

CRAIN'S CHICAGO BUSINESS

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Equity

Food insecurity magnifies inequity in Chicago

Multiple stakeholders are making it their business — and a moral obligation — to bring food and related businesses to communities on the margins.

By DEBORAH L. SHELTON



Hundreds of thousands of Chicagoans go to bed hungry or fill their stomachs with empty calories because that's all they can find or afford.

They ration food, depend on charitable donations or agonize over how to stretch their budgets to pay for meals to get them through the day.

These aren't Dickensian characters. This is 21st-century reality for many people living in a major U.S. city.

Riverdale on Chicago's Far Southeast Side is 95% African American — and 99.85% of residents there have "low access" to food, defined as living more than a half-mile from the nearest supermarket, according to the [Chicago Health Atlas](#).

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On the Near North Side, where 70% of residents are white, everyone lives within a half-mile of [at least one supermarket](#), giving them abundant grocery [choices](#).

A McKinsey [analysis](#) last year found that counties in the U.S. with above-average Black populations had fewer grocers, restaurants and farmers markets and more small convenience stores.

Those statistics underscore a glaring racial and economic disparity and help explain why some Chicago communities struggle more than others with food insecurity and convenient access to fresh and healthy foods.

"Some neighborhoods are overly serviced and others are barely serviced," says LaForce Baker, vice president of community impact at World Business Chicago, which works to attract businesses to low-access areas.



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Traveling farther away from home to buy food can pose challenges, especially for seniors and people living with disabilities, among those most at risk for food insecurity.

Money spent elsewhere also means fewer dollars get recirculated in under-resourced communities.

Yellow Banana, a retail grocer, owns and operates 38 stores in five states under the Save A Lot banner, with six locations in Chicago. The company's four founders — two are Black and one is Black and Latino — feel a moral obligation to operate stores in underserved communities.

"Where you live shouldn't dictate your access to healthy, affordable food," says co-founder Michael Nance, who is African American and Latino.

The closings of Aldi stores in West Garfield Park and Auburn Gresham and a Whole Foods Market in Englewood have focused renewed attention on the city's "food deserts."

Chicago political leaders, activists and entrepreneurs have vowed to step up efforts to bring more healthy food to underserved areas.

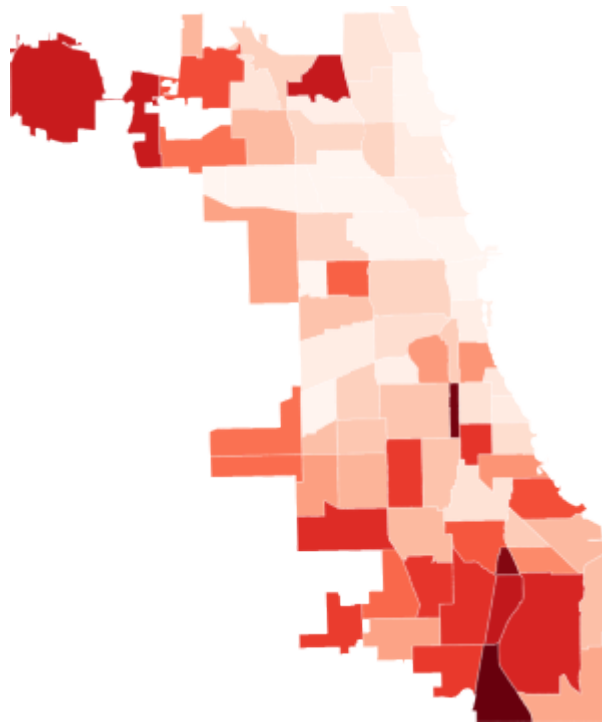
BULLETPROOF GLASS AND CHEESEBURGERS

Yellow Banana is an example of one such effort. The company plans to buy a Save A Lot grocery store in Auburn Gresham that closed in 2020 and reopen it in early 2023.

Earlier this year, the company received a \$13.5 million community development grant to purchase and remodel stores on the West and South sides. Save A Lot is one of the nation's largest discount grocery chains. Yellow Banana is its third-largest retail partner.

Percentage of residents who have low access to food, 2019

0 100



Source: Chicago Health Atlas • Note: Low access to food is defined solely by distance: farther than half a mile from the nearest supermarket in an urban area, or farther than 10 miles in a rural area.

 A Flourish map

Other efforts to improve access include food pantry expansions and the launching of farmers markets, pop-up farm stands, and small and midsize urban farms. Some residents are learning to grow their own produce.

David Edwards is tackling food inequity on multiple fronts.

