

A View from Behind the Cash Register

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I got out of my Uber at the intersection of Carey and West Baltimore Street. Hiding from the chilly October breeze, I wrapped my scarf tightly around my neck and rolled down the sleeves of my Johns Hopkins sweatshirt. Before me was a three-story brick building with “Western Grocery” scrawled across the wall in blue spray paint, and an arrow directing me to turn the corner. I followed it to the store entrance on Carey Street, which was covered in wire mesh, and stepped through the bulletproof glass door. I found myself confined in a locked vestibule with a tall, bulky African American man in a baggy T-shirt and jeans. He leaned against the menu taped to the window, waiting for his sandwich.

\$3.50 to pay for his sandwich, she saw me and immediately buzzed me through.

The door unlocked and I was allowed into her store, leaving the man still waiting for his food in the vestibule.

Welcome to food shopping in a typical Baltimore corner store.

Western Grocery and Carryout is one of 450 small groceries and corner stores in the city, most of them in “food deserts” – low-income neighborhoods that are over a quarter mile from a supermarket, in which at least 30% of residents live without access to a vehicle, forcing them to shop locally in an environment with limited healthy food sources.³ Some are set up like Jojo’s, with windows and walls reinforced by wire mesh and locked doors that prevent customers from freely entering the store.⁵ Shopkeepers take customers’ orders through bulletproof glass and push their requested items through a rotating window post payment. Unlike traditional grocery stores and supermarkets, corner stores and small groceries have limited food options, which are most often processed and calorie-dense, like chips and soda.^{3,5} Fresh and frozen produce are rarely available due to the lack of proper infrastructure, such as refrigerators, freezers, and ample shelf space.⁵

Corner stores and small groceries represent 78% of food sources for residents in food deserts. One in four Baltimore residents live in such food deserts, according to the Baltimore City’s Food Environment 2015 Report.³ Food deserts tend to be in the city’s poorest neighborhoods, which are predominantly African American. These neighborhoods have more liquor stores, criminal activity and violence. People living in food deserts suffer the worst health outcomes in the city, including obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases, which lead to an increased mortality rate⁴.

For good reason, city officials and public health



The storefront of Western Grocery & Carryout. The building was covered with black, metal fences. The store was on the first floor. Jojo and her family lived upstairs. Taken on October 20th, 2016

“Jojo, you’ve got company,” yelled the man.

I heard a shuffle come from behind a thick glass window—also bulletproof—that separated the Chinese store owner, Jojo, from her customers. Before I saw her, I saw her display case, featuring a rainbow of candy and tobacco products. A no-smoking sign in capital letters and bold font hung ironically above the cigarette display. As she leaned over a small revolving window, through which the tall man placed



The display of candy, cigarettes and other commonly purchased small items at the front of the store. Jojo exchanged these products for money via a small rotating window. Taken on October 20th, 2016.

experts are trying to see if they can use these corner stores to improve health outcomes for food desert residents by replacing nutrient-poor processed foods with fresh nutrient-rich produce. I worked for two years on a Johns Hopkins obesity-prevention research study called B'more Healthy Communities for Kids, which ended this past June. We cooperated with corner stores and carryouts in low-income, food desert neighborhoods.² The study randomly assigned 28 geographic zones to serve as either controls or areas for intervention. In intervention zones, we worked to improve access and demand for healthy foods in corner stores by paying them to stock certain products, like fresh fruits, and to use educational displays and shelf labels to encourage customers to buy the healthier offerings. We also conducted taste tests, passed out giveaways, and educated customers on nutrition.²

By the end of the program, my team found that, in comparison to control stores, more healthy foods were purchased in our intervention stores where they were made available and promoted. These kinds of positive results were also seen in previous healthy corner store programs, including Baltimore Healthy Stores and Shop Healthy NYC.⁷

I had helped recruit corner store owners to participate in the program and learned that many were immigrants; most were Korean-American, but many came from China, where I was raised. I was one of

the only Chinese speakers on my research team, so I did most of the interviews and data collection for the stocking and sales of products. I never had the chance, however, to learn about the Chinese store owners themselves or ask about their relationship with the predominantly black community they served. That was outside the scope of our study.

