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Objectives 5-7 address major, interrelated challenges that San Diegans face in achieving food security, accessing traditional, healthy, nutritious, and culturally appropriate foods, and recovering wasted food.

OBJECTIVE 5

Food insecurity is a public health crisis that affects hundreds of thousands of San Diegans—and millions of Americans—on a daily basis. Food insecurity is a deep and persistent issue, amplified by the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, that costs billions of dollars in education and healthcare annually.

OBJECTIVE 6

Residential segregation—evident across San Diego County—impacts the availability of food options. To a large extent, nutritional inequities and diet-related health problems impacting low-income communities and communities of color across the region are the result of unequal access to traditional, healthy, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food.

OBJECTIVE 7

Wasted food is wasted resources. Food is landfilled by the ton every day while thousands of San Diegans experience food insecurity. Food recovery—the practice of redirecting edible food that would otherwise go to waste, and distributing it to hunger relief organizations—provides local organizations with additional, and possibly more diverse food resources for feeding those in need.

OBJECTIVE

06

Improve Community Food Environments

STRATEGIES AT A GLANCE

- Support coordinated efforts and collaboration to improve community food environments
- Expand land use policies and economic development incentives to encourage local food production and healthy food retail
- Support the case for reparations
- Promote food sovereignty

Introduction

There is a strong relationship between food, health, and place. The built environment around neighborhoods shapes the availability of food and the overall health of residents. Food can be a source of nourishment or a source of sickness. Supermarkets, restaurants, and corner stores are all features of the built environment, and the types and proximities of these businesses define our community food environment and ultimately, our health.

As a social determinant of health, community food environments affect health, well-being, and quality of life, and can create or perpetuate the conditions that contribute to health disparities and inequities.

The increased prevalence of cheap food, large portion sizes, and high calorie ingredients across communities, paired with government policies and lifestyle choices, has led to an epidemic of health and diet-related diseases, including obesity and type 2 diabetes. More people are sick in this country—100 million pre-diabetic or diabetic adults, 122 million adults with cardiovascular disease, 3 in 4 adults overweight or obese—*than are healthy*.[1]

Poor diet is the leading cause of death in the U.S.[2] and the consumption of specific foods and nutrients are connected to increased deaths due to heart disease, stroke, and type 2 diabetes.[3] In particular, men, Black and Hispanic/Latinx individuals, and people with lower education levels have higher rates of death from unhealthy diets than women, White individuals, and people with higher education levels.

Research has overwhelmingly confirmed that race/ethnicity and lower socioeconomic status are associated with higher rates of diet-related illnesses and deaths. Low income communities and communities of color also have unequal access to quality healthcare, creating compounding challenges.[4] The disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on low income communities and Black, Indigenous, and people of color further highlights the disparities and inequities related to health. As an acknowledgement of the rampant inequality that exists today, both the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the County of San Diego Board of Supervisors recently declared racism a public health crisis.

Most of us know that diets high in fruits, vegetables, and fiber and low in fat, sodium, and added sugars are good for our health. These foods however, are not as widely available as unhealthy foods, especially across low income communities and communities of color. The social determinants of health—economic stability, education access and quality, health care access and quality, neighborhood and built environment, and social and community context—intersect in these communities, creating unequal access to healthy food, among other inequities. Research from metropolitan regions across the country, including the City of San Diego, has confirmed that residential segregation impacts the availability of healthy food options, resulting in nutritional inequities and diet-related health disparities across urban areas.[5] These trends also affect rural communities and Indigenous communities. Based on a person's race and zip code, one can generally predict their likelihood to have diabetes, heart disease, or other diet-related diseases.

[1] Mozaffarian, Dariush and Dan Glickman, August 26, 2019, *"Our Food Is Killing Too Many of Us,"* The New York Times

[2] US Burden of Disease Collaborators, February 13, 2018, "The State of US Health, 1990-2016: Burden of Diseases, Injuries, and Risk Factors Among US States," i, 319(14), doi:10.1001/jama.2018.0158

[3] Micha, Renata et al., March 7, 2017, "Association Between Dietary Factors and Mortality From Heart Disease, Stroke, and Type 2 Diabetes in the United States," JAMA, 317(9), DOI: 10.1001/jama.2017.0947.

[4] Fiscella, Kevin, Peter Franks, Marthe R. Gold, and Carolyn M. Clancy, May 2000, *"Inequality in Quality: Addressing Socioeconomic, Racial, and Ethnic Disparities in Health Care,"* Journal of the American Medical Association, 283(19): DOI: 10.1001/jama.283.19.2579.

[5] Havewala, Ferzana, December 2020, "The Dynamics Between the Food Environment and Residential Segregation: An Analysis of Metropolitan Areas," Food Policy

Communities with limited healthy food options are commonly described as food deserts, where healthy, fresh food options are sparse, food swamps, where there is an overabundance of unhealthy food, or food mirages, where healthy food options are present, but unaffordable or otherwise out of reach.[6] These terms however, fail to acknowledge deeply rooted structural issues that influence community food environments and fail to capture the complexity of the issue. The idea of a food desert paints a picture of a barren landscape, minimizing the role of ethnic markets in providing access to affordable, fresh, healthy, and culturally appropriate foods,[7] overlooking that people may not shop at the closest food retailer,[8] and ignoring all of the ways that people are self-reliant in these communities.[9]

Karen Washington, a community gardener and food justice activist in New York, redefines food deserts more aptly as food apartheid, which takes into consideration the structural issues embedded in our food system.[10] The reason for the lack of healthy food options in these communities is not because people do not want to eat fresh fruits and vegetables, but rather because healthy, nutritious, traditional, and culturally appropriate foods are not available. She highlights that these communities need more than just healthy food options in stores, they need an influx of resources and financial support, along with increased ownership of land and capital, to truly transform conditions and overall health.

Improving community food environments is complex. It will require an intersectional approach that considers race, culture, housing, transportation, and our economy. This work must also center the needs and aspirations of residents and build community power. Acknowledging and preserving the life, traditions, values, and potential of diverse communities and promoting food sovereignty must be the centerpiece of any attempt to improve community food environments.

[6] Burton, Michelle et al., 2018, *Fresh Perspective: Food Equity and Community Development*

[7] Joassart-Marcelli, Pascale, Jaime S. Rossiter, and Fernando J. Bosco, March 26, 2017, "Ethnic Markets and Community Food Security in an Urban "Food Desert,"" Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space

[8] Widener, Michael J., February 2018, "Spatial Access to Food: Retiring the Food Desert Metaphor," Physiology & Behavior, 193 (Part B), DOI:*10.1016/j.physbeh.2018.02.032*

[9] Yeoman, Barry, September 14, 2018, *"The Hidden Resilience of 'Food Desert' Neighborhoods,"* Civil Eats

[10] Brones, Anna. *"Karen Washington: It's Not a Food Desert, It's Food Apartheid,"* Guernica, 10 May 2018

Core Challenges

The core challenges to improving community food environments in San Diego County are:

- **Confronting historical and ongoing inequalities**
- **Increasing healthy food access while preventing gentrification**

Confronting Historical and Ongoing Inequalities

The U.S. has a long, deep history of racism and economic inequality, endorsed by government policies, that have systematically and disproportionately impacted Black, Indigeneous, and people of color. Stark inequalities exist across every aspect of society, including land tenure, wages, income, savings, unemployment, poverty, occupation, business ownership, home ownership, education, health, food security, and more. These patterns of injustice are plainly visible today in neighborhoods across the country.

As a result of decades of segregation and racist housing policies that have unfairly benefitted White communities, Black, Indigenous, and people of color are now concentrated on reservations and in urban areas with limited resources and opportunities to thrive. Housing discrimination was legal until 1968, and essentially every metropolitan region in the country, including San Diego County, was segregated.[11]

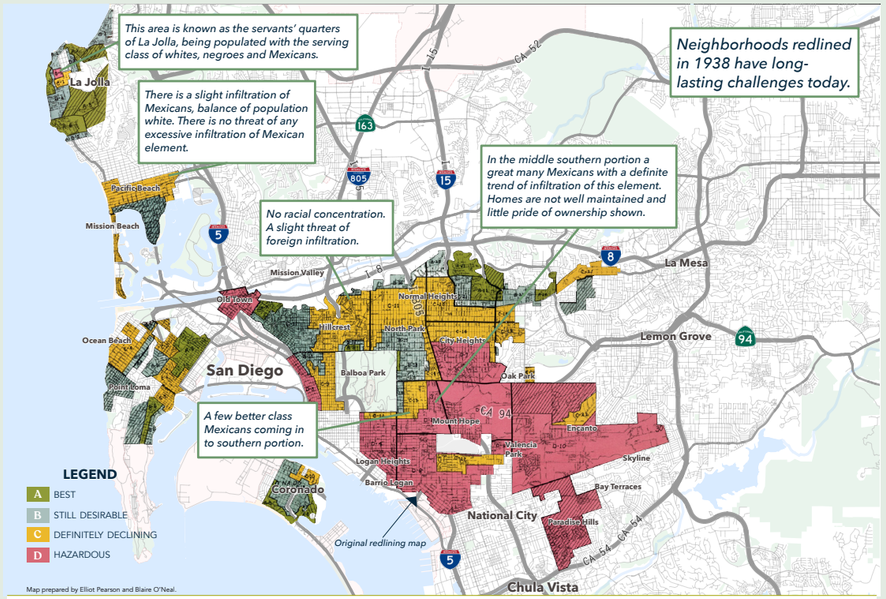
There were many local, state and federal housing policies that mandated segregation, but redlining, the practice of refusing to issue mortgages in and near Black neighborhoods while subsidizing home ownership for White communities, has had a particularly lasting effect. The impacts of housing discrimination and segregation are deeply felt today across all communities of color, and have shaped the food environments within these neighborhoods.

Research conducted by Dr. Pascale Joassart-Marcelli at San Diego State University paints a picture of Southeastern San Diego with green hills that "were dotted with dozens of small farms, especially East in Encanto and Skyline. Farmers were from diverse backgrounds, including Mexican, Japanese, Filipino, and African-American growers" in the early 20th century. The policies and decisions over the years, including racially restrictive covenants that pushed people into Southeastern San Diego, redlining, freeway construction, the placement of federal housing projects, and incentives for White families to move to the suburbs, all contributed to the challenges present today.[12]

[11] Rothstein, Richard, 2017, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History Of How Our Government Segregated America*, New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation.

