


PURCHASED AT

a chain supermarket
in Bloomfield, New
Jersey, September 30,
2003, at 7:30 A.M.
Median annual
household income in
Bloomfield: \$53,289



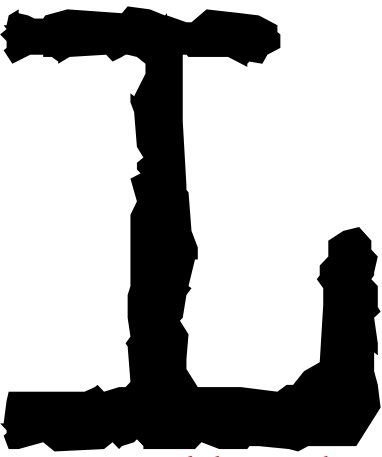
Middle-income Americans buy cheap, high-quality
fruits and vegetables, while millions of poor people
can't get a decent tomato. SELF investigates
the class war being waged in America's supermarkets.



PURCHASED AT
a small grocery in
Hunts Point, a
section of Bronx, New
York, September 30,
2003, at 10:15 A.M.
Median annual
household income in
Hunts Point: \$16,919

A ROTTEN DEAL

BY LAWRENCE GOODMAN
STILL LIVES BY DAVID LAWRENCE



Lisa Ortega, 35, hears the rumbling of trucks all day. They drive by her home in Hunts Point, a neighborhood in the Bronx in New York City. Hundreds of them come and go, carrying fruits and vegetables bought and sold at the nearby Hunts Point Terminal Produce Cooperative Market, the largest wholesale produce distribution center in the world. Millions of tons of produce pass through the market daily, not only bananas and broccoli, but also ultra-gourmet items like edible flowers and truffles. The city's best food purveyors and restaurants as far away as Florida get their produce here. So do a few specialty supermarkets in Canada and even Europe.

The wholesale market is off-limits to Ortega and anyone else who doesn't purchase an entire crate of tomatoes or flat of strawberries at a time. She has to go to a neighborhood supermarket. Tonight, with a thunderstorm threatening, she heads to the Associated store down the block from her apartment to buy dinner items for herself, her two daughters and her son.

Ortega eyes the selection in the produce aisle. Many of the tomatoes are rotten. She replaces the one she's holding after her finger slips into a brownish hole on its surface. She picks up a package of carrots and beets that have been plastic-wrapped together in a Styrofoam container. The end of one of the carrots is dried out, with a strange crust growing on it. Both beets are moldy. She moves on to the string beans, many of which are shriveled. Ortega glances at the oranges. Most are shrunken and mottled with black spots. "Oranges?" she says. "I don't even go there." (A store manager blamed the low-quality produce Ortega found that day on the delivery company and says the store has switched companies.)

Hunts Point, according to federal statistics, is in the poorest congressional district in the nation: The median annual income for a household in this neighborhood is around \$17,000. Ortega, a single mom and community organizer at a nonprofit, has been a resident and an activist here for about a decade. A few years ago, she helped evict a tenant in her building who she says was working as a prostitute. A relative of the tenant patrolled the hallways with a sawed-off shotgun to intimidate Ortega. She fought and won. But she has simply given up trying to find decent produce where she lives.

"To eat healthy in this neighborhood?" Ortega says. "Forget it."

About 10 miles south of Hunts Point, in Chelsea, one of New York City's middle-class neighborhoods, the national natural food chain Whole Foods Market regularly stocks specialty items like organic radicchio. Throughout well-to-do areas across the country, supermarkets sell newly created hybrid vegetables such as Broccolini, a cross between broccoli and Chinese kale. Scientists are even working on a genetically modified tomato with three times more cancer-fighting lycopene than the regular variety. Food-industry executives call developments like this a bona fide revolution: the increasing availability of practically any edible you could wish for. Yet in dozens of inner cities, you can't even buy a fresh tomato—if you can find a store that sells produce at all. A July 2003 report from the University of Southern California at Los Angeles reveals that nearly 30 percent of the food markets in three lower-income L.A. County neighborhoods sold no fruits or vegetables. Several years ago, researchers in Detroit found that only 18 percent of the food stores in the city's poorest neighborhoods stocked items the federal government has declared vital to healthy eating, like bananas, rice, meat and bread.

The reality is, where you live and how much money you make play significant roles in how easy it is to buy and prepare a nutritious meal, as a nine-month investigation by SELF reveals. Over the past four decades, a number of economic and social factors have converged to create a food environment that discriminates against the urban poor. Large supermarket chains (the best bet for affordable, fresh and healthy foods) abandoned less affluent city neighborhoods, focusing instead on the suburbs, where residents have deeper pockets. The produce that does find its way to these urban grocers is generally of poor quality and is sold at higher prices than in wealthier areas. Studies show that this barren food environment is contributing to the escalating epidemic of obesity among the inner-city poor. And if things don't change, experts say, the situation will get much worse.

