Food Deserts and Wage Deserts: The Importance of Metaphor in Policy and Activism

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So-called "food deserts," or neighborhoods deprived of businesses that sell healthy foods, are also poor neighborhoods, where even workers don't make enough for basic living, regardless of food options. Laura Wolf-Powers introduces the concept of "wage deserts" to shed light on these islands of poverty and advocate for economic and policy measures that go beyond access to food.

Since the early 2000s, food deserts—"low income neighborhoods, both urban and rural, that have limited access to full-service supermarkets or grocery stores" (Jiao *et al.* 2012)—have been central to public health research on food access, nutrition, and obesity. Since the mid-2000s, policymakers have devoted significant resources to tools for identifying food deserts,[1] and into programs that create incentives for grocery-store operators to establish stores in these underserved areas.[2] These efforts are laudable but insufficient. Many food access advocates seem not to have registered the fact that the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, informally known as food stamps, was cut by $8.6 billion over ten years in the 2014 Farm Bill.[3] Maintaining and expanding redistributive programs like SNAP, as well as promoting urban farming and gardening, is critical to household food security. Yet efforts to eliminate food deserts through retail development have recently been claiming the bulk of policy attention and academic "air time."

While echoing the food desert metaphor, the concept of a wage desert (which my collaborators[4] and I have developed using data from the Longitudinal Employer–Household Dynamics program) advances the idea that hunger and poor nutritional outcomes in struggling neighborhoods are just as likely to be attributable to lack of monetary resources as to features of the retail environment. In a wage desert, work fails to provide basic self-sufficiency for at least 80% of primary jobholders.[5] Figure 1 shows Philadelphia, Pennsylvania's 23 wage deserts.

1 See, for example: www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas.aspx.

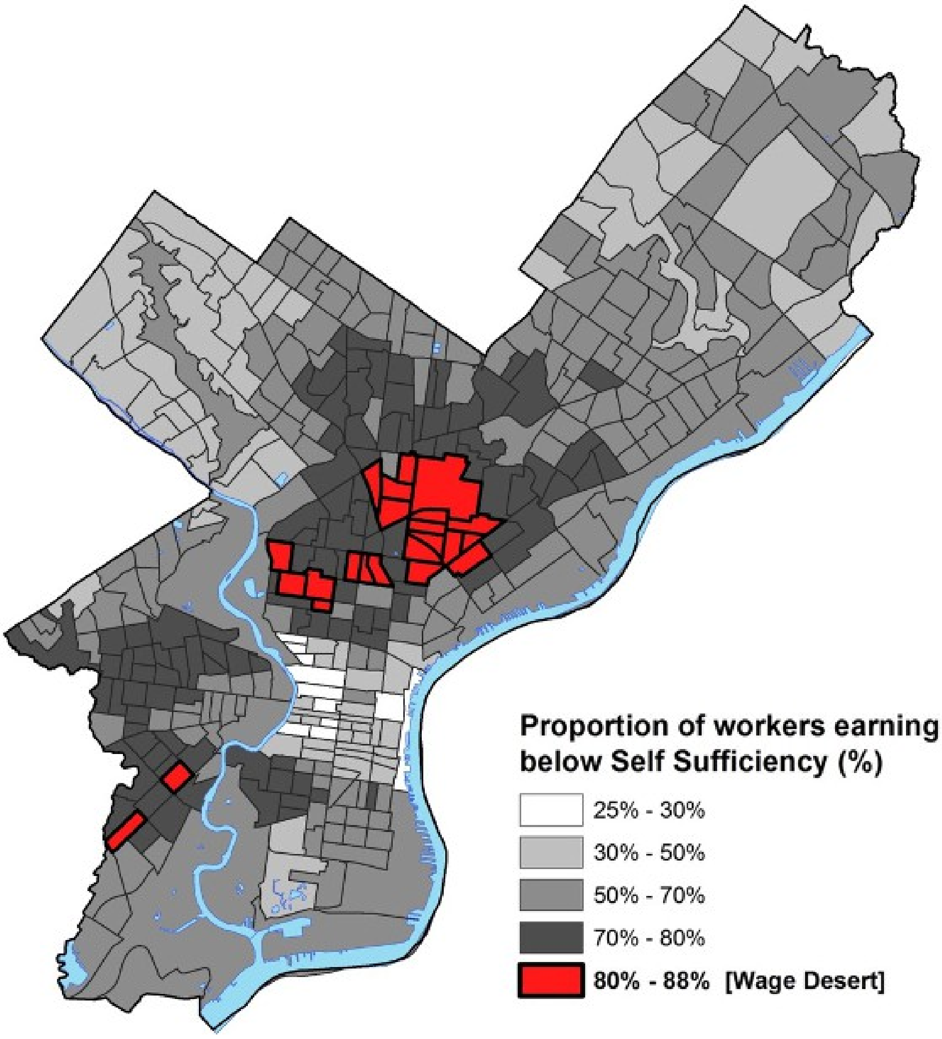
2 See, for example: www.healthyfoodaccess.org/funding/healthy-food-financing-funds.

