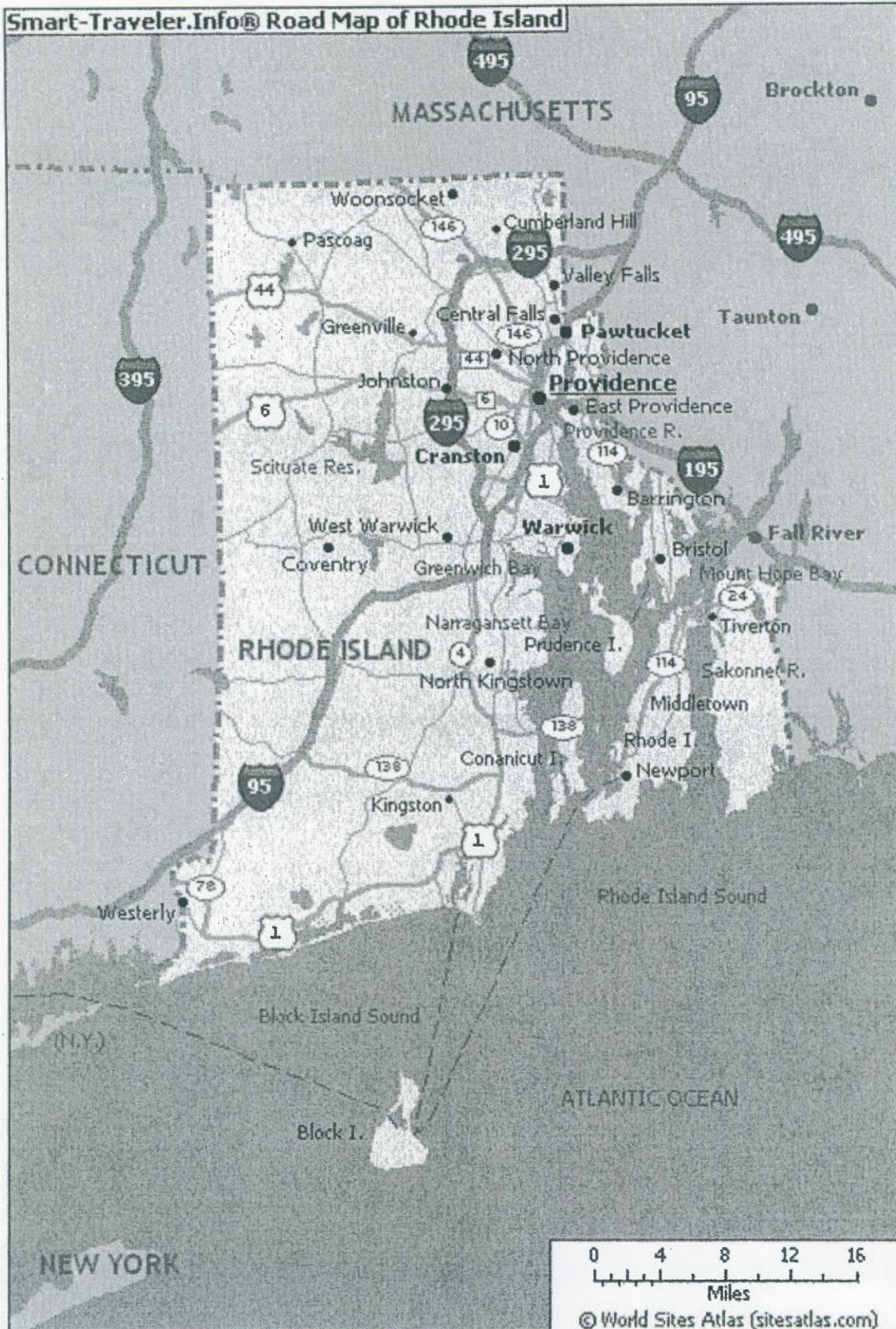


**Food Inequality and Social Justice**

By

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The State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations (World Sites Atlas 2012)



### Abstract

*Inequality in regular access to healthy food is a complex social justice issue in the United States. The health ramifications of poor food access and the unaffordability of healthy food choices are a consequence of economic systems based on a hierarchy of race, gender, and class structures. This research explores this inequality through the medium of three organizations that are challenging this systemic violence toward marginalized peoples.*

*City Meal Site, Big Train Farm, and The Environmental Justice League of Rhode Island serve different populations with the unified goal of getting healthy food into the hands and mouths of people through volunteer work, education, and partnerships. The applicable goal of this research is to examine how these programs are working within the communities they serve, areas where they may not be effective, and how these organizations confront a system based on exclusion.*

### Introduction

Every month, 14 percent of Rhode Islanders experience hunger and the inability to access enough food. An additional six percent of Rhode Islanders either lost weight or did not eat due to a complete deficiency in food availability over the course of one year, according to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) (2011). That is over 200,000 residents of the smallest state in the country.

For this paper, I looked at three organizations and their approach to the problem of hunger through their response to the social and political imbalances that disproportionately burden marginalized communities. Layers of social inequity, including disinvestment in education, targeting minority communities for heightened advertising, and even reduced infrastructure maintenance, all combine to form a subtly violent system that directly, if invisibly, assaults poor people. People with behaviors, looks, or circumstances outside of the cultural majority, or normative culture, are especially at risk of suffering the consequences of a system that is weighted against them.

Economic and social policies and procedures, generally established by and for the powerful, can produce negative consequences for marginalized people or groups of people. At times these consequences may include bodily harm on a deeply physical and personal level. This is a type of violence that is often invisible due to its indirect nature. This structural or systemic violence takes a circuitous path that often begins with political and economic policies (Bourgois 2003).

These policies shape the systems of society in a way that further disadvantages those most at risk for committing the “crimes” of poverty: homelessness, unemployment, and poor health, to name a few. This type of policy driven marginalization and systematic invisible violence stems from a neoliberal economic ideology that assumes everyone has the same opportunities. This assumption of equal circumstances and opportunities places a great emphasis on personal responsibility for both success and failure.

The reality is not so simple, and circumstances are far from equal. The inequity of circumstances serves to establish an intimately self-actualized violence as individuals begin to blame themselves for their problems in the same way that the social structure blames them (Bourgois 2003). The nature of neoliberal policies allows for these ideals of individual accountability to seep into society in subtle ways and obfuscate the delineation between individual responsibility and the forces within which the individual must function (Bourgois 2003:15).

In looking at the individual, or even organizations such as those included in this research, it is important not to neglect personal choices. However, it is also important to consider the structural and political forces that shape the circumstances surrounding those choices. This is the liminal space where we can find both compliance and resistance. Structural forces may shape the



individual, but “through cultural practices of opposition, individuals shape the oppression that [the structural] larger forces impose upon them” (Bourgois 2003:17). In other words, resistance is sometimes the key to survival in a system that disinvests in the well being of the individual.

This is the same space where the individual unconsciously acts as an agent of a neoliberal rearrangement of society, while at the same time acting out of resistance to that rearrangement. In fact, the argument could be made that this resistance and opposition is precisely what the neoliberal market economy would produce. As governmental social safety nets are disestablished because of their inefficient use of capital, neoliberal proponents argue that charitable organizations and community services will step in to meet the needs of those unable to meet their own needs.

The question then becomes; are the organizations examined in this research both products of and resistance to neoliberal economics? Are they actually succeeding in either resistance or in fulfilling the needs of people who need community organizations to step into the roles vacated by state and federal service organizations?

Within this context, I introduce some of the programs that have emerged in the wake of an economic philosophy that takes advantage of these structural forces but also creates this problem of hunger. The soup kitchen at City Meal Site, The Healthy Corner Store Initiative developed by the Environmental Justice League of Rhode Island (EJL), and the community supported agriculture (CSA) produce subscription of Big Train Farm are all attempting to create a new future, and it is important to understand how they function, how they succeed, and how they might improve. They also serve as a microcosmic way to study the effects of neoliberal economic policies in a local setting.

### Methodology

This research was conducted using a blend of traditional literature research and the anthropological methods of participant observation. I selected the primary sites and organizations for several reasons, not the least of which was my own pre-existing involvement with them. I have worked with Alane Spinney of City Meal Site in a service industry job for two years, and we frequently discuss politics and social justice issues. My family has been buying produce from John Kenny's Big Train farm for several years, as well.

Originally, we bought produce from him at the downtown Providence farmers market. Big Train's garlic is hard to beat, and since they decided to limit produce sales only through a CSA, we are in the process of buying into our third CSA subscription with them. I also volunteered at the EJI and am continuing to work with them on another project.

Additionally, I wanted to include these three organizations and their programs because they represent three distinct responses to dealing with the problem of hunger in an urban setting. City Meal Site is a soup kitchen that serves a diverse population by offering one meal each week. The reality is that a small operation such as this has neither the funding nor the staff to operate more frequently than this. Therefore, their focus is on a good quality meal and creating a welcoming atmosphere.

Big Train Farm has a very different approach and a distinctly different clientele. A CSA subscription is prohibitively expensive for most people living with food insecurity. It involves a significant financial investment months before the produce becomes available. Paying in advance for a full season of produce is less challenging with Big Train Farm, as they offer a payment plan. While it is still expensive, the payment plan makes the CSA affordable and more attainable

to a less affluent clientele than a traditional CSA would. It also brings healthy and fresh food to people who may otherwise not be able to afford to buy as frequently or as directly from a farmer.

The Environmental Justice League of Rhode Island is a small organization, but has a very large impact on the community. It has multiple projects going at any given time and works with many of the marginalized communities in the Providence area. Though the focus is environmental justice, the EJL takes on many other social justice issues as well. The Healthy Corner Store Initiative is just one example of this dedication to the community.

Much of my information is based on these long-term personal relationships and on observations and conversations regarding these programs with the people who run them. I also used the most updated census data available at the time of this study. A majority of the demographic data comes from the 2010 census, though the exact dates range from 2008 through 2011. A minimal amount of census data dates to the 2000 census.

