Food Access in a Southern Vermont Food Desert

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Introduction

In Bennington, Vermont work is underway to bring together the disparate constituencies within the food and farm sectors (Fredericks et al., 2012). Three of these constituencies are representatives of the food security organizations—the food pantries, soup kitchens, and senior meal programs—representatives of the farmers' market, and representatives of the hospital. It seems a natural collaboration because the essential mission of the three types of organizations is the same: that people eat well. It is only when you ask the questions what people, what is well, and why, that differences in the mission become obvious. Debates over programs and projects and clear articulation of goals reveal what is really at stake: Differing values that drive the mission that people eat well.

The team-up of the local food movement, public health advocates, and food security programs to bring healthy, local food to consumers who suffer from nutrition related diseases and who are low-income might seem to be a win-win-win scenario. Small-scale organic and direct market farmers will get more of taxpayers dollars through WIC, SNAP, and the Federal School Lunch program, low-income families will have greater access to healthy, local food, and our nation's obesity crisis can be averted. The solution to serve more local, wholesome food to more types of people seems clear, but is the problem equally clear? Is the problem that direct market farmers need more customers or that new farms should be established? Is it that local or organic food costs too much or that “bad” food costs too little? Is it that people are gaining too much weight because they do not choose the “right” foods or because the food environment they live in does not enable them to eat right? Or is the problem poverty? Or lack of education about nutrition?

The simple solution of facilitating access to locally produced foods for those in need of healthy food attempts to address multiple complex, confusing, and interrelated problems within the nation’s food system that are not solely based in science, but are also based in values that can be implicit or explicit, and are not universal. For example, the claims that people should have a certain body mass index, that they should eat organic or local food, that they should eat more of some whole foods (fruits, vegetables, whole grains, beans) and a little bit of others (meat, full-fat cheese and milk), and less processed foods or GMOs are not wholly quantifiable scientific truths, they reflect personal values based on aesthetics, preferences of taste, environmentalism, anti-industrialization, and others.

The debate over the significance of the food desert concept, both in material and symbolic terms, brings the complexities of using science to support value-based claims into focus. The downtown portion of Bennington, Vermont is classified as a food desert by the USDA because the median family income is less than 80% of the state’s median and at least 500 people in the census tract lives more than one-half mile from the nearest full-service supermarket or 100 households live over one-half mile and do not have access to a vehicle (USDA, 2013). The 2010 U.S. Census registered Bennington with a population of 15,764 inhabitants, making Bennington the largest town in southern Vermont and the third-largest town in Vermont as a whole, and designating it an urban cluster. From 2007 to 2011, the median income for a household in the town $33,706, as compared to Vermont's average $53,422 and the median income for a family is $40,615 compared to Vermont's median family income of $66,190 in 2011 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013; Department of Numbers, 2013). The per capita income for the town is also below average, $17,290 compared to Vermont's $28,376. As of 2011, 12.3% of Bennington County's population are below the poverty line, including 21.2% of those under age the age of 18, and 14.7% of Bennington County residents receive SNAP benefits (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). 362 households have no vehicle access and are over one-half mile to a supermarket, and 4292 people are over one-half mile from a supermarket (11.6% of the population). Of those 4292 people, 1440 are low-income with low access (USDA, 2012)

The food desert phenomenon is considered a national problem. In a report to Congress on food deserts, the problem is framed by the following statistics: 23.5 million people live in low-income areas (areas where more than 40 percent of the population has income at or below 200 percent of Federal poverty thresholds) and are more than 1 mile from a supermarket or large grocery store. Not all of these 23.5 million people have low income, though. 11.5 million of those who live in low-income areas, or 4.1 percent of the total U.S. population, are low-income themselves. There are U.S. households in more extreme situations as well—2.3 million, or 2.2 percent, live more than a mile from a supermarket and do not have access to a vehicle. An additional 3.4 million households, or 3.2 percent of all households, live between one-half to 1 mile and do not have access to a vehicle (Ver Ploeg, 2009).

The statistics on income level and distance to a supermarket warrant concern. The concept of a food desert, a place where access to good quality, healthy, and affordable food is limited, has become a rallying cry for some but an object of critique for others, not because the problem of food access is disputed, but rather how the problem is framed is under dispute. Public health advocates look for causal relationships between food access and diet related diseases like obesity and diabetes. While spatial correlation has been shown to be statistically significant in some locations, causality is notoriously hard to establish due to the myriad of factors that influence obesity (Gallagher, 2001, 2006; Ver Ploeg, 2009). Food justice activists use food deserts to highlight environmental racism—food deserts are often found in communities of color where structural inequalities lead to more dangerous and less healthy environments (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011).

The food desert concept suggests that an individual's choices are limited by the location in which they live, raising important questions about limitations of personal agency within the political economy and shifting responsibility from an individual to the state to ensure that all people have access to healthy and affordable food. The limitations of personal agency is an important social condition that the current neoliberal political economy obscures by shifting social responsibility from the public to private spheres through the emphasis on the free-market to equally distribute goods and services and on consumers to exercise choice to achieve self-actualization and fulfillment (Guthman, 2011). It is on the point of consumer choice where the food desert concept falls short. Whether consumers can or cannot access their choice foods, what should consumers be choosing? It is assumed that if one lives in a food desert they cannot access good food; food desert residents are perceived to eat more fast food and convenience foods since that is what is available and affordable (Bodor et al., 2007).

