

## **Northeastern Illinois Community Food Security Assessment Finding Food in Pilsen: Summary Report, October 26, 2007**

### ***The Project:***

In fall, 2003, researchers at Chicago State University and UIC were funded by the Chicago Community Trust to perform a region-wide analysis of access to healthy food. This study, named the Northeastern Illinois Community Food Security Assessment, called for region-wide mapping and deep analysis of a number of case study areas. The Lower West Side Community Area, commonly known as Pilsen, was chosen as a case study area. Researchers partnered with Alivio Medical Center to collect the Pilsen data.

The Northeastern Illinois Community Food Security Assessment measured access to food in Pilsen through three techniques. First, Pilsen was part of a broad mapping of food access sites in the six-county Chicago area. This data was analyzed by the number of stores in each community and also by a technique that looked at the mean distance from all street addresses in a community to stores of various types. Second, Pilsen was one of six case-study areas where qualitative group interviews were performed. These interviews included consumers, store managers, emergency food system workers, service providers, and local activists. Third, a market basket study, where stores are assessed for the availability of foods on a standard list, was performed.

For this study, the borders of Pilsen are set by the Lower West Side community area, which extends from east of Halsted to just west of Western, and from the train tracks north of 16<sup>th</sup> St. to the South Branch of the Chicago River. Residential development is focused in the north end of this area.

### ***Store Mapping:***

Key Findings of the GIS Study include include:

- Overall, the number and concentration of stores of supermarket and grocery (not bodega) size was greater in Pilsen than almost anywhere else in the city. There are six “supermarkets” (note this includes stores that are medium in size and might not be defined as a supermarket by residents).
- Most of these supermarkets were small and not large chains. There are no full-service chain supermarkets. The only chain is an Aldi, which is not a full supermarket.
- Pilsen residents were closer to the nearest corner store in than residents of any other Chicago community area, a mean of 337 feet away (less than a tenth of a mile). Pilsen residents also have close-by supermarkets compared to other community areas, but their access to large chain markets is worse.
- The residential areas of Pilsen are densely populated and stores are clustered within this area. However, leaving Pilsen in most directions involves going under a long underpass or long bridge. This may detract from the ability of Pilsen residents to frequent stores outside the community.

- The closest chain supermarket to most of Pilsen is the Jewel at Ashland and Roosevelt. But, this is out of the neighborhood under a long underpass. It is not far to drive from most of the community, but many do not have easy automobile access. The Ashland bus also serves this store, but for many in Pilsen, this is hard to get to.
- There has been very little change in chain supermarket access in Pilsen since 2005.
- These results generally reflect similar patterns in Hispanic neighborhoods throughout the city and suburbs

### *Qualitative Interviews:*

Eight qualitative interviews were conducted across seven different food system sectors in the Pilsen Community as part of the larger Northeast Illinois Community Food Security Assessment. Perspectives were sought from a broad range of food sector stakeholders ranging from community members to established restaurateurs to WIC and soup kitchen staff. Verbatim transcripts of the interviews were coded for each food sector then the Atlas-ti software program was used to examine the data across the food system sectors to determine the issues that were common as well as unique to each food system sector in response to the interview questions. The complete results are presented in the Report with the Key Findings described here.

### *Key Findings*

Barriers to Healthy Foods at the Community-Level Barriers include the problems associated with forced over-reliance on smaller local retail outlets for food on a routine basis. Specifically, food items are more expensive and of perceived poor quality in local food outlets than at larger food grocery chains. Interview participants charge local retail stores with perceived price discrimination including price inflation of preferred ethnic food items and during peak shopping hours. A general sense of deception on the part of food retailers was expressed by interview participants suggesting that expiration dates are changed and meat doctored to look more appealing in order to make a profit. Lastly, genuine frustration was expressed with respect to the state of cleanliness of stores. This as well as the rudeness of cashiers was defined as an act of disrespect to consumers.

Another influence to community-level food security may be general threatened “sense of community” due to a high rate of gentrification, and thus community change and instability compromising ability of the community to join together.

