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Food Access in Central and South Los Angeles: Mapping Injustice, Agenda for Action

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Food Access in Central and South Los Angeles: Mapping Injustice, Agenda for Action



May 2007

A report on
Project CAFE:
Community Action on Food Environments

Executive Summary

Overweight and obesity are pressing public health concerns across the United States and in Los Angeles. Most efforts aimed at reducing obesity have focused on educating people to make healthy food choices. However, even if people know what to eat to be healthy, they need to have access to healthful foods. Too many communities, especially in low-income areas, lack access to healthy and affordable foods, such as fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Challenges to food access include long distances to supermarkets and low quality foods in stores.

Project CAFE (Community Action on Food Environments) is a collaborative project addressing food access, availability, and affordability in three Los Angeles neighborhoods. Project CAFE's community-directed research indicates a pressing need for environmental and policy changes to make it easier for people to access healthy and affordable foods.

Key Findings:

- ▶ The most common places to buy food in the three project communities are carryout/fast-food restaurants and convenience/liquor/corner stores.
- ▶ Full-service supermarkets make up less than 2% of the total number of food stores. One of the communities had no full-service supermarket at the time of the survey.
- ▶ Fast foods are easily accessible in the neighborhoods and outside school grounds. In addition to fast food restaurants there are more than 100 mobile food vendors who usually sell chips, beverages, ice cream/frozen treats, and candies.
- ▶ Foods needed to make up a healthy diet are generally not available at most convenience/liquor/corner stores. These stores typically sell more calorie-dense and nutrient poor foods and drinks, and the healthy food items that are stocked in these stores are sold at higher prices compared with full-service supermarkets and specialty food stores.
- ▶ The quality of many food items in surveyed stores is substandard, and some foods are sold past the expiration date.
- ▶ Schools generally offer fresh fruits, low-fat milk, and water; however, all the schools had liquor/convenience/corner stores and/or mobile food vendors within three blocks of the school.
- ▶ Challenges to accessing and purchasing healthy food items include distance to full-service supermarkets and lack of convenient transportation, high food prices, and safety.

Agenda for Action:

- ▶ Attracting new food stores
- ▶ Working with convenience/liquor stores to offer more healthy produce
- ▶ Creating farmers' markets on school sites
- ▶ Establishing food access goals and policies in community plans/zoning regulations
- ▶ Creating a city-wide network of community groups to work on food access policies

Introduction and Background

Obesity and the Food Environment

Obesity has become a public health problem of paramount importance. In Los Angeles County, it is estimated that over half of adults are overweight or obese. Weight issues are more common among African-Americans and Latinos than Whites and Asians, and obesity is also associated with low-income households.¹ Physical activity and diet are both important factors that influence weight and health.

Previous studies have shown the importance of a healthy food environment to enabling consumers to make healthy food decisions. Morland et al documented an association between food environment and meeting dietary recommendations, as fruit and vegetable consumption increased with the presence of a supermarket in the neighborhood.² A study focusing on African-American populations found fewer healthy food options³ at restaurants in less affluent areas compared to more affluent areas of LA.

Despite the evidence linking access to healthy foods with healthy diets, food access is a vexing problem in urban communities. A seminal study conducted after the LA uprising in 1992 found that the supermarket chains had abandoned the inner city. The researchers called for reinvestment in urban areas and implementation of a coordinated food policy.⁴ Even ten years later, this so called “grocery gap” persisted wherein each supermarket in the areas impacted by the uprising served 27,986 people, and in LA County each supermarket served an average of 18,649 people. Promises by the supermarket industry to relocate in urban areas were largely unmet, with industry consolidation compounding the problem.⁵

Most recently, a study on food landscapes calculated the retail food environment index in California counties and cities.⁶ This ratio of fast food restaurants and convenience stores to supermarkets, produce stores, and farmers’ market is one indicator of overall food access. The authors calculated that LA has more than 4 times the number of fast food and convenience stores as supermarkets and produce vendors. Project CAFE’s own findings, presented below, show that low-income Los Angeles neighborhoods suffer from an even more serious imbalance of food retail establishments.

These studies all underscore the importance of an environmental approach to obesity prevention and health promotion.

