"Improving Health Through Holistic Interventions: A Case Study of 'Food Deserts' in Philadelphia"

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Walter Licht, School of Arts and Sciences, Department of History

The obesity epidemic poses innumerable economic and health concerns for the American population. Its reach is nearly universal and recent estimates foresee no end in sight: by 2030, 51 percent of Americans will be obese—not merely overweight—which constitutes an additional $550 billion on obesity-related spending. Moreover, the factors perpetuating this epidemic are intimately intertwined and difficult to combat. One such component is access to healthy foods. Currently there are 23.5 million Americans living in "food deserts," or areas without proximate access to healthy foods. This often causes these individuals—most often minorities and low-income residents—to shop and eat at the plethora of local convenient stores or fast food restaurants in their neighborhoods. This paper strives to dissect the growth of these "food deserts" by digesting their current impact on the obesity epidemic and by contextualizing how historical events and circumstances led to the rise of this phenomenon. The case study of the neighborhood of Mantua, Philadelphia sheds light upon how history greatly impacts the present conditions, and how the solutions to multifaceted, modern public health crises—such as the obesity epidemic—can thus only be ameliorated using holistic, well informed interventions.