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## Bridging Inequity Through Farmer's Market Mobility: Food Access Barriers and Alternative Food Systems in Kingston, New York

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Bridging Inequity Through Farmer's Market Mobility:  
Food Access Barriers and Alternative Food Systems in Kingston, New York

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
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## **Abstract**

Low-income communities in the United States face disproportionately higher levels of food access barriers than other demographics in the country. Flawed public transportation systems, high cost, inefficient government food assistance programs, and structural exclusivity have created a food system that is largely inaccessible for many low-income individuals. This project demonstrates existing inequity in our food systems and illustrates the ways and which it is experienced by low-income demographics. It describes ways that geographic and physical space, economics, policy, and socio-cultural components impact food access experiences, and the ways these components impact choice and decision-making. While the existing system is unjust and inequitable, alternative food systems can create and foster equity and resiliency. This project illustrates existing exclusivity in alternative food systems, while advocating for their necessity in creating broad systematic change. They must be redefined and recreated as inclusive, community systems, and through this, they have the potential to foster community, create resiliency local food systems, and increase equity. This project uses Kingston, New York as a case study to examine existing barriers and the potential for farmer's markets and urban farms, such as the Kingston YMCA Farm Project to mitigate food access barriers.



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## **Introduction Literature, Framing, and Problem Overview**

### *Introduction*

Mirroring the rise of industrial agriculture and the increase in car ownership, grocery stores have moved to the outskirts of urban and suburban centers. This has created and added to transportation, policy, economic, and socio-cultural barriers to food access (New York City Department of Planning, 2008; Blanchard and Lyson, 2006). These barriers are felt primarily by low-income urban and rural populations of the United States, which disproportionately experience lower access to healthy, affordable food (Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010). Smaller grocery stores in low-income, urban areas typically have higher prices, limited quantity, and lower quality (Weinberg, 2000). Access, cost, and quality gaps impact nutrition, economic security, and the quality of life of the populations effected, creating critical food justice issues (Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010).

While food access barriers persist throughout the country, there are many organizations working to improve access and minimize barriers. Through these organizations, we can see increased inclusivity and decreased barriers. Gottlieb and Joshi define the food justice movement as, “(i) seeking to challenge and restructure the dominant food system, (ii) providing a core focus on equity and disparities and the struggles by those who are most vulnerable, and (iii) establishing linkages and common goals with other forms of social justice activism and advocacy” (2010). Alternative food systems are often exclusive to low-income communities due to cost, access, policy, or language barriers; however, organizations and institutions that create inclusive alternative food systems can bridge food justice challenges.

My research examines geographic, economic, policy, and socio-cultural components that make food access disproportionately challenging for low-income communities. I use Kingston,

New York as a case study and I conduct interviews with low-income Kingston residents to determine the barriers they face when accessing food. My research examines the Kingston YMCA Farm Project, an urban farm located in Midtown, Kingston, to determine ways alternative food systems can mitigate access barriers in their communities. Additionally, I use the Project to examine challenges alternative food systems face when working to create more equitable systems. The farm is located in a low-income area of Kingston and works to provide affordable, healthy produce to members of its community. However, individuals of the Midtown community still encounter barriers to accessing healthy food, thus, my research examines what barriers they face and what influences decision-making. The following discussion examines government food assistance policy as an inadequate but essential source of nutrition for low-income populations, and demonstrates how individuals interact with surrounding complex food systems. I describe how food access barriers are complicated and interwoven, and how they produce unique experiences for all individuals, but create a shared experience of insufficiency and inequity. Low-income communities experience disproportionately high barriers to food access, and existing government policies, as well as private organizations and institutions fail to mitigate these barriers. However, alternative food systems, such as farmer's markets and urban farms, can address food system insufficiencies and inequities due to their flexibility and mobility.

### *Food Justice*

The term "food justice" has been gaining attention in food movements and environmental justice literature, and is used to address race, class, and gender inequities, and the existence of exploitation and oppression in the food system. This term is used to address all aspects of the

food system from labor exploitation to racial and class disparities in health. The term “food desert,” also gaining in popularity, primarily focuses on distribution, access, and consumption. It was first used in England in the early 1990’s to characterize areas with no access to affordable, fresh food due to a movement of grocery stores out of neighborhoods and into suburbs (Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010). The term “food mirage” is used in a similar way as food deserts, but it makes the distinction that the availability of grocery stores does not equal accessibility. The term is defined by Betsy Breyer and Adriana Voss-Andreae as a location where “full service grocery stores appear plentiful but, because food prices are high, healthful foods are economically inaccessible for low-income households” (2013). These terms begin to address a national phenomenon of disparities in access for neighborhoods with differing demographics. As a result, poorer communities have higher risks for food-related diseases, such as heart disease, obesity, and diabetes (Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010).

The term “food deserts” has been used to refer to both rural and urban areas; however, rural and urban food deserts face different challenges. In rural areas, food desert terminology generally refers to the physical distance from grocery stores. In rural areas of Texas, Arkansas, Alabama, and Oklahoma, the loss of small-town grocery stores related to economic decline and population loss resulted in a significant decline in food access (Blanchard and Lyson, 2006). Urban areas often have an abundance of small stores and markets, yet these are generally small, expensive grocery stores with very little fresh produce and less-processed products (Bader, 2010). A 2007 study in Chicago found that ½ million residents in primarily black neighborhoods had limited or no access to a full-service food market (Gallagher, 2007). Gallagher writes, “in a typical African-American block, the nearest grocery store is roughly twice the distance as the nearest fast food restaurant” (2007). Additionally, a 2008 study by the New York Department of

City Planning determined that three million residents in New York City live in neighborhoods with a high-need for affordable, fresh produce, and a high percentage of low-income people surveyed reported that they had not eaten any fresh produce the day before. Many people who live in low-income areas have little choice about where they shop and what they can buy, which indicates inequities in choice and also in nutrition. The availability of supermarkets is a large piece of what determines adequate access to food, and low-income and higher-income areas show a discrepancy in the populations who have full-service markets available (Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010).

In addition to low-income families, minority families, families with children, and single-parent households are more likely to be food insecure (Coleman-Jensen et al, 2011). People of color and minorities are more likely to live in poor neighborhoods, but in a 2007 study after controlling for income and population density, Black neighborhoods in Harlem were still less likely to have supermarkets or affordable full-service grocery stores (Galvez et al, 2007). Additionally, in a study in of New Orleans neighborhoods, race was a stronger predictor than wealth of a higher density of fast food restaurants (Block et al, 2004). In both New York and New Orleans, lack of food store availability disproportionately affected black communities independent of median income, median rent, and population density (Galvez et al, 2007, Block et al, 2004). Women are also disproportionately at risk for food insecurity, as women are more likely to live in neighborhoods with limited access to food and are more likely to have high-risk family structures, such as being a single parent (Smith, 2012). Since women are typically responsible for managing the food in a household, they are disproportionately affected by food insecurity as they reduce or alter their own intake to provide adequate food for their children (Olson, 2005; Coleman-Jensen, 2010).

Figure 1: Food Security in United States Households

Category	Percent of Households
<b>Food Secure</b>	
National Average	87.3%
Households with Children	83.4%
<b>Food Insecure</b>	
National Average	12.7%
Single women with children	30.3%
Single men with children	22.4%
Hispanic households	19.1%
Black, non-Hispanic households	21.5%
White, non-Hispanic households	10.0%

Data from: *Household Food Security in the United States in 2015*, (Coleman-Jensen et al, 2016).

#### *Inequity in Market Availability*

The full-service food market emerged in the 1920's and 1930's and started increasing in size after the late 30's. During that time, markets averaged about 6,000-8,000 square feet, as opposed to 46,000 square feet now, and were primarily focused on local and regional foods (FMI, 2016). This hyper-regional focus ensured that customers had fresh produce from surrounding areas at affordable prices. However, with the increase in industrial agriculture and the heightened dependence on non-perishable processed food, by the late 1940's, grocery stores started to move to the outskirts of urban centers and began rapidly increasing in size (Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010).

For the urban poor, this was the beginning of food access barriers. Small grocery stores continued to exist in urban centers, but were unable to compete with large grocery stores (Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010). Thus, people lacking adequate transportation were left to spend more money on lower-quality food. This pattern exists today, and more and more grocery stores are closing in urban areas and relocating to the outskirts of cities. From 2000 to 2006, New York City's population increased by about three percent; however, many neighborhoods lost supermarkets and even more are at risk of closing (New York City Department of Planning, 2008). The availability, location, and type of grocery store now frequently indicates the demographic who lives in the area, putting poorer neighborhoods at a disadvantage.

Neighborhoods with higher income levels and higher proportions of white residents tend to have greater access to supermarkets, while low-income neighborhoods with high proportions of minority residents have high access to small grocery stores, but little access to supermarkets (Bader, 2012). A 2000 study found 30% fewer supermarkets in low-income areas than in wealthier areas, and zip codes with greater numbers of individuals on food assistance had significantly less supermarkets than other areas (Weinberg, 2000). Access to convenience stores is associated with poorer demographics, thus exemplifying a class disparity (Bader, 2012). When access to healthy food is limited, households must spend more time and money to eat a nutritious diet. This demonstrates that food insecurity generates time, cost, nutrition, transportation, and social inequities, which manifest as elements of food injustice.

Low-income populations must spend more money on food than the urban and suburban middle and upper classes. A 2000 study indicated that prices in a market with 42 core items were as much as 48 percent higher in small grocery stores than in supermarkets (Weinberg, 2000). Additionally, small stores in high-poverty areas offer five to ten percent less variety in brands

and food types than those in other areas and offer a fourth less non-food items than grocery stores in other areas (Weinberg, 2000). Fewer food choices means that populations that rely on food items from elsewhere in the world that are considered “specialty” in United States grocery stores, are often unable to access them. Not only do people in low-income areas experience a lack of quantity and quality of food, they also experience a lack of culturally appropriate food.

Additionally, produce in low-income areas is frequently lower quality. A USDA study found that produce in grocery stores in low-income areas had a higher likelihood of being wilted or otherwise compromised, as opposed to produce in wealthier neighborhoods (Weinberg, 2000). Retailers perceive a lack of buying power in low-income areas, so they leave for higher-income neighborhoods (Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010). While many retailers perceive disinterest in food quality among low-income communities, a 2008 study demonstrated that low-income heads of households are concerned about food, but lack access to local markets because of cost or transportation (Webber and Dollahite). Lower rates of produce purchases is not due to disinterest, but is instead due to cost, transportation, and access barriers. My research demonstrates the ways this inequity manifests in Midtown, Kingston, an area without supermarkets, yet an abundance of fast-food restaurants and convenience stores.