[12] Joassart-Marcelli, Pascale, 2018, Part 1: Historic Background and Current Needs, *The Good Food District: Report of Needs, Resources, Priorities, and Impacts*, San Diego, CA: Project New Village and San Diego State University.

FIGURE 1 **Redlining in San Diego County**



Source: Robert K. Nelson, LaDale Winling, Richard Marciano, Nathan Connolly, et al., "Mapping Inequality," American Panorama, ed. Robert K. Nelson and Edward L. Ayers, accessed November 29, 2020, https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/#loc=11/32.763/-117.337&city=san-diego-ca. Note: map captions come from the original Home Owners' Loan Corporation assessments.

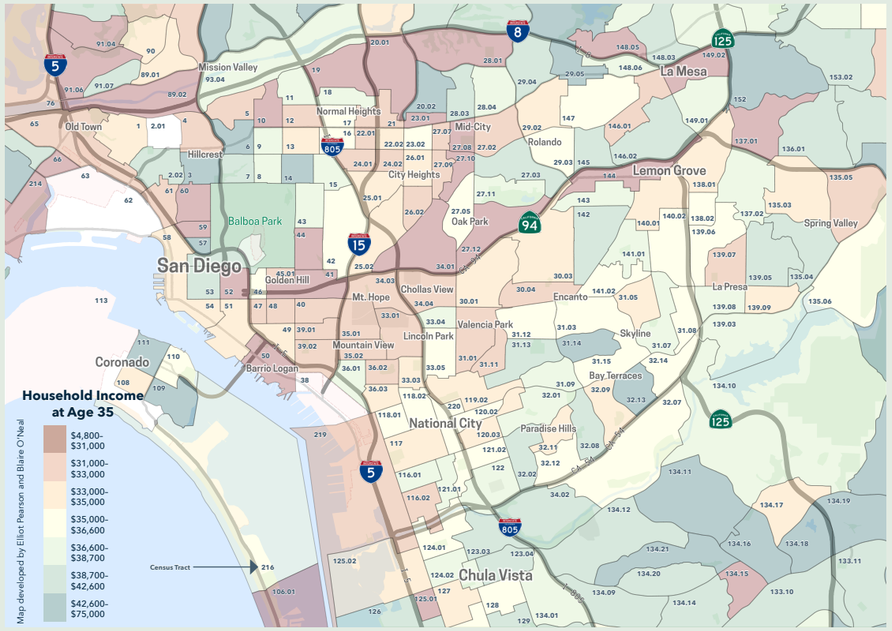
The original redlining map from 1936 shows that racial discrimination in San Diego County was targeted at both Black and Hispanic/Latinx communities, which were described as "hazardous" or "declining" using racist language as illustrated by quotes from the 1936 Federal Housing Administration's Undewriting Manual (Figure 1). Today, the region's Black population remains concentrated in Southeastern San Diego. San Diego County's Hispanic/Latinx population also remains concentrated in Southeastern San Diego, as well as the South Bay area (e.g., National City, Chula Vista) and parts of North County (e.g., Escondido, Vista, San Marcos).

Unfortunately, very little has changed over the years. The lasting impacts of segregation and inequality in San Diego County are deeply visible across all indicators of success and wellness, including economic mobility, social determinants of health, food security, and diet-related diseases.

Economic Mobility

The Opportunity Atlas illustrates which neighborhoods across the country provide children with the best chance to rise out of poverty. The tool tracks children who were born between 1978 and 1983 who are in their late-thirties today, mapping them back to the original Census tracts where they were born and estimating outcomes later in life. Not surprisingly, people who were born in previously redlined areas, especially people of color, have lower economic mobility than those who were born in more affluent and less segregated places. For instance, Figure 2 below shows that Hispanic/Latinx people who were born to low-income parents in Southeastern San Diego generally had lower household incomes than White households and surrounding communities during adulthood. Similar patterns are visible for other communities of color throughout the region.

FIGURE 2 **Opportunity Atlas for Hispanic/Latinx Population in Southeastern San Diego**

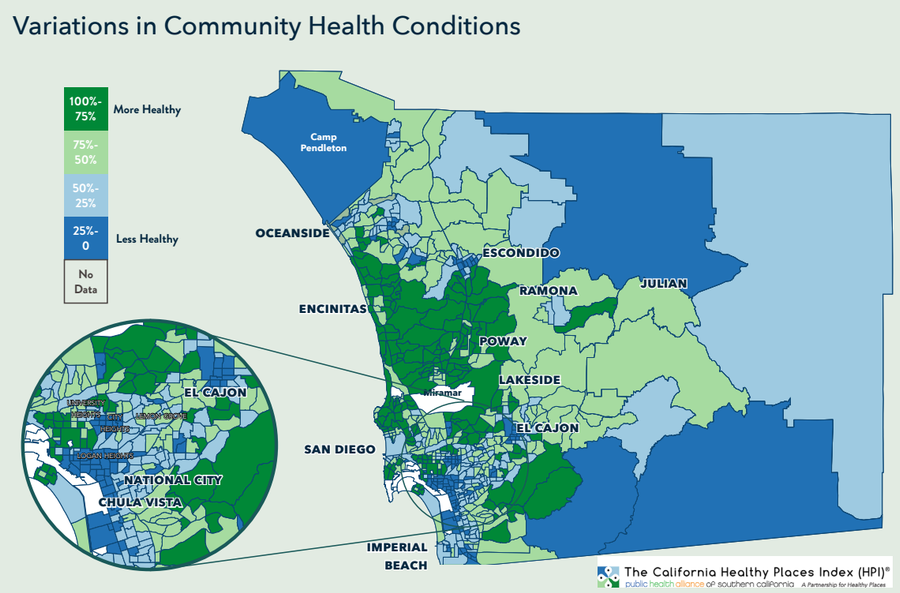


Source: The Opportunity Atlas, https://www.opportunityatlas.org/. Selections: Parent Income = Low; Child Race = Hispanic; Child Gender = All; Color scheme = On Screen.

Social Determinants of Health

The California Healthy Places Index (HPI) compiles indicators for social determinants of health, scoring regions along a continuum from less healthy (0) to more healthy (100). Census Tracts in Southeastern San Diego, Chula Vista, El Cajon, the border region, and rural areas all have significantly lower scores than more affluent, and predominantly White communities in San Diego County (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3 **California Healthy Places Index**

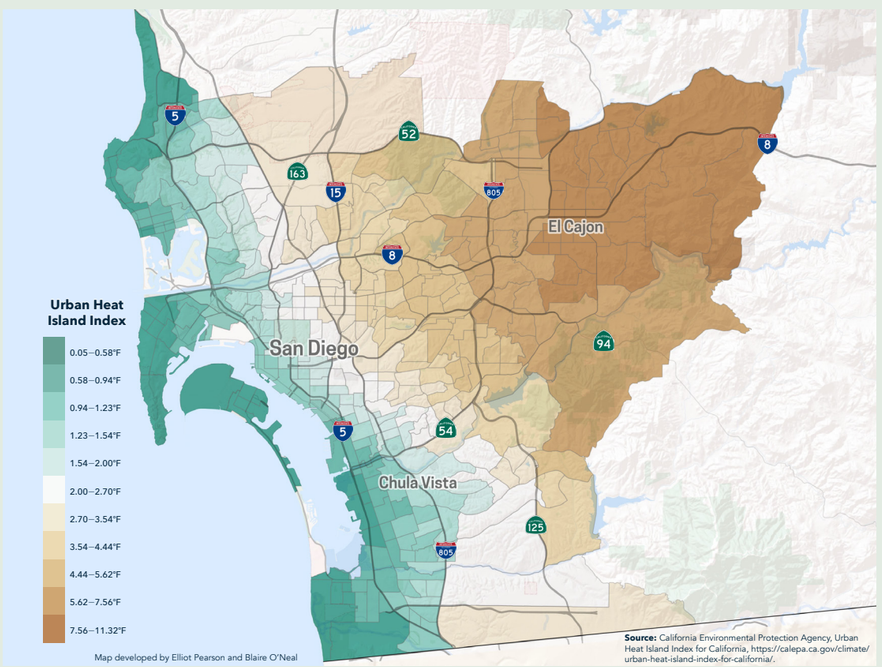


Source: The California Healthy Places Index, https://map.healthyplacesindex.org/.

Urban areas dense with buildings, roads, and other infrastructure become heat islands that can also impact human and animal health, especially as temperatures increase due to climate change. An analysis of 108 urban areas in the United States—including San Diego—that were redlined found that 94% of these urban areas have consistently higher temperatures relative to non-redlined areas.[13] HPI indicators for access to parks and tree canopy coverage found that Southeastern San Diego, City Heights, Chula Vista, El Cajon, the border region, and rural areas tended to have lower scores. The Urban Heat Island Index for California shows a resulting temperature gradient, from the coast shaded with trees and the marine layer, to urban areas dense with concrete and asphalt with relatively less tree coverage (Figure 4).