3 See: www.motherjones.com/politics/2014/01/republicans-won-food-stamps-farm-bill.

4 My collaborators in this project are Joshua Warner and Shiva Kooragayala of the University of Pennsylvania and Katie Nelson of PolicyMap; also Marla Nelson of the University of New Orleans and Jessica Fisch of the Georgia Institute of Technology. Thanks to all, particularly Josh, Shiva and Katie.

5 See: http://lehd.ces.census.gov/doc/workshop/2014/Presentations/WageDesertsPresentation-September8.pdf.

Figure 1. Philadelphia's 23 wage deserts



Source: Wolf-Powers, Nelson, Warner and Kooragayala 2014.

Working, but not making it—what LEHD shows

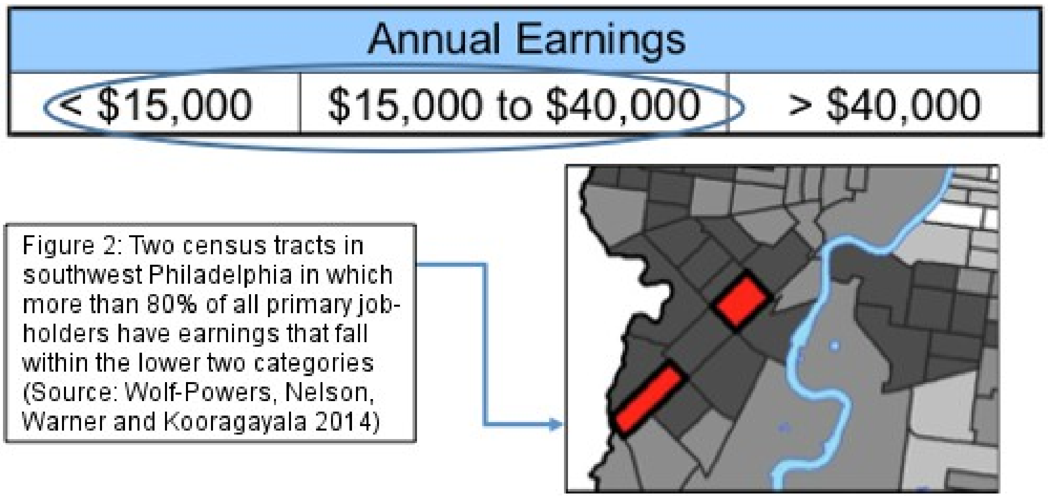
The Longitudinal Employer–Household Dynamics program (LEHD) is a partnership between the Center for Economic Studies at the US Census Bureau and state governments. States share Unemployment Insurance earnings data and the Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW) data with the Census Bureau, and Census Bureau researchers combine these with data from censuses and surveys to create statistics on employment, earnings, and job flows at detailed levels of geography and industry and for different demographic groups (Abowd *et al.* 2005). LEHD offers powerful insights into inter- and intra-metropolitan commuting patterns (for example, US Census Bureau's OnTheMap[6] tool is derived from LEHD data). It also offers insights into the demographic and job characteristics of sub-groups of workers.

Low-wage earners are of particular interest. As wages for people in the lower deciles of the income distribution have failed to keep up both with productivity and inflation in the past few decades, policymakers have become increasingly concerned about working poverty and barriers to economic mobility (Andersson *et al.* 2003; Holzer 2005; Theodos and Bednarzik 2006). The LEHD spatializes the phenomenon of low-wage work by permitting low-wage earners to be identified by their residential locations. The LEHD places every primary job-holder into one of three categories:

6 See: http://onthemap.ces.census.gov.

category 1, where earners earn less than $1,250 a month, or $15,000 a year; category 2, where they earn between $1,251 and $3,333 per month, or $15,000 to $40,000 per year; and category 3, where they earn more than $40,000 annually. In Philadelphia and in most major cities, economic self-sufficiency is at least $40,000, even for a household consisting of just one adult and one child. In many places, then, earners in the first two LEHD categories can be assumed to be operating below self-sufficiency, while those in the third category can be assumed to be operating above self-sufficiency (Figure 2).

Figure 2



Source: Wolf-Powers, Nelson, Warner and Kooragayala 2014.

