FLINT, MICHIGAN’S FOOD CRISIS
Retail Abandonment, Social and Economic Burdens, and Local Food-Oriented Solutions

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Introduction

You may have heard of Flint, Michigan because of the state-generated water crisis that has affected its residents since 2014. Not long after a state-appointed emergency manager’s team decided to change the city’s water source as a cost-savings measure, residents began raising concerns about their water quality.

After months of residents advocating and speaking out, researchers at Virginia Tech University and Michigan State University were able to use their resources to demonstrate that both water and blood lead levels were exceedingly high among Flint homes and residents. The net effect of this crisis has been that thousands of vulnerable children were potentially exposed to high levels of lead, and the extent of long-term public health issues remains uncertain.

As with the decisions made to change the water source which precipitated the Flint Water Crisis—decisions which were outside the control of Flint residents—individuals are increasingly left out of the decision-making process in the contemporary global food system in terms of what food will be produced for their consumption.

This shift away from local power in decision-making is reflective of the dominant political philosophy since the late 1970s: neoliberalism (Harvey 2007a). The essence of neoliberalism (which is not exactly “liberal” in the sense of the modern Democratic party in US politics, and in fact was ushered in by the Republican party) is that the government should roll back its role in taking care of citizens’ health and safety, and instead should focus its efforts on creating an environment conducive to big businesses. As a product of neoliberal governance schemes, therefore, both the Flint Water Crisis and the globalization of the food system reflect a primary concern for the economic “bottom line.” But, when corporations (or cities) are driven first by profit, a variety of public health-related issues arise and individual well-being suffers.

Troublingly, in many ways, the negative aspects of the global food system far outweigh the government malfeasance of the Flint Water Crisis. As demonstrated in the chapter’s case study of Flint, the global food system does not serve everyone equally, and many residents in underserved areas find it increasingly difficult to access or afford healthy food (the food products necessary to sustain a healthy lifestyle, including fruit and vegetables, proteins/lean meats, dairy/dairy substitutes, and whole grains).
Part of the problem is that, even where people can access food, the foods that are present are often processed, high in sugar, and low in nutrients (e.g. potato chips and sugar-sweetened beverages). The twin issues of “stuffed and starved”—investigated by the researcher Raj Patel—have created an untold burden worldwide (Patel 2007). Not only are there increased rates of diet-related diseases such as obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and cancers, but simultaneously issues relating to malnutrition continue to plague millions of people. Although society has more than enough food to feed the entire planet, the food system has not been effective at ensuring this food reaches everyone equitably.

Furthermore, the localized (and largely healthier) food systems of our ancestors, characterized by the milkman, the local butcher, and small-scale farmers, are largely a relic of the past in many communities. Instead, food retail has consolidated into big box stores and relies on extended food supply chains, with food coming from all over the globe. Indeed, advances in technology and changes in public policy have created a food retailing system considered by many to be spatially and socially exclusionary and environmentally damaging (Patel 2007; Roberts 2008; Weis 2010).

So, although the global food system has been successful at increasing the amount of food available worldwide, it has also unsettled local food systems and created entirely new problems around how to eat healthily in the face of so many unhealthy options. Flint is used as the case study for the conflict between conventional (often global) and alternative (often local) food systems because it has been at the forefront of “what not to do” in terms of issues related to food access. As demonstrated throughout this chapter, Flint’s experience with retail restructuring and other social and economic issues makes it an interesting case study on the topic of “food deserts,” or low-income areas without ready access to healthy foods.

As with the Flint Water Crisis, however, the “Flint Food Crisis” represents a symptom, not a cause, of a long process of decline in population and economic security combined with the evolution of food retail from “mom and pop” neighborhood grocery stores to all-in-one regional supercenters. Furthermore, as with the water crisis, the lack of effective government intervention has sparked additional interest in rebuilding agency among the local population. In other words, local community groups are taking action to equip residents to be better able to address their own food access needs in light of the failure of our political and economic systems to protect all segments of the population. This is similar to the global food system more broadly, as it is operated by big businesses that by their nature tend to minimize the agency of the individual by centralizing control. Thus Flint’s situation is still particularly dire, and continued advocacy is essential. In this chapter, we explore how structural factors can serve to overpower personal agency in decision-making on major public health issues.

