

A History of Food Insecurity in West Oakland, CA: Supermarket Location

Andrea Fuller

Abstract Within the last 30 years, the issue of food security has been important in the discussion of poverty in the United States. Inner cities have been prime locations where the lack of access to healthy food for low-income residents has been evident. West Oakland, a region of Oakland, California mainly populated with low-income families and individuals is a community experiencing food insecurity. This study investigates local food access, with regard to supermarket and convenience store locations. This study is not an assessment of West Oakland's food insecurity, but an examination of when major transitions occurred in local history leading to the present state of food insecurity. Comparison of population size and supermarket and convenience store location is used to locate possible times of transition, beginning with 1940. Linking local history and the perspectives of community elders to numeric data exhibits strong evidence that food access became a community wide problem before the late 1970's and early 1980's. The late 1970's and early 1980's have been noted to be the major transition point for the majority of inner cities researched in food security, due to supermarket relocation out of these communities. Identifying another transition time and mechanism may be helpful in prevention of food insecurity for similar communities and may be useful in aiding communities working toward food security.

Introduction

A common sight in an inner-city neighborhood is that of a liquor store with people loitering around its entrance. Far less common is the sight of a supermarket with customers entering and exiting busily. Abandoned buildings condemned to generations of misuse are also a part of inner-city landscape. One may stop and wonder what these buildings once were and what services they provided. Could it have once been a market that provided several jobs to community members and supplied neighborhood families with a broad selection of foods at a reasonable price? Maybe such an image is a stretch of the imagination, but perhaps this was the case. Many of today's inner-city neighborhoods no longer have supermarkets, but only a number of high priced convenience stores. By a number of standards developed by independent researchers, community organizations and various levels of government, these communities are considered food insecure (need citation).

What Does it Mean to Be Food Insecure The concept of food insecurity relates to the ability of individuals or households to obtain adequate access to food. There are several different definitions that explain what it is to be food insecure. Food security has been defined as “access to nutritionally adequate food at affordable prices”(White, 2003), “all people obtaining a culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet, through non-emergency food sources at all times,” (Curtis, 1995), and a few other variations of these. A panel of experts assembled by the Life Sciences Research Office of the Federation of American Societies Experimental Biology, developed this definition of food security in 1990:

Access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life and includes at a minimum: (1) the ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, and (2) the assured ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways (e.g., without resorting to emergency food supplies, scavenging, stealing, and other coping strategies). (NeHAUSER, et.al., 4)

Different components contribute to food security including the location of food sources, the type of food available at those food sources, the prices of food items, and transportation to these sources. Food security is also related to the financial or legal limitations to gaining access to food sources. In “Falling Through the Safety Net,” Curtis and McMellan state that “food security takes into account both community and individual resources including adequate personal income, access to transportation, cooking and storage facilities, as well as the existence of competitively priced food, nutritious culturally acceptable food choices, and adequate local conventional food

sources” (Curtis, 1995). Many low-income communities in the United States have a lack of grocers that supply a variety of foods at affordable prices, which would fall into the category of “adequate local conventional food sources.” This paper explores this reality in the history of West Oakland, California.

The system by which the majority of Americans envision fellow citizens obtaining food has a scarce presence in low-income inner-cities (Fisher, 1997). In an article entitled, “What is Community Food Security,” Andy Fisher writes, “Supermarkets have abandoned the inner cities making access to healthy and affordable food difficult for the transit-dependent. Those supermarkets that remain often charge far higher prices than their suburban counterparts,” (Fisher, 1997). In some cases the only nearby source of food may be corner stores with limited selections, with far higher prices than a supermarket.

A number of studies have pointed to the late 1970’s and the early 1980’s as a time many major supermarkets in the United States moved out of the inner city, low-income neighborhoods into suburban areas (Curtis, 1995; Fisher, 1997; Mascarenhas, 1992, Nehauser, et.al. 1999). Some explanations include high insurance rates, employment and security problems, and low profits (Curtis, 1995). It has been pointed out a number of times by researchers that most inner city residents have nearby access to small independents stores with limitations on food variety in comparison to supermarkets (Curtis, 1995). This limited access to an expensive and overwhelmingly convenient, minimally nutritious food, or lack of access to affordable nutritious food has many consequences and implications for a community.

