



GOOD

FOOD

EXAMINING  
THE IMPACT OF  
**FOOD  
DESERTS**  
ON PUBLIC HEALTH  
IN CHICAGO



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RESEARCH & CONSULTING GROUP

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

## OVERVIEW

*Examining The Impact Of Food Deserts On Public Health In Chicago* provides evidence that access to healthy food impacts diet-related health outcomes, accounting for other important factors such as race, income, and education.

More than a half million Chicagoans live in food deserts (areas with no or distant grocery stores) and roughly 400,000 Chicagoans live in areas with an imbalance of food choices (nearby access to fast food restaurants but no or distant grocery stores). While many of us take food options for granted, residents of the food desert often cannot choose between eating an apple instead of a candy bar, a salad instead of French fries, or fresh skinless chicken instead of deep fried, high-fat chicken.

The study found that, as communities become more out-of-balance in terms of food choices, residents are more likely to die prematurely and at greater rates from diabetes, cancer, and cardiovascular diseases, as well as suffer from obesity and hypertension.

*LaSalle Bank is committed to building sustainable communities and understands that many of the Chicago's neighborhoods are challenged by limited access to healthy food. Researcher Mari Gallagher proposed, and LaSalle Bank commissioned this report to explore the health consequences of food deserts. We hope that the findings will reveal both the challenges and opportunities involved in providing affected neighborhoods equal access to healthy food.*

**-Mary Laraia,  
Group Senior Vice President,  
LaSalle Bank**

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*This report makes a real contribution to the field of epidemiology and other disciplines. Its evidence applies to a broad swath of health outcomes, ranging from "premature mortality," to cardiovascular, diabetes, and cancer deaths to obesity and hypertension. Are there aspects of places that can make us sick or keep us well? The answer is most assuredly "yes!"*

**-George Kaplan  
epidemiologist and scholar  
and author of the report's Foreword**

*The study assesses the link between food imbalance and the quality and length of life, and the quality and cause of death. It is also about solutions, and about creating and supporting new partnerships and opportunities that will improve and extend lives.*

**- Mari Gallagher  
researcher and report author**

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**View the full report and related materials at [lasallebank.com](http://lasallebank.com)**

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 1923, long before the rise of McDonald’s golden arches, an advertisement for beef made this proclamation in the *Bridgeport Telegraph*:

*“Ninety percent of the diseases known to man are caused by cheap foodstuffs. You are what you eat.”*

The phrase *you are what you eat* actually dates back to the 17th century. Over time, science has repeatedly demonstrated that nutritional intake directly affects health outcomes. That we are what we eat is a medical fact. But to what degree does what we eat and, thus, our health, depend on where we live and the types of food we have access to?

Examining The Impact Of Food Deserts On Public Health In Chicago probes this very question. Given our foundational premise that the health and vitality of urban communities is a block-by-block phenomenon, our first task is to measure the distance from every City of Chicago block to the nearest grocery store and fast food restaurant. Next, we develop an empirical score to quantify the balance of food choice available to residents. Finally, we compare food access and food balance directly to health outcomes, holding constant education, income, and race. Here is what we found:

- Residents of food deserts – large geographic areas with no or distant grocery stores – face nutritional challenges evident in diet-related community health outcomes. Those outcomes worsen when the food desert has high concentrations of nearby fast food alternatives. We call this the Food Balance Effect.
- Majority African American and majority White communities that have out-of-balance food environments will have higher rates of residents dying prematurely from diabetes that are statistically significant, controlling for income, education, and race. African American communities will be the most likely to experience the greatest total years of life lost from diabetes as a result. To measure this effect, we developed a Food Balance Score: the distance to the closest grocer divided by the distance to the closest fast food restaurant for each block, tract, and Community Area in the City of Chicago. The chart in *fig. 1* shows 2003 diabetes average years of potential life lost (YPLL) by high, middle, and low Food Balance Scores by Chicago Community Area. The more out of balance the community, the higher the life lost to diabetes. Diabetes

*African American and White communities that have out-of-balance food environments will have higher rates of residents dying prematurely from diabetes.*