FIGURE 4

San Diego Urban Heat Island Index



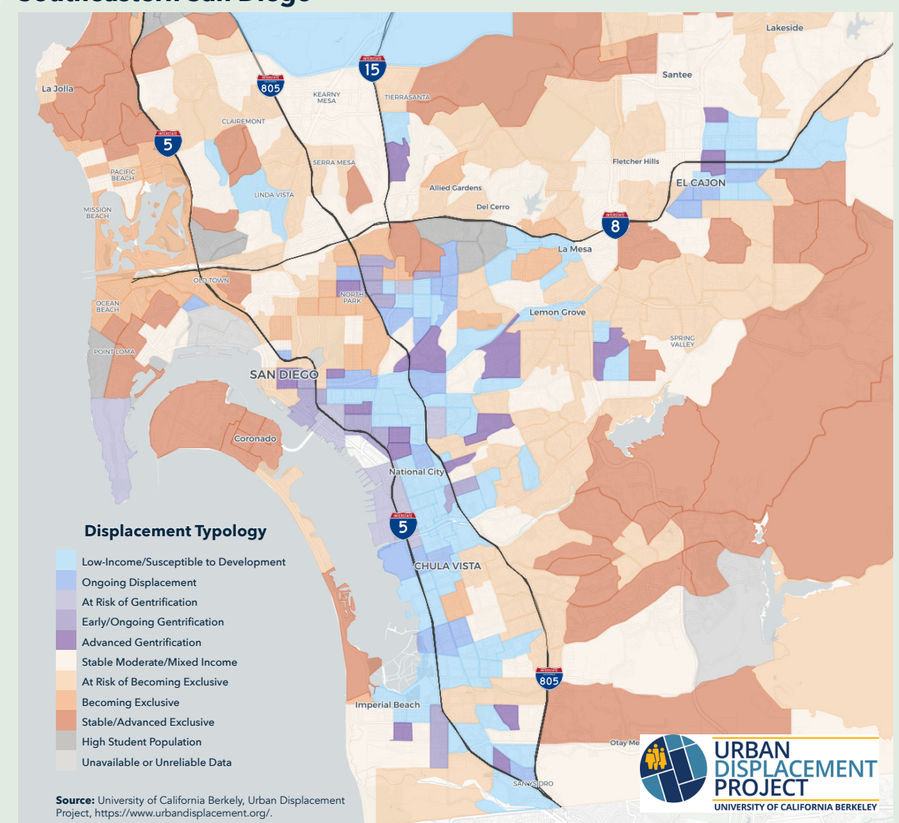
[14] Hoffman, Jeremy S., Vivek Shandas, and Nicholas Pendleton, January 13, 2020, *"The Effects of Historical Housing Policies on Resident Exposure to Intra-Urban Heat: A Study of 108 US Urban Areas,"* Climate, 8(1)

Food Security

Similar to the Opportunity Altas and Healthy Places Index, communities of color in Southeastern San Diego show the highest rates of food insecurity and CalFresh enrollment (Figure 5). These same trends are also visible in Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap and AskCHIS Neighborhood Edition, reinforcing the pattern of inequality.

FIGURE 5

Receipt of SNAP/CalFresh by Hispanic/Latinx Households in Southeastern San Diego

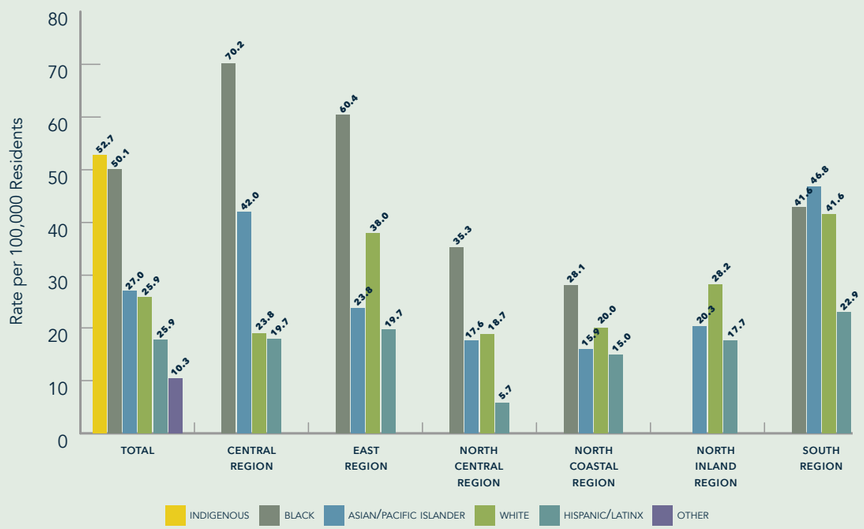


Diet-related Diseases

The same patterns are also visible with regards to diet-related diseases. The rates of death from diabetes disproportionately impact Indigenous and Black communities in San Diego County (Figure 6). Rates are particularly high in the Central Region, including Central San Diego, Mid-City, and Southeastern San Diego, the East Region, including El Cajon, La Mesa, and Lemon Grove, and the South Region, including Chula Vista and National City.

FIGURE 6

Rates of Death From Diabetes by Race/Ethnicity in San Diego County, 2017

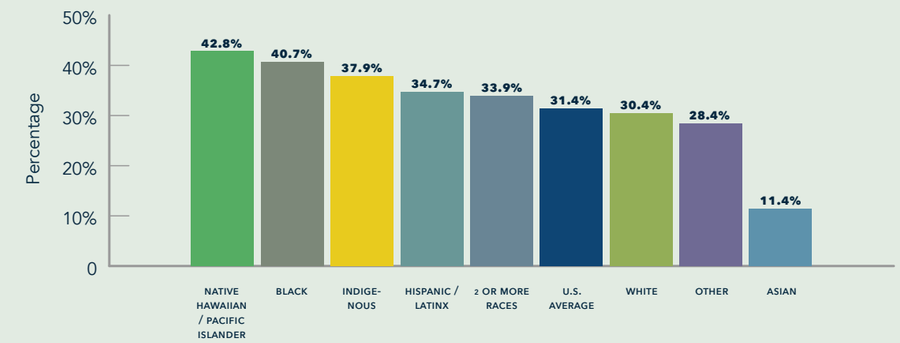


Source: County of San Diego, Chronic Disease Dashboard, 2018, www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/sdc/hhsa/programs/phs/community_health_statistics/regional-community-data.html.

Nationally (Figure 7), statewide (Figure 8), and in San Diego County (Figure 9), obesity trends follow a similar pattern. Disparities vary by race/ethnicity, education, and income, all of which are connected to where people live.[14] Black, Indigenous, and people of color (with the exception of Asian Americans) are disproportionately impacted.

FIGURE 7

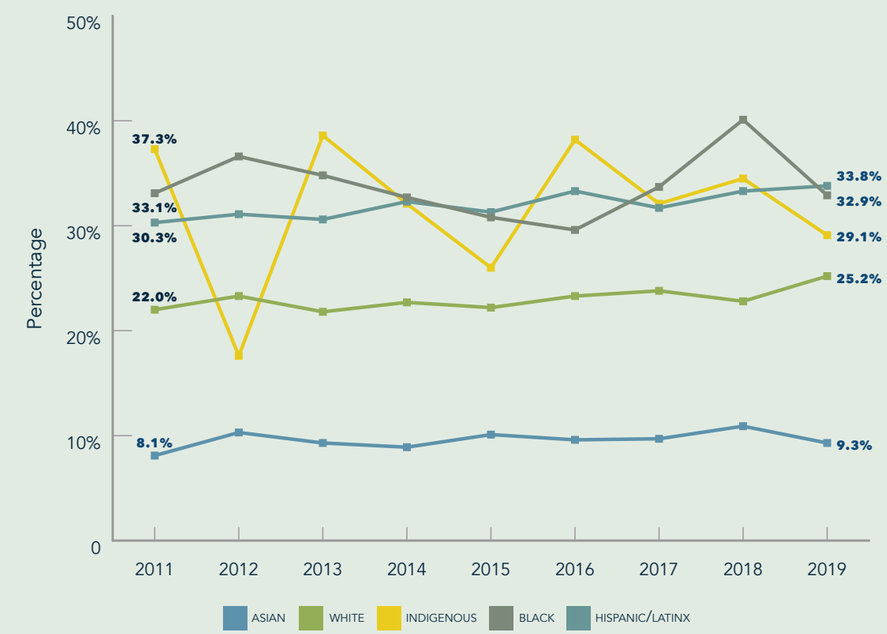
Adults Who Have Obesity in the United States by Race/Ethnicity, 2019



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019, Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity, https://nccd.cdc.gov/dnpao_dtm/rdPage.aspx?rdReport=DNPAO_DTM.ExploreByTopic&islClass=OWS&islTopic=OWS1&go=GO.

FIGURE 8

Adults Who Have Obesity in California by Race/Ethnicity

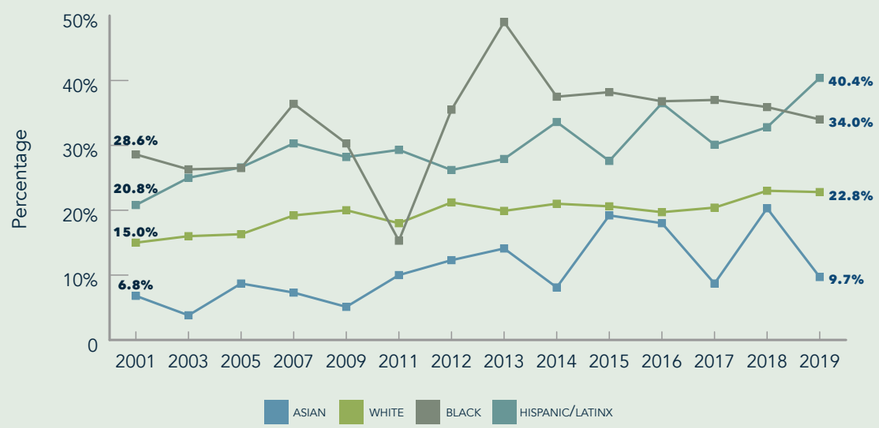


Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity, https://nccd.cdc.gov/dnpao_dtm/rdPage.aspx?rdReport=DNPAO_DTM.ExploreByLocation&rdRequestForwarding=Form. Note: Sample sizes were relatively small and confidence intervals are much wider for Indigenous Californians compared to other categories.

[14] Goodman, Melody et al., March 29, 2018, *"How Segregation Makes Us Fat: Food Behaviors and Food Environment as Mediators of the Relationship Between Residential Segregation and Individual Body Mass Index,"* Frontiers in Public Health, 6(92)

FIGURE 9

Rates of Death From Diabetes by Race/Ethnicity in San Diego County, 2017



Source: California Health Interview Survey, https://ask.chis.ucla.edu/AskCHIS/tools/_layouts/AskChisTool/home.aspx#/results. Note: nearly all values for Asian San Diegans and many of the values for Black San Diegans are considered "statistically unstable." Values for Indigenous San Diegans were too unstable to use.