Effects and Implications of Food Insecurity Consuming nutrient deficient foods is a threat to anyone’s health. However, in low-income communities, with very limited access to healthy food, it can be seen that entire neighborhoods are subjected to major health risks. With youth, unhealthy eating has been linked to deficiencies and problems like obesity, behavioral problems, and deficiencies in intellectual performance (Petrillo and Meyers, 2002). In communities of color, particular illnesses and diseases are disproportionately prevalent, such as hypertension and stroke, diabetes, and coronary heart disease (Berton, Barnard, and Mills, 1999). In light of such concerns, access to healthy food cannot be taken lightly, especially since medical care for such communities is just as difficult, if not more difficult to access.

Individual and community food insecurity has been closely linked to poverty. Nehauser and her colleagues, in their assessment of food security of California explain that, “Because other

household costs (rent, utilities, transportation) are relatively *inelastic*, food becomes the only available area of *elasticity* in the family budget. Thus, people at or below the poverty line are at most risk of food insecurity” (Nehauser et.al. 1995). Inner-city communities have a large percentage of individuals and families living at or below the poverty line.

In West Oakland, CA 20.2 percent of families and 29.6 percent of individuals lived below the poverty level in 1999 (West Oakland Census Tract-402). In addition to having a high percentage of poverty, the mean income was \$27,628 a year, with 57 percent of families earning below \$35,000 a year compared to Oakland’s overall Mean Household income of \$54,000 in 2000 (Oakland CEDA-Demographics, 2000). With reference to these numbers, West Oakland is a community susceptible to food insecurity. Community organizations have taken notice to issues of food insecurity in West Oakland.

A community-mapping project of West Oakland’s food assets and resources in 2000 uncovered many aspects of West Oakland’s food insecurity. There is currently only one supermarket in West Oakland. Many of West Oakland residents shop at the 36 convenience store that are located in West Oakland, when they do not have not access to a supermarkets in other parts of Oakland or Emeryville. The report says, “for the last 12 years West Oakland did not have a large supermarket with the neighborhood boundaries,” (Farfan-Ramirez, 2000)

In the late 1960’s, for example, the Black Panthers instituted a breakfast program for school children, because of lack of access to a nutritious breakfast (Foner, 1995). In looking through newspaper articles during my research, I came across a flyer advertising a food co-op, from January 1981, reading, “Are you tired of going outside of West Oakland to shop? Do you want a quality food store in West Oakland? Do you want a food store that you own?” These examples indicate that West Oakland has a history of food insecurity on a community level. Does West Oakland’s history of food insecurity follow the trend described for other inner-city communities? This paper examines this question: Was grocery market flight in the late 1970’s and the early 1980’s the major transition point for food access in West Oakland? It is hypothesized that grocery market flight in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s will be a major time of transition with regard to food access.

Methods

This study uses several types of data including archival research and interviews.

Stores enumerated in this study are those listed in the Oakland Telephone directory under the headings “Grocers-Retail” and “Market.” Telephone books from the year 1940 to year 2000 were used as sources of grocer locations in Oakland. Starting with 1940, until 2000, in increments of five years, every listing for food stores under “Grocers-Retail” and “Market” in West Oakland were recorded and compiled into an Excel database. Listings that appeared under both headings were not counted twice. Please note that many small, independent stores may have been listed as “liquor stores.” These liquor stores were not included in the analysis, in order to be consistent with each decade.

The method to determine whether a store was located in West Oakland consisted of using a detailed Map of West Oakland which identified all the streets within the district. The boundaries used, starting Northwest and moving clockwise begin at 35th Street and Pacific Ave, up 35th Street, then moving south down Martin Luther King, Jr. Way (called Grove earlier maps and listings) until 14th Street and continues south down Castro Street. At Castro and Embarcadero, the boundary is westward until Pacific Avenue, which ends the loop. Any grocery outside this boundary was not included in the data for West Oakland stores.