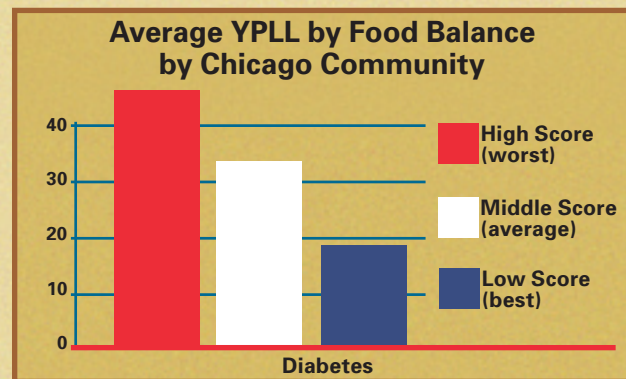


fig. 1

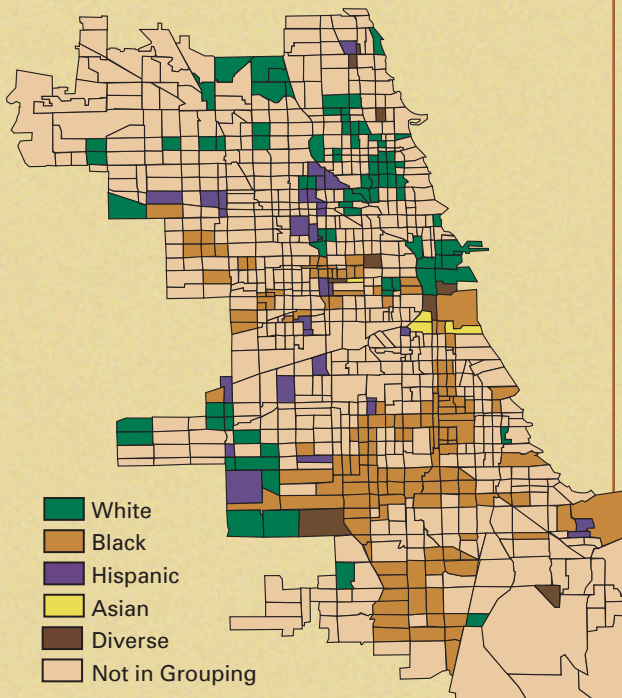
*Diabetes is also a serious health issue confronting Latino and diverse communities.*

## Diabetes by Chicago Community Areas by Food Balance Scores

Food Balance Groupings	YPLL	Death Rate Per 1,000 Population
Worst	45.48	1.27
Middle	33.48	1.11
Best	25.36	0.56

fig. 2

## Chicago's Most Out-of-Balance Tracts When It Comes to Food Access



This map shows the most out-of-balance tracts that have no or few grocers but nearby fast food restaurants shaded by that tract's majority

fig. 3

is also a serious health issue confronting Latino and diverse communities. Our study suggests that food access and geographic food balance, however, are not the key contributors to those poor health outcomes.

While the calculation of years of potential life lost might be a new concept to some, almost everyone can relate to differentials among death rates. Fig. 2 shows the numeric years of potential life lost outcomes from the previous chart along with 2003 death rates for diabetes. The diabetes death rate for the most out-of-balance Chicago communities is more than twice the rate for all other communities.

The map in fig.3 shows Food Balance Scores by race for the tracts that scored in the worst third. These are areas that have no or distant grocery stores, but nearby fast food restaurants, where the greatest premature death from diabetes will likely continue to occur.

Premature death due to cancer and cardiovascular disease is also greater for African American, White, and Latino communities where there is greater imbalance of food choices. While these effects are not statistically significant, the pattern repeats itself in nearly every instance of analysis: as communities become more out-of-balance in terms of food choices, diet-related deaths and premature death increase.

African Americans are the most disadvantaged when it comes to balanced food choices, although other racial groups do suffer as well. African Americans on average travel the farthest distance to any type of grocery store, and their low access communities cluster strikingly. Chicago's food deserts, for the most part, are exclusively African American.