This chapter is organized as follows. First, the chapter looks at how food retailing and food systems have changed since the 1920s, how this has influenced Flint’s current state, and the implications for healthy eating. Second, it examines how racism and deindustrialization in the American Rust Belt have affected communities such as Flint and made food retail regeneration a more complicated question. Overarching these two aspects, the chapter considers neoliberalism and globalization as driving forces. Third, the chapter explores several food system initiatives pursued in Flint since the turn of the 21st century to help contextualize how these issues of retail restructuring and deindustrialization are being overcome locally.

Retail Restructuring

To understand why the food system currently looks the way it does, we need to look back at the evolution of food retailing.

Traditional Food Retailing

One hundred years ago, retail followed a relatively dense settlement pattern, clustering both together and near residential populations. Retailers that could pay the highest rents located together near the
center of the city (Jones and Simmons 1990; Clarkson et al. 1996). Because cities were necessarily dense and human-scale prior to the growth of the automobile—given that most people needed to walk to get from one point to another—amenities such as food could be found within walking distance (see Figure 38.1). The dominant idea was that shoppers patronized the nearest center and most trips were single-purpose (Brown 1991; Clarkson et al. 1996; Guy 1999). Because of the frequent need for groceries, food retailers exhibited a dispersed, neighborhood-level pattern (Murphy et al. 1955).

Functionally, the traditional food retail system was characterized by short supply chains, since fresh goods needed to reach their market before rotting and technology had not yet enabled some frozen and shelf-stable foods (Jones and Simmons 1990). This meant that the food available for purchase was often dependent on what could be grown nearby. Retail was also staffed by a knowledgeable store-manager base centered on full-service stores; few chains existed, and proprietors needed to manage their own purchases. All of these factors kept stores small. It is of course important not to romanticize this localized food system, as food quality and options paled in comparison to what is available presently. We discuss lessons from this type of food system later in the chapter.

Within our case study city of Flint, a popular local grocery chain called Hamady Brothers grew from one store in 1911 to 36 stores throughout the region at its peak in the 1960s. Hamady’s itself grew through early retailing advances, including self-service shopping and large parking lots for the

Figure 38.1  A Hamady Brothers food market in the 1930s. Hamady’s was one of the first grocery stores to cater to the automobile shopper.

Source: www.pinterest.com/pin/523825000399479984/
automobile shopper. Over time, it was unable to keep up with additional technological and supply chain advances (discussed below), and was eventually merged into larger chains. Most of the original store sites now sit vacant, while new grocery stores continue to be built on the urban fringe.

The automobile age that the Hamady Brothers stores initially seized on by providing ample parking for shoppers has also meant opportunities to lengthen supply chains (Jones and Simmons 1990). Refrigeration technologies aided this change, since goods could travel greater distances before rotting. Personal car ownership also weakened local retailer monopolies and created greater intracity competition, as residents could now be expected to travel several miles to obtain groceries (Guy 1998). Retailers that remained were often larger in scope and able to broadly distribute operating costs. Huge efficiencies were achieved by increasing the average size of stores and closing underperformers (Eisenhauer 2001; Dunkley et al. 2004). This story was played out in virtually the same manner with the Hamady Brothers chain.

**Transformations**

Another factor that kept stores smaller and more local up until the 1980s was the presence of antitrust legislation, which was meant to prevent retail from growing beyond regional networks in two ways. The first—price discrimination legislation—protected small retailers from competition, and was supported by the Robinson–Patman Act of 1936. The second—anti-market-extension merger regulation—was supported by the Celler–Kefauver Act of 1950. Effectively, large chains saw diseconomies of scale, so market power was concentrated among food manufacturers and distributors (Wrigley 2001). But political changes began a shift in power to retailers (Wrigley 2001). The rise of neoliberalism meant relaxed regulatory constraints and allowed for greater retailer independence (Barndt 2008). Recall that this was happening just as government was reducing its role in providing social services, setting the stage for increased issues with food insecurity just as the food retail system was consolidating its footprint.

Following a phase of store mergers, and with the advent of information technology systems for centralized administration and control of logistics, retailers were able to increase consolidation efforts and transcend diseconomies of scale (Wrigley and Lowe 2002). Any increase in costs related to IT investment was spread out over growing retail chains. The results of this have been an increase in market share of the largest companies, the development of food retailer-owned warehouses, trucking fleets, and buying offices (Kaufman 2000), and the development of retailer–government regulatory relationships (Marsden et al. 1998). In turn, this increase in size has resulted in extended supply chains and food offerings.

