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Regional

Brown studies problems of "Food Deserts"

To many people geography deals with maps and the location of countries and cities, but there is much more to the work of geographers. One example is the work done by Stacey Brown, an assistant professor in the department of geography at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, who specializes in an area that is unknown to most but extremely important – medical geography.

Born in Ardmore, Okla., Brown received her bachelor's degree in geography from Oklahoma State University and her master's, also in geography, from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. She completed her doctorate in geography from Oklahoma State University.

While her field of medical geography may appear very specialized, it is in fact a broad area of research, encompassing everything from the impact of diet to climate change on public health. The specific questions scholars in her field address are varied. Do residents have access to physicians and hospitals? Are there opportunities for residents to get physical activity? Do people feel safe in their neighborhoods? Do they feel connected with their neighbors? Are there grocery stores available to sell fresh fruits and vegetables?

"One of the neatest things I think that has been discussed is this idea of food deserts," Brown said. "A food desert is an area in a neighborhood or in a city or in a country that has no access to fresh fruits and vegetables or maybe to a grocery store. So there has been a lot of work done, especially in the United Kingdom and also here in America, looking at where these grocery stores are and what kind of impact is occurring with them not being in a particular location, and what

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kind of influence and positive impact that having fresh fruits and vegetables can have on a diet."

Another issue she has worked on is whether hospitals in the United States are located where they should be. "I think hospitals need to be in more of a central location," Brown said. "Specifically in rural areas they are probably not where they need to be. In the cities they are probably going to be more downtown or maybe even out on the fringe to handle new populations. There is also an impact of these "minute clinics," the health care centers that are open longer during the day and on weekends. So I think that has probably helped a little bit of the hospitals' burden."

Problems happen not only regarding the location of hospitals but of physicians as well. "There is actually a larger problem worldwide of a deficit of doctors," Brown explained. "Even doctors that are trained in Africa or even in the Caribbean will want to come to the United States for their practices and to do medicine. It is creating a worldwide deficit."

The data that she and her colleagues generate – despite being very visual – are not always taken into consideration by policy makers. "I think unfortunately politics and money does play a role," Brown said. "I think education is one of the biggest keys to overcoming a problem. And even maybe there is not room for building a new grocery store somewhere, but maybe we can talk to people about how

to properly prepare food and start preparing food at home rather than buying food from fast food locations."

Due to the real-world applications of the kind of work people in medical geography do, Brown said that there is a growing job market for people with geography skills. "We have one of the highest job outlooks for the next two or three years and you can work anywhere from a corporate environment to government offices," she said. "It really runs the gamut."

Brown was also involved in some studies related to the effects of Hurricane Katrina. "I got to be involved in analyzing the locations of shelters," said Brown. "So I looked at where residents in New Orleans went during Katrina and really found out that most people did not like to go very far away from their home. Usually it was about 90 miles away."

Her next big project will be in St. Louis where she will be analyzing infant mortality and the differences that exist that can be connected to race, poverty and income. "There is a stark difference between the number of infants that die every year to Caucasians versus those that are African-American," Brown said. "My new research now is going to look at where the hospitals and doctors are and try to see if we can maybe lower that infant mortality for residents black and white everywhere and here in St. Louis."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.



Dr. Stacey Brown at her office.