Each listing was recorded in an excel database. All the stores for each year were totaled and compared to other years. The listing titles were analyzed for indications of what type of food items the store sold and its size. One major assumption was made in my analysis. I assumed that small independent stores have less variety in food goods and are not competitively priced, while I assume that large grocery stores, especially chain stores, have more variety and are competitively priced. Previous studies have shown that prices are generally higher at convenience stores in comparison to regular supermarkets (Farfan-Ramirez, 2000). Significant differences in the number of grocery stores over times were measured by the p-value using ANOVA analysis. In order to conduct the test, I took the average for every decade to create another row of data.

Population data was compiled using United States Census records. This data includes West Oakland population estimates, data on race, income, and poverty status. Starting with 1940 census tracts for West Oakland were identified using the census tract map for Oakland. Some estimates are overestimates due to tract size and area. For years 1940 and 1950, data for tracts 11

through 21 were totaled for West Oakland. From these records total population, racial data, and median income were totaled. For 1960, data for tracts 14A through 27A were totaled. This information included the same data as for 1940 and 1950. For 1970 through 1990 tracts 4014 through 4027 were totaled for West Oakland. The information recorded included statistics on total population, land area, racial composition, income, and poverty status.

In addition to the collection of food store and population data, various sources of literature were collected and used to give insight to the social history of West Oakland relating to commerce, grocery store location, and community groups concerned with food issues. News paper articles, fliers, and government and agency documents from the public library, City Hall, and the local university were once source of literature. Video documentaries and books were also used to add context to the data.

Interviews were conducted with five community elders and two community activists. Participants were personally recruited by simply asking them to participate in the study. Respondents were recruited based on their availability and for being a long time resident of West Oakland over the age of 55 or being an activist in West Oakland with concerns about food security. Recruitment was subjective in order to gain specific information on the history of food security in West Oakland.

The interviews were conducted one-on-one, lasting approximately a half an hour with each respondent. All community elders were asked identical questions, different from those asked to community activists, which were also identical. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Results

The following trend was found for the number of good stores in West Oakland. An overall decreasing trend is evident in this data. The p-value for the ANOVA test conducted for the data in table 1 is $p=2.66E-8$. There is a significant change in this data. A separate ANOVA test was conducted for years 1970, 1975, 1980, and 1985 this p-value is $p=0.0167$. This indicated a significant difference as well.

Year	# of Stores
1940	112
1945	93
1950	137
1955	116
1960	132
1965	79
1970	46
1975	31
1980	22
1985	24
1990	26
1995	16
2000	23