## Average YPLL by Food Balance by Chicago Community

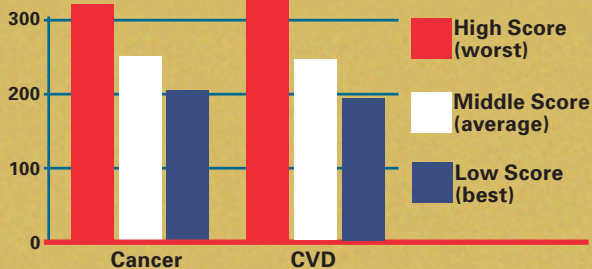


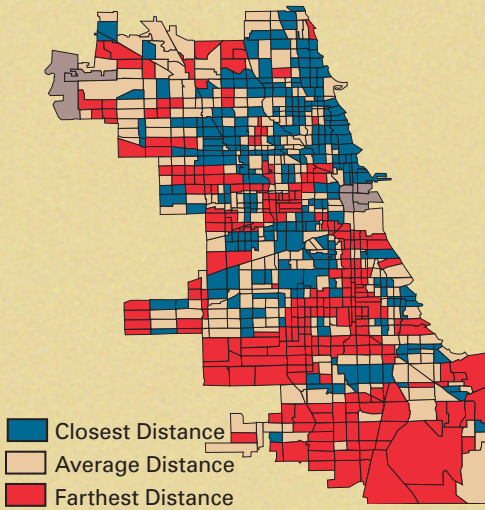
fig. 5

## Cancer and Cardiovascular Disease by Chicago Community Areas by Food Balance Scores

Food Balance Groupings	Cancer		Cardiovascular Disease		Food Balance Score
	YPLL	Death Rate	YPLL	Death Rate	
Worst	314	9.73	345	11.07	2.04
Middle	247	7.42	242	7.41	1.25
Best	204	6.68	185	5.72	0.87

fig. 4

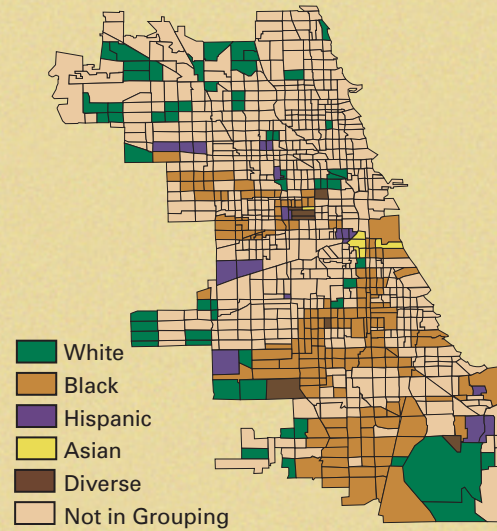
## Distance to Grocers by Tract in Chicago



The map shows distance to all types of grocery stores at the tract level. Red colored tracts are the farthest distance from grocers; we see that they form three key food deserts on Chicago's West and South side.

