Regional Landscapes of Food Access in

Ontario

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Acknowledgements

I have spent this past semester in a program called the Ontario Program through my school, Pitzer College. Throughout this program I have learned about social justice issues, community organizations, community organizing approaches, and qualitative research methods. I have also had the opportunity to put all of these things into practice throughout Ontario and the Inland Empire. I would like to acknowledge and thank everyone with whom I have spent time and learned from throughout this semester.

I have spent numerous hours working with a program called Harvest and Deliver where I had the opportunity to spend time with and learn from the director, Sarah*1. I have really appreciated this time. I have also spent many days at Amy’s Farm and would like to thank farmers George* and Rolando* for the time they have spent with me and their help in my research. I would also like to thank all the members of Generations and Sandra Wolfsen* from Hunger Ministries for keeping me inspired with all the hard work they do in promoting food justice.

Finally I would like to extend my thanks to Lucy Block and my professors Susan Phillips, Tessa Hicks, and Tom Dolan for teaching me more than I could have imagined learning in one semester. With their help, I have realized my potential to affect change and have been inspired to take action in the communities in which I live.

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1 * Full names of study participants have been changed to protect confidentiality
Introduction

The aim of my research project is to determine whether a network of corner stores in low-income, food desert areas in Ontario, California can become a network for healthy food distribution. Research has found that high rates of diabetes and obesity are linked to food environments that lack grocery stores and available fresh produce and have a surplus of fast-food restaurants and convenience stores. It is also proven that the highest rates of obesity and diabetes occur in low-income communities where people live in poor food environments.² A community-based perspective takes into account local community members’ perceptions of need for increased access to healthy food and necessity for the various types of community food access projects that have started to form in the Ontario area. This project has been separated into two parts. The first part assesses the regional food landscape in and around Ontario, California. The second part is an action research project to assess at a micro-level the possibility of making over one or more stores and stocking them with locally grown produce. With this portion I have used existing assets of the community (i.e. corner stores and liquor stores) as possibilities for solving problems of food insecurity and poor nutrition.

My research included local food advocates and members of the general population encountered through interaction with food projects in Ontario such as Linda Vista Community Garden, Amy’s Farm, the Generations Project, and Harvest and Deliver. It also included members of communities that are considered food deserts and liquor/corner store owners. I chose the store owners based on the area surrounding the store, and spoke to community members who I met through the projects on which I worked.

This project is beneficial because its end goal is to provide healthy food options to members of communities where access is limited. The Inland Empire, and in particular Ontario, is a black hole in terms of both ethnographic research and social change work. Ontario is 77% Latino, but Latino voices continue to be underrepresented in the political process. This research is relevant to a broad spectrum of Ontario community members, as well as those interested in movements toward regional equity in the Inland Empire. Additionally, Ontario is a recognized food desert, and obesity in San Bernardino County is at 28%. This research dovetails with the existing goals of Healthy Ontario, as an initiative supported by the County of San Bernardino Public Health Department, to improve physical, social, and economic health and well-being in the region. Finally, this project will help people understand that the lack of healthy food and eating habits are not personal deficiencies, but that they are structural problems in our current food system. The changes we as food advocates are hoping to make are not about changing poor personal choices, but about making the right choices available to people.

Structural violence plays a strong role in food access, particularly in food injustice. Structural violence is violence that results from social structural systems and appears to be fundamentally built in inequalities. It is embodied in stress, health disparities, and often earlier death than in those not facing structural violence. This type of violence is masked in discourses of personal choice, making it hard to locate the blame. Structural violence comes into play in food access because low income neighborhoods tend to be located in urban centers, and resources are not always plentiful in these areas.

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Food deserts are areas in which access to fresh food is limited, nonexistent, or out of the affordable price range of residents. Liquor stores, mini markets with few to no healthy options, convenience stores, and fast food restaurants are plentiful in these areas, but supermarkets and other healthy food outlets are not. This lack of nutritional foods is detrimental to the health of a community and often causes obesity related, heart related, and other diseases. Structural violence prevents individuals in low income and poverty stricken areas to gain access to necessities. It is a way in which people are systemically denied essential resources, such as healthy food.

A possible approach to address structural violence and the food deserts that it has created is increased implementation of public transportation. Many people cannot travel to outlets for healthy food due to the distance from their homes and lack of a personal vehicle, and public transportation in Ontario specifically is far from ideal. Improving transportation would thus be an approach that would make the existing resources more available. The approach that I have taken with Market Makeovers is also attempting to address the problem of accessibility with resources already present. By stocking preexisting markets and corner stores with fresh produce from local, organic farms at affordable prices, people in low income communities will be able to easily access these foods. The ideal situation would be if the local government in Ontario would subsidize this project. By doing this they themselves would be addressing the problem of structural violence and they would also make the idea of a “corner-store conversion” more appealing to both market owners and farmers. In addition to economic development and supplying healthy foods in places in which it is not present, education of the community is essential in getting people to change their eating habits. If low income communities are aware of the health benefits of healthy food and if they know that it can be affordable, they will likely make better decisions about food choice. Through education, communities can be organized to
create a network of corner stores that provide healthy foods, community gardens can be started, awareness can be raised, and a number of other alternative methods of obtaining healthy foods can be generated.

