

THE HEALTHY CORNER STORES NETWORK

Surf Conference Panel Session 4A

By: Alina Enoiu

Mentor: Professor Margaret Weir, Political Science and Sociology

“The wise man should consider that health is the greatest of human blessings.
Let food be thy medicine.”

—Hippocrates

As a country we are more equipped to treat and cure illnesses than we have ever been. However, on the path to becoming more innovative, we seem to have forgotten the basics: that fresh, unprocessed food—food that grows in the ground—is essential to a healthy body. As a result, obesity is the second leading cause of preventable death in the U.S. and, according to the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, could become the leading cause in the next year—surpassing tobacco use.¹

My research question is how does the healthy corner store movement in Oakland, California negotiate the incentives offered by the government to sell healthier food with the difficulties that come with running a profit-oriented business? I choose to focus on Oakland because the people that struggle the most with healthy eating are those living in low-income neighborhoods or communities of color where accessing healthy food is challenging.² Oakland can, therefore, be considered a food desert because “residents cannot buy affordable, healthy food.”³ “[W]hile there are about 40 liquor and corner stores in West Oakland, there is only one supermarket.”⁴ Because these communities have a base of corner stores where people already shop, such as liquor stores or other smaller-scale stores, bringing healthy options to local corner stores may be an effective strategy to combat food insecurity. Thus, the “healthy corner store movement” attempts to increase the availability of nutritious, high quality, and affordable food in small-scale stores in underserved communities.

For this paper, I will focus on the effect of a specific federal policy, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), which provides checks or food-specific vouchers that can be redeemed for healthy foods for low-income women and children.⁵ In other words, I will focus on corner stores that are WIC authorized, meaning they can accept vouchers from the state for certain products. I choose to focus on WIC for two reasons. First, people who are food insecure often receive federal aid such as WIC to help support their families.

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- 1 Advanced Health Care Network, “Obesity Quickly Becoming No.1 Preventable Cause of Death, Study Says.”
 - 2 Treuhaft and Karpyn, “The Grocery Gap,” 7.
 - 3 Walker, Keane, and Burke, “Disparities and access to healthy food in the United States,” 876.
 - 4 Haletky and Taylor, “Urban Agriculture as a Solution to Food Insecurity,” 54.
 - 5 California WIC Association, “Changes in the WIC Food Packages,” v.

Second, and more importantly, WIC acts as an incentive from the government. In 2007, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) changed its food packages for the first time in 35 years. WIC retail providers would now be required to stock “fresh fruits and vegetables, whole-grain cereals, and culturally appropriate foods such as whole wheat tortillas, soy beverages, and brown rice.”⁶ Because these corner stores would be required to stock these healthier foods, people who shop at these stores would have a greater access to fresh food and produce. It is important to note that the people who can benefit from the changes to WIC are not only the WIC consumers themselves but also people who shop at stores that are WIC authorized. In other words, a WIC program that requires healthier food for participating stores can indirectly benefit all patrons to those stores regardless of whether or not they receive the vouchers. Thus, changes to the WIC program “hold the potential to transform the retail food landscape in low-income communities across the state.”⁷ In order for this potential to be fulfilled, however, store owners must either see being a WIC authorized store as profitable enough to make changes to their store or must actually want to provide healthier food so much so that they would be willing to make the necessary sacrifices to provide those options.

I. Customer Demand for Produce

After interviewing store owners, I learned that selling fresh produce is often not profitable for corner stores. While there is certainly a lack of fresh produce in this community, people do not necessarily seek to buy fresh food from corner stores. One store owner said in regards to fresh produce, “Not everybody buys it. We rely on WIC.”⁸ Another store voiced concerns about how much of the fresh produce is actually thrown away especially in the summer months where food spoils more quickly. “This fridge right there used to be all produce—we used to have all produce and fruits—and it was basically wasted.”⁹ It is not that store owners do not want to offer people healthier options. However, they can only offer products that people will purchase. If healthier products do not sell, store owners end up losing money, and their businesses suffer. Therefore, the hope is that being WIC authorized will bring in a new base of customers that will be substantial enough to either purchase the fresh produce or bring in enough profit to offset the loss from the wasted produce.

If selling produce is not profitable, one would expect WIC authorization to be beneficial. Why then would store owners continue to sell products that do not make them money? In order for WIC authorization to be profitable, first corner stores have to get people to use their vouchers at their stores rather than at a larger grocery store. This seems likely to happen in Oakland because there are so few grocery stores and people may not want to travel long distances to buy groceries. A manager at a local WIC clinic in Oakland cited corner stores as not only more convenient but also more sympathetic to WIC recipients and to those who might not speak English, which is often the case in some parts of Oakland. Therefore corner stores seem to have all the advantages in attracting WIC recipients. In reality, however, corner stores did not seem to get a lot of customers paying with WIC vouchers. One owner stated “We don’t get too many

6 California WIC Association, “Changes in the WIC Food Packages,” v.

7 California WIC Association, “Changes in the WIC Food Packages,” v.

8 Anonymous. Interview by Alina Enoiu. Tape recording. Oakland, CA. August 2013

9 Anonymous. Interview by Alina Enoiu. Tape recording. Oakland, CA. August 2013

customers for WIC anyway—only about 10.”¹⁰ Even among those customers, some did not use their vouchers for produce. “Some people get vouchers for produce, some don’t. They might just use vouchers for milk.”¹¹