**Effects on Consumers**

While it is reasonable to expect that these changes should have brought about better food for consumers, the reality is quite the opposite. The structural change that has occurred in the food conventional system has negatively affected healthy food access and diet in many ways. The types of farm subsidies in place for North American agriculture tend to favor mono-cropping and create larger surpluses of commodity crops, giving farmers little incentive to cease production. This has created increasing quantities of value-added products derived from these commodities and the promotion of overconsumption of meat. Part of the reason for this increase in meat consumption is that it creates a market for the huge surplus of grain produced by this system (Weis 2010). Negative outcomes of increased meat consumption include an increased prevalence of diabetes, stroke, and high blood pressure (Sofi et al. 2008; Micha et al. 2010).

The problem with this “illusion of choice” (Patel 2007) of value-added products is that most of the products being pushed by food companies are unhealthy; health problems associated with
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Consuming highly processed foods include obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease (Monteiro et al. 2011; Mytton et al. 2012). Yet subsidies for these products make them appear less costly to consumers than fresh, non-processed foods (Nestle 2003)—partly by their masking of long-term health problems—which has led to an increase in consumption. This use of subsidies contrasts with what happens in other countries, where high food costs combined with the lack of a social safety net make the conventional food system in general unaffordable, contributing to problems of hunger and starvation (Patel 2007).

Spatial issues regarding healthy food access also arise with the consolidation and growth of food retailers. Stores became larger to capitalize on these technological advances, but consumer markets grew at a slower pace; the result was fewer, larger stores (Jones and Simmons 1990). And, since most consumers owned private automobiles, new stores often chose to locate in suburban locations where land was cheaper and easier to access (Lavin 2000), meaning that low-mobility consumers were now disadvantaged in terms of accessing healthy foods (Wrigley 2001). This has certainly been the case in Flint, where the county population has remained largely stable while the city population has been cut in half (meaning that the out-county has continued to grow at the expense of the city). Even worse, neighborhoods that lose or have fewer food retailers are correlated with higher prevalence of obesity and diet-related health problems (Poston and Foreyt 1999; Morland et al. 2006; Wang et al. 2007).

Further, when horizontal mergers of food retail became attractive in the 1980s, participating retailers were subject to forced divestments of redundant stores (Wrigley 2001). This “creative destruction of capital” (Paruchuri et al. 2009) had the effect of increasing gaps in the retail food environment as non-competitive branches were closed. New food retailers were often prevented from entering these former retail sites as a result of restrictive covenants (Smoyer-Tomic et al. 2006). One can find innumerable examples in the Flint community of early big box sites that have now been rendered vacant by this practice or through abandonment more generally. The end result of all of this is that there are many locales where consumers (often the urban poor) pay higher prices for healthy foods (Chung and Myers 1999; Winkler et al. 2006) or have no access at all (Cummins and Macintyre 2002).

Consumers are disadvantaged in other ways as well. While food retailers and manufacturers continue to make record profits, they rarely pass on the cost-savings to consumers (Clarke 2000). The effect has been to keep prices high in areas where little competition exists, making issues of food accessibility and affordability more severe (Clarke 2000; Dunkley et al. 2004). In communities such as Flint, where economic downturns occurred at the same time as this retail restructuring, the gaps in access and the price premiums paid by residents shopping at smaller stores have grown.

Racism and Deindustrialization in the American Rust Belt

Flint is the birthplace of General Motors. As such, it at one time had a massive number of jobs tied to the automobile industry: as many as 80,000 in a region of fewer than 500,000 people. While this was a great benefit to the community and the many people moving into the region, history has shown that it is never good to put all of one’s eggs in one basket when it comes to job diversification. The success Flint had in the automobile industry stymied growth in other sectors, while simultaneously concentrating employment in one sector. By the mid-20th century, Flint had the least industrial diversification of any city in America (Rodgers 1957; Lewis 1965).

Racial Tensions

It was also one of the most segregated cities in the country (Taeuber and Taeuber 1969), with poorer and black populations relegated close to factories in areas with considerable environmental health problems (Lewis 1965). The passage of a Fair Housing ordinance in 1968 suggested that equality
Figure 38.2 Map showing both where African-Americans were segregated prior to the passage of a Fair Housing ordinance (the black outline) and neighborhoods that were subject to blockbusting in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s (in progressively darker shades of gray)—or where half of the white population departed within a ten-year period.
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in housing was coming, but the breakdown of Flint’s racial dividing line caused thousands of white families to move out of the city at a rate of over 1,000 people per year during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s (Figure 38.2). Eventually, nearly 100,000 white people would leave the city for the surrounding countryside, increasing abandonment throughout the city, but particularly in older neighborhoods near factories and in the northwest part of the city.