With this food access project in conjunction with the Market Makeovers project, Ontario has the potential to move away from structural violence, at least on the side of food access. These food deserts can become more livable and detrimental health problems can be resolved. As the system is now, communities are unable to produce their own food, and most of the food that is available to them is of little to no nutritional value. The most important and effective way of alleviating these low income communities of their food insecurities is through awareness. If people know about the options that are available to them, they are likely to take action or at least consume more healthy foods.
Ethical Considerations in Research

When a researcher enters a community to do research, he or she must be aware of his or her surroundings and be sure not to offend or harm any of the people being studied. The five most important considerations a researcher should be cautious of and responsible for are: maintaining confidentiality, conducting a risk benefit analysis, assuring voluntary participation, giving full disclosure, and assuring that harm will be done to the persons or the community. In addition it is important that the researcher is aware of transparency and creating a balance between benefits and reciprocity.

The information I have used and obtained through my research is not of a very sensitive nature and ethical considerations were used when discussing issues of health and food choices. Participants are not personally identified in this report and names have been withheld in any written materials; they are identified as members of a given community or their names have been changed for privacy purposes.

The risks of this research are common to research in general. When people enter into a marginalized community to ask intimate questions about daily life, they must establish relationships of trust, openness, and honestly with community members. This is necessary in order to not act exploitatively or appear to be acting so. Food and eating are highly personal and closely connected with health, wellbeing, and culture, but during my research no sensitive issues arose. For these reasons it was necessary to act with respect and sensitivity, fully disclosing the purpose of this research, confidentiality, and how data is being used.
Research Methods and Methodologies

The methods I have used include mapping, informal interviews, formal interviews, and participant observation. I used mapping to determine the areas considered food deserts, transportation in these areas, and the demographics of the population that lives in them. I also used mapping to locate nearby food sources including supermarkets, food banks, mini markets, and liquor stores. I conducted informal interviews with all the people with whom I worked. This includes Sarah* from Harvest and Deliver, Alexandra* from Linda Vista, George* from Amy’s Farm, store owners with whom I was considering collaborating, Catherine* from Hunger Ministries, Linda* from Generations, and Scott* from Market Makeovers. The conversations I had with these people helped to guide my research project and decide the issues on which I ultimately chose to focus. My formal interviews were conducted with Sarah, Linda, and Karen*. These interviews were especially useful for my write-up as they provide more concrete and personal evidence and examples regarding food access in Ontario. Participatory observation was used to construct narratives about the projects and organizations with which I was interning. I used notes taken during the internships, at meetings, and in conversations with supervisors, staff, volunteers, and others. This method has helped me gain familiarity and insight into the various groups I worked with and helped make them more comfortable with my presence and my role as a researcher. I did participant observation primarily with Harvest and Deliver, Amy’s Farm, and Linda Vista by not only watching, but by helping harvest, farm, and garden and interacting with the community members.

The methodology that I used is critical. I think this is most appropriate because in a critical ethnography, the author is generally advocating for the emancipation of marginalized groups in society. In my research, I am advocating for people living in low income communities with

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5 * Full names of study participants have been changed to protect confidentiality
limited food access. A major goal of my research project is to make people in these food desert areas aware of the healthy options they are lacking and the importance of said healthy foods. As D. Soyini Madison writes, “Knowledge is power relative to social justice, because knowledge guides and equips us to identify, name, question, and act against the unjust”\(^6\). If these communities gain knowledge through any of the projects on which I am working, they will better be able to overcome the social oppression they are facing. Using the critical theory model, I hope this project has and will continue to provide healthy food options to members of communities where there is little access, bring about a concern for healthy eating habits, and help people understand that the lack of healthy food and poor eating habits are not personal deficiencies, but rather that they are structural problems in our current food system. I chose the critical theory model because it looks at all sides of an encounter, whereas a different methodology might focus on one aspect such as poor personal choices. I instead I am hoping to make the right food choices available.

A Review of the Literature

LIMITS TO FOOD ACCESSIBILITY IN THE U.S.

There has been and there continues to be disproportionately less access to healthy foods in low-income minority and mixed race neighborhoods throughout the United States. This leads to

poor diets and ultimately diet and obesity related diseases. The main causes of access issues are that large grocery stores with less expensive produce tend not to locate in low-income neighborhoods, which often happens to coincide with little access to transportation. Numerous authors have addressed the characteristics and causes of such areas, and how limited access affects local populations. However, there is still significant work to be done on how limited “limited” access is, long term effects of changes and responses to the issues of food accessibility, and much else.

