

Hunger in the Land of Plenty

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Helder Camara was Archbishop of the Brazilian Diocese of Olinda and Recife from 1964 to 1985. At a time when the poor were rapidly bloating urban centers across the third world and Americans were hardly aware of such poverty, Camara famously gave a challenging voice. “When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food,” he said, “they call me a communist.”

The ingeniousness of the Archbishop’s teaching is so subtle it deserves saying directly. Despite high moral praise for those who minister to the most basic of individual needs, Camara discovered that pushing hard questions about the system of food production and marketing on behalf of the poor risks perception as the enemy. Today it remains immensely more difficult to examine how communities fail the poor than it is to organize action for charity and handouts.

That is why the West Texas Hunger Summit last week was like fresh air. Organized by the San Angelo Regional Office of the Texas Hunger Initiative, their ultimate goal is to achieve “food security” by ensuring that every individual in Texas has access to three healthy meals a day, seven days a week. Because charity gets part way to the goal, they provide the leadership sustaining San Angelo’s Kids Eat-FREE volunteer program that has given more than 130,000 meals to local children over the past four years during summer months when school is out.

Beyond the giving of food, however, what impresses me about the Hunger Initiative is that they do more than ask why the poor have inadequate access to food. They engage action at the local, state, and national levels to affect food policy, encourage public education, community organizing, and local community development for food security. Consequently, charitable feeding campaigns did not dominate the agenda for the Hunger Summit. Instead, it featured an asset-based approach to community development, various grassroots organizing strategies, and examination of systemic access barriers to nutritious food such as the payday lending traps and food deserts.

The latter topic is important for our city. Food deserts moved onto the national agenda in 2009 when the Economic Research Service at the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) reported to Congress on access barriers to nutritious foods that are a factor in obesity and diet-related diseases, which are exploding in the country. The report identified a small percentage of low-income households and populations across the nation living far from a supermarket or grocery store and lacking easy access to transportation. Using the 2000 Census as a baseline, the USDA estimated 13.5 million Americans lived in 6,500 census tracts that were food deserts with insufficient access to healthy diets.

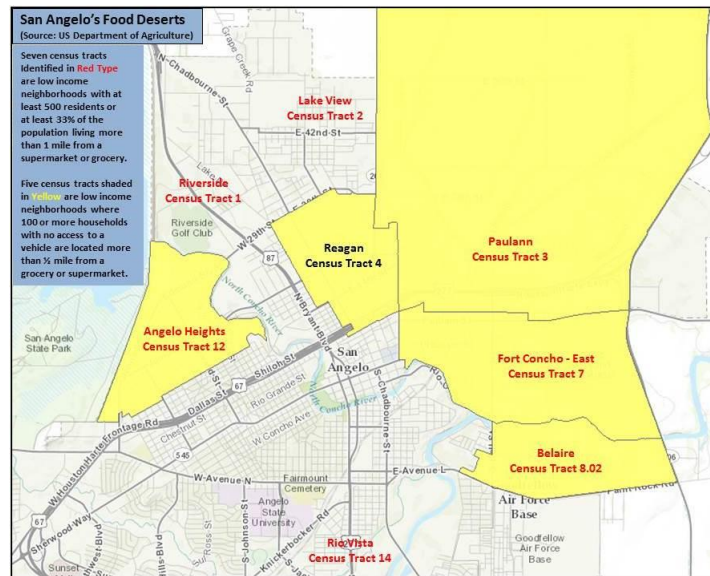
Later USDA estimates suggest as many as 23 million Americans may live in food deserts. Making revisions based on the 2010 Census, the USDA also identified two distinct but overlapping types of food desert tracts across the nation.

There is one essential criterion for either type. A census tract, regardless of which type it is, must be designated a low-income area by virtue of having either a median family income below 80 percent of the city’s overall median, or a poverty rate of at least 20 percent of the population. In

addition, for the first type of food desert, at least 500 persons, or at least 33 percent of the population, must live more than a mile from a supermarket or full-service grocery store.