Data from the most recent San Diego County Childhood Obesity Initiative report found that 34% of children/students were overweight or had obesity, including 49% of Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander children, 44% of Indigenous children, 43% of Hispanic/Latinx children, and 37% of Black children.

These trends highlight that diet-related diseases are tied to place and disproportionately impact communities of color in San Diego County.

Acknowledging and confronting the historical and ongoing inequalities that are plainly visible and are denying opportunities for low income communities and communities of color to thrive is essential for understanding how to improve community food environments in San Diego County. Reversing the impacts of decades of segregation, housing discrimination, and social and economic inequality will require significant investments moving forward.

Commentary

Small and Diverse: The Food Businesses Leading Resilience in City Heights

ELLE MARI, UCSD CENTER FOR COMMUNITY HEALTH

Cassava root. Freshly made tortillas. Locally raised halal lamb. Cleaned and chopped nopales. Affordable bulk spices from around the world. Bok choy and collard greens. There is an impressive diversity of good food I can find a few blocks from my home in City Heights, offered at independent grocers, community gardens, and farm stands. However, in my same community, nearly a quarter of adults live in poverty, 40% of children live in impoverished households, and the food insecurity rate is more than double the county average (CHIS, 2016). Many San Diegans negotiate the rising costs of living in our region with stagnant wages, and now during the pandemic, often lost wages. Food budgets may suffer, yet we see residents rely on unique neighborhood-based assets to put food on the table. Despite, or better, in resilience to a lack of national chain supermarkets and health food stores, many low-income neighborhoods and communities of color have cultivated a landscape of small cultural grocery stores and community/educational gardens with farm stands. These food assets and the people who make them thrive, business owners and shoppers, are the foundation for an inclusive, equitable, and economically viable community food environment.

Since 2016, I've worked with 30 small neighborhood food markets and convenience stores in high-need areas to improve access to healthy food with our Live Well Community Market Program. These family-run businesses have loyal long-time shoppers depending on them for affordable staple foods and specialty cultural foods within walking distance. My Urban Food Equity team has led market makeovers at four retailers to invest in and promote their long-term viability as good food neighborhood assets.

Urban farms are also promising in building community food resiliency. In 2017, I founded the San Diego Urban Growers' Collaborative, partnering with 15 urban farms and gardens to investigate the barriers and opportunities for collaboration among urban growers to improve their viability and serve low-income residents and communities of color. In 2020, we awarded partner farms a total of $50,000 for walk-in refrigeration equipment to alleviate cold storage infrastructure gaps for improved harvest and aggregation capacity. Currently, I'm excited about launching our Good Food Finder, a free online directory that highlights BIPOC and women owned/operated farms and allows consumers to search for CSAs and farm stands in their neighborhoods that match their food budgets and values.

We must invest and lift up the people and places that contribute to making good food attainable for all. We must be willing to rethink the perceived limitations of square footage needed for success in grocery and acreage needed to produce food. I'm grateful to be part of a network of advocates seeking equitable and sustainable transformation in our San Diego food system.

Increasing Healthy Food Access While Preventing Gentrification

As a result of historical and ongoing inequalities, access to healthy food is limited across most low income communities and communities of color throughout the country.

Research of urban areas across the U.S., including the City of San Diego, consistently highlights that segregated communities are more likely to have greater concentrations of fast food, convenience stores, and corner grocery stores and less likely to have supermarkets. People living in segregated communities also have to travel longer distances to find healthy food and even when it is available locally, it is often unaffordable.[15] Essentially, healthy food is not a choice in these communities.

Many federal and state policy programs use the USDA definition of food deserts to increase the presence of large grocery stores through tax credits and other

financial incentives. These efforts however, oversimplify the layered complexities within historically disinvested communities and assume that the addition of a chain supermarket will catalyze transformation. Focusing on large grocery stores also undermines the resources and potential that already exists within these communities, along with the desire for greater food sovereignty.

Supporting smaller, ethnic, and independently owned stores with financial, marketing, and technical assistance along with community-led initiatives, including gardens, farmers markets, mobile markets, and food hubs, provide much better solutions for addressing disparities and meeting community needs.

Measuring Access to Healthy Food in Southeastern San Diego and Across Indigenous Communities in San Diego County

Elle Mari, *UCSD Center for Community Health*

Many efforts to increase healthy food access in low income communities or communities of color often involve mapping out the areas of greatest need and developing solutions to increase healthy food options within the region. Ensuring that these initiatives map more than just access to supermarkets is essential. They must also consider the history of the landscape and the role of small, ethnic, and alternative food markets and restaurants.

New York City and Baltimore offer two examples of cities that have created an index to identify the areas with limited grocery stores (supermarkets and neighborhood stores) and healthy food options in their respective cities. Based on the findings, New York City developed the Food Retail Expansion to Support Health (FRESH) program to offer zoning incentives and financial benefits to stores that open within these underserved communities[16] while Baltimore designated investments within Healthy Food Priority Areas.[17]

[15] Havewala, Ferzana, December 2020.

[16] NYC Planning, *Going to Market: New York City's Neighborhood Grocery Store and Supermarket Shortage*, 2008

[17] Misiaszek, Caitlin, Sarah Buzogany, and Holly Freishtat, January 2018, *Baltimore City's Food Environment: 2018 Report*, Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future

[18] Pascale Joassart-Marcelli, Fernando J. Bosco, and Emanuel Delgado. 2014. Southeastern San Diego's Food Landscape: Challenges and Opportunities. Policy Report. San Diego, CA: Department of Geography, San Diego State University and Project New Village. Available *here*.

While the City of San Diego or San Diego County does not have an index similar to New York City or Baltimore, Figure 10 builds on previous research from the Department of Geography at the San Diego State University[18] to show access to grocery stores with healthy food options in Southeastern San Diego. Although the data is imperfect, it paints a picture of the regions with limited access to supermarkets, reinforcing many of the trends visible across other indicators in the region.

USDA Food Access Research data was used to develop the map and show proximity to supermarkets across Census tracts in the region. The dark blue shaded tracts in Figure 10 represent the regions where people have reduced access to healthy food. The large, red dots highlight the regions with low income and reduced healthy food access and the small white dots represent regions with higher income and greater healthy food access. The large white dots represent regions with greater healthy food access but still having low income populations that are experiencing reduced food access, and the small red dots indicate regions with lower incomes but greater access to healthy foods.

The results are unsurprising and mirror the trends visible across other indicators within Southeastern San Diego. Moving forward, additional research and refinement of the data is necessary for Southeastern San Diego and across other historically disinvested communities throughout the County.

The research from SDSU highlighted the abundance of smaller retailers that have historically been ignored and could play an important role in increasing healthy food access if they received greater support. Similar opportunities were also found in City Heights, where ethnic markets dot the landscape and are essential allies for improving food security, but often receive limited support. Future efforts to map access to healthy food should also highlight the presence of smaller, ethnic, and independently owned stores throughout neighborhoods and the role they can play in increasing access to healthy food and preserving community culture.

FIGURE 10

Low Income and Low Access in Southeastern San Diego

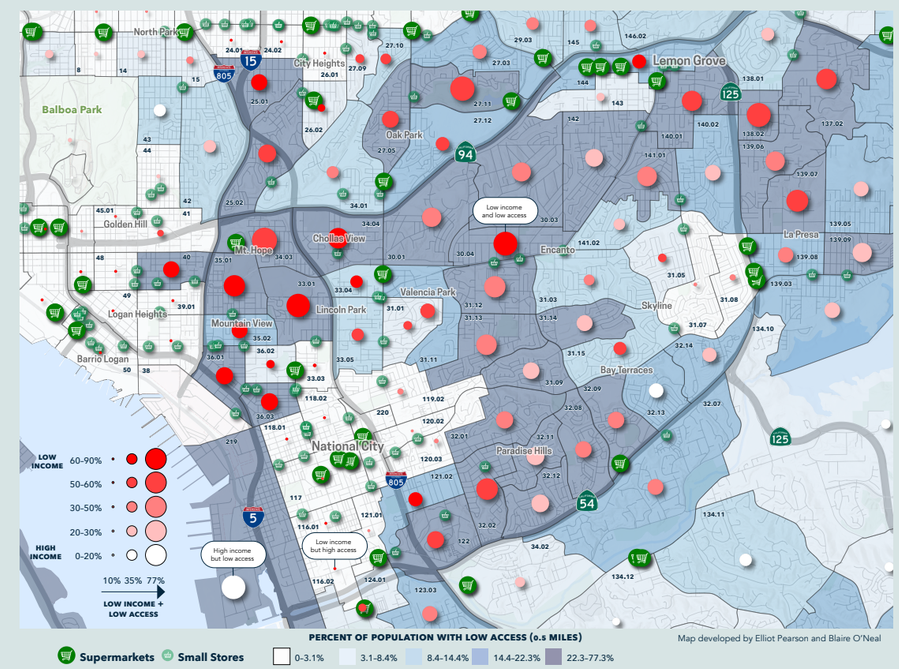
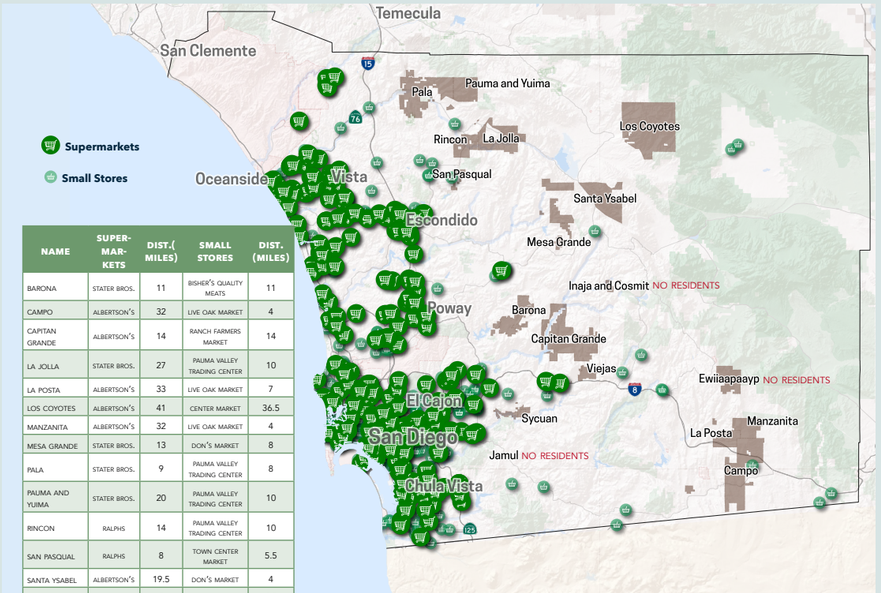


Figure 11 shows the proximity of supermarkets and smaller grocery stores to the 18 Indian reservations within the region. Using business license records from SANDAG, approximately 1,400 stores were classified as major grocery stores, smaller stores, and convenience stores. Of these, approximately 300 supermarkets and 370 smaller stores are shown on Figure 10. Although local Indigenous communities do not live exclusively on the reservations, Figure 10 generally illustrates the distances that Indigenous and rural communities have to travel for grocery shopping in San Diego County.