So then if food deserts do not have good food, what is "good" food? This question does not have a singular answer, yet in the food desert discourse there is a definition of good food that is central: whole foods (Guthman, 2011; Nestle, 2006; Pollan, 2008; Planck, 2007). Fruits, vegetables, whole grains, meats, beans and dairy are considered good foods, hence the emphasis on the distance to full service supermarkets that ensure provisioning of good food on an affordable basis. But the definition of good food does not stop there, however, thanks to the alternative food movement some whole foods are better, even healthier than others. The fruits and vegetables and other whole foods that you can get at farmers' markets or on farms, or grow yourself are the best quality foods that are best for you. The problem with this definition of good food that is well-recognized by those who believe it, however, is that local food is not affordable to all. It was not designed that way, local food is priced to give farmers more adequate remuneration for being stewards of the land and of our bodies, and good stewardship costs more. Price of local foods do vary, however, and are not always universally more expensive (Pirog and McCann, 2009). The inherent assumptions about the problem of good and bad food in the debate about food access are important to recognize because these assumptions fundamentally shape solutions. Public health, food justice and alternative food advocates have agreed that relocalizing food systems through farmers' markets (mobile or traditional), community supported agriculture, food coops, community gardens, green grocers and street vendors are excellent solutions to the food desert problem (Koc et al, 1999). On the question of affordability however, the only solution seems to be subsidizing the cost of good food, through federal SNAP and WIC benefits, or new non-profit and government programs (Oberholtzer et al., 2012). These solutions are laudable and certainly bring benefits, but both the development of market alternatives and food subsidies divert attention to the causes of inequality that lead to the condition of a food desert.

This paper aims to analyze the discourse around food access and food deserts in Bennington, and to investigate the lived experience of Bennington residents in their day-to-day modes of accessing their desired foods. Bennington, like any food desert location, deserves focus because as the discipline of geography teaches us, the particularities of place are uneven and unique, even in the wake of globalizing forces. Bennington is also unlike the urban, minority ghetto food desert that is commonly associated with the term. Bennington is an urban cluster by U.S. Census definition, but is better described as a commercial hub in a very rural area. It is also predominantly white, 96.7% of Bennington County residents identify as white (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). Car ownership is the norm and bus service exists, albeit limited. 2.35% of households in Bennington County have no car and low access to a supermarket (USDA, 2012). Bennington does have more sprawl than other quaint, Vermont towns, but there are two full service supermarkets and a discount supermarket between only 1.4 and 2.2 miles from the center of downtown. Bennington is also in a state with a nationally celebrated Farm to Plate Initiative that is focusing human and fiscal resources on the improvement of the agricultural economy and access to healthy, affordable food for all Vermonters (Vermont Farm to Plate Strategic Plan, 2013).

Bennington, Vermont is a good case study in trying to understand the meaning of its food designation both in the hearts and minds of its residents, as well as in their day-to-day quest to eat. At first glance, Bennington does not look like a food desert. So what does the food desert designation mean for Bennington residents? Some residents are outraged and offended by the food desert designation. The *Bennington Banner* ran an opinion piece entitled “Not a Food Desert” that blames Bennington leadership for allowing the federal government to falsely label the town in order to become eligible for federal money to subsidize new food retailers that the opinion writer emphatically feels would be shameful to accept (Bethel, 2012). This opinion is rooted in free-market ideology, with a moral undertone, but also wounded pride for the existing food retailers that he feels serve the community well but are deemed inadequate by the faulty food desert designation.

The first part of this research is designed to question the validity of the emphasis placed on full-service supermarkets to supply affordable, healthy foods. Do food retailers other than supermarkets provide healthy, affordable food? We conducted a market basket inventory of all food retailers in the food desert boundaries of downtown Bennington. The second part of the research is designed to bring the experiences and opinions of Bennington residents into the conversation about food access in Bennington. Who gets to define what good and poor food access means is just as important as the definition of good food itself (Guthman, 2011). We conducted 92 surveys with a convenience sample of Bennington grocery shoppers about their shopping patterns, preferences, and opinions about their food environment. The quantitative and qualitative data generated from these surveys are supplemented with the primary author's participation in community forums on Bennington's food system and involvement with the Bennington and Vermont Farm to Plate Initiatives. The research aims to induce the validity and limitations of the food desert designation for Bennington. This research was initiated as a result of information needs and gaps identified by community practitioners. It is our hope that this research will inform the conversation about food access, alternative food markets, and consumer preferences in Bennington, and in other places where our results might be applicable.

Methods

This research was developed and undertaken by a group of eight students and the primary author in her Spring 2013 Bennington College course *Bennington Farm to Plate*. We adapted methods from the USDA Community Food Assessment Toolkit (Cohen, 2002). The first part of the project involved inventorying all food retailers in the downtown Bennington area for availability and price of a regular weekly grocery list. We followed the Market Basket for the USDA Thrifty Food Plan because it is a nationally recognized grocery list that is considered affordable and nutritious (Carlson et al., 2006). There are 68 items in total, divided into 9 different categories by food type. We developed our retailer list by conducting Internet research, consulting the list of retailers used in the Vermont Fit and Healthy Retailer Survey, and ground truthing to finalize a list of 24 retailers. We created a typology of retailers by store type (see Table 1). We went through each store with a pricing survey for all 68 items and collected the lowest prices of each items or noted them as missing. We visited each retailer once, except for the farmers' market that we visited twice. We recognize that price and grocery availability fluctuate so our data captures a one time snapshot rather than variation and averages. The collected prices for each item were standardized by modification into price per unit to facilitate comparison across specific items, stores, and store types and to make comparisons with the Thrifty Food Plan national average grocery prices that are made available by the USDA on a monthly basis.