**fig. 6**

## Chicago's Food Deserts Are Nearly Exclusively African-American



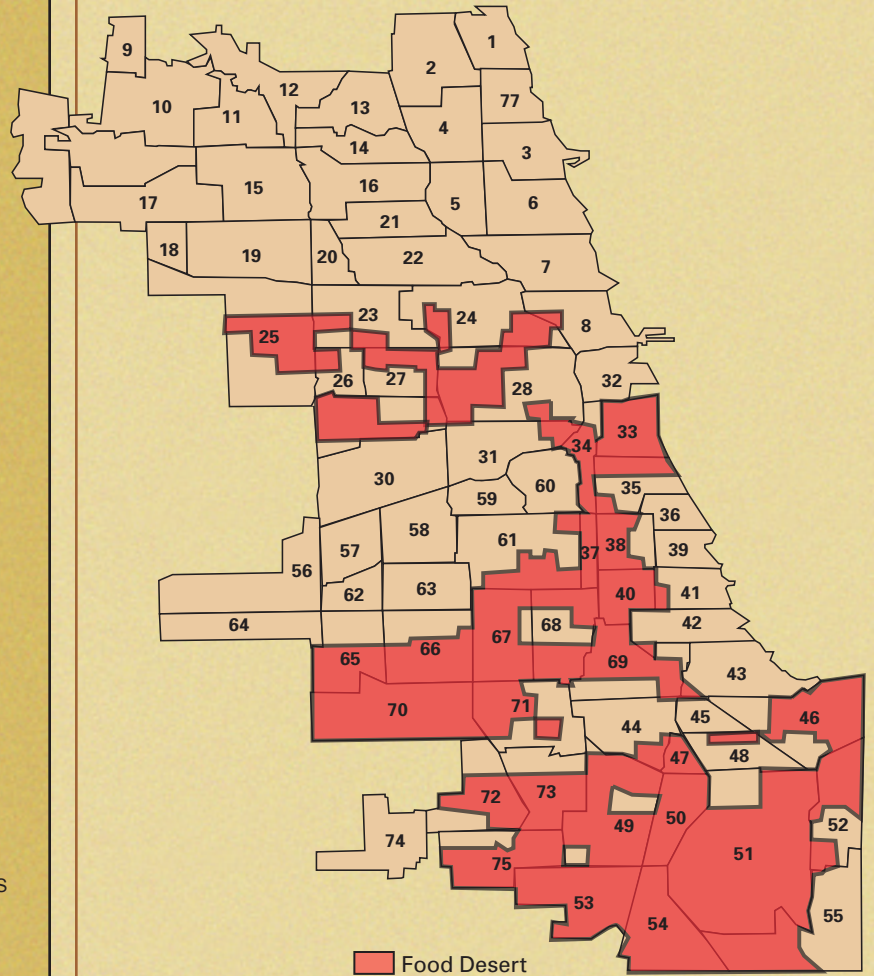
The map shows only the tracts that are the farthest distance to grocers and shades them by race. We see that the three clusters of food deserts are primarily African American, with the African American majority tracts.

**fig. 7**

## Chicago Communities

- |                       |                           |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| 1 ROGERS PARK         | 40 WASHINGTON PARK        |
| 2 WEST RIDGE          | 41 HYDE PARK              |
| 3 UPTOWN              | 42 WOODLAWN               |
| 4 LINCOLN SQUARE      | 43 SOUTH SHORE            |
| 5 NORTH CENTER        | 44 CHATHAM                |
| 6 LAKE VIEW           | 45 AVALON PARK            |
| 7 LINCOLN PARK        | 46 SOUTH CHICAGO          |
| 8 NEAR NORTH SIDE     | 47 BURNSIDE               |
| 9 EDISON PARK         | 48 CALUMET HEIGHTS        |
| 10 NORWOOD PARK       | 49 ROSELAND               |
| 11 JEFFERSON PARK     | 50 PULLMAN                |
| 12 FOREST GLEN        | 51 SOUTH DEERING          |
| 13 NORTH PARK         | 52 EAST SIDE              |
| 14 ALBANY PARK        | 53 WEST PULLMAN           |
| 15 PORTAGE PARK       | 54 RIVERDALE              |
| 16 IRVING PARK        | 55 HEGEWISCH              |
| 17 DUNNING            | 56 GARFIELD RIDGE         |
| 18 MONTCLARE          | 57 ARCHER HEIGHTS         |
| 19 BELMONT CRAGIN     | 58 BRIGHTON PARK          |
| 20 HERMOSA            | 59 MCKINLEY PARK          |
| 21 AVONDALE           | 60 BRIDGEPORT             |
| 22 LOGAN SQUARE       | 61 NEW CITY               |
| 23 HUMBOLDT PARK      | 62 WEST ELSDON            |
| 24 WEST TOWN          | 63 GAGE PARK              |
| 25 AUSTIN             | 64 CLEARING               |
| 26 WEST GARFIELD PARK | 65 WEST LAWN              |
| 27 EAST GARFIELD PARK | 66 CHICAGO LAWN           |
| 28 NEAR WEST SIDE     | 67 WEST ENGLEWOOD         |
| 29 NORTH LAWNSDALE    | 68 ENGLEWOOD              |
| 30 SOUTH LAWNSDALE    | 69 GREATER GRAND CROSSING |
| 31 LOWER WEST SIDE    | 70 ASHBURN                |
| 32 LOOP               | 71 AUBURN GRESHAM         |
| 33 NEAR SOUTH SIDE    | 72 BEVERLY                |
| 34 ARMOUR SQUARE      | 73 WASHINGTON HEIGHTS     |
| 35 DOUGLAS            | 74 MOUNT GREENWOOD        |
| 36 OAKLAND            | 75 MORGAN PARK            |
| 37 FULLER PARK        | 76 O'HARE                 |
| 38 GRAND BOULEVARD    | 77 EDGEWATER              |
| 39 KENWOOD            |                           |

