

# FINANCIAL TIMES

June 13, 2013 7:50 pm

## US: Starved of healthy options

By Anna Fifield

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Poor Americans have access to the wrong kind of food, and obesity is placing a huge burden on the healthcare system



In the shade of a huge tree, several dozen members of the Granderson family gathered for a barbecue on a hot Mississippi afternoon. There was grilled chicken, corn on the cob, pasta salad and southern-style beans. Children played under the tree, drinking medicine-coloured soft drinks, while a scruffy dog sniffed around for scraps.

It was quite a spread. But to provide it, the women in the family had to drive 25 miles from their home in Tchula, more of an intersection than a town, to the nearest well-stocked supermarket, a Walmart in Greenwood.

“Fresh food is scarce around here,” says Victoria Granderson, a 42-year-old prison officer and a mother of two, as she worked away on a cob of corn.

Tchula, population 2,052, is a “food desert”, a place where residents have limited – and often no – access to healthy food. Although Tchula lies on the fertile soil of the Mississippi delta and cotton and soyabean plants flourish in the fields surrounding the town, the produce on sale at the only local grocery store, the Tchula Food Center, is in varying stages of decomposition.

There are three brown bananas that are only good for cake and cabbages that might have made decent coleslaw a few weeks earlier, although the potatoes are passable. But the meat fridge contains unidentifiable rounds labelled "meat dept" and the chicken sits on bloodied mats. The freezers are bursting with heat-and-eat French fries, breaded cheese sticks and "popcorn shrimp".



For the residents of Tchula – which is 96 per cent African-American, with an unemployment rate approaching 25 per cent and no public transport – this is the only option when it comes to grocery shopping.

"In the local store, the prices are much higher," Ms Granderson says. "They do it because they know you're a local and if you don't got a ride, you're going to have to pay it."

The US is in the grip of an obesity epidemic. More than a third of American adults – including half of African-American adults – are obese, as are one in five children, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Mississippi, at 35 per cent, has the highest obesity rate in the country.

More than 27 per cent of all Americans aged between 17 and 24 – more than 9m people – are now too heavy to join the military if they wanted.

Obesity costs hundreds of billions of dollars a year for healthcare, reduces productivity through missed days at work and increases medical and disability claims.

An average company with 1,000 employees faces \$285,000 per year in extra costs associated with obesity, according to the Rudd Center for food policy and obesity at Yale University.

This obesity epidemic is affecting poor Americans in particular, and Tchula shows why: while its residents may have access to food, it is not the right kind of food.

"There's a great irony here. Mississippi has all this great farmland but at the same time we have food deserts," says Sandra Shelton, executive director of the Partnership for a Healthy Mississippi, a non-profit organisation. "We have the highest obesity rate but at the same time we have the highest hunger rate. The common denominator is poverty."

We have the highest obesity rate but we also have the highest hunger rate. The common

At 41 per cent, according to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the adult obesity rate in Holmes county, where Tchula lies, is a full five points above the Mississippi level. Its population is almost twice as sedentary as the national average, and half of its restaurants are fast-food outlets.

denominator is  
poverty

While there are various definitions of a “food desert”, the US agriculture department’s formula, incorporating low income and low access, suggests that almost a third of the people living in and around Tchula do not have a car and live beyond walking distance (more than half a mile) from a supermarket.

And the US, the richest country on the planet, is speckled with places such as Tchula. From Baltimore to Detroit, Philadelphia to Los Angeles, there are communities where it is nigh on impossible to find a crown of broccoli or a lean cut of meat. Yet every petrol station seems to sell fried chicken meals for a couple of dollars, and shelves overflow with bottles of budget-brand sugary drinks.

The Centers for Disease Control estimates that 25 per cent of Americans do not have the ability to buy healthy food in their area.

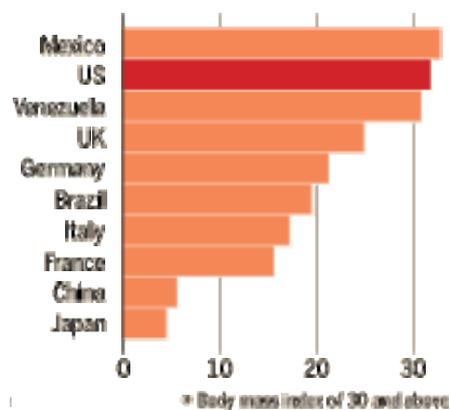
While many, such as Ms Granderson, can drive to big stores to buy vegetables, about 10 per cent of the population, or 29.7m Americans, also qualify as low income, according to the USDA, making it harder for them to trek out to a food oasis.

Everyone from the CDC to Michelle Obama – the First Lady’s “Let’s Move” programme encourages Americans to eat better and exercise more – has made the connection between the availability of fried food and the need for elastic-waisted trousers.

However, experts disagree over whether there is a causal link between food deserts and obesity. Some studies have concluded there is no strong evidence between easy access to fresh food and being overweight.

Kelly Brownell, director of the Rudd Center, says the problem with making a definitive link is that there are so many factors involved, including poverty and demographics.

**Prevalence of obesity\***  
% of adult population, 2008



Source: World Health Organisation

“But it does make sense that people don’t have access to healthy foods that they’re going to suffer health consequences for it,” Prof Brownell says. “If what you have access to and what you can afford are the unhealthy choices, then of course those are going to be the foods that comprise your diet. And then there will be a cascade of health consequences that follow from that – not just obesity but other diet-related diseases like heart diseases and cancer.”

