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Critical review

Towards a public food infrastructure: Closing the food gap through state-run grocery stores



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ABSTRACT

There has been a national movement towards closing the grocery gap through public-private partnerships. In this short review, we consider the limits of these interventions in addressing the economic barriers shaping food access and contend that the weaknesses are rooted in the politics of the neoliberal state. We then introduce the concept of the affirmative state and the examples of the military commissary and state-run alcohol stores to legitimate the notion that state-run grocery stores can overcome the limits of conventional grocery gap interventions.

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1. Introduction

A food desert trope has emerged that conflates poverty, diet-related diseases, and lack of access to produce (Guthman, 2011; Shannon, 2014). This relationship is also known as the food gap or the grocery gap (Treuhaft and Karpyn, 2010; Winne, 2008).² Many initiatives have emerged in the U.S. to combat this new social problem, including, community supported agriculture (CSA) programs, farmers' markets, community gardens, urban farms, and cor-

ner store and street vendor conversions (Dannefer et al., 2012; Fuchs et al., 2014; Fisher, 1999; Fisher and Gottlieb, 1995; USDA, 2001). Yet, none have had as much municipal, state, and federal support, discursively and financially, as policy interventions to bring grocery stores and supermarkets to underserved communities through low-cost financing, tax abatements, and zoning exceptions. The Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI), the Healthy Food, Healthy Communities (HFHC) Fund, and the Food Retail Expansion to Support Health (FRESH) program are illustrative of such initiatives.³

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² The food gap refers to a lack of access to produce, be it due to an absence of a farm stand, farmers market, urban farm, corner store, or grocery store. The grocery gap refers specifically to a lack of access to a grocery store.

³ HFFI is a federal program. HFHC is a New York State initiative. FRESH is a New York City program. These are just three of numerous financing interventions modeled on the Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative (FFFI), which emerged in 2004 as a public-private partnership to reduce financial costs and operating barriers for grocery retailers in low-income communities, brought 88 new or improved grocery stores to such neighborhoods, and has been nominated for as well as won several prestigious awards (Karpyn et al., 2010).

We question the logic behind and the merits of these grocery gap initiatives (GGI) based on recent scholarship as well as our own research in two underserved low-income communities in New York City, which finds that bringing a grocery store to a low-income community does not necessarily increase food access in a meaningful way because price points are still too high (Alkon et al., 2013; Cummins et al., 2014; Caruso, 2014; Myers and Caruso, 2014; Myers and Sbicca, 2015). We contend this occurs because GGI are rooted in a neoliberal state that creates a good climate for business by reducing “regulatory and tax burdens”, a logic that has constructed programs that focus on subsidizing retailer profits first and foremost, conflate geographic access with economic access, and fail to address the economic and political policies that produce the grocery gap in the first place. To address this problem we shift the focus away from neoliberal GGI towards an affirmative state that values “egalitarian social justice” (Fung and Wright, 2003: 4). Such a state, we contend, could restructure GGI to focus on lowering economic barriers to food access by creating state-run grocery stores modeled on the military commissary and state-run alcohol stores that would sell food at lower prices than comparator private stores. We contend that this conceptual move, when combined with these two examples, provides a philosophical as well as a practical foundation for how the state can increase economic access to fresh affordable produce in low-income communities.

2. Addressing the grocery gap

From the 1930s through the 1990s redlining, urban renewal, benign neglect, and planned shrinkage destroyed the built environment, social networks, and economic worth of low-income Black and Latino communities, while the government simultaneously shifted mortgage, transportation, and development dollars towards the affluent White suburbs (Fullilove, 2005; Jackson, 1987; Massey and Denton, 1993; Sugrue, 1996; Thabit, 2005). The legacy of these private and public policies is a racial wealth gap that continues to limit educational and employment opportunities for and the buying power of Black and Latino communities (Conley, 1999; Oliver and Shapiro, 2006; Shapiro, 2005). Another outcome of this racialized investment strategy is the movement of grocery stores from low-income urban areas towards the affluent suburbs (Alwitt and Donley, 1997; Cotterill and Franklin, 1995; Curtis and McClellan, 1995; Eisenhauer, 2001; Weinberg, 1995). This restructuring of the food environments of low-income urban communities has had a negative effect on the quantity and quality of produce available to residents as well as the prices they must pay for such produce (Block and Kouba, 2006; Chung and Myers, 1999; Hendrickson et al., 2006; Zenk et al., 2006).

