

MAHONING VALLEY HEALTHY NEIGHBORHOODS

Promoting Equitable Access to Healthy Foods
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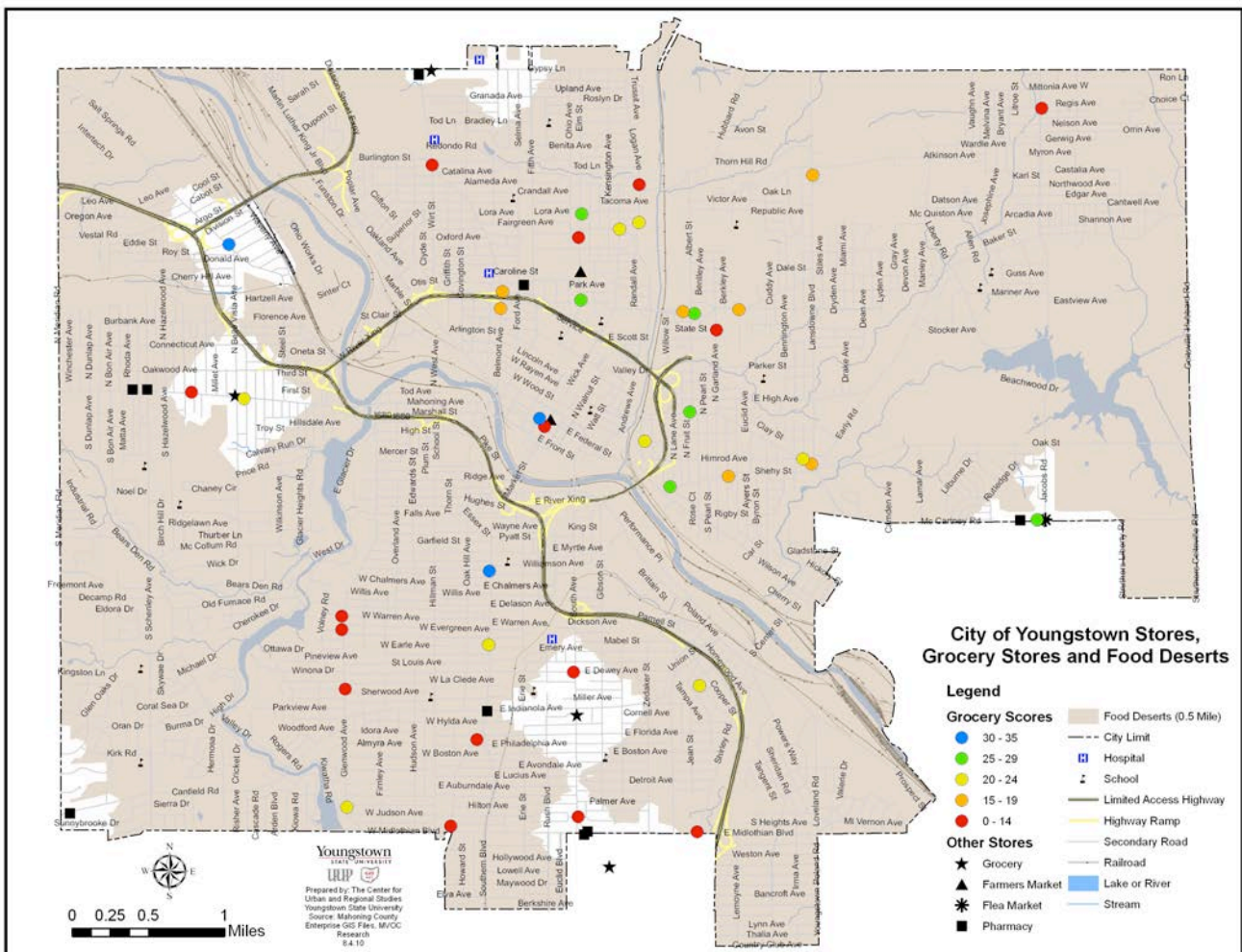
INTRODUCTION

MVOC Healthy Neighborhood Store Initiative

For many residents in the Mahoning Valley, good health is simply beyond their reach. Education, environment, socio-economic status, and access to healthy foods are all factors of good health that disproportionately – and negatively – affect urban residents, a significant proportion of whom are low- and moderate-income minorities. As population within the core cities has declined, grocers and other stores providing fresh produce and nutritious foods have left the city, leaving the remaining residents with little or no access to the choices necessary to maintain a healthy diet.

