Healthy food void may feed obesity

Study points to lack of grocery stores in poor neighborhoods

By Janell Ross
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There were maps showing where obesity is clustered in Nashville.
There were maps showing where the city’s grocery stores, obvious fast-food restaurants, poor residents are, and where those who do not own a car live, too.

And, when Dr. Heather O’Hara stood in a Meharry Medical School classroom this week to defend the research project and data she’s spent more than a year poring over, there were plenty of nervous moments, too.

But, O’Hara’s look into the relationship between where people live, what kinds of food stores are near their homes, and how much they weigh is anything but an ivory tower exercise.

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MIRIAM LEIBOWITZ
Re-Storing Nashville program coordinator

In Nashville’s poorest communities, body mass indexes, a critical weight to height ratio and

measure of health, are on average higher than in other neighborhoods.
And there are hints that the reason for that difference may not lie simply between individual plates and mouths, but in what food can be found closest to Nashville’s poorest homes.
More than a quarter of the people living in low-income sections of North Nashville, Edgehill and

» FOOD, 6B
Study suggests obesity link

East Nashville — where fast-food restaurants are plentiful, full-service grocery stores completely absent and many residents do not have cars — has a body mass index (BMI) over 30, according to data gathered by the Nashville Health Disparities Coalition.

Thirty is the official mark of obesity and the gateway to a variety of serious health complications, including diabetes and heart disease. By comparison, less than 5 percent of people living in areas such as Belle Meade and Green Hills have similar body mass indexes.

The findings are too preliminary and small scale to draw conclusions about other cities, or about the causes of disproportionate weight problems in poor sections of Nashville, O’Hara said.

But combined with other data, they point to real questions about the role of individuals and societies in shaping how much we all weigh.

“What I’ve done, this is a baseline study, something that’s never been done in Nashville, Tennessee, before,” said O’Hara, a Meharry-trained doctor who will earn a master’s degree in public health this spring.

“Based on what we know ... I think it does show that there’s a desperate need for more research in this area, and that it needs to be done expeditiously.”

Food deserts are communities generally characterized by the absence of grocery stores in a 1.5-mile radius; a large share of residents who do not have cars; multiple liquor stores; and no direct access to affordable fresh fruits, vegetables, low-fat dairy and meats, said Miriam Lebowitz.

Lebowitz is the program coordinator for Re-Storing Nashville, a Mana-Food Security Partner’s project. The program will provide free meals and snacks to residents of North Nashville, Edgehill and East Nashville.

And with a portion of a $7.5 million Centers for Disease Control grant announced last month, the program will work to bring more fresh fruits, vegetables and the needed equipment to sell them to existing corner stores in Nashville’s food deserts.

Not really a choice

A bill has been introduced in the Tennessee legislature that creates business incentives to bring markets to underserved communities and fresh foods to existing stores.

“I do sometimes hear people talking about living in a food desert and obesity as a matter of choices,” Lebowitz said.

“I think what we do want people to understand is that if you don’t have any choices, it’s really hard to make good ones.”

When Teresa Cantrell runs low on food in the middle of the week, she makes a list. Then, sometimes, a more than four-hour trip.

Cantrell, 49, lives in Edgehill Apartments, a public housing complex just south of downtown and in the center of one of Nashville’s food deserts. She doesn’t own a car. So, while she tries to plan and shop for the week on weekends, when she can ride with her sister, sometimes she runs short.

On Wednesday, she took a 10:45 a.m. bus, spent a half hour waiting for a bus transfer downtown and a half hour in the store. She bought ground beef, a large tomato, a large onion and a few other items, bought the bus and got home right about 3 p.m.

Cantrell said her only other option is a neighborhood store within walking distance that sells a hair-product-heavy mix of hair tonics, shampoos and some food at convenience store prices.

“The only vegetables they have are in cans,” said Cantrell.

That’s why Cantrell isn’t surprised when she sees already chubby kids in her neighborhood eating snack cakes or drinking soda.

Maps raise question

That’s also one of the reasons Cantrell said she and a dedicated group of neighbors have been trying to get a full-service grocery store to come to the neighborhood for at least five years. She also is a part of a Mana-Food Security Partner’s community group working to bring stores to food deserts around the city.

In the United States, people tend to think about obesity as a personal failing or a character issue, a question of willpower, said David Schlundt, an associate professor of psychology at Vanderbilt University and one of the key researchers involved in gathering the Nashville Health Disparities Coalition data.

But it’s not a coincidence that New York is America’s thinnest city, based on average body mass index measurements, Schlundt said. The structure of New York City puts people out on the sidewalk and using public transit, because that’s the best way to get around.

O’Hara started looking at the question of what impact life in a food desert has on weight after a Tennessee State University associate professor geographer, David Padgett, showed her a set of maps he created marking Nashville’s grocery stores, fast food restaurants and households without cars.

“Tying Nashville Together, a nonprofit, originally asked Padgett for help mapping Nashville’s food deserts in 2005,” O’Hara said. “I was very interested in finding out if there are any health implications to living in a food desert.

“If struggling with life in a food desert isn’t just a question of convenience, that really makes a much stronger case for public intervention.”

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