The Study and Findings

Project CAFE: Community Action on Food Environments

Project CAFE was formed in 2003 to document and improve the food environment in three neighborhoods. Project CAFE brings together community-based organizations and residents, researchers, community activists, physicians, and epidemiologists working together to facilitate positive community-driven changes in local nutrition environments in communities that suffer disproportionately from diet-related poor health conditions. The major partners of Project CAFE are the Center for Food & Justice at the Urban & Environmental Policy Institute at Occidental College, Blazers Youth Services Community Club Inc, Esperanza Community Housing Corporation, the Healthy School Food Coalition, and research and medical partners at the University of Southern California and Childrens Hospital Los Angeles.

Project CAFE focuses specifically on three neighborhoods in central and south Los Angeles. The Healthy School Food Coalition worked in central Los Angeles near Pico-Union and MacArthur Park. Esperanza Community Housing Corporation and Blazers each worked in neighborhoods in south Los Angeles.

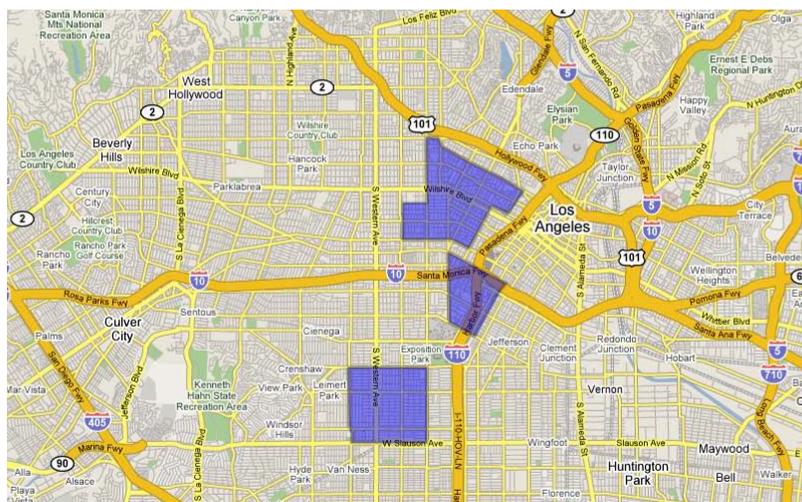


Figure 1. Map depicting areas where Project CAFE conducted community food assessments.

Community Food Assessment

Project CAFE conducted a community food assessment to measure food access in three low-income communities of color. A food assessment is “a collaborative and participatory process that systematically examines a broad range of community food issues and assets, so as to inform change actions to make the community more food secure.”⁷

This report summarizes the findings of the food assessment and recommends strategies and actions to promote access to healthy food in homes, schools, and neighborhoods.

Community partners in Project CAFE conducted a community food assessment from 2004-2006 to document the availability and affordability of foods in three non-overlapping neighborhoods in Los Angeles. These areas share similar economic and demographic profiles: high levels of poverty with predominantly Latino and immigrant populations.

The overall goal of the assessment was to understand the local food environment and use this information to develop strategies for improving access to healthy and affordable food in all the communities. Project CAFE recruited and trained community members to: 1) map the number and type of food stores and restaurants in the project areas, 2) conduct a survey of stores for product availability, pricing, and quality, and 3) survey five schools to examine the school food environment.

Name	Defining characteristics	Examples
Supermarket	A chain store that includes a wide variety of general food items.	Jons, Vons, Ralphs, Food 4 Less, Numero Uno
Convenience/ liquor/corner store	Smaller than a supermarket, these stores don't have the same variety as supermarkets and may or may not be chains.	7-11, 99 Cent Stores
Convenience store WITH gas	Sell food and convenience items as well as gasoline.	AM/PM
Specialty food store	Meat market (carnecería), fish markets, bakery (panadería), and other single item/type specialties.	
Full-service restaurant	Table service available. Can be local or chain.	IHOP, California Pizza Kitchen
Fast-food restaurant	Chain fast food where food is served on trays and ordered at a counter.	McDonald's, Jack in the Box, Subway, Tommy's
Carryout eating place	Non-chain fast food.	Gus
Carryout specialty items	Specialize in coffee, donuts, smoothies, ice cream.	Starbucks, Winchells, Baskin Robbins
Bars and taverns	Serve alcohol.	
Mobile food trucks	Food sold from wheeled vehicles, carts, and other mobile sites.	Juan's Taco Truck

Table 1. Categories for food stores and restaurants.

