



T H E L I S T

Gaps in the

Grocery stores abound in Greater Washington. But too many communities still lack access.

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The number of grocery stores in Greater Washington is ever-expanding, with the likes of Giant, Wegmans, Whole Foods Market, Lidl and Aldi opening this year alone. But for the most part, they're only opening in certain areas. There is still a healthy food disparity problem – what some call “food deserts.”

The wealthiest areas get the most grocery stores. And risk for food insecurity also tends to fall along racial lines, with white residents in the District experiencing basically none, while Black and Hispanic families take the brunt of it, according to the latest Census research (see charts below).

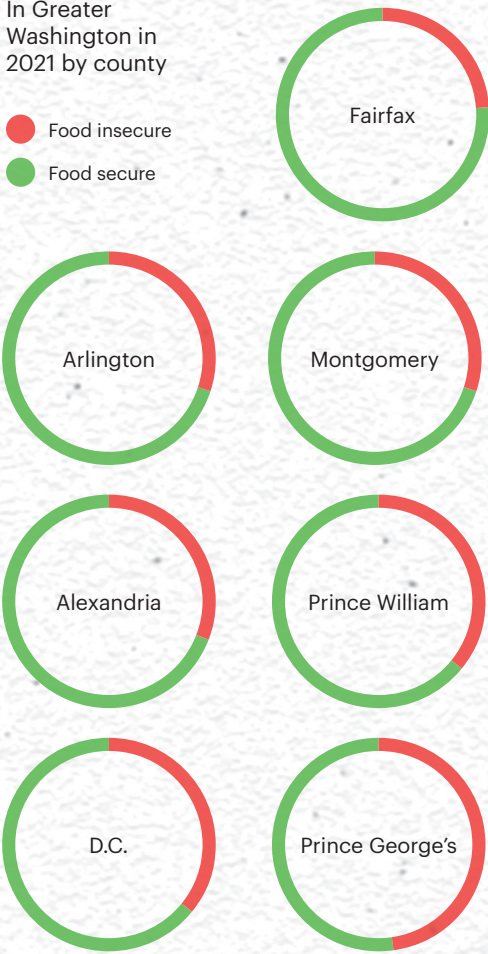
More than 75% of the District's food deserts are found in wards 7 and 8, said D.C. Councilman Vincent Gray, D-Ward 7, with only three grocery stores to serve 170,000 residents even as other wards tout nine or more – there are 15 in Ward 6 alone. There are legislative efforts to draw in more, for example the East End Grocery Incentive Act, which allows the Bowser administration to invest in infrastructure to support the construction of even more full-service grocery stores and co-anchor retail opportunities.

For low-income residents and seniors dependent on government benefits like the Women Infants and Children program (WIC) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), grocery stores are still the most reliable way to use those benefits to buy eligible food items – they are more likely to accept SNAP cards than other retailers. So there isn't just demand, there is real need.

CHARTING FOOD INSECURITY

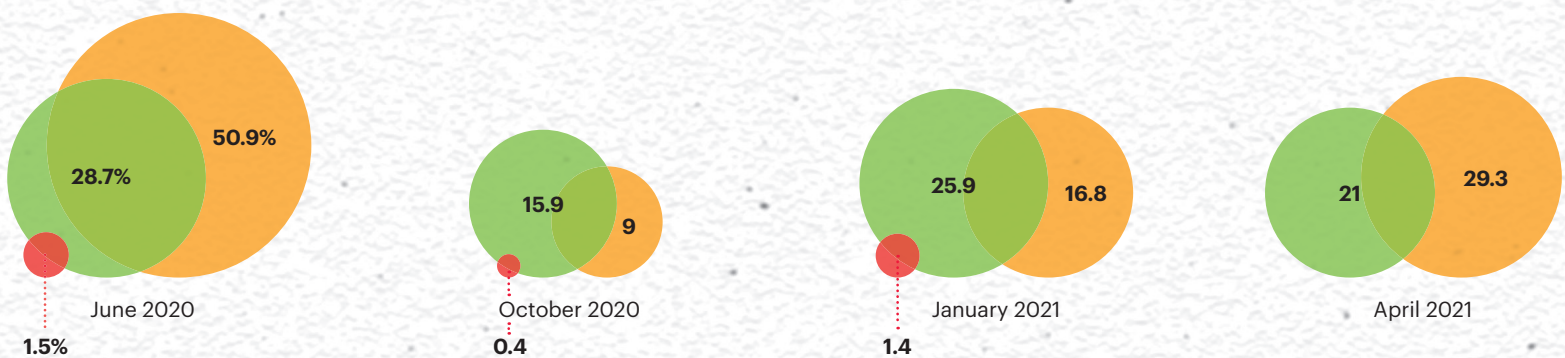
In Greater Washington in 2021 by county

● Food insecure
● Food secure



Food insecurity in D.C. for households with children, by race

● White ● Black ● Hispanic or Latino



SOURCES: D.C. Hunger Solutions; Food World and U.S. Census Bureau; Capital Area Food Bank; D.C. Office of Planning
WBJ ILLUSTRATION BY MAGGIE LYNN; GETTY IMAGES

food chain



2 Questions

with D.C. Central Kitchen CEO
Mike Curtin Jr.

