


Fresh Divide: Inside Pittsburgh's food deserts, where buying milk or veggies is impossible

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COLIN DEPPEN / THE INCLINE

Rossilynne Culgan and Colin Deppen
Oct. 15, 2018, 5:30 a.m.

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This is the first of four stories examining food deserts in the Pittsburgh region.

Part 2: Could an urban farm help those marooned on Pittsburgh's Hilltop? (<https://theincline.com/2018/10/16/fresh-divide-could-an-urban-farm-help-those-marooned-on-pittsburghs-hilltop/>).

Part 3: Gardens sprout in Homewood, where residents 'decided to grow our own food' (<https://theincline.com/2018/10/17/fresh-divide-gardens-sprout-in-homewood-where-residents-decided-to-grow-our-own-food/>).

Part 4: After years without a grocery store, a new kind of market comes to Clairton (<https://theincline.com/2018/10/18/fresh-divide-after-years-without-a-grocery-store-a-new-kind-of-market-comes-to-clairton/>).

Jessica Paquette arrived at the Arlington Avenue dollar store around noon on a recent Wednesday. She needed to buy milk.

The 30-year-old mother of two walked through the aisles stocked with confections and party favors to a small refrigerated section at the back. She stood there a few moments, paced for a few more and then flagged down an employee.

“I’m looking for white milk,” Paquette said.

The employee said all they had was chocolate.

Paquette, a new arrival to Mt. Oliver Borough, which is surrounded on all sides by the City of Pittsburgh, threw up her hands and started scrolling through her phone in hopes of finding someone to give her a ride. The employee went back to stocking shelves.

“I’m probably not even gonna worry about it ‘cuz I’m walking,” Paquette said of the milk in speaking with *The Incline*. “I don’t have a car. I know there’s a Shop ‘n Save down a ways, if you take the 51 [bus]. But I’m not in the mood for all that.”

Her story is not unique.

1 in 5 Pittsburghers

In 2017, more than 1-in-5 Pittsburgh residents were food insecure, meaning they routinely had to choose between food and other basic needs – housing, medicine, education, transportation, and utilities – or between reducing portions or skipping meals entirely, per city data.

This, in a city with a resurrected restaurant scene receiving glowing culinary profiles in outlets like *The New York Times* and *Bon Appetit* and no shortage of fine-dining catering to a growing group with more disposable income. While that may attract tourists who dine out, it’s a different story to actually live here and fill kitchen cabinets.

“There’s the dichotomy: It’s a foodie city, but not a lot of people are close to a grocery store,” said Sarah Buranskas, food access coordinator for the Pittsburgh Food Policy Council.

This divide is evident in Pittsburgh-area communities with less disposable income than most, areas the free market has long overlooked. The result? As Paquette experienced first-hand, options are often limited in places like the Hilltop, Homewood, and Clairton.

There are a number of reasons for this, including distance, price, topography, walkability, and access to transportation and public transportation. Pittsburgh experts urge considering other factors, too, such as sidewalk availability and weather when discussing food deserts.

While geographically distinct, the Hilltop, a dozen communities on Pittsburgh’s southern end; Homewood, technically three eastern neighborhoods; and the City of Clairton, a Mon River town 15 miles southeast of Pittsburgh, are all linked by a lack of access – and people trying to overcome the problem.

It’s those people who tell the story of what many Pittsburghers experience every day in trying to put food on the table and how what you eat so often depends on where you live.

By the numbers

Shelly Danko+Day has no illusions about how much work needs to be done. She is Pittsburgh’s urban agriculture and food policy adviser and works to improve food access in the city, build out local food systems, and expand the reach of the city’s farmers markets.

“We know we’ve got problems with food equity and food security in the city,” she told *The Incline*. “These are the same places with access issues to parks and hospitals.”