### *Alternative Food Systems: Farmer’s Markets*

While low-income communities experience substantial barriers to food access, alternatives to conventional food systems can mitigate these barriers. Throughout the past two decades, farmer’s markets have been increasing, demonstrating an interest in an alternative to the industrial food system. From 1994- 2009, there has been a 300% increase in the number of farmers markets in the country (Pilgeram, 2012). Farmer’s markets are equated with

environmental sustainability and serve as a way for consumers to find transparency in the food system. Since industrial agriculture is tied with social and environmental justice issues, farmer's markets present an alternative. Most farmer's markets emphasize small-scale farms and demonstrate a commitment to social justice and environmental sustainability. Additionally, farmer's markets present ways that small farms can survive, as they provide a market for food produced without the use of expensive machinery or the requirement for large plots of land (Pilgeram, 2012).

While additional grocery stores would both reduce cost and increase choice in low-income areas, I argue that alternative food systems, such as farmer's markets, are a better way to address food access barriers and neighborhood preferences. Due to the mobility of farmer's markets, they can exist in "food deserts" and "mirages" without infrastructure that a grocery store or supermarket would require. There are also examples of "bridge markets," which use the existence of a farmer's market in a high-income area to allow farmers to offer lower-priced produce in low-income areas (Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010). Additionally, farmer's markets can cater to specific neighborhood needs, while supporting local farmers and regional economies. They can adjust programming to address particular issues, while creating community that revolves around an equitable food system. Through working within alternative food systems, there is greater potential to create equity and overcome traditional food access barriers.

Since markets are relatively mobile, they do not depend on commercial space and rather can be brought anywhere where there is a parking lot, streets that can be sectioned off, or an organization willing to lend space for a few hours. This mitigates transportation barriers, as fresh food can be brought directly to where people work, live, and interact. A study done in London, Ontario, Canada, an area classified as a food desert, saw a 12% reduction in the average price of

food after the introduction of a farmer's market (Gilliland and Larsen, 2009). Before the market, the area had many small grocery stores, which were significantly more expensive than supermarkets in the region; however, many people were unable to access supermarkets due to lack of transportation. The introduction of a farmer's market with products priced lower than surrounding small grocery stores lowered the average price of food in the area by 12% and greatly increased the amount of fresh produce. A study in Flint, Michigan had similar findings. Researchers traced the impact of moving the farmer's market from the outskirts of the city into the city center in closer proximity to low-income neighborhoods (Sadler, 2016). The study found a larger and more diverse range of customers after the move with an increase from 31% to 37% of survey respondents from "the most distressed neighborhoods" (Sadler, 2016). Additionally, 21% of respondents either took the bus or walked, compared to 4% previously (Sadler, 2016). The farmer's market's change in location had a significant impact on how many people went and who the market was serving. In both cases, farmer's markets can be used to provide affordable options in areas where there are few, and alleviate instances of food insecurity.

While farmer's markets can be a powerful tool in combatting food insecurity, it is essential that they create spaces for low-income communities in addition to middle and upper-class communities. The movement of farmer's markets can be powerful by decreasing travel burden posed by lack of car ownership or public transportation. Additionally, they can be a unique source of fresh, unprocessed food in areas without affordable options. Yet, they can also be exclusive and unapproachable to many members of the population. Ryanne Pilgeram notes that "the marketing and practice of sustainability ties the images and ideologies of the white, middle-class, nuclear family to the perceived wholesomeness of sustainable foods and privileges whiteness and heterosexuality within the space of the market" (2012). Julie Guthman similarly

demonstrated that people of color do not participate in these markets proportionate to the population (2008). While farmer's markets can potentially increase access to fresh vegetables in low-income areas, they often do not create inclusive spaces for low-income, minority communities. Though farmer's markets are not always inclusive, the model itself has the potential to create change in the food system and when used correctly, can serve and empower communities.

### *Public Food Assistance*

Food assistance programs aid low-income recipients in accessing food and can be used at many supermarkets, grocery stores, gas stations, convenience stores, and some farmer's markets. The primary food assistance program is SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), which aids recipients in the purchase of any food item, with some exceptions such as alcohol and prepared foods. There are also a variety of more specific food assistance programs such as WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) and FMNP (Farmers Market Nutrition Program). WIC aids women and their children in the purchase of nutritious food in order to aid child development. FMNP is a program geared towards WIC recipients and elderly SNAP recipients to purchase fresh produce from local farmer's markets. The FMNP is unique due to the way it subsidizes food purchases for low-income populations, while supporting small farmers. Additionally, it works to build local communities and economies. Benefits of the FMNP include increased consumption of fruits and vegetables, an increase in the perception of value of fruits and vegetables, and increased purchasing power (Just and Weninger, 1997). The program provides FMNP checks for money spent at farmer's markets, so for every five dollars a WIC recipient

spends, they get two dollars back. This incentivizes farmer's market purchases for people who may not otherwise be able to prioritize it.

Since 1992, FMNP has served as a permanent feature of the WIC program, geared towards supplying nutritious food to the “nutritionally at-risk” (Just and Weninger, 1997). While the FMNP provides a variety of benefits to recipients, barriers to access still present challenges to fully utilizing benefits. WIC serves approximately 8 million individuals and approximately 1.7 million WIC individuals use the FMNP, so roughly eighty percent of WIC users currently do not use the FMNP (USDA, 2016). Just and Weninger found that utilization heavily depends on information supplied to recipients, as well as ascribed benefits and knowledge of how to prepare the food (1997). So, if local WIC and SNAP offices do not promote the program, it will likely be underutilized. Transportation is also a critical barrier; if recipients cannot get to the farmer's market, they are unable to utilize their benefits, and the FMNP checks go unused. Therefore, it is important to evaluate the location of farm stands and the populations they are serving. Additionally, without proper knowledge of food preparation, recipients will be unable to use what they are purchasing. The program has many benefits, but there are a variety of reasons it goes unused. Due to the low utilization rate of the FMNP and the low availability of produce in low-income areas, it is important to investigate ways alternative food systems can bridge these gaps and tie together government policies and local organizations.

#### *Private Food Assistance: Food Pantries*

While food pantries are designed for emergency food assistance, they frequently become regular tools for accessing food. The amount of government food assistance individuals receive is frequently insufficient in covering their weekly and monthly food costs, so food assistance

recipients increasingly rely on private food assistance, such as food pantries (Anderson, Paynter, and Berner, 2016). One study found that the average food pantry client has an 1,823-day long relationship with an individual pantry, demonstrating that individuals who go to pantries often go to them for years at a time, not just occasionally (Anderson, Paynter, and Berner, 2016). This illustrates that government programs are frequently unsuccessful in supplying low-income individuals with enough assistance to fulfil all of their nutritional requirements. Alternative food systems, both private and public, can address this disconnect; however, there is a critical need for more successful government food assistance policy.

#### *Food Assistance and Farmer's Market Challenges*

While many participants in food assistance programs are aware of the economic incentives to purchasing food at farmer's markets provided through SNAP, WIC, and FMNP, farmer's markets are not always easily accessible. For people who do not own cars, time, distance, and the cost of transportation can be barriers to access. In a USDA study of WIC and SNAP recipients, 42 percent of farmer's market shoppers who frequently shopped at their farmer's market indicated that they did not shop as often as they wished because it was easier to buy their groceries at one location, and 35 percent said the market was not close to where they lived (2014). In the same study, about 73 percent of non-shoppers said that they did not shop at farmer's markets because it was easier to buy all of their groceries in one location, while 42 percent indicated that it was challenging to get to farmer's markets. About 33 percent said that the prices at farmer's markets were too high (USDA, 2014). However, only 2.8 percent of non-shoppers knew that some farmer's markets offered incentives to SNAP and WIC recipients and 50 percent indicated that they would be more likely to shop at farmer's markets if incentives

were offered (USDA, 2014). There are a combination of factors that determine an individual's ability and desire to access markets, but knowledge of these programs is an important factor and it determines experiences of resulting barriers.

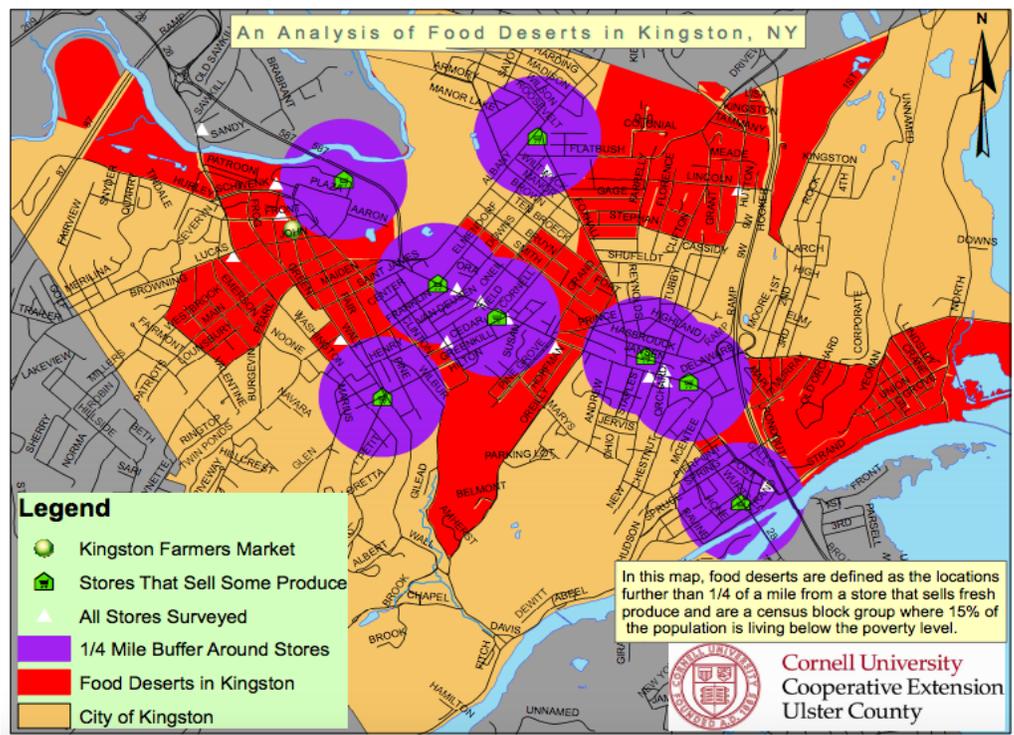
Even if an individual can access a farmer's market, there are a variety of variables that affect their comfortability in the space. Ryanne Pilgeram conducted an ethnography at a farmer's market in the pacific northwest where both vendors and customers were predominantly middle or upper-class, white individuals (2012). Due to this, the farmer's market was less accessible to low-income, people of color because of the construction of wealth and whiteness at the market. In many markets, SNAP benefits get transferred into tokens at the market to be used at individual vendors. However, this inhibits any level of anonymity and is a barrier to anyone uncomfortable with using their benefits publically. At grocery stores, EBT can be used in the same way a credit card is, so individuals uncomfortable with using their SNAP benefits publically can have a certain level of anonymity. Components of exclusivity and comfortability are important in determining who will shop at a market, and they can be substantial barriers to some. The availability and accessibility of a market does not necessarily mean the market will be utilized. Additional attention should be given to the social aspects of markets, as in many cases this is a determinant of whether or not the market will be utilized. This study will examine how socio-cultural components interact with political, economic, and geographical aspects to determine the experiences of food assistance recipients.

