In Baltimore, a Legacy of Redlining Lives on Through Food Deserts

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Just a block from Towson University and boasting a cafe, florist, and games room, a new Whole Foods on Towson Row – only 15 minutes from Baltimore – symbolizes the area’s growth and prosperity. First opening its doors last year, the Whole Foods is part of a boom for this once-small college town that has since ushered in a new shopping center and an influx of restaurants. But for residents of Baltimore itself, the store is also symbolic of the incredible wealth disparity between city and county that seeps into all parts of life—including the distribution of food.

One in four Baltimore residents lives in a food desert. By the city’s definition, this means they live more than a quarter mile from a supermarket in an area with a median income below 185% of the Federal Poverty Level. A third of these households don’t have a car available. As such, residents must rely on corner stores, the only ones within walking distance, for their groceries. While always stocked up on processed foods, corner stores rarely have any organic produce, and never in the same quantity as full-service supermarkets.

While the new Whole Foods exemplifies the food disparity in Baltimore, it is far from the only example. Just this past November, Giant opened a new store in the affluent Locust Point neighborhood in South Baltimore, their first new location in the city for over a decade. The area is already serviced by a Harris Teeter. At the same time, it was announced that Price Rite, the only full-service supermarket in Pigtown, would be shutting its doors. With its closure in early December, residents now face over a mile walk for groceries. Just like that, a new food desert was created.

As with many systemic disparities in Baltimore, access to food is highly determined by race. Full-service grocery stores are almost exclusively located in the “White L,” a term coined by research scientist Lawrence T. Brown to describe the majority-white Baltimore neighborhoods that run down the city’s center. Fanning out on either side of the L is the “Black Butterfly.” With premier supermarkets — like the Locust Point Giant — consistently opting to open in the “White L,” 32% of Black Baltimoreans are stuck in food deserts.

It’s a cyclical pattern. As few residents of food deserts have access to a car, public transportation is the only way to get to organic grocery stores. But Baltimore’s free bus system, the Charm City Circulator, almost exclusively operates within the “White L.” The same is true for bike paths and the light rail routes. At every turn, the city’s infrastructure prevents those within redlined districts from getting out of them.

So, what solutions are there? As grocery delivery services have become more popular, residents have the opportunity to get fresh produce delivered right to their door. Local outreach programs, like FreshCrate in North Baltimore, also stock discounted organic products in corner stores.

Still, these solutions fail to address the root of the problem. Until the city takes steps to incentivize supermarkets to open locations in food deserts, a quarter of Baltimoreans will remain caught up in this vicious cycle.