What is clear, however, is that food deserts disproportionately affect poor people. Almost a quarter of Mississippi’s population receive food stamps – government assistance amounting to \$4 per person per day – and try to get the most calories for their buck.

Mike el-Haj, the manager of the Tchula Food Center, knows that he could do better. But the economies of scale are not there. "It's a small town," he shrugs, and goes back to stocking a cabinet.

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Bigger retailers, however, are taking action, notably the biggest of them all: Walmart. Now the world's largest seller of produce, the company has made an effort to improve its healthy offerings, increasing its fresh food range and reducing the salt and sugar content in its own-brand foods. It has also opened 86 stores in food deserts.

Jack Sinclair, executive vice-president of grocery at Walmart, says the chain is trying to make sure that price does not make healthy food prohibitive. "How can we democratise the healthy part of our food offering?" he asks. "The customer will always make their own choice but we are trying to make sure that price is not a factor in that." Right now, that makes fried chicken a better option than spinach, and the fact that convenience stores accept the electronic food stamp card while farmers markets generally do not, doesn't help.

The Food Trust, a non-profit group, has been a national pioneer with its "healthy corner store network" in Philadelphia, increasing the availability of healthy foods in 600 small shops in underserved neighbourhoods.

Similar schemes are under way in New York, Louisiana and Illinois, and the Obama administration is watching closely. It has allocated \$35m for the Healthy Food Financing Initiative, a federal plan to help expand access to nutritious food options in distressed communities.

But the challenge varies state by state, and most of the action is at the local level. In Mississippi, food retailers and public health officials have established the Mississippi Grocery Access Task Force to try and overcome the challenges, some of which are relatively simple.

For example, grocers experience a surge in business when food stamps are distributed at the beginning of the month, while demand plummets in the second half. The taskforce is trying to have the benefits distributed evenly throughout the month.

It is also looking at whether they can provide mobile grocery services to small communities, perhaps using local churches – Tchula has four – as distribution points for people to collect items ordered in advance.

And there are efforts to encourage the establishment of farmers' markets with the technology to accept food stamps.

"The whole idea is if you build it they will come," Ms Shelson says.

Some Mississippi elementary schools have replaced their deep fryers with convection ovens, have reduced the unhealthy options in vending machines and introduced healthier lunch offerings.

There are early signs that these efforts are working. The proportion of public elementary school students who are overweight or obese has fallen from 43.9 per cent in 2005 to 40.9 per cent in 2011.

However, most of the drop was among white children, with the obesity rate among young African-Americans flatlining. But, as Ms Shelson says, at least it didn't go up.

Prof Brownell of Yale agrees that the initial results are encouraging.

"But we are going to need much more than those things in order to make significant progress," he says, such as better zoning and tax incentives for markets that sell healthy foods. "There are a number of challenges to be met and there will have to be money to correct those problems."

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Consumer groups and even some municipalities have considered taxes on low-nutrition foods and drinks.

Roy Mitchell of the Mississippi Health Advocacy Program, part of a Catholic organisation, thinks there could be scope for tax changes, such as removing the state tax charged on all grocery items from designated healthy foods.

"Conservatives can sell this as a tax break for everyone," Mr Mitchell says, outlining how to make the idea politically palatable.

But while there is a solid base of evidence that tobacco taxes have an impact on people's decision to smoke, there is no clear conclusion that fast food taxes do the same. And legislative action is a hard sell, especially in the south, where "big government" intrusion is far from welcomed.

Mississippi senators made their feelings about New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg's ban on large, sugary drinks clear. They passed a broad "anti-Bloomberg" bill in March preventing state bodies from limiting portion sizes and from banning food based on its nutritional value.

That speaks to a larger problem. In Mississippi, it's all relative, says Ms Shelson. People don't feel fat at 250lbs when everyone around them weighs 300lbs.

## Budget cuts: Food aid for poor under fire

With the US Congress in a belt-tightening mood, the food stamps that help low-income people are on the chopping block.

The Senate this week passed a \$500bn, five-year farm bill that will cut the budget for food stamps, officially known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, by \$4.1bn during the next decade. And that was the proposal from the Democrats, long-time supporters of the programme.

Republicans, who control the House of Representatives, want more swingeing cuts: the lower chamber's farm bill would cut the budget for food stamps by \$21bn, the biggest reduction in a generation. That proposal is set for a vote in the House as soon as next week.

The proposed cuts have alarmed public health experts, who say that reductions to the food stamp programme – which helps feed 47m people, more than half of whom are children – could create health problems for millions of Americans.

Republicans say they are taking aim at a growing culture of dependency. Stephen Fincher, a Republican congressman from Tennessee, invoked Bible verses to argue in favour of the cuts during a House agriculture committee hearing last month.

"The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat," he said, citing Thessalonians. While it was a Christian duty to care for the poor and hungry, he said it was not the government's duty.

The federal budget for food stamps has ballooned since the recession struck, from \$35bn in 2007 to \$80bn last year, as more and more families struggled to feed themselves. However, growth in the number of people enrolling in the programme slowed last year as the economic recovery gathered pace.

Benefits are allocated according to need, but the average recipient received about \$133 a month, or \$1.48 per meal, last year, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. The amount has fallen to about \$1.40 per meal this year.

The US Department of Agriculture's food and nutrition service found that food stamp recipients spend more than 85 per cent of their benefits on fruit and vegetables, grain, dairy and meat.

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