According to the USDA, nearly six percent of all U.S. households did not always have the food they wanted or needed because of access related problems, and more than half of these also lacked enough money for food. Some poor or rural areas do not have access to supermarkets, grocery stores, or other food retailers that offer a variety of healthy and fresh foods, so they become reliant on small markets or fast food restaurants with limited options. Larson, Story, & Nelson assert that neighborhood residents who have better access to supermarkets and limited access to convenience stores tend to have healthier diets and lower levels of obesity. The limited variety in conjunction with higher relative prices of nutritious foods may cause populations in areas with limited access to adjust their diets based on their food environment. Mulligan et al. assert that, “Taken together, availability and affordability determine the total cost of food, or its

accessibility,” meaning that accessibility is not simply proximity. Prices of healthy foods have remained relatively constant through time, but prices of unhealthy foods have declined significantly making them seem less expensive. People tend to operate in terms of relative prices, so it would appear as if healthy foods are becoming more expensive. A third factor is the lack of public transportation. This further marginalizes the disadvantaged population and limits their options for food resources, excluding the neighborhood convenience store.

Twenty nine percent of zip codes nationwide do not have a grocery store or supermarket, and people tend to buy food at the places closest to them, even if what they prefer or need is not available. The USDA claims that these neighborhoods can be characterized by higher levels of racial segregation and greater income inequality. Larson et al. agree, saying that national and local studies have shown disparities according to income, race, ethnicity, and urbanization in access to food stores and restaurants. Low-income neighborhoods and predominantly minority and racially mixed neighborhoods have significantly less supermarkets than do predominantly White neighborhoods, but more small grocery stores and far more liquor stores. Stores in disadvantaged neighborhoods are less likely to sell healthy foods mainly because of the types of

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Local food environments vary substantially by neighborhood racial, ethnic and socioeconomic composition, which supports the notion that there is a socioeconomic “contextual effect” that should be considered when designing food access policy. Neighborhoods with greater need have poorer spatial access to the type of stores where greater selections and lower prices are available.

These “food desert” areas are caused by an inability to access affordable nutritious food due to distance from a supermarket or large grocery store, access to transportation, or high prices. The 2008 Farm Bill defines a food desert as an “area in the United States with limited access to affordable and nutritious food, particularly such an area composed of predominantly lower income neighborhoods and communities.” Winne asserts that poverty is the cause, as our food system is racist, classist, and sexist. The struggle for equity, access, affordability, healthy food, and food security will ultimately be won by those with the most at stake.

Limited access to nutritious food may be linked to poor diets and obesity and diet-related diseases, but the USDA proposes that easy access to all food, rather than lack of access to healthy foods, may be more to blame for increases in BMI and obesity. Residents of poor areas have more access to small grocery stores, small drug stores, and liquor stores, and less access to large grocery stores or supermarkets, and these smaller stores generally have higher prices.

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Additionally, many residents rely on public transportation which increases their monetary cost and the amount of time they must spend shopping.\textsuperscript{22} When access to healthy food is limited, households must spend more time and money to eat a nutritious diet, so many households choose to substitute unhealthy for healthy food to save resources, leading to elevated rates of overweight and obese people. The price gap is continually growing between healthy and unhealthy food; thus unhealthy food may be out of reach for many low-income families.\textsuperscript{23}

The USDA suggests that subsidy programs or restructured zoning policies may be effective solutions, and that a public health campaign could be useful in educating consumers about nutrition. States and localities have administered nutritional assistance programs as well as programs to increase access to affordable and nutritious food for underserved populations\textsuperscript{24}; however Winne declares that food banks are not the solution. Food banks are a symbol of our society’s failure to hold government accountable for hunger, food insecurity, and poverty, and what we as a society need is to provide a place to get healthy food to low-income neighborhoods. We need to provide subsidies to those who cannot afford the true cost of healthy, sustainably produced food.\textsuperscript{25} Alwitt and Donley propose that market incentives can encourage the retail outlets to locate in poor areas. Poor areas could provide great places for larger markets to expand.\textsuperscript{26}

The existing data and research are insufficient to fully understand how access, availability, and price together affect shopping and consuming behaviors, though it is evident that they are all factors. Studies are also needed to determine how food access affects diet, obesity, and other health outcomes, because there are parties that assert it is not the lack of food, but the food choices that lead to said health problems. Studies that use cross-sectional variation in prices of food and individual and neighborhood characteristics could help show how these factors interact to affect food shopping and intake.27 Finally, longitudinal data on various aspects of research on food deserts is scarce. Whitacre et al. write that a store that crosses from mainstream to a fringe store, or vice versa, has a big impact on a community, so it would be beneficial to study the long-term effects of transforming a liquor store or small market and providing produce to low-income communities.28 Longitudinal research is needed to track the same population over time as changes in their food environment occur. A study such as this would need to look at food choice, how it changes with incoming and outgoing resources, and the role of price.


Discussion

Within the Ontario area there are numerous opportunities for better food access in areas that are now considered “food deserts” or communities with limited access. Through a local food security consortium called Generations, I have been fortunate enough to meet a number of activists with tremendous visions and potential. Current projects include community gardens; local food banks; a project with various colleges called the Real Food Challenge, which aims to make twenty percent of the food on college campuses sustainable, organic, and local; and finally the Harvest and Deliver program. Food deserts are described by the USDA as urban neighborhoods and rural towns without ready access to fresh, healthy, and affordable food. This lack of access contributes to a poor diet and often leads to high levels of obesity and other diet-related illnesses. Food deserts are prevalent in the Inland Empire, and my research has allowed me to better understand this phenomenon though a number of existing food access related projects and a new project modeled after the Market Makeovers concept originally done in Los
Angeles. The factors of food insecurity I will discuss are the methods of distribution, access and affordability, rising need, charity and service based models, and the challenges and logistics of getting food.