## Chicago's Food Deserts by Tract with Community Boundaries



**fig. 8**

*Communities that have no or distant grocery stores, or have an imbalance of healthy food options, will likely have increased premature death and chronic health conditions.*

In a typical African American block, the nearest grocery store is roughly twice as distant as the nearest fast food restaurant. This means that, for African Americans, it is much easier to access fast food than other types of food. Following a doctor's dietary recommendation is likely very difficult for the half million plus African Americans who live in the 287 worst grocery-store-access tracts.

Food balance is a statistically significant contributor to increased rates of body mass index (obesity), but when we conduct the analysis separately by distinct food venues, we see that distance to a grocery store has an even greater impact on body mass index. As grocery store access decreases, obesity increases, holding education and income constant. Since obesity can fuel the onset of other diseases and chronic health conditions, the development of grocery stores in underserved areas likely would contribute positively to community health and wellness of African Americans and other groups. Conversely, living in a food desert can mean greater rates of obesity, premature death, and lower quality of life, especially for mothers and children.

In Chicago, body mass index patterns cluster dramatically by race and by place: the North and Northwest sides have the lowest rates of obesity, while the West and South sides have the highest rates of obesity.

All of these findings point to one conclusion: communities that have no or distant grocery stores, or have an imbalance of healthy food options, will likely have increased premature death and chronic health conditions, holding other influences constant. Although we must set our findings in the context of the challenges and limitations of linking cause and effect and of predicting, with certainty, the exact statistical magnitude of the relationship between food access and health, it is clear that food deserts, especially those with an abundance of fast food options, pose serious health and wellness challenges to the residents who live within them and to the City of Chicago as a whole.

The diet-related health outcomes that we focus on – cancer, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity, and hypertension – steal time, resources, vitality, and productivity, and they reinforce each other. According to a recent report released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “obesity can increase the risk of (adult onset) type 2 diabetes by as much as 34 fold, and diabetes is a major risk factor for amputations, blindness, kidney failure, and heart disease.” Obesity alone is estimated to cost the United States health care system \$100 billion per year (Koplan and Fleming, 2000). Six out

of every 10 adult Americans are overweight, nearly one in three is obese, and half of all meals are eaten outside the home, mostly at fast food restaurants (UMN News). And according to a study by Lisa Young and Marion Nestle of New York University, food portions, calories, and fat content have increased dramatically over the last few decades, not just at fast food locations, but everywhere. For example, a muffin today is typically 333% larger than what the USDA recommends. In these times, choosing healthy foods on a regular basis is a difficult challenge for anyone, but for residents of out-of-balance food deserts, it is nearly impossible.

The costs associated with the Food Balance Effect will be borne directly by communities and their residents as it relates to the quality and length of life, and indirectly by the health care industry, by employers, by government agencies and by others who take on the financial burden of pre-death treatments. To simply demonize the fast food industry for the negative health outcomes associated with the Food Balance Effect would be to miss several key points that we discuss in the section titled *Author's Comments, Conclusions, and Acknowledgements*. Less important now is what the fast food industry has been. More important are what it is becoming, what it could become, the best way to monitor the Food Balance Effect moving forward, and how to stand behind and support African American and, indeed, all community leaders who struggle to secure quality and sustainable food venues in their neighborhoods. As we all need to eat to live, food might not only be our most common denominator as people, but also our most unifying call for collective, strategic action that transcends race, place, class, and outdated development models that just don't work in these underserved communities. Identifying market as well as needs-based solutions that promote access to nutritious foods and healthy food choices will require input and support from the food desert residents themselves as well as from grocers, banks, brokers, developers, planners, health advocates, educators, government, and foundations – ultimately everyone – to achieve even a modest level of success.