With minor exceptions, all participant observation sessions were conducted in Providence, Rhode Island, at multiple locations throughout the city. Names of individuals and locations marked with an asterisk (\*) are pseudonyms. For the sake of continuity, the asterisk only appears when these names or locations are first introduced.

The essence of anthropological research is to build strong relationships with people and learn how they function within their particular version of society. This type of work is dynamic and situationally relevant. Ethnographic research that is focused on issues of social justice inherently confronts power differentials and structural hierarchies that would be reluctant to undermine the hegemony they currently enjoy. I discovered this first hand at points during this study, which I will detail later in this paper.



Ethnographic research is also not a science that is devoid of the observer's moral and ethical situation. Because of that, this type of oversight is prohibitive in assuming a "value-free science" in a world of inequality (Bourgois 1990:51). "A research project which investigates structures of inequality will have a hard time passing a human subject's review board if the canons of [IRB] ethics are rigidly applied" (Bourgois 1990:51).

### **The Setting**

A 45-minute drive on Interstate 95 will take you from the Connecticut border, all the way through Rhode Island and to neighboring Massachusetts. Evergreen trees and grassy areas border the four-lane highway at the southwestern end of the state. At the northeastern end of the state, the road expands to eight lanes, complete with "suicide" ramps (interstate entrance and exit ramps combined into one ramp), S- curves, potholes, the orange cones of construction, and congestion. Along the way the landscape turns into an urban wasteland of strip malls, industrial regions, a working port, abandoned mills, and train yards.

The capital city of Providence is a medium-sized New England city, situated between Boston, Massachusetts, and New York City. The state's population density is over 12 times the national average, and the majority of that population live in Providence and in the neighboring cities of Warwick to the south and Pawtucket to the north. Rhode Island is the cradle of the Industrial Revolution in the U.S. The first factory in the country, Slater Mill, was established in Pawtucket in 1793 ([slatermill.org](http://slatermill.org)). The Jewelry District of Providence housed notable companies such as Gorham Silver and the Imperial Knife Company. Many of these mill and factory buildings are still standing as ghosts of Rhode Island's industrial heritage.



That industrial heritage, while once an attractive feature of the state, has led to a high unemployment rate. In the decade between 2001 and 2010 Rhode Island lost 24,000 manufacturing jobs (Wall Street Journal 2012). Only Washington D.C. has a higher percentage of manufacturing job loss, and the current (as of March 2012) unemployment rate in Rhode Island is the second highest in the nation at 11.1%; the national rate is 8.2% (BLS 2012).

Alongside that industrial history is a history and a present rich in agriculture. A number of old farms are still in existence, and there are currently over 1,200 farms in the state. This accounts for approximately 10% of the land use (College of the Environment and Life Sciences 2009 and USDA 2012). But this farmland is difficult to come by. Most of the usable farmland is situated close to the over 400 miles of Atlantic coastline outside of the dense urban interstate corridor.

Despite this small land availability, these farms produce an amazing array of produce and a local organization, Farm Fresh Rhode Island, manages 45 different summer farmers markets throughout the state. Additionally, there are countless roadside stands, farm stands, or pick-up trucks selling loads of produce in urban parking lots. Depending on the time of year, you can find apples, blueberries, squash, kale, potatoes, garlic, carrots, eggplant or even locally made artisan cheeses.

In 2010, agricultural exports added 15 million dollars to Rhode Island's economy, up from 7.7 million dollars in 2001. Because there is a limited number of crops that can be grown in such a small state, Rhode Island ranks 49<sup>th</sup> in agricultural exports out of the 50 states. This is deceiving, however, because in 2010 Rhode Island ranked 7<sup>th</sup> in the value of production per acre (ERS/USDA 2010 and 2012).

This creates an interesting juxtaposition; Rhode Island has been hemorrhaging manufacturing jobs, creating a significant hardship for people who have worked these jobs for multiple generations. The farm economy, on the other hand, is seemingly doing very well. This is the backdrop with which the structural forces emerge and affect people on the level of every day concerns.

There is a noteworthy dichotomy in this information; there is an abundance of agriculture available within the state, yet there are high numbers of residents who do not have regular access to sufficient food. Even with the many farmers markets and the high value of Rhode Island's produce, there are still significant problems with hunger and poor nutrition in the state. Though there is an abundance of food available, it is not always affordable. Food that is unaffordable equates to food that is inaccessible.

### **Hunger**

In the three-story multi-family homes and in the homes that line treeless sidewalks, this oft hidden and harmful problem plagues individuals and families living on the edge of economic disaster. Issues of race, class, and gender that are exploited by advertisers and corporate food entities exacerbate the problem of hunger.

Hunger, as defined by the USDA, is physiological state stemming from an "involuntary lack of food, result[ing] in discomfort, illness, weakness, or pain that goes beyond the usual uneasy sensation" of needing to eat (2011). From personal experience, what this means in reality might be eating one meal each day supplemented with crackers or a candy bar. Or it may mean not eating at all some days.



Hunger is not just hunger, though. The USDA separates hunger and food insecurity.

Hunger is a subjective and individual experience. Food insecurity is more statistically standardized and is based on social and economic factors. Food insecurity is further categorized into two categories: low food security and very low food security.

Low food security is defined as having regular access to food, but in reduced amounts or with limited variation. Accessible food may come from food pantries or from governmental assistance programs such as the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP). Very low food security is defined by situations that disrupt the ability to eat, and specifically include economic hardship or the ability to access food assistance programs (ERS/USDA 2011).

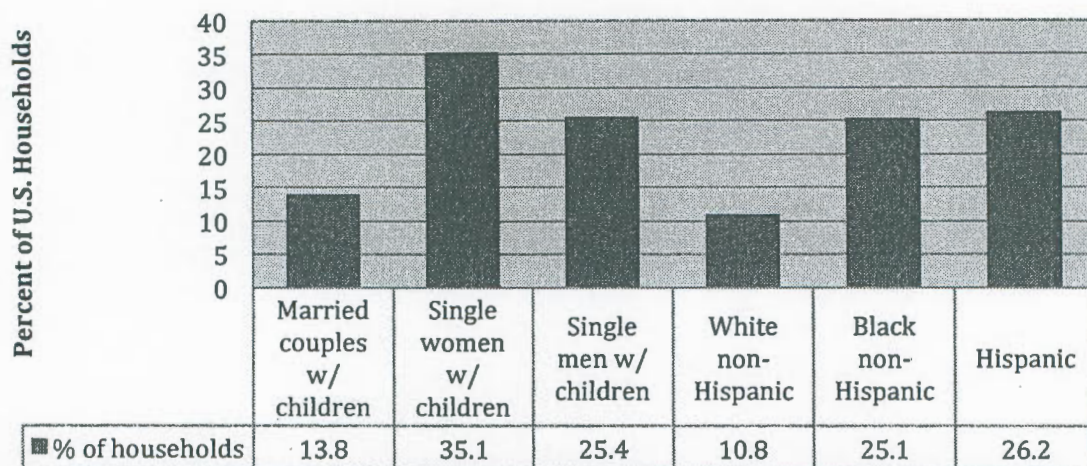
Feeding America, a network of food banks across the U.S., reports that in 2009, approximately 20 percent of households with children had inconsistent access to food (2011). The Rhode Island Food Bank experienced a 45 percent increase in demand between 2008 and 2010 and reports that approximately 14 percent of Rhode Island households are food insecure<sup>1</sup> (Rhode Island Food Bank 2010). Food insecurity is reported in every county in the United States (ERS/USDA 2011).

A 2004 study reports food insecurity in 56% of poor working families in Rhode Island (Gorman 2006). Another study in North Carolina found that over 63% of migrant farm worker families were food insecure (Borre 2010). Food insecurity is, sadly, easy enough to find.

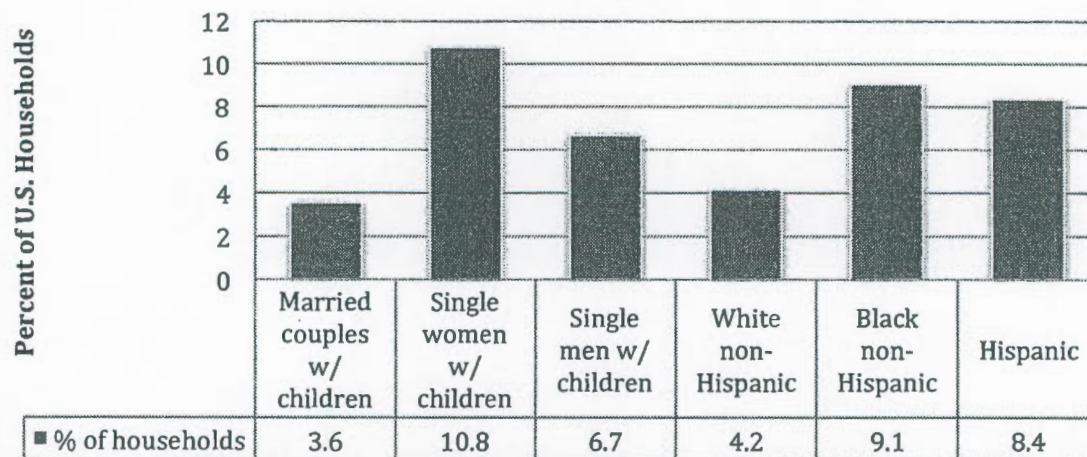
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<sup>1</sup> The earlier number of 20% of food insecure households and this number of 14% represent two different sources of information. The numbers can vary based on the source and the details of the study.

### Prevalence of Food Insecurity 2010



### Prevalence of Very Low Food Security 2010



Data for both charts from ERS/USDA food security statistics 2010

In looking at these statistics, there is a clear parallel between the two graphs. Even without an understanding of our culture, a patriarchal and racialized society seems evident. This alone offers some insight into whom suffers most from hunger in our society. Single mothers and non-white people are, according to this data, most at risk of hunger. This would also indicate



that those same people are most at risk of harm when economic policies cut funding to social services.