INCONVENIENCE FOODS

"The food environment in the inner city is hopeless," says Marion Nestle, Ph.D., professor of nutrition at New York University in New York City and author of *Food Politics* (University of California Press). There are three times as many supermarkets in wealthy neighborhoods as in poor ones, according to a 2002 study in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*. And there are four times as many supermarkets in predominantly white neighborhoods as in mostly black ones. The typical shopper living in urban America earns around \$20,000 a year, according to The Urban Institute, a social-policy organization in Washington, D.C. She spends, federal statistics show, about \$2,200 a year on edible groceries, or \$6 a day. (The average upper-middle-class household making more than \$70,000 a year spends almost \$4,600.) The best place to shop for healthful foods would be a large supermarket chain, which studies have shown offer the lowest prices. But most of these expansive stores, which often need to occupy a block or more, lie far away from the cramped streets of the inner city—as many as 3 miles away for those who live in poor communities such as southwest Philadelphia.

Because owning a car is often impractical or financially

impossible, many poor residents must take a bus to get to a large market and then hire a cab to cart the bags home, an expense that can add \$400 to a yearly grocery bill. It's no wonder that nearly half of food stamp recipients get to the supermarket only once a month. The average American goes twice a week. The less often a shopper can make it to the market, the less viable fresh options become. Canned or boxed foods will last months; fresh lettuce and ripe oranges won't.

BIG, FAT CONSEQUENCES

If you are one of the nearly 14 million city residents living in poverty in the United States (earning \$18,556 or less a year for a family of four), you have little choice but to purchase food at nearby convenience stores stockpiled with candy, beer and soda, or at one of a number of fast food restaurants you'd probably pass on your way. "It's easier to get a fatty piece of fried chicken than it is to get an apple," points out Maya Rockey Moore, Ph.D., vice president for research and programs at the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, a nonprofit public-policy research organization in Washington, D.C. Buying junk food becomes inevitable: It's cheap, it's easy and it's everywhere.

McDonald's and its ilk are simplistically blamed for the growing girth of America, particularly among the poor; 23 percent of the nation's lower-income classes are obese, compared with 16 percent of the middle and upper classes. Indeed, a diet high in saturated fat (disproportionally present in processed and fast food) raises the risk for obesity and the diseases linked to it, such as heart disease, stroke and cancer. But consider this: A 2002 study by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill found that the concentration of fast food restaurants was no different in low-income neighborhoods than in high-income ones. Fast food restaurants, it seems, make it their business to be everywhere. Supermarket chains—which carry fruits and vegetables, the very foods that can ward off obesity and its related ailments—do not. When you connect the dots, a picture emerges that is more complex than the conventional wisdom: It's not that the urban poor have more access to fast food; it's that they have fewer alternatives. "Most Americans find it hard to control their weight and eat healthy," says Angela Odoms-Young, Ph.D., a public health expert at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb. "So what makes us think

the poor, with all these barriers, should be able to do it?"

If there were more supermarkets in low-income areas, would obesity rates decline? Some argue no. "Not having a supermarket is a relatively small factor," says John Calfee, Ph.D., resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank in Washington, D.C. "The big factor is that people eat too much." Yet a 2002 study by the University of Southampton in England suggests that more supermarkets could make a difference. The researchers looked at fruit and vegetable consumption in a poor neighborhood in the northern England city of Leeds before and after a large market opened. Those who switched from a convenience store to the new market ate 18 percent more fruits and vegetables, while those who'd

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE MOLDY



SUPERB IN THE SUBURBS
This Kings supermarket in Montclair, New Jersey—a well-to-do suburb of New York City—displays rows of unblemished ripe bell peppers in a rainbow of alluring colors.



BORDERLINE IN THE BRONX
A 40-minute drive from Montclair, at the Associated supermarket in the Bronx where Lisa Ortega shops, the produce appears to be turning to mulch on the shelves.

had the worst diets doubled their consumption of produce.

Of course, factors besides diet come to bear upon the high rate of obesity among the poor: lack of exercise combined with the stress of urban living. But food remains a big part of the picture. Unless America improves the availability of nutritious food in the inner cities, experts warn, a national health crisis is in the offing. "In the coming years, the health needs of the poor due to obesity are going to escalate faster than those of any other population sector," says James O. Hill, Ph.D., director of the Center for Human Nutrition at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center in Denver. "We are going to be looking at an epidemic of diabetes, heart disease and cancer among this group." *(Continued on page 157)*

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FOOD FLIGHT

The food environment in the poorest areas wasn't always so grim. Until the 1960s, supermarket chains saw cities as the ideal places to locate. Their business model was simple: Lure as many customers as you can and get them to purchase as much as they can carry. Because urban neighborhoods were densely populated, stores could count on the thousands of people who lived nearby to flood in every day of the week.