The second part of the project was the development of a qualitative and quantitative survey about purchasing patterns and opinions about Bennington's food environment. The survey was four pages with twelve sections that asked about understandings of the food desert concept and food access, where people shopped and why, the effect of transport on store selection, what people purchase and why, how frequently they shop, eat out, or eat at home, how they define good quality food, and socio-economic characteristics. Not all data is reported on in this paper. Overall, 94 surveys were collected by means of a convenience sample. We approached shoppers randomly at the stores within our retail inventory. We focused our surveying on shoppers at stores within the food desert in attempt to get a high proportion of food desert residents to participate. Surveys were conducted over a two-week period from May 8th to May 22nd, 2013. Our research methods followed ethical research guidelines of voluntary participation and confidentiality required by Bennington College's Committee on Human Subjects.

Results and Discussion

"*What bothers me the most, and should bother all of you, is the fact that we have been labeled a food desert by the feds in order to qualify for this grant* [from the Healthy Food and Financing Initiative]. *Bennington has an Aldi's, Hannaford, Price Chopper, and Wal-mart, not to mention our downtown local food suppliers—Henry's, Willy's, Martin's Mini-Mart, and Spice n'Nice. We also have two day's of farmers' markets on a weekly basis* [in the summer season]. *Where is the town's leadership in this community that would let this type of negative label stand without question just to get free money? Can our community pride be bought and sold this easily?*" (Bethel, September 6, 2012)

"*We have a wonderful opportunity to bring to life a long-term dream of many in our community—a food cooperative on Main Street in downtown Bennington. A food co-op would do four things. Eliminate the 'food desert' by bringing a grocery store downtown. Bring business to downtown. Bring jobs for low-income residents. Renovate an historic building. You can protest Bennington being called a food desert, but facts are facts and a food co-op faces the facts and moves to solve the problem*" (Murphy, September 10, 2012)

These two excerpts from the *Bennington Banner* illustrate a debate happening in the Bennington community about the nature of its food environment and how to improve it. The goal of developing a sustainable, affordable local food system that is a significant part of the community and its economy has been identified in myriad governmental and non-governmental planning documents and reports (Bennington Regional Plan, 2007; Bennington Town Plan, 2010; Bennington Municipal Energy Plan, 2012; Connecting the Dots in Bennington's Food System, 2012; Vermont Farm to Plate Strategic Plan, 2011; Bennington Community Visit, 2012;

Bennington Farm to Plate Action Plan, in preparation). There have been many inspirational projects undertaken to achieve this goal but truly bridging food aid and local food projects brings significant challenges. The controversy over the proposed food cooperative in downtown Bennington illustrates this point, as does the effort of the Walloomsac Farmers' Market to expand their demographic base and attract low-income consumers (Shelly and Keys, 2013, personal communication)[1]. One of the central points of contention about the co-op that is not explicit in the quotes above is the cost of membership and the cost of groceries that will no doubt be higher than other options in town, as well as the form of social organization a cooperative business uses that appeals to certain demographic groups and not others. The food co-op in Bennington is behind schedule because they are having trouble recruiting the 200 members they need to open.

A working group conversation from the Bennington Farm to Plate Community Forum, multiple perspectives were shared about the difficulty in reaching the group's goal "to expand the demographic base of consumers who purchase local and healthy food" (Bennington Farm to Plate Action Plan, in preparation). Lack of education, or knowledge, about what is good food (for bodies and for society) can be taken as a facile cause of not knowing or wanting to pay more for food. As one working group participant said, "We should look at the money going into things like cigarettes and soda, and think about how this parallels with healthy food and affordability." But the professionals in food security world in Bennington fiercely reject the notion that the poor spend their money on unhealthy things. A leader of a well-respected food security organization in town sums it up this way, "I work with people on a monthly salary of $700-$750 and $100-200 in food stamps.... they are no different than affluent people in when it comes to what food

[1] We interviewed Shelly Stiles, Walloomsac Farmers' Market Board Member on March 13, 2013 and Katherine Keys, Walloomsac Farmers' Market Manager on July 5, 2013.

they appreciate and demand. They know the food is there; the difference is that they can't afford it. These people aren't buying coke, typically. They buy what they need first."

The debate about the food desert designation, the co-op, the behavior of low-income food shoppers, and the cost of "good" food happening in Bennington is essentially one about who is responsible for people eating well. Are consumers themselves responsible to make informed choices? Is the educational system responsible? Should local or federal government set policy and provide tax dollars to support food access initiatives? Or should the free-market be left to respond to supply and demand and price resources accordingly? Again, the food desert concept assumes the free-market has not done the job of equally allocating healthy, affordable food options. While the debate on this point will continue, this investigation starts with asking if this assumption is true for Bennington.