Table 1: Number of Stores In West Oakland

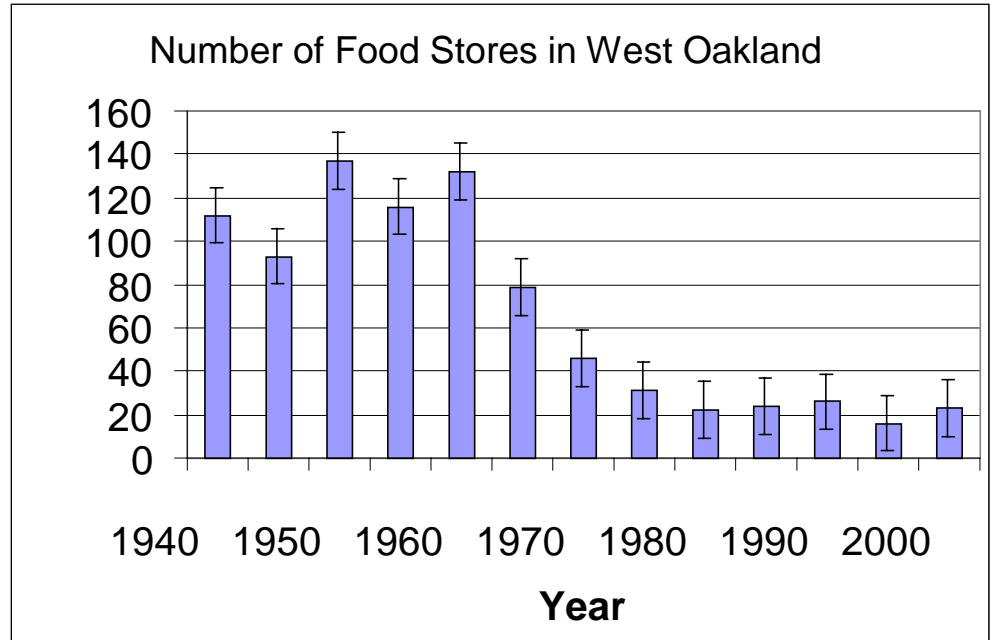


Figure 1: Number of Stores vs. Year

The following table summarizes the population characteristics for West Oakland over time.

	Total Population	% families below poverty line
1940	51,861	no data found
1950	76,138	no data found
1960	28,730	no data found
1970	25,278	30%
1980	20,573	32.20%
1990	23,397	36.70%

Table 2: West Oakland Population Statistics

	Total Population	% families below poverty line
1940	302,165	no data found
1950	384,575	no data found
1960	367,548	no data found
1970	361,561	12%
1980	339,337	16%
1990	372,242	16.70%

Table 3: Oakland Population Statistics

A great deal of information regarding the history of West Oakland was uncovered through archival research and interviews.

Discussion

In order to bring the historic information into dialogue with the numeric data, the analysis has been organized by decade.

1940 World War II brought a large amounts of immigrants to West Oakland to get jobs in shipbuilding and other related industries. The majority of these immigrants were African-Americans from the southern part of the United States (CA Dept. of Transportation, 1997). A drastic demographic change occurred with this migration. In 1940, West Oakland was approximately 12 percent “Negro,” however; by 1950 this percentage increased to 50 percent (United States Census, 1940).

When World War II came to an end in 1945 many jobs were lost. The war economy that supplied jobs for so many, had come to a halt, and West Oakland’s economy began to decline. However during this decade, it is apparent that there were numerous food stores in West Oakland (Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company, 1945). Few to no listings of chain grocery stores or supermarket in the Oakland phonebook indicate that the grocery retail economy in the 1940’s was very different. Large grocery chains were not yet common. Small, independent grocers provided communities with a wide selection of food. Some of the listings from 1940 and 1945 include Castello Grocery: Delicatessen-Beer-Wine; Tin’s Market: Meats-Groceries-Vegetables; Cleveland Market: Meat-Groceries-Free Delivery; and Curtis Street Grocer: Meat-Fish-Poultry-Vegetables-Fruit-Beer-Wine-Groceries (Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company, 1940, 1945).

1950 In 1950 a similar situation of numerous, small grocers composed the grocery resources for West Oakland. Meanwhile the local government begins implementing Federal Urban Renewal Programs, which included building the Cypress Freeway in 1957 (Pointer, 2000). The construction of the Cypress freeway devastated the West Oakland community, ripping their community in half, in a literal sense. Homes and businesses were destroyed causing more problems in the community. Many who could afford to leave West Oakland did, this can be seen in the crude approximation of the West Oakland population. In 1950 the total population was approximately 76,138 and by 1960 it fell to approximately 23,730. It is not definite that everyone that moved from West Oakland move for this reason, but surely many did. By 1960, 50,000 whites had fled West Oakland (Pointer, 2000).

1960 Bart construction and the 7th Street Regional Post Office displaced several businesses. More families moved out of the area, and the community continued to get poorer and poorer. Between 1960 and 1965, the number of food stores dropped from 132 to 79. This decrease seems to have a number of contributing factors including a grocery retail movement towards larger chain stores and business being pushed out of the area due to Bart construction over West Oakland's largest area of commerce. There is strong evidence that somewhere in this decade food access becomes a major issue. The Black Panther Party had a very strong presence in Oakland's poorest neighborhoods. In 1969, the party established the Free Breakfast for Children Program (FBCP). The sight where the breakfast was served in the community was St. Augustine's Episcopal Church on 27th and West Streets. On March 26, 1969, in an article titled "To Feed Our Children," a Black Panthers member wrote, "this program was created because the Black Panther Party understands that our children need a nourishing breakfast every morning so that they can learn." The writer continues, "For too long our people have gone hungry and without the proper health aids they need" (Foner, 1995). The Black Panther had a successful Free Breakfast for the Children Program, because of their dedication to this program, and because there are so many in inner-city communities who would like to give their children affordable, well balance breakfasts, but either don't have the time or access or both. The Black Panther Party also instituted programs that gave food away through the networking of different churches. The Black Panthers were aware of food insecurity in West Oakland. Their Breakfast and food programs addressed a need in the community that wasn't being met elsewhere.