### **We Have a Problem**

The first time I walked into a food pantry, I was 19 years old. I was subsisting largely on ramen noodle packs that were ten for one dollar. I usually ate these for two meals each day, and it did not take long to grow weary of the salty pot of brown ramen noodles. My refrigerator contained a bottle of store brand ketchup and a pack of sliced cheese. I worked full time stocking grocery store shelves overnight, repeatedly bending, kneeling on hard tile floors, and pushing pallets full of cans and boxes. Despite this hard work, I still had barely enough to pay my rent and utilities.

I would scavenge the dumpsters of area stores for boxes of cereal or dented cans of beans. Ironically, I could not take damaged food products from my own store or I would have been accused of stealing. I paid for gas in pennies, nickels, and dimes. An area food pantry was the only option I knew of to get basics like bread, pasta, and fruit. For someone who had grown up to be self-sufficient, stepping into that food pantry was humiliating.

I had to show a utility bill as proof of a local residence. I had to provide my paycheck to a stranger who would determine how much food I was eligible for. My response to this substrate of the social structure, was to choose quickly and leave. I decided that scavenging for supermarket waste, and attending “Food Not Bombs”<sup>2</sup> events was significantly preferable to entering the food pantry again.

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<sup>2</sup> Food Not Bombs is a pseudo-organization that cooks and serves food to people somewhat in the fashion of a soup kitchen; however, the ethic behind it is a more global effort to subvert some of the power and politics of food control and reclaim what should be freely available to everyone.

Though I did not realize it at the time, I was exhibiting the effects of internalized violence. The structure in place for accessing food was insulting, but in my effort to resist that insult, I was putting myself at risk of increased hunger and malnutrition.

This was also, perhaps, the beginning of my interest in food justice. Personal experience goes a long way in creating interest in a problem. I am fortunate now to have enough quality food and to eat well. Still, my knowledge is situated in a past with insider information and an empty stomach. I cannot, however, claim a current position of objectivity. All knowledge comes from somewhere and has a history (Haraway 1988:581).

The tenets of scientific inquiry espouse the neutral and objective observer, however, ethnographic research is not a science that is devoid of the observer's moral and ethical situation. It is unlikely to be a "value-free science" in a world of inequality (Bourgois 1990:51). Early works of anthropological research, such as those by Bronislaw Malinowski make attempts toward this. More contemporary anthropologists such as Donna Haraway debunk the ideal of objectivity, or the "god trick of seeing everything from nowhere," as a form of white male supremacy (1988:581). The unmarked person (the white male) looking upon the inferior other, be they female, dark-bodied, ethnic or underprivileged with the "conquering gaze from nowhere" establishes the delusion of objectivity (Haraway 1988:581).

Likewise, Lila Abu-Lughod notes that this "objective" removal from the research subject creates a hierarchy that further isolates and objectifies them (1991:138-139). In agreement with Haraway and Abu-Lughod, this idea of an absolute objectivity is not one that I can subscribe to. My experience is part of and informs my knowledge. I attempt to look critically at the information and present research that is as unbiased as I am able to be, but there is no definitive or objective truth, only a personal truth.



One of the benefits of situated anthropology, however, is the ability to use those personal truths to establish patterns. Personal circumstances may be vastly different, but the similarities can be used to draw larger conclusions. Some of those larger conclusions may be used to illuminate the systemic inequality and to strengthen the people functioning within that system.

It is with this critical, but situated approach that I look to the people in similar situations across the United States. People of every background are finding themselves in economic straits, and turning to the help offered by soup kitchens, food pantries, and government assistance. The Coleman-Jensen report notes that the year 2010 saw the highest number of food insecure households ever recorded in the U.S. at 14.5 percent (worldhunger.org 2011). And, as mentioned above, some 20 percent of Rhode Island families are food insecure.

While there are programs to help people, such as the SNAP program, it is not always as easy as it may seem to get this help. The application for food assistance in Rhode Island is 17 pages and requires extensive additional verifications including proof of address, pregnancy (if applicable), and birth certificates for each person in the household receiving benefits. Unhoused people need to provide proof that they are homeless either through verification by an agency or by a statement from a legitimate witness.

This is not the American dream fantasy espoused by the ideology of hard work equating to a comfortable home, a full refrigerator, and a fancy car. I would argue that in many cases, the inverse is true. The working poor may work a mix of full and part time jobs that go well beyond the 40-hour workweek and still live in economically stressful conditions.

Take Katherine\*, for instance. She is in her early twenties and works full time in the service industry. She is a smart woman who can discuss politics and philosophy on a deep level. She understands the nuances of structural violence toward women and people in low-income

jobs. She also has no health insurance, receives governmental food assistance, and lives in an apartment that has broken windows and a non-working lock on the main door of the house.

Her situation exemplifies the difficulty created by economic policies that keep wages low and services such as the cost of public transportation high. She experiences the intimate effects of the unaffordability of food even with full time employment. Her application for food assistance was “such a pain in the ass” and not very private, as she had to approach her boss to sign papers of employment verification.

Despite this, Katherine has a resistance-oriented reaction to the disinvestment in people in her circumstances. She publicly displays her resistance through body art and through clothing adornments that advocate for worker’s rights and anti-racism. She spends time volunteering for organizations that feed the hungry and works on educational projects for community organizations.

### **City Meal Site**

There are many approaches to viewing the problem of hunger and food insecurity in America. It is a socioeconomic problem that can be scrutinized with numbers. It is a governmental problem that tells a story in the amount of food subsidies available to lower income people. It is an issue of availability, resources, and manufacturing, and has a dynamic in the agricultural and business world. Most succinctly, however, hunger, nutrition, and food insecurity are problems that affect people on a personal level. It also causes some people to work for change.

One of these people is Alane Spinney. Alane runs City Meal Site on Tuesday evenings and provides dinner for up to 300 people. She is gracious to each person who walks through her



door regardless of social status. No one asks for verification of legal status, economic status, proof of residency, or any other bureaucratic documentation.

City Meal Site is a soup kitchen in the basement of an Episcopal church close to downtown Providence. Every Tuesday at 4:00 Alane opens the doors of the church and people file in to sit and partake of a hot meal. Alane has watched the harmful effects of a neoliberal economy from the kitchen of the church. Where she once had 50 or 60 people at the beginning of the month, she now feeds over 100 on a regular basis. In the middle of November, she had 250 people come through the door.

This steady increase in people seeking a meal speaks to the power of national economic conditions can impact individuals. The failure of social welfare services to fully provide for societal needs leaves programs like City Meal Site to pick up the slack. This is precisely what would be expected in a market-focused economy that and assumes pro business policies will benefit almost everyone through the proliferation of opportunities. This type of economic philosophy also expects social services to be taken up by charitable organizations.

The way the structure works for some and not for others is at the unspoken forefront of the church basement where City Meal Site operates. The basement is set up similar to a small cafeteria. It is rectangular, with an old tile drop ceiling and fluorescent lights. On a walk to the pantry at the far end of the hall, I passed the kitchen, the serving tables and 15 plastic cafeteria-style tables divided into three rows of five tables. All the tables had eight place settings, which included a paper placemat, a plastic fork, a square white paper napkin, and a clear plastic tumbler glass placed upside down on the mat. Small black and white plastic salt and pepper shakers adorned each table and the metal folding chairs were spaced four on each side.

Alane wants her guests to feel like they are deserving of some decency perhaps often in short supply on the street. “If I wouldn’t feed it to my grandmother, it doesn’t leave this kitchen”. Though her kitchen survives on donations and a keen ability for creative food uses, she does not believe that people needing food assistance should be denigrated by giving them second-rate meals.

Alane’s response to the structural forces that are bringing people to her door is one of frustration; she is keenly aware of the economic policies that further marginalize those already most in need. She is also aware that the climate created by this economy places a great burden on the individual to figure out how to function “successfully” within the constraints of systemic forces that are negatively shaping their personal circumstances.

The inability to conform to these standards that create “success” places the burden of failure on the individual and creates the stigma that comes with a personal social location that rests outside the normative culture. But it makes no difference to Alane who walks through her doors. Each and every person is greeted, and Alane will often inquire about a personal health problem or social matter that some of her regular guests are facing. Not everyone is a regular, though; there are some who only come at the end of the month when the money from government assistance is running out. Meanwhile, recent economic conditions have forced many more people into the soup kitchen.

### **A One Woman Show?**

Alane is a complex and quiet middle-aged woman. She has short dark hair with streaks of gray, and wears glasses. She is usually seen wearing comfortable blue jeans and t-shirts emblazoned with political commentary. Anyone who has met her will attest that she is, if nothing

else, a character. She moves in quick bursts, yet speaks in a slow and contemplative manner. She has a dry and witty sense of humor, and is fond of a good colloquialism.

Alane appreciates the finer nuances of a good cheese or a coffee. We tried a new coffee together one morning and she shared with me the ritual she employs in opening her senses to a new experience. She will close her eyes and cup her hand around a mug, lowering her nose to inhale the aroma. Then comes the slow and deliberate sip in an effort to tease out the different notes and characteristics. There is a long pause as she considers what she has just tasted, and a subtle nodding of the head as the different elements become defined.

She appreciates the artistic qualities of foods as well, often taking pictures of a particularly intriguing dish or a well-made latte. We looked at an *Edible Rhody* magazine together one afternoon, and coming across a photograph of a fresh meal, Alane stepped back, crossed her arms and, shifting her weight to one leg, stated with a reverent tone, "Would ya' look at that".

Alane is also one of the most compassionate people I have ever met. She runs the City Meal Site soup kitchen on an entirely volunteer basis. Every Tuesday, from late morning until early evening, Alane can be found in a small kitchen in the basement of a church chopping, dicing, mixing, frying, and assembling meals for up to 300 people. This is her "day off." She also works full time in the service industry as a barista.