#### *Case Study: Kingston, New York*

Kingston, New York, located in Ulster County, has a population of about 24,000 people (Kingston Census, 2010). Approximately three in every twenty Ulster County residents and one

in five children lack access to food to meet basic nutritional needs (Books, 2012). In Ulster County in 2010, about 12% of all residents, 15% of all families with young children, and 47% of all single-mother families with young children had incomes below the poverty level (Books, 2012). About 14% of Ulster County households received SNAP benefits in 2011 (Books, 2012). The USDA identifies “low food access” communities as areas where “at least 500 people and/or 33 percent of the census tract’s population lives at least one mile from the nearest supermarket or large grocery store in urban areas, and 10 miles in rural areas” (2016). Based on these guidelines, 17.4% of Kingston residents live in a low-access area. The figure below shows Kingston food deserts in red, demonstrating that much of Midtown, Kingston is classified as low-access.

Figure 2: Food Deserts in Kingston, NY



(Cornell Cooperative Extension Ulster County, 2015).

Grocery stores in Kingston, like in many other urban areas, are located on the outskirts of the city. Midtown Kingston, in particular, lacks affordable stores that stock nutritious food.

Aside from a few small, expensive convenience stores with limited options, there are few places to buy fresh produce. A study conducted by the Cornell Cooperative Extension Agency surveyed stores that sell food in Kingston and found that almost half (45.5%), do not sell fresh produce (2012). So, while food may be available and accessible, fresh produce often is not. Additionally, the Cornell Cooperative Extension study found that the average size of grocery stores in Kingston is less than 500 square feet, with only a few large supermarkets located in the outskirts of the city (2012). Since small grocery stores are likely to be more expensive with lower quality food and low a likelihood of fresh produce, this hyper-availability of small grocery stores disproportionately affects low-income populations.

*Organization: Kingston YMCA Farm Project*

There are a variety of organizations in Kingston, NY that work to make food more accessible to low-income communities. SNAP and WIC are available through the Ulster County Department of Social Services, and there are eleven food pantries located within the city (Ulster Corps, 2016). Both the Kingston YMCA Farm Project and the Kingston Farmer's Market have initiatives designed to help food assistance recipients better reach fresh produce. These programs, used together, can often provide a full range of products and nutrients; however, it is often difficult to utilize all of these programs together. Transportation proves problematic in the city of Kingston, and while programs exist, they cannot always be utilized. The Kingston YMCA Farm Project works to bridge this gap, and through this project, I investigate the ways in which it is successful and the challenges it faces.

The farm is one of the very few providers of fruits and vegetables in Midtown. The stand accepts SNAP, WIC, and other traditional food assistance benefits and also transports produce to

various locations around the city for additional access. While the farm is successful in reaching some populations, there are also populations it is ineffective in reaching. In Kingston, 55% of FMNP checks go unused, demonstrating that food assistance recipients are unable or uninterested in using them. While this is lower than the nationwide average of 80%, it is still substantial (USDA, 2016). The Farm Project demonstrates an effort to address many of these problems, yet is unable to reach portions of the population. This may be due to geographic, economic, policy, or socio-cultural barriers. However, in order to mitigate food and environmental injustice, it is important to examine them and determine ways of reaching nutritionally disadvantaged populations.

The Farm Project has created various programs designed to supply produce to those who cannot get to the Kingston YMCA, where the farm stand is located. The farmer runs a mobile market, where she brings the farm's produce to locations in Kingston, including two hospital locations, a retirement home, and the Kingston Public Library. Through this mobile market, she aims to expand the population she reaches. While this is successful, there are still a significant amount of FMNP checks that go unused. Thus, through this project, I examine factors such as interest in fresh produce, knowledge about FMNP and local farmer's markets, Kingston transportation systems, cost, and exclusivity in order to determine the barriers that prove most challenging for food assistance recipients.

### *Methods*

I conducted interviews with eleven low-income individuals and food assistance recipients who I met through the Kingston YMCA Farm Project, the Kingston Farmer's Market, and a Kingston food pantry. Interviews address questions such as how successful participants feel their

food assistance programs are, how they describe experiences accessing food, and how they address their nutritional needs for their families.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, I asked them to specify the largest barriers to accessing food in their communities and how they cope with them.

I analyzed interviews by identifying connections with the literature and between interviewees. I looked for patterns and themes that emerged in order to characterize common experiences. I connected these experiences with themes other researchers had established and used related literature to strengthen new findings. I conducted observations at the Kingston YMCA Farm Project for over forty hours at both the farm stand and the farm. I observed who came to the YMCA, who bought food at the farm stand (located in the YMCA lobby), and who interacted with the farm itself. I observed the farmer and her interactions with customers, as well as customers' interactions with each other. At the Kingston Farmer's Market, I observed from the market management table for a total of twenty hours. I interacted primarily with individuals who came to the market to use SNAP, WIC, and FMNP and observed their interactions with farmers and market management. I spent four hours at a Kingston food pantry and observed ways volunteers, customers, management, and church leadership interacted with one another. Through these observations, I looked for ways individuals demonstrated comfortability or experienced barriers. I analyzed how individuals experienced spaces and how and when challenges emerged. I examined connections and communities, and how relationships existed and emerged in these spaces.

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<sup>1</sup> Appendix 1

### *Project Structure*

Chapter one discusses geographic and physical barriers to food access. The chapter demonstrates that low-income communities have disproportionately fewer healthy, affordable food options in their communities and it examines ways that transportation and car ownership impact food access. I explain that individuals without access to cars in an area with inadequate public transportation experience significant barriers to food access. Additionally, the chapter addresses the geographical layout of the city and Midtown Kingston and discusses how the distance affects access experiences. Community develops through physical and geographic space, and I demonstrate how this determines interactions with surrounding institutions. Lastly, the chapter addresses ways that the Kingston YMCA Farm Project bridges geographical and physical access barriers, and ways that alternative food systems have the potential to bridge access gaps.

Chapter two discusses barriers created by economic and policy structures and the ways this affects experiences. It examines SNAP, WIC, and FMNP structures and how these programs can aid in the purchase of fresh produce, and the ways in which they limit and restrict food purchases. I identify that all individuals run out of food assistance each month and how this limits where and what individuals purchase. I describe how individuals evaluate, prioritize, and experience cost and the resulting ways this impacts their choices. Through this, the chapter explains the difference between actual cost and perception of cost and the ways this disparity impacts purchases. I discuss cost at the Kingston YMCA Farm Stand and the ability of the stand to keep prices affordable. The chapter examines ways that food pantries close the gap between the amount of food assistance received and the amount needed, and the resulting dependence on private, emergency food assistance locally and nationally. Finally, the chapter examines how

cost and policy shape and limit food access experiences to ultimately narrow choices and complicate food purchases.

Chapter four illustrates ways socio-cultural components impact the experiences of food assistance recipients. The chapter demonstrates the prevalence of exclusivity in alternative food systems and the ways this makes farmer's markets challenging to those who do not feel included. I examine ways food pantries create spaces of inclusivity, and foster participation and community. Additionally, the chapter illustrates knowledge networks and communication structures, which impact experiences and relationships. Finally, I determine the ways alternative food systems can foster inclusivity in order to create more equitable food systems.

#### *In Summary*

Through the discussion of my findings, I determine experiences of individuals in the low-income Kingston community and the ways in which they interact with conventional and alternative food systems. Individuals face significant barriers in accessing food and I demonstrate the importance of fostering inclusive spaces. I identify the role that the Kingston YMCA Farm Project plays in the community, the ways that it mitigates food access barriers, and the way it is perceived in its community. My findings support and expand upon existing literature, and demonstrate food access barriers that exist nationally and in the Kingston community. Cost and policy define food choices, as does existing transportation structures, and these factors impact how individuals interact with and experience space. Within alternative food systems, exclusivity manifests as a significant barrier; however, I address ways that these same alternative food systems can foster inclusivity and serve as ways to mitigate food insecurity. I further suggest that efforts to combat food access challenges should be directed at alternative

food systems due to their ability to work within a new, more flexible system and due to their ability to address aspects of food justice more thoroughly. Through my discussion, I highlight the experiences of individuals who suffer from the highest levels of food injustice and determine the ways we can better address this inequity in our food systems.