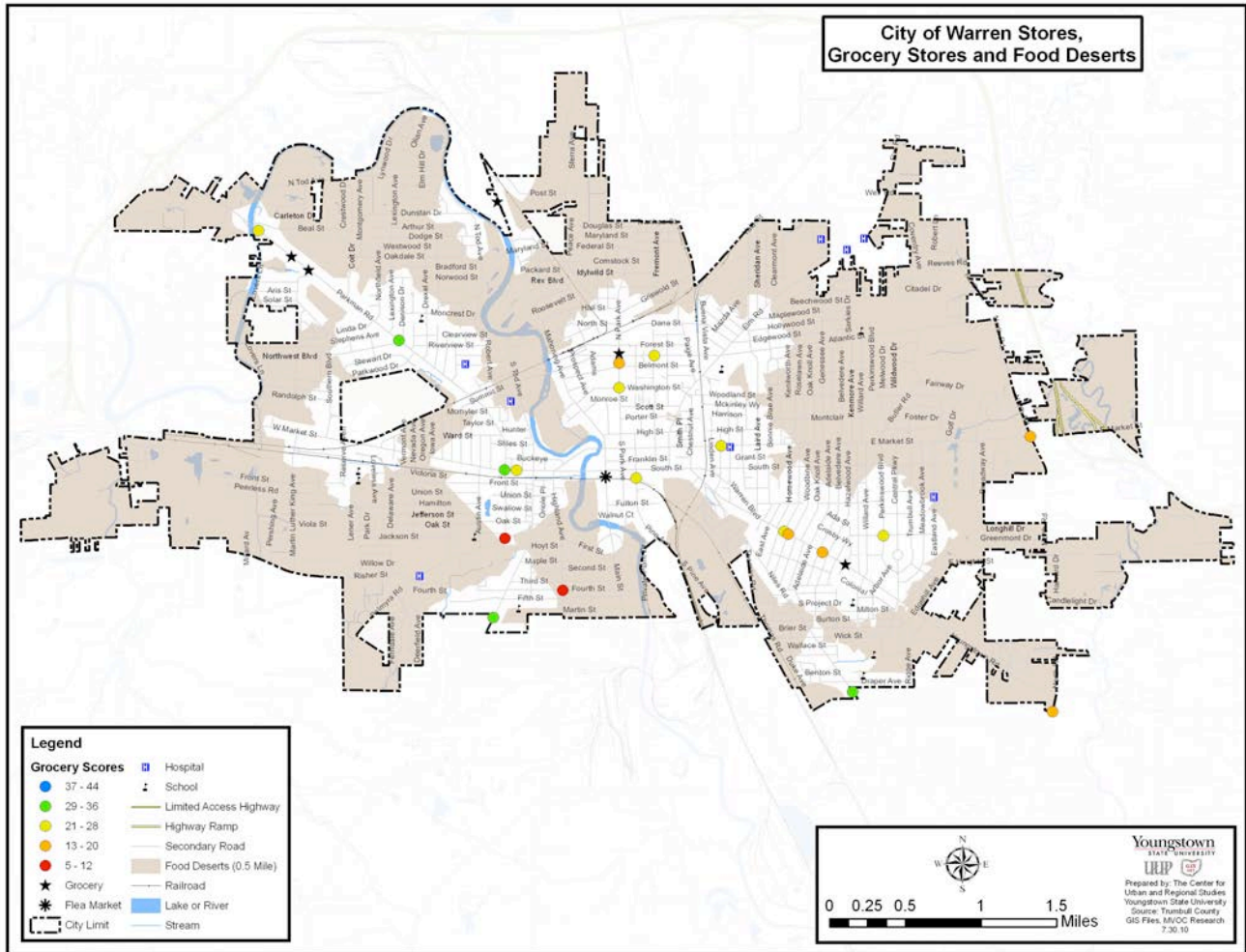
This exodus has resulted in a series of local “food deserts” in the cities of Youngstown and Warren – large geographic areas without access to a full-service grocery store. In 2010, MVOC staff surveyed all grocers, farmers markets, flea markets and neighborhood stores in each city, and subsequently mapped the regions of each city that are located more than a half-mile (considered a comfortable walking distance when shopping) from a full-service grocery store. The following two maps show the location of each store, as well as resulting food deserts in the cities of Youngstown and Warren.