I have seen Alane talk very sincerely to people who would usually be ignored. Though she does not seem to mind conversing with those who have the socially unacceptable odor of not bathing due to limited ability, she and I will share a wrinkly-nosed glance when dealing with someone who is wearing lipstick and perfume that is applied with a heavy hand. It could be argued that we are economically biased in this reaction. The overly perfumed are expressing a



status with the ability to afford these social accouterments, while the unhoused are dealing with problems of bodily odor due to a mental or physical inability to regularly access bathing facilities.

Alane has built relationships with several of the unhoused and downtrodden in the vicinity of her job and will offer them a coffee or a small lunch at times, as she is able to. These relationships have benefited her workplace as well; when one of the unhoused men witnessed the theft of a coffee delivery tricycle from her employer, he told her exactly where to find the trike and offered a description of the offender.

Alane's story exists in the same flowing manner as her thoughts. She was born and raised in Rhode Island close to the Atlantic Ocean. She refers to herself as a "swamp yankee" in reference to the rural area where she grew up. She has an advanced degree in art from the Rhode Island School of Design and taught art as a college professor in Wisconsin for some time. She is quick to defend benevolent organizations that offer health care to lower income women, such as Planned Parenthood.

She has a keen sense of social justice and, in part, it is this dedication to social activism that led Alane toward the soup kitchen. Under the ideals of a neoliberal economic system, Alane is doing precisely what would be expected; she is filling the social service gap created when governmental agencies reduce their presence in filling this type of societal need.

However, Alane is not one to extend herself for people who simply lack the personal responsibility to take care of themselves. She understands that housing and job crises, exacerbated by the deregulation of transnational banks and corporations, are symbolic of the structural forces against which these individuals exist every day. In that sense, I would argue that

Alane's involvement in City Meal Site is a form of resistance against the suffering that pro-wealth economic policies are causing.

When she realized that there was no location for the hungry to get food on Tuesdays, she went to the Episcopal Church on North Main Street to assume the responsibilities of the meal site that had been established there. This is a well established and very large, old (some would say that it is also haunted) church well located for accessibility. There is a bus line that goes from the veteran's hospital directly to within one block of the church and another bus route that runs from the other side of town to the front door of the church. It is also an easy walk from downtown, which is accessible by nearly any bus in the city.

But Alane cannot run the soup kitchen alone. A large group of volunteers help her - some on a regular basis, and others only occasionally. One of the other steady volunteers, and Alane's partner in this experience, is Mike\*.

Alane introduced me to Mike, who coordinates the volunteers serving food and drinks. Mike is warm and welcoming, with a firm handshake and a quick joke. I also met Mimi\*, who is one of the stalwarts of the soup kitchen. She is an older member of the church and wears a City Meal apron and a white bonnet style hat. Mimi is direct and to the point. "You here to work, or just to look pretty?" she asks me. She seems pleased that I plan to work.

The atmosphere before the site opens for service is busy and jovial. Alane chimes up with the joke: "How many Episcopalians does it take to change a lightbulb? Two; one to call the electrician and one to mix the martinis." Amid the laughter, two older men from another Episcopalian church told me they had decided that volunteering at the soup kitchen got them out of the house and away from the to-do lists their wives' had made for them.

## Dinner

At 4:00 the doors open and approximately 100 people come in and seat themselves at the tables. Some sit alone, but most find a friend or acquaintance to sit with. Others come in groups of two or three. The population is diverse. There is one man who looks like he could have come from an office job. He is balding, with dark hair on the sides of his head, a bushy black mustache and thick-framed glasses. He wears a vertically striped long sleeve button down shirt and light brown pleated dress pants that don't quite fall close enough to the ankles of his black sneakers to appear neat. His belt is pulled tight and creates an hourglass effect around his waist, while the shirt struggles to remain tucked in. He sits alone and does not look up often.

At another table there is a dad with a young boy about seven or eight years old and another boy who appears to be in his early teens. There is a tall black man with sunglasses, a full head of greying dreadlocks pulled back in a band and a long grey beard that is divided into two dreadlocks with large wooden beads at the end. The beard hangs to the chest of his crisp brown "Star Wars" t-shirt.

At one table there is a man who appears to be in his 50's. He has an over-pronounced bushy head of jet-black hair and a thick black mustache. His dirty white muscle shirt shows the gold chain around his neck and the fading tattoos on his thin arms. He has the leathery dark skin of someone who spends a lot of time outside in the sun.

Once everyone is seated, Alane comes out to welcome her guests and begins by asking if there are "any announcements from the floor." Underlying her sense of community and inclusiveness, the floor truly is open for announcements from the attendees. This egalitarianism is uncommon in most bureaucratic settings. Just imagine trying to state your position on a social



problem at the DMV! Yet Alane waits patiently, looking around the room for anyone wishing to speak. Today there are no announcements from anyone.

Before eating, Alane announces the meal for next week (BLTs) and says a short prayer of thanks. Most attendees bow their heads and close their eyes. At the end of the prayer, one man at a table near the front of the room makes the sign of the cross, moving his right hand quickly from forehead to chest, and then across his chest left to right. I find it interesting that, despite the hardships that these guests face, there is still evidence of faith in a religious tradition.

The meal service begins as volunteers fan out delivering a basket of bread to each table and small salads with a choice of milk or juice. A plate of pasta and meatballs follows this; there is no desert available tonight. The lower turnout left us with a lot of extra food, but very few people accept the second helpings we offer.

Alane believes that the people who come to her for meals are hungry for more than just food. She believes many of the people who come to the soup kitchen need human interaction and connectedness as much, if not more, than they need to eat. Despite that, she says “my biggest fear is not having enough food to feed people.”

Currently, she is able to source her food from the good will of the church, through grants, and from gleanings at area farmers markets. However, grants are becoming harder and more competitive to access. There are fewer available, and those that are available are often reducing the value of the awards. Nearly all the money Alane gets goes directly to food purchases. There is no paid staff despite the fact that Alane, with two or three other volunteers, spend hours preparing food for hundreds of people to have a sit down dinner.

This could create an interesting dilemma; as this part of the research ended, Alane informed me that City Meal Site would be moving soon, to a location across town. The church

that currently houses the meal site is closing due to an unfunded need to make repairs and updates. While it remains to be seen how this will impact the soup kitchen on a detailed level, Alane feels that the new site's proximity to a large shelter and advocacy center for many of the area's unhoused people will substantially increase the number of guests she has for dinner.

### **Food Insecurity and Food Access**

Food security, as defined by the United States Department of Agriculture, is the capability to get enough food on a regular basis to live a healthy lifestyle (USDA 2010). Food insecurity is the absence of that security. It is not knowing if there will be dinner or breakfast. Food insecurity is, in the simplest terms, wondering if you will have enough to eat today or enough to feed your children.

The USDA breaks food insecurity into two categories: low food security and very low food security. In both of these categories, there are large numbers of people who are able to buy food, but it often runs out. Nearly 30% of people in the very low food security category go at least one day without eating during the month (USDA 2012).

Jerry\* comes through every day around lunchtime. There are, as usual, several dozen people seated at the sidewalk tables in front of several downtown eateries. I am in front of the coffee shop, drinking a hot coffee in the warmth of the sun, with the sounds of Black Sabbath slipping quietly from the shop's open doors and windows. It is a beautiful spring day, with a sleepy breeze and the smell of a quickly approaching summer.

Jerry, a young black man wearing jeans and a plain white t-shirt, walks down the street, stopping at each table. He stays just long enough to ask: "Spare some change so I can buy me sumthin' ta' eat?" He moves on promptly from the people that deny him, including myself. I do

not have much in my pocket, and I feel sure his is a story like so many I have heard recently. The drug and wine money in the guise of food/diapers/gas/stolen rent money that people are asking for is not what I wish to contribute to right now.

I have grown somewhat immune to Jerry. He does this every day, going from table to table. He never harasses anyone, he just asks and moves on. Today was different, though. Jerry apparently had made enough money to walk into the sandwich shop next door. A few minutes later, he came out with a sandwich and a bag of chips. I learned a lesson about honesty, trust, and hunger from Jerry today. Jerry is also exemplifies the failure of the spreading neoliberal economic ideals.

If that economic approach were working, Jerry would have community organizations to fulfill his need for food. As it stands, however, the funding for social services is decreasing to the point that Jerry's need is unmet, yet community organizations seem unable to fill that gap. Ultimately, it is the individual that bears the weight of this fissure.

### **Accessibility**

In conjunction with food insecurity is food accessibility. Accessibility is a real problem both in financial terms and in the physical location of grocery stores. The United States Department of Agriculture recognizes this problem with the designation of food deserts. A food desert is a low-income census tract where at least one-third of the residents are more than one mile (in an urban area) from a grocery store (USDA 2011). Providence has 7,000 people living in two food deserts located on the south and west side of the city (USDA 2011)

Often this absence of a full grocery store gives rise to numerous convenience and corner stores. In itself, this is not bad. Many of these stores, particularly the privately owned corner



stores, provide a much needed source of simple foods and cooking supplies. In some cases, they even act as a makeshift community center.

El Bamba Market\* sits at a corner on busy Broad Street on the south side of Providence. Even before getting to the door, there is a bustle of activity. A small group of young people inhabits the paved and fenced parking lot between the store and the nightclub next door. Underneath a large blue tarp, they have multiple cafeteria-style tables set up with sneakers and t-shirts for sale. Some of the t-shirts are hanging on the fence so they can be seen from the street. El Bamba is brightly colored and attention grabbing; the one story market is painted bright yellow, with large red and blue writing on the sides. The entrance door is on the corner, and stepping through that door is stepping into another world.

The store is packed with people milling about and chatting loudly in Spanish. There is a lottery sales counter just inside that corner door. The numbers of people waiting to buy lotto tickets, or to cash in their recently purchased tickets, make it difficult to enter the store. To the right is a long counter with an overhead cigarette dispensary. There are several people congregated near this counter as well, asking about the cost of various items.