Is the focus on distance to full service supermarkets an accurate measure of a food desert? Food sold at convenience stores has been shown to be more limited in whole food groceries and more expensive (Chung and Myers, 1999). On average across store types in Bennington, we found that it was impossible to purchase a full market basket in all non-supermarket, downtown retailers combined (hereto referred to as food desert retailers). The average percent of missing items from a complete market basket in food desert retailers is 58%. The only stores that have a complete market basket are the two supermarkets in Bennington. The food desert store with the best variety of food items is a neighborhood variety store, which had 15 items missing, or 22% of the market basket. In order to purchase nine more of those fifteen items, one would have to visit at least three more stores (out of 12 to choose from) and still might not be able to purchase fish, ground turkey, ground pork, chicken thighs, melon or grapes. Non-supermarket retailers outside of the food desert had 50% of the market basket items missing.

Food inventories then is not a function of being in the low-income area, but is the function of the store type itself. The effort in time, gas, knowledge and risk-taking in what might be available or not on a given day to get a full market basket is most likely going to be greater shopping at non-supermarket retailers. This is one reason why it has been shown, and is corroborated by our study, that people will travel further to get a full assortment of affordable groceries in one stop (Sharkey, 2009; Thomas, 2010). That is the strength of the supermarket model; one-stop shopping and average price outweigh length of travel time rendering the emphasis on supermarkets more important than that of distance.

As for the price of groceries in Bennington's food desert, the total cost of market basket items on average is 29% higher in price than the average of the two supermarkets combined. In the food desert, shoppers would have to visit at minimum four stores to get 91% of their weekly market basket and pay $151 instead of $117 in one stop at the supermarket. There are a food items that are lower in price in the food desert than at the supermarket (see Table 2). The average cost of bananas in the food desert is $1.07 per pound compared to $1.53 at the supermarket, a dozen eggs cost $2.37 compared to $2.57 at the supermarket and ground beef cost $3.09 per pound compared to $4.24 at the supermarket. The store with the highest mode of minimum prices is actually located not in the supermarket or downtown proper, but at a discount grocery specialty store that is just outside of downtown on the commercial strip, within walking distance of low-income housing and technically within the food desert. The maximum prices that were found in the food desert are grossly over the price of the supermarket. There is great variation in prices for certain items such as toasted oats, white sugar, tuna fish, and lettuce. Toasted oat cereal ranged from $1.52 to $7.17 per pound and tuna fish from $2.00 to $9.84 per pound, and white sugar from $0.60 to $8.97 per pound showing that there is price gouging at some stores.

The Walloomsac Farmers' Market increased their winter market frequency from once to twice per month in the 2012-13 season. We sampled prices at the market twice during the winter season in order to compare prices to other Bennington retailers. While farmers markets certainly carry the reputation that they are more expensive, it is worth investigating because it is not universally true for all products and markets. The USDA Thrifty Food Plan is biased towards retailers that source produce globally, not seasonally by location, so we used comparable fruits and vegetables from the farmers' market. In Bennington, the Farmers' Market is on average 144% more expensive than other sources of groceries. All products were more expensive (see Table 3).

Given the expense of their products, the Walloomsac Farmers' Market is very interested in reaching out to low-income consumers and has formed a working group of the Board of Directors to do so (Stiles, personal communication, 2013). The market only employs a part-time market manager. Dedicated volunteer board members, some of which are farmers who sell at the market, do most of the work of the administering the market. SNAP recipients (3SquaresVT is SNAP in Vermont), can shop at the market through three different programs. The Farmers' Market accepts EBT cards to purchase wooden tokens that can be spent at the market. WIC or SNAP recipients that meet program criteria can get $30 worth of coupons to be spent exclusively at farmers' markets in the summer season. The program opens in June and recipients get coupons on a first come first serve basis; there are only coupons for a18% of the eligible WIC population. In Bennington County the redemption rate has hovered around 60% for the last several years and program workers are looking at ways to improve usage rates (Prinz, personal communication, 2013[2]). This suggests that there is not a dearth of federal monies to be spent at the market, but

[2] We interviewed Sheila Prinz, Nutritionist and WIC Program Coordinator at the Bennington Office of the Vermont Department of Health on April 22, 2013.

lack of interest among WIC recipients. A newer program, Harvest Health, was initiated this year at the Walloomsac Market through a partnership of NOFA-VT, Wholesome Wave, and the Vermont Agency of Agriculture to match 3SquareVT benefits at the market. For every $2 spent, a $2 coupon is granted, up to $10 per visit. The total value of coupons that the market could receive for the 2012-13 season was $1200, and the market reached that cap in mid-April. The coupons were reinstated for the 2013-14 season on July 2, and usage started right away. The program was successful in increasing monies spent at the market. During the period when the Harvest Health coupons were active, 3SquaresVT beneficiaries on the whole purchased more on average ($82.93 per market day) than during the period when the coupons were inactive ($56.31 per day). However, it was not successful in attracting new customers to the market. There were slightly fewer average 3SquaresVT users per market day *and* fewer users new to the market (2.4 and 0.5, respectively) when the coupons were active as opposed to when they were not available (2.8 and 0.8, respectively) (Keys, personal communication, July 6, 2013). The incomplete usage of Farm to Family coupons, the successful usage of all Harvest Health coupons but inability of the program to attract many new users suggests that the means of coupon distribution is key. For people who already shop at the market and get their coupons at the market, spending more there is desired. But getting new 3SquaresVT or WIC recipients to the market, even with money in hand, is a challenge. The market does attract about one new 3SquaresVT customer every other market day, so a growing clientele may be possible.

