

**Deciphering Janesville's Southside Food Desert:
An Analysis of the Institutions of Education and Economy**

Ivory Christianson

Department of Jensen, Rock University High School

Introduction to Sociology

Adjunct Erin Jensen

December 4th, 2023

Introduction

While food deserts may not be on the minds of most in Janesville, they are an unfortunate reality for Southside residents. An urban food desert is identified when over a third of the area lives more than a mile from a grocery store with a weekly revenue exceeding two million dollars. In contrast, Janesville's Northside boasts over eight medium to large grocery stores within three square miles. Since the closure of the Kroger-owned 'Pick 'N Save' in 2017, the entire Southside has been left without a single full-service grocery store. Most residents now live approximately five miles away from one, either Daniel's Sentry on the Janesville Westside or Piggly Wiggly on the Beloit Northside.

Adding to the challenge, 29% of Janesville residents live "below a basic survival budget", with a significant majority residing on the Southside (Nathan et al., 2023). Within this demographic, 64% of renters and 42% of homeowners report inadequate access to fresh fruits and vegetables (Nathan et al., 2023).

The closure of the General Motors (GM) car manufacturing plant in 2008 exacerbated the situation on the Southside, creating a significant void in the local job market. This event not only resulted in a decline in financial resources for Janesville but also triggered a surge in poverty rates and restricted access to healthy food options. 15 years after GM closed, Janesville residents face a persistent challenge. The employment and education landscape has shifted causing the emergence of a food desert. The safety net once provided by GM is gone, and many are now slipping through the cracks.

General Motors

The General Motors Janesville (GM-J) plant, opened in 1919, emerged as the lifeblood that Janesville desperately needed after World War 1. Initially focused on producing tractors and farm equipment, the facility quickly became a cornerstone of the local economy, employing over 3,000 workers—equivalent to more than six percent of Janesville's population (Census Bureau, et al., 2021). Facing an early setback amid a farm industry depression, the plant laid off a third of its workforce within a year. General Manager Joseph A. Craig played a pivotal role in the recovery, successfully persuading General Motors to relocate truck manufacturing from Flint, Michigan, to Janesville. This strategic move not only revitalized the local economy but also preserved over 1,000 jobs. Over the next seven decades, GM-J stood as a symbol of industrial success, weathering economic challenges and contributing significantly to the prosperity of Janesville. Despite whispers circulating a year before the fateful day in December 2008 about the potential closure of underperforming or aging GM plants, few believed that GM-J, with nearly a century of success, could be among them. Yet, on June 3rd, 2008, CEO Rick Wagoner delivered the unexpected announcement of GM-J's closure within the next two years (*GM closing Janesville assembly plant*, 2008). The plant, the oldest running GM facility in the country, had been an enduring source of pride and stability for the community. After just six months and 20 days, the once-thriving GM-J plant, which had seen almost 70 years of smooth sailing, produced its final vehicle—a 2009 Black Chevy Tahoe. The Southside of Janesville fell into an eerie silence, marking the end of an era as the lifeblood and backbone of the city closed its doors for the last time.

The closing of GM-J rocked Janesville and specifically the Southside to its core. The closure resulted in the displacement of 1,200 employees, marking the disappearance of a cornerstone in the Janesville economy. For years, recent high school graduates had the opportunity to embark on their professional journeys with a comfortable, livable

salary—ensuring the well-being of themselves and their families. However, that era came to an abrupt end. The closure not only disrupted livelihoods but also contributed to Janesville's population stagnation, with only a modest increase of two thousand residents since GM-J shut its doors.

The General Motors Janesville plant closure sent shockwaves through the Janesville Southside, contributing significantly to the area's transformation into a food desert. The economic upheaval disrupted the established pathways for local employment and education, as GM-J historically provided a viable livelihood for Janesville residents without the need for a college degree. This unique aspect of GM-J's workforce had shaped a community belief that a college degree wasn't essential for securing a livable wage. However, with the closure, this paradigm shifted, and the once-thriving local economy faced a downturn, affecting businesses, including grocery stores, and limiting access to fresh and affordable food options.

Pick 'N Save

Pick 'N Save Janesville (PNS-J) began in 1997 as the 16th store in the Mega Marts lineup, a small, homegrown Wisconsin grocery brand. Within just four years of opening, Mega Marts was purchased by the larger grocery store company called Roundy's. From 2001 to 2008, PNS-J not only hit its stride but also established itself as the sole full-service grocery store on the Southside, strategically positioned just five minutes away from GM-J, with convenience for workers across all three shifts contributing significantly to its financial success. However, the closure of GM-J cast a shadow over PNS-J's future, a fact known within the store but seemingly unbeknownst to the community at large. The subsequent acquisition of the Pick 'N Save brand by Kroger in 2015 heightened the apprehensions of PNS-J associates. Their foresight proved accurate, as on September 10th, 2017, the associates gathered in Produce to learn about the impending closure. The store's rich history, from its origins with Mega Marts to the final chapter

under Kroger, underscores the dynamic shifts in the grocery industry and the challenges faced by local businesses in evolving economic landscapes.