Sarah, president of The Incredible Edible Community Garden nonprofit and Harvest and Deliver, believes that one solution to the food access problem that many low income communities are currently facing might be distributing produce personally and on a small scale. There is something I was reading...about a community or group that was able to purchase the largest vehicle bus that they could, and the bus was fitted out with all shelving and stuff inside there...produce and whatever they got...and this was produce that people picked, they were able to go and move throughout various communities. People would come in and they would purchase from there, and then all the sudden little community boards went up inside the bus that talked about recipes or talked about this or that or something else, and that was pretty cool, and the person that started this project is finding out that he’s getting sufficient people to come through because what he was offering was so affordable that he can actually run the bus, and I mean that’s kind of a neat way to do it...Why can’t we do that? If you can do it for an island, why can’t we do it for these food desert islands?²⁹

This response by Sarah alludes to the idea that if produce is available and affordable, it will be bought, so what needs to be done is to provide produce in the areas in which it is lacking. This is where the Market Makeovers idea, also known as a Corner Store Conversion, comes in. Mini-markets and liquor stores are prevalent in low-income communities so they act as a perfect agent with which to provide fresh and local fruits and vegetables. Sarah agrees that this is a promising model because these markets have the locations and are already established in communities,

²⁹ Petit, Mary. Personal interview. 19 Apr. 2012.
whereas a company from outside needs to find land and build their market or store which is a big expense.  

Though the locations of corner stores are ideal, one must consider multiple other factors in determining if they are a realistic option for healthy food distribution. A number of factors go into consumers decisions of what food to buy and where to buy it. These factors include food availability, which means how much there is and where it is located, and access, meaning the cost and how easy it is to get to. When asked about whether the Market Makeovers model is feasible, Sarah responded by comparing it to a system with which she is familiar. Sarah grew up in an Italian neighborhood in New Jersey where all of the food shopping was done in small corner stores. Everyone in the community knew everyone else and everyone knew who was selling what. People bartered for products and helped one another out. This is similar to corner stores in Ontario because the neighborhoods seem to have positive and trusting relationships with the store owners, so if stores provide more produce, and societies can get back to this system, it could work very well.

Karen, Environmental Studies and Anthropology professor, brought the Market Makeovers idea to the Ontario Program and shared her vision of making it happen in Ontario. She sees Ontario as the perfect location to perform a “corner store conversion” due to the systemic problem and the resources that are present.

That’s actually a real possibility in a place like Ontario because of how close you are to all that agricultural land, a lot of which is underneath preservation status, and so that’s the type of thing to me that makes the most sense, to provide through a network of stores that already exist, which there is an asset, and then another asset which is this agricultural

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30 Petit, Mary. Personal interview. 19 Apr. 2012.
31 Petit, Mary. Personal interview. 19 Apr. 2012.
land, and kind of combine the two together. So, I think there’s a lot of potential for that in that area, it’s just making it happen is the challenge.³²

Linda, a member of Generations and a strong advocate for food justice, somewhat jokingly suggests a model similar to the Star Trek economy as the solution to food deserts.

Star Trek economy is based on you know this whole idea of, it’s not altruistic, you just take care of the whole community, what you do is part of the common good and...I have some real issues about water and food being legislated or anything like that. I want to be able, part of my God given right is to be able to grow my own food and things like that.³³

When asked about the Market Makeover idea, Linda responded that it has much potential. Furthering Karen's point that Ontario is the perfect area, Eleanor asserts that right now is the perfect time and it is now that people will be open-minded about a change such as this. People will be more receptive than ever before because they are becoming interested in monitoring caloric intakes and nutritional values, so positive change should come out of providing outreach in these food deserts at this time.³⁴

All of the opportunities for food justice address the issue of access. Many people in low income communities do not have access to healthy foods because the places in which it is sold are far from their homes, or the price is too high. One of the places Harvest and Deliver provides for is the GAP (God Always Provides) Food Bank. It is located in an industrial area of Rancho Cucamonga, thus requiring some mode of transportation to get there. When asked about this issue, the woman who runs the bank, Margaret*, said that it is mostly working poor and underserved community members who use the resource, but not homeless or severely poor.

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³³ Torres, Eleanor. Personal interview. 19 Apr. 2012.
³⁴ Torres, Eleanor. Personal interview. 19 Apr. 2012.
There are few buses that run in the area, so if one does not have his or her own transportation, he or she does not have access.