But beginning in the early '60s, urban blight—crime, drugs, corrupt city politics and racial tensions—triggered a mass exodus of well-to-do urbanites to the suburbs in the nationwide population shift known as white flight. Supermarkets, industry officials insist, had no choice but to follow. Between 1975 and 1991, the number of supermarkets in inner-city Los Angeles went from 44 to 31, a reduction of 30 percent. Cities across the country saw similar downsizing. This migration was strictly a business decision, says Todd Hultquist of Washington, D.C., a spokesman for the Food Marketing Institute, the industry's trade group. "It's challenging to operate a business that's losing money," he says. "With soaring operating costs, inner cities had become inhospitable for businesses."

Activists at the time, however, protested that the movement to abandon poor areas was spurred not by a genuine risk of failure but by a hunger to make more money. Ron Donohue, Ph.D., a real estate consultant in North Palm Beach, Florida, looked into the issue as a doctoral candidate at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor in 1997. He wrote his dissertation on supermarket flight and concluded it wasn't a matter of livelihood, nor was it that there were not enough customers left in the inner cities; store owners simply believed they could turn a higher profit in the suburbs.

Around the time of white flight, Donohue explains, the frozen TV dinner was catching on. Supermarket chains discovered that milk and butter didn't net them as much as frozen meals, for which many Americans were willing to pay extra. The same held true, he says,

for the one-stop-shop concept. Customers would pay more for the ease of purchasing greeting cards and other nonfood items in the same place they buy groceries. In the suburbs, stores had the real estate to expand to accommodate such goods, and the industry calculated that the poor weren't interested in these extras. "The low-income shopper didn't fit into their economic model anymore," Donohue says. John Stanton, Ph.D., professor of food marketing at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia, who worked in the supermarket industry, concurs. "The thinking was, Let's put stores where they have a higher average income and where we can make the most money."

No one can be sure that supermarket chains would have made less money had they stayed in inner cities, but the consensus among analysts is that the industry stereotyped the poor and grossly underestimated the inner city's profit potential (see "Fresh Ideas," below). "The supermarket industry's assumptions about the poor were never based on reality but instead on a bias," says Cynthia Cohen, president of Strategic Mindshare, a consulting firm in Miami that specializes in inner-city retailers. The result: Poor urban neighborhoods were left in their current state of fresh-food famine.

Most small groceries in the inner city face the same challenges as their

Fresh ideas

Although markets insist they can't make money in urban areas, research now suggests otherwise. Strategic Mindshare, a Miami firm that specializes in retailers who operate in inner cities, conducted a study in the late 1990s of shopping habits among the poor. It found that low-income customers buy just as much processed and prepared (though not gourmet) foods as the wealthy. The sheer number of urban shoppers makes up for their lack of buying power. Indeed, the most profitable Stop & Shop store in the country is in inner-city Boston, according to a 1998 report by Initiative for a Competitive Inner City, a nonprofit organization in Boston that promotes economic development in inner cities. Another report found that as of 1996, 22 percent of Pathmark supermarkets were in urban areas, yet those stores generated 25 percent of the chain's profits.

Statistics like these should prompt the industry to wake up to the inner city's potential. Critics, though, point out that more needs to be done. "Some chains have made great inroads, but I still see a lot of talk, only a little action," says Cynthia Cohen, president of Strategic Mindshare. Meanwhile, some communities have taken matters into their own hands. Here's how they're doing it:

Creating pro-business opportunities In 2001, Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley made a bold and unusual pledge: He would bring at least half a dozen new supermarkets to his city. To date there are 12 new stores in low- to moderate-income areas, several drawn by the promise of tax subsidies. Many consider Baltimore a model for other cities that want to lure supermarket chains.

Getting shoppers to the market Some stores have joined with community and public officials to offer free transportation to customers. In certain cities, bus routes have been created specifically to take low-income residents to and from shopping areas where supermarket chains are located. Hartford, Connecticut, did this in 2000, and within a year ridership more than doubled.

Involving the community Sometimes independent store owners thwart development of large supermarkets. Smaller local merchants fear they'll be driven out of business, so they rally community opposition and lobby politicians not to hand out tax incentives to chain stores looking to open businesses in the area. In Newark, New Jersey, Pathmark got around these problems by offering a community development corporation an ownership stake in a new, local store to help encourage support. The group recruited and trained employees from the neighborhood and helped with publicity. The store is now one of the most profitable in the Pathmark chain.

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customers: They don't have the capital or large enough operations to keep a stock of top-quality foods.