The self-sufficiency standard as an alternative to the federal poverty measure

Embedded in the wage desert concept is the self-sufficiency standard, an alternative to the federal poverty measure that estimates the amount of income required for a household to meet basic needs, taking into account family composition, ages of children, and (perhaps most importantly) geographic differences in cost of living. The standard was originated by Dr. Diana M. Pearce in the early 1990s and underwent a major expansion with funding from the Ford Foundation in the 2000s. Dr. Pearce is now at the Center for Women's Welfare at the University of Washington School of Social Work, where she and her colleagues have developed county-level self-sufficiency standards for 37 states and the District of Columbia.[7]

In estimating income necessary for basic needs, the self-sufficiency standard considers housing, child care, food, health care, transportation, and taxes (the federal poverty level considers only a family's food budget[8]). By the yardstick of the standard, many households that officially fall above the poverty line are nevertheless non-self-sufficient. Using the self-sufficiency standard in conjunction with LEHD earnings data yields a reading of how people in a given county are *working yet struggling to meet basic expenses*; it demonstrates the extent to which low earnings (in addition to unemployment and detachment from the labor force) are a source of economic deprivation. For example, the 2012 Self-Sufficiency income level for a Philadelphia household consisting of one adult and one preschool-aged child was about $43,000 annually[9] [10] [11] (the federal poverty level for the same household in 2012 was $15,130). In the 23 census tracts shown in red in Figure 1, 80% of

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7 See: www.selfsufficiencystandard.org/about.html.

8 See, for example: www.ocpp.org/poverty/how.

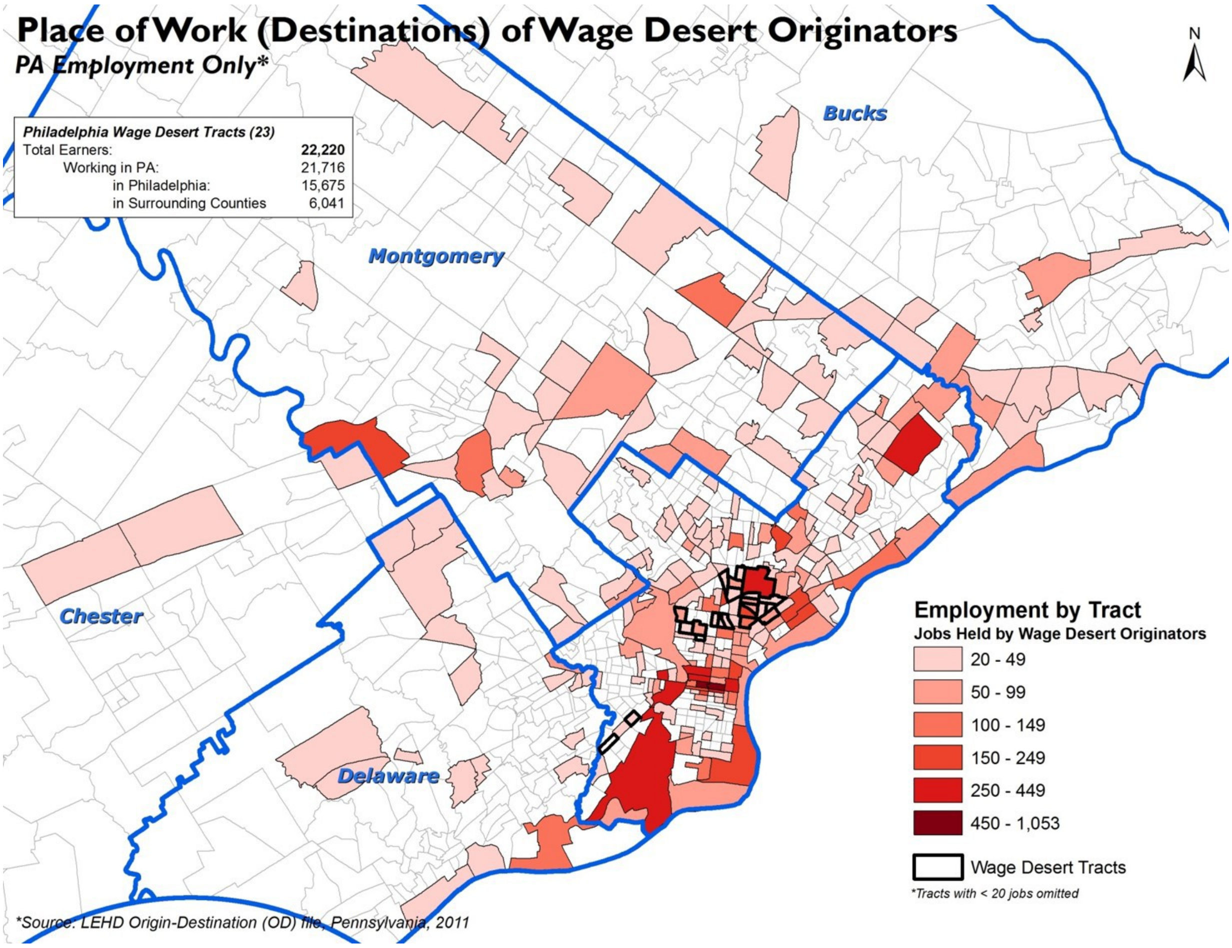
9 See here: www.selfsufficiencystandard.org/docs/PA2012_Web_101112.pdf.