D.C. Central Kitchen is a nonprofit that fights hunger and poverty through its creation of, and training for, culinary jobs while also providing healthier food options to the underserved in our region.

What do you think might be the biggest public misperception about the food-insecure population in our region and who they are? Misperceptions abound, but two stand out. First, people struggling with food insecurity want to make healthy choices. There is enormous unmet demand for fresh fruits and vegetables in our underserved communities. Second, food insecurity affects people of all ages, from kids through older adults, and many are working or live in households where someone is employed. We need better access to healthy food and good jobs all across our city.

Food deserts are also still an issue today — what do you think might be the best way to address them via policy or other major changes? D.C. Central Kitchen’s Healthy Corners program is a part of the solution. With the help of D.C. Health and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, we help small corner stores stock and sell fresh fruits and vegetables at discounted rates while helping shoppers use federal benefits like SNAP and WIC to purchase healthier options right in their own neighborhoods. Just as importantly, this program proves that the stereotypes and assumptions discouraging other retailers from investing in these communities are just that, and we hope more will follow our lead.

COUNT THE STORES

Below is the supermarket distribution by jurisdiction, with demographic information. Food World counts international markets larger than 20,000 square feet.



	Loudoun	Fairfax	Arlington	Montgomery	Prince William	D.C.	Prince George's
Population	405,312	1,149,439	236,434	1,047,661	466,834	701,974	910,551
Median income	\$147,111	127,866	122,604	111,812	107,707	90,842	86,994
% foreign born	25%	31	23	32	25	13	23
International markets	4	33	1	20	12	12	23

T H E L I S T

Leading the fight against food deserts

We also spoke with Beverley Wheeler, director of D.C. Hunger Solutions, to learn more about food disparity in the District. An initiative of the national nonprofit Food Research and Action Center, D.C. Hunger Solutions works to end hunger in the nation's capital through a combination of advocacy, direct service and education. Wheeler is also a member of the D.C. Food Policy Council, where she chairs its Food Access and Equity working group. Here is what Wheeler told us, edited for space and clarity:

How would you describe the food desert problem in D.C.? We don't call them food deserts, even though that is a USDA designation, because it gives people the impression that there is nothing in these neighborhoods. And that's not true. There's a lot going on in these neighborhoods.

You focus mainly on grocery stores because that's where people can use their federal assistance benefits. What other options do they have? So there are the healthy corner stores that we started with — this is D.C. Central Kitchen — almost about 10 years ago. You can actually use your SNAP benefits in the healthy corner stores. We also helped to make sure that you could use your federal benefits, WIC and SNAP, and some of the senior feeding programs at farmers markets.

What did this disparity look like when you started examining grocery stores in 2010? We were slightly shocked that there were minimal grocery stores in the neighborhoods that needed them most. Wards 7 and 8, when we first started our grocery store report, there were four grocery stores in Ward 7 and three in Ward 8. We thought, "Wow, let's have the city do tax incentives for grocery stores in order to have them move into these neighborhoods."