Even with the variation in price of groceries around Bennington, Bennington residents still have higher average grocery costs than the national average. The national average for March, 2013 for a USDA Thrifty Food Plan weekly market basket for a family of four with two children aged 6-8 and 9-11 years was $146.60 (USDA, 2013). In Bennington the averages at the two supermarkets were \$151.86 and \$159.93. It is worth noting that the less expensive supermarket is the number one cited market preferred by our survey participants. Bennington County's median household income for a 2.3 people is \$48,083, below the national median of \$52,762 for 2.6 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). On average, Bennington residents must spend proportionally more of their income on groceries than people in other places across the United States unless they take the time to seek out lowest cost items at multiple retailers across town. Our survey indicates that the majority of respondents prefer to do the bulk of their shopping at supermarkets rather than price seeking for specific items. Price and variety of store inventory are considered the most important factors for choosing where to shop (see Table 4). Only 14% of survey respondents indicated distance from home as a factor that shapes where they choose to shop. When we broke out shopping locations by whether people lived within or outside of the food desert, the only difference was a slightly higher percentage of people shopping at convenience stores rather than supermarkets for their top three store types (see Table 5). All income groups reported affordability as an important factor, with slightly more emphasis in the low income demographic (under \$40,000 per household). Comments about specific items or kinds of items were also frequently cited as reasons to shop at certain stores. For example, "best bread in town," "great cheeses," coffee, bulk items, organic or local items, and fresh meats were mentioned as determinants to go to a particular store, and particularly for food desert stores. The theme of preference for certain items or for a variety of items was emphasized over convenience or closeness to home when were looked at why people shopped at non-supermarket store types in the food desert.

The simple answer to the question, why do people shop at food desert stores, is specialty items. This finding is supported by another result from our survey, that only about half of the respondents who reported that they shop at food desert stores live within the food desert. Proximity to work was cited 18 times (and 19 respondents cited proximity to home) as a reason for deciding where to shop but the clear trend from our study is that food desert residents, like non-food desert residents, shop at supermarkets for the bulk of their food, and food desert and non-food desert residents shop at particular stores within in the food desert for specialty items. These items might be what people consider premium items or good quality discount items. The farmers' market, health food store, butcher, discount stores (like dollar stores and Aldi's) are referenced here.

Whereas affordability and store selection are the main parameters for deciding where to shop, quality of food is the single most important parameter for what people choose to buy. We asked survey respondents to rank in order of importance the influence of four factors on what food they buy (see Table 5). Eighty-two percent of respondents indicated quality was the first or second most important factor, with nutrition emphasized as the first or second most important by 62% of respondents, slightly more than price, which was selected as first or second most important by 54% of respondents. Ease of preparation was considered least important.

We anticipated the emphasis on quality so we asked respondents to describe what defines good quality food (see Table 6). The keyword "fresh" was mentioned more frequently than any other term. While the meaning of "fresh" can be interpreted in multiple ways, respondents usually paired "fresh" with other terms to provide a better idea of what they meant. By and large in our survey, fresh is an adjective used for perishable whole foods: fruits, vegetables, meats, and dairy. Unprocessed, healthy, nutritious are other adjectives associated with fresh. References to production practices such as organic, GMO-free, no hormones or pesticides, and local were also associated with freshness. One respondent described the types of foods he/she considered good quality: “Good quality foods are whole foods. In my house, pasta, rice, and highly processed foods are used minimally as sides. We prefer low-fat proteins and fresh fruits and vegetables.” Another respondent thought of quality as an indicator for meals, or combinations of foods and stated that quality means “Fresh ingredients, preferably local, with a good ratio of vegetables to meats and grains.” Another respondent specifically referred to produce and qualified the importance of quality over price by stating, “I want fresh, preferably locally grown, produce and don't mind paying a little extra for that.” Others were less exacting, for example “Something that is semi-nutritious and taste[s] good” or simply “good food is affordable with good taste.” The current discourse in our nation about quality food being associated with provenance, production practices, health and whole foods is the dominant description for “good quality” food in our survey.

The emphasis on quality foods as whole foods, or ingredients of a meal, suggests that our survey population cooks at home. When they shop at their number one store choice (mostly the supermarket), 85% of our survey sample reports they buy fresh fruits and 80% buy fresh vegetables, 79% buy dairy, 71% buys dry grains, and 67% buy fresh or frozen meats. We asked about eating at home verse eating out and found that 75% of our survey population eats at home daily. Eating out or eating take-out on average occurred once a week to once or twice a month, and eating fast food averaged between monthly to every few months. We had only three respondents who ate at soup kitchens. The Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System reports that only about one-third of Bennington County residents eat the recommended daily allowance of two or more fruits per day and three or more vegetables per day (CDC, 2010). This is on par with national averages, but based on our survey data we cannot blame this lack of fruit and vegetable intake on access.