Barriers to Food Security at the Individual-Level A great deal of discussion across the food sector groups suggested that Pilsen community residents may largely have access to healthy foods but lack the resources to buy and prepare the healthiest foods. These issues include limited income of community residents in light of inflated area food prices. The cheapest foods, simply, are generally not the healthiest. If a person has limited income, it was argued they were going to buy the cheapest foods available, chips, processed and canned foods. Interview participants largely agreed that knowledge of healthy foods was poor among community residents making them vulnerable to pop culture advertising of low quality and often expensive fast foods. The food shopping, preparation and cooking skills needed in preparing healthy meals of, particularly younger residents, emerged as an important barrier to family food security as younger parents were less prepared to play the important role of securing healthy food for their families. A direct result of these inferior skills is the reliance on fast foods resulting in what one interview participant called the ‘McDonald’s mentality’ in which kids become so accustomed to junk foods that they won’t eat healthy food. Lastly, limited time given busy schedules was cited as an individual-level barrier to food security.

Vulnerable Populations Three populations emerged as perceived vulnerable groups to food security. These include seniors who are often at the whim of family members to access food; immigrants, who have language barriers and may be isolated from services; and, men, who were perceived to be at risk because they are reluctant to seek food assistance programs due to a potential stigma associated. Men were also discussed as potentially disproportionately needy since programs like WIC exist solely for women and children.

Role of Existing Community Food Programs in Community Food Security An interesting theme emerged with regard to barriers to community gardens as a means of addressing food insecurity. Barriers included poor soil quality and industrial contamination in Pilsen, lack of space, risk of theft, and that alternative community gardening spaces such as rooftops have become reserved for children to keep them off the streets and safe from neighborhood violence.

Strategies Used to Access Food in Pilsen A number of examples were given by interview participants to describe means of accessing food when someone experiences food insecurity. These include: shoplifting, especially by children taking chips and candy bars; acquiring food by begging for a handout at restaurants and even private homes; and selling miscellaneous items on the street for food money. Interview participants also affirmed the evidence of ‘dumpster diving’, prostitution or exchanging sex for food or other services, going on dates to get food, as queried by the interviewer.

Community-based Organizations Approaches to Food Insecurity According to the interview participants, some innovative strategies are in place to improve access to healthy foods. The community-based organization (whose agency runs a Kid's Café program) representative interviewed reports a relationship with local retail food owners in which plates of food are given to retail owners and cashiers in exchange for not selling chips to kids in between 4:30 and 5:30 p.m. when dinner is being served at the CBO. This is done to increase the chances of the child participants in the CBO's food program eating the healthy meal provided to them.

Potential Strategies to Improve Food Security It was suggested that the food security situation is getting better. People are generally more informed. However, recommendations include that information should be delivered via Spanish-language radio programs and through children. Word of mouth was suggested as a more effective route than radio or print advertising. Children are most effective in informing parents about services or other issues especially in immigrant families, and when English is a second language. Also, providing food preparation and cooking education directed at younger families was reiterated as a necessary strategy.

Needs and Interests of Food Sector Groups in Overall CFIS Pilsen food sector interviewees expressed a need for more grant money, space both organizational and food storage, and volunteers. There is an interest in collaboration on a community wide effort to improve food security. However, nearly all interviewees reported that they would have very little if any time they could invest in such an effort.

Some of the food sector stakeholders seemed to have a hard time seeing how their actions contribute to larger community food insecurity. This was especially evident in the restaurant and retail store interviews. One of the restaurant representatives expressed a disinterest in donating old or excess food to food pantry but instead takes it home or throws it away. The food retail outlet representative refuses to participate in LINK because of a perception of an administrative burden.

However, the community members felt that Pilsen is at an optimal place to start a community effort and cited many community-based organization and initiatives representative of the spirit of the community in advocating for itself.

### ***Market Basket Study***

A market basket survey assesses a sample of retail food stores using a common list of food items, a shopping list, and checks whether each item is available, and the price for that item. These are then added together to give the cost of the entire market basket. Stores in Pilsen were selected from a verified list of store types (Discount supermarket, independent groceries, chain drug stores, liquor stores with food & gas stations with food). The market basket lists used were the Thrifty Food Plan list from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and a Mexican Module developed for this study. Key findings included the following:

- The Discount Supermarket carried more of the Thrifty Food Plan items, and the weekly market basket cost was less than at the other Pilsen stores (\$71.64 vs. \$115.80 in independent groceries vs. \$122.23 in liquor stores with food)
- Independent Groceries carried more of the Mexican Module items and in more food categories than other Pilsen store types
- Prices were higher in every food category for the Independent Groceries compared with the Discount Supermarket

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