1970 Louis Stores Inc, store number 45 has a location at 929 West Grand Ave. Not much information was found on this store. Since it is a member of a grocery chain, it indicates that there may have been a wide selection of foods in the store, and that it may be relatively larger than many of the other stores. In 1970 there is a decrease in the number of grocery stores from 79 to 46, and another decline in 1975 from 46 to 31. The decrease in number of stores could have been due to small store consolidation into larger chain stores and business continuing to leave West Oakland.

1980 During the 1980's, the number of food stores decreases again to 22 stores, staying right around this number until the present. During this time there is no identified supermarket in the area, but a number of small independent stores. A flier by the West Oakland Food Coop reads, "Are you tired of shopping outside of West Oakland to shop? Do you want a quality food store in

West Oakland? Do you want a food store that you own?" This indicates that access to larger grocery stores with a variety of items including fresh fruits and vegetables at affordable prices is not in existence in West Oakland. In a local report the by the West Oakland Community Development District Council in the 1980's one of the commercial concerns listed was, "there are not enough grocery stores," and that "The prices at local stores are not comparable with prices everywhere."

What Does this Indicate A number of different things seem to have occurred simultaneously. The information gathered indicates that West Oakland has been food insecure since the late 1960's. The Black Panther food programs and the decline in the number of stores in West Oakland are major indicators of this. However, the number of stores takes another drastic plunge during the 1970's and early 1980's, which would support the hypothesis that West Oakland does follow a trend of food access that involves food market flight from the neighborhood in the late 1970's and the early 1980's. The factor that does not allow me to accept this hypothesis is the lack of data showing that there were major grocery markets to flee West Oakland. With the exception of Louis Stores Incorporated, store number 45, information on any other large grocer located in West Oakland was not obtained. The hypothesis could be rejected, but I did not obtain definite data excluding unlisted Safeway stores from West Oakland during this time period. There was a listing for the main office, but not a listing for the stores. These locations are difficult to locate. Although store numbers decrease, there aren't significant incidences of supermarkets leaving West Oakland. Stores outside of West Oakland that West Oakland residents might travel too, may have closed or changed location, but there were none in West Oakland. Without this information one cannot determine whether West Oakland follows the "grocery market flight" trend or not. Information regarding stores that may have been located in West Oakland, but are not identified in phonebook listing, as well as more information characterizing smaller independent stores in the 1970's and 1980's.

This information coincides with the interviews on a number of different levels. When elders were asked if how they obtained groceries twenty or thirty years ago, many didn't report a difference. Confirming that West Oakland has had limited access to healthy affordable food. All of the respondents conducted their major grocery shopping outside of West Oakland at major chain grocery stores. All of the respondents from the group of elders ranged from periodically to often in visiting convenience stores to buy food items. One elder recalled the significance of the

Black Panther Party's food programs in West Oakland, and confirmed that there was a need for children to have access to healthy breakfasts.

One community activist who works in West Oakland recalls community members informing him/her that the building of the Cypress freeway had a major impact on access to healthy, affordable food. Another impact this individual felt contributed to food insecurity is the change in ownership in these small independent stores. These stores once provided jobs for community members and circulated money back into the neighborhood. The respondent explained that many of the owners of convenience and small, independent stores do not live in the West Oakland.