Grocery shopping is a very important part of people's lives in Bennington, yet only half of the survey sample fully felt that they had sufficient access to good quality food. Six percent of the sample flat out said they did not have good access, and about 42% had caveats about being able to access good quality food. Some of the qualified responses had to do with insufficient food aid, for example "The 3 Squares Program is far superior to the food bank and Kitchen Cupboard" or "Now yes, however when I was a single mother in a one income household, no. Because even then with foodstamps, I could not afford the healthy foods for my family. Now with two incomes it is different." Other caveats included inadequate year-round access to local produce, such as the response "Somewhat. In the summer there is the Farmers' Market" while others felt it was the cost of local produce that was the problem, "Yes. It isn't always cheap, but by home cooking and eating vegetarian we eat local/good all year round." One respondent was attuned to the co-op controversy in town and took the opportunity in this question to voice his/her opinion by responding, "No, I miss having a local co-op, have to work harder and drive farther for good food now."

Another question we asked to identify strong themes in what defines good access to food was "What changes would you like to see in Bennington to improve your options to purchase good quality food?" The most common response (20 out of 62) was the addition of new retailers, again with a focus on selling affordable fresh or local fruits, vegetables and meats. There were mentions of desire for more farmers' markets, grocery stores in downtown, larger health food stores (not a co-op), an "upscale" grocery, Wegman's, Whole Foods or Trader Joe's, or a food "warehouse" like BJ's or Sam's Club (see Figure A). Ten respondents specifically want a co-op in town, and another ten wanting to expand options at existing retailers, such as the farmers' market, local meat and produce offerings at the supermarkets or an expanded Wal-Mart, which is in planning stages for Bennington (Freeman, March 24, 2013). For one respondent who wants to see more local food, they feel that as a town, Bennington cannot support such a change, "Honestly, Bennington needs to start buying more locally grown meats and produce which big chain stores do not provide... However, Bennington doesn't have the job market to support that. Too many families rely on food stamps and unemployment."

Only three comments referred to more ethnic food. One respondent suggested there be more culturally diverse restaurants, two requested more Asian products. The comment "more variety of ethnic products, especially Asian" serves as a reminder about how the dominant discourse about good food is centered around narrowly defined definitions of good health and production practices. Cultural diversity is at the margin of the good food discussion. Bennington does not have a substantial immigrant population to support ethnic foods (there are Latino farm workers in the area who curiously do not have a presence in the food environment), but as this survey shows, neither does the existing population demand ethnic food.

Conclusion

Our research shows that access to good quality food for Bennington residents means year-round access to affordable vegetables and meats, emphasizing local production. Transportation was only mentioned once as a restriction on access. In this singular response it was acknowledged that there are little food options downtown. Among the suggestions to improve food access in Bennington only three about transport: bike lanes, a grocery store in walking distance of downtown, and better transport options to current supermarkets. Yet when we asked respondents how does transport and distance from home to food retailers influence where they shop, half said it they did influence shopping patterns, mostly when trips to get groceries were made in order to reduce driving. Some respondents mentioned a preference for walking; only two were restricted by not having a vehicle, mirroring overall car ownership rates of 98% in Bennington. According to our survey population, people are not restricted from getting groceries because of transport options and distance, but are conscious of reducing time and money spent on travel by coupling grocery shopping with other trips to town or by reducing frequency of shopping.

Our survey began with the question “Are you familiar with the term food desert”? Only 28 out of 87 respondents were familiar with the term. The last question of the survey told respondents that downtown Bennington is considered a food desert by the USDA, and that “a food desert is a place where people do not have access to convenient, healthy and affordable food.” Half of the respondents agreed and half disagreed with this statement. The debate centered around affordability, placement of grocery stores, and transport options, the exact criteria given in the food desert definition. But, for the first time in this survey, lack of education about what is “good food” and poor choices were invoked as problems rather that the place of Bennington itself. Comments ranged from outrage, “No. I've worked at farms for five years, so this shocks me. Food is there, cooking education isn't” to using educational inequity to account for the designation, “No. We have access. I feel we are more of an "Information Desert,” to downright blame on those who are believed to lack access: “A lot of people here don't have money to buy food but smoke and do drugs,” “No. I think people make poor choices and need to be educated on what is healthy food,” and “No—it is an effort thing.”

In the end, centrality of responsibility for eating well comes back to the forefront of the debate just as it is central in the public discourse about food access, healthy eating and local foods in Bennington. It is interesting to note that not one respondent took personal responsibility for learning how to eat better. The need for education is always invoked for the other. Suggestions for improved inventories of existing retailers invoke business as responsible to consumers needs, and the call for new retailers in town suggests there is a role local government can play. Federal food aid was acknowledged as a means of helping those in need in Bennington, but no one said to expand food aid programs as a means to improving food access in Bennington. The split response on whether Bennington has an adequate or inadequate food environment suggests that the town is not in acute need of amelioration of its food environment. Distance to a full service supermarket was an impediment for a few survey respondents, mirroring car ownership rates in Bennington, but did not completely restrict access to desired food retailers. Our finding that is most consistent with the USDA food desert designation is the emphasis on full service supermarkets as a marker of an affordable, complete market basket. But we must remember that this emphasis reflects a relatively new shopping pattern due to the consolidation of food retail that has occurred over the last several decades. People do not go out of their way to price seek the lowest cost items, they rather put themselves in a store environment they consider affordable and shop based on ideas of quality. We also found that people appreciate shopping at particular places for specialty items and will pay more for them; specialty stores were among almost all respondents top three store choices, and this is where the food desert retailers shine. If one might re-imagine an improved food retail environment for downtown Bennington, or Main Street anywhere, a cluster of well (or variously) priced, diversely stocked food retailers might both satisfy the convenience of one-stop shopping with the desire for personalized, specialty food shopping. Thriving downtown food environments such as this exist in cities and towns, particularly in ethnic neighborhoods (Imbruce, 2011).