"What I'm trying to accomplish is to fill up a lot of these food deserts here in Chicago," says Edwards, who owns a produce business and the Smooth & Social Roots Cafe in Garfield Park. He wants to one day open a grocery store on the West Side.

The cafe serves smoothies and Caribbean-and Cajun-inspired dishes, some of which are made with produce grown in an adjacent garden and at two nearby farms. Edwards participated in the Chicago Botanic Garden's Windy City Harvest apprenticeship and farm incubator programs, which have trained and supported many farmers of color.

"I don't want people in my community to have to go to places with bulletproof glass and have to order cheeseburgers and stuff," Edwards says. "I want them to be able to have

someplace where they can come in and order healthy food and sit down to eat comfortably."

MORE PEOPLE ARE FOOD INSECURE

The Greater Chicago Food Depository has identified 40 high-priority food-insecure communities in Cook County, with 28 in the city and 12 in the suburbs.

Its partner network served almost 361,600 households in August 2022 — a 30% jump from the previous August.

Food insecurity remains significantly above pre-pandemic levels in the Chicago area at 19% overall — 29% among Latinos and 37% among African Americans.



A complex problem with deep roots in the city's racial history, food insecurity is a major contributor to health disparities, experts say.

Chicago, like many American cities, has "a history of redlining and disinvestment that, in turn, impacts multiple access points for food," says Ruby Ferguson, who leads the Chicago Food Equity Council.

The council, [formed by executive order](#) in February by Mayor Lori Lightfoot, aims to achieve food equity by bringing together city departments, community organizations and various agencies "to reimagine and transform" the city's food system.

Five high-impact priorities have been identified, including: removing barriers to urban farming and food pantry expansion; better connecting residents with nutrition programs; leveraging city and institutional procurement to assist local growers, producers and food businesses of color; and supporting food entrepreneurs of color.

The mayor's Chicago Recovery Plan committed \$10 million to capital investments in urban agriculture, the creation of a food incubator and development of a Chicago Good Food Fund, where entrepreneurs on the South and West sides can seek capital.

Ferguson, a dietitian by training, says the council's work will ensure that "communities that have a history of disinvestment have pathways to wealth-building through food."

DISMANTLING 'FOOD APARTHEID'

Liz Abunaw, an upstate New York native who settled in Chicago after earning an MBA at the University of Chicago, was struck by the lack of retail businesses on a West Side commercial corridor, where she found herself while trying to find a place to get cash in 2016.

"I quickly realized that it was not easy to do basic life errands there," she says. "I couldn't find a grocery store. I couldn't find a bank. I couldn't find a pharmacy. All I was trying to do was get cash without paying exorbitant ATM fees."

Abunaw, who uses the term "food apartheid" to refer to the race, class and other structural forces that drive food inequity, decided to do something about it.



She started Forty Acres Fresh Market in 2018 with a pop-up farm stand on the West Side and later expanded to the weekly Austin Town Hall City Market, which had its last day for the year in late October. She accepts Link, the debit card for the state's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (food stamps).

"Most of our customers come to us because of the mission," she says. "They stay with us because they get really great quality produce at a really great value."

While most of her business centers on residential delivery in Chicago and the western suburbs, she also sells produce to organizations and operates pop-up markets in underserved communities. Commercial development of a 10,000-square-foot grocery store on Chicago Avenue in the Austin neighborhood is underway.

Grocery stores play a key role in neighborhoods.

"They are not simply transactional places to sell food," Abunaw says. "You have social interactions there that create community bonds and make neighborhoods enjoyable places to live."

Percentage of population experiencing food insecurity

North Central Side Northwest Side West Side Near South Side Southwest Side Far South Side

Source: DePaul University, College of Liberal Arts & Science, Public Health Program

 A Flourish chart

THE LINK BETWEEN FOOD AND JOBS

Organizations such as the Greater Chicago Food Depository and Windy City Harvest have provided support to emerging farms owned by people of color.

Windy City Harvest provides paid training in the food system for more than 150 people annually, including an apprenticeship program in partnership with the City Colleges of Chicago and a re-entry program for people leaving the criminal justice system.

Graduates of the programs earn certification in areas such as food handling, sustainable urban agriculture, sustainable urban horticulture and environmental literacy.

Since 2013, it has incubated 26 small farm businesses, the majority owned by people of color.

Yellow Banana prioritizes local residents in its hiring, viewing its mandate as threefold: "addressing food security, employment and being a part of local economic development," says co-founder Ademola Adewale-Sadik.

Growing Home, a U.S. Department of Agriculture-certified organic, high-production urban farm in Englewood, also shares the mission of food production and paid job training.