Stores such as El Bamba serve an important purpose in the way they can gather a community together. They also make available many items, including culturally important food items that may not be easily accessible otherwise. El Bamba sits in the middle of a USDA recognized food desert. Along with lottery tickets and cigarettes, there is a meat counter, produce, and other food items that residents would otherwise need to travel across town for.

### Creating and Maintaining Boundaries with Food

While economics is the most obvious power differential at play here, there are deeply complex social justice issues involved in this disparity. The health ramifications of unaffordable food choices and resultant quality of life consequences, including educational and economic success, help to maintain a class divide that is increasingly exponential between the upper and lower economic classes.

Again the specter of the myth of equal opportunity arises. In theory, anyone can go to any supermarket and buy healthy food. Anyone can go to the doctor for their health or get a tutor for help with education. But there are both subtle and very overt instances of boundary marking.

This idea was underscored by two separate incidences involving a farmers market that caters to a higher income clientele. This particular market is located in a section of the city that is well known for high property values and private schooling. The excerpt from field notes below highlights an incident that intrigued me enough to ask permission to do some further observations at this particular market. Both of these interactions revealed some interesting data regarding this idea of the control of food and access, as well as the hierarchies invested in that control. First, the incident in question:

*Fieldnotes: Farmers Market in an affluent Providence neighborhood*

*Time: 10:30 AM*

*Weather: Overcast and cool early, warming up slightly, but still moderate for June*

*Children danced at the music tent or sat and ate pastries with their parents, and dogs played or just sniffed at people passing by. The atmosphere seemed as equally a social event as it was a market event. A number of folks sat listening to the music: an older man and woman with an acoustic guitar, a flute, and a harmonica playing 50's and 60's era folk music. They were under a small tent with a small amplifications system*



*(which is important to note for a later observation). Most of the songs ended with a smattering of light applause.*

*The music tent was in the middle of an outer ring of vendors. A large grassy area in front of the tent was filled with people walking to different vendors and about two-dozen people sitting and eating, listening to music, and carrying on conversations. One woman, in her early 30's was dancing with her four-year old daughter. The woman was wearing new blue jeans with Saucony running sneakers and a long sleeved blue shirt with white polka dots. She had a watch with a light brown leather strap on her left wrist, and her hair pulled up in a clip.*

*Around the outer edge of the market, just outside the ring of vendors, was a bike valet area, where people could lock their bikes and have someone watch them. There were large numbers of bikes in this area, both new looking "fancy" bikes with streamlined rims and white-walled tires and older, beat up bikes.*

*Beyond this, there were a number of mobile food/drink trucks parked along the edge of the park. A juice truck had a steady clientele of people buying ginger lemonades and fresh juices. The lemonade and ice cream trucks had little activity.*

*The racial makeup was largely white except for the African American man who had set up his acoustic guitar and a small amplifier and tip jar at the bus stop outside of the main ring of the market. In fact, he was probably a good 100 feet from the market. As I was leaving, I saw a woman, seemingly someone associated with the market, wearing a flowing brown sundress with her arms folded across her chest and holding a clipboard.*

*She was telling the man that they didn't really like amplifiers at the market (never minding that the two musicians in the tent were using small amplifiers) and there was already music there. I could not hear much of the conversation. What I did hear seemed to imply that he was not approved and shouldn't be playing there, or at least not with a small amplifier. This is, of course, a public park, where people were engaging in Tai Chi, having yard sales across the street, playing, running, lots of kids on the playground making noise, etc. It is also worth noting that he was not playing loudly enough that his music was overpowering the music in the center of the market. In fact, I had not even noticed him until I was walking by.*

This last incident particularly intrigued me, and seemed exemplary of

Counihan's ideas surrounding the social control of food and access as a tool of power (1998). A particular type of person is welcome and allowed at the market, but there are certain class expectations that are, at least informally, necessary to navigate this social experience. However, I was hoping that this incident was some misunderstanding or overreaction on my part. I planned to prove myself wrong. After all, we are dealing with a type of market that, by nature, is intended to deconstruct some of the hierarchies that exist in this control of food. The farmer has more



control of his or her product and profit; the buyer gains knowledge about the source of their food and contributes directly to his or her own local economy.

I did not interact with anyone during this first observation, except to buy a coffee. Even though this was an outdoor public setting, I decided to seek approval from the market manager to continue observations with the intent of interacting with some of the vendors and maybe customers as a research method. I had been to this market as a customer prior to this, but I was looking forward to learning their outlook and approach to food justice and working with them as partners in this project

As it turned out, this is where I truly discovered the significance of the desire to delineate the bounds of this market and who should fall outside of those bounds, and would not be welcome. My request to do research at this market was denied by the market manager due to the space limitations of setting up a booth for me. Thinking I had not explained myself very well, I replied to them that I did not need a booth and that “my impact would be extremely minimal - no different than anyone there to shop or socialize, except that I would be taking notes. There would also be no requirements or effort on the part of the market”. I also reiterated that part of my research was looking at the economic disparity in access to fresh and healthy food - an economic disparity that most markets seem to be working to overcome.

I was met with defensive questions such as “What is in it for the market?” and “Who is paying the fees and insurance?” I attempted to answer these questions as clearly as possible, but this type of boundary building continued until I eventually dropped that line of inquiry since I had by then developed more welcoming and positive research partners.

As noted, this particular market serves, for the most part, a higher income and largely Caucasian population. Their defensiveness combined with the additional data gathered outside of

the boundaries of the market, such as the directive by the market for the black musician to quit playing music on public property, clearly establishes an intentional hierarchy and boundary to the access of certain socially significant food spaces.

Even without physical barriers, there are definite social boundaries. These observations, contrasted with the helpfulness of the groups working with marginalized populations, amplified this idea of the power inherent in the control of food. In this case, perhaps maintaining an aura of exclusivity for a perceived higher economic status clientele.

This segregation is a structurally condoned form of symbolic and normalized violence inherent with the economic social stratification of neoliberal policies. The market manager acted as a policing agent, making sure to minimize the introduction of people who could possibly upset the social framework established at this market. The management's "right to protect" their property seemingly overrides any individual rights to access food, information, or to cross the economic and race-based social strata.

### SNAP

Food insecurity is one of the defining issues of poverty. "Food, clothing, and shelter" is the catch phrase for basic living requirements in America. Those are the prime physical needs of our bodies. When that food is unavailable or inadequate, there are safety nets that are supposed to catch us. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is designed to replace the Food Stamp program.

This program supplies food benefits to individuals and families. These benefits can be redeemed for necessary food items at supermarkets and corner groceries. The program requires that capable adults be working or enrolled in a job training program in order to receive benefits.

Again, this assumes that the individual has control of and responsibility for their circumstances. However, the current unemployment rate in Rhode Island is 10.5%. Without a job, the maximum amount of benefits for a family of four is \$668 per month. This seems reasonable until we delve just a bit deeper. The maximum amount for benefits is reduced based on income. What this equates to for a family of four with one full-time minimum wage job is \$360 per month for groceries<sup>3</sup>. Even worse, the average monthly benefit for the year 2006 was only \$85.

Despite this minimal average, the SNAP program has expanded to include farmers markets and to make fresh and healthy food available in the program. In the 2010 fiscal year, over seven million SNAP dollars were spent at farmer's markets throughout the U.S. (SNAP BRD 2010). In fact, the Farm Fresh program in Rhode Island, which runs a number of area markets, will add two dollars to every five dollars of SNAP benefits redeemed at the market.

Even so, the food costs are still high enough that it is challenging to feed a family of four. As an experiment, I went shopping at a large chain supermarket. I price-shopped for an assortment of items chosen from a mix of USDA recommendations and my own family's weekly list, including dry black beans, pasta and sauce, bananas, bread, personal hygiene products, and a fair amount of fresh vegetables and fruits. This added up quickly to over \$100. That was before I had even finished collecting items for a week's worth of meals.

In the midst of this fallout, there remain groups and individuals dedicated to ensuring that everyone has access to a healthy and secure source of nutrition. There are soup kitchens such as City Meal Site and bread pantries to help feed the marginalized of our society. There are groups

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<sup>3</sup> A full-time minimum wage job earns \$1200 gross per month. That is approximately \$1000 per month after deductions for social security, etc. The average rent for a two bedroom apartment in Providence, RI is \$978 as of this writing. I was able to find some apartments for \$600, however, that only leaves \$400 (plus \$360 in SNAP benefits) to pay for food, utilities, transportation, clothing, and so on. If we assume approximately \$500 per month for groceries, which is possible, but very tight, there is \$260 left over for all expenses other than housing and food.



who are attempting to place healthier food choices in the corner market, and to take corporate food advertising out of public schools. There are small farmers who are attempting to reinvigorate the idea of food as a local and seasonal commodity. One program run by a small local farm is beginning to make some headway into providing fresh and healthy food for marginalized people in the community.

### **The Small Farm**

Mindy wears a red "Farmall" baseball cap and a Black Flag t-shirt (a punk rock band from the early 1980s). Her cargo pants are cut off just above the ankle, showing her black combat boots. John has tattoos on his calves and one on the back of his neck, an earring in his left ear, and wears round-rimmed glasses. Devo is playing on a small portable CD player and the room is a constantly shifting mixture of people here for their CSA pick-up.

CSA stands for "Community Supported Agriculture." It is a cooperative agreement between a farmer and customers that allows customers to get a weekly share of produce. Customers pay several months in advance for these weekly shares, which allows the farmer to have money for the purchase of seeds and equipment prior to the growing season. In return, the customer gets fresh produce over the course of the harvest season generally beyond the amount that they paid for. Generally, the subscription offers more food at a lower price than it would cost to buy it on a weekly basis. There is usually one day of the week that subscription customers come to a specified place to pick up their food for the week.

These are not your stereotypical farmers wearing overalls and chewing on straw, and they are not running a typical farm. John and Mindy run Big Train Farm. On the west side of Providence, in the lower level of the Bell Street Chapel, the beige tile floor and the drop ceiling

become a market brimming with freshly picked tomatoes, kale, jalapeno peppers, fingerling potatoes, and the smell of fresh basil.