On September 10th, 2017, associates noticed scattered flyers, placed with purpose in the familiar nooks of the store: by the time clock, the lockers, the deli backrooms, outside the freezer, and quietly positioned near the associate bathroom. Each flyer carried a vague message: **“Associate Meeting - 5pm - Human Resources - Deli Floor.”** As the clock struck five, all 71 employees gathered in Deli. The announcement echoed through the space, revealing the harsh reality – “The Janesville Pick ‘N Save store is going to be closing. You’ll all be reassigned to other stores.” The weight of the situation hit home as my mother, Tracy, a 20-year PNS-J associate, stood in the Deli section listening to the head honchos tell her that the store she saw with “dirt floors and unfinished ceilings” would be closing its doors, forever. It was barely 48 hours before the public found out. The community was left in shock, they didn’t see all the dirty laundry PNS-J had been hiding since 2008. In the eight years post the closure of GM-J, PNS-J’s weekly revenue dwindled to a mere third of its former numbers, exposing the economic hurdles the store had been navigating. The closure marked not just the end of a local institution but bore far-reaching consequences, directly contributing to the emergence of a food desert on Janesville’s Southside. The gap left by the closing of General Motors in 2008 set the stage for an economic downturn, gradually paving the way for a growing food desert. However, PNS-J’s closure in 2017 dealt a decisive blow, turning the evolving food desert into a stark reality. With the sole full-service grocery store on the Southside disappearing, residents faced heightened challenges in securing fresh and affordable food options. This emphasized the previously overlooked connection between local businesses and the overall well-being of the community they faithfully serve.

To the melody of “Linger” by The Cranberries, my 10-year-old self turned off the office lights, signaling the end of an era. Descending the peculiar 4-step staircase, I couldn’t shake the

realization that Pick 'N Save was bidding farewell to its patrons for the last time. The closure wasn't merely a chapter closing for my family; it was a poignant moment impacting thousands of families in Janesville. "With GM closing, Pick's closure was inevitable," my mom remarked, as she physically closed the automatic doors one last time. The echoes of the Cranberries' song mixed with the finality of the moment, encapsulating not just the end of a store but a reflection of broader economic shifts that had left an indelible mark on the community.

Who's to blame?

The Janesville Southside food desert is the result of the failure of the institutions of the Workforce/Economy and Education. GM-J was the heartbeat of the city of Janesville and gave many young adults the chance to enter an industry role with a solid starting income. With the union wages, job security, and promise of a long-term pension after thirty years of work, there was no need to pursue any further education (Rothstein, 2016). This created an air of indifference towards secondary education that was passed down through the years to the children of the families that worked there, painting the picture of their future at GM-J, not just a job.

"[GM] posted the largest annual loss in its history" in 2008 and due to this, they outsourced most of their production and inevitably had to close plants to move their work to more profitable regions (Goldstein, 2017). Simply another victim of the company's last ditch effort, GM-J had to shut down. GM-J was the top paying blue-collar job in Janesville; The loss of the plant meant the loss of financial stability for the workers that had depended on it for nearly a century. Buying power plummeted and the economic landscape of Janesville changed drastically. Workers could no longer afford the prices that PNS-J had set for healthy and sustainable food so they simply didn't go there anymore. Less people meant less profits. Just as

GM-J had done 8 years prior, Kroger chose to save its bottom line and pulled the plug on PNS-J. This decision left “22,000 citizens without direct access to a full service grocery store” (Aarsvold, 2023). Even six years later, the Southside is still grappling with the loss of PNS-J. While new stores have opened in different parts of the city, none have entered the barren food landscape of Janesville’s Southside, leaving this once bustling motor city without access to healthy and sustainable food options.

GM and Kroger closing their Janesville locations highlights the conflict theorist belief that once the power elite are no longer set to profit from people under them, those citizens are no longer of use to them. Despite GM-J and PNS-J being the foundation of Janesville, their parent companies pulled out of the city, leaving the Southside a shell of its former self. The recently added Hy-vee on the northside could have been the saving grace that thousands of families needed. But just as Kroger and GM before, they couldn’t see the people, they could only see the dollar signs.

Works Cited

Aarsvold, M. (2023, April 18). Southside Janesville residents tired of living in Food Desert. NBC15.

<https://www.nbc15.com/2023/04/18/southside-janesville-residents-tired-living-food-desert/>

Census Bureau, Federal Bureau of Investigation & Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2021). *Janesville*.

Janesville - Place Explorer - Data Commons.

https://datacommons.org/place/geoId/5537825/?utm_medium=explore&mprop=income&popt=Person&cpv=age%2CYears15Onwards&hl=en

Census Bureau. (2020). *U.S. Census Bureau quickfacts: Janesville City, Wisconsin*. United States Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/janesvillecitywisconsin/PST045222>

Dutko, P., Ver Ploeg, M., Farrigan, T. (2012). (rep.). Characteristics and Influential Factors of Food Deserts. United States Department of Agriculture.

Goldstein, A. (2017, April 18). *What is Janesville, Wisconsin, without General Motors?*. The Atlantic.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/04/janesville-wisconsin-gm-economic-future/523272/#:~:text=Back%20during%20the%20Great%20Depression,before%20GM%20filed%20for%20bankruptcy.>

GM closing Janesville assembly plant. (2008). Bizjournals.com.

<https://www.bizjournals.com/milwaukee/stories/2008/06/02/daily9.html>

Goldstein, A. (2018). *Janesville: An American story*. Simon & Schuster Paperbacks.

Nathan, C., Grenawalt, D., Yenser, E., Camber Davidson, J., Zupan, N., Mueller, M., & Palmore, Z. (2023). (rep.). *Rock County Food Environment Report*. Rock County Public Health.

Public Broadcasting Service (2022). Food Deserts [Video]. Intersections.

<https://www.pbs.org/video/food-deserts-luboex/>

Robyn Correll, M. (2022, November 1). *What are food deserts?*. Verywell Health.

<https://www.verywellhealth.com/what-are-food-deserts-4165971#:~:text=Defining%20Characteristics,from%20the%20nearest%20grocery%20store>

Rothstein, J. S. (2016). "Introduction: Three Auto Plants in the Global Economy." *In When Good Jobs Go Bad: Globalization, De-unionization, and Declining Job Quality in the North American Auto Industry* (pp. 1–30). Rutgers University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1dxg8b9.4>