Because the neighborhoods from which white families (and, later, most middle class residents regardless of race) were moving were suburban by design, the food landscape in these areas was already arranged in an auto-centric fashion. The eventual trickling down of these neighborhoods into lower socioeconomic strata meant that the residents living there no longer necessarily had access to automobility. Thus the low-density, suburban form of many of Flint’s neighborhoods now serves to exacerbate food access issues for residents.

If white and middle class flight weren’t enough of a burden to carry, Flint’s urban fabric was also torn apart by urban renewal policies targeting traditionally black neighborhoods (Sadler and Highsmith 2016). The rationale for urban renewal of majority black neighborhoods was that black residents now had the ability to live anywhere, but the effect was that hundreds of homes and businesses disappeared as entire neighborhoods were demolished. Because this co-occurred with white/middle class flight, it meant a huge upheaval in the character of Flint neighborhoods. For every family that moved out whether because of flight or urban renewal, it became more and more difficult for the city to manage growing challenges like crime, blight, tax base decline, and school attendance decline. And, with a wide range of urban neighborhoods emptying out, it became increasingly difficult for food retailers to be profitable, particularly given the food system-specific challenges they were already facing.

Neoliberalism and Globalization

We have discussed how the political philosophy of neoliberalism re-shaped the food economy specifically, but it also had profound effects on local economies more broadly, particularly through the process of industrial decline known as deindustrialization. The onset of deindustrialization meant a series of job losses in industrial sectors throughout the latter part of the 20th century, changing the employment structure of the community. These job losses and lower industrial productivity meant a decline in city revenue during the same period when neoliberalism compelled governments to roll back social services. Thus, even as the food system was changing for the worse, Flint’s local economy changed such that people became more constrained in their ability to afford healthy foods.

Flint is symptomatic, but not a unique case, of this change. Rather, Flint was particularly vulnerable to food system decline as a result of the already-existing economic changes and racial tensions. The world economy in the post-World War II years was premised on a Fordist structure, which meant a proliferation of manufacturing jobs with standardized industrial practices. But the decline of this brand of global economy in the 1970s and 1980s brought about the changes that make up deindustrialization (Harvey 1989, 2007b; Peck 2002).

Because Flint was so dependent on a single sector for a majority of its jobs, it was severely negatively affected by the economic restructuring and neoliberal policy-making common to deindustrialization (Wolfe and Gertler 2001). As with the scaling back of social programming that we discussed above, federal governments during this period were scaling back their role as the primary unit of economic competition by taking measures to open up national economies to global markets (Giovanardi 2012). Thus, where industries had previously competed domestically with other manufacturers, neoliberalism supported an increase in global competition. This meant that urban centers had to undergo restructuring to keep up with this new global marketplace (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Peck 2002; Cleave et al. 2016).
The idea was that a rising tide globally would lift all boats. The ideas espoused during this period have also been referred to as “trickle-down economics” or “Reaganomics” (an homage to Ronald Reagan, the US president who most embodied this theory). It did not take long for the negative effects of neoliberalism and deindustrialization to begin hitting cities. One researcher has put it this way: “In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a fiscal crisis in cities across Europe and North America caused by the triple problems of deindustrialization, a falling tax base, and declining public expenditure had some serious implications for cities” (Hannigan 2003, p. 353).

But, because neoliberalism was so dominant in practice, such policies continued unabated to allow the emergence of political-economic structures and ideologies based around privatization and deregulation (Rantisi and Leslie 2006). While these policies are intended to support the healthy growth of businesses, they do not account for the negative effects of globalization, nor have they been able to address the economic and health issues being faced by the American middle class. In light of the 2016 US presidential election—which was said to be a referendum on “business as usual” politics—it is deeply troublesome that the victor resides in the political party with the bulk of culpability for putting such policies in motion over the past 30 years. Contrary to the populist mentality growing across the world at the time of writing of this chapter, there is reason to believe that policies favoring big businesses over individuals (those common to neoliberal policy-making) will continue for the foreseeable future. What is shortsighted about such policies is that, in neglecting to provide a social safety net for individuals, societal costs accruing to public health and safety issues wind up costing more than if the safety net had been provided in the first place.