Bennington residents agree with the dominant national discourse of good quality food being whole foods or minimally processed foods that are local or organic, and that good access to food must include these types of food. This finding should provide support for the current and future initiatives of those in the various constituencies in Bennington that want to promote local foods. The trick will be pricing and availability, and to start with improving the inventories of favorite shopping locations might be more successful than creating new market based alternatives. The question of responsibility is not easily resolvable except for multiple parties to assume responsibility rather than pass it off to someone else. The food desert designation, whether or not it is accurate for Bennington, gives reason to focus energies on questions about good food and good food access. Organizations involved in improving food access should be clear about their goals and underlying values, whether it is food security, health, or local farms, and collaborate accordingly.

Tables and Figures

Table 1: Typology of Food Retailers in Study: This list includes all food retailers in downtown Bennington north of Main St and along the commercial corridor of Northside Drive to Kocher Drive.

Store Type	**Total Count**	**Count in Food Desert**	**Market Basket Items Present (%)**
Gas Station Convenience Store	6	4	30
Variety Store or Corner Market	4	4	48
Specialty Grocery	4	4	47
Dollar Store	3	1	30
Supercenter	2	1	49
Supermarket	2	0	100
Pharmacy Convenience Store	2	1	36
Farmers' Market	1	1	16
Total	24	20	--

Table 2: Variation in Prices for Select Market Basket Items
Pricing is based on a one-time inventory and so do not represent temporal variation in pricing. Minimum prices and minimum average prices are highlighted for ease of comparison between food desert retailers and supermarkets.

	Food Desert Retailers			**Supermarkets**		
Food Item Price ($) per pound, unless noted	Min	Max	Mean	Min	Max	Mean
Apples, any variety	0.96	2.85	1.95	1.49	1.99	1.74
Bananas	0.44	1.99	1.07	0.69	2.36	1.53
Oranges, any variety (bagged or loose)	0.66	2.04	1.23	1.58	1.79	1.69
Carrots, unpeeled (bagged or loose)	0.65	2.79	1.51	1.49	1.5	1.50
Lettuce, leaf (green or red)	1.47	2.49	2.00	1.99	1.99	1.99
Onions, yellow (bagged or loose)	0.76	2.85	1.44	0.80	1.49	1.14
Tomatoes (any variety)	1.35	3.89	2.78	1.99	1.99	1.99
Potatoes (any variety)	0.37*	0.44	0.40	0.50	0.50	0.50
Spaghetti sauce, any variety	0.67	4.33	1.87	0.61	0.67	0.64
Orange Juice, frozen concentrate	1.72	3.45	2.59	3.4	3.4	3.40

Broccoli, frozen chopped	1.45	4.78	3.27	1.39	1.99	1.69
Green beans, frozen	2.09	4.78	3.35	0.99	1.25	1.12
Breads, white, enriched	0.68	4.79	2.47	0.79	1.08	0.94
Bread, whole wheat	1.20	3.25	2.45	1.07	1.51	1.29
Bagels, plain, enriched (per bagel)	0.28	0.80	0.54	0.40	0.47	0.44
Ready-to-eat cereal - toasted oats	1.93	7.17	4.21	2.10	2.33	2.21
Flour, white, al-purpose, enriched	0.43	0.96	0.71	0.46	0.47	0.47
Macaroni, elbow style, enriched	0.85	2.99	1.69	0.90	1.20	1.05
Rice, white, long-grain, enriched	0.60	3.76	1.79	0.73	0.88	0.80
Spaghetti, any variety, enriched	0.85	2.99	1.96	0.95	0.97	0.96
Milk, 1% lowfat (gallon)	2.99*	4.5	3.58	3.29	3.39	3.34
Milk, whole (gallon)	2.79	4.99	3.80	3.64	3.74	3.69
Cheese, cheddar, any variety	3.58	6.98	5.95	3.99	4.79	4.39
Beef, ground, lean	2.29	3.89	3.09	3.49	4.99	4.24
Chicken, fryer, cut-up or whole	0.89	1.79	1.34	0.99	1.39	1.19
Turkey, ground	2.49	2.49	2.49	1.3	3	2.15
Eggs, grade A, large (dozen)	1.45	3.50	2.37	2.49	2.65	2.57
Fish, flounder or cod, frozen	3.99	3.99	3.99	4.99	8.65	6.82
Tuna Fish, chunk-style, in water	2.00*	9.84	4.98	2.84	2.85	2.84
Beans, garbonzo (chick peas), canned	0.60*	3.09	1.93	1.06	1.29	1.17
Vegetable oil, any type	0.83	2.83	1.69	1.00	1.06	1.03
Sugar, white granulated	0.60	8.97	1.60	0.66	0.67	0.67
Jelly, grape	0.85	3.85	1.92	1.00	1.25	1.13
Chocolate chips, semi-sweet	2.39	7.19	4.80	2.65	2.92	2.79