**Chapter 1**  
**“These Days with a Lot of Planning:”**  
**Geographical and Physical Influences on Food Accessibility**

*Introduction*

This chapter discusses the geographical and physical barriers in Kingston such as transportation, geography, housing, and time that prevent or limit sufficient food access for individuals. Major Kingston supermarkets, such as ShopRite and Hannaford, are located on the outskirts of the city. Midtown Kingston, where the majority of interviewees are from, has a significant lack of healthy, affordable food options. While Kingston has a bus system, many find it does not provide affordable and timely access to all areas of the city. This chapter will demonstrate how access to vehicles, public transportation, and neighborhood characteristics are contributing factors to the experience of buying food. However, these barriers must also be viewed in respect to socio-cultural factors, such as neighborhood community, work and childcare duties, and comfortability within spaces. Additionally, political and economic factors, such as food assistance programs and regulations, supermarket and grocery store cost, and the availability of pantries impact experiences accessing food. Due to the variety of complicated and overlapping barriers, individuals each have different approaches to weighing geographical and transportation barriers in conjunction with socio-cultural and economic factors. This chapter will not only examine particular geographic and physical barriers to food purchasing; it will also examine how food assistance recipients weigh their options to overcome these obstacles with other significant considerations and experiences.

Physical distance can be an approximation of burden; however, various other barriers affect and contribute to the experience of buying food. Munoz-Plaza et al. write that “physical distance does not equal travel burden,” in order to explain the disconnect between spatial

distance and the energy it takes to move between places (2008). While one grocery store may be closer to an individual, another that is farther away may be more accessible by public transportation. Additionally, this experience is impacted by vehicle ownership, which greatly extends the range of travel to certain food stores, giving drivers access to many more options than non-drivers (Munoz-Plaza et al., 2008). Since low-income demographics have lower rates of car ownership, they experience disproportionately more barriers to food access than middle and high-income demographics (Munoz-Plaza et al., 2008). Through my research, I will demonstrate that vehicle ownership changes food accessibility, often necessitating an elaborate and well-planned schedule that accounts for public transportation, weather, cost, and time.

Living in an area without opportunities to obtain affordable, healthy food makes access disproportionately challenging, regardless of car ownership, and puts low-income individuals at a higher risk for food-related illnesses. Midtown, Kingston has many small convenience stores and fast-food restaurants, but no supermarkets and few affordable grocery stores (Khan et al., 2012). Related research demonstrates that low-income communities that lack access to inexpensive, nutritious food options are at a higher risk for food-related diseases, such as heart disease, obesity, and diabetes (Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010). Burdens placed upon low-income communities demonstrate a class disparity that manifests in health-related issues, which is emblematic of food injustice (Bader, 2012). Through my research, I examine how geographic and physical barriers put low-income Kingston community members at a greater risk for food-related diseases. Additionally, I illustrate how low-income individuals disproportionately experience travel burden in Kingston, which in turn affects purchasing healthy, affordable food. I connect these experiences with experiences in other United States cities, and I examine how physical and geographic barriers impact other areas and populations.

Farmer's markets and stands are mobile businesses that can be moved in order to address the needs and desires of communities. Their mobility and range of product offerings provide an opportunity to address access barriers. Not only can markets address issues related to the lack of available produce, but they can also provide culturally relevant products. Due to their ability to be flexible, markets can address food security and community health-related challenges. Studies such as one in Ontario, Canada, have found that farmer's markets can also impact the price of food in surrounding areas. This study found a 12% reduction in the average price of food after the introduction of a farmer's market in an area classified as a food desert (Gilliland and Larsen, 2009). Since low-income areas tend to have higher availability of small, expensive convenience-style grocery stores, the potential to lower the prices of fresh produce at these stores is significant. The Kingston YMCA Farm Project works to combat community food insecurity through its location in the heart of Midtown, Kingston. Its mobile market programs, which bring farm produce to food insecure and low-income areas, also address transportation and geographic barriers. This chapter evaluates the successes of the Kingston YMCA Farm Stand and the challenges it faces in combatting physical and geographic barriers through its programs. Additionally, it illustrates the potential for similar programs to alleviate the effects of food insecurity.

### *Geography*

Midtown, Kingston has been classified as a food desert by the Cornell Cooperative Extension Ulster County (2015). Due to this, many individuals in the area have a hard time accessing food, particularly fresh produce. Stores in Midtown that sell food include Stewart's, Walgreens, a small grocery store called Sunshine Market, and many fast-food restaurants.

Supermarkets, like ShopRite and Hannaford, are located on the periphery of the city, and offer a wide variety of fresh produce, yet are challenging to access without a car. One study found that less than half the stores that sell food in Kingston sell fresh produce, and of those, only half restocked produce twice a week or more (Cornell Cooperative Extension Ulster County, 2015). Individuals from Midtown reported that, of stores nearby, only one store carried a minimal amount of produce, and individuals were unclear if it accepted WIC or SNAP. Some small convenience stores, such as Stewart's, occasionally sell produce, but it is generally limited to lemons and limes or the occasional tomato. One individual said, "I can't buy food in Midtown, because I know it's going to be pricy." In this case, even the limited amount of food available in Midtown is inaccessible due to price constraints. Food in Midtown is often sold at higher prices than at supermarkets, yet is lower in quality. This is illustrative of problems throughout the country, as smaller grocery stores in urban areas typically have higher prices, limited quantity, and lower quality (Adams et al., 2010; Weinberg, 2000).

Many residents of Midtown rely on busses or taxis to obtain food, which can both be cost-prohibitive and time-consuming. When individuals use taxi and bus systems, they often have to transport groceries significant distances by walking, which is challenging if not impossible for those with disabilities. D. R. Ingram describes geographic accessibility as the "inherent characteristic (or advantage) of a place with respect to overcoming some form of spatially operating source of friction (for example, time and/or distance)" (1971). This definition is particularly important, because it combines place with the barriers, or "friction," that exist within them. It also speaks to the combination of factors that influence and transform an individual's relationship to place. For many people in Midtown, food accessibility is a daily challenge, consisting of several transportation or time-related barriers. Individuals' relationships

with food are determined by complicated, interrelated factors and systemic challenges, resulting in increased barriers for low-income communities.

When choosing where to buy produce, location, cost, and transportation are among the greatest determining factors. They frequently impact each other in complicated, overlapping ways. One individual, a 70-year-old, African American man from Midtown, said,

“There’s like a little desert here. It occurred to me some time ago, that even though it is more expensive, sometimes significantly more expensive, to go to Walgreen’s or Stewart’s, which has some fresh fruit, or to Sunshine, which is a tiny little market, it’s still cheaper to go into the smaller markets to get cucumbers than it is to get on a bus, go all the way Uptown, get the cucumbers, and come back. So, usually if I only need a few items, I will run to Sunshine or Stewart’s instead of going to the supermarket for them. But, there is a desert in terms of significant variety.”

This individual, like many others, weighs cost with the distance to a certain location and the time it would take to travel there. The lack of food variety and quality means that an individual without a car must make a time-consuming and costly trip just to get to get a small amount of produce, or pay more to get the produce close to them. Even though stores nearby are more expensive, this individual chooses to go to stores nearby because trips to less expensive supermarkets are more costly and time-consuming. Additionally, not all local stores accept EBT, and as a result, individuals are often unable to buy food even if it is available to them. Thus, individuals who live in areas without affordable, healthy food have less choice and often lower food quality. This is an example of food inequity, as individual choice is diminished, and cost and transportation time are increased.

Many other individuals face challenges with the quality of food available to them. One interviewee, a 65-year-old white woman from Midtown, reported that even the produce at Hannaford is not always great, especially in the winter. From her house, Hannaford is about five to twenty minutes away by bus depending on the traffic, but if she wanted to go to the mall, where Adam's and Mother Earth's are, she would have to go from her house to Hannaford and then take the Saugerties bus to the mall loop bus. It is not worth this long journey for a few vegetables. Individuals must decide to spend a disproportionate amount of time and more money on public transportation for fresh fruit and vegetables, or suffer from diets with little or lower quality produce.

The lack of fresh produce in Midtown, Kingston is a problem that manifests in many low-income urban areas around the country. One study found a higher density of supermarkets in high-income areas, but more small markets in low-income areas (Munoz-Plaza et al., 2008). While supermarkets can sell relatively high-quality produce at low prices, they are not the best options for improving equity in food systems due to their history of overlooking farmworker abuses and environmental exploitation (Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010). The prevalence of inequity and unsustainable practices indicates a need for food system reform. Projects such as the Kingston YMCA Farm Project provide an alternative to supermarkets while addressing food access issues of quality and affordability. Urban farms, like the Farm Project, exist in and serve their neighborhoods and perpetuate transparency by the visibility of working conditions and agricultural practices. Additionally, successful urban farms are in constant dialogue with their neighborhoods about how to better serve surrounding residents. They hold the potential to create dialogue and perpetuate transparency in a way that large supermarket corporations cannot.

While the Kingston YMCA Farm Project provides affordable access to high-quality produce in the summer months, when the farm is not operating in the winter months, the problem of limited access returns. Many individuals use these programs already; however, the main determinant is if they are easily accessible for the variety and cost they provide. For those surveyed who did not go to the Kingston YMCA Farm Project, but did go to the farmer's market, the main determinant was the ease of transportation. The ease of transportation in this case, was different than distance. Many people can make it to the farmer's market, because the bus takes them very close it but are unable to get to the YMCA Farm Project, because the bus takes too long, or is too time-consuming. Individuals rely on transportation systems as a determinate of access more than the actual physical distance.

### *Public Transportation*

Urban sprawl and uncontrolled growth have displaced people from where they live, work, and purchase necessities. This increases travel distances and forces the reliance on public transportation for individuals without cars. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, grocery stores expanded and moved away from city centers and closer to freeway exits and areas that could accommodate large parking lots (Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010). The Transportation Bill, periodically renewed from the Interstate Highway Act of 1956, addresses ways in which Americans use transportation systems, which in turn, is vital in determining how individuals work and shop. This bill, however, does not address food distribution or food access in any of the projects or legislation. As a result, there are systemic and structural inequities that are unaddressed and virtually unacknowledged by important policy structures (Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010).

Existing policies rarely address social and economic inequities, and as a result, many systems fail to serve low-income communities in equitable ways (Bullard and Johnson, 1997). Many dense urban areas, particularly low-income and inner-city regions, suffer from grocery gaps, a term coined by Gottlieb and Joshi in order to create more accurate terminology than “food desert.” The authors define grocery gaps as “the lack of full-service food markets with affordable items, including fresh food, within walking distance” (Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010). The term can be expanded to address transportation necessary to combat inequities in access, and can describe not only poorer quality offerings, but the lack of resources to find better offerings.