FIGURE 11

Indigenous Reservations and Distance to Grocery Stores



NAME	SUPER-MAR-KETS	DIST.(MILES)	SMALL STORES	DIST. (MILES)
BARONA	STATER BROS.	11	BISHER'S QUALITY MEATS	11
CAMPO	ALBERTSON'S	32	LIVE OAK MARKET	4
CAPITAN GRANDE	ALBERTSON'S	14	RANCH FARMERS MARKET	14
LA JOLLA	STATER BROS.	27	PAUMA VALLEY TRADING CENTER	10
LA POSTA	ALBERTSON'S	33	LIVE OAK MARKET	7
LOS COYOTES	ALBERTSON'S	41	CENTER MARKET	36.5
MANZANITA	ALBERTSON'S	32	LIVE OAK MARKET	4
MESA GRANDE	STATER BROS.	13	DON'S MARKET	8
PALA	STATER BROS.	9	PAUMA VALLEY TRADING CENTER	8
PAUMA AND YUIMA	STATER BROS.	20	PAUMA VALLEY TRADING CENTER	10
RINCON	RALPHS	14	PAUMA VALLEY TRADING CENTER	10
SAN PASQUAL	RALPHS	8	TOWN CENTER MARKET	5.5
SANTA YSABEL	ALBERTSON'S	19.5	DON'S MARKET	4
SYCUAN	SPROUTS	8	CANYON STORE	4.5
VIEJAS	ALBERTSON'S	5	RANCH FARMERS MARKET	5

Business license records from SANDAG were classified as supermarkets and small stores (including convenience stores, yielding ~1400 records). Of these, ~300 supermarkets (major chains) and ~370 smaller local grocery stores (smaller stores and convenience stores) are shown on the map.

Expanding efforts to map access to healthy food across urban and rural communities is important. It is equally important to ensure that these efforts leverage people, resources, and assets that currently exist across historically disinvested communities before building new supermarkets and large, corporate-owned grocery stores.

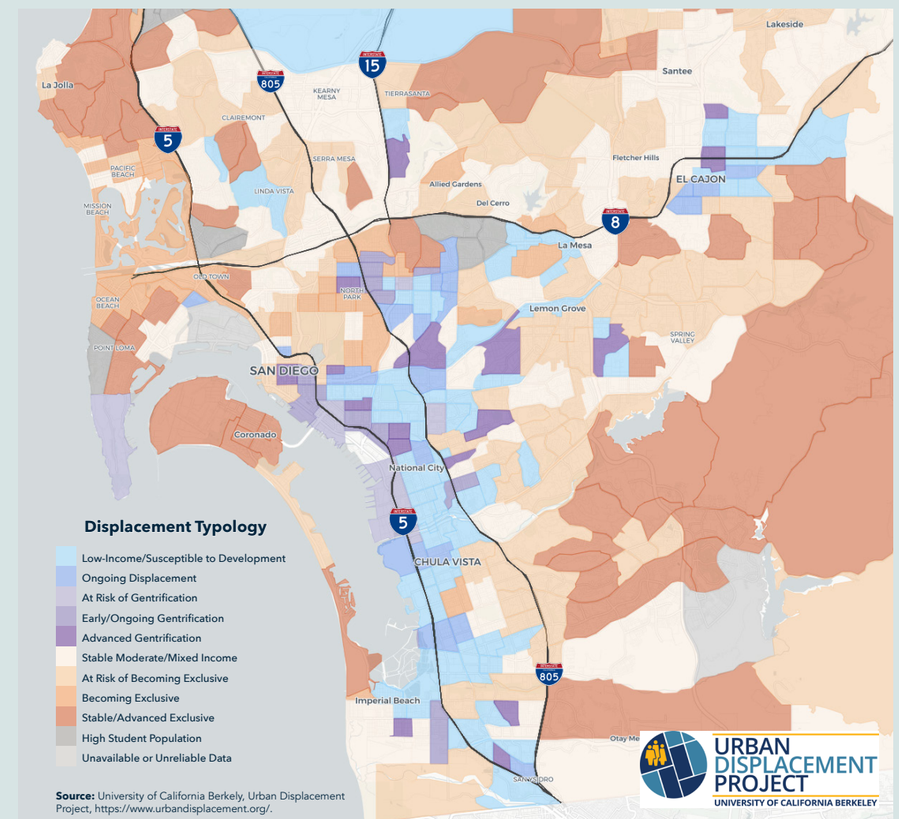
Many well-meaning efforts to improve healthy food access across low income communities and communities of color fail to center the needs, cultures, and aspirations of residents. They also fail to consider the impacts of decades of income inequality and systemic racism that has contributed to the current conditions within these communities.

An unintended consequence of efforts to improve community food environments in urban areas is gentrification, or the influx of higher income, higher educated people and capital coming into working class areas. Displacement happens when lower income people are forced to move as a result of increased taxes and property values. The indicators used to measure gentrification across neighborhoods include the percentage of college-educated people, the percentage of White (non-Hispanic) people, changes in median household income, and changes in median gross rent.

The Urban Displacement Project calculated that the share of gentrified neighborhoods in San Diego County increased by 18% from 1990 to 2015, including neighborhoods in Southeastern San Diego (Figure 12). Other communities across San Diego County that are experiencing

FIGURE 12

Gentrification in San Diego



Source: University of California Berkely, Urban Displacement Project, https://www.urbandisplacement.org/.

rapid gentrification include City Heights, Logan Heights, and Oceanside. City Heights in particular, is a uniquely diverse cultural and food community that is quickly moving toward the displacement of residents and small food businesses.

Focusing on external solutions and bringing new businesses into neighborhoods to increase access to fresh, local foods rather than investing in internal, community-driven solutions is a primary contributor to gentrification. Dr. Pascale Joassart-Marcelli, a professor at San Diego State University, studies the relationship between food and place, and her research has highlighted the connection between improving community food environments and gentrification, particularly in Southeastern San Diego.[19]

Ultimately, increasing healthy food access without preventing gentrification will require a fundamental shift in how we view and support low income communities and communities of color. We will need to look beyond the surface to the root causes of racism and economic inequality. We will need to invest significant capital and resources into these communities and allow residents to shape their own community food environments. We also need to consider the broader issues of low wages and limited property ownership that perpetuate the conditions that keep low income communities and communities of color from thriving.

[19] Joassart-Marcelli, Pascale and Bosco, Fernando J. 2017. Alternative Food and Gentrification: How Farmers' Markets and Community Gardens are Transforming Urban Neighborhoods. In Winnifred W. Curran, and Trina Hamilton (Eds.), Just Green Enough. New York: Routledge. Pp. 92—106

SPOTLIGHT

Mid East Market

Stepping into City Heights' Mid-East Market is a sensory experience, and for many first- and second-generation Americans, it conjures up memories of home—childhood, comfort, holiday traditions, multi-generational family gatherings. The market is small, its aisles densely but neatly packed with rows of spices, desserts, and specialty products that hail from all over the world: Africa, the Middle East, India, parts of Europe. Fresh produce is around the corner, and against the back wall is a counter for ordering the store's signature offering: Halal lamb, goat, and chicken, all locally raised without hormones or antibiotics, grass-fed, and humanely slaughtered. On weekend mornings, a line forms, made up of both City Heights residents and those who have come from farther away—each person calling out their regular orders and swapping conversations with owner Al Ilaian. "This is a neighborhood gem," one customer says.

Where Mid-East Market is situated is significant: City Heights has been called the most ethnically diverse neighborhood in the nation, with residents of Vietnamese, Somali, Cambodian, Laotian, Hispanic/Latinx, and Middle Eastern descent, to name a few—and dozens of languages spoken across its small footprint. Murals displaying diverse faces and community gardens where Asian and African vegetables are grown dot the streets. Although many differences exist among City Heights' diverse ethnic groups, the feeling of solidarity is palpable: The shared experience among immigrants and refugees is stronger than their differences.

In 1980, Palestinian immigrants Hani and Khawla Ilaian opened the Mid-East Market on El Cajon Boulevard and 46th Street to provide the growing Middle Eastern population with Halal meat. As they became more familiar with their diverse community, they expanded their offerings to serve local needs with specialty products from all over the world, as well as fresh produce. The spice aisle and specialty ingredients now reflect the global tastes of their neighbors. "We cater to many African, Afghani, Indian, Russian, Iranian, and Iraqi customers," explains Hani and Khawla's son, Al, who has now taken the reins at the store.

In addition to whole goat legs and shoulders, lamb shanks, chicken, and beef, the shop also offers healthy prepared foods, including Arabian specialities like smoked eggplant baba ganoush, marinated olives, and other items like "Mediterranean salsa" that were added to suit the local community's taste. There is a section of whole, dried spices, including items like Ethiopian barbari and Ethiopian butter spice, samke hara (hot fish) spices, sumac, cloves, whole cardamom, fenugreek, and much more, all at varying price points. Nezar, Al's younger brother, assures customers that the market has a healthy turnover, which means these dried spices are fresh.