Map 1: City of Youngstown Stores, Grocery Stores and Food Deserts



Source: MVOC data, YSU mapping

Map 2: City of Warren Stores, Grocery Stores and Food Deserts



Source: MVOC data, YSU mapping

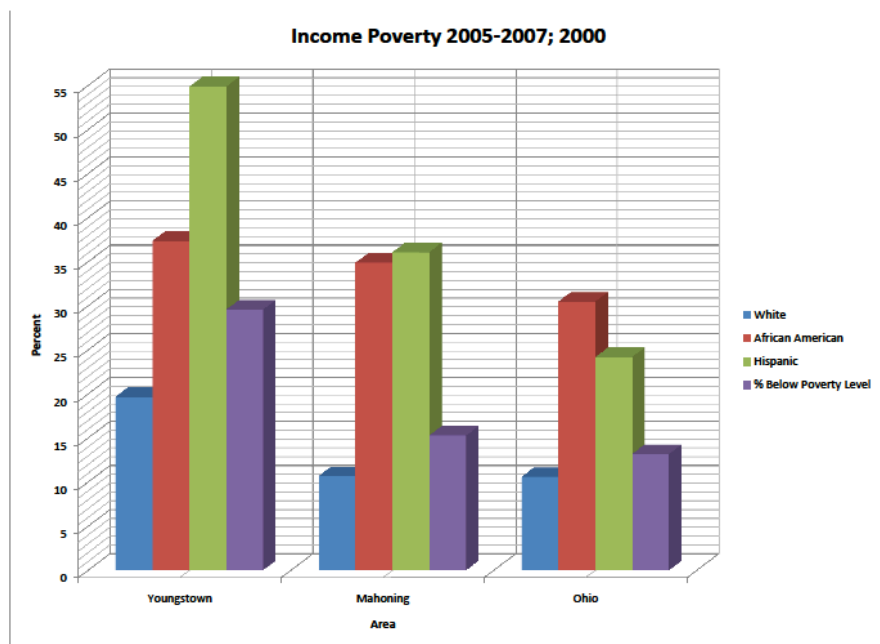
Though six full-service supermarkets are located within the city of Youngstown, 90.7 percent of the total population is located outside a half-mile supermarket service area. In addition, of those households without access to an automobile, 93.1 percent are located outside the half-mile service area. In Warren, there are four full-service supermarkets that are outside the half-mile service area for 60.2 percent of the total population.

With limited access to full-service supermarkets, a majority of urban residents in Youngstown and Warren are reliant upon neighborhood corner stores. Integrated into the fabric of the urban environment, corner stores are centrally located and easily accessible to pedestrians and users of public transportation. In fact, these stores often serve as the primary grocer for many residents, especially low- and moderate-income individuals, seniors, and minorities. Frequently, corner stores stock a vast majority of unhealthy nutritional choices: snack foods high in fat and calories, sugary drinks, liquor, and tobacco.

Considering these limited options in tandem with a lack of access to fresh produce and healthy food choices, it is no surprise that local obesity and diabetes rates exceed national averages. Studies have demonstrated that residents of distressed urban neighborhoods carry a 50 to 80 percent increased risk of heart disease. In the Youngstown-Warren-Boardman MSA, 27.8 percent of residents are obese, compared with 26.6 percent of the nation; these figures are generally even higher for low-income and minority urban neighborhoods. Correspondingly, 9.3 percent of residents are being treated for diabetes, compared to 8.7 percent nationally.

The loss of retail in the urban core of cities like Youngstown and Warren is a direct reflection of long-term disinvestment, the loss of living-wage jobs, and population decline. According to the U.S. Census, Youngstown has experienced a near 50 percent drop in population in the last two decades. In March 2009, Youngstown’s unemployment rate reached 14 percent, and its poverty level at 30 percent (with 38 percent of African-Americans and 55 percent of Hispanics living below the poverty level), double the rate for the state of Ohio.

