Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations

Objective:

This paper discusses the failed food markets on Indian reservations. Both historical and contemporary factors play into the suppressed demand and supply of food in these markets. Of primary focus is the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) commodity foods program "Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations" (FDPIR).

Significance:

In the United States (U.S.) there are 5.2 million Americans who identify themselves as American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN) [1] belonging to 566 federally recognized tribes and hundreds more unrecognized tribes.[2] The AIAN population is growing at nearly three times the rate as the general U.S. population (26.7% versus 9.7%).[3] Each tribe is unique and many tribes are making progress in revitalizing their Native languages and cultures.

Tenure of land in Indian country is held in one of three categories: 1) trust lands held "in trust" for the benefit of the tribe, 2) allotted land held "in trust" for the individual, or 3) "fee land" held by individual owners.[4] Only about 22% of AIANs live on AIAN lands.[5]

Compared to other Americans, AIANs have a lower rate of high school graduation/GED completion (71% versus 80%) and fewer AIANs hold bachelor's degrees (11.5% versus 24.4%).[6]

On average, 50% of AIAN 16 and older, living on reservations, are not working.[7] Health issues show staggering disparities. i.e., "[AIAN] die at higher rates than other Americans from chronic liver disease and cirrhosis (368% higher), diabetes mellitus (177% higher), unintentional injuries (138% higher), assault/homicide (82% higher), intentional self-harm/suicide (65% higher), and chronic lower respiratory diseases (59% higher)."[8] Today, AIANs have a life expectancy that is 4.2 years less than the U.S. average.

Poverty effects 27% of AIAN, close to double the U.S. average.[9] Relative to other U.S. children, AIAN children have nearly twice the levels of food insecurity, obesity, and Type II diabetes[10]. Fifteen of the 26 counties, designated as "majority American Indian", are among America's top ten percent of food insecure counties[11]. Poverty is only part of the food market issues. To understand contemporary AIAN food issues, it is essential to understand historical events related to today's market conditions.

European diseases killed up to 90% of all AIANs between the 17th and 19th centuries[12]. With severely diminished populations, some AIAN nations willingly entered into treaties with the U.S. Many treaties included specific food arrangements called "annuities" which granted hunting/fishing/gathering/farming rights on reserved tribal land and/or places ceded from tribal lands.[13]

In 1887, the passage of the Indian Allotment Act (Dawes Act) complicated treaty agreements and land ownership.[14] The Dawes Act divided much of the tribally owned reservation lands into 160-acre parcels called "allotments." These parcels were "allocated" to AIAN heads of

households and other tribal members. After receiving an allocation, the new “owners” were required to put ”their land” into farming/ ranching production.

Many AIANs sold their allotments almost immediately (below market prices) to pay for food and other essentials. Most of allotted Indian farming/ranching efforts were eventually deemed failures and the U.S. reallocated the lands to non-Natives who were “more able” to make “good use” of the land. The Homestead Act of 1862[15] reallocated once tribally held 160-acre parcels of “public land” to non-Native settlers to farm/ranch the land. Through the Dawes Act, tribal lands decreased from 155 million acres in 1881 to 48 million acres in 1934; losing 107 million acres of prime farm/ranch land to non-Natives.[16]

Complex probate laws that apply to AIANs that hold allotted land require that when the “owner” dies, their property automatically descends to each of their living children as undivided "fractional" interests. So, if an AIAN owning a 160 acre allotment died and had eight children, instead of each child inhering 20 acres, each child would inherit a $1/8^{th}$ interest of the 160 acre allotment.[17] This fractionation has expanded geometrically across generations. Today, there are hundreds of thousands of tiny fractional interests with no clear ownership rights making it virtually impossible to use the land at all.

With the loss of annuity rights, and the devastating effects of the allotment period, hunger became a serious issue on Indian reservations. To address hunger issues, U.S. government

rations were issued[18]. Unfortunately, government rations suppressed cultural norms, market opportunities for entrepreneurs and were often of poor quality and inadequate quantities. Indian nations suffered from perennial hunger up until the Great Depression.

During the Great Depression, as food prices fell, farmers responded by putting more land into production hoping that increased crop yields would make up for poor prices. However, as the supply of food went up, the demand for food (and food prices) continued to go down. In 1933, farmers had crops that they could not sell at any price while both Natives and non-Natives faced hunger issues.