City Heights has long been called a "food desert," with official discussion of solving food insecurity issues here revolving around adding more big box grocery stores—but when you take the time to wander the aisles of a small, family-owned store like Mid-East Market, try the products, and wait in line with fellow customers, this characterization of the neighborhood and proposed solution seem blunt at best. Perhaps the food landscape we dream of for places like City Heights should not look like what has worked elsewhere, but center the experiences of those who live and shop here daily. Mid-East Market may not be an oasis in a desert, so much as it is a gem in a resilient community—and one of many examples of neighborhood businesses that can thrive if we support them.

The Opportunity

Strategies

Community food environments have a significant impact on health, well-being, and quality of life. The increased prevalence of cheap, highly processed foods coupled with unequal access to healthy, culturally appropriate foods, has led to an epidemic of diet-related diseases around the country and here in San Diego County.

Although there have been significant investments to improve health outcomes and food environments, rates of obesity, heart disease, and diabetes continue to climb. As a result of decades of structural racism and residential segregation, Black, Indigenous, and people of color are disproportionately impacted by these health disparities, and consistently denied opportunities to shape their own community food environments.

In San Diego County, we have an opportunity to better coordinate efforts to improve community food environments in a way that considers the root causes of unequal access to healthy food, especially within communities of color. We have an opportunity to center the needs and aspirations of residents and direct significant resources toward community-driven solutions and community ownership. Ultimately, we have an opportunity to preserve the life, traditions, values, and potential of all communities in San Diego County, and promote food sovereignty for all.

Strategies

01

SUPPORT COORDINATED EFFORTS AND COLLABORATION TO IMPROVE COMMUNITY FOOD ENVIRONMENTS

Improving community food environments requires an intersectional approach that includes race, culture, housing, transportation, and our economy. Increasing collaboration within and across these sectors is essential to create lasting change.

San Diego County has several organizations and programs devoted to improving community food environments, including the UC San Diego Center for Community Health, Live Well San Diego, San Diego State University, BrightSide Produce, Mid-City CAN, Vista Community Clinic, Bayside Community Center, place-based education centers like Coastal Roots Farm, Olivewood Gardens & Learning Center, MAKE Projects, Wild Willow Farm & Education Center and community gardens like Project New Village, Mundo Gardens, Community Roots Farm, and many more. Directing more resources toward these organizations and increasing coordination across them, especially around policy advocacy efforts, is a clear opportunity. In addition, fostering relationships with housing, transportation, and economic development organizations is also an opportunity moving forward.

The recent declaration of racism as a public health crisis by the County of San Diego Board of Supervisors provides an opportunity to begin to address the inequities that have led to disproportionate access to healthy food within communities of color. The new Office of Equity & Racial Justice and Office of Climate and Environmental Justice can play an important role in supporting increased collaboration to improve community food environments by convening community groups, food system organizations and businesses, county and city departments, funders, educational institutions, and others to collaborate on healthy food access initiatives.

In addition, there are opportunities to update the Healthy Food in Every Neighborhood: A Policy Scan of Local Jurisdictions in San Diego County. The 2016 scan identified support for farmers markets, urban agriculture, and government procurement of healthy foods. An updated version could include a comprehensive food policy analysis for each jurisdiction as well as an analysis on food environments, including ethnic markets, corner markets, grocery stores, urban agriculture, and other food access points. Conducting new research to map out community needs, like Baltimore's Healthy Food Priority Areas and New York City's Supermarket Need Index are also opportunities to consider in San Diego County. A unique feature of Baltimore's approach was the development of a Resident Food Equity Advisors program, that compensated residents to participate in policy-making efforts. Expanding the Resident Leadership Academies program could provide a similar structure for San Diego County. Ensuring that community organizations and residents are actively involved in shaping decisions to improve community food environments is essential.

And finally, bringing people and organizations together to identify more funding for promoting food sovereignty efforts in urban and rural settings throughout the County is a clear opportunity moving forward.

02

SUPPORT THE CASE FOR REPARATIONS

"Two hundred fifty years of slavery. Ninety years of Jim Crow. Sixty years of separate but equal. Thirty-five years of racist housing policy. Until we reckon with our compounding moral debts, America will never be whole."

—Ta-Nehisi Coates, The Case for Reparations, The Atlantic

Reparations—the redress of historical injustices—is essential to transform the conditions and health across communities of color. Efforts to improve community food environments must acknowledge the role of historic and ongoing racism, discrimination, and segregation in compromising the health and sovereignty of Black and Indigenous communities. Reparations are important "where the scale of harm far exceeds a judicial system's capacity to carry out justice," and have been put into place by governments across the world, including Germany,

[20] Dixon, Peter, August 24, 2020, *"U.S. Cities and States Are Discussing Reparations for Black Americans. Here's What's Key,"* The Washington Post

Argentina, Chile, South Africa, and others. In the United States, the federal government paid $1.5 billion to Japanese Americans who were interned during World War II decades after their captivity. Although no amount of money can compensate for the losses experienced by those who have been unjustly oppressed, reparations provide an acknowledgment of historical injustice and a pathway toward making amends.[21]

Supporting the case for reparations for the descendants of slavery include direct payments, college tuition reimbursements, student loan forgiveness, down payment grants and housing revitalization grants, and business grants for start ups, expansion, and purchasing property.[22] Historic reparations for Indigenous tribes were grossly insufficient in that the federal government prevented tribes from managing control of the funds. Reparations for Indigenous communities include the same concepts as above as well as the return of ancestral lands.[23]

Several cities—Asheville, North Carolina, Evanston, Illinois, Burlington, Vermont—and the state of California have stopped short of direct payments but have either established commissions/task forces for studying reparations, issued apologies, or created programs to fund home ownership and business development. At a minimum, the County and City of San Diego should review California Assembly Bill 3121 and actions taken in other municipalities to support the case for reparations.

Reparations are an important strategy for addressing past harms inflicted on people of color, but they must be accompanied by efforts to dismantle racism as well. These issues run deep and involve more than just compensation. Committing to reparations and the deeper work of becoming antiracist are essential to improving community food environments.

[21] Rosario, Isabella, March 24, 2020, *"The Unlikely Story Behind Japanese Americans' Campaign for Reparations,"* NPR

[22] Ray, Rashawn and Andre M. Perry, April 15, 2020, *"Why We Need Reparations for Black Americans,"* Brookings

[23] Hassan, Adeel and Jack Healy, June 19, 2019, *"America Has Tried Reparations Before. Here Is How It Went,"* The New York Times

03

EXPAND LAND USE POLICIES AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT INCENTIVES TO ENCOURAGE LOCAL FOOD PRODUCTION AND HEALTHY FOOD RETAIL

Economic development and land use incentives can be powerful tools for investing in specific neighborhoods and improving community food environments. Incentives for encouraging local food production and business development include policies that attract healthy food retail, limit the density of less healthy food retail, and permit community gardens and urban agriculture.

Historically, land use policies, such as zoning regulations, and economic incentives have been used to discriminate and segregate people based on race, ethnicity, or income status. Eliminating land use barriers and creating incentives to reverse these impacts and providing pathways for increased healthy food access within disinvested neighborhoods is an important strategy for improving community food environments.

Promise Zones and Opportunity Zones are two relatively new federal programs that seek to revitalize economically disadvantaged neighborhoods through the use of tax incentives and other supports. Similar initiatives to improve specific neighborhoods have included Empowerment Zones, Enterprise Communities, Renewal Communities, and New Market Tax Credits.

In San Diego County, Southeastern San Diego was designated as both a Promise Zone and an Opportunity Zone. However, it is too early to understand the impacts of this designation on the food environment in the region. One analysis has suggested that the wealthiest investors may benefit from Opportunity Zone tax credits and very few low or middle income families in Southeastern San Diego will receive tax benefits from the program. In this way, Opportunity Zones may be a catalyst for gentrification.[24] Moving forward, it will be important to monitor the impacts of these well-meaning incentive programs to ensure that they increase equity for the residents of low income communities and communities of color rather than wealthy investors.

[24] Kitson, Kayla, April 2019, *The Federal Opportunity Zones Program and Its Implications for California Communities*, California Budget & Policy Center

Some organizations are taking a more community-driven approach to improving food environments, including Project New Village's Good Food District, which seeks to build greater health and wealth for the residents of Southeastern San Diego. There are clear opportunities for incentivizing community gardens, urban agriculture, and healthy food retail to support the Good Food District and similar initiatives across other historically disinvested urban and rural communities in San Diego County.

Other targeted initiatives include the City of Baltimore's Grocery Store Tax Credit which encourages grocery stores to locate in specific neighborhoods. In Los Angeles, a Good Food Zone policy was passed in 2020 to encourage food-centered community economic development initiatives. The Good Food Zone policy provides incentives, business services, and technical assistance to stores and restaurants to increase healthy food options. Similar incentives are worth exploring in San Diego County, especially in combination with the Live Well Community Market Program and BrightSide Produce. Moving forward, it is important that land use and economic incentive programs to attract healthy food retail in San Diego County are designed to nurture and support resident-owned food businesses and prevent displacement.

Below are a few examples of resident-led initiatives from around the country that are leveraging economic development and land use incentives to develop grocery stores and improve community food environments.

Good Food Markets, DC	Good Food Markets are mission-driven small-footprint grocery stores located in four Washington, DC neighborhoods that previously had limited healthy food access.
Mandela Partners	Mandela Partners leads several place-based business development programs that weave together business incubation, access to community capital, and tailored support for launching and growing local food enterprises.
Detroit People's Food Co-op	The Detroit People's Food Co-op is an African American led, community-owned grocery cooperative. The co-op's purpose is to provide improved access to healthy food and food education to Detroit residents.

In addition to incentivizing healthy food retail, there are also many policy opportunities to promote healthy food access by discouraging certain types of food businesses. The Healthy Food Policy Project highlights policies that municipalities across the country have taken to promote healthy food access including setting quotas along with distance and density requirements to limit fast food restaurants in certain places and implementing excise taxes for soda and sugary drink distributors.

Taxing the sale of sugary and highly processed foods is another strategy that can promote healthy food access. The city of Berkeley passed a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages in 2014, generating 1.5 million dollars annually and has seen consumption rates drop by 21 percent each year.[25] The Navajo Nation also recently reauthorized a 2% sales tax on unhealthy foods and beverages bought from retail stores on tribal land.[26] The revenue generated from the sales tax is used to fund community-based projects that center on wellness and promoting healthy living for the Navajo people.

