deal with healthy food access within the City of Milwaukee are scarce. Nonetheless, in the proposed state plan “Healthiest Wisconsin 2020”, the calling for improved health outcomes through investment in wellness programs and access to healthy food options have remained key objectives in the current state plan. According to Healthiest Wisconsin 2020 focus areas, adequate, appropriate, safe and nutritional foods are essential to ensure healthy development among Wisconsin residents across a lifespan.¹²

In addition, both the Food-Share Wisconsin program and the Women Infant and Children’s (WIC) Farmers Market Nutrition programs address food access in Milwaukee. Both programs are means-tested and income-based. Program eligibility requires applicants to be at or below poverty guideline while also participating in job training while actively seeking employment.^{15, 16}

According to the U.S.D.A, in 2010 food insecurity affected more than 270,000 households in Wisconsin.¹³ Access to nutritional and healthy food remains an objective identified in the 2020 vision for Wisconsin. Policies implemented by local officials will likely determine if these health objectives will be achieved.

Currently Mayor Tom Barrett, has developed the HOME GR/OWN initiative. This program, spearheaded by the Environmental Collaboration Office (ECO), has set objectives on transforming neighborhoods by remaking vacant lots into community assets, which would in turn, promote economic sustainability. The initiative aims to link healthy local food access with green space development. This city ordinance has led to the repurposing of city owned vacant lots, allowing the growth and distribution of healthy food options in local areas. This initiative has been geared toward increasing new food-based businesses, improving community appearance by repurposing vacant lots, and linking growers and local markets to improve Milwaukee’s economic infrastructure.

In addition to Mayor Tom Barrett’s initiative, other grassroots organizations in the community are actively working to address food insecurity and

Healthy Food Access in Milwaukee, 2016

healthy food access in Milwaukee. Growing Power, founded by Will Allen, promotes education, healthy food access, and community well-being for local residents. Growing Power operates the Community Food Center, which employs community youth and teaches them how to maintain and grow healthy foods.¹⁶ The food that is grown is then sold at a low cost to nearby low socioeconomic communities.

Policy Options

Below are three policy alternatives that address key causal factors contributing to poor access to healthy foods in Milwaukee.

I. Corner store subsidies

Residents in many American cities, including Milwaukee, live in neighborhoods that lack grocery stores and other outlets that reliably stock appropriate, high quality, fresh produce.⁶ However, these neighborhoods often do have other food retailers such as convenience stores, corner stores and bodegas.¹⁷ Other cities such as Baltimore have employed public-private partnership to help these small businesses carry fresh and healthy foods that local residents' desire.¹⁸⁻²¹ Small scale convenience stores may already be interested in carrying healthy food products like fruits and vegetables but may lack the necessary infrastructure. ***In order to increase physical access to retailers, a policy alternative is a City of Milwaukee supported subsidy program for small food store owners in low access neighborhoods to encourage participation in a fresh fruit and vegetable sales program.***

In exchange for a commitment to dedicate retail space to fruits and vegetables in their stores for a minimum time period, store owners would be able to use a combination of low-interest loans and matching funds to purchase infrastructure related to fresh food sales similar to pilot program implemented in Baltimore.¹⁹ There is evidence that consumers will purchase fruits and vegetables at small stores.¹⁸ Limitations to this approach include challenges in recruiting and sustaining participation in a healthy food sales program if it fails to be profitable for the store owner.

II. Small business grants to support urban agriculture

Supporting a growing sector of urban agriculture businesses in Milwaukee would provide for improved access to healthy food options and also provide employment opportunities. Already in Milwaukee organizations like Growing Power, the Salsa Lady, and Cream City Farms are developing an urban agriculture infrastructure and programs. Urban agriculture entrepreneurs have also developed profitable business catering to urban markets including restaurants.²² ***A policy alternative that provides small business support urban agriculture and food production can impact access to healthy food.*** Currently, UW-Extension provides training with its Emerging Farmers program, and financial support in the form of small business grants could extend this work. This type of policy alternative would cultivate new business and employment opportunities in the community and provide financial incentives for new healthy food entrepreneurs. Previous USDA support for urban agriculture has spurred the development of healthy food resources in Chicago.²³ Limitations to this approach include a reliance on city funds to provide grant investments to start-up businesses.

III. Creating & expanding community gardens

Community gardens and school gardens provide access to healthy and fresh produce in places other than the grocery store. Community gardens, especially gardens located nearby schools, can help expose children to a wide range of fruits and vegetables. Community gardens can also help improve food security and provide servings of fruits and vegetables that would not otherwise be available.²⁴

A policy alternative to increase healthy food access through the creation, promotion, and integration of community gardens into communities could improve healthy food access. Community garden programs are associated with higher self-reported consumption of fruits and vegetables.²⁵ City investments in community gardens through improvements and new installations would further build on the success of both the Milwaukee Urban Gardens and HOMEGR/OWN partnership and the

Healthy Food Access in Milwaukee, 2016

new HOMEGR/OWN orchard parks. Limitations to this approach include the seasonal nature of gardening in Wisconsin and lack of access in winter months. Additionally, gardening may not be accessible to all individuals, such as individuals with limited mobility.

Endnotes

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