Out of curiosity, and to fulfill a recent class requirement, I decided to explore this by visiting Western Grocery & Carryout, one of our experimental control stores that had not received any intervention. The store is relatively large and also operates as a carryout that sells hot foods.

Western Grocery & Carryout is located in Sandtown-Winchester, a low-income African American neighborhood that many people know as Freddie Gray's home.¹ In 2011, almost one-third of families lived below the federal poverty line. Average life expectancy at birth was 65.3 years, compared to the national average of 79. Out of the 55 Baltimore neighborhoods, Sandtown ranked in the top five amongst those with the highest density of liquor stores, tobacco retailers and vacant lots and buildings.¹ For every 1,000 residents, 4.53 were murdered annually in Sandtown, a homicide incidence rate over twice that of Baltimore city. Sandtown also has more people in Maryland's prison system than any other neighborhood in the state.¹ "Behind Glass" corner stores, like Jojo's, are common in these high-crime neighborhoods.⁵

After getting buzzed into the store, I waited for store owner Shi Jin Zhou, nicknamed Jojo by her customers. There I stood, by yet another door that separated her and her cash register from the store's interior. Recognizing me from previous visits, Jojo unlocked the door and welcomed me in. As I stepped behind the bulletproof glass, I entered Jojo's world.

She greeted with me with a warm smile. Jojo kept her space hot, so I had to peel off my layers while I walked across the narrow hallway behind the glass display. The space was larger than it appeared from the outside and led to a small kitchen, where slices of bacon were sizzling on top of a black iron griddle. Through the glass, I spotted the man on the other side, still waiting in the vestibule. I wondered if he knew an entire kitchen existed behind the menu wall.



The inside of Western Grocery & Carryout: Customers, who want to buy larger items on the shelves, are buzzed inside through a locked glass door. Taken on October 20th, 2016.

Jojo is a petite woman in her early 30s, with a heart-shaped face and large dark brown eyes. After graduating from college in the Fujian province, she immigrated to New York City to be with her family in 2010. Jojo worked long hours studying English and civics to become a U.S. citizen last year. Chuckling, she told me in Mandarin, “Bei le yi hou, kao wan yi hou, da gai jiu wan ji le.” After memorizing, after taking the exam, I basically forgot everything.

Jojo met her husband in New York almost as soon as she moved there. They got married and moved to Baltimore, where most of her husband’s relatives live. Jojo’s parents, who had also previously lived in Baltimore, owned Western Grocery & Carryout. They let Jojo take over the two-story property, and it has been hers ever since. The store is on the first floor, and she lives upstairs with her husband, one-year-old son, three-year-old daughter, and a nanny she brought over from China to help take care of her kids.

Jojo’s day begins at 8am. She gets ready and cooks breakfast for her family before opening the store. Ev-

ery day, she works from 9am to 10pm. Once or twice a week, she takes her family to visit her parents, who moved back to Baltimore to help her older brother and his family of five. Like Jojo, her brother emigrated from Fujian and manages a similar store in Baltimore about 15 minutes away by car. Jojo described her life here as fairly good and roughly the same as how it was in China. “Zhi shi huan ge di fang shen huo,” she said. It’s just switching a location to live.

Besides continuing her lifestyle, Jojo and her family have also maintained good health after emigration. “Zhi shi man man bian da le.” Just slowly getting older, she joked.

While Jojo regarded her eating habits as healthy, she felt differently about her customers. In Mandarin, she said, They drink and eat soda and chips every day – which were the most popular items that Jojo sold. At most, they’ll eat a healthier option of a sandwich. If they have money, they’ll order a hot food, like a sandwich or fried chicken. During the interview, Jojo prepared a bacon, egg and cheese sandwich for a customer. She spread butter and jelly on two slices of toast, before adding the rest. “You’re putting jelly on the sandwich?” I asked, wrinkling my forehead out of confusion. She grinned and said that she found the combination weird too. Sweet and salty. They like it. I tried it before, and it’s actually not bad.