Health Effects

As these problems relate to health issues, where communities such as Flint previously had both economic plenitude and a political system that provided that social safety net, they have now been dealt simultaneous blows to their vitality. In a system that promotes social programs, the effects of poverty can be muted. But, with the loss of a social safety net, the negative health effects of poverty became amplified, especially among the non-white minority population who have historically been discriminated against through segregatory housing policies and racist hiring practices.

Within Flint, as residents lost their jobs, the ability to afford healthcare became increasingly difficult. Making matters more challenging, doctor’s offices, drug stores, and other medical services closed in many neighborhoods. Other essential functions for healthy living also closed, including not just grocery stores but also financial institutions, educational institutions, and employment opportunities. The city more recently has had to roll back services including garbage pick-up, police and fire patrols, and parks programming and maintenance, as it struggles to continue providing basic governmental functions.

As residents have moved out of Flint, taxes and service rates have been increased to provide and maintain basic services like water and sewers. Crime also increased as a result of increased poverty, abandonment of homes, and declines in policing levels, making it even more difficult for residents to conduct healthy, active lifestyles (Greater Flint Health Coalition 2012). More recent research on the city has shown how retail demand has continued to shrink, and many neighborhoods are now characterized as food deserts (Sadler et al. 2013a).

The net effect of this is that residents find it more difficult to access healthy foods, so dietary habits worsen. The lack of nutrient-dense food options means that school and worker performance declines, rates of obesity, diabetes, and metabolic syndrome increase, and chronic diseases like heart disease and some cancers become more common. As a broader example, consider that obesity is currently responsible for 3 million to 4 million deaths worldwide each year (Lim et al. 2013). Worse still for American children, pediatric obesity rates have risen 40% since 1980 (Ng et al. 2014), and today’s
children are now projected to have shorter life spans than their parents as a result of these diet-related health issues (Olshansky et al. 2005). Flint’s issues with healthy food access and poverty mean that their obesity rates are likely as bad as or worse than the US average.

**Food System Changes**

From a broader perspective, these issues are made even more complex because the focus of food policy-making on large-scale agriculture means that social programs to support personal nutrition are overlooked (Sodano 2012). That is, subsidy for large-scale agriculture continues while government bureaucrats seek to cut funding allocated to food stamps. Additionally, some national-level healthy eating programs provide contradictory or erroneous claims about healthy eating (Blay-Palmer et al. 2013). Thus consumers are in a position where they have fewer resources to devote to healthy eating while simultaneously receiving messages about healthy eating that have been warped by food corporations.

Neoliberal reforms have also meant the devolution of responsibility for food planning from the state to (often fiscally insolvent) local municipalities (Morgan 2013) or under-resourced citizen groups (Mansfield and Mendes 2013). At best, this conflict between food companies and social justice groups creates a “policy cacophony” whereby implementing policies is an arduous process (Gortmaker et al. 2011, p. 839). At worst, these interventions can backfire and create unintended negative health consequences (Johnson et al. 2012).

Such changes within the food system directly reflect the economic changes brought about by neoliberalism and globalization. As shown here, a combination of changes in how food is produced, processed, and distributed has had cascading effects on the ability of people to obtain healthy foods. Because the global food system is so interconnected, capital flows at the international scale, leaving many smaller or poorer communities excluded. Examining specific aspects of the local food system within Flint is therefore of interest because it—like many other communities—has experienced negative consequences from the advent of the global food system, and local food offers a way to ameliorate those consequences.

**Local Food Systems as a Response**

Given what we have thus far covered about Flint’s decline as a result of political-economic change and population abandonment, we should not be surprised to learn that, within the city limits of Flint (with a current population just under 100,000), only one chain grocery store remains. Since 2010, five chain grocery stores and one independent grocer have closed in or immediately outside of the city limits, and only two have reopened (both as independent stores).

Because of the criticisms levied against the conventional food system—namely, that it promotes unhealthy eating and is inherently socially inequitable—and owing to one of Flint’s newfound assets in the form of once-abandoned property, local food systems have become the topic of a lot of work in the community since the turn of the century (Sadler et al. 2015). Flint is therefore in an interesting but challenging position, because the broader food system has changed to favor large suburban stores at the same time that the city itself has lost a great deal of population, rendering it unattractive to such stores.

