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Designing Access: How Urban Planning Shapes Food Security in America

Food deserts, which affect 19 million Americans or 6% of the population, are areas with limited access to healthy and affordable food (Fowler). These deserts are often the result of urban planning that prioritizes car dependency, particularly in low-income communities. In Arizona alone, 43 food deserts have been identified, with one in six Arizonans expected to face food insecurity by 2030, according to Arizona State University's School of Geographical Sciences and Urban Planning. This connection between poor urban planning and food insecurity highlights the significant impact of city design on public health.

Urban sprawl and poor zoning laws are major contributors to the development of food deserts, creating vast, car-dependent cities where essential services, including grocery stores, are difficult to access without a vehicle. Zoning ordinances, intended to keep residential areas separate from industrial zones, have inadvertently led to sprawling cities where basic needs require long commutes. The USDA reports that 6% of the U.S. population lives more than a mile from the nearest grocery store, with limited access to transportation (USDA ERS). This distance becomes a significant barrier for low-income families, who are less likely to own reliable vehicles and often have to rely on unhealthy food options nearby. Furthermore, the lack of

reliable public transportation in these areas exacerbates the problem. A survey by U.S. Hunger found that 42.6% of food-insecure individuals have no access to transportation, making it even harder to reach grocery stores or food pantries (U.S. Hunger). This lack of mobility not only limits food access but also highlights how poor city planning can trap residents in cycles of poverty and poor health.

The impact of food deserts is even more severe for individuals with chronic illnesses or disabilities, who are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity. The U.S. Hunger survey reported that 73.5% of food-insecure households included someone with a disability or chronic illness, further complicating their ability to access healthy food (U.S. Hunger). Many are advised by healthcare providers to maintain a balanced diet, yet the high cost of healthy food in these areas forces them to choose between food and necessary medication. This creates a vicious cycle where poor health and food insecurity feed into each other, making it difficult for affected individuals to break free from these challenges.

Imagine a future where every neighborhood has easy access to fresh, healthy food—where urban design actively supports the well-being of all residents. Addressing food deserts requires a fundamental shift in how we think about city planning and transportation infrastructure. By prioritizing public transit and creating walkable communities, we can ensure that all citizens have the opportunity to lead healthy lives, regardless of income or physical ability. The choices we make today in designing our cities will determine whether future generations inherit a landscape of abundance or scarcity.

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