Food Mapping Methods

Mapping of local nutrition resources involved community members conducting a census of the physical location of places that sell food, including supermarkets, fast-food and full-service restaurants, bars, convenience/liquor/corner stores, carryout stores, and mobile food vendors. Community members identified the boundaries of their own neighborhoods and were trained to collect data that included the name, type, and address for all stores selling food. All food establishments in each of three neighborhood areas were mapped by walking the streets in the defined area during the spring and summer months of 2005.

Type of food place	Food store	Eating establishment	N (%)
Carryout eating place/ fast-food restaurant/carryout specialty food items		X	303 (29.6)
Convenience/liquor/corner	X		223 (21.8)
Full-service restaurant		X	171 (16.7)
Specialty food store	X		140 (13.7)
Mobile food truck	X	X	115 (11.2)
Convenience store with gas	X		39 (3.8)
Bar/tavern		X	17 (1.7)
Supermarket	X		15 (1.5)

Table 2. Types of food stores and eating establishments mapped for all communities combined.

Food Mapping Results

The most prevalent stores selling “whole food” in the neighborhoods were convenience/liquor/corner stores, specialty food stores, and full-service supermarkets. While there were an abundance of convenience/liquor stores (223) and specialty food stores (140), there were few full-service supermarkets (15), comprising less than 2% of the total number of food stores and eating establishments (Table 2).

Figures 2, 3, and 4 represent the breakdown of food stores and restaurants in each of the three communities. Figure 2 shows that more than 50% of food establishments were convenience/liquor stores and fast-food restaurants, while supermarkets comprised 3% of the total number of food stores and eating establishments in the Blazer community.

In the Esperanza area the absence of any full-service supermarkets is particularly striking (Figure 3). Convenience/liquor stores and fast-food restaurants comprised more than a third of the total number mapped.

In the HSFC area, convenience/liquor stores and fast-food restaurants made up more than a quarter of the total number of stores and restaurants mapped, while supermarkets comprise 1% of the total. Mobile food vendors constituted 13% of food outlets (Figure 4).

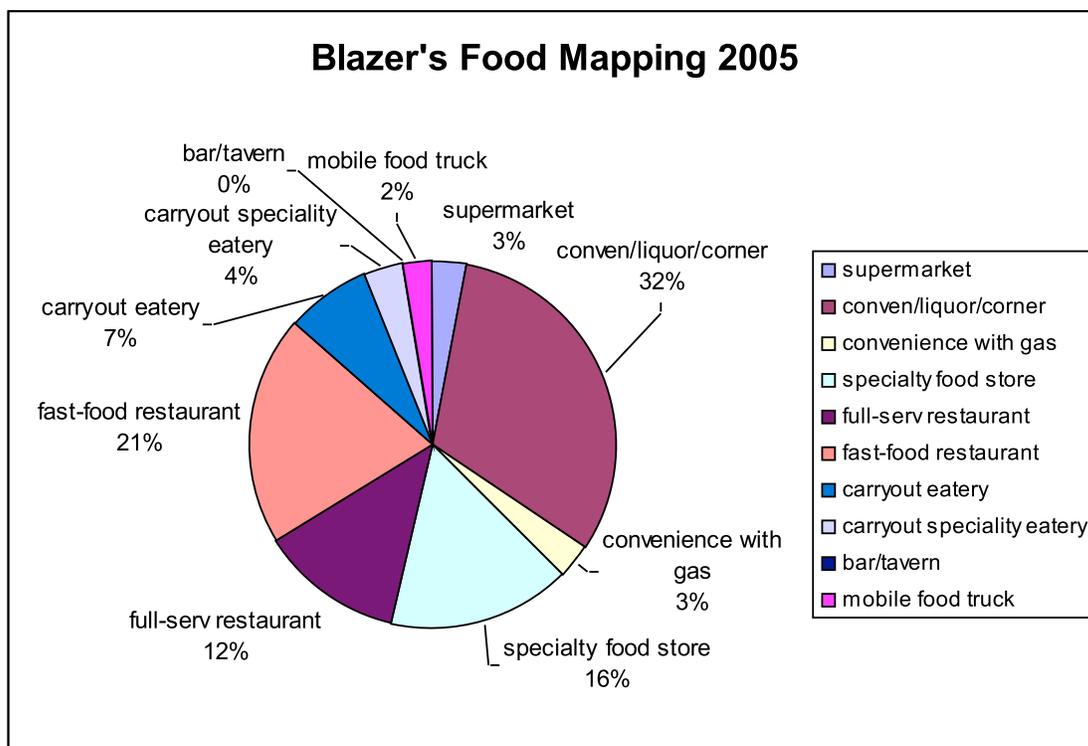


Figure 2. Food Stores and Restaurants in Blazer's Community.