Big Train's CSA is rather unique in its method. John and Mindy set up tables with a colorful display of Rainbow Swiss Chard, yellow summer squash, beets, green and white sweet onions, and fresh garlic all picked and washed earlier in the day. CSA members are given a credit each week to shop market style. Some choose to skip the kale and get a few extra beets or pick up some extra salad greens.

A traditional CSA is not cheap. A full share in a CSA, which is normally enough produce to make meals for a family of four, averages around \$500 for a season's worth of fresh produce. Often, a CSA subscription requires payment in full months before the produce is harvested. For people in lower income brackets, it is not easy to come up with that kind of money for a one-time payment. There are reasons for that setup. Farms are beginning their planting seasons in late winter by preparing equipment, buying seeds and so on.

Some farms attract a particular group, while others may have a more diverse customer base. The Big Train Farm CSA draws a wide range of people from office workers in dresses or ties to people working in the service industry such as cooks and retail store employees. Big Train appeals to a wide range of people for several reasons. One of the primary attractive features of the Big Train CSA is the payment plan.

The Big Train CSA makes it much easier for lower income customers to afford to eat fresh, local food by offering a payment plan. Payments can be spread out over the course of several months, and Big Train even offers work shares- trading farm work for a large reduction in the cost of a CSA. This program seems to be working well. Big Train has been able to turn the

focus of the farm to working more specifically with CSA customers and to engaging the community with the idea that good food should not just be for the wealthy.

A CSA is still unaffordable for those living on a subsistence income. Even with the payment plan offered by Big Train, there is still a substantial cost involved, one that feels like a luxury in many ways. When Big Train sold produce at a downtown farmers market, my wife and I would take a \$20 bill and spend most of it buying produce from John. It is not without some financial stretching that we are able to buy into the Big Train CSA. So even though Big Train's payment plan does help more people afford quality local food, it does not yet extend that benefit to the truly low income. This is one of the ongoing issues with this particular problem of the affordability of healthy foods.

In part, this high price tag for fresh and local foods comes out of a disparity in agricultural subsidies. Agricultural subsidies are heavily biased toward large farms. Within that, many of the subsidies are for corn. The Environmental Working Group reports that in 2010, over three billion dollars were given in corn subsidies. Of this amount, 66% of corn subsidies went to just 88 farms (EWG 2011).

This allotment of subsidies appeals to the market economy idea that includes the efficiency of scale. However, it also reinforces the economic policies that serve to marginalize not only lower income people, but small farms. The extension of this implicates a system of structural violence toward many communities that would function on a smaller or less normative scale. An imbalance in subsidies forces smaller farms to give up land, or even to sell the farm and try to find other job. It is clear that these economic policies would hurt small farms. But the people served by those small farms, would also be put at risk.



Hence, we are brought into the realm of politics very directly. It is impossible for Big Train to reduce the costs to customers without going bankrupt, yet they try to make fresh food accessible as much as they can. To some extent, this style of farming and focus on social equality is a form of political activism.

John is very aware of what is happening in the world of agriculture. “We really need to look into the future of agriculture and how the local food movement and farm shares are going to be sustained.” John believes that the increased public awareness has helped, but the next step is to look forward toward what may happen to many of the larger farms as the overall farming population ages and land becomes more difficult to obtain and sustain.

His concern for conscientious farming and equality in food distribution is evident, and the equality in access to healthy and fresh food is high on his list of concerns. He and Mindy are looking into grants that would help them expand production and provide fresh produce to McAuley Village - a program that provides support and temporary housing for homeless single parents. As of this writing, it looks as though Big Train Farm will be able to supply produce to them, but it will still be some time before the outcome of that will be observable.



*Beets and sweet onions at the Big Train CSA pick up.*

Big Train's CSA program is currently successful, but in order for it to be sustainable there must be room to grow. Unfortunately, good farmland is challenging to come by. In Rhode Island, the land is either expensive, not good soil for growing produce, or, as was the case with some land that Big Train was looking at, located near a toxic pollution site<sup>4</sup>. In the meantime, efficiency is the key, and good weather is the hope.

Despite the success of at least one program, and a good outlook for another, it is not easy being a small farmer. Big Train Farm functions on three acres of leased land. John and Mindy grow approximately 100 different varieties of crops on this land, from eggplants to garlic to kale and heirloom tomatoes. The limited land and large diversity imposes a need for efficiency in

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<sup>4</sup> Rhode Island has 68 federally recognized toxic waste sites- these are only the ones with federal oversight; it does not include those with state oversight. This includes brownfields, superfund sites, and other toxic cleanup sites. Just the list of federal sites puts the Rhode Island average at 1 toxic site for every 31 square miles. This severely limits the amount of arable land for safe agriculture.

operations. John and Mindy accomplish that well. Their CSA subscriptions feed roughly 200 people with 95 shares divided among full, half, and work shares. Additionally, they also provide produce to several local restaurants and cafes.

Customers of the Big Train CSA enjoy the variety. The variation gives rise to creative and new cooking ideas, or sometimes trying a well-known vegetable in a new way. Broccoli fresh from a garden is bursting with subtle flavors and juices that disappear when it rides across the country on a truck and sits on a store shelf for several days. With such a seemingly successful CSA program, and engaging customers with new tastes and old favorites, it would seem that the program would be financially successful for Big Train.

Unfortunately for small farmers, resistance to the forces of a hierarchically based system places them in at risk for economic hardship. The crops that they grow and sell must sustain them beyond the growing season and through the winter months when there is no produce to sell. That does not always happen, though. There are costs inherent in running a farm, such as buying seeds and maintaining equipment, plus the lease payments on the land.

When I spoke with John at the last CSA pickup of the season, he was looking for carpentry work to help cover his expenses until the spring. It is interesting that the people providing food for so many must outsource their own labor during the off-season to feed themselves at times.

Government subsidies that overlook small farms in favor of large farms are one reason this happens, but there are other structural reasons as well. In order to understand this concept, and to understand the disparity in access to and the affordability of nutritional food, it is important to know some of the history of food and economics in the United States. The problems



we have today must be looked at in context. These problems do not exist in a vacuum. In fact, this has been coming for a long time.

### A Brief History

In the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s, the United States experienced a convergence of natural and economic catastrophes. The financial collapse that began in 1928 spurred the Great Depression. Unemployment rates for the next ten years would average close to 20%<sup>5</sup>. This coincided with the Dust Bowl, a drought that destroyed millions of farm acres over a period of eight years. The effects on the American public were staggering. Mass migrations, homelessness, and unprecedented lines at soup kitchens became common.



*Bread Line, New York City 1934 (image in Public Domain)*

This crisis was not without preliminary factors. Economic disparity leading up to and during the depression was at an unprecedented extreme. The upper earning classes received an

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<sup>5</sup> The unemployment rate remained above 20% between 1932 and 1935. ([www.bls.gov](http://www.bls.gov)).

increasing concentration of wealth in the years prior to the Great Depression. It is estimated that the personal income for the top 1% rose 75% between 1920 and 1929, while 80% of American families had no savings accounts (Tucker 1938:586 and San Francisco State University). Actual figures show the top 1% of Americans holding 40% of household net worth in 1922. In 1929 that number jumped to 48% (Carter et al 2011).

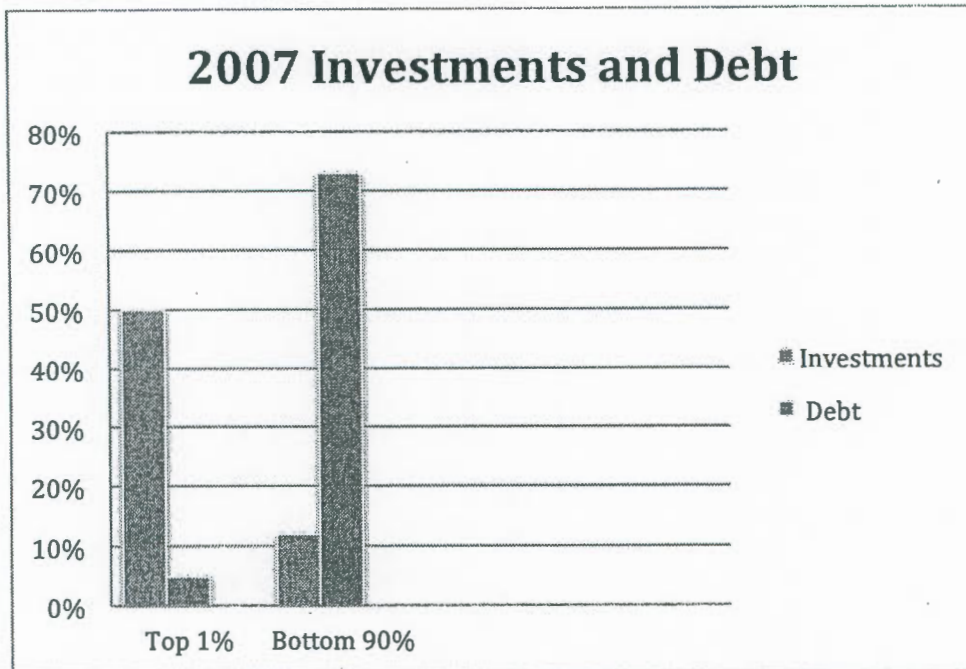
It is not too much of a leap to look at current economic trends in the United States to understand that we are in a precariously similar situation. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the unemployment rate in the U.S. has been between 9 and 10% since 2009 (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2011). Though that is about half of what it was during the Great Depression, the income gap between the top percentage and the majority of the country has skyrocketed.