Vehicle ownership is an important factor for buying produce in Kingston and can change what is available to an individual and their purchasing experiences. Car owners that I interviewed observed that they had easier access to food than those who did not own cars. For car owners, price is generally the largest barrier in accessing food. One individual, a 45-year-old white man from Midtown said, “transportation is easy, since I have my own vehicle. It’s cost that’s the biggest challenge.” Yet, most individuals who did not own a car stated that transportation was the largest barrier to buying high-quality food, as they were often unable to leave their neighborhood to buy food, and were then forced to pay high prices for lower-quality food. While vehicle ownership generally makes accessing food easier, low-income areas are still faced with a lower density of supermarkets and must travel farther to reach those supermarkets. One study in East New York, Brooklyn found that an adjustment for vehicle ownership added 1.6 accessible supermarkets in low-poverty areas and only .8 in high-poverty areas, thus demonstrating that even though vehicle ownership did increase the availability of supermarkets, residents in low-income areas still were still disproportionately affected by a lack of supermarkets (Munoz-Plaza et al., 2008). A few individuals spoke hopefully about having a car

in the future, but for many this is unrealistic; some are unable to drive, or some feel car ownership is too cost-prohibitive.

For people without cars, local transportation systems are vital in providing access to necessities. A few people I spoke to told me that they moved to Kingston because of the public transportation system. One individual, a 65-year old, African-American man said,

“One of the reasons I moved to Kingston was because I thought, erroneously, that I wouldn't need a car here because there is a bus service. But, it can be really challenging, especially when the weather is cold or very hot to get yourself down to the store. And, I could hire someone or get a taxi, but that increases the cost.”

Many individuals mentioned the challenges and inefficiencies of the public transportation system in our interviews. For those who live at a senior center, the bus stop is close, and it goes directly to Hannaford. But for others who may have to walk a distance to the bus stop and then change buses once or twice, it can be challenging and time-consuming, and even more so carrying bags of groceries. A few people mentioned that ShopRite had more variety than Hannaford, and sometimes better quality for the cost, but it was virtually inaccessible if using the bus system. Not only do people who live in Midtown suffer from a grocery gap, but they also only have one supermarket that is easily accessible by public transportation.

Food pantries are a significant resource for those who do not receive enough aid from government food assistance programs. One study found growing evidence that food assistance recipients are not receiving enough funding to completely cover their food expenses, requiring individuals to find food elsewhere (Anderson, Paynter, and Berner, 2016). Individuals I interviewed mentioned that they run out of SNAP or WIC at the end of every month so they have to find ways to supplement their food assistance. Many rely on food pantries, such as People's

Place, the Seventh Adventist Church, or Saint James. Pantries are often chosen for their location, and they are an important way for individuals to bridge assistance shortcomings and access barriers.

Transportation and location determine choices of where to buy food. People who could get to locations where the farmer of the Kingston YMCA Farm Project delivers, such as the YMCA Farm Stand, the library, or the senior center, are able to buy from the Kingston YMCA Farm Project. But, this is not an option for those who were not able to get to these locations easily, whether it was too far to walk or inaccessible by public transportation. Food purchasing patterns, as mentioned earlier, determine personal relationships and community ties and are determined by regulations from government assistance programs; however, transportation and physical accessibility are often the final determinant. Since, even if someone felt strongly about shopping at a certain location, if it was not accessible, they would not be able to go there. So, for people who shopped regularly at the Kingston YMCA Farm Project, it often made a significant difference in the quality of food and nutrition of food they had access to. One individual, a 65-year old, African American man said,

“The food desert [and the lack of] fresh produce, that’s what made [the Kingston YMCA Farm Project] so significant to me. I knew that if I wanted to get fresh greens, I would have to make an effort to know what the bus schedule was, go out and catch the bus, go Uptown, and then come back. As opposed to just walking a few blocks [to get to the YMCA Farm Stand].”

For many people who don’t have cars, walking is their primary form of transportation, so having stores locally makes a big difference in the time and cost involved in buying food.

Since so many residents in low-income areas suffer from grocery gaps, public transportation is an important factor in how individuals access food in surrounding areas. The efficiency of public transportation is a crucial factor determining food justice due to the way it defines experiences accessing fresh and local food. While transportation is a determination of levels of food access, it remains imperative that we find solutions for access barriers to inexpensive, high-quality food in low-income communities. While efficient public transportation is necessary, the root problem is the low variety and poor quality of the food and produce. This should be mitigated by high-quality, affordable options, supported by efficient public transportation systems.

### *Time and Efficiency*

While barriers to food access exist, an important part of food purchase experiences is how people interact with and manage those barriers. Many individuals indicated that they had an elaborate and thorough way of purchasing food in an attempt to make sure their food assistance lasted as long as possible and to take advantage of the lowest prices. Many indicated that these are some of the largest challenges in purchasing food. Others discussed that depending on others was a challenge. Some people get rides with friends or family to buy food, but if that ride is unavailable one week, food purchasing becomes much more challenging. Additionally, the timing of food purchasing is important. One individual, a 65-year-old white woman from Midtown, said,

“If I’m all out of food stamps, and I won’t get more for a few more days, but my ride to Hannaford’s is going to occur tomorrow, and I don’t have control over that, then I’ll go [with her], but I won’t want to buy anything. I’ll just buy a couple things that I can’t do

without, and then when I get the food stamps, I'm dying to go because I finally have money."

Transportation determines when this individual buys food, and she must give up a certain level of convenience in order to make sure she has food. She is reliant on rides and depends on them regardless of when they occur, and if it works with her own schedule. She remarks that, when she cannot get a ride, she often has to rely on nonperishable staples and goes without fresh produce for days at a time.

Individuals design their schedules around when they can purchase food. A typical month of food purchasing for an individual is often elaborate and carefully planned, due to transportation challenges and inefficiencies. For example, a typical month for a 65-year old African-American man from Midtown looked like:

"Usually the first week of every month I do staples at Hannaford, and meat and fish. The second week we [residents in the senior residential apartment complex] get free food deliveries from the county community action organization. They come on the second Wednesday of every month in the morning. We sign up for it, [and it is determined by] income and age. They do a food distribution, which is a variety of stuff, almost always some kind of frozen meat, which is sometimes good and sometimes not so good, some canned stuff, and some packaged stuff, and depending on the season, fresh produce. They do that once a month. Depending on her schedule, [the farmer from the Kingston YMCA Farm Project] would come every other week, and I would get fresh produce from her. So, the next week is the third week, and I sometimes go to Hannaford again to get any more ingredients."

This man has a regular schedule of how and where he buys food every month, which depends primarily on what is available to him. He relies on donations from outside organizations, but remarks on the mediocre quality. Another individual noted that she knew the dates that food went on sale at various locations as it was necessary to incorporate these sales into her food-buying routine. She went to ShopRite once a month, the farmer's market every week, and Adam's every Sunday when they would put produce on the sale rack. Most individuals knew exactly when each store or pantry was open, what they offered, on what days they ran deals, and how long the food would from these various places stayed fresh. Additionally, most had a set schedule of how they would get to each place at a particular time of day. Since many do not have cars, most relied on public transportation or rides from friends or family members.

For those that use food pantries as a way to supplement food purchases, there is often a waiting time to enter and receive this food. One woman stated, "Time is a challenge, because it takes a lot of time to go there [the food pantry], because you have to sit and wait. Sometimes it takes three or four hours to get food, and there's a lot of other things you could be doing." Time is significant for most individuals and presents a real barrier to accessing the free food that the pantry provides. If an individual has to work or take care of children, it can be challenging to find this amount of time in one day to wait to receive food. Additionally, this waiting period does not take into account transportation time to get to a particular area. So, while a pantry may offer free food, it may be inaccessible for people who do not have the time that it requires.

A few individuals noted physical impediments like walking and carrying groceries as barriers to their food purchasing. For those who could not walk a long distance, having a bus stop that was close was a determining factor in their ability to get food. Additionally, for those who were disabled and for whom walking was possible but took longer, a walk to a local market

would take significant time out of their day. Many people mentioned that if the weather was bad, they were often unable to do their shopping, which could make the upcoming week especially challenging. Others indicated seasonality as a challenge, as there are greater variety of places to buy food in the summer, but significantly fewer in the winter. The Kingston Farmer's Market is only open twice a month in the winter instead of every week, which complicates buying patterns. And, many places that are easily accessible in the summer become less accessible in the winter.

Many people indicated that convenience was a luxury for them. Individuals said that they did not expect food purchasing to be easy or convenient. In fact, it is almost always complicated and requires a great amount of planning. Food purchasing for these individuals is disproportionately challenging, requiring them to overcome a great deal of barriers for only one meal. There is very little infrastructure in place to mitigate these barriers besides the existence of food assistance, which enables individuals to be able to purchase food, but does not provide any systems to access the food itself. I found that access barriers disproportionately increase the amount of time and energy required of low-income individuals to buy food, particularly those who receive forms of food assistance. Low-income communities are affected by these strains to a greater extent than wealthier communities due to minimal resources, higher reliance on public transportation, and use of limited government food assistance programs.

### *Geographic and Physical Community*

The geography and physicality of space define and create community and through this, impact food purchasing experiences. Locations determine accessibility, but they also determine how individuals interact and use nearby business and institutions. Community, in this sense, is defined as groups of individuals who live in the same place, or who share common

characteristics, attitudes, interests, or goals. In many ways, community is related to comfortability; individuals often feel like they have a sense of community when they are comfortable in a particular space. Geography influences comfortability in a space, and in turn, the likelihood of continuing to shop there. Many individuals reported preferring to shop closer to home, due to ease and convenience. However, they also indicated that they preferred to shop at a particular store because they were familiar with the surrounding community and often knew the people selling food. This was a common reason for not going to other places. For example, a few people did not go to the Uptown Farmer's Market because not only was it far away and challenging to get to, it also felt uncomfortable. Therefore, distance played a large role in an individual's desire to go to a particular place, yet comfortability was also a factor. Another individual mentioned that he went to the Kingston YMCA Farm Stand because he felt like he had established a relationship with the farmer and had created a sense of community there. Many individuals reported that it was easier to establish community closer to home, which increased the likelihood of shopping there. The combination of distance and comfortability are conflated in shopping choices and preferences, illustrating the complex nature of food accessibility.