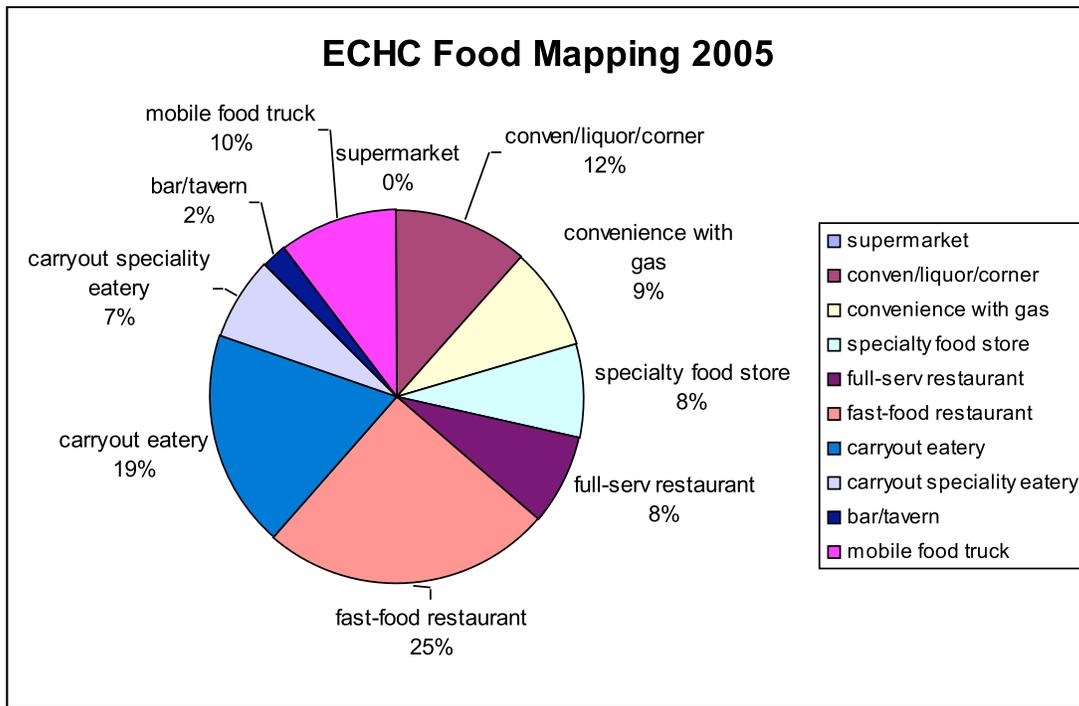


Figure 3. Food Stores and Restaurants in Esperanza's Community.