Conclusions

This study was unable to determine whether a main transition point for food access in West Oakland was grocery market flight in the late 1970's and early 1980's, new points of investigation have been noted. If grocery market flight did occur in the late 1970's, it was by no means the beginning of West Oakland's food insecurity. Historical evidence shows that obtaining healthy food was an important concern for residents before the late 1970's, which can especially be seen through the Black Panther Party's Free Breakfast for the Children Program in West Oakland, as well as the flier from the West Oakland Food Co-op.

Although grocery market flight is a large contributor to food insecurity, the conditions of poverty, unemployment, and the demolition of community commerce for urban redevelopment have lasting effects on food access in the inner city. West Oakland has never had major grocery stores within its boundaries until recently, because no major store wanted to locate into the poor economic conditions facilitated by projects like the Cypress Freeway and the Bart on 7th street (Pointer, 2000). In "Highway of Dreams" one gentleman described West Oakland flourishing with businesses owned by the community, that were later displaced directly by the building projects or indirectly by the economic situation these projects helped to create. In the documentary "Crossroads: A Story of West Oakland" one community activist remembered being economically "poor" in West Oakland, but not living in a "culturally rich environment." For that person, although their family did not have a lot of money, their community was strong, he they possessed African-American role models who were lawyers and doctors and local establishment owner who live in the neighborhood (CA Dept. of Transportation, 1996). This individual expressed that their family did not live poorly even in times of economic difficulty.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks go out to the following people who contributed a great deal to the completion of this study: The Environmental Sciences 196 staff including Donna Green, John Latto, Kevin Golden, Renata Andrade; Dana Harvey with the West Oakland Food Collaborative, Azibuike Akaba with the West Oakland Environmental Indicators Project, David Roach with Mo' Betta Foods, and Betty Martin at the Dept. of Historic records at Oakland City Hall.

References

Andrews, Margaret, Gary Bickel and Steven Carlson. "Household Food Security in the United States in 1995: Results From the Food Security Measurement Project." *Family Economics And Nutrition Review*. Winter 1998 (17-30).

California Department of Transportation. *Crossroads: A Story of West Oakland*. Quest Productions, 1996.

California Department of Transportation. *Sights and Sounds: A Story of West Oakland*. 1997.

Curtis, Karen and Stephanie McClellan. "Falling Through the Safety Net: Poverty, Food Assistance and Shopping Constraints In An American City." *Urban Anthropology*. 1995 **24**(93-130).

Fisher, Andy. "Assessing Your Community's Food Security." *Urban Ecologist*. 1997 **2**(12).

Fisher, Andy. "What Is Community Food Security?" *Urban Ecologist*. 1997 **2**(3-4)

Foner, Philip. *The Black Panthers Speak*. Da Capo Press Inc., 1995.

Gottlieb, Robert and Andrew Fisher. "'First Feed The Face': Environmental Justice And Community Food Security." *Antipode* 1996 **28:2**(193-203).

Mascarenhas, Michelle. "Combating Supermarket Flight in Los Angeles." *Urban Ecologist* 1997 **2**(5-6).

Neuhauser, Linda, Dora Disbrow, and Sheldon Margen. "Hunger and Food Insecurity in California." *California Policy Seminar*. University of California 1995.

Oakland Community and Economic Development Agency. "Market Profile"
www.business2oakland.com/main/demographics.htm accessed 2/17/2004

Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company. *Oakland Phonebook*, 1940, 1945, 1950, 1955, 1960, 1965, 1970, 1975, 1980, 1985, 1990, 1995, 2000.

Pointer, Nandi. Highway of Dreams. UC Berkeley School of Journalism, 2000.

Sustainable Food Center. "Limited Access to Food." Access Denied.

http://www.main.org/sfc/access_denied/access_denied4.html accessed 2/17/2004.

United State Census Bureau. San Francisco-Oakland Area Housing and Population Statistics, Census Tracts. 1940, 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990.

White, Dustin. "Food Security in Oakland, Ca: Creating Access to Healthy Food."

<http://landscape.ced.berkeley.edu> Spring 2003 accessed 2/17/2004.

West Oakland Community Development District Council. West Oakland Community Development, 1988.