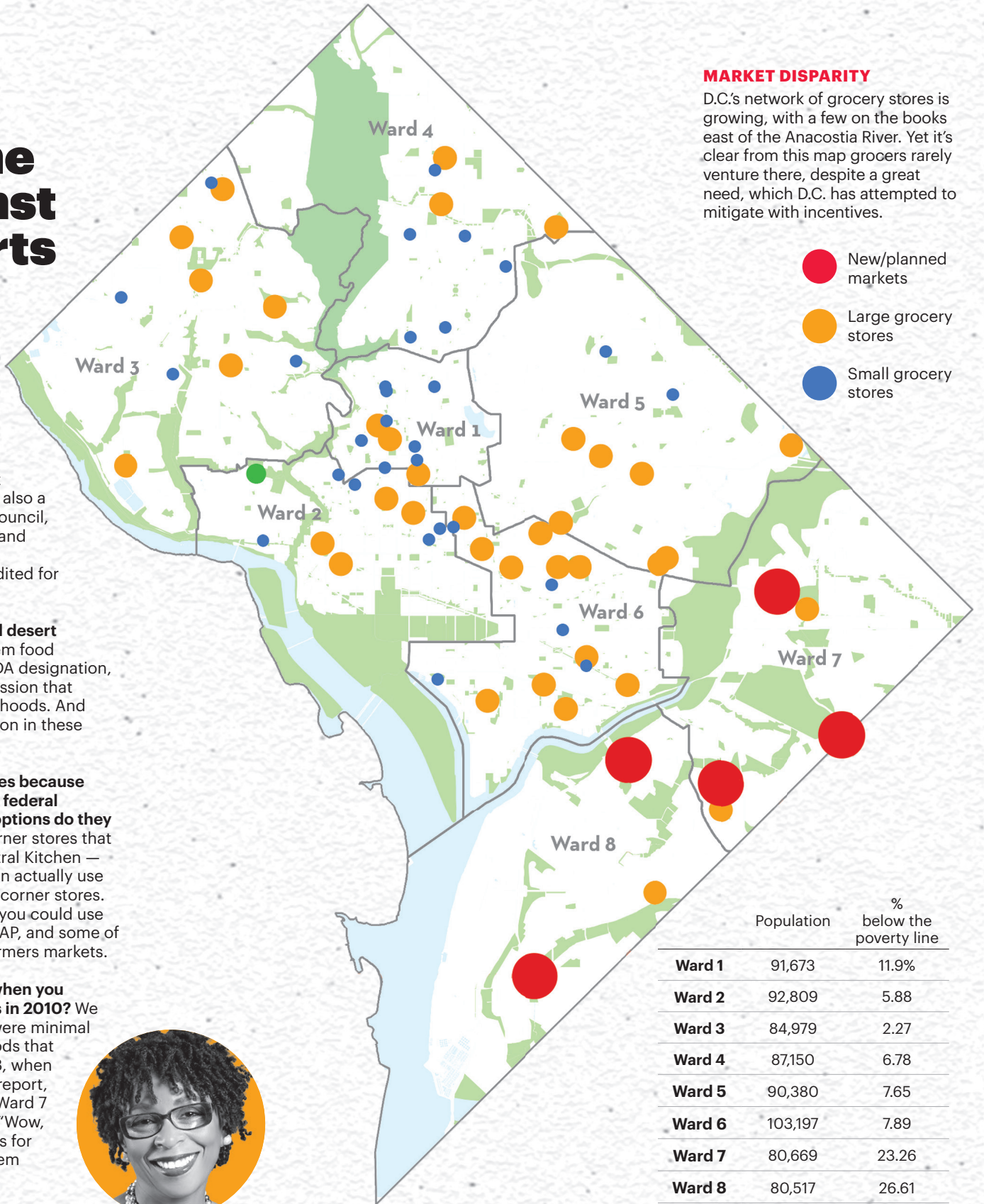
Did it work? When we went back and did our report in 2015, much to our surprise, Ward 7 then had two grocery stores, and Ward 8 had one grocery store. And there were roughly 80,000 residents in each of those wards. And what we realized from the grocers, they have a business model, and their business model is dedicated to build on education and income. So until education and income changed in these neighborhoods, they weren't going to go in them. That was not their interest.

What else did you find? There were covenants in some of these neighborhoods that once a grocery store left, that another grocery store couldn't come back in. Those covenants were taken out, I'm going to say, about five years ago, because a lot of people didn't realize that those are remnants of the institutional and structural racism that had to do with what we were going to provide in neighborhoods that were primarily Black.

How else do you fight that kind of systemic problem? There is the Nourish D.C. Fund that the city set up that will help support small food businesses and entrepreneurs. That is to address the racism and disinvestment and low food-access areas. We also know that hunger comes from poverty. So while we are doing healthy food access, we also want to support entrepreneurs and new businesses in those neighborhoods



Wheeler



MARKET DISPARITY

D.C.'s network of grocery stores is growing, with a few on the books east of the Anacostia River. Yet it's clear from this map grocers rarely venture there, despite a great need, which D.C. has attempted to mitigate with incentives.

- New/planned markets
- Large grocery stores
- Small grocery stores

SOURCES: D.C. Food Policy Council; D.C. Hunger Solutions

because they not only provide healthy food access, but they also provide economic development.

The other fund, which is also very exciting, is the Food Access Fund. It's designed to provide capital investment to help small, medium and large grocery stores, as well as sit-down restaurants move into wards 7 and 8. And there's about \$54 million over three years that is being dedicated to that effort, and it really is working.

Where do you see the biggest obstacles to progress? Some stores are reluctant to move into neighborhoods because they don't really understand how much money is in those neighborhoods. For some reason, they believe because low-income individuals live there, that there are not a lot of jobs in those neighborhoods, that people can't really support their grocery stores, even though we know people have to eat. And we try to educate them that for every SNAP dollar that's spent in there, you're going to get a multiplier effect because people are not only going to buy food when they go into a grocery store, they're also going to buy other necessities, diapers, cleaning supplies and that sort of thing. So you really can make a living.

"The East End is a valuable market location for retail and hospitality providers. I am pleased that Lidl will lead the way, followed by my efforts earlier this year, which set in motion a significant breakthrough for the long-stalled development of Capitol Gateway. I am proud to have worked with my council colleagues to pass emergency legislation that put us on the fast track to open another new grocery store — a Giant — in Ward 7."

D.C. COUNCILMAN VINCENT GRAY, D-Ward 7, on the Lidl under construction at Skyland Town Center and the potential — a deal is not done yet — for a Giant Food on the District's border with Prince George's County. In both cases, Skyland and Capitol Gateway, the incoming grocers are replacements for Walmart, which in 2016 bailed on leases to open in the respective developments, setting both back by years.