In terms of prices, good local and organic produce has the tendency to be expensive, specifically in the case of Amy’s Farm. One of the missions of Amy’s Farm is to provide their farm workers with a living wage, and in order to do so they must sell their fruits and vegetables at prices higher than those at supermarkets, prices that low income families generally cannot afford. That being said, the head farmer, George is of the belief that quality produce should not only be available to wealthy people, but it should be accessible to everyone. For this reason he is on board with the Market Makeovers project and willing to negotiate prices so that underserved community members living in food deserts are able to purchase high quality, fresh, and local produce.

Sarah’s Harvest and Deliver program services low income communities in the most basic of ways. She helps provide food to those who do not have much. Directors of the food banks to which she provides have said that what she brings in is the freshest food some of these people have ever had. When asked how she sees her projects affecting communities, Sarah responded:

Well I think they benefit low income communities because I deliver the produce to local food banks, local shelters, local kitchens that provide for a combination of homeless, working poor, underserved in the community. So, and from the people that run many of these places they’ve indicated that they’re typically lacking in fresh produce, So, this is one way to provide accessibility and affordability of fresh produce to a group of people who do come to these places for their other food needs. Accessibility because they’re coming there anyway, so now they get that. Affordability because it’s free.35

35 Petit, Mary. Personal interview. 19 Apr. 2012.
Sarah looks at demographics to explain why food deserts are such an issue in the Inland Empire. There are a number of communities and people that due to either a lack of transportation or a lack of funds cannot access fresh produce.

I think we have to look at it differently, I’ve been reading a lot the past couple years about people, even in the government, wanting to provide programs where there’s incentives for people to open up fresh food markets in different areas, and that’s good to a point, though we have to look at it more holistically. It’s not just a matter of saying here’s an outlet that has fresh produce for you. Well, how do you get people to go there? It’s got to benefit both the seller and the user, the consumer.  

Sarah continues to explain that businesses will not and cannot afford to continue providing the fresh produce if it is not being bought, and if people cannot reach the stores in which to buy produce it will not sell. Even if the government is providing incentives for stores to open up in food deserts, the stores still need to budget. If sales go down, prices go up, and if prices go up, low income communities cannot afford to buy, leaving them in the same situation in which they started.

Karen brought the Market Makeover concept to Ontario in an effort to help address the food insecurity issues. She believes that liquor or corner stores can be a network for distributing fresh produce because communities already use them and owners and customers tend to have strong and trusting relationships. Further, they are in low income neighborhoods which makes them within walking distance of the people who do not have produce readily accessible. People currently walk from their homes to corner stores so they do not need cars, but to get to a supermarket they need to use a car or a bus. Not only is the public transportation system in

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36 Petit, Mary. Personal interview. 19 Apr. 2012.
Ontario in need of improvement, but it is also hard to travel by way of bus carrying large amounts of groceries. This model has been successful in East Los Angeles and elsewhere, so there is a lot of potential for its success in the Inland Empire. Karen speaks to how liquor stores can improve accessibility to healthy foods if people simply open their minds to the idea.

I think that people are too used to thinking of liquor stores as a drain on the community and I think to change, to use the one demonstration project to change the thinking about liquor stores is really the first step, you know that they’re an asset, they’re something that’s good, they’re something that’s present and they can be utilized for the greater good which is making good food available to poor people essentially.\(^{37}\)

Linda explains the importance of accessibility in discussing the misunderstandings that many people have about food. Most people are of the belief that organic healthy foods are expensive, so through all of Linda’s projects and the projects other people are doing, the goal has been to provide accessibility through affordable organic foods. Once people know how and where to get these foods, they can start providing it for themselves. This idea, Linda believes, is particularly important in these hard economic times and being able to provide can further empower people and raise awareness among communities.

Accessibility is being taken from us a little bit at a time in this country and we have to make sure, that’s why it’s really important to address the ‘food deserts’ and the whole need to you know keep pushing that awareness and everything for people.\(^{38}\)

One of the successful Market Makeovers projects, Yash La Casa Market, supplies seasonal produce from farmers markets as well as wholesale produce; things that were previously unavailable within walking distance to this particular neighborhood in East L.A. As

\(^{38}\) Torres, Eleanor. Personal interview. 19 Apr. 2012.
an alternative in Ontario, Amy’s Farm will be providing produce to the market in Ontario with which we are working. As an incentive to the market owner, the farm has offered to donate some of their extra produce as an experiment for a limited amount of time to see if people buy into the idea.

Sarah sees this issue of availability in mini markets as one of price, not only for the customers but for the store owner as well. If people do not buy, they will not provide, but not buying does not necessarily mean that customers are not interested. There is more to it than that.