On the positive side, however, it means that some problems of the conventional food system are somewhat absent from the urban landscape. That is, although food deserts proliferate, the food retail landscape is ripe for investment owing to retail leakage to suburban stores. The abundance of available land can be the site of innovation where the motivation is community food security. That is, in a community abandoned by the conventional food system, people are exploring how alternative forms of food production can address a community’s need to sustain and improve food security.
Local Food Systems to Strengthen Food Access: Edible Flint

Within Flint, one of the earliest efforts was an amalgam of community partners known as the Flint Urban Gardening and Land Use Corporation. As the name suggests, it was primarily focused on the creation of and support for urban gardens, and on policy decisions around land use that would impact the ability of people to use their land for such purposes. Shortly thereafter in 2004, the Genesee County Land Bank Authority and other community partners created a “Clean & Green” property maintenance program, with a stated goal of working with community organizations to maintain blighted properties (Sadler and Pruett 2015). Naturally, some of these properties came to be used for community or church gardens.

Growing out of this work, a local food collaborative called Edible Flint was formed in 2009 to be the unifying advocate for all things related to gardening and local food in the community (Sadler et al. 2015). Its work encompasses a garden starters program to train community residents on basic gardening techniques, as well as an access and education work group that aims to increase knowledge of healthy eating options in the community. It also holds an annual garden tour to showcase a sampling of the community and private gardens throughout the community (Figure 38.3). All of these activities help generate interest around potentially growing food for sale, and for several years Edible Flint also helped run a growers’ cooperative that sold collectively at the farmers’ market.

As Edible Flint has continued to grow, its role in the community has grown. Based on focus groups with community members conducted in 2015, many people now see the network as the primary opinion leader on Flint’s local food system. The more recent creation of a Regional Food System Navigator by the Community Foundation has offered new opportunities for linking previously unconnected non-profits and institutions with local food system work. Overall, these early efforts centered on a desire to recapture the benefits of the earlier, more localized food systems noted earlier in this chapter, while also creating the conditions by which the conventional food system could further enrich the food opportunities available.

Retail-Based Interventions: Witherbee’s Market versus The Local Grocer

As these local food system efforts were growing, the downtown core of the city was also experiencing new investment in education, healthcare, and business. With the financial support of several non-profits, an independent grocery store called Witherbee’s opened in 2010 not far from downtown, marking the first time in over ten years that a grocery store had called downtown home. The developers benefited from a number of tax incentives and government loans to support the cost of retrofitting an old building into the grocery store (Sadler et al. 2013a).

The presence of development incentives might have suggested that the store may not have been profitable, because food retail site location by big box stores is frequently based explicitly on where a store can make the most profit. In this case, the developers sought not only an economic rationale, but a social justice orientation: their purpose was to improve food access for the neighborhood around the store. In other words, they would literally be “re-storing” a food desert.

Store surveys and mapping conducted between 2009 and 2011 suggested that the store had a positive effect in terms of bringing down the price of groceries in the neighborhood and increasing access to healthy foods (Sadler et al. 2013a) (Figure 38.4). But further work also showed that only 10% of a sample of area residents routinely shopped at the store. A preliminary study by one of the investors suggested that the store would need to recapture 4.3% of the dollars being spent outside the neighborhood to be profitable. Despite this seemingly attainable goal, the store closed after just 18 months of operation, citing an inability to pay the bills or turn a profit (Sadler et al. 2013b).

The trouble with this outcome is manifold: clearly, many people were not shopping at the store, whether owing to price or ingrained habits of shopping elsewhere. The case may be that there simply
was not enough of a critical mass of people living nearby to sustain the store. But its closure also meant that those with the lowest mobility had now lost a source of healthy food. For the neighborhoods immediately north of downtown Flint, they would once again be a food desert.

That would remain the case until a popular farmers’ market vendor—The Local Grocer—expanded its operation into the former Witherbee’s site in late 2015. The very notion that a farmers’
Figure 38.4  The results of a survey of every store in and around the City of Flint are shown as circles. The scores represent a composite of the availability, quality, and price of healthy foods, with higher scores representing “better” stores. The background shading shows the percentage of families using food assistance. Note the absence of stores with high scores from neighborhoods with a high dependence on food assistance.
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A market vendor would grow sufficiently to allow it to expand into a former grocery store is indicative of the growth in local food systems in the Flint community, but further discussion of the farmers’ market itself is included below. In contrast to Witherbee’s, The Local Grocer benefited from an already-established customer base, as well as from entering the site with five additional years of reinvestment in the area. Additionally, rather than attempting to match the offerings of conventional grocery stores, The Local Grocer is a “made-in-Michigan” store, thereby attracting clientele not only from the neighborhood but from around the area who are interested in local foods. The Local Grocer has also benefited from being one of the first in the area to offer Double-Up Food Bucks, whereby customers using food assistance benefits could effectively double their purchasing power by purchasing local and healthy foods.