For these reasons, Congress passed the Commodity Credit Corporation Charter Act of 1933[19]. This legislation allowed banks to accept crops as payment for farm loans and allowed the USDA to buy crops that might have otherwise gone unsold. The USDA established the Family Commodity Distribution (FCD) program to match hungry Americans with surplus crop yields.

In 1973, the Agricultural and Consumer Protection Act introduced SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) as a replacement for FCD,[20] With SNAP, instead of receiving food packages directly from the USDA, consumers were given "food stamps" allowing them to support local food merchants and food producers, which improved the wellbeing of whole communities. Families using SNAP chose their own food packages as appropriate to their taste

preferences and needs. Some argued that SNAP would not be effective program on Indian reservations because of market failures caused by:

- Presence of convenience stores (instead of full service grocery stores) who carried mainly non-perishable foods because of the low volume of perishable food sold in sparsely populated, remote areas
- Nearly extinct traditional food economies
- Few Native land owners being able to serve as local food producers
- High rate of poverty on reservations.

As a remedy for the market failure, the 1973 legislation mandated that residents of reservations be allowed to choose between SNAP and FDPIR. In 2013, the FDPIR program served 75,808 participants[1] across 276 tribes, in 24 states[2122]. While temporarily alleviating food deserts by ensuring that FDPIR participants received wholesome food from USDA sources, the unintentional consequence of FDPIR programs was to promote long-term food market failure through decreased demand.

Method:

The author visited four FDPIR centers, was part of executive board meetings of the National Association of FDPIR, attend national and regional conferences and meet with USDA FDPIR staff members. Through USDA grant money, the author spent a summer working with one reservations' FDPIR director and conducted focus groups. This paper presents in-depth case studies of FDPIR centers.

Results:

[1] These numbers have not been officially released by the Food and Nutrition Service for external use.

Centers were diverse in their arability of land, proximity to larger food markets, stability of local Tribal governments, and unemployment rates. Variability in the style of the FDPIR center, distribution policies, educational outreach programs, the types of foods ordered from the available USDA package[23] and the use of community gardens to supplement diets was seen across locations (see Table 1).

The consumer interest was best served when centers created a 501c3 organizational system outside of the tribal government. This arrangement allowed tribes to avoid paying the 25% food cost matching funds normally required by the USDA. Centers that allowed consumers to pick up food packages in a store-like environments (rather than warehouse or tailgate centers) had more stable inventories and improved feelings of consumer dignity. Centers that allowed only one pick-up per household, per month, effectively prevented large households from collecting all of their allotted food because of home food storage issues. Centers that allowed large families to pick-up their food supplies every 10 or 15 days circumvented home storage issues. Families that were allowed to pick-up perishable produce every 10 or 15 days (rather than once a month) were able to have fresh fruits and vegetables all month long. Centers that worked with local food banks to "recapture" commodity foods were able to add significantly to their community's food stores.

While most FDPIR centers made limited deliveries to families some FDPIR centers did not make deliveries which caused hardships for families who lived far away (up to 160 miles per round trip). Not having deliveries led some families to choose SNAP over FDPIR benefits.

Most FDPIR centers did not have active nutrition education programs in place. Barriers to offering educational programming included time, facilities and expertise. Community gardens with Tribal College support were an effective way to supplement diets with seasonal fruits and vegetables. Additionally, the gardens built community and individual human capital.

Conclusions and relevance:

This work found that although FDPIR centers help ensure nutritious food choices for local income residents, the program may itself be hindering the full development of local food merchants and suppliers. While FDPIR associations meet once a year, an ongoing communication system across directors and staff would help improve the efficiency and performance of all centers.

Table 1. Four case studies of Food Distribution Programs on Indian Reservations Centers

	Fresh fruits available	Fresh vegetables available	Warehouse, tailgate or "store" style	Deliveries available	Number of times pick-ups are allowed by family size	Educational outreach programs in place	Community Garden
Crow	Extensive	Extensive	Store	No	Every 10, 15 or 30 days	No	No
Blackfeet	Extensive	Extensive	Store	Yes	Every 30 days	No	No
Salish/Kootenai	Limited oranges, apples	Limited carrots, potatoes, onions	Store	Yes	Every 30 days	No	Yes
Northern Cheyenne	Limited	Limited	Warehouse	Yes	Every 30 days	No	No

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