We hope that this study provides one small step in the direction of understanding the complex relationship between food balance and community health.

We invite your comments and participation moving forward.

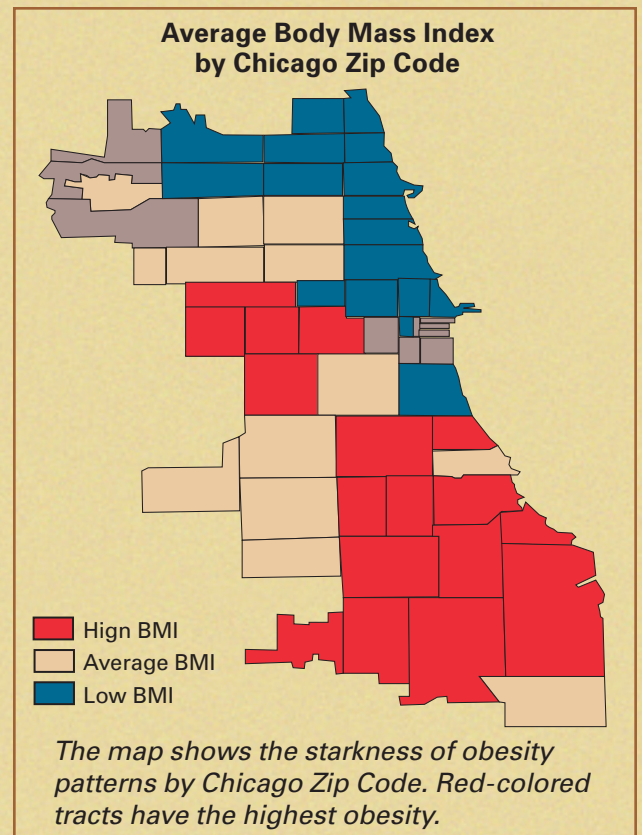


fig. 9

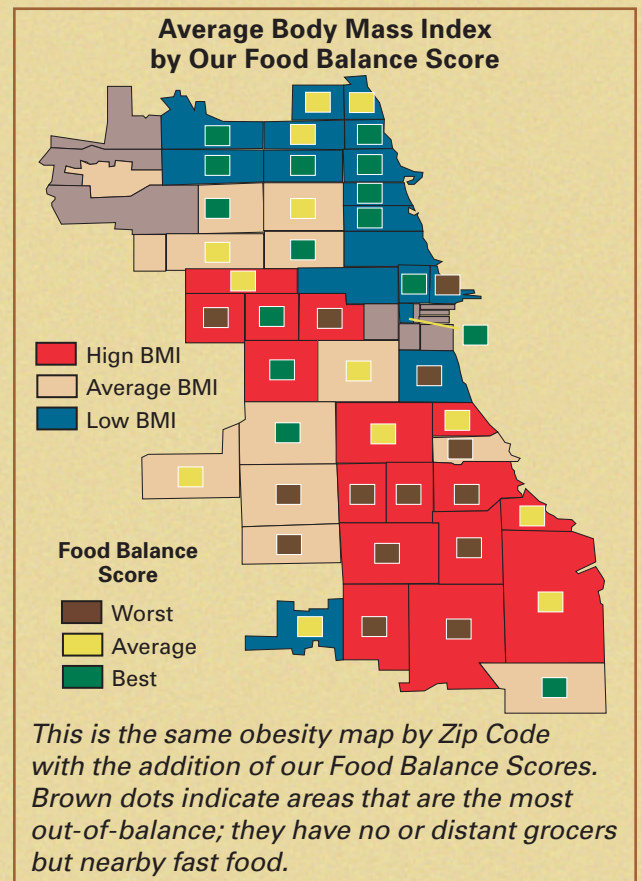
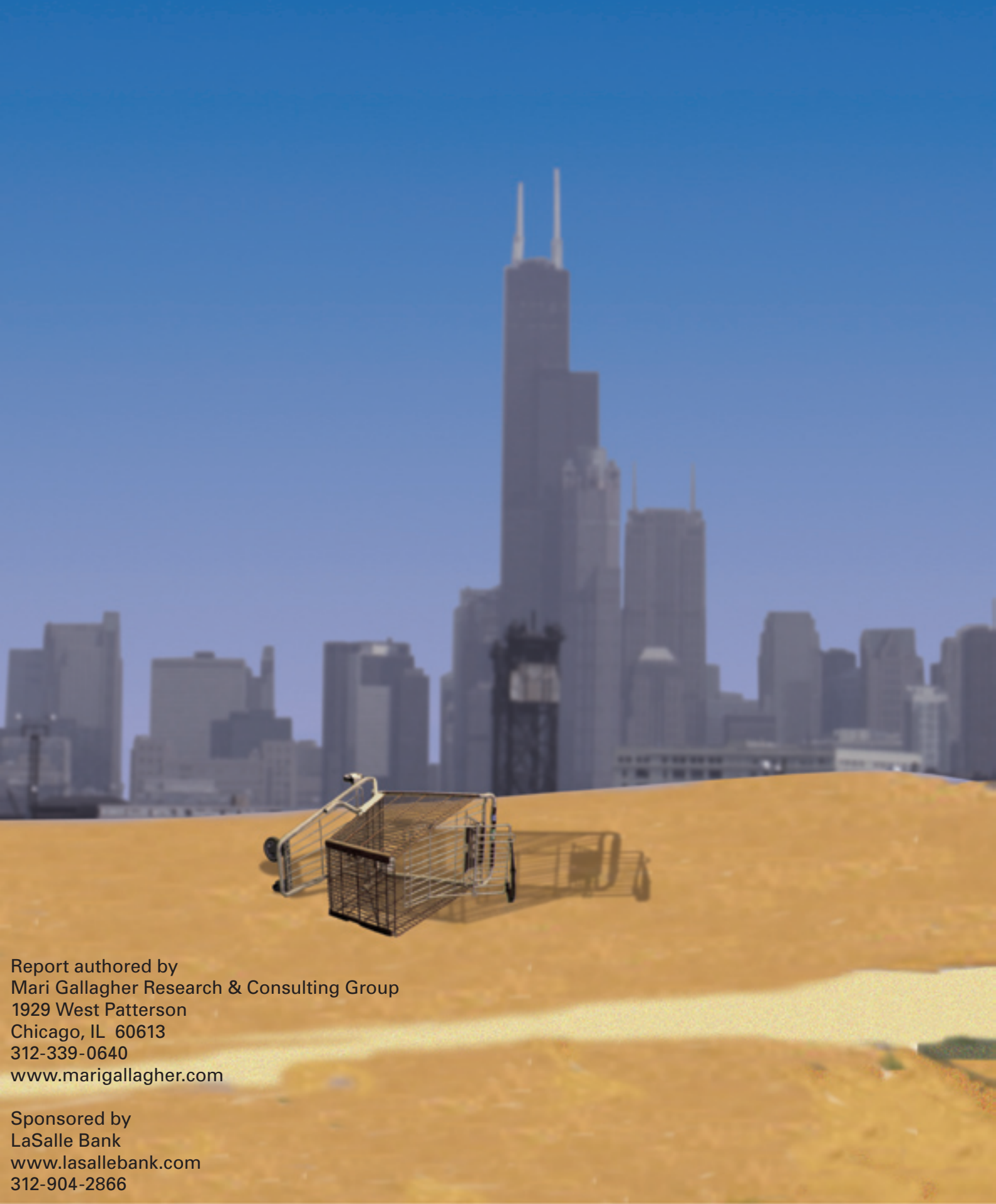


fig. 10



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