Land use policies and economic development incentives are powerful tools for nurturing the development of healthy and equitable community food environments. Ultimately, these strategies must involve and center the needs and aspirations of residents, build community wealth, and ensure that residents are not displaced.

SPOTLIGHT

Project New Village & the Good Food District

Dian Moss, Managing Director of Project New Village in Southeastern San Diego, was not always interested in food justice—in fact, her discovery of the movement was happenstance. "In 2006, I happened to sit at a workshop with a woman named Ellee Igoe, who was then the manager for the International Rescue Committee's farm and now runs Solidarity Farm. She kept talking about this issue of food justice, of which I had never heard of before. I heard of a lot of justice movements, but not food. I come from south central Los Angeles, Compton, and I figured you got what you got."

Looking around the room, Dian did not see any of her neighbors, but she did see an opportunity. She explains, "In Southeastern San Diego, we only had a few retail stores, including a Food 4 Less. There were no farmers' markets and no community gardens that I knew of." The conditions she saw were the result of a long history of racially-driven policies in the neighborhood such as redlining, discriminatory ordinances, and poor planning decisions.[27] Inspired, Dian brought the idea of a community garden to her neighbors and together they broke ground on Mt. Hope Community Garden in 2011.

The community garden was just the beginning for Dian and Project New Village. The garden planted the seed for a host of food-centered projects in Southeastern San Diego, including local farmers' markets and a community pantry in response to COVID-19.

The organization's most ambitious project is the Good Food District Hub, a multi-story, mixed-use development planned on the site of the community garden that centers urban agriculture in promoting social wellness, community cohesion, and overcoming the legacies of systemic and structural racism in the neighborhood. With Dian's leadership and the help of The Conservation Fund, the nonprofit has already been successful in purchasing the land for the project—no easy feat for a small nonprofit focused on addressing systemic racism.

Dian's work in Southeastern San Diego is a testament to the strides that are possible when Black, Indigenous, and people of Color take on leadership roles in their communities.

Strategies

04

PROMOTE FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

An important strategy for increasing access to fresh, healthy, culturally-appropriate, and traditional foods is to promote food sovereignty, especially within Black, Indigenous, and communities of color. Developed by La Via Campesina, the concept of food sovereignty is rooted in the ongoing global struggles over control of food, land, water, and livelihoods, and embodies the idea that all people have the right to define their own agricultural and food policies. It centers the following principles:

- The universal right to sufficient, healthy, and culturally appropriate food
- Those who grow, harvest, and process food are valued
- Local food systems that benefit and protect all
- Local control over lands, seeds, and water
- Respect for local knowledge and skills passed down over generations
- Working with nature and improving resilience in the face of climate change

Indigenous communities have been leading the movement for greater food sovereignty for centuries as sidelined[28] tribes have fought for the return of ancestral lands, access to traditional foodways, decolonized diets, supportive policies, food security, and economic opportunities.[29] Black organizations, like the National Black Food & Justice Alliance, are also working toward food sovereignty by increasing the visibility of Black people in food systems and shifting power.

[24] UC Berkeley School of Public Health. *"Do Soda Taxes Work?"* UC Berkeley Public Health, 29 Oct. 2020

[26] Smith, Noel The Lyn Daily Times. *"Navajo Nation Leaders Reauthorize Sales Tax on Unhealthy Foods, Beverages."* Farmington Daily Times, 9 Jan. 2021

[27] Joassart-Marcelli, Pascale, 2018, *Part 1: Historic Background and Current Needs, The Good Food District: Report of Needs, Resources, Priorities, and Impacts*, San Diego, CA: Project New Village and San Diego State University

[28] Simms Hipp, Janie and Colby D. Duren, June 2017, *Regaining Our Future: An Assessment of Risks and Opportunities for Native Communities in the 2018 Farm Bill*, Prior Lake, Minnesota: Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community

[29] Montalvo, Melissa, March 31, 2021, *"Indigenous Food Sovereignty Movements Are Taking Back Ancestral Land,"* Civil Eats

SPOTLIGHT

Pala Environmental Development Garden

The traditional territory of the Pala Band of Mission Indians stretches from Warner Springs, home to the original village of Cupa, all the way to the mouth of the San Luis Rey River in Oceanside. The Pala Environmental Department is dedicated to healing this land and protecting the cultural and sacred sites within its boundaries. Kurt Broz was hired by the Pala Tribe as a staff wildlife biologist more than eight years ago to help with this mission. "My job is to focus on the Tribal perspective while using my science background, to make sure that Native vegetation remains—not just food plants, but basket rusches, too," he said. "In this role, I do a bit of everything. The reservation covers 14,000 acres, which makes it one of the largest in the state."

Restoring such a large area is a monumental task, which the Pala Environmental Department is tackling one small plot at a time. "We need to replace our grass lawns and oleanders with Native plants. Then you would see more butterflies and lizards come back," said Broz. "There are lots of non-Indigenous groves—avocados, citrus, organic, not organic—on tribal land. For the garden, though, we wanted to focus on restoring native varieties."

The Pala Community Garden was started with a grant from CocaCola for the empowerment of women and Indigenous food sovereignty. It wasn't the first attempt at a Pala community garden, but it has proven to be the most successful. "The previous garden project and wildlife habitat was too far away from the center of town and no one used it," Broz explained. "Pala is more suburban, so we knew that we needed to place the garden appropriately. Next to the administration building, there was a wastewater pond and about three or four acres of Tribal-owned lands. The building is a place where residents often stop by to take care of administrative tasks, and come together for things like senior lunch. The vision was to create a garden with two-thirds dedicated to Native, low-water plants and Indigenous foods and the other third used for sustainably-grown lettuce, herbs, and fruit trees, which are not culturally important, but will serve the community needs." People weigh in on what gets planted in the edible section of the garden via the Pala Facebook page.

The garden is part of a larger vision to protect and reclaim traditional food systems. Acorns are one of the most sustainable food sources, but to render them edible, the tannins must be leached out. This process was developed over ten-thousand years ago, but that kind of ecological and culinary knowledge is being lost. "The hope is that those who are preserving Native traditions through cultural events, weddings, funerals, and community gatherings will be able to glean Native ingredients from the garden," said Broz. "It's hard to have enough acorns for all 1,200 members of the reservation—the garden can't be the only solution—but it might be a good supplement. Our hope is that the garden will grow into a network of self-sustaining little gardens."

Restoring Native environments and protecting Indigenous traditions will require multi-generational involvement. "A lot of people don't necessarily understand Tribes," says Broz. "Funders often say, 'We'd like to donate toward x resource that we believe will be helpful,' rather than asking, 'What do you need?' To make real impacts and truly support tribal communities, we have to listen, understand, and adapt to the needs they express."

Broz sees a large part of his job as ensuring that future generations are prepared to continue stewarding the land and deepening their understanding of tribal ways and native plant species. He proudly runs @planet_pala, the Instagram account of the Pala Environmental Department, where he posts photos of native plants with short, educational captions, and reminders about events on tribal land. He and his team have also put together a lesson plan on food systems, which includes a "food system trunk" that can be loaned out to teachers. The trunk includes an inflatable Earth, props about pollinators, plants, and carnivores, and other items that help make the connection between science and food. "I want to bring younger members into positions like mine," he says. "I hope the programs we run are inspiring younger generations to take on active roles in the environmental reclamation of their lands."

Broz shares a vision with Pala tribal leaders for making an impact beyond what can be done within the reservation's borders. "We are applying for funds to build a nursery facility where seedlings for local species will be started, for community members to take and grow elsewhere in the region," says Broz. "Pala people are historically from Warner Springs, but were forced from their land onto what is now known as the Pala reservation. That means they no longer have access to traditional plants like willows, sages, junipers, and incense cedars. The nursery could change that," he said. "The Native perspective is not at all like the European view of 'This is a plant for food, whereas this plant is lumber.' It is a more holistic approach that connects past and future, and that's what we're really trying to restore."

Promoting food sovereignty means that residents should have the power to define and implement solutions for improving their own community food environments. Many of these efforts center the role of small ethnic markets and restaurants in providing access to affordable, fresh, healthy, and culturally appropriate foods[30] along with community wealth building models that provide quality local jobs. Efforts to build food sovereignty also prioritize gathering sites for harvesting traditional foods, community gardens, urban agriculture initiatives, community supported agriculture programs, farmers markets, mobile food, community kitchens, food business incubators, and food and farm place-based educational centers. Elevating food sovereignty ensures that improvements in food environments directly benefit residents rather than benefiting outsiders and attracting gentrification.

[30] Joassart-Marcelli, Pascale, Jaime S. Rossiter, and Fernando J. Bosco, March 26, 2017.

There are currently several organizations and businesses that are promoting food sovereignty across San Diego County, including Project New Village, Mundo Gardens, the Pala Environmental Garden, Botanical Community Development Initiatives, Foodshed Small Farm Distro and Pauma Tribal Farms. In addition, there are many initiatives working to support greater sovereignty within communities, including the Live Well Community Market Program which supports the success of small, independently-owned stores in low income areas, the UC San Diego Center for Community Health Good Food Finder and Farmers' Markets for All programs which help residents seek out local producers and local markets, and the ¡Más Fresco! More Fresh Program which partners with Northgate González Markets to increase food purchasing power for residents.

Expanding access to food and farm place-based educational initiatives, like Coastal Roots Farm, Olivewood Gardens and Learning Center, and Wild Willow Farm & Education Center, and developing processing and distribution infrastructure such as community kitchens and food incubators like IRC MAKE, are also essential elements of supporting greater food sovereignty.

And finally, one of the most powerful ways to build greater food sovereignty is expanding support for urban agriculture and community gardens. This was the top desire heard from residents across low income communities and communities of color throughout San Diego County.

In San Diego County, there are several organizations, including Project New Village, Mundo Gardens, New Roots Community Farm, Bayside Community Center, Wild Willow Farm & Education Center, Victory Gardens San Diego, San Diego Co-Harvest, Master Gardener Association of San Diego County, Botanical Community Development Initiatives, Pala Environmental Department and many more, that are championing urban agriculture and community gardens. These programs are increasing access to healthy, culturally-appropriate, and traditional foods, promoting hands-on educational opportunities, and encouraging community building opportunities.