LOW ON THE FOOD CHAIN

You can witness this inequity at the Hunts Point Terminal Produce Cooperative Market. Thousands of workers stand on an open-air platform hoisting crates of fruits and vegetables, graded by farm workers according to federal guidelines, into cargo containers for transport to retailers large and small across the city. But in one corner shoved against a wall so they won't be in anyone's way, are dozens of boxes of tomatoes. Many of the fruits are bruised; some are even smashed to a pulp. Others have what appear to be blisters. They're no longer top grade or even middle grade; they're just "bad tomatoes," says Joel Fierman, co-owner of Fierman's Produce Exchange, the wholesale company that ordered this shipment. About 10 percent of Fierman's product arrives damaged. A farmer may have picked a bad crop or the truck may have been delayed long enough to allow the goods to spoil.

There's no telling where these tomatoes will end up, but they're representative of the kind of product that, as another Hunts Point produce wrangler puts it, "generally goes to the poor neighborhoods." These boxes of "compromised" produce are frequently bought at a discount by inner-city store owners or distributors, who come to Hunts Point to sort through the shipments. "I'd guess that half the damaged produce ends up in poor neighborhoods," Fierman says.

What happens in Hunts Point happens at wholesale markets across the country. "A large portion of our discounted produce goes into poor neighborhoods," says Vincent Mantia, president of the Wm. Mantia Fruit Company, a wholesaler at the St. Louis Produce Market in Missouri. Experts say it also works in reverse. Unblemished produce does go to higher-income neighborhoods, according to Stanton.

While you might think bottom-

tier produce would be sold more cheaply than the high-grade fruits and vegetables, the opposite is true: The poor pay more for their lower-quality food than the middle and upper classes pay for their unblemished produce. A 1997 USDA study found that food prices, including those for produce, are, on average, 10 percent higher in inner-city food markets than they are in the suburbs. Depending on where you live, the disparity may be even greater. A 1999 study published in *The Journal of Consumer Affairs* looked at food stores in the Twin Cities region of Minnesota and found that food prices were, on average, 20 percent higher at inner-city convenience stores than at supermarket chains in wealthier neighborhoods. According to Phillip Kaufman, the agricultural economist who wrote the USDA study, the reason small shops charge more is that they can't afford not to; they charge what they must to stay in business. In contrast, large chain stores such as Wal-Mart can buy sizable quantities directly from big industrial farms, cutting out middlemen and getting a rock-bottom price, a savings that they pass to the consumer, says Mark Winne of Hartford, Connecticut, a member of the Food and Society Policy Fellows Program, which promotes food education. "Lower-income people who are already struggling financially must pay more for their food, and what they get is lower quality," Winne says.

It's no surprise that shoppers go for cheaper options, which often happen to be less nutritious. "It's a myth that low-income people make irrational decisions when they go shopping," says Adam Drewnowski, Ph.D., director of the University of Washington Center for Public Health Nutrition in Seattle. Drewnowski refutes the idea that because the poor in general have less formal education, they don't know enough to seek the healthiest foods and simply grab what tastes good. Far from being impulse shoppers, lower-income consumers are, as one might expect, frugal and practical. Doughnuts and Big Macs are, economically, great deals. They're loaded with calories for energy and give you a near-full meal for

around \$2.50. For less than the price of a box of raspberries, they're far more filling. "It just doesn't make economic sense for them to eat healthily," Drewnowski says.

WEIGHING THE OPTIONS

Lisa Ortega stands in her cramped kitchen putting away groceries. Onto the shelves go several boxes of sugar-coated cereal and off-brand cookies. She places the frozen pizzas next to a box of peas that has been in the freezer for so long, it's encrusted in a layer of frost. The only vegetables Ortega bought was two cans of corn.

With a salary of \$31,000, Ortega earns more than most people in her neighborhood but is still on a budget. "I have \$110 a month to spend on food," she says.

As Ortega stashes the last of her groceries, Jadine, her 16-year-old daughter, pops in to say hello. Every time Ortega looks at her child, she can see the consequences of their food choices. Jadine is barely taller than 5 feet and weighs 170 pounds, obese according to World Health Organization calculations. A few months ago, Jadine went on a diet. Ortega started purchasing more fruits and vegetables for her. Then Ortega bought a pint of strawberries, and the ones hidden on the bottom turned out to be rotten. A few days later, she picked out tomatoes that looked fresh, but by the next day they'd shriveled. "It was just too wasteful to keep buying produce, then throwing it away," Ortega says.

Still, Ortega feels guilty. "I know I've played a part in making Jadine the way she is." Asked if she would buy fresh produce if a quality market opened up on her corner, she says yes. Until then, she could scour the neighborhood to find decent produce, which she thinks must exist somewhere. Or borrow a friend's car to drive to a better store farther away. Or she could continue to do what most Americans do, regardless of where they live: Head to the closest store that offers the best deals. "I wish I could do better," she says. ■

Lawrence Goodman, a former staff writer for Philadelphia Magazine, has written for Salon.com and Glamour and is a playwright in Providence, Rhode Island.