The farm grows an average of 40,000 pounds of food annually on 1.5 acres, including 145 varieties of produce, says Executive Director Janelle St. John. Its placement rate for those seeking full-time employment averages 80%.

Growing Home's community-supported agriculture program, or CSA, sells to the general public. Last year it launched its Englewood CSA, which provides free food every other week to 30 households.



Food giveaways also take place at events such as the organization's Harvest and Winter festivals, and about 125 packages of food are delivered weekly to two food pantries.

But St. John says expanding access is not just about giveaways, but also ensuring affordability to paying customers.

"What we sell on the North Side for \$1, we sell for 50 cents in Englewood," she says. "If you have Link, it is an additional 50% off. We also take senior citizen coupons. We do that with our local markets and pop-ups."

They have partnered with the University of Illinois Chicago's Englewood clinic to provide fresh produce to about 25 patients with diabetes and other food-related chronic conditions.

Growing Home also offers cooking demonstrations, recipe cards and other services to show customers how to prepare meals in a healthy way.

NUTRITION CLOSE TO HOME

When Benita Lindsey lived in South Shore seven years ago, she traveled up to an hour to reach a supermarket. She didn't have a car at the time, so she rode public transit. But now that the retired government worker lives in Englewood, she shops at Growing Home.

She especially enjoys its peaches, pears, tomatoes and greens of all types.

For the last four years, she and a neighbor have volunteered every Thursday to pack donation boxes and assist on market days. She thinks that many in her community are unaware of Growing Home and are missing out.

"In this neighborhood, I think that's why we have so much diabetes and cancer, because we are not eating right," she says.

The pandemic caused demand to skyrocket at Pan de Vida starting in April 2020, when the Little Village food pantry was feeding 400 families weekly. By June, it was feeding 6,000 families through drive-ups and home deliveries, with the help of the Greater Chicago Food Depository. That was about 30,000 people.

In June, the pantry moved into a remodeled grocery space and was renamed Pan de Vida Fresh Market by its owners, New Life Centers and New Life Community Church Little Village. With shopping carts, Spanish music playing and brightly colored murals outside, it doesn't look like the typical food pantry.

Residents can select their own items, up to 50 pounds of food once a week, says Rosario Dominguez, communications and marketing director at New Life Centers. Up to 150 families are served daily, Tuesday through Saturday. An outdoor produce market operates every other Friday.

Many of the seniors who visit the pantry live alone, Dominguez says. "The staff is definitely aware of that, and they're willing to be a listening ear for them and to see their needs beyond just the food."

STRUGGLING TO STAY AFLOAT

Like the communities where they're located, some food businesses are struggling.

Cedillo's Fresh Produce, an immigrant-owned family farm, has faced multiple challenges this year.

Without employees during the growing season, co-owners Juan Carlos Cedillo and his wife, Dulce Margarita Morales, ran their farm with the help of their two daughters and volunteers.

"We could always use more hands," says Morales, co-founder of Mercado de Colores, a farmers market in Little Village, and Colectiva Ukulima, a collective of farmers of color.

They also could use assistance with accounting and record-keeping, and they needed help this year with utility bills.

"We definitely felt the economy hit us hard this year," Morales says.

But they didn't raise prices.

"We're not making enough money for us to become rich, but we're not going to say we're failing," Morales says. "We are succeeding at providing for our community."

'COME HELL OR HIGH WATER'

Fueled by the COVID pandemic, Edwards' organic produce business took off. It delivers to homes, restaurants, food cooperatives and larger CSAs.

His produce varies depending on the season and might include Swiss chard, kale, blueberries, bananas, oranges, organic honey, carrots and beets.

But his Smooth & Social Roots Cafe, which has an on-site garden and chicken coop, is still establishing itself. Confident there's a market for it, Edwards is elevating his social media presence to get the word out.

At Yellow Banana, the owners realize they need to succeed where other grocers have failed.

Ensuring success means "constantly adapting and thinking about the operational side of things so that we can deliver affordable nutrition to working families, which is our mandate," says Adewale-Sadik.

Competitor checks are conducted weekly to ensure bargain prices for staples, such as eggs, butter, milk and cooking oil. "We've made a commitment to our customers that come hell or high water, they can come to our stores to get the best price on those core items," Nance says.

Yellow Banana also is thinking about starting a transportation service limited to certain days and locations.

And Ferguson says the Chicago Food Equity Council is looking at the big picture and not relying on a single store or solution to end long-standing inequity.

"When we go grocery shopping, we might stop and get coffee. We might go to the butcher. We might get a cupcake for a friend to celebrate their birthday," she says. "We're thinking about that entire food ecosystem and how businesses can support each other and people can have choices."

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