Reducing food insecurity: Revitalizing farmers' markets in the United States

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Stephen Loverde

Abstract:

The modern American food system has succeeded in increasing yields of cash crops for an international market, but comes up short in the equitable distribution of food amongst its own population. There is no cure-all that can be applied to remedy the situation, rather small scale changes are necessary to facilitate improvements. Here, Arc GIS was used to construct a set of maps of the contiguous United States that established a comparison of Supplementary Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly Food Stamps)-EBT accepting farmers’ markets to counties characterized by a high percentage of the population receiving SNAP benefits. The focus of this study was three geographic regions of the US: the Northwest, Northeast, and Southeast, each chosen for its socioeconomic qualities; this study reveals a substantial number of farmers’ markets, which are a well known source of fresh, local food in the country, and highlights the need for the conversion of these resources to become capable of handling SNAP transactions. Increased numbers of SNAP-accepting markets, and reduced distance between such markets and SNAP-reliant counties can diminish food insecurity by making it realistic for a greater portion of the population to purchase healthy and locally grown food.

Results and Conclusions:

In 2012, there were a reported 8,144 farmers’ markets across the US and 2,007- about 25%- were able to handle SNAP-EBT transactions. A reported 14% of the US population received SNAP benefits as of 2010 (last year of complete USDA data). It is apparent from these Arc GIS maps that farmers’ markets (especially those accepting SNAP-EBT) are concentrated primarily in the Eastern US, though there is a high concentration on the western coast as well. Proportion of farmers’ markets with SNAP capabilities is highest on the West Coast, though there is not a high need there. Reception of SNAP benefits is lowest in the Midwest and in the Northeast US, and farmers’ market access is great in terms of quantity and type. However, there is a severe disparity between counties with a high incidence of SNAP usage and farmers’ markets accepting such benefits in the Southeast, mainly the Appalachia region, and also the Pacific Northwest. When including the non-SNAP markets, there is a relative abundance in these regions illustrating the small percentage of markets enabled to accept these food bucks. Were these markets to begin accepting SNAP transactions, how might the purchasing habits of poor families there change? Their ability to acquire healthier and fresher foods would undoubtedly increase. Though the transition process to accepting SNAP-benefits may be arduous, it holds immense power in shaping purchasing habits of poor families there change? Their ability to acquire healthier and fresher foods would undoubtedly increase. Though the transition process to accepting SNAP-benefits may be arduous, it holds immense power in shaping purchasing habits.