Let’s take a look at people who provide...food. You know it’s a matter of dollars and cents to them. You may not get some of the large food chains that want to make an investment in a particular area with a store because they feel they’re not gonna have enough traffic through it to make it a profit, and part of the reason there’s not enough traffic is either one, people can’t afford what they’re selling the produce for, or number two, they can’t get there and many people are either walking or using a bike or they have limited transportation and there may not be sufficient public transportation to get them to places....So, there’s a lack of stores that will have the fresh produce.\(^{39}\)

Another reason that healthy food is not available in many low income areas is simply due to location. Linda explained, “It wasn’t unusual to hear how grocery stores don’t want to service those areas, and in fact you’ll find some of these gas stations will actually be much more money rather than...suburban areas...The inner city is much more problematic.”\(^{40}\)

The need for the aforementioned food access programs is definitely present in Ontario and the rest of the Inland Empire. Many low income community members not only do not have access to healthy fresh food, but a number of them also have little access to sufficient food in

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\(^{39}\) Petit, Mary. Personal interview. 19 Apr. 2012.
\(^{40}\) Torres, Eleanor. Personal interview. 19 Apr. 2012.
general. It is for this reason that Margaret, the woman who runs The GAP Food Bank, can feel good about filling bags with the donated cakes, chips, cookies, and other unhealthy snacks, as she says, “At the end of the day, it is calories that they need to survive.” Sarah, on the other hand, does what she can to provide more nutritious food because she feels that, “If I’m going to donate, it’s going to be healthy food.” A conversation with Margaret revealed that need in these communities seems to be rapidly growing; middle class people and others who never thought they would go to a food bank began needing to in order to feed their families when the recession hit in 2008.

It is difficult to assess the needs of a community without being a part of it. Many of the projects that members of Generation are working on as well as the Market Makeovers project are not necessarily community driven, but address needs that are clearly present. Though Sarah does identify as an outsider to the community, she has a good understanding of how she can most effectively help and the importance of community collaboration.

So I think people have to recognize the challenges, but for me for example and a lot of people, as an outsider to this community, you can’t go in and just say, ‘you know this is the solution to the problem.’ When you haven’t spoken to the community, you don’t really know what the problems are, and it’s important to engage the community into a discussion, and do several things. Recognize they have got to be part of the solution. They know what the problems are, they know what their priorities are, and if you step in and decide that you can help, you have to follow through on it until the end because if you don’t, then the next person that comes in, there’s less and less trust on the community
part to say, ‘oh yeah here we go again,’ you know, ‘this sounds good but then you’re going to leave and we’re still in the same situation.’ 41

Karen, too, recognizes that these projects, specifically the Market Makeovers project, are top down models of assessing community needs. This is not typically the approach that is promoted through the Ontario Program because an outsider cannot simply enter a community and assert what he or she thinks the problem is, but she believes that in the case of Market Makeovers, it can be most effective and create the most change. The model has been successful in other areas such as Los Angeles, so it should be replicable here in Ontario. 42

In terms of addressing the needs of the community, Karen says that she hopes and truly believes that this project will do just that. She sees what low-income communities in Ontario are lacking and the issues they are facing, and has found the means to provide a solution. People both inside and outside of food desert communities are finally starting to see the health issues that low income communities face. There are high rates of obesity, even among children, and there are issues around food and community health that need to addressed, and we have finally reached a point where the communities themselves realize this. 43

Projects such as Harvest and Deliver use excess food to provide for people who do not have enough. The larger idea of Harvest and Deliver is to take the fruit that families do not have the time to pick and give it to the needy. If it weren’t for this program, the fruit would fall to the ground and rot which leads to an influx of rodents, a loss of productivity for the trees, and hundreds of pounds of fresh fruit going to waste. When asked about the sustainability of her program, Sarah responded that, “They're sustainable from the standpoint that the trees are producing, the fruit is there, and certainly the need is there.” The program feeds thousands of

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41 Petit, Mary. Personal interview. 19 Apr. 2012.
homeless and underprivileged people each year with the help of volunteers, interns, and food banks. The produce is mainly donated to KidCare International, Heather’s Souper, The GAP Food Bank, and Hunger Ministries.

Food access affects everyone, but mostly the homeless, working class, and poor communities. Hunger Ministries is another group that services mostly homeless men, women, and children in the Pomona area. Catherine serves a big dinner twice each month and also cooks and serves to smaller groups. When I have asked about homeless people, she has told me that they are not starving because there are enough groups around like hers; homeless people know where free food is served and when, and will travel to get it. Generations’ most profound service to the homeless and working class population is the creation of community gardens all around the Inland Empire. These gardens give people a place to grow their food, something they may never have had the opportunity to do. The working class and other low income populations also address their food insecurities through food banks such as The GAP and KidCare International, to which Harvest and Deliver provides. Margaret has said that it is mostly the “working poor” who go to the food banks, meaning people who work “but still need help making ends meet.”

Charity and service based models are two of many ways to give back to the community and help those in need, and they tend to be religiously based. The members of Generations are partners in a number of projects such as the food banks and other food donation sites mentioned above, as well as: the Friendship Garden at First Mennonite Church, Northkirk Presbyterian Church Memorial Garden, the Incredible Edible Community Garden, Redeemer Lutheran School Orchard, Linda Vista Community Garden, and a potential community garden at The Church of Second Chances. The GAP is one of the largest food banks in the Inland Empire and it feeds about three hundred and fifty families per week, mostly from donations. Hunger Ministries is run
out of St. Ambrose Church in Claremont and serves food to about one hundred homeless men, women, and children on the second and fourth Tuesdays of every month. The woman who runs the ministry, Catherine, receives most of her food donations from stores like Costco as well as local and individual deliveries. The Friendship Garden is a small community garden located behind the church which was started recently but has plans to grow in the future. The goal is to make it a living food bank which gives homeless and underserved communities a place to grow their food.