Another way The Local Grocer contrasts with other food retailers is that, unlike the other closed store sites which are on huge footprints in often suburban locations, the Witherbee’s site now occupied by The Local Grocer was chosen for its distinctiveness. It is in an urban setting with limited parking, but with easy access to multiple bus lines and on a smaller footprint. Operating costs are thus lower than for a traditionally sized store.

Unconventional Solutions: The Flint Farmers’ Market and the Flint Fresh Mobile Market

As discussed above, the local food movement has strengthened enough in Flint that a farmers’ market vendor now operates a grocery store in Flint. Much of this growth is attributable to the work of vendors and market managers at the Flint Farmers’ Market, which has been in continuous operation since 1905. Rescued from closure in 2002 by a non-profit development corporation, the former city-owned market has grown substantially in recent years. It therefore has continued to be an “oasis” in a city with an increasing number of food deserts, providing healthy foods to the community.

Importantly for the market and the community, a partnership with the Fair Food Network starting in 2011 enabled the market to be one of the first in the state to offer the Double-Up Food Bucks program. This eliminated an important barrier seen again and again in healthy food access work: affordability. Thus they were able to grow a clientele from a diverse range of socioeconomic groups (which as noted has undoubtedly helped The Local Grocer as well).

In 2013, the market announced plans to move closer to the city’s main bus station downtown. Not only would the market be more accessible to people coming by bus, but also it would become handicap accessible, double in size, add vendors, and create a new kitchen incubator space. All of these were projected to contribute to increasing the market’s role in providing healthy food in the community. Work conducted after the market opened in 2014 confirmed the projections: the market was making more than twice as much in sales as it was before the move, and many more residents from socioeconomically distressed neighborhoods were now visiting the market (Sadler 2016a).

The very presence of the market therefore set the stage for The Local Grocer (which has now occupied the Witherbee’s site north of downtown) to grow. But its presence was rooted in the growing local food movement in the community: several vendors at the market are urban gardeners or farmers, and they can scarcely keep up with demand for local, healthy foods.

As a next step toward re-localizing healthy food options, community partners (including the farmers’ market) in the winter of 2016 convened to discuss the possibility of creating a mobile market that could visit food deserts throughout the city (Sadler 2016b). Rather than requiring people to find the healthy food, the healthy food could come to them. These partners included representatives of community and institutional entities whose work touched on anti-hunger and local food efforts. Because of their efforts, the Flint Fresh Mobile Market was born. The very same grocery store that grew from the success of the Flint Farmers’ Market (The Local Grocer) is now the operator of the mobile market.
Thus one can see how the evolution of local food systems has contributed to increasing healthy food access in Flint. Despite its challenges in other areas, the city has seen growth in local food: the farmers’ market was nearly defunct in 2002, but growth in urban gardening and farming helped increase the number of vendors at the market. And subsequent work has afforded market vendors the opportunity to move into more traditional styles of food retailing.

Conclusions

Flint, Michigan, of any city in the country, has experienced perhaps one of the most severe cases of economic decline resulting from both deindustrialization and racism. But, despite the food system changes that have rocked the traditional food retailing network in the community, the local food economy has shown remarkable growth since the turn of the century. Not only has the community’s farmers’ market grown into a much larger new facility, but new local grocery stores have opened and sales of garden kits to community members through the local food network continue to grow. Ongoing talks to reintroduce a traditional grocery store to a large food desert in the underserved, suburban northwestern side of the city signify the commitment of both non-profits and institutions to “re-store” Flint’s food deserts.

While the city continues to face infrastructure challenges owing to rollbacks in state government funding as a consequence of neoliberalism, the local food system appears strong. Bucking the notion that big business is the stalwart of the American economy, Flint shows that, when the conventional economy abandons a city, innovative and entrepreneurial people quickly fill the void. The proliferation of alternative food systems within the city provides an interesting counterpoint to the dominant system, lending insight into what may happen in the years to come as the negative effects of globalization—including environmental degradation and growing social inequality—become more apparent.

References


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