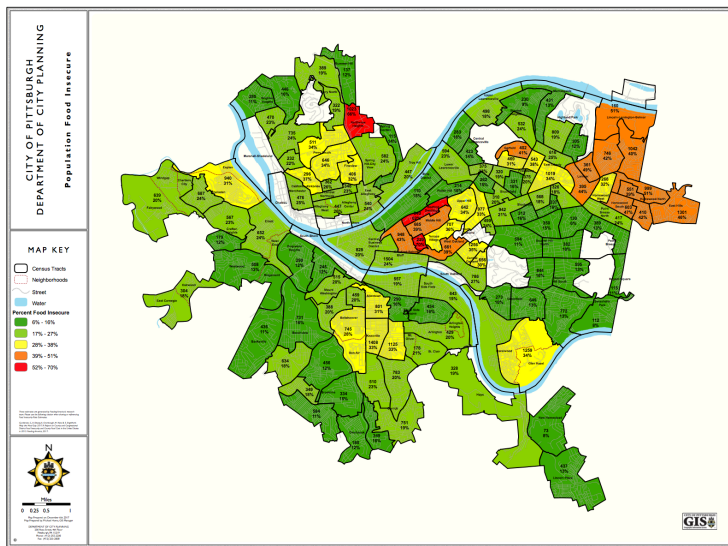
While the city has hotspots where 30 to 70 percent of residents are food insecure, it’s an issue just about everywhere, she said.

“As of 2017, 21.4 percent of City of Pittsburgh residents faced food insecurity,” she added.

Generally speaking, food insecurity refers to an individual’s ability to afford food. Food deserts refer to their ability to find it nearby. And while food insecurity can exist outside of food deserts, a map of Pittsburgh’s food insecure communities reveals considerable overlap.

The map is a sea of dark green (six to 16 percent food insecure) and light green (17 to 27 percent) punctuated by islands of yellow (28 to 38 percent), orange (39 to 51 percent) and red (52 to 70 percent). Danko+Day said none of these ranges are comforting.

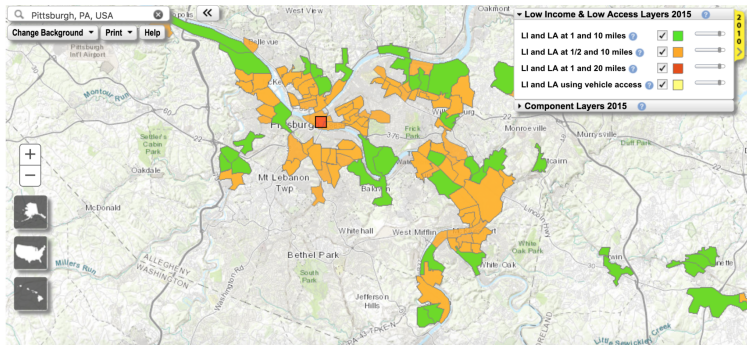
“Green isn’t peachy,” she explained. “That’s still up to a quarter of residents in those areas.”



This map documents Pittsburgh’s food insecurity. COURTESY OF SHELLY DANKO+DAY
In the food deserts of Homewood and the Hilltop, food insecurity rates are predictably high, impacting between a third and one-half of all residents.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture measures food deserts based on several [metrics of low access and low income \(https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/documentation/#definitions\)](https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/documentation/#definitions), explained Shelly Ver Ploeg of the department’s economic research service. Ver Ploeg also leads the department’s food assistance branch.

Low access areas, for example, can be measured as places where at least 100 households that do not have a car are more than ½ mile from the nearest supermarket, super center or large grocery store. Low income areas are defined as places with poverty rates of at least 20 percent or places where the median income is at or below 80 percent of the metropolitan area’s median income, per the USDA.



The USDA's Food Access Research Atlas details low-income and low-access areas. [U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE ECONOMIC RESEARCH SERVICE FOOD ACCESS RESEARCH ATLAS \(HTTPS://WWW.ERS.USDA.GOV/DATA-PRODUCTS/FOOD-ACCESS-RESEARCH-ATLAS/GO-TO-THE-ATLAS/\)](https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/go-to-the-atlas/).

'Food apartheid'

The issue of hunger and poverty goes much deeper than simply where a grocery store opens its doors.

It's about "the systemic roots that help set up those conditions and the economic inequity that leads to hunger in one of the wealthiest countries in the world," said Helen Gerhardt, a grassroots organizer at Just Harvest.

Grocers decide where to put their stores based on population density, along with consideration of "street visibility, other businesses in the area [...] and marketplace saturation," said Laura S. Strange, vice president of industry relations, communications and marketing with the National Grocers Association.

The purchasing power of a potential customer base is also a factor. For these reasons, in places like the Hilltop, Homewood, and Clairton, the free market's response has long been a collective shrug.

A group of major food retailers promised in 2011 to open or expand 1,500 grocery or convenience stores in and around neighborhoods with no supermarkets as part of Michelle Obama's healthy eating initiative. But in 2015, the *Associated Press* reported, the retailers were well short of their target (<http://www.chicagotribune.com/business/ct-grocery-chains-ignore-food-deserts-20151207-story.html>).