The geography of an area also has a significant impact on the health of individuals living there. Many individuals said they wanted to improve their own health, or mentioned that people that they were close to were having food-related health problems. One individual said,

“I like the food pantry...I like that it's on a Sunday. It really helps, because I go to church in the area, and from there, I can get my food. And, whatever I get there, I'm grateful for. I love the fact that they give a lot of fresh vegetables, the fruits, the greens, because everyone I know has diabetes. So, if you're having diabetic problems in your community, the best thing to do if you're a food pantry is to give out fresh fruits and vegetables. And,

the vegetables and stuff they give there, are still coming from the farmer's market. If you can budget and plan, these days with a lot of planning, you can get fresh vegetables.”

This individual got the majority of her fruits and vegetables at a food pantry and mentioned that community was one of the biggest reasons she got food there. She felt connected to the location and the people and returned each Sunday. Since people are more likely to buy food in spaces they feel comfortable in nearby, this surrounding food environment has a large impact on their health. One study found that the food environment within a mile of the home had a greater impact on insulin resistance, a condition related to diabetes, for individuals who did not own cars (Munoz-Plaza, Filomena, and Morland, 2008). Another study found a strong association between the prevalence of obesity in communities where there were fewer supermarkets and more small grocery stores or fast-food restaurants (Morland and Everson, 2009). Experiences with food-related diseases that the many individuals in Midtown Kingston mention, are likely due to poor food quality in their surrounding area, and the challenges of getting to a store with healthy options.

Food pantries are often deeply community-based, and I found that individuals I spoke with often went to pantries, particularly when those pantries were in places that were accessible and made individuals feel comfortable. One individual stated that he used to go to a few different food pantries, but now only goes to one, because he has established community there. While pantries are designed to be short-term, emergency relief for people who do not have enough money to buy food, they are increasingly becoming long-term solutions. Of all the people who go to pantries, more than two-thirds go on a regular basis (Anderson, Paynter, and Berner, 2016). National studies have found that the average food pantry client has a 1,823 day long relationship with an individual pantry, demonstrating that this community relationship is evident in other

areas as well, and pantries typically establish long-standing relationships with the people who go there (Anderson, Paynter, and Berner, 2016). In addition to the communities that pantries establish, this is also likely due to government food assistance programs being insufficient.

While farmer's markets and farm stands have the reputation of being exclusive, pantries are considered inclusive and inviting. One individual describes her experience at the food pantry as,

“When I go there I get along very well with everyone, and we joke around. It's a little family thing. You see the same person, you have connections with some people. And you smile, you laugh, and you go about your business. It's a time when I get to see people outside of work. The volunteers are very nice, as well. They help you with your bags and bring them to the parking lot for you.”

The pantry serves a vital role in supplementing her food purchasing, but it is also a place where she enjoys going and finds community. The community that different organizations establish determines individual experiences, the relationships people have with their community, and where individuals purchase food.

Comfortability and community also contribute to convenience. Individuals are more likely to develop relationships with places that work within their schedules. Since many low-income individuals often work multiple jobs or jobs with irregular hours, places to buy food with flexible hours increase the comfortability. When asked where individuals felt most comfortable conducting interviews, many suggested fast-food restaurants like Burger King, McDonald's, or Dunkin Donuts. Melvin Delgado (2013) writes, “fast-food restaurants are readily available to consumers with minimal time to eat and limited budgets, and are open to accommodate all three meals and late-night snacks, too.” Fast-food restaurants are convenient for individuals who do

not have time to go food shopping and have limited choice of where to eat when they do have time. They are places where people feel comfortable because of their long hours and geographic accessibility. Finally, because fast-food restaurants are found at higher densities in low-income neighborhoods, the health implications from eating at these restaurants disproportionately effect low-income individuals with irregular schedules or little time.

### *In Summary*

Through my research, I found that car ownership or the lack thereof plays a pivotal role in determining the relationship individuals will have with their food environment. Car ownership gives individuals autonomy and independence, and also the ability to overcome geographical barriers, like grocery gaps. However, individuals who live in areas with little to no access to affordable and healthy food must still travel longer distances to access alternatives. For individuals who do not own cars in Midtown, Kingston, accessing food can be enormously challenging. Most mentioned the inefficiencies of the public transportation system, coupled with the time and energy it takes to get anywhere. They mentioned that when they were unable to reach a nearby supermarket, they were often unable to find healthy alternatives. Most explained that every week they had to come up with elaborate, time-consuming schedules for purchasing different types of food at different places, relying on different forms of transportation for each trip. Experiences of individuals without cars in Midtown, Kingston was time-consuming and disproportionately challenging compared to the experiences of car owners.

The way that certain food providers organize and design their businesses determines the way they will impact their community. These food providers have the power to shape community by the ways they provide their food and the hours they are open. This gives a certain

level of power and responsibility to business owners, and to city planners and developers to create food systems that will provide accessible and high-quality food. The inaccessibility of stores that sell high-quality, low-cost food in low-income areas is an example of food injustice, as many people simply cannot access areas outside their community that supply better-quality food. While some individuals are able to overcome barriers to food access, many have to make considerable sacrifices to overcome them. Therefore, there is a need for programs such as the Kingston YMCA Farm Project to alter food systems in the low-income areas that are neglected. While it is possible to alleviate some of these geographical and physical boundaries, future community and governmental policies should address access inequities and work to develop systematic policies to eliminate food system injustices.

The Kingston YMCA Farm Project holds potential to mitigate effects of the grocery gap in Midtown, Kingston due to its location and its healthy, affordable options. The main geographic and physical barrier preventing individuals from going to the Farm Project is transportation. Residents who lived in Midtown, who are unable to walk far distances, regularly stated that they were unable to get there. Many mentioned that taking the bus would take too long or that they were unable to carry groceries back to their house. Even though the YMCA is located in a space that helps mitigate the Midtown grocery gap, transportation structures need to be improved to allow individuals access fresh produce. However, it was rarely transportation alone that prevented people from going to the Kingston YMCA Farm Project. These transportation barriers factored into decisions to shop elsewhere, but were also commonly combined with economic, policy, and socio-cultural components to influence accessibility. Chapters three and four will address the ways that policy structure, economic challenges, and socio-cultural factors combined make local food systems accessible or challenging.

## **Chapter 2**

### **“Too Much Red Tape:”**

#### **Food Policy Implications for WIC and SNAP Recipients**

##### *Introduction*

This chapter discusses food access barriers existent within political and economic systems. I discuss value hierarchies in purchasing food and the way individuals interact with the policies that govern food purchasing. While food assistance policy generally exists to provide food to people who have difficulty accessing and affording it, due to certain policy structures and regulations, many individuals face challenges getting this food assistance or getting enough assistance to fulfil nutritional needs. The structure of these programs means that there are challenges both in receiving and using food assistance. Within these policies there are incentive programs such as the Farmer’s Market Nutrition Program (FMNP), which incentivizes purchase of fresh, local produce. These incentives are in the form of additional assistance designed only for local produce and can help individuals purchase fruits and vegetables when it may otherwise be challenging to prioritize these purchases.

Farmer’s markets are often the center pieces of alternative food system models and have been used as ways to mitigate environmental, economic, and equity challenges in our food system. Since 1994, farmer’s markets in the United States quadrupled from under two thousand to more than eight thousand (USDA 2013). And, while they can be tools to combat justice and sustainability issues in our food systems, on a national level they are less accessible to low-income families (Alkon, 2014; Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010). Alternative food systems are currently not doing enough to bridge access gaps, as low-income communities and communities of color disproportionately face greater obstacles to the consumption of local and organic food (Alkon, 2014). While this inequity exists, economic and policy structures such as subsidies, work

exchanges, and a number of other strategies have demonstrated potential to mitigate exclusivity in alternative food systems (Alkon, 2014). In addition to examining the impact of policy and economic structures in the existing food structures, I will also examine economic and policy-related accessibility in alternative food systems and the ways in which it mitigates or perpetuates exclusivity. Finally, I will discuss how cost and policy barriers manifest at the Kingston YMCA Farm Project and the Kingston Farmer's market and how they impact local Kingston food structures. This chapter will demonstrate how policy and economic structures can challenge or ease experiences receiving and using food assistance, and the ways in which these structures affect choice, quality, and food system perceptions.

### *Policy Structure*

Individuals interviewed in this project are recipients of either WIC (Women, Infants, Children) or SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program). Both programs are run by national and state governments in order to provide food assistance to low-income individuals and families. WIC is particularly aimed at low-income women, infants, and children up to age five, who are identified to be at nutritional risk (USDA Food and Nutrition Service, 2017). SNAP provides individuals with monetary assistance in purchasing food in order to supplement food intake. While the program is generally successful in increasing the food budget of individuals who receive assistance, there are limitations on what individuals can buy, such as non-food household items like soap or paper towels, vitamins or medicine, or any hot foods or prepared food that will be eaten in the store (USDA Food and Nutrition Service, 2017). WIC checks, in comparison, have much more rigid guidelines. WIC checks specify the type, size, and sometimes nutritional components of eligible food items. Additionally, individuals must buy all of the items

on their check in the quantity that it specifies. The program differs from SNAP in that it is not a specified amount of money that individuals can use on any kind or type of food item, but instead, is an itemized list of items that must all be purchased at one time. Both programs are useful in that they increase food budgets of food assistance recipients; however, both programs can be challenging in terms of the application process, where assistance can be used, and the limitations of purchases.

The Farmer's Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) is a program for WIC and elderly SNAP recipients designed to provide extra nutrition assistance for local produce. It currently operates in 38 states and is designed to support individuals at nutritional risk in addition to small farmers (USDA Food and Nutrition Service, 2017). WIC and elderly SNAP recipients are given coupons to use at farmer's markets, so for every five dollars an individual spends, they get two dollars back in the form of coupons. There is no application process for this program; if an individual receives WIC, or SNAP and is 60 years or older, they can receive FMNP coupons (USDA Food and Nutrition Service, 2017). The FMNP is unique in that it is designed to benefit both food assistance recipients as well as local farmers. This program has potential to support local economies and food systems, while making fresh produce more accessible.

