The formation of an urban food desert: Struggle for a just food system in Phoenix, AZ.

By Tommy Bleakdale and Sharon Harlan
School of Human Evolution and Social Change, Arizona State University, PO Box 87240, Tempe, AZ 85287

Introduction

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines a food desert as: a low-income census tract where a substantial number or share of residents has low access to a supermarket or large grocery store. Understanding urban food desert formation is an increasing priority for low-income communities, academics, and institutions such as USDA. This study will examine the historical development of three communities in Phoenix, Arizona, that have been classified as urban food deserts by the USDA and independent ASU research groups. The predominantly Hispanic and African American communities, located in historically Mexican-American areas to the south and west of the municipal center, are struggling with poverty and access to resources.

Methodology

Comparative historical analysis generally uses a qualitative historical recount to build a convincing argument and a quantitative element verifying the causal effects outlined in the historically based argument. Qualitative argument:

If cases of historical structural violence* took place across all three communities they may have set the conditions for modern food deserts.

"Structural violence is injury caused where there is no actor committing the violence or where it is not meaningful to search for the actor... It is said to be built into the structure."

Quantitative measurements:

Historic home ownership versus renting (shows absentee ownership).

Historic car ownership (shows ability to get to work and markets).

Historic poverty rates.

Three cases of structural violence

First Case: 1880 - 1939

Boosterism promising riches in farming coaxes immigration to Phoenix.

"Indians, blacks, Mexicans, and Orientals furnished a permanent low-cost labor pool for employers." - Charles G. Leland, 1899

Cotton busts would leave minority labor "starving, literally starving." - Carrington, 1930

Second Case: 1940 - 1979

Large tracts of farmland are subdivided and sold to individuals and land developers increasing dependence on imported food.

Small community grocery stores begin to be replaced by large supermarkets forcing grocers to find new lines of work.

Third Case: 1979 - present

Large chain supermarkets begin to go out of business in surrounding neighborhoods.

Many of the small stores left in these neighborhoods specialize in liquor with little fresh food available.

Conclusions

Multiple cases of historical structural violence plaguing these communities have been identified. These communities may never have been food secure and the process of urbanization has only accentuated their food insecurity. A full history and analysis is underway.

Works Cited


Acknowledgements

This project is generously supported in part by in part by NSF Grant No. GEO-0816168, Urban Vulnerability to Climate Change.