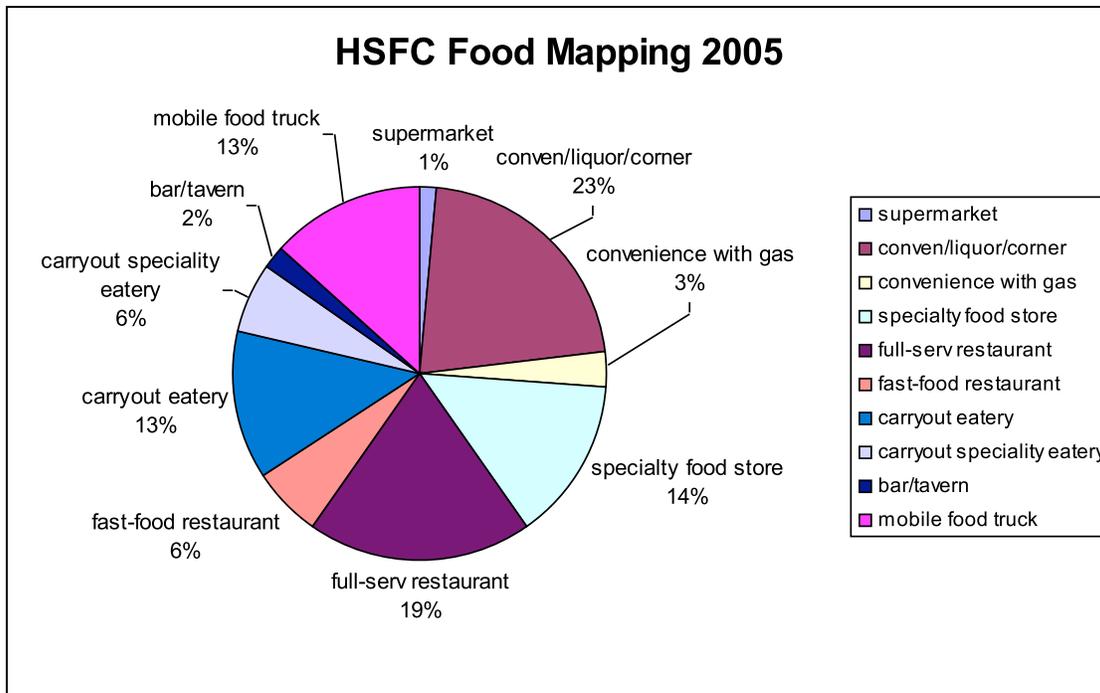


Figure 4. Food Stores and Restaurants in Healthy School Food Coalition's Community.

Store Survey Methods

Food categories from the USDA Thrifty Food Plan, modified to include a greater variety of ethnic food preferences and specialty items, were used to develop a survey to assess the primary food stores. Three types of food stores were surveyed - liquor/convenience/corner stores, specialty food stores, and full-service supermarkets. Blazers and Healthy School Food Coalition surveyed 100% of their full-service supermarkets, while Esperanza had no full-service supermarkets to survey. A random sample of

convenience/liquor/corner stores and specialty stores was conducted. (Convenience/liquor stores: Blazers =35%; Esperanza =88%; and Healthy School Food Coalition =10%. Specialty stores: Blazers = 35%; Esperanza = 100%; and Healthy School Food Coalition = 5%).

Data analyses of the store survey focused on food items recommended by the USDA Thrifty Food Plan needed for a healthful diet (Table 3).

Store Survey Results

The most frequently missing items in the food stores are presented in Table 4. Foods with higher nutritional value like grains, vegetables, fruits, and lean sources of protein were often absent. Sweets and calorie dense snacks included in the survey, such as Pepsi, sugar, and “Hot Cheetos,” were more likely to be available in the surveyed stories.

Convenience/liquor/corner stores, the most prevalent store type, and specialty food stores, did not offer most of the foods recommended by the USDA and the Thrifty Food Plan. Of the full-service supermarkets included in the survey, the majority of food items of interest were available. Overall, there are very few stores selling organic food items. Among the full service supermarkets, one store offered organic cheddar cheese and eggs and two stores sold organic milk. One convenience/liquor/corner store offered organic lettuce, milk, cheese and eggs and one specialty store offered organic cheese.

Grains	brown rice, whole wheat bread, ready to eat cold cereals, grits
Vegetables	broccoli, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, cucumber, green peppers, jicama, lettuce, potatoes
Fruits	avocados, melons, apples, papayas, mangos, oranges, limes
Milk	soy milk, soy cheese, cheddar, string cheese
Meat and beans	ground beef, turkey, lunch meat, chicken legs, chicken breast, tofu

Table 4. Most Frequently Missing Items* in Food Stores (All store types combined)

*50% or more of stores did not have these food items on survey day.

Grains	Milk products
Breads, yeast and quick Breakfast cereals, cooked and ready to eat Rice and pasta Flours Grain-based snacks and cookies	Whole milk, yogurt, cream Lower fat and skim milk, lowfat yogurt Cheese Milk drinks and milk desserts
Vegetables	Meat and meat alternatives
Potatoes Dark green and deep yellow vegetables Other vegetables	Beef, pork, veal, lamb, and game Chicken, turkey, and game birds Fish and fish products Bacon, sausages, luncheon meats Eggs and egg mixtures Dry beans, lentils, peas, and nuts Tofu Beans
Fruits	Other foods
Citrus, melons, berries and juices Non-citrus fruits and juices	Table fats, oils and salad dressings

Table 3. USDA Thrifty Food Plan - food items recommended for a healthful diet.