Some activists prefer the term "food apartheid," because they feel it better speaks to the complexities and systemic equity issues of food access.

"'Food desert' does not take into account that food desert communities align really closely with communities of color," said Buranskas, of the Pittsburgh Food Policy Council, which brings together local stakeholders to work on the issues of food and healthy equity and food access, among others. "Food apartheid is an attempt to acknowledge the disparity of communities that are and are not affected by this issue."

Ayanna Jones, an activist and community garden founder in Homewood, said food apartheid "addresses what's happening in this community without any fluff and puts it on the table."

"People not having food is not a natural occurrence," Jones said. "We have to recognize that the food access in the black community is not happenstance. It's a purposeful plan to put substandard food in our community."

Meanwhile, 40 percent of the food produced in the U.S. is thrown away, said 412 Food Rescue Senior Program Director Jen England. 412 Food Rescue collects surplus produce from stores and delivers it to people in need, dropping off donations at food pantries, housing sites and senior high rises. The rescued food, from produce to dairy products, can be eaten right away.

"We don't have a production problem. We have a distribution problem," England said. "Food deserts are a good example of that. We need to think of that as a systemic issue. What does our food system look like?"

Among similarly sized cities, a [2013 report from Just Harvest](http://www.justharvest.org/advocacy/food-deserts/) (<http://www.justharvest.org/advocacy/food-deserts/>), states, "Pittsburgh has the highest percentage of people" residing in so-called food deserts.

This is their story, a chronicle of the food challenges facing Pittsburghers and the DIY spirit of residents and activists who are sick of waiting for a free-market solution that may never come.

Editor's Note: Come back each day to read the next installment of this four-part series examining local food deserts, and [sign up here \(https://bit.ly/fresh-divide-newsletter\)](https://bit.ly/fresh-divide-newsletter) to get these stories in your inbox each morning:

How you can help

Here's what local experts say is most helpful to your fellow Pittsburghers – from volunteering to donating to getting out the vote.

With your time:

[Attend \(https://www.pittsburghfoodpolicy.org/\)](https://www.pittsburghfoodpolicy.org/) a Food Policy Council meeting, which are open to the public, and get involved with one of the council's groups.

[Drive \(https://412foodrescue.org/\)](https://412foodrescue.org/) food to local communities, most within a 15-minute drive, after downloading the 412 Food Rescue app.

[Volunteer \(mailto:blackfarmerscoop@gmail.com\)](mailto:blackfarmerscoop@gmail.com) with Black Urban Gardeners and Farmers of Pittsburgh Co-op (BUGs) by emailing blackfarmerscoop@gmail.com.

[Volunteer \(https://www.svcgpggh.com/\)](https://www.svcgpggh.com/) at Homewood's Sankofa Village Community Garden's work days, donate to the garden, or buy produce in the summer.

With your money:

[Attend \(https://www.facebook.com/harambeesbackyardmarket/\)](https://www.facebook.com/harambeesbackyardmarket/) an upcoming Harambee's Backyard Market.

Buy produce at small corner stores to show merchants that it's valuable to stock those items, said Sarah Buranskas of the Food Policy Council.

Donate money (or your time) at the food bank.

Shop at your local farmers market.

With your vote:

[Attend \(https://www.pittsburghfoodpolicy.org/meetings-and-events?view=calendar&month=October-2018\)](https://www.pittsburghfoodpolicy.org/meetings-and-events?view=calendar&month=October-2018) a Food Policy Council event to learn from local experts about legislation like the farm bill or SNAP.

[Contact \(http://www.legis.state.pa.us/cfdocs/legis/home/findyourlegislator/\)](http://www.legis.state.pa.us/cfdocs/legis/home/findyourlegislator/) your elected representatives. "Pittsburghers need to make sure that urban agriculture is evenly distributed in black communities" by making sure they get grants for gardening projects and holding leaders accountable, said Ayanna Jones of Sankofa Village Community Garden.

[Sign up \(https://www.pittsburghfoodbank.org/get-involved/advocate/\)](https://www.pittsburghfoodbank.org/get-involved/advocate/) for alerts on the food bank's website to find out when to contact your legislators.

Vote for candidates who support equity – and have the voting record to prove it, said Helen Gerhardt of Just Harvest.

This series was supported by The Pittsburgh Pitch, a project of [100 Days in Appalachia \(https://www.100daysinappalachia.com/\)](https://www.100daysinappalachia.com/), and the Center for Media Innovation at Point Park University.



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