Food Accessibility in Richmond, Virginia: 
A Case Study in the Neighborhood of Highland Park

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**Introduction**

The area of Highland Park, a neighborhood on the Northside of Richmond, Virginia of approximately 27,400 is the focus of this study on food access and quality. The area was chosen for its close ties to the University of Richmond’s Bonner Center for Civic Engagement’s volunteer program, which sends students to six sites in the area to work on social justices issues and general volunteer opportunities. Partner sites, the CCE and students may gain valuable insights from this research on food insecurity conditions that remain unmentioned in weekly volunteer interactions. As a whole, this study aims to explain what grocery options are made available to those living in Highland Park and determine whether or not areas of the neighborhood could be candidates for a food desert.

In order to place these locations in comparison to options available to University of Richmond students, the study will examine how access to food in the West End differs to those who do not have a large grocery store in their area. The guiding research question therefore is; what is the quality of food access in the neighborhood of Highland Park and how does the difference in accessibility to another, more affluent neighborhood shed light on social inequalities in the city?

**The Highland Park Study**

In the 1990s, a group of researchers from the United Kingdom began to quantify patterns of access to food retailing in urban centers in order to determine whether or not citizens living in these corridors had sufficient access to food retail space. Published in the *Urban Studies* journal, several papers outlined formulas, methodologies and other
techniques to determine what should or should not be deemed a food desert, “an area with relatively poor access to adequate food provision” (Clarke 2002). The “local mapping approach” that Clarke, Eyre and Guy used in order to investigate accessibility-based measurement of food provision was the guiding structure for the study of Highland Park, Richmond, Virginia (2002). This approach was comprised of four stages: using MapInfo, all chain grocery stores shops in Cardiff, UK were mapped using documents from Cardiff County Council and field survey observations to geo-reference store locations within the city; next they created 500 meter radiuses around each chain store which would signify a reasonable walking distance to a large supermarket, and areas lying outside of these radiuses would be candidates for food deserts; they restricted their food desert studies to areas characterized by high Carstairs indices of multiple deprivation (an index created in Scotland based on four indicators: low social class, lack of car ownership, overcrowding and male unemployment) and finally, they examined locations and characteristics of independently owned food shops in remaining areas (2002).

![Figure 2. Areas of low food provision in Cardiff, as identified by the local mapping approach.](image-url)
This study was vital in the formation of research methods for a proposed case study of food accessibility in the neighborhood of Highland Park, yet more data should be collected to form a more complete study. In Blanchard and Matthews’ work on food deserts in America, they note that while the quantity of large food retailers in urban spaces is critical in understanding issues of food accessibility, the quality and price offered to consumers at the independently owned convenience stores and marketplaces or gas stations should also be included in the discussion of food desert constructions. This conclusion was made after the recognition that the proliferation of gas stations and small convenience stores ensures that food is available to all citizens. When these small operations are the only food option for residents in specified areas, their product quality and prices must be examined. Consumers in this situation are forced to “choose from a smaller variety of food products that may not be suitable for the maintenance of a healthy diet, thus, the application of the food desert concept in the United States elucidates a great divide between those with and without access to low-cost, high-quality foods” (Blanchard p. 202).

If price and quality are inexcusable variables necessary for a complete food desert study, here enters a dimension of subjectivity into the research. In an effort to reduce these concerns, the Highland Park case study used methodologies from an already proposed study in neighborhoods of Lexington, Kentucky that addressed issues of price via a market basket survey of specific goods coupled with the inclusion of observations on clients, workers, general appearance and products and services offered at the location (Tanaka, Mooney 2008). This case study of Highland Park emulated this study’s general
structure and in an effort to create a fair manner to compare goods and quality of space among the retail operations in this area.

For this study in Highland Park, grocery sites were found and mapped through the search function on Google Maps and field studies by driving through the area defined by the zip code, 23222. This area is defined below and all fieldwork and searches were restricted to these boundaries as determined by the US Census Bureau: All grocery operations were visited to photographed or entered for a price check of the following goods: gallon of milk, loaf of bread, pound of spaghetti, tomatoes (per lb), lettuce (per lb), potatoes (per lb), block of cheddar cheese and ground beef (per lb).

*Highland Park Data*

After several drives through the neighborhood and fact checking of Google search results, the following map produced on ©2008 Google - Map Data ©2008 Tele Atlas titled “Highland Park Grocery Options” outlines markets/convenience stores/gas stations in blue and the *Food Lion* Store #601 and the Laburnum Ave. *Save-a-Lot* in green with an approximated 500m radius surrounding the stores.
The pictures and chart that follow describe the general appearance and market basket prices from a sample of visited establishments. The entered operations found on the chart were chosen by safety and comfort of the researcher to enter alone:
B) Photographs

1. 201 E. Laburnum Ave.
   Richmond, VA 23222

2. 2919 North Ave.
   Richmond, VA 23222
5. 402 W. Brookland Pkwy
Richmond, VA 23222

6. 2208 North Ave.
Richmond, VA 23222
C) Market Basket Survey #1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Store</th>
<th>Milk</th>
<th>Cheddar Cheese (8 oz)</th>
<th>Eggs, Grade A</th>
<th>Loaf of bread</th>
<th>Lettuce</th>
<th>Spaghetti (1 lb)</th>
<th>Tomatoes (1 lb)</th>
<th>Potatoes (1 lb)</th>
<th>Ground Beef</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S + K</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>1.59</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>2.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Save-a-lot</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>1.99</td>
<td>1.59</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>2.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race Track</td>
<td>4.50</td>
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<td>2.29</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>1.29</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marketplace</td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>1.59</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>1.89</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td>2.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northside Foodland</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1.25</td>
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<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Dollar</td>
<td>4.99</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1.29</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketplace #7/Citgo</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>--</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race Track</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>--</td>
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<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walgreens</td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>1.89</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1.19</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Eleven</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>1.79</td>
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<td>--</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>R&amp;S Food Store</td>
<td>4.99</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1.99</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>1.99</td>
<td>1.19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>4.51</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td>1.99</td>
<td>2.76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

