No actual food deserts: Desserts and more

By ACSH Staff — April 18, 2012

It s become a catchphrase in the battle against obesity in the U.S.: Food deserts where residents are said to have little access to establishments that sell fresh fruits and produce are supposedly partly to blame for the nation s rising obesity rates. But do these food deserts even exist?

An article in today s New York Times [1] cites two recent studies suggesting that poorer neighborhoods are not, in fact, food deserts, since they actually have a multitude of healthful food options. Together, these studies suggest that, while certain poor urban neighborhoods may indeed have more convenience stores and fast food restaurants, they also tend to have more supermarkets and grocery stores than are found in more affluent communities. Furthermore, the research finds, childhood obesity is not related to the types of food available in these lower-income neighborhoods.

For the first study, Dr. Helen Lee of the Public Policy Institute of California obtained data on 8,000 children, including their weight and where they lived and went to school. She correlated these data with information on the food establishments located in particular neighborhoods. The results, published in the journal Social Science and Medicine [2], showed that, even though poor neighborhoods had almost twice the number of fast food restaurants and convenience stores per square mile than are found in wealthier neighborhoods, they also had nearly twice as many grocery stores and supermarkets. This finding contradicts the belief that residents of poorer neighborhoods have limited access to establishments that offer healthful food options.

The second study, led by a researcher from the RAND Corporation and published in The American Journal of Preventive Medicine [3], uncovered similar results after analyzing data from the California Health Interview Survey on over 13,000 children in California. These surveys included questions on weight, height, and diet, as well as students home and school addresses. The researchers found that there was no correlation between what types of food were available near their homes and what these students actually ate nor was there a relationship to how much the children weighed. Looking at a national study on middle school students, these researchers also found no such link between the types of food available in a child s neighborhood and the child s weight.

Dr. Lee points out that previous studies concluding that food deserts contribute to obesity had significant limitations. For instance, some studies ignored smaller grocery stores, while others examined areas by zip code, which may comprise a widely varied demographic of neighborhoods.

As ACSH s Dr. Ruth Kava comments, These studies demonstrate that the issue of obesity is more complicated than just a question of where you live, how much you earn, and how many McDonald s are in your neighborhood.