



Food Deserts, Food Insecurity and Poverty in Native Communities

What is a food desert?

- ◆ Food deserts are defined as parts of the country lacking fresh fruit, vegetables and other healthful whole foods and are usually found in impoverished areas. This is largely due to a lack of grocery stores, farmer's markets, and healthy food providers.¹ (Note: The term "desert" is used by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. However, many Native tribes, especially those in the desert Southwest, do not necessarily like its use in this regard.)
- ◆ As part of the First Lady's Let's Move initiative to end childhood obesity, the U.S. Department of Agriculture created a Food Locator showing parts of the U.S. that are food deserts. Almost all American Indian reservations are classified as food deserts.

What is food insecurity?

- ◆ There are two types of food insecurity, according to the Interagency Working Group on Food Security and Food Security Advisory Committee (1999). In Type I food insecurity, an individual or group of people do not have enough food to eat. In Type II food insecurity, the individual or the group does not have enough *nutritional* and culturally appropriate food to eat.
- ◆ According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, food insecurity is a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food. Further, according to the recent government data, almost one out of four American Indians are food insecure, compared with 15 percent of U.S households.

American Indian and Alaska Natives also have the highest rate of poverty of any other racial group in the nation. In 2009, their poverty rate was 27.3%, almost twice the national poverty rate of 14.2, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce. In addition, American Indian communities have some of the highest unemployment rates in the U.S.

High poverty levels, a large number of Natives experiencing food insecurity and many Natives living in food deserts, all contribute to poor health outcomes that include diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity and heart disease.



¹ U.S. Department of Agriculture. Retrieved October 2013 from, <http://apps.ams.usda.gov/fooddeserts/>.



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Consider this:

- ◆ At mild or moderate levels, food insecurity results in anxiety, limited nutritional options, and trade-offs between food and other basic needs. In more severe cases, food insecurity results in hunger and extended periods of time without food.²
- ◆ Adults living with the most severe levels of food insecurity have more than twice the risk of developing diabetes as adults who are not food insecure.³
- ◆ To maintain caloric intake, adults who experience food insecurity limit the variety of their food and concentrate on a few low-cost, energy-dense and nutritionally-poor foods such as refined carbohydrates and foods with added sugars, fats and sodium.⁴
- ◆ American Indian children are experiencing obesity at a startling rate, with 31.2% of four-year-olds currently obese, which is a rate higher than any other racial or ethnic group, according to a 2009 report by Centers for Disease Control.
- ◆ Heart disease is the leading cause of death among American Indians and Alaska Natives, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

Where do we go from here?

- ◆ Talk to schools, senior center and community program representatives to promote programs and policies that require more healthy snacks and traditional foods;
- ◆ Advocate for the protection and increase in funding for safety net programs like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and the Supplemental Security Income (SSI);
- ◆ Support community and school-garden programs; and
- ◆ If possible, grow a garden to supplement your current diet to meet your nutritional needs.

2 California Pan-Ethnic Health Network. Retrieved October 2013 from, <http://www.cpehn.org>.

3 California Pan-Ethnic Health Network. Retrieved October 2013 from, <http://www.cpehn.org/pdfs/DiabetesBrief.pdf>.

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For more information, visit:

- ◆ WhyHunger is committed to end hunger and poverty by connecting people to nutritious, affordable food and by supporting grassroots solutions that inspire self-reliance and community empowerment. www.whyhunger.org.
- ◆ The American Nutrition Association's mission to promote optimal health through nutrition and wellness education. <http://americannutritionassociation.org/newsletter/usda-defines-food-deserts>
- ◆ The Center for Disease Control's Traditional Foods Project includes 17 programs that striving to restore local and traditional foods. www.cdc.gov/diabetes/projects/ndwp/traditional-foods.htm.
- ◆ Food Empowerment Project - Food Deserts www.foodispower.org/food-deserts/
- ◆ U.S. Department of Agriculture - Food Insecurity www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us.aspx#.UnquIc0xYgM
- ◆ Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program www.fns.usda.gov/snap/applicant_recipients/eligibility.htm
- ◆ A list of recipes from *Indian Country Today* utilizing traditional Native foods. <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/department/native-recipes>.