SPOTLIGHT

Bayside Community Center

KIM HEINLE AND AMY ZINK, BAYSIDE COMMUNITY CENTER

Linda Vista is one of San Diego's six most socio-economically distressed communities, which is compounded by it being a USDA-defined food desert. With more than half of the nearly 34,000 residents considered "low income," mobility challenges for public transit riders to get to the closest supermarket located in Mission Valley, and lack of access to fresh and affordable healthy foods, it is within Bayside Community Center's mission to address the situation.

Bayside's mission is to empower its diverse community to improve its quality of life through services, education, and advocacy. Bayside leverages its mission to improve food security in Linda Vista. Through services, Bayside hosts weekly food distributions (~70 clients) and bi-weekly deliveries of food boxes to homebound senior citizens (~35 clients) during the pandemic. The items received are a mix of nonperishable items coupled with fresh produce grown in Bayside's Co-op Garden and local microfarms in partnership with Co-Harvest Foundation.

Bayside's Environmental Learning Center is the vessel through which Bayside educates residents of Linda Vista on how to cultivate and implement ways to address food insecurity and to incorporate healthy, nutritious diets on a budget. Bayside also advocates at the local and state levels for changes that have long-term impacts on the food system in San Diego and Linda Vista.

Through this three-pronged approach, Bayside has made important, positive, and long-lasting changes in Linda Vista that improves food security. One example of this is Bayside's lead role in advocating for and passing AB551 in 2015 and 2016. Bayside's role as the co-chair of the San Diego Food Systems Alliance's Urban Agriculture Working Group played an important role in the bill's passage, which helps increase access to land in communities for urban agriculture-related purposes.

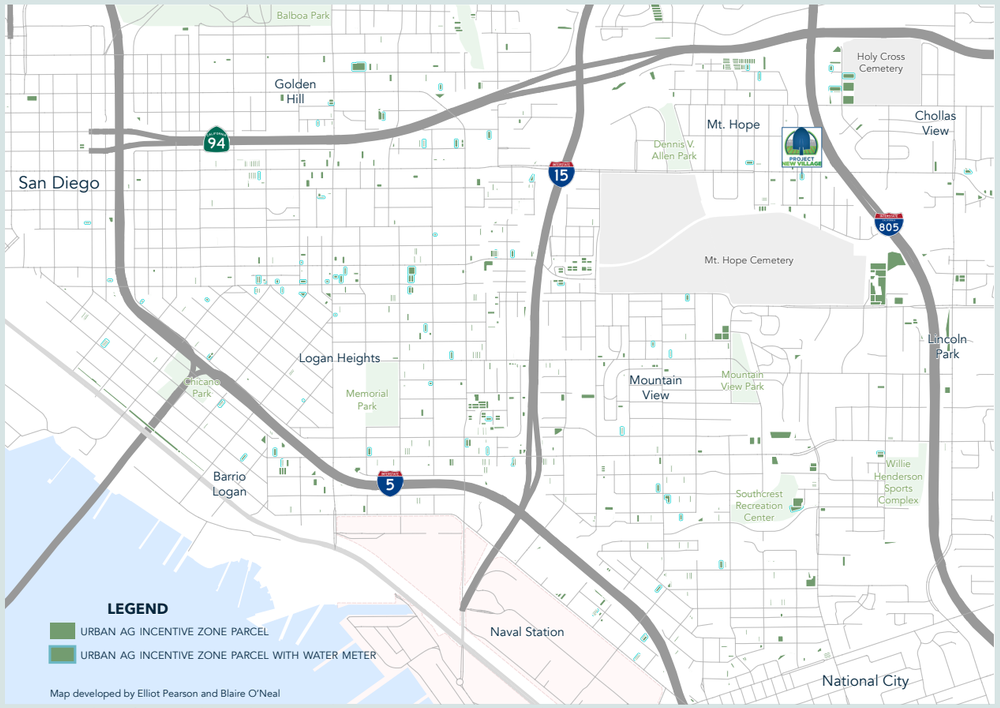
Looking ahead, Bayside's vision for food security in Linda Vista is to cultivate more families who are self-sufficient, who can grow their own food for their families, and who are part of a bigger, systemic shift in pushing our food system in equitable, healthy, and sustainable directions. We see this manifesting as the launch of the Linda Vista Community Garden, a thriving weekly farmers market that brings farmers and shoppers together to celebrate the cultural diversity that abounds in Linda Vista, and increasing access to growing spaces for families and individuals to become self-sufficient.

We are continually inspired by the community members who come together around a common theme—growing food, healthy eating, and removing socio-economic barriers to food security.

There are many challenges however, to expanding urban agriculture and community garden initiatives in San Diego County, including limited financial support, increasing development pressure, accessing vacant land from cities, permitting policies, and sustaining volunteer efforts.[31] The City of San Diego created the Urban Agriculture Incentive Zone program to offer a property tax incentive to eligible properties to encourage urban agriculture and community gardens. While it is clear that many parcels are potentially available (Figure 13) throughout the city, the program has not been widely used, most likely due to limited program outreach efforts, challenges with reaching landowners and matching landowners with growers, and land suitability challenges, including poor quality soils within eligible parcels. The County of San Diego also has an Urban Agriculture Incentive Zone program for the unincorporated regions as well, and has experienced similar challenges.

[31] Meenar, Mahbubur R. and Brandon M. Hoover, August 11, 2012, *"Community Food Security Via Urban Agriculture: Understanding People, Place, Economy, and Accessibility From a Food Justice Perspective,"* Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development, 3(1)

FIGURE 13 Urban Agriculture Incentive Zone Parcels



Source: The City of San Diego, Urban Agriculture Incentive Zone Program, www.sandiego.gov/economic-development/business/starting/urban-agriculture.

Strategies for increasing investment in urban agriculture and community garden initiatives, include articulating the benefits to policy-makers and funders, implementing recommendations from UC San Diego Center for Community Health's Urban Growers' Collaborative Project, learning from other cities and initiatives such as Homegrown Minneapolis and Soil Generation in Philadelphia, and centralizing resources and removing zoning barriers similar to the efforts of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative.

The ability to grow, harvest, and process your own food is one of the most powerful tools for cultivating food sovereignty. Investing in local tribes, organizations, and initiatives that are doing this important work in San Diego County is essential moving forward. Food sovereignty is the only true pathway to improving community food environments.

SPOTLIGHT

Púyily ‘Áy’enish (Big Meal, A Great Feast)

Launched just before the pandemic shook the world, the Pala Band of Mission Indians’ Púyily ‘Áy’enish (Big Meal, a Great Feast) couldn’t have been a more valuable last gathering.

The first Púyily ‘Áy’enish took place in November 2019. A collaboration among Pala’s Cultural Resource Committee, Chia Cafe Collective, and Indian Health Council, the feast was developed as an annual fall event to inspire community gathering, cultural learning, and general well-being. A menu of Indigenous food, prepared according to custom and heritage, was selected to nourish both the body and the mind.

“Preparing for the feast allows us to share knowledge and work with various partners to access traditional foods,” says Chris Nejo, a member of the Pala Band and spokesperson for the Pala Cultural Resource Committee. “It also gives us an opportunity to connect with the Earth as our ancestors did.”

The group contacted elders and community members to share their knowledge of how to properly harvest and process every food item, including honey mesquite and acorns that were gathered on what is now state park property and the Cleveland National Forest. Pala leaders forged relationships with local, state, and federal agencies to allow their people to go about their harvest undisturbed.

“At first, we could sense a slight hesitation among the agencies to allow us to gather in areas where many cultural resources are present, but they did what’s right—they allowed us to gather as we would traditionally, and saw firsthand the respect we have for the land and all the resources present,” says Nejo.

Practices of gratitude after gathering and preparing the food included prayer and giving small offerings, such as tobacco. The menu was distributed in both English and the Pa’enixily (Cupeño) language. Chris feels that the event significantly strengthened social connections among tribal members, by providing an opportunity for people to come together to gather, hunt, prepare, and eat food, and share traditional knowledge, especially about the uses of native plant species.

In the fall of 2020, however, with the world on pause, it seemed impossible to host a second great feast. It was obvious that the community craved some form of connection with tradition and with each other. Organizers of the event found a way to host a drive-through Púyily ‘Áy’enish.

The drive-through gathering included distributing 100 meals of prickly-pear-marinated quail—double the amount in its inaugural year. “Indigenizing our diet helps restore our spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical health,” Nejo says. “We felt we must continue doing what’s best for the wellness of our people.”

Besides the impacts of COVID-19, there are other challenges the Pala tribe faced in organizing the great feast that shine a light on difficulties they face on an ongoing basis.

“Climate change, invasive species, and pollution make it difficult to find foods that were once abundant,” Nejo says. “We also need to be careful where we gather because plants soak up the pollutants in water. We need to be mindful of where we harvest.”

The Pala Band now has a goal of starting a seed bank and planting community gardens to grow some of the harder-to-find food plants. “This will also ensure that everything we grow is safe to consume,” Nejo says.

He notes that the feast wouldn’t have been possible without the support and involvement of the entire community, including the governing bodies that permitted access to gather on state park property. But the bureaucracy was also an obstacle.

“My vision for food sovereignty in San Diego is tribal members being able to gather healthy foods in healthy environments without needing a permit,” Nejo says. “We should all be able to access healthy and culturally appropriate foods. We need to play a bigger part in land management and be more involved in developing policies that deal with how food is produced and distributed.”

From Improving Community Food Environments to Scaling Up Food Waste Prevention, Recovery, and Recycling Initiatives

The built environment has a significant impact on the health of residents. Increasing access to fresh, healthy, culturally-appropriate, and traditional foods is a core element of improving community food environments. The next objective focuses on our natural environment and food waste. Wasting food has a significant impact on the environment, and is a primary contributor to climate change. Scaling up food waste prevention, recovery, and recycling initiatives can go a long way toward mitigating the impacts of climate change and offers a strategy for supporting greater food security.

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