D) General Observations

As noted initially, the prices for the goods in the Highland Park Market Basket Survey were found in stores that I felt comfortable entering. I can recognize that with harboring “concern” or attention to my “comfort levels,” I may be holding some prejudices and I acknowledge this factor. Further research on this topic may devise better ways of retrieving price data in the stores without fear of harassment and then the ability to acquire more data. Also, with the size of the visited locations in mind, I felt uneasy not purchasing something if I entered the store. The project then became a bit expensive.

- Generally speaking, independently-owned markets/convenience stores served as gathering places for primarily males aged 20-mid 30s and those who were waiting for a bus as many were adjacent to or near a GRTC bus stop.
- Almost all of the advertised that Virginia lottery tickets and cigarettes were sold inside.
• Almost all contained some type of security gates or grills on exterior doors to prevent theft. There was also only one entrance in each establishment to assumedly track entrants through a single door.

• I was told to feel better twice in different locations by customers after coughing and sneezing. Clerks were friendly at check out and usually started some kind of conversation.

• The variation of produce was very small. Green peppers, tomatoes, lemons and onions were offered at most establishments if produce was available. If available, aside from retail chains, the produce was small, wrinkled or overripe. Pears and apples were sold individually in some instances while bunches of grapes were found, old and browning in plastic wrap at multiple locations.

• Variation in product choice was usually zero. At most there were three options for goods offered in stores but usually those were snack foods. Staple goods, such as those in the market basket, were only offered in one form. For example, milk was usually Vitamin D or 2%.

• Goods were often unmarked and several prices were found by asking the cashier. My theory is that since the goods offered were necessities, prices were of little concern to costumers.

• Costumers only purchased a maximum of 5 goods. I am curious how often costumers then frequent these retail operations.
• Store owners and workers were of mainly Asian and Middle Eastern descent. Specialty pastries and snacks were found in glass cases in the front in multiple locations.
• In each location aside from the two retail chains, the lighting was usually dull and there was a noticeable odor. Floors were also darkened with foot traffic marks or stains.
• Each was organized uniquely as opposed to the layouts found in chains.
• Aisles were very small and cramped. Store owners could see through the entire store making my search for prices very questionable.

**West End Comparative Data:**
In an effort to compare food retail operations accessible to those living in the West End of Richmond, as determined by the US postal code 23226, grocery operations were determined by these boundaries:
The following data was found in a market basket survey and general observations of major retail stores within the West End area. Only major retail chains were visited to conduct this survey because these are the frequented stores for the bulk of consumers shopping needs in the area. Again ©2008 Google - Map Data ©2008 Tele Atlas was used to produce the map “West End Grocery Options.”

A) Generated Map #2
B) Market Basket Survey #2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Store</th>
<th>Milk (8 oz)</th>
<th>Cheddar Cheese (8 oz)</th>
<th>Eggs, Grade A</th>
<th>Loaf of bread</th>
<th>Lettuce</th>
<th>Spaghetti (1 lb)</th>
<th>Tomatoes (1 lb)</th>
<th>Potatoes (1 lb)</th>
<th>Ground Beef</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Target</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.92</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Lion</td>
<td>3.99</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>2.59</td>
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<td>.87</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kroger</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>2.99</td>
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<td>Ukrops</td>
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<td>Joe’s Market</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

C) General Observations

Retail options available to those living in the zip code of 23226 have five available retail chains for their grocery needs. These chains are frequented by suburban consumers and are always fitted with large parking lots. Although there is no data to prove this, there is assumedly more transportation for food via car than by foot or bus.

- Produce variety is expansive. For example, in Kroger, there were several kinds of potatoes such as Yukon, russet, microwaveable wrapped and Idaho baking potatoes. There were often pictures and a description of where the good was produced next to the item. There was also an organic produce section.

- Variety for other goods is enormous as well. For instance, bread choices at Kroger included over six types of brands with each its own distinction between white, wheat or other.

- The store conditions were extremely sterile with bright floors, wide aisles, large signs distinguishing sections of the store, clear marking of all prices.

- Easy listening music was playing at every location.
• In store interactions were mostly, “I’m sorry” or “excuse me.”

• There was a similar order to each location visited with produce at the entrance, meat, dairy products lined along the edges and all other goods in the center.

Analysis of Data

From this data collected it is easy to see that there exist major discrepancies between Highland Park and the West in terms of access to a variety of goods and fresh produce and at a competitive price. Although this research can serve as ultimate proof that there are serious food inequalities within Richmond city limits, there are numerous other studies that have shown this is no new phenomenon in urban areas in the United States. Studies in city centers all over the country including Philadelphia, Hartford, Detroit, Atlanta, New York City have shown that low-income neighborhoods are unjustly excluded from quality food purchases due to the lack of retail chains and the dominance of small independent markets. What must come from the Highland Park data is the need to research regeneration efforts in the area and more importantly include citizen input to find how to make a positive change in the neighborhood that benefits store owners and community members alike.

Conclusion

Present findings and discuss the conclusion(s) you are able to draw from your study
• What readings or topics of discussion in this class do you most see your project relating to?
• Any problems you ran into, things you would do different, and/or suggestions for future research.