Table 1: Income and Poverty in Youngstown, the Mahoning Valley, and Ohio



Source:

As poverty levels steadily increase in our community, there is no denying that it affects our children. Research has shown that children think better and achieve more when they benefit from a healthy diet. Nearly 90 percent of students attending Youngstown City schools are receiving a free or reduced lunch; as are 70 percent of their counterparts in the Warren City school system. Often, the meals that these children receive in school are their best (and sometimes only) source of nutrition.

Table 5: Number of Students Receiving Free or Reduced Lunches

School	Total Students	Receiving Free Lunch	Receiving Red. Lunch	% Free	% Total
Youngstown City Schools	6,705	5,756	231	85.85	89.29
Warren City Schools	5,563	3,719	269	66.85	71.69
Eagle Heights Academy	721	573	14	79.47	81.41
Legacy Academy	79	65	3	82.28	86.08
Stambaugh Charter Academy	549	472	26	85.97	90.71
Summit Academy Middle School	179	163	10	91.06	96.65
Summit Academy High School	114	103	9	90.35	98.25
Youngstown Academy of Excellence	189	185	3	97.88	99.47
Youngstown Community School	322	256	23	79.50	86.65
Totals	8,858	7,573	319	86.55	91.06

Source: State of Ohio Department of Education data

ANALYSIS

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Based on the aforementioned statistics, it is evident that local efforts for health equity in the Mahoning Valley must strategically focus on healthy food policy and providing access to fresh produce and nutritious food choices in chronically underserved neighborhoods. In March 2010, the Mahoning Valley Organizing Collaborative (MVOC) mapped out two major campaigns to deal with the issues of healthy neighborhoods in our community: the Vacant Property campaign and the Health Equity campaign.

The Health Equity campaign explores the effects of various social determinants and health disparity as related to local residents’ ability to access healthy foods. In April 2010, community leaders from Youngstown and Warren surveyed local neighborhood stores, using a questionnaire developed by members of the Healthy Neighborhood Store Initiative committee. A total of 46 neighborhood stores were surveyed, including four chain stores: two CVS and two Walgreens. Those taking the surveys were trained to look for a wide variety of healthy food products, including dairy items, fresh fruits and vegetables, breads and cereals, proteins, healthy drinks and snacks. The results of the surveys concluded that:

- 39 of the neighborhood stores sold milk (85 percent), including all four chain stores;
- 27 of the neighborhood stores sold eggs (59 percent), including two of the chain stores;
- 21 of the neighborhood stores sold wheat bread (46 percent), including all four chain stores;
- 11 of the neighborhood stores sold apples and bananas (24 percent); additionally two of the chain stores sold apples, and one chain store sold bananas.

There were 12 categories for vegetables, including canned and Spanish vegetables. Of the 46 stores surveyed, 19 sold canned vegetables (44 percent), including the four chain stores. Several stores stocked expired or outdated products, dented cans, or cans that were dirty or dusty. The results of the surveys established that:

- Ten of the neighborhood stores (22 percent) sold potatoes;
- Nine of the neighborhood stores (20 percent) sold onions;
- Five of the neighborhood stores (11 percent) sold tomatoes;
- Five of the neighborhood stores (11 percent) sold lettuce; and
- Three of the neighborhood stores (seven percent) sold carrots.

Based on these results, the committee created a Total Grocery Score: a combined score based on the healthy offering of food products in the following categories: dairy, fruits and vegetables, bread and cereals, proteins, healthy drinks and snacks. The score also incorporates points received for grocery-related services including the Women Infants and Children (WIC) credit and acceptance of the Ohio Directional Card (EBT). It is notable that only ten of the neighborhood stores (22 percent) received an Admirable or Good rating, and that 17 stores (40 percent) received a Poor rating. Additionally, only four neighborhood stores (nine percent) sold meat, with six stores (13 percent) accepting WIC vouchers and 22 stores (48 percent) accepting EBT.

Table 1: Total Grocery Score Received

Score Range	Rank	Rate	No. Stores	Notes
30 – 35	A	Admirable	3	One store scored a perfect 35
25 – 29	B	Good	7	
20 – 24	C	Moderate	12	Includes all four chain stores
15 – 19	D	Fair	7	
0 – 14	F	Poor	17	Five stores scored below seven

Source: MVOC Healthy Neighborhood Store Initiative committee data

Each of the neighborhood stores were also surveyed for their cleanliness and atmosphere, receiving a compiled score based on questions concerning sanitation, safety, student restrictions, and friendliness. These factors were chosen based on the committee’s believe that a store that appeared to be clean and presentable with a welcoming staff would entice neighborhood residents to feel comfortable shopping locally. The bulk of neighborhood stores ranked in Moderate or below with regard to cleanliness; Moderate was also the average rating for atmosphere.

