



## For Some, There's Never a Bountiful Harvest

ROBERT WILONSKY | NOVEMBER 21, 2007 | 8:00AM

It was nothing short of a Major Event when Minyard Food Store opened a 50,000-square foot grocery at [Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert B. Cullum boulevards](#) in the Fair Park area in the September 1995. "I can't believe we finally have what most people have in their communities," a South Dallas resident told *The Dallas Morning News* back then, in a story headlined, "New Minyard fills a void for many in South Dallas." Before then the woman had to travel some 20 miles out of South Dallas just to buy fresh meat and poultry.

For years, the only passable grocery in the neighborhood was on Second Avenue, a few blocks down from the fair. Its shelves were stocked with dusty jars of preserved and pickled foodstuffs; if memory serves, there was no bakery, no fresh fish or meat and very little in the way of produce that didn't look flat-out exhausted. The Minyard on MLK replaced two other smaller nearby Minyard locations -- and, as *The News* [pointed out](#) only last year, it "was the first modern, full-service grocery store in South Dallas."

The *News* story appeared because of persistent rumors that the location was about to shutter -- an unfathomable development, given the dearth of groceries in the area. One store to serve 30,000 folks living in the neighborhood. *One store*. But to area residents, it was old news, crappy business as usual: Said one neighborhood resident at the time, the lack of groceries in South Dallas has "been discussed in my neighborhood for ages." And today, it's being discussed elsewhere, thanks to a report on that very subject being released by the [J. McDonald Williams Institute](#). The timing is no coincidence: Says the release accompanying the report, titled [Access to Grocery Stores and Food Security in Dallas](#), "The lack of grocery stores in Dallas' southern sector is making it hard to put healthy food on Thanksgiving tables."

Ultimately, the findings of Nathan Berg (an associate professor of economics at the University of Texas at Dallas) and Timothy Bray (director of the Williams Institute) will

come as no surprise to those who live and work in southern Dallas. "The area's under-served by *everything*," says my father, whose auto parts store has been on Second Avenue since the mid-1950s. For years, when Dad or one of his employees forgot lunch and needed to eat, they would walk down to that grocery store and return with packaged, processed cold cuts and outlet-store-bought bread and off-brand chips a few weeks shy of stale -- still, better than nothing.

But as Berg and Bray note in the introduction to their study:

"This paper reports new evidence suggesting that access to reasonably priced, nutritious food is a much more difficult problem than is commonly recognized, affecting more than 400,000 residents in Dallas County, Texas."

And when folks can't find decent food, they turn to the unhealthy alternatives peddled by convenience stores -- at exorbitant prices, no less. So residents in southern Dallas go broke eating food that's slowly killing them. As the study points out:

"The food that is available in low-income neighborhoods typically contains high concentrations of unhealthy fats, carbohydrates, and additives, which contribute to health problems such as obesity, diabetes, and heart disease."

And, as far as Berg and Bray are concerned, the lack of groceries in southern Dallas makes no sense for three reasons: A lower-income population is more likely to spend a higher percentage of its income on food than on luxury purchases ("like vacations"); a good grocery in the area would thrive in the vacuum; and a grocery would have tremendous access to a labor force looking to work and to lower-cost real estate.

But common sense and business sense mean nothing, the report says -- not when perception is everything:

"Interviewing top executives at a broad range of businesses in Dallas, Berg asked these elite respondents how they had made high-stakes decisions about where to locate stores. He also asked if respondents had considered particular low-income neighborhoods in southern Dallas. The interviews revealed that most businesses considered only a short list of potential locations, and that concerns over crime eliminated low-income areas from consideration, without any quantitative cost-benefit calculation in the vast majority of cases. A number of respondents said that even if they received a subsidy equal to their entire rental costs for a year, they would not consider locating a store in what they perceived to be high-crime neighborhoods."

As Bray and Berg note, like they have to: "Everyone has to eat, after all." Apparently, not everyone. And not everywhere. --[Robert Wilonsky](#)

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