These charities and community gardens are all wonderful sources for food and they help a huge number of people, but as with any charity based model, there are negatives. Volunteers come and go and can be unreliable. Many people will help as much as they can, but all the collaborators I have spoken to mentioned that most of their volunteers cannot help on a consistent basis, thus leaving them sometimes understaffed and less productive at times than they might want to be. The biggest challenge Sarah has faced in her particular project, Harvest and Deliver, is finding someone to be an equal partner with her. This would be beneficial because she and her partner could either work together or switch off every other week so to increase availability and productivity. She notes something promising about what she is doing; how she has unintentionally spread awareness about the importance of providing fruit to underserved communities by simply doing what she has been doing.

One thing that is really encouraging to me because I’ve been doing this for three years now, and several of the people that otherwise would just have the fruit fall or you know have others come and take it, when I ran into some scheduling situations...they called me and said, ‘where do you deliver to and I’m happy to take it there,’ Now that didn’t happen before but it happened now so that was very encouraging...I was so gratified to
find that these were people that if I couldn’t do it, they pick their fruit...Part of the...reason they didn’t pick before is they said, ‘what are we going to do with it?’ They just throw it in their trash, but now if they have a place to bring it, they’re getting some satisfaction out of that, so that’s nice.\textsuperscript{44}

Despite the encouraging and positive aspects of charity, Sarah is able to recognize the aspects that are frequently criticized, but she feels that the positives outweigh the negatives. People often see charity as an enabler, allowing people to be homeless and stay homeless without any motivation to get out of their situations. She admits that she does enable some, but there are homeless men and women who want to do everything they can to get out of their situation, and will even help pick fruit or work at the kitchen or food bank or do whatever else they can to contribute to the sources from which they are benefitting. This group of people does not want handouts unless they have no alternative, and this is the group that Sarah is really looking to help.

And then there’s a group that you know are so far into their abyss that they may not be able to work their way out of it, and what do you do? It’s kind of like you’re walking along the street in a city or anywhere and you have somebody that’s laying on the street that’s homeless that’s got a sign that they need some food or what have you. Do you step over them? Or do you try and provide something?...You know, you can’t do it with everybody but the way I figure it is I’m one, I can do what I can, and I will do what I can, and if everybody felt that way there’d be so much more that can be done for people. So yeah, some are enabled and will take advantage of the system, but you have that in all walks of life...I’m going into it with my eyes wide open and recognizing, yeah I’ll get

\textsuperscript{44} Petit, Mary. Personal interview. 19 Apr. 2012.
taken advantage of in some cases, but that’s not going to jade me into thinking I’m not going to do this for anybody.\textsuperscript{45}

As a way to address to the controversial opinions of charity that Sarah speaks of, Eleanor describes how she approaches her service work. She sees organizing and charity as somewhat the same thing. Eleanor quoted the proverb, “Give a man a fish he eats for a day, teach a man to fish, he eats for a lifetime,” in describing how she models her programs. “My programs have always, always had that ethic in it.” She approaches change with the idea that a top down model can be effective, and is sometimes even necessary to make change happen in a community.

There’s two different types of classes in terms of making change happen within a community in terms of governance. You either do it from the top down which means change will last longer...or you do it from the bottom up. There’s a possibility that by the time you get everybody to make that change it may not last as long because of how brittle sometimes community organizing can be. So what you’ve done is taken a top down approach with a community, kind of a grassroots issue, and brought us to middle ground. And if it’s done well, it can be done effectively.\textsuperscript{46}

Non-profits help in the same way charities do, but tend to also have an educational facet. Heather of Heather’s Souper keeps this learning aspect of giving in mind in her goals for future projects. She aims to start up a nonprofit and develop a “transition shelter” modeled after an agency in Santa Barbara that offers free room and board, so long as people are working to get off the ground and get employed. Currently, Heather serves breakfast to homeless men and women every Saturday and is providing a number of other services. In aiding with the homeless community Heather has encountered both personal and logistical struggles. She recognizes that

\textsuperscript{45} Petit, Mary. Personal interview. 19 Apr. 2012.
\textsuperscript{46} Torres, Eleanor. Personal interview. 19 Apr. 2012.
she has made mistakes in her efforts and that her efforts will not always work out as planned. Some people simply do not want to get out of their situations, and she has become okay with that. The biggest impact she is making is by offering part or full time jobs to people who need them and cannot otherwise get jobs. This is beneficial in making them able to create a resume, get training, start a bank account, and do whatever else is necessary to become eligible members of society.

Despite the success of all these projects, it is still important to create a model where people are helping themselves. The Market Makeover model is an example of this, and along with its potential, it does face many logistical issues. The responses I got from most market owners in Ontario were: there is not enough space in the market; they do not have any extra refrigeration; they do not want to spend money because they do not think they will make a profit selling produce; fresh food goes bad and canned food does not; and people come to liquor stores and mini markets for snacks and alcohol, not produce.

