



## Anthropology and Urban Foodways

*Society for Urban National and Transnational/Global Anthropology*

Andrew Newman

### An Interview with Alex Hill of the Detroit Health Department

**Alex B. Hill** is an epidemiologist in the newly reorganized Detroit Health Department and holds an MA in anthropology from Wayne State University. His research (see <https://alexhill.org>) draws on mixed methods and ethnography, in particular, to foreground the relationship between food access and social inequality in a city well known for both urban farming as well its so-called “food desert” areas. Much of Hill’s work is collaborative and he is particularly interested in using anthropology to develop tools for neighborhood organizations seeking to document their food environments and plan interventions.

#### **AN: Tell me about your work, and how anthropology has shaped your approach to food-related issues in Detroit?**

AH: My current position is as an epidemiologist with the City of Detroit Health Department. We are pretty new here; just relaunched August 2015. As epidemiologists, we are primarily looking at data, but a big part of that is examining the social determinants of health and their impacts on the whole population of Detroit, including food access.

My focus in medical anthropology was very helpful. The anthropology side of collecting the data and making it meaningful to other people is crucial. The food piece is probably the best example. From the data, we can count the number of grocery stores. We can add up the dollars people are spending outside of the city. We can pull the percentage from the Census of people relying on SNAP/food stamps. But it didn’t all really make sense until I was able to bring in ethnography, interview people, and ask them where they were going for food and why it mattered to them.

#### **And how did thinking anthropologically shape your thinking around the food desert concept?**

In large part, the federal government created this label through the USDA, the term is meant to include access to nutritious and affordable food, but is often misrepresented in media. It is a very market driven approach that comes from a perspective of deficit; the absence of grocery stores or the lack of food. Detroit by contrast is full of food, but lacking in food choices. Food insecurity remains high largely due to economic factors, absence of good jobs. The food desert label has been used for the New Market Tax Credit to bring a Whole Foods and Meijer into the city.

#### **So, the food desert label has become a catalyst for urban redevelopment projects?**

Right. Many of the local and regional foundations started giving funding specifically for food initiatives and urban agriculture in Detroit. Food became a sort of entry point for foundations to do work in Detroit. The main problem with this was that over time food access became less interesting and foundations left and funding dried up.

#### **What about urban agriculture? Isn’t that a promising source of food in inner-cities, especially Detroit?**

It’s a great headline. But from my study with 200 people, only three of them did gardening or urban agriculture. It is a very small subset of people that are able to use urban agriculture or gardening. It’s not like it is a resource that is able to get you an entire meal, or a week’s worth food, it is always just a supplemental amount of food. With urban agriculture the biggest thing is what results from perception. I completed a lit review of 30 different urban ag community program studies, and the social connections that people create and the psychological effect of gardening have the biggest impact.

#### **From the surveys and work you’ve done around the city, can you talk about working alongside neighborhood-based organizations and community groups?**

Yes. I've been critical of people who do research on Detroit, and who either just look at the data and don't talk to people, or who set themselves up, collect data from people and leave. In my work I try to employ a research justice framework where the research is the community's and not mine to own. I can be an echo and a bridge for the information and issues that communities share.

I found it was very helpful for community groups to be engaged in the surveying of grocery stores, including going to those stores and judging their outside and inside appearances, and seeing what foods were there or not there. Also, I think the qualitative interviews had a big impact for how local leaders thought about implementing new programs; it could mean thinking differently about why people went to different places to get food, as well as how people got there.

**Although we have been talking about food, in Detroit and nearby Flint, access to water is something that is no longer taken for granted. Can you talk about how your work relates to water access?**

I've supported a few community groups in analyzing data around water, especially in thinking about affordability. In Detroit, when we have 40% of people living below the poverty line, water affordability is a long way off. Detroit as a city and region is rebuilding many of its systems. We have to make sure we do that with people, and their problems, at the forefront.

**One final note. You have a great mapping website: [Detroitography](#). Can you talk about how you became interested in mapping, and its relationship to your work on food.**

About 8 years ago I started teaching myself GIS and mapping so I could better understand Detroit. I wanted to visualize human impacts more than just putting data on a map. I saw organizations in Detroit pumping out maps, but it didn't have much context. It was really important for me to challenge that, and capture more qualitative data, and reframe data in a way that related to people.

*Andrew Newman is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Wayne State University and Secretary of SUNTA.*

For questions about this column, email Andrew Newman at [andrew.newman@wayne.edu](mailto:andrew.newman@wayne.edu)

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