Recent census studies show the widening gap in income levels, and the amount of average individual debt is staggering, especially in relation to income levels. In short, this equates to poverty, whether in actual numbers or in daily reality. One does not need to look far to see the effects of poverty. It is evident in the proportionally high prices that the poor pay for transportation. It is evident in the low level of health care and in the high crime rates of inner cities (There is much historical evidence to suggest that poverty and neglect produce high crime environments. See Philippe Bourgois' *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio* (2003), or Khalil Gibran Muhammad's *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (2010), or George Jackson's *Soledad Brother* (1994) to name just a few sources.

The financial system collapse of 2008 and the continuing downward trend of the economy is the ongoing result of events and conditions prior to that, just as the market crash of 1928 was preceded by vast gaps in income inequality. As of 2007, the top 1% of Americans held



nearly 50% of the total investments in the country and held a total debt of just 5%. Meanwhile, the bottom 90% of Americans held just 12% of the total investments and carried over 73% of the debt (Dormhoff 2011).



These numbers are disconcerting in large part because of the individual repercussions in quality of life. High debt comes with a multitude of problems, not the least of which is a reduced ability to access health care<sup>6</sup> and quality nutrition. Higher rates of poverty have also been directly linked to predatory lending<sup>7</sup>, predatory advertising, and high rates of environmental hazards.

This economic crisis is especially evident in the state of the nation's food. We have been flooded with high calorie/low nutrient processed foods increasingly since the 1950's. Advertising

<sup>6</sup> The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reports that almost 50million Americans (16%) were uninsured in 2010. This does not include the underinsured, but does reflect the systemic racism in our society. Over 30% of Hispanics and over 20% of blacks were uninsured as compared to whites (11.7% uninsured) (HHS 2011).

<sup>7</sup> In searching for the average welfare payment in Rhode Island, I came across welfarebenefits.org, a multilevel marketing company that claims to offer walmart grocery vouchers and debt relief through a credit agency. These agencies are notorious for predatory practices and ruining people's credit. In fact, upon registering with welfarebenefits.org, I immediately received an email from them informing me of an offer from YesCash, a payday loan company. Their fees run around 30%, but I am unclear on the details, as the link to the "terms and conditions" was not working. Another agency offers a \$250 grocery card as long as you participate in at least two "sponsor's offers." Incidentally, it was difficult to find welfare information.



for these foods has also encouraged Americans to consume more and more of them. While this problem affects many Americans, it is those in low-income communities that suffer the most. These energy dense/low nutrition foods are less expensive, and more readily available at convenience stores and corner markets.

How is it that the richest nation on earth suffers so much from the disease of poverty? And how does nutritional deficiency affect our vulnerable communities? These problems can be directly attributed to the systemic policies that disproportionately favor a higher income economic class. A recent trip to the supermarket Price Well\* may lend credence to this.

### **A Trip to the Grocery Store**

Today is the second day of the month. Social security, welfare, and various social programs all send out benefits on the first. The store is located in a largely Hispanic and lower income section of town. The products reflect the customer base: a large variety of hot sauces and peppers, plantains, fresh tortillas, and the Mexican soft drink, Jarittos. This is the only supermarket in town to carry fresh cactus in the produce section. The store is not very well lit, and there is a nearly overwhelming smell of floor cleaner.

The aisles include stacks of boxes containing rice, beans and juices that are not placed on shelves; they are instead left in the open shipping boxes presumably to help reduce labor costs. As I head down the bean aisle, there is a stock person standing on 25 pound bags of rice to straighten items on a top shelf. He has a cell phone earpiece in one ear and an ipod earbud in the other ear.

The store is crowded with people, and the lines to the registers extend across the entire front of the building. I am in the express lane, with a Dia de los Muertos prayer candle (a sacred

heart) and Tapatio hot sauce, but the line is still long and slow. There is a family in the line next to mine with two overflowing carts. Multiple boxes of Lucky Charms, Fruit Loops, macaroni and cheese, cases of canned soda, and can after can of soup crowd the basket.

These foods are inexpensive, and quick and easy to prepare. However, the nutritional content of cereal and macaroni and cheese is minimal. Despite the limited nutritional content of these items, they might be the only food easily enough prepared by a parent that works two jobs, or a family that is trying to keep down the cost of cooking gas.

This type of shopping in bulk is not limited to the family in line beside me. Box upon box of cereal, canned foods, frozen meals, and cartons of sodas fill the carts of shoppers in nearly any large grocery store in the city. Carol Counihan suggests that the food stamp program supports this shopping trend by an increase in the usability of food stamps for that type of food (1992:61)<sup>8</sup>. This has changed somewhat in recent years. The current list of eligible items for purchase with SNAP benefits now include fresh fruits, vegetables, and even plants that will produce food, such as bean plants or tomato plants.

However, the frequency of benefit availability also encourages the purchase of boxed, canned, or frozen foods. Fresh fruits and vegetables do not keep for long - a week at best. Government benefits in the form of social security, disability, and food benefits are given on a monthly basis. Food purchased at that time will not only need to be enough to last for a month, but must also be shelf stable for that amount of time.

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<sup>8</sup> Recently, the SNAP program expanded the benefit to include some fast food restaurants. There are some hairy issues with this. One of the benefits of including prepared foods is that people who have no place to cook (those living in shelters, who's gas or electricity may be suspended, or unhoused people) can easily access ready to eat food. On the downside, it would appear that this will increase the sales for fast food establishments, and does not provide much in the way of quality nutrition. This balance between affordability, accessibility, and reality is an ongoing dilemma for many of these programs that are attempting to provide food for the hungry, including the SNAP program and many public school lunch programs.

It is possible to use the food benefits at any time during the month; however, it appears much easier to get the entire shopping trip done at one time. This is apparent in the overflowing parking lot of Price Well. Many of the cars are lacking exterior parts such as headlights or rear windows. The trunks of these cars and the back doors of these cars are flung open as overfull shopping carts are emptied into them.

### **Advertising and Placement**

Access to food is only one part of the problem, though. Food insecurity is also about the ability to make healthy choices and to have access to nutritionally adequate food that the body is able to use (Tweeten 1999:475). Even then, however, access to those choices is not enough. The choices must be affordable, and there must also be education surrounding that availability, and not just any education.

One size does not fit all when it comes to education. Education surrounding nutrition must have cultural relevance in order to affect change (Counihan 1992:56). Advertisements for nutritionally deficient products, targeted disproportionately to marginalized communities, frequently subverts attempts at nutritional education. A 2009 study found that low-income Latino neighborhoods had significantly more outdoor advertisements for fast food and sodas than upper income white neighborhoods. Likewise, all low-income areas, regardless of ethnicity, had a much higher incidence of similar advertising as compared to high-income locations (Antronette et. al. 2009:172-73).

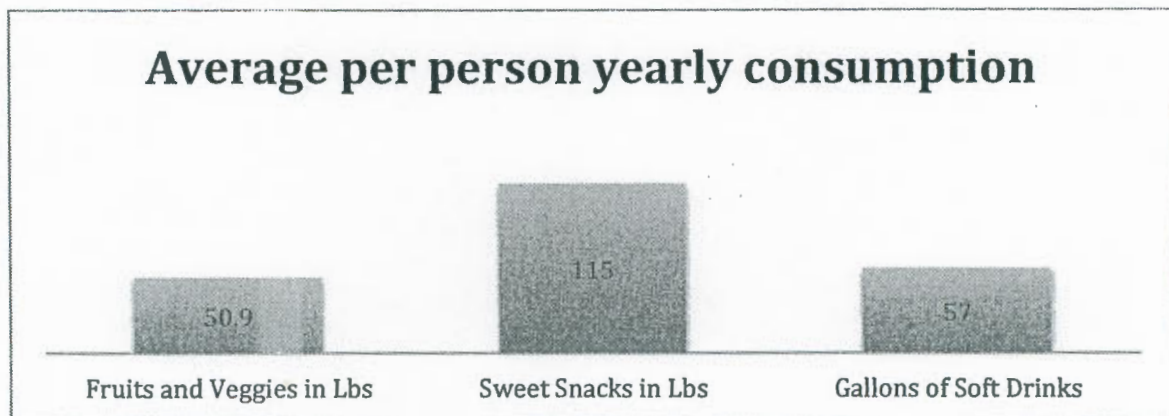




There is an interesting contrast at the pictured corner shop; the shop owner is willing to exploit neighborhood residents with addictive products, yet he clearly distrusts the neighborhood as shown by closing the store with steel gates at night. Furthermore, this store is only a half block from a public elementary school and is on a main street used by many children on their way to and from school. These children see this advertising at least twice daily for five days each week. Beyond the cigarette ads, however, are the racks of potato chips and candy bars available just inside the door of this shop. These low priced and quickly grabbed items are additional evidence of the exploitation of a market population that is marginalized.

That exploitation carries into the corner markets in many parts of the city. The first thing available upon walking into nearly any corner store is a rack of potato chips or candy bars. I saw this in at least seven different corner markets in various sections of Providence. These items are inexpensive and supply a treat or reward to school children. Counihan suggests that food is a

tactile and physical form of power. Those without power also have little power over access to food (1992:55). However, when the food that the powerful eat, as seen in television advertising, is easily available, children will buy that food to, either consciously or unconsciously associate themselves with that power and to disregard their lower social status (1992:61).



Data from the USDA Food Atlas for Providence County, 2006

### **The Environmental Justice League of Rhode Island**

The south side of Providence is characterized by low-income households, a high crime rate, and is brimming with two and three family homes that are often housing more people than they are designed for. Demographically it is largely Dominican, Puerto Rican, and Central American. This is the section of town that the Environmental Justice League of Rhode Island has targeted in the Healthy Corner Store Initiative.

In order to understand the initiative, it is important to understand the Environmental Justice League, and that begins with the EJJ director Amelia Rose. I first met Amelia at the Urban Environmental Lab on Brown University's campus. The lab is actually a two-story home



with a vibrant community garden in the front yard. A worn wooden fence overflowing with sunflowers and colorful lavender and mint plants greeted me.