10 The analogous standard for a family containing one adult, one preschooler and one infant was nearly $58,000, while the standard for two adults, one infant and one preschooler was about $63,000 (Pearce 2010). It is unfortunately impossible to tell from the LEHD data how many low-earning workers are employed full-time or seasonally.

primary jobs leave those residents who hold them below $40,000. While some Philadelphia workers hold multiple jobs, and while others live in two-earner households (and either circumstance may boost their wage income), clearly earnings from work fail to yield self-sufficiency in a stunning number of households. About 60% of the primary jobs held by Philadelphia residents pay less than $40,000 per year.

Other LEHD files enable the creation of maps showing the distances that jobholders residing in wage deserts travel to reach their workplaces. In the Philadelphia metropolitan area, these destinations are dispersed, with about 30% located outside of the city. Figure 3 suggests that in Philadelphia the hardship associated with low wages is often exacerbated by time and monetary costs associated with commuting long distances.

Figure 3: Places of work for earners residing in Philadelphia's wage deserts



Source: Wolf-Powers, Nelson, Warner and Kooragayala 2014.

Limits of LEHD and policy implications

The usability of the wage desert concept is limited by the small number of LEHD wage categories and the fact that the categories top out at $3,333 per month. The inability to distinguish among jobs paying $40,000 annually and (say) $50,000 annually makes it difficult to understand wage dynamics in a place as thoroughly as would be desirable. The possibility of two-earner households and multiple job-holding by individuals also makes it challenging to draw conclusions about household self-sufficiency from LEHD earnings data. Nevertheless, our discussion and

[11] An example of how the standard varies geographically: the standard for one adult and one preschool child in rural George County, Mississippi, is $27,357 annually, as compared with around $43,000 in Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania and over $63,000 in San Francisco County, California.

elaboration of wage deserts aims to provoke thought about active policy responses to the spatial concentration of low-earning individuals—people who are employed but whose wages are too low to render them economically self-sufficient—in addition to policy to combat concentrated poverty more generally. Policymakers and planners might, for example, target tracts with high proportions of low-earning workers as priorities for interventions that help people avail themselves of subsidies to which they are entitled (medical, childcare, and housing subsidy, the Earned Income Tax Credit, and, of course, food stamps). Work destination information might be used to target the neighborhoods in which large proportions of low-wage earners work as priorities for services like skills upgrading, ESL (English as a second language), childcare and youth development.

Conclusion: the politics of metaphor

The notion of a wage desert points to a need for more urban researchers and practitioners to advocate aggressively for active labor market policies and higher wage floors. Activism among low-paid workers is increasing with such campaigns as "Fight for 15"[12] and local living and minimum wage efforts. For example, Philadelphia advocates successfully pressed for a 2014 ballot measure that required a $10.88 minimum wage for city subcontractors.[13] Scholars can back them up by continuing to do research that calls attention to what amounts to a pandemic of low-wage work and foregrounds facts on its social consequences—both for low-wage workers and for taxpayers in general.[14] "Wage desert" language can be helpful in shifting the focus from retail deprivation to wage insufficiency.

Geographer Trevor Barnes has pointed to the ubiquity of metaphors in social science and policy discourse. Metaphors, he argues, "are central for both discovery *and* justification in science" (1996, p. 159). The food desert metaphor has justified grocery store development while soft-pedaling other more basic, radical (but perhaps politically controversial) approaches to the problem of food insecurity. Adding wage deserts to the conversation brings to the fore the crucial role that increasing earned income must play not only in enhancing food access but also in broadly reducing economic deprivation.

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[12] See, for example: www.usatoday.com/story/money/2015/04/15/fast-food-strike-fight-for-15-service-employees-international-union/25787045.

[13] See: http://ballotpedia.org/City_of_Philadelphia_Sub-Contractor_Minimum_Wage_and_Benefits_Ordinance_Question,_Proposition_1_%28May_2014%29.

[14] See: http://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/the-high-public-cost-of-low-wages.

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