San Angelo has seven census tract neighborhoods identified as food deserts of this first type. Angelo Heights, Riverside, Lake View, Paulann, Fort Concho-East, Belaire, and Rio Vista tracts are each low-income neighborhoods in the city where at least a third of population (or, alternatively, at least 500 people) reside more than a mile from a grocery.

San Angelo Food Deserts



Overall, more than 33,000 residents live in these seven food desert neighborhoods of the first type. Of course, many of these (about two-thirds) are not low-income individuals, nor are they all located more than a mile from a grocery market with available healthy food choices. They merely happen to live in an area of the city where significant numbers of people are low-income and far from a healthy food market source.

Nevertheless, about 11,000 of the total 33,000 residents in these food desert neighborhoods (about one-third) are low-income individuals located more than mile from a grocery. These individuals define the neighborhoods that form the first type of food desert tracts, and they directly experience the barriers to obtaining healthy foods that arise from the combination of scarce income and distance from the source. The fact that about 8,500 of them (approximately 79%) are vulnerable children (under age 18) or seniors (age 65 and over) adds to the challenge. Various physical or mental disabilities also raise barriers for a good number of these residents by impairing abilities to carry out daily living chores that are taken-for-granted by most of us.

The second type of food desert continues to focus on low-income census tracts, but turns attention to lack of access to transportation in households. The USDA also changes the distance criterion for this second type of food desert. Recall that a distance of more than one mile was used to define “living far” from a grocery in the first type discussed above.

The USDA defines the second type as a low-income census tract that includes 100 or more households located a half-mile or more from a grocery and having no access to a vehicle. Five San Angelo census tracts represent this type of food desert. The neighborhoods in Angelo

Heights, Paulann, Fort Concho-East, and Belaire depict both types of food deserts. The city's Reagan area joins the list of the second type of food desert tracts. (Neighborhoods depicting both types are highlighted yellow on the map above).

Altogether, there are about 700 households located more than a half-mile from a healthy grocery source and lacking access to a vehicle in the San Angelo food deserts of the second type. This includes about seven percent of all households in the five neighborhoods. Their members face numerous barriers to maintaining a healthy diet that arise from the combination of low household income, lack of transportation, and distance from a well-stocked grocery. As in the first type of food desert, the presence of vulnerable children and elder occupants complicates the challenges in these households.

One of San Angelo's leading non-profits working in the food deserts has a unique activity once a year when they invite a wide variety of leaders from all parts of the community to ride along with their volunteers as they deliver meals to elderly citizens. What strikes me is how many participants in the Meals for the Elderly "Big Wheels" event seem to leave the experience making comments suggesting it opened their eyes to a depth of poverty and hunger they never knew existed in San Angelo.

A lot more of that kind of awareness is necessary for the community to address seriously the food deserts. We need that awareness every day in order to reach beyond praising the saints giving food charity to ask why not every individual has access to healthy meals.

Asking Helder Camara's question does not diminish the magnificence and generosity of San Angelo's donors of treasure and time to support impactful programs like Kids Eat-FREE, Meals for the Elderly, Our Daily Bread Soup Kitchen, Grace and Grub, Rust street Ministries, or the Regional Food Bank. Raising the question does beg that we do more, however.

Doing more to ensure that every person has access to healthy food might start by supporting and promoting the Texas Hunger Initiative effort to use resources already established but underutilized. Examples of local resources that disparage and stigmatize as often as they encourage or promote include the national SNAP (food stamp) and WIC programs.

Doing more also entails developing new projects and resources. There are budding community and neighborhood garden projects awaiting the care and attention needed for expansion through local neighborhoods. A more vibrant farmer's market with operations extended through the year would be an asset. We could explore community supported farming and more farm-to-school programs. With encouragement and support, we could establish service-learning programs to address the food deserts and to engage secondary and university level students in 4-H and other related extracurricular clubs, such as those studying culinary arts and food sciences curricula. Students could gain both career-related knowledge and a sense of responsibility to the community.

An added number of people in San Angelo and the surrounding region are more aware of possibilities like these thanks to the West Texas Hunger Summit last week.

Anne Frank was someone who knew dire poverty and desperate hunger. Her lesson for us, "Hunger is not a problem. It is an obscenity." "How wonderful it is," she wrote in her Diary, "that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world."