Prices varied by food store type (Table 5.) Overall, in this survey, convenience/liquor/corner stores had more items that cost more. For example, convenience/liquor/corner stores had the highest prices on oatmeal, whole wheat bread, lettuce, apples, 2% milk, and chicken legs. Yet, these stores offered the lowest prices on commonly eaten food items such as corn tortillas, potatoes, eggs, and oranges.

Full-service supermarkets offered the highest prices on common food items such as corn tortillas, potatoes, eggs, and oranges and the lowest prices on oatmeal, whole wheat bread, carrots, apples, and 2% milk.

Specialty food stores and full-service supermarkets shared the highest prices for carrots, corn tortillas, and potatoes and offered the lowest prices on lettuce and chicken legs.

Food Category	Food Item	Overall Average Price	Full-service Supermarket Average Price	Liquor Convenience Average Price	Specialty Foods Average Price
Grains	Oatmeal/18 oz.	\$2.43 (0.98 – 5.12)	<i>\$2.00 (0.98 – 3.00)</i>	<u>\$2.70</u> (1.39 – 5.12)	\$2.38 (1.10 – 4.56)
	Whole wheat bread/24 oz. loaf	\$2.30 (0.99-3.35)	<i>\$2.19 (0.99-3.29)</i>	<u>\$2.49</u> (1.79-3.35)	\$2.20 (1.30-2.89)
	Corn tortillas/12 oz. taco size	\$0.66 (0.29-2.59)	<u>\$0.66</u> (0.29-1.59)	\$0.63 (0.29-2.59)	<u>\$0.66</u> (0.33-1.16)
Vegetables	Carrots/ lb.	\$0.49 (0.20-1.39)	<i>\$0.37 (0.20-0.50)</i>	\$0.52 (0.30-1.00)	<u>\$0.62</u> (0.33-1.39)
	Lettuce/head	\$0.75 (0.25-1.30)	\$0.84 (0.39-1.29)	<u>\$0.70</u> (0.25-1.29)	<i>\$0.68 (0.45-1.30)</i>
	Potatoes/5 lbs.	\$1.57 (0.37-3.95)	<u>\$1.91</u> (0.75-3.95)	<i>\$1.66 (0.37-3.45)</i>	<u>\$1.91</u> (0.37-3.45)
Fruit	Apples/lb.	\$0.63 (0.22-1.00)	<i>\$0.57 (0.33-0.99)</i>	<u>\$0.69</u> (0.22-1.00)	\$0.59 (0.50-0.69)
	Oranges/lb.	\$0.47 (0.11-1.99)	<u>\$0.59</u> (0.20-1.99)	<i>\$0.38 (0.20-0.70)</i>	\$0.41 (0.11-0.89)
	Avocados/each	\$0.91 (0.33-1.75)	\$0.68 (0.33-1.25)	\$1.01 (0.50-1.75)	<u>\$1.07</u> (0.50-1.50)
Milk	2% milk/gallon	\$3.17 (2.25-4.50)	<i>\$3.00 (2.25-3.49)</i>	<u>\$3.26</u> (2.25-4.50)	\$3.14 (2.49-3.95)
	Cheddar cheese/lb.	\$4.39 (1.60-9.16)	<i>\$3.50 (1.60-5.69)</i>	<u>\$4.94</u> (2.25-9.16)	\$4.44 (3.59-5.13)
Meat and Protein	Chicken legs/lb.	\$1.18 (0.39-2.39)	\$1.30 (0.39-2.39)	<u>\$1.87</u> (0.79-1.99)	<i>\$1.26 (0.79-1.09)</i>
	Beef/lb.	\$2.38 (1.39-3.29)	\$2.34 (1.39-3.29)	<u>\$2.43</u> (1.99-2.99)	NA as <5 stores offered
	Eggs/dozen	\$1.54 (0.40-0.99)	<u>\$1.61</u> (0.79 – 2.59)	\$1.49 (0.40 – 2.29)	\$1.62 (1.00 – 2.99)
	Pinto beans/lb.	\$1.02 (0.44-3.49)	\$0.95 (0.38-1.69)	\$1.02 (0.44-3.49)	\$1.10 (0.69-3.00)

Table 5. Food Prices of Selected USDA Thrifty Food Plan Food Items of Similar Size

*Italics indicates lowest price. Underline indicates highest price.