I suspect that WIC recipients are not buying produce from corner stores for two reasons. First, many residents in Oakland rely on emergency food systems such as food pantries. “Due to this drastic food insecurity in West Oakland, the demand for emergency food services is increasing. Again, while there is only one supermarket, there are 32 emergency food sites in West Oakland . . . 25 % of the West Oakland population regularly relies on the emergency food system. Many individuals and families rely exclusively on this system for their daily food intake.”¹² A volunteer at *Feed My Sheep Food Pantry* explained that one woman didn’t have to go shopping for two months because her needs were being met entirely by the food pantry.¹³ Another reason is cost. Because corner stores are much smaller than grocery stores, they purchase produce from distributors in smaller quantities, meaning that they have to pay more per unit than a larger store. The increased cost is naturally transferred to the consumer who has to pay more for the same product than they would at a larger store like Safeway. Because WIC recipients pay with vouchers rather than cash, it would seem that they would not care about the increased price. If a box of cereal costs 6 dollars, the extra cost would be picked up the state, not by the consumer. However, this is where produce differs from all other products. When WIC recipients want to use their vouchers for fruits and vegetables, price DOES matter. Unlike other products, recipients have a cash limit for these items. For example, they may only be able to get 12 dollars worth of produce with their vouchers. Therefore, when making decisions about where to shop, customers may sacrifice convenience for a better deal and go to a grocery store where produce is cheaper even if it is further away. This is important because if WIC recipients are not shopping at corner stores, then being WIC authorized is not profitable and does not help corner stores sell healthier food.

Thus, my research shows that selling fresh produce is sometimes not beneficial for store owners and WIC authorization may not make it any more profitable. The change in WIC policy to require store owners to sell healthier food often does not benefit store owners. This flaw in the WIC program could be accepted if it led to a community that was eating healthier. If greater access to healthy food exists, but community members are still not purchasing items, then greater access to produce does not lead to food security. In other words, if the produce is there but people are still not buying, a new approach must be taken to combat food insecurity.

II. New Approaches

Though incentivizing store owners through WIC may not do a good job of reducing food insecurity in Oakland, bringing healthy options to corner stores may still be a viable strategy. In the course of my research, I came across several corner stores that were not WIC authorized but had a large selection of produce—more so, actually, than the WIC authorized stores. While WIC stores did have some produce, as required by federal policy, the quality and variety of produce sold was often dismal. One store that had been successful at bringing healthy options to

10 Anonymous. Interview by Alina Enoiu. Tape recording. Oakland, CA. August 2013

11 Anonymous. Interview by Alina Enoiu. Tape recording. Oakland, CA. August 2013

12 Haletky and Taylor, “Urban Agriculture as a Solution to Food Insecurity,” 54.

13 Anonymous. Interview by Alina Enoiu. Tape recording. Oakland, CA. August 2013

its store without WIC authorization is School Market. School Market, a corner store in Fruitvale, underwent a successful corner store conversion a few years ago. The current store manager explained that they were able to do this because the city stepped in to help them. The city mostly helped with planning, “mapping out what was bad and how to make it better,”¹⁴ but they also put up about 20–30% of the funds necessary to start the project. The first thing they did was change the front of store, knocking down walls and putting in windows to let in more light and make the store more attractive to potential customers. The most important thing they did was put in a produce freezer, which allowed them to sell fresh fruits and vegetables. Even though they were receiving help from the city, the produce freezer was the most difficult part of the transition. The store manager explained that they were losing a lot of money and throwing food away; at one point they even wanted to get rid of the freezer and stop selling the fresh produce.¹⁵ Similar to the WIC corner stores I visited, selling produce here was just as difficult and the store lost money. However, this store was able to overcome the initial difficulties through proper planning and aid from the city. For example, the city helped the store plan events to help spread the word to the neighborhood about the new and improved School Market. Eventually, School Market began to sell more produce and overcame the initial losses of their investment. Their selection of produce was also much more impressive than any of the WIC stores I visited. Many of the WIC authorized stores did not have a large variety of fruits and vegetables and the quality of the produce was often poor compared to stores like School Market that had a large produce section. More importantly, they succeeded without a federal policy that served as a sort of ultimatum—sell healthy food or lose authorization.

III. Conclusion

After visiting both corner stores and WIC stores, I learned that changes to the WIC policy may not be the most effective way to increase the amount of healthy food in corner stores and ultimately reduce food insecurity. WIC authorization is not sufficient for store owners who wish to expand their selection of healthy food because it does not lead to a sufficient demand for the very produce it requires that the store stock. This leads to store owners losing money and being forced to choose between continuing to serve WIC recipients or relinquishing their authorization status. If corner stores are left unable to accept WIC vouchers, residents in low-income communities may be even less food secure than they were before the new policy. Now they not only would not be able to buy fresh produce but also any other products such as milk or bread. If we set high standards for corner stores but make no attempt to help them reach those standards, then we fail. Furthermore, corner stores can be successful in selling more produce without this ultimatum, as evidenced by School Market. However, government intervention must center on providing financial aid and other types of support if corner stores are to succeed. Changes to policy without support for the corner stores themselves may cause more harm than good if residents in low-income communities, such as Oakland, are left unable to redeem their vouchers, losing access to what could be a lifeline for their families. When looking to reduce food insecurity in the U.S., perhaps we should return to the teachings of Hippocrates: “First do no harm.”

14 Anonymous. Interview by Alina Enoiu. Tape recording. Oakland, CA. August 2013

15 Anonymous. Interview by Alina Enoiu. Tape recording. Oakland, CA. August 2013

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