While the program can be beneficial for both farmers and food assistance recipients, it is currently underutilized at the Kingston YMCA Farm Stand and nationally. Nationally, WIC FMNP is utilized by more than 1.7 million WIC families, while generating \$14 million in revenue for 17,926 farmers (USDA, 2016). While this is a significant success, there is substantial room for growth as the number of people WIC is serving is approximately 8 million; so roughly eighty percent of WIC users currently do not use FMNP (USDA, 2016). This gap is demonstrated at the Kingston YMCA Farm Project, which experiences a low number of FMNP

recipients despite efforts to make produce affordable and accessible. In Kingston, 55% of WIC checks go unused. So, while this is better than the national average, there is still a great deal of funding going unused. This chapter will examine economic and policy barriers in using FMNP checks and other forms of government assistance.

### *Receiving Food Assistance*

While policy exists in order to help people with limited resources access food, those policies frequently do not reach all who could benefit (Martin et al., 2003). Accessibility problems are often due to systematic inefficiencies, which lead to barriers applying in the first place or individuals giving up after they encounter too many challenges. Barriers include getting to social service offices to apply for food assistance, in addition to personal stigmas about food assistance (Martin et al., 2003). Homelessness and limited English also lead to low participation in food assistance programs (Algert et al., 2006). Individuals in Kingston reflect these challenges that have occurred elsewhere as they encounter significant policy and economic barriers to applying for and receiving food assistance.

Many individuals mentioned that systematic and policy inefficiencies were reasons they do not apply for or receive food assistance. One individual, a 60-year-old woman of color, said she went to food pantries because she did not make enough money to sustain herself and her children on what she was earning. However, if she were to receive food assistance, she would not receive enough to make a difference. She said,

“There is too much red tape to get a little bit of food stamps. Why do I have to tell my whole life story just to get \$25 of food stamps? I stay away from those places. I’d rather go hungry than go in there. And that’s not only for me, I know a lot of people in my age

and in my income bracket, and foreigners too. We're not accustomed to going out and begging and get something. We'd rather be hungry than go up there and tell your whole life story just for \$25."

This woman indicated issues with both the structure of food assistance programs and also the process of applying. She indicates that the amount that she would receive would not be enough, even though she struggles to feed her family. This quote also speaks to cultural and social implications that are conflated with inefficient programming. It demonstrates the fact that it is rarely just one factor that contributes to the inability to access food, but instead is a combination of factors. In this case, the interviewee is 60 and an immigrant and reports that within her socio-cultural circles, many are uninterested in sharing personal information in order to receive minimal amounts of assistance. This policy is often enacted at national and state-levels; however, the way it is implemented at the local level, through government and social workers, will affect how that policy is experienced.

Staff at social service offices, as well as institutional policies, can heavily impact experiences applying for food assistance. A 65-year old Latino man from Uptown, attributes changed experiences with food assistance to his social worker:

"I have a good worker who is helpful with food stamps. When I went there at first, though, they gave me five dollars for the month. It gets frustrating when you go and they only give you five dollars in food stamps. What are you going to go with that really? That's a gallon of milk."

This individual indicated that his financial situation changed, and with the help of his social worker he was eventually able to get more in food stamps. He speaks also about his daughter who is unable to get WIC to help feed her baby.

“My daughter tried to get WIC while she was pregnant. They said there was a long waiting list, so they gave her an appointment two months later. So, two months go by and then they call and say that it’s been canceled. So, I called up and they said they’d give me an appointment the next day. And then, they called back the same day and said they couldn’t do it because they were too busy. She just tried again, and they gave her an appointment for another two months down the line. So here we are, almost a year has passed, and we still haven’t had an appointment.”

His daughter faced challenges in even being able to schedule an appointment for food assistance. The offices are busy and are unable to serve this individual in an effective way. This individual instead relies on food pantries to get the majority of her food. However, there are things she cannot find at most places, like certain brands of baby formula, because her baby is allergic to one of the most common kinds. She says that WIC would be able to help with this, but she isn’t able to get an appointment. This is representative of a national challenge, as social service offices generally have too many clients and too few social workers, which leads to overworked social workers and individuals left with greater barriers to receiving food assistance (Razavi, 2010)

A 65-year-old, African-American man, when speaking about how the Kingston YMCA Farm Project Mobile Market comes to a senior residential center, said that the reasons people did not apply for assistance was that they “may have problems with literacy, or pride, or be embarrassed.” He identified social and cultural implications for not applying for food assistance. This was a problem, he said, because individuals did not have money or FMNP checks to spend on the produce there. Most instead relied on donations, often canned goods and few fresh vegetables, as their main source of food. Barriers to applying for food assistance were inhibiting individuals from being able to take advantage of the subsidized fresh produce that was being

delivered to where they lived. The same individual said, “we have 108 units here, and I think two percent buy produce [from the YMCA Farm Project].” While this is only an approximation, the individual notes that a substantially small amount of people in this particular building buy the food that is being brought to the building and sold at a lower cost than other food providers.

While challenges to receiving SNAP and WIC exist all over the country, one individual notes difference based on location. She first started the process of applying for SNAP in NYC, and then applied again when she relocated to Kingston. She says,

“[In Kingston] I was the 3rd person in line, and in New York City you’re the 100th. In the city, you can’t always talk to your caseworker because they have so many people to help, and you could spend three hours just being there. When I went to the Kingston DSS [Department of Social Services], I spent less than an hour and I got the help. Also, I’ve been here for three years, and I’ve had the same caseworker. I never had that in New York City, it’s a different system, or the same system, but it works differently.’

Based on location and the process of individual SNAP or WIC offices, the experience of receiving food assistance can be entirely different. While many Kingston individuals cited challenges with the process of applying for food assistance, this individual reported that it was much easier in Kingston than where she had previously lived. Through these interviews, it is evident that application experiences are relative and also personal. Each individual had a different experience; however, each individual I spoke to had encountered challenges and complications with the system. Lacking food assistance means that individuals are unable to fulfil their family’s nutritional needs while having to divert a disproportionately high amount of time and energy to food. Thus, there is a portion of the population who is nutritionally deficient, despite existent programs. This results in a level of inequity that goes unaddressed by

government programs, which are too often unsuccessful in reaching all of the people who demonstrate need.

### *Using Food Assistance*

Although the large supermarkets generally accept food assistance programs like SNAP and WIC, it is less common for small grocery stores or farmer's markets to accept these as forms of payment (Jones and Bhatia, 2011; Pilgeram, 2012). In interviews, many individuals mentioned that they had thought of going to a particular place to purchase food but ended up not going because they were unsure if it accepted SNAP or WIC checks. A 50-year-old Latino man from Midtown said,

“the people that have money will go there [the farmer's market], but people who are poor are not going to go there and buy stuff, because you go up there, and it seems like everyone's a little bit more dressed up and cleaned up, and you can't bring your kids, and I don't know if they take food stamps.”

This quote combines policy and economic barriers with socio-cultural barriers and ideas of exclusivity; however, a main piece is that this individual is unable to overcome exclusivity barriers because he is faced with the possibility of not being able to purchase anything. In this case, the individual identifies that cost and acceptance of food assistance is the ultimate determining factor of whether or not he goes to the farmer's market. Lack of acceptance of government food assistance is an inhibitor elsewhere of participation in alternative food systems such as farmer's markets and remains problematic without active work to make markets and grocery stores inclusive (Jones and Bhatia, 2011).

The quality and quantity of food can be lower at nearby locations that accept forms of food assistance, which results in barriers to purchasing healthy, affordable products. An individual from Midtown mentioned that the only stores nearby that accepted forms of food assistance were stores like the Dollar Store and Stewart's, which had few healthy food options. These stores sell primarily packaged and canned food, and little if any, fresh produce. This is related to physical and geographical barriers as this individual is unable to find fresh and healthy food nearby. However, individuals express that there may be one or two stores that do sell fresh produce, but they do not accept SNAP or WIC. While there are incentives to buy fresh produce, the incentives are limited. In this case, geographic and policy structures combine to make healthy food in the local food system inaccessible. Due to the structure of food assistance and the fact that, for many individuals, the amount they are given is not enough to last the month, there is an unintentional incentive to buy the cheapest food possible.

When individuals are not given enough money to feed themselves and their families, most buy inexpensive food that will make them the fullest. These health implications disproportionately affect low-income individuals receiving food assistance (Zhang et al., 2010). Since the food system in the United States is such that the least expensive food is the most unhealthy, large amounts of individuals on food assistance must choose less healthy options simply to have the amount of food that they need (Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010). While incentives to make healthy food affordable exist, they must be greater and more efficient in order to change the kinds of food people can and want to buy.

Individuals mentioned that the Farmer's Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) was helpful in increasing the amount of fresh produce they could get and also in stretching the amount of food assistance they received for the month. One individual, a 65-year-old white woman from

Midtown says, “the highlight of my food-purchasing week is the farmer’s market, because we get a 40% discount on what we spend.” She later said,

“Fruits and vegetables, compared to grocery stores where I buy organic, are the same price at the farmer’s market. It turns out to be less expensive than going to the store. I think of it as: I get twenty dollars, and then when I spend that twenty, I get eight dollars back. And that eight dollars buys two dozen eggs, so I think of it as, I get free eggs that week. I’d say the prices of organic are equivalent to organic at the farmer’s market.

Without the 40%, they’re comparable but the 40% makes a difference. And, so does the freshness of the food at the farmer’s market.”

For this individual, the FMNP makes a significant difference in purchasing food. She notes that, in her experience, prices are similar at the grocery store and at the Farmer’s Market but by having FMNP credit, produce at the Farmer’s Market is much more affordable. Most individuals who used the FMNP spoke about it similarly and said it made a significant difference in the quality and cost of their produce purchasing. However, at this point FMNP is only offered to WIC recipients and low-income seniors, so while it is beneficial for those who it is offered to, it is inaccessible to others who may also benefit.

Existing policy structures make a significant difference in experiences purchasing food. A study of WIC participation in the FMNP found that WIC recipients, in general, had lower quality diets than average, yet FMNP participants reported a higher consumption of fruits and vegetables (Kropf et al., 2007). This study demonstrates not only the existence of lower-quality diet among WIC recipients, but also the ways in which the FMNP can improve quality. It demonstrates the disproportionate challenges WIC recipients face, but the potential of policy and government programming to improve experiences. A New York statewide initiative in 2001

aimed at increasing the utilization of the FMNP was successful in increasing the amount of WIC recipients and SNAP seniors who redeemed FMNP coupons. The initiative included increasing state FMNP staff, enhanced collaboration among state agencies, local community building, and the dissemination of nutrition education resources (Conrey et al., 2003). Increased resources and collaboration between state and local governments has the potential to increase the efficiency of the program in New York State, demonstrating that further attention would continue to improve the program. In addressing the inefficiencies of the FMNP, it is imperative that we remove barriers and increase accessibility through local programs and community attention. However, we must also create and foster policy at the national, state, and local level that refines and improves the FMNP, due to way that the success and failures of policy determine the experiences of individuals and the health and equity of the community.