Amelia arrived on bike at the same time I did. She seems to be quite the adored figure in the lab, as I heard no less than six or eight voices saying hello to her as we walked in. The kitchen of the house was quite busy with the youth program. Amelia's partner in the EJL, Julian Rodriguez-Drix, was teaching a class about cooking and food preparation.

If current economic policies remove social safety nets, classes such as this do more than just fill those gaps. As simple as it may seem, teaching a cooking class to teens is a form of resistance to neoliberal economic structures. The EJL is working with the community to help people understand how much power they do have access to. Eventually, this knowledge can help shape policies that work for people rather than for transnational corporations.

The Urban Environmental Lab is where the EJL holds classes, but their actual office space, the space where they do most of their work is on the other end of town. The EJL office is the back room on the first floor of an old, bright yellow Victorian home on Westminster Street. The simplicity of their office space highlights their commitment to the people they serve. The Childhood Lead Action Program takes the rest of the first floor. This shared space exemplifies the partnerships that the EJL has with so many other community organizations.

It also clear that "this" space is a truly utilitarian space, and that the focus of EJL is far beyond the office walls and into the community. There is little in the way of decoration or amenities. The walls are off-white; there is one light fixture in the ceiling, and a distinct absence of table or floor lamps. What little decoration there is comes in the guise of flyers and posters for past projects and for projects in similar organizations.



It is clear that the office of the EJM is a hub of activity, but that most of that activity is outwardly focused. The office space appears purely utilitarian and, though it seems quite unorganized to the uninitiated, is arranged in a way that is accessible to Amelia and Julian. There is a certain amount of quaintness to the disarray and leads one to believe that the office space is only a place to work out of rather than in. Oscar Lewis remarks, in "Possessions of the Poor" that "The brevity of possession... suggest that the life of the very poor ... is oriented almost exclusively to day-to-day concerns" (1970:460).

Since the EJM deals primarily with economically depressed and marginalized people, it is fair to transfer Lewis' observations to the possessions of an organization that works with people and their "day-to-day concerns." These concerns are evident not only in the spartan office space, but also in looking at the EJM website and the other organizations they work with: The Environmental Council of Rhode Island, Healthy Housing Collaborative, Toxics Action Center, and many others.

### **Healthy Corner Store Initiative**

One of the recent projects of the EJM is the Healthy Corner Store Initiative. The idea for the project came from work in Hartford, CT and in Philadelphia where the initiative was able to get state, and eventually, national funding. That is still a bit further down the road here in the Providence area, but the EJM has been able to work with a local produce vendor and a packaged foods vendor to procure an affordable source of fruit cups and vegetables and healthier packaged snacks respectively.

These fruit cups and snacks are then sold in participating corner markets in lower income sections of town. The idea is for the fruit and snacks (such as granola bars) to be priced

competitively with sweet snacks and for them to be easily accessible inside the stores. The EJM worked directly with several area markets to get these products into the stores and to set up a self-sustaining ordering system as well as a commitment from the vendors to continue to supply these stores at a discounted price.

The EJM and high school student volunteers also worked with these stores to arrange the new products so they were at the front of the stores in the place where chips and candy bars would normally be found. This is an ongoing project, as there is the issue of profit for the store owners to consider. Several stores eventually changed the arrangement back to the original pattern of chips and candy in the front.

One store near an elementary school also offered a stamp for children buying healthier food snacks that could be redeemed at the school store for small prizes. Unfortunately, the store reports that even though the less nutritious snack foods have been moved toward the back of the store, the kids will still go seek those out.

Amelia does like to check in with the stores on a regular basis, so another EJM volunteer, Michelle\*, and I set out to visit some of the stores participating in the initiative. Our first stop was at the D&C Market on Elmwood Ave. The store is painted bright yellow with an awning advertising meats, calling cards, sandwiches, and the ability to wire money to Mexico and South America. These advertisements are written in both Spanish and English and clearly communicate to the large Hispanic population in the area.

It is significant to note that D&C is female-owned and the advertisements on the outside of the store are not for cigarettes, but for calling cards and the lottery. The advertisements for calling cards rather than for cigarettes suggest that this store is more inclined to encourage their clientele (largely Hispanic) to keep in touch with family and friends still living in Mexico or



Central America. The importance of family outweighs the profits of exploitation by tobacco companies.

Inside, a young woman greeted us in English and informed us that the owner was not in at that time as she was in court, but should be back in a little while. I found it interesting that she volunteered that information even before we had told her why we were there. This young woman went on to translate for us with an older gentleman who was cooking. He spoke only Spanish, and when I replied to him in Spanish, there was a noticeable relaxation in the room. This is important to note, as the barriers to communication can establish a definite power differential. Though I was in his work place, and clearly in the minority both linguistically and ethnically, the normative culture in the area places me in the majority.



At the same time, within that power differential, the owners of many of these small markets know when they are in control and how to communicate that power. El Bambo Market, like D&C, is brightly colored and attention grabbing. To our right when we walked in was a long counter with a raised floor so that Renaldo\*, who runs El Bambo stands higher than the



customers buying goods at his store. Renaldo is framed by an overhead cigarette dispensary that further distances him from customers, while amplifying the power differential.

When we walked to this counter, Renaldo greeted us brusquely in English and leaned forward with both palms flat on the counter. It seemed like he was leaning over us rather than toward us, perhaps asserting his ownership of the situation to which we, as strangers and outsiders, did not fit into. Renaldo relaxed slightly when he realized that we were working with Amelia and the EJM, but still continued speaking in short bursts, though I noted that he also did this during a phone call. I also noted that he spoke just a little more softly to Michelle than to me.

Renaldo did not say very much regarding the initiative and the introduction of inexpensive healthy snacks in his store. He has been able to keep them fresh a bit longer since placing them in the cooler. Unfortunately, the cooler is located near the back of the store, so that defeats the purpose of making these snack easily visible and quickly accessible.

The end result for the Healthy Corner Store initiative, and the information we were able to retrieve suggests that in some cases the initiative is doing well and customers are responding favorably to the accessibility and affordability of healthy food. In other cases, the initiative has not been as successful. The dichotomy runs along gender lines; the female-owned stores were successfully selling the new healthy snacks while the male-owned shops were having trouble with the fruit snacks spoiling from inattention.

My experience was that this gender division is due to a different and calmer atmosphere in the female-owned stores that encourages a thoughtful purchase. There is a notable difference, however, that should be acknowledged and accounted for. It may be more efficient to focus this program on female-owned shops, or even to partner with them to expand the program to other shops with similar atmospheres.

Despite some of these setbacks, Amelia remains excited about continuing the project and learning from the experiences. She realizes that some of the implementations are not ideal. But, she notes that while “healthier” is not the same as “healthy” it is a step in the right direction and that this needs to be practical and achievable in small steps if there is to be any long term success.

### **Discussion**

New data is constantly emerging, and individual situations are constantly changing. Facets of structural classism and racism are continually being exposed but force one to wonder how much deeper the decay extends. Class, gender, and race play substantial roles in access to healthy foods.

This is all relevant data when it comes to the ability to access affordable and healthy foods. With low-income and minority families working more hours, and with the constant stresses of such an environment there is a direct line to a cycle of poverty and inequality. The cycle of poverty continues to be further embedded into the system by a destruction of the family (through parental absence via multiple jobs) that so many claim to be protecting.

This alludes to the embeddedness and the insidious nature of neoliberal economic philosophies. As the structural forces that constrain personal responsibility are ignored while simultaneously exalting personal responsibility, the facets of internalized violence become ever more harmful. This is a set up for frustration and limited success at best.

Programs that fail to account for this system based on policies that invisibly marginalize people based on race, gender, nationality, and socio-economic status have a much smaller chance of success, and they also have greater obstacles to overcome. Telling someone they need to eat

more fruit without accounting for access and affordability does little to accomplish the goal of healthier eating.

### **Conclusion**

The Healthy Corner Store Initiative, the City Meal Site, and the Big Train Farm CSA are all making some headway into feeding the hungry. They are all working toward, with some success, a plan to make healthy and/or affordable food available to a larger section of the population.

In some ways these programs fit perfectly into the structure of an imbalanced economy. They do attempt to be the community organizations that fill in for the government's non-present safety net. Below the base of the public image, however, is a fierce resistance to those policies that harm the most at risk among us.

The ultimate goal of this research was to learn how these programs are working within the communities they serve. At this point, that remains to be seen. City Meal Site is moving to a space that will offer them a larger clientele. Big Train Farm will be working to provide produce to a program that offers housing and job training to single parents. The Healthy Corner Store Initiative is in the learning stages with hopes to grow larger.

The layers of social inequality and economic barriers make change problematic. In fact, these

“ethnic components to [lifestyle] have emerged ...out of a history of slavery, racism, and socioeconomic inequality. They manifest themselves through everyday practices that enforce social hierarchies and constrain the life choices of large categories of vulnerable people...Ethnic components to [lifestyle] thereby become a strategic cog in the logic of



symbolic violence that legitimizes and administers ethnic hierarchy, fuels racism, and obscures economic inequality” (Bourgois 2009, 42).

Here again is the cycle of poverty demonstrated through the entrenchment of imbalances of power and status. This is what must be overcome in order to achieve equality; however, small steps in the right direction may eventually lead to larger change.

The long term effects of the Healthy Corner Store Initiative will be helpful in determining the benefits to the communities being served by this program. Additional time is necessary for this program to become fully integrated into the community, and to generate useable data. Likewise, the work that Big Train Farm is just beginning to do with McAuley Village and the benefits of that work could only be determined with additional time.

These programs are both new. City Meal Site has a history of success in their current location. It is reasonable to believe that the success will carry over into their new location. However, there may be significant changes in both clientele and in volunteers, as well as a potential loss of funds that came from the church that City Meal Site is leaving.

Though the work is not done, it must be done enough for now, with the hope that we can pick it up in the future and follow it further with new insight and a new and more developed perspective. These programs will have time to become more deeply rooted in their communities and it will be more feasible to analyze areas of success that may be transposed to other similar projects.

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