Table 2: Scores Received for Cleanliness

Score Range	Rank	Rate	No. Stores	Notes
5	A	Admirable	4	Includes only four chain stores
4	B	Good	5	
3	C	Moderate	18	
2	D	Fair	11	
1	F	Poor	8	

Source: MVOC Healthy Neighborhood Store Initiative committee data

Table 3: Scores Received for Atmosphere

Score Range	Rank	Rate	No. Stores	Notes
10 – 15		Good	10	Includes all four chain stores
5 – 9		Moderate	26	
0 – 4		Poor	10	

Source: MVOC Healthy Neighborhood Store Initiative committee data

Table 4: Overall Store Score

Scores	Rank	Rate	No. Stores	Notes
46 – 55	A	Admirable	2	
36 – 45	B	Good	13	Includes all four chain stores
26 – 35	C	Moderate	12	
16 – 25	D	Fair	12	
0 – 15	F	Poor	7	

Source: MVOC Healthy Neighborhood Store Initiative committee data

After the surveys were conducted, the group evaluated their experiences. Each community member that participated in the survey process was asked: “Would you shop at this particular store?” Out of the 46 stores surveyed, the group would shop at only 18 of the stores (39 percent) – with four of those stores being the larger, national chain stores. The surveys also revealed that over half of stores surveyed displayed some signs of loitering on site, or immediately adjacent; fully 65 percent of stores surveyed displayed negative marketing materials; and that few stores allowed any natural lighting in the facility – many stores had blacked-out windows, or windows covered with marketing material, and several stores did not even have windows.

While serving as a MVOC intern in 2009, Stephen Flannery completed a report entitled “Youngstown Food Desert Analysis”. Mr. Flannery compared and contrasted geographic and racial data, demonstrating that significantly more Whites than African-Americans are located within the service area boundaries for local grocery stores. When access to vehicle and public transportation data were added to his analysis, it became even more evident that inner-city residents are significantly underserved with regard to healthy food access.

CONCLUSION

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The preceding analysis sets the stage for MVOC's community campaign to increase the health and vitality of these neighborhoods by combating the impact of food deserts and other health-related disparities.

Health disparities, as defined by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, are gaps in health status (including life expectancy, infant and maternal mortality rates, obesity and diet-related disease) among groups of people based on differences in factors such as socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, immigration status, environmental exposures, gender, education, disability, geographic location, or sexual orientation. National reports show a strong correlation between socio-economic status and health problems. It has been shown that African-Americans die from stroke at 146 percent more than Whites; from heart disease at 131 percent more than Whites; and from diabetes at 208 percent more than Whites. Additionally, these studies show that 11 percent of Americans have "low food security" and that four percent have "very low food security" – with African-Americans and Latinos estimated at double those national rates.

Many socioeconomic factors influence the health of a community. In a recent study, Mahoning County reported heart disease as number one in the top ten diseases afflicting residents, followed by stroke at number two and diabetes at number five. The report also shows that 73.5 percent of adults in the county eat less than the recommended five servings of fruits and vegetables daily. Additionally, 41.8 percent of adults are overweight, with 25.4 percent considered to be obese.

National and local statistics examined in this report, coupled with the results of the neighborhood store surveys, provides significant evidence that the inner-city neighborhoods in Youngstown and Warren are experiencing serious shortages in access to healthy foods. The Healthy Neighborhood Store Initiative seeks to answer the questions posed by Mr. Flannery: "Do we bring the food to the residents or the residents to the food? Can we encourage a grocery store operator to locate within the underserved areas? Or can we improve public transportation (shuttle bus) to circulate among the grocery stores and underserved areas?"

These shortages in access will factor strongly in the MVOC Health Equity campaign. By carefully laying the ground work and examining current resources, the committee will be able to paint a concise picture of how our community can most effectively combat the impact of food deserts on the health and welfare of our residents, and the viability of our community's neighborhoods.

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