The mini markets, liquor stores, and corner stores in Ontario supply predominantly canned goods, packaged products, dried beans, household items, alcohol, and tobacco products, but little to nothing that is fresh. If they provide any produce it is minimal, such as lemons and limes for alcoholic drinks or a few wilting oranges and bananas. Depending on the location, these markets can serve as simply a place to purchase alcohol, an outlet to visitors at a nearby hotel, or a family’s staple grocery store. This is where the problem lies; if all of a family’s food is bought at one of these markets, this family cannot be eating healthy. Of the store owners I spoke with, the majority of them asserted that people will go to supermarkets if they want produce, unaware of the fact that many people cannot do that. The owners therefore will not provide produce because they feel that it will not be bought. If the donation of produce from
Amy’s Farm to a market is successful, and the market is making a profit from the produce, the market owner will begin purchasing from the farm and potentially from elsewhere on a regular basis. If community members start buying the newly added produce, it will prove to store owners that people do want fresh food and that it was simply an issue of inaccessibility.

The high school students that worked on the successful markets in East L.A. outlined some additional issues that they had to overcome. The first step of the process was to get to know the business, customers, and owner with whom they wanted to work before approaching with a proposition. This was a challenging process for them but has proven to be especially difficult with the project in Ontario because of the limited amount of time with which I was working. Next the students needed to convince the store owner that the change would enhance business and the profile of the store. In their case this was not much of a challenge because they quickly found an owner who was conscious of the social issues and health concerns facing customers and the surrounding neighborhoods. In my case it took about fifteen different tries to find an owner with this awareness and these priorities. Once the store owner was sold on the idea, the challenge was to balance price and quality of the produce and to find five to ten thousand dollars for refrigeration. They were able to get this money through grants and a partnership with UCLA. Money is still a factor in the project in Ontario, but the outcome is looking promising because the market owner is very active in the community and positive about the idea of supplying fruits and vegetables.

The next hurdle for this project is going to be bringing in community members and making sure this model is at least partially community driven. Sarah is not entirely convinced that this project will benefit the communities because making something available does not necessarily mean that there is interest.
There is an education process. Just because you have a place and there’s fresh produce doesn’t mean people are going to come. So there’s part of an education process, but I do think there is much more awareness with the youth in the community who are starting to see their parents and their grandparents and even their siblings and their selves starting to suffer the effects of poor nutrition, and they don’t want that to happen, and I think that they may be the group that tends to encourage their parents and grandparents far more to have healthy foods in the house.47

That being said, Sarah admits that working with the community is a challenge. It takes a lot to gain a community’s trust and once it is gained, one has to fully commit to the project. “It’s like once you start the process and people get used to that and then they don’t see it...if it were me, my heart would sink.” This is very valid with the Market Makeover idea because in the beginning the market will be receiving the produce for free as an experiment to gage community interest, but if the owner decides to discontinue the supply due to a lack of revenue, those community members who were interested will be let down. This is just another factor that has to be considered in a community driven project.

The concerns that Karen sees to be most prevalent are finding the store owners and farmers who will be interested in this project.

I mean the thing that’s risky about being a store owner in this economy is that any time you tip the scale a little bit one way or the other, you put yourself at risk, and the same thing is true with farmers. Farmers are eking out a living, barely able to exist usually, and so to tip things one way or another is dangerous.48

47 Petit, Mary. Personal interview. 19 Apr. 2012.
Throughout the semester I have found a store owner to commit and a farmer to commit, but it has been a challenge. One needs to address every concern that both farmer and owner have had and will continue to have, and even with these two community members secured, there will continue to be barriers. The issue of funding still needs to be addressed after the “trial” period of free produce from the farm, transportation and delivery of the produce needs to be addressed, and more community engagement needs to be done. When asked what could be done if this project does not succeed Karen had a rather positive response, “I mean if it doesn’t work this time, it may be that it wasn’t the right time, it may be that we need different types of resources. We would have to figure out why if it didn’t happen.” The Market Makeover idea is possible in Ontario and it will take time, but the first steps are done and with all of the resources available in the area, the next steps will come soon.

**Conclusion**

This research is significant because it addresses a major social and health concern of low income neighborhoods in Ontario. If corner stores can become a network for healthy food distribution, the needs of food desert communities can be largely addressed. Through my work this semester I have been able to identify a market with which to work on the corner store conversion project. I have also spoken with a farm that is willing and able to supply this market with fresh, local, organic produce. Finally, I have found a suitable refrigeration system for the produce that will be supplied in the market and have found a probable source of funding. The next steps in this project will be solidifying the funding for refrigeration, finding a means to transport the produce to the market on a regular basis, gaining more community engagement, and tracking whether the produce is selling or not and why. Because securing a market and a farm to
work with was a more recent development, I have not yet been able to see the reactions of the community. If the newly implemented fruits and vegetables are selling within the next couple of months, the project has been successful and ideally the market owner will start paying to supply the produce on a regular basis. If the produce does not sell, the next students to work on this project will need to evaluate the situation and work to identify what the deterring factors are.