Table 3: Farmers' Market Prices

Item (per pound, unless noted otherwise)	Walloomsac Farmer's Market price	Average price across all other retailers
Carrots, unpeeled	2.50	1.72
Onions, yellow	2.00	1.31
Potatoes	2.00	0.83
Bread, whole wheat (per 24 oz loaf)	3.75	2.28
French or Italian Bread (per 1 lb loaf)	3.00	2.02
Bagels, plain (per bagel)	1.25	0.56
Cheese, cheddar	19.00	5.87
Beef, ground	5.85	3.74
Pork, ground	5.75	3.04
Luncheon meat	6.50	3.57
Eggs, per dozen	3.50	2.22
Margarine or butter	16.00	2.02

Table 4: Factors that Influence Store and Food Choice
Importance rank was calculated by averaging weighted responses on a ranking scale of 1 – 4 for the four factors listed in the table for store and food choice.

Reason for store choice	Importance Rank	Reason for food choice	Importance Rank
Price	2.12	Quality	1.68
Variety of store inventory	2.24	Nutrition	2.25
Support local business	2.68	Price	2.26
Distance from home	2.97	Ease of Preparation	3.20

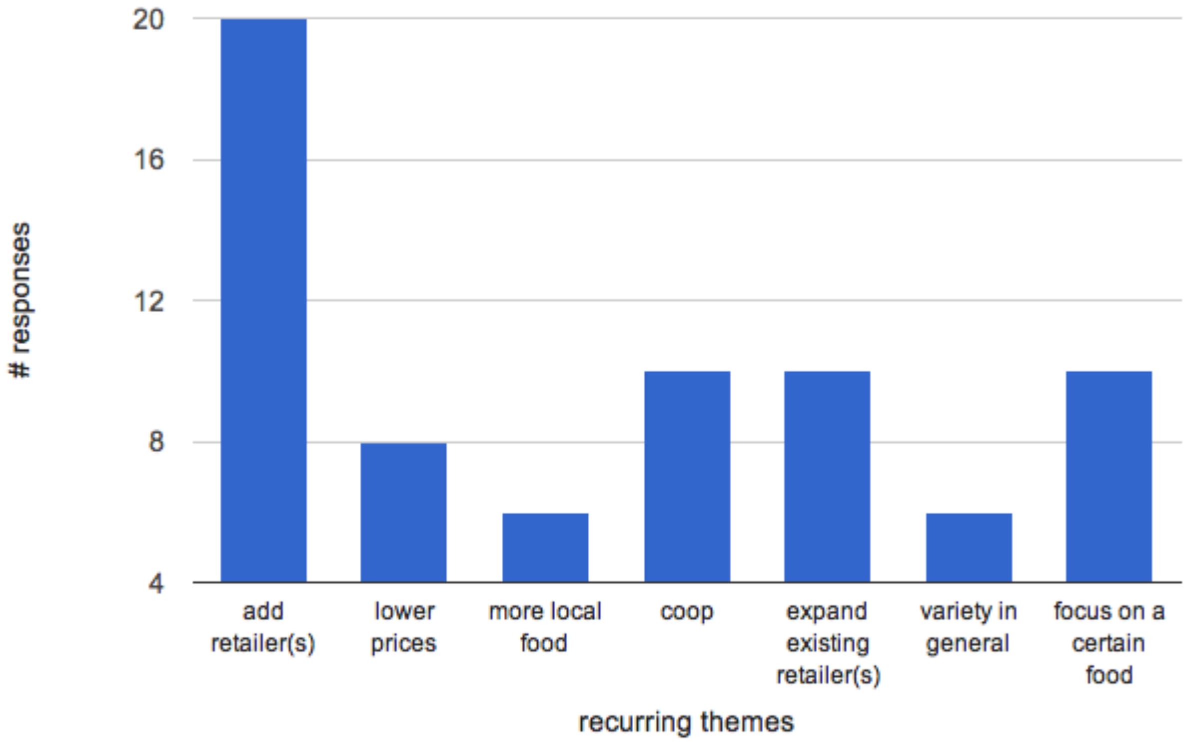
Table 5: Preferred Store Types
The stores are defined as preferred by being one of the three store types where survey respondents said they do the most of their grocery shopping.

Preferred Store Type	Food desert residents (%)	Non-food desert residents (%)
Supermarket	65	72
Specialty Grocery	10	12
Supercenter	10	10
Convenience	8	2
Dollar Store	3	0
Farmers Market	2	1
Gas Station	2	1

Table 6: Keywords Used to Define Good Quality Food
Percent of keywords was calculated for the number of responses in which they appeared in answer to the open-ended survey question, "In your opinion, what defines good quality food?"

Quality Keyword	**Percent of responses**
Fresh	55
Nutritious	20
Good Taste	19
Organic	18
Unprocessed	14
Local	9
Few or no chemicals	9
Healthy	9
Produce	8
Price	7
Whole food	5
Natural	4
Aesthetically pleasing	3
Safe	3
Not Expired	1

Figure A: **Suggestions for Improving Access to Good Food in Bennington**
This graph shows the frequency of responses grouped by theme to the survey question, "What changes would you like to see in Bennington to improve your options to purchase good quality food?"



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