Summary of Challenges to Accessing Healthy Food

Project partners were interviewed to determine their personal experiences living and shopping in the communities. Partners described many challenges to accessing healthy foods.

1. **Cost:** Food is perceived to be expensive and prices influence what people will buy. People reported that they have a limited budget to spend on food, and while they want the highest quality food for their families, they have to settle for the quality they can afford.
2. **Distance:** The nearest full-service supermarkets are often located more than one mile away from residents' dwellings, twice as far as typically considered to be within reasonable walking distance. Many people do not have their own transportation and must rely on walking, riding a bus, or the grocery store shuttle, which requires a minimum amount spent to qualify for a ride. Among those people who do have vehicles, the price of gasoline and the hassle of driving to the store are issues. Therefore, many people buy smaller amounts of food on a daily basis.
3. **Safety:** Many people think that it is unsafe to shop after dark due to concerns about crime in their neighborhoods.
4. **Easy access to fast food:** It is much easier to purchase fast food in the neighborhoods and outside the school grounds as there are many mobile food vendors that sell prepared foods in residential areas and near schools.

School Surveys

School surveys were completed in the fall of 2006. The overall purpose of these surveys was to assess the schools' food environment, including the cafeteria, snack and beverage machines, school stores, drinking fountains and other sources of food and drinks such as mobile vendors located near the school site. Five school food environments were surveyed and represented three elementary, one middle school, and one high school.

School Survey Results

Schools generally offered fresh fruits, cut fruits, fresh low-fat milk and water (fountain and bottled). Lunch service at most schools ran smoothly without major delays and students had adequate room to sit down and eat. None of the schools had food branding or advertising on book covers, pencils, etc. Most schools, however, offered no skim milk and offered only the bare minimum or inadequate vegetarian entrée options. Most schools did not post the nutritional content of their meals and did not post their health inspection report. All schools had liquor/convenience/ corner stores and/or mobile vendors within three blocks of the school selling chips (Hot Cheetos, Fritos, and Lays), beverages (Water, Gatorade, and Coke), ice cream/frozen treats, candy (M & Ms, Hersheys) and hot foods.



Project CAFE participant conducts a store survey

Agenda for Action

These findings indicate that many community members may be forced to rely on convenience/liquor/corner stores, full-service and fast food restaurants, and carry-out eating establishments as primary food sources. These businesses offer few or no healthy items, and community members are severely limited in the food choices available to them. Accessing healthy and affordable foods might require balancing grocery bags on the bus, paying costly cab fare, or being dependent upon the store shuttle services which often require a minimum purchase of \$40 for the service and can require long waits.

Project CAFE has identified five campaign priorities to improve access in these three neighborhoods and across the City. We want to make neighborhoods healthier by:

- ❑ **Attracting new food stores**

Full service supermarkets and other stores stocked with a wide variety of healthy and affordable food items are needed to improve food access. In addition, these stores should contribute to the overall economic conditions of the neighborhood and the region by stocking locally grown fruits and vegetables and paying workers a living wage.

- ❑ **Working with convenience/liquor stores to offer more healthy produce**

Existing stores can be part of the solution! Community groups and stores can be partners in improving food access by working together to build demand and supply for healthy foods. All stores should accept food stamps and WIC coupons and sell high quality produce.

- ❑ **Creating farmers' markets on school site**

Farmers' markets are a popular strategy for increasing fresh food access, building community, and creating public spaces for interactions. Schools are logical community institutions to get involved in promoting healthy food access and healthy, vibrant communities.

- ❑ **Establishing food access goals and policies in community plans/zoning regulations**

The City of Los Angeles Planning Department is in the process of updating at least 8 of the City's 35 community plans. These plans lay the ground work for economic and community development. Food access is an important component of neighborhood health, and so goals relating to attracting healthy food retail, capping or reducing the saturation of fast food/drive through restaurants and liquor stores should be incorporated into the plans.

- ❑ **Creating a city-wide network of community groups to work on food access policies**

Groups across the City are interested in improving food access. Better networking and coordination are needed to launch and win campaigns for improved food access and healthy neighborhoods.

End Notes

- 1 Obesity on the rise. County of Los Angeles Department of Health Services Public Health. July 2003.
- 2 Morland K et al. The contextual effect of the local food environment on residents' diets: the atherosclerosis risk in communities study. *American Journal of Public Health*. 2002; 92(11); 1761.
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