Despite the economic and political roots of the grocery gap, research on and the discourse surrounding the topic have overwhelmingly focused on the barrier of geographic access (Treuhaft and Karpyn, 2010; USDA, 2009; Walker et al., 2010). This is beginning to change though, as recent research has underscored that economic access may be the primary barrier. Cummins et al. (2014) investigated the outcomes of a Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative (FFFI) funded grocery store in a low-income predominantly Black community in Philadelphia. The study found no significant effects on daily fruit and vegetable intake and attributed this to the limits of addressing geographic access without also addressing economic access. A key finding was that price points were still an issue despite the FFFI program, which led the authors to recommend that “the development of new food retail stores should be combined with initiatives focused on price and availability” (Cummins et al., 2014: 289). An earlier article by Alkon et al. (2013) that focused on the flatlands of Oakland and the West and South sides of Chicago had similar findings. A summary of five sep-

arate studies, the article underscored that residents valued price and quality over convenience and subsequently traveled outside of their underserved communities to shop at grocery stores that offered better prices and higher quality produce. Through qualitative interviews with residents they found that geographic access was not the only, or even the primary, barrier to fresh produce access, it was lack of disposable income and therefore the price point of food. These findings led the researchers to call for “efforts to increase the buying power of low-income people and to decrease the price of healthy foods” (Alkon et al., 2013: 134). Similar research has emphasized that price points are a key factor shaping food purchases (Powell et al., 2009; Caspi et al., 2012), and that having a locally appropriate pricing structure is important when trying to increase fruit and vegetable consumption in low-income communities (Morland, 2010). Such changes could enable low-income residents to purchase more affordable and higher quality food without having to leave their communities (Barnes, 2005; People’s Grocery, 2012; Pratt Planning Studio, 1996; NYCDPC, 2010; Social Compact Inc., 2008).

In addition to these studies, we have been engaged in several years of qualitative research on the food environments in two communities underserved by grocery stores, Queensbridge, Queens, and East New York, Brooklyn (Caruso, 2014; Myers and Caruso, 2014; Myers and Sbicca, 2015). Through interviews and conversations with residents in these communities, as well as use of secondary sources, we have found that grocery stores have failed these communities in their absence as well as their presence. In these communities grocery stores are few and far between but they are also known for selling produce and meat whose prices are high and quality is low—including produce, milk, and bread that is spoiled, expired, and moldy. As a result, many residents leave their respective communities and shop at larger chain stores in adjoining neighborhoods that offer better quality at a lower price.

3. The grocery gap, the role of the state, and a public food infrastructure

Overall, grocery stores, with or without public subsidies, have been unable to fully realize economic access for low-income communities based on the intersection of the political economy of grocery retailing and the racialized distribution of income and wealth. We therefore support the critiques of scholars who contend that attempts to bring grocery stores back to low-income communities solely through financial incentive programs without either increasing the incomes of residents or lowering the prices of produce will have limited success in improving food access (Alkon et al., 2013; Cummins et al., 2014; Myers and Sbicca, 2015). We build on these critiques by proposing that one way to lower the price of produce for low-income communities, and thereby increase economic access to produce for such communities, is through the creation of a state-run grocery store modeled on the commissary and the state-run alcohol store.

Historically, upon realizing that the market has failed to provide quality services to low-income communities, that the market is unable to address collective action problems, or that certain goods and services should be publicly provided, the state has stepped into either subsidize the market costs of or directly deliver these goods and services (Wright and Rogers, 2010).⁴ For instance, public education, public libraries, public transportation, municipal water and sewer systems, fire departments, Medicaid, Medicare, and social security. All of these are examples of the state creating a robust public infrastructure that has been integral to creating a basic

⁴ These outcomes have generally been due to the efforts of bottom up social movements or enlightened public employees and officials.

standard of living, reducing or eliminating the negatives associated with poverty and inequality, as well as facilitating the conditions for upward structural mobility in the United States (Massey, 2006; Wright and Rogers, 2010).

While a public infrastructure for education, transportation, safety, and retirement are now taken for granted aspects of everyday life, food is not. We seek to change this reality by advocating on behalf of and pushing for the creation of an affirmative state, “a state that plays an energetic and positive role in the society in solving collective problems and advancing public purposes” (Wright and Rogers, 2010: 388). Accordingly, rather than pursuing private gain and radical individualism, an affirmative state sees the “well-being of all citizens... as part of a collective responsibility” (Wright, 2006: 1), and is guided by a politics that embraces “egalitarian social justice, individual liberty combined with popular control over collective decisions, [and] community and solidarity” (Fung and Wright, 2003: 4). To realize these values, the affirmative state would actively intervene into the creation and regulation of markets, the distribution of income and wealth, and the distribution of power within the workplace and electoral process in order to realize economic and political democracy, increase the social and economic security of its citizens, and create a robust public infrastructure to address social needs (Fung and Wright, 2003; Wright, 1998, 2006, 2013).