“Would you eat the food you sell?” I asked her. “Mei you chi,” Jojo replied. I don’t eat it. She commented that she rarely eats what she sells, not because she finds the food unhealthy, but because she doesn’t want to eat the same foods that she handles every day. I’m also not used to it. I prefer Chinese food. Jojo prepares Chinese-style cooking. We have rice, meat, vegetables, and soup sometimes. It varies! To convince me, she pointed to her rice cooker, which sat next to a big tub of mayonnaise that she used for her customers. She also commented that Chinese restaurants were easy to find, because so many Chinese people lived in the city.

Jojo lives in a food desert because that’s where her business is. However, Jojo owns a car, so she shops at least once a week at the large wholesalers B Green and Sam’s Club, and a specialized Asian supermarket about 20 minutes away called GreatWall. When I re-

stock for the store, I also pick up groceries at Great-Wall. Many of her customers have no such option. At least 1 in 3 people in her neighborhood don't own a car or the economic flexibility to travel for groceries; so they eat Jojo's food.

I grew up in China, where I ate mostly fresh produce. Eating according to season was part of the Chinese culture. I could see that Jojo had a similar approach to food. I wondered why she was not selling the food she bought for herself. So I asked Jojo if selling fresh produce was important to her. She told me that it was and that they had tried, unsuccessfully, to sell fruits in the past. "Zui jian dan de ping guo, oranges, dou jing chang fang huai diao." Even the simplest kind of fruits, like apples and oranges, are often left until they're spoiled. Jojo said that her customers had poor diets. The healthier the food, the more unlikely they'll eat it. Items like vegetables and fruits, they eat very little of these items. Even if we provide it, they won't buy it, and it'll go to waste.

Halfway through our interview, her one-year-old son wandered back into the store with his nanny tagging behind. Jojo told me that they had been walking around outside the store. "Do you think that's safe?" I asked, as my research coordinator had always advised me to visit these neighborhoods in pairs. Not that safe, Jojo replied. But the people here, how it's like in America is that...they'll respect old people and kids more. Do you know that? Us young people, if we go out, they're more likely to harass us. But the elderly and kids are safer; they won't bully them, so it's alright. Jojo confessed that she's afraid to walk around outside, and if she did go out, it was for only short stretches close to the store.

She described her relationship with her clientele as pretty good, but said she found their character and behaviors improper. "Bi jiao huai," she commented. Quite dishonest. Jojo said that if she doesn't watch her customers, they will steal her things. There's poor public security. That's why we need to fence up the door and windows. "But they know your name!" I protested, struggling to imagine myself stealing from an acquaintance. They know my name because they live close by and come regularly. But they'll still steal from me. Of course, there are exceptions. Some are good.

There're just less of them.

Although both Jojo and I moved from China to Baltimore, our experiences with the city differ drastically. Living in the "Hopkins Bubble," I realized how privileged I was and am to never have to worry about food and physical security. Within half a mile from where I live, I could grab an apple from Charles Market whenever I craved one. Jojo had to drive miles. Yet, she is one of the lucky ones in her community.

Jojo and her neighbors face a flawed built environment, with limited parks and green spaces, dirty streets and vacant homes. This restricts their opportunities for physical activity and social interactions. They also share a fear of community violence and crime, which are results of a poor education system, lack of job opportunities and enduring poverty. But unlike many of her neighbors, Jojo's food environment is not limited to Sandtown; she has access to affordable and fresh food options. As a result, Jojo and her family's health conditions have not deteriorated from living in a food desert. Even though she knows the same cannot be said for most of her customers, she feels there's very little she can do about it.

But Jojo can contribute to her community's health, even if she's powerless to change the built environment. Based on my team's research, corner store owners can affect their customers' shopping and eating habits. These changes are difficult, but not impossible over time and with education. Hopkins and the city health department are hoping to work through community members to change the food environment in these nutrition deserts. They are not only encouraging store owners to stock healthier items, but also guiding them on how to promote these new offerings. Stepping back into the vestibule, I thought about the candy and tobacco that greeted me and hoped that soon they could be replaced with a rainbow of fruits and vegetables instead. Although substantial reforms have yet to reach Jojo and her customers, I have a feeling that she will cooperate, probably enthusiastically. She has a stake in the city just as much as her neighbors do. While holding her son, who was recently born in Baltimore, Jojo said, "Wo men zhu zai zhe li."

We live here now.

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