The problem is that over the last several decades the state has stepped away from being an affirmative state attuned to combating inequities and meeting social needs and moved towards being a neoconservative state that consolidates White privilege and a neoliberal state that prioritizes economic growth over social equity. It has thus become an advocate for “free markets” over public goods and services, and provides massive tax breaks and public subsidies to private corporations instead of creating social supports for its citizens (Harvey, 2005; Massey, 2006; Wright and Rogers, 2010). With regards to food access, this has meant cuts to food stamps, increased restrictions on food stamp usage and eligibility, privatizing the food safety net, and creating an economy built around poverty level wages for millions of Americans (Berg, 2008; Massey, 2006; Poppendieck, 1999; Wright and Rogers, 2010). To counter these inequities and realize food access for low-income communities requires a turn away from the neoconservative and neoliberal state towards the affirmative state, a state that not only sets the conditions for how markets operate, corrects market failures, and steers markets towards reducing poverty and inequality, but also de-commodifies certain aspects of life or lowers their market costs based on a human rights framework that privileges social need. Given that the grocery gap is a public bad as well as collective action problem, and that the population sees equitable food access as a social good (Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota, 2015; Hart Research Associates and Chesapeake Beach Consulting, 2014), it falls upon the state to enact a solution to an issue that is clearly a negative effect of the current structure of U.S. society. We turn to the history and politics of the commissary and the state-run alcohol store for insights into what an affirmative state can build upon to realize economic access to food for all.

4. Alternative model I: The commissary

The commissary found on military bases sells goods at cost to any military family member, active or inactive, charges no sales-tax, and instead levies a five percent surcharge on groceries to fund the creation of new stores and the maintenance of existing stores (DeCA, nd). Such an economic model produces prices that are generally 30 percent lower than prices found at traditional grocery stores. Of particular note is that this thirty percent difference is a bit more than the gap between the USDA's Thrifty Food Plan and Low-Cost Food Plan and a bit less than the gap between the USDA's

Thrifty Food Plan and Moderate-Cost Food Plan (USDA, 2015). Consequently, commissaries in underserved communities would lead to an increase in purchasing power for community residents who shopped there and thereby improve food access.

The history of the commissary also underscores the state's long-term role in shaping food systems in order to improve food access. While most citizens are aware of the food stamp and school food programs, both of which exemplify the logic of an affirmative state, they are less knowledgeable about commissaries and their role in realizing food access for military families. If the state can intervene in markets for the sake of improving nutrition and educational attainment for children (school breakfast and lunch), food security for the poor (food stamps), and food access for military families (commissary), we contend that the state has the obligation, and the capacity, to improve food access for all low-income families through a civilian commissary.

5. Alternative model II: The state-run alcohol store

Currently there are 17 US states that maintain some control over the retail of wine and liquor (Maynard, 2013). These “alcohol control states” established retail venues to sell various alcoholic products after the demise of prohibition in 1933, in order to remove economic incentives to maximize profits and with it the consumption of alcohol products (NABCA, nd). Despite this history rooted in public health concerns, research on these retail stores suggest they operate much like conventional privately owned liquor stores and have been successful in meeting consumer demand, keeping consumer costs down, and at the same time providing a source of revenue for the state (NH Liquor Commission, 2009; Zardkoohi and Sheer, 1984). Moreover, states have found that these existing venues are well accepted by residents because they are able to blend into the commercial fabric while providing good value for customers through the buying power allowed by their scale (NABCA, nd). These positives, if translated into food retail, would be a major benefit to communities underserved by grocery stores.

It is our contention that these state owned and operated retail venues can serve as a model for expanding food access and creating a public food infrastructure under the auspices of the state. Research on state-run alcohol stores have found that they are successful in limiting the public bad associated with drinking—lower rates of alcohol consumption, lower rates of alcohol-related vehicular fatalities, and lower rates of domestic abuse and aggravated assaults (Zullo et al., 2013). State-run grocery stores could mirror these benefits through expanding the public good associated with food access—reducing rates of hunger and food insecurity, increasing the educational success of youth, and improving the overall physiological and psychological health of communities.

6. Conclusion: Embracing a public food infrastructure

Low-income communities have long struggled to obtain quality produce at affordable prices. A key factor creating these food access issues lies in the political economy of food retailing and racialized income and wealth gaps, which have pushed grocery stores towards more affluent areas with higher profit margins. The dominant solution to this grocery gap has been the creation of public-private initiatives to subsidize the costs of grocery store development and operation in low-income communities. Despite these efforts, the limited research on these interventions, as well as existing scholarship on the food environments of low-income communities, underscore that merely bringing a grocery store to a low-income community may not, in and of itself, substantially increase food access. Given the structures shaping disposable income and store profitability, price points may still be too high.

To address this problem we put forth a proposal to include food retailing within the concepts of the public good and public infrastructure, along the lines of education, transportation, safety, and retirement. Through such a shift we intend to move the state away from a neoliberal state that primarily subsidizes the profits of private actors towards an affirmative state that addresses collective action problems, minimizes public bads, and works to create public goods through state-run alternatives to the market. We utilized the commissary to examine one case of an already existing state-run food retail system, albeit targeted to a specific subpopulation, while the state-run alcohol store presents a retail form that is available to the general public and has been effectively run in many states for several decades. Taken together, these two retail forms point to the possibility of an effective state-led intervention to increase the affordability of food, improve food quality, and overcome the limits of a purely neoliberal/geographic access approach that bogs down the success of current public-private GGI.

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