### *Policy Influence on Choice and Quality*

Food assistance policy is highly structured, often resulting in choice and quality limitations. WIC, in particular, has strict guidelines about what an individual can and cannot buy with their food assistance. For example, one individual, a 25-year-old white woman from Uptown, said that with WIC she was only able to buy 2% milk in one-gallon containers, and it could not be organic. She was unable to buy whole milk, organic milk, or another size container of milk. The choice of many individuals on WIC is limited to what their WIC check allows. This designation is aimed at helping mothers make healthy choices for themselves and their children, but many individuals felt that it actually hindered their ability to make healthy decisions. For many items, organic choices are not allowed. This, too, is where individuals felt the quality declined. Some were worried that conventional milk was of a lower quality than organic milk

and were worried about feeding their kids GMOs and hormones. Another said that her child was lactose-intolerant and allergic to soy, so she could not buy cow's milk or soy milk. Yet, almond milk or other non-dairy substitutes were not allowed on her WIC check. While these programs are designed to improve the health of low-income mothers and their children, it can be challenging to fulfil nutrition requirements under such strict regulation.

While SNAP and WIC recipients are given a certain amount each month based on their calculated need, this amount rarely covers the entirety of food purchasing needs. Many individuals mentioned that they wanted to make healthy choices, but since they were on a limited budget, they often had to buy cheaper, lower-quality food. One person said, "if I ate crumbier food, [my food stamps] might go further." This low-quality food is generally higher in calories for the price, so when having to feed a family on a tight budget, many people consider how many people that food will feed, as opposed to how healthy it is for each individual (Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010). For example, the price of a head of broccoli is \$1.99 at the Kingston Hannaford and has about 250 calories total. The price of a box of Hannaford-brand macaroni and cheese is 75 cents and has 260 calories per serving in a 3-serving size box. Thus, food assistance recipients experience decreased choice due to budget limitations and inadequate food assistance.

Price differences and the availability of food assistance affected whether or not individuals shopped at the Kingston Farmer's Market. While policy structures can limit choice, not receiving certain types of food assistance can limit choice even more. The FMNP allows qualifying individuals to shop at farmer's markets for decreased cost, but does not provide that benefit for food assistance recipients who do not receive FMNP benefits. One individual, a 35-year-old woman of color from Midtown, said,

“the produce varies at the farmer’s market. Sometimes it’s more expensive. Sometimes it’s not expensive, but I don’t have the budget to pay even a little bit more than I could find elsewhere, because I need to save the money that I can and make it stretch.”

This individual mentioned that going to the farmer’s market used to be her routine, but she had to change it because she can generally get better deals at supermarkets. She made this choice due to her inability to spend any more money than absolutely necessary, even if it means higher quality. Additionally, this individual was a SNAP recipient but did not qualify for FMNP because she was younger than 60 and was not a WIC recipient. Participation in the FMNP subsidizes the cost of farmer’s market produce and could have allowed her to continue her routine of shopping at the farmer’s market. However, it is unavailable to her. The strict policy structure, tied with budget concerns, limits choice and quality, leading to a critical food justice issue of disproportionately lower-quality food for food assistance recipients.

#### *Actual Cost versus Perception of Cost*

When choosing where to buy food, individual perception of cost contributes to the decision. This perception of cost may be different than actual cost but is treated as fact and can change food purchasing experiences. Alternative food systems like farmer’s markets and stands are often viewed as expensive and inaccessible. While this may not always be the case, if the perception is that cost is high, people are less likely to buy food there. I found that this was a contributing fact at both the Kingston YMCA Farm Project and the Uptown Farmers market. A 60-year-old woman of color from Midtown said, regarding the Farm Project,

“The farm stand seemed to be out of the Y, so the only time I would go was when I was going to the Y, and the prices are the same as the store, sometimes more expensive.

That’s what put me off, because if you are a farm, you could be a little bit cheaper.”

This individual, who mentioned they do not go to the YMCA very often, was under the impression that the produce was expensive, or at least the same as supermarkets. This idea was common among individuals I interviewed. Many mentioned that they heard from others that the farm stand or farmer’s market was expensive, or they did not go due to assumptions about who shopped there and assumptions about local and organic produce. The perception of cost through assumptions or community networks determined food purchasing. This piece is significant, as it means that efforts to make food accessible to low-income individuals must do more than simply make produce affordable. It demonstrates that, when working in alternative food systems, organizations must not only change actual cost, but also must address perceptions of cost, as well.

The Kingston YMCA Farm project is a site that some individuals have deemed too expensive; however, the farmer actively tries to do the opposite. Her goal is to provide healthy, affordable food with accessible pricing. She writes,

I want prices to appear "cheap" to people familiar with local, organic produce and to seem "reasonable" to people on a tight budget. I try to check in with prices at Hannaford and Adams for a comparison and I try to be about on par with the price of conventional produce at those places.

Even though the food is organic, she prices it similarly to conventional produce, which is reasonable considering the quality. Additionally, she makes a deliberate effort to keep prices affordable and reasonable to members of the Midtown community. It is important to note that

while programs can actively price produce affordably, the perception of cost can sometimes outweigh the reality of the price. Many individuals I spoke to either did not know about the Kingston YMCA Farm Project or said they had heard about it, but believed or heard that it was too expensive. Since the Farm Project is actively trying to address these perceptions about farmer's markets, it is significant that these are the reasons many individuals are not going there. It demonstrates that perception of price, and also the perception of food providers, plays a determining role in who shops where.

### *Private Food Assistance*

Individuals who receive food assistance are not always able to fulfil their nutritional requirements through the structure of their food assistance program. All people I spoke to said that it was challenging to make their SNAP, WIC or other food aid last through the entire month. As a result, all individuals I spoke with relied on other programs in order to make up the disparity. A 50-year-old white woman from Midtown, said “on food stamps, you don’t have enough money. So, I go to the pantry, to People’s Place.” Another individual, a 65-year-old African-American from Midtown, said “if you can get to People’s Place and [the food pantry at] the church, you have enough food. Because with food stamps you never have enough.” For many people, private food assistance made up the shortcomings of public food assistance. This reliance on food pantries is illustrative of national challenges to food assistance programs and comes about through geographic challenges that were discussed in chapter 2, policy and economic challenges, and socio-cultural components (Anderson et al., 2016).

Many reported that private food assistance frequently consists of highly-processed food and low-quality produce. Food pantries tend to focus on quantity instead of quality, with a lens

on antihunger instead of food justice. Antihunger is the focus of getting people the amount of food they need, often without regard to quality or equity. However, food assistance from a food justice means perspective consists of providing people with high-quality, nutritious food in an equitable way. This means that, while pantries can provide people with enough calories, they often do not focus on healthful calories (Joshi and Gottlieb, 2010). This leads to high amounts of low-income individuals with enough food but without enough healthy options. One individual describes what is donated to his senior living center,

“A lot of the things that become available through these programs are not ideal. Usually canned, processed, and packaged food. Some frozen meat, canned vegetables, corn and peas and carrots, sometimes some pastry donuts or other sugar stuff, always dry cereal, and sometimes they do non-food things like toilet paper.”

Almost all individuals mentioned experiences similar to this one, citing instances of too much processed and packaged food, or low-quality vegetables. When individuals have so few options about how and where they get their food, donations are important to consider because they frequently represent a substantial portion of a family's food consumption.

Many individuals reported that high-quality donations can make a substantial difference in their diets. Some individuals mentioned the farmer's market table at People's Place, where farmers donate fresh fruit and vegetables in the summer, available to anyone. A 60-year-old white woman from Midtown said,

“they do have a table where anyone can take food. In the summer, its fruit and vegetables. Last year, there were loads of food from farms at the farm stand and I didn't run out of money, because I got so much free produce from there.”

In her case, she was able to make her food assistance stretch significantly due to the free fresh produce from People's Place. When so many people rely on private assistance to supplement their food intake, the quality is important as it makes up a substantial part of individual diets.

Other individuals note the freshness, quality, and lack of choice in various places where they receive donations. Donations often come from supermarkets and will arrive at pantries and donation centers just before expiration. One individual says,

“It could be more fresh. What happens by the time we get it and it's half bad, you have to be in a hurry to fix it, and it may be too much, and you're diabetic and on a diet.

Sometimes, I have to cook three pots of some things to make sure it doesn't go bad, and that takes time. If you had the money and went to Adams and picked the stuff yourself, it would be fresher and would last longer.”

This individual experiences lower quality due to inability to choose where she buys food. And, that if she had more money, she would make different choices. Other individuals shared this sentiment; they felt that, due to limited budgets, they had a challenging time finding healthy, fresh, affordable food. Additionally, this demonstrates a time strain on individuals who receive lower-quality produce. They must prepare it right away, instead of having the luxury of preparing it when they have the time and energy.

Likely due to systemic inefficiencies and inadequate governmental resources, the dependence on pantries is mirrored in other cities. In some areas, the pantry system is less efficient than it is in Kingston. One individual, a 40-year-old woman of color, spoke about her experience in New York City,

“I would go to food pantries, and they would only give you a box of spaghetti, a can of spaghetti sauce, two vegetables and maybe a little juice, and that was it. And, you could

only go there twice a month. It would all depend on the section you were in. If you were living in Chelsea, in the richer areas, you'd get more from the expensive food there.

Those are the pantries that the media shows. They always show pantries where there is a lot of food. They don't show the ones all over the city that run out. And sometimes, pantries would run out of food. So, you have a whole line of people, hundreds of people, and they wouldn't be able to get food from the pantry.”

This same individual noted that, when she moved to Kingston, she found fifteen pantries that were well-stocked and had good quality food. She eventually narrowed down the pantries she used to three, based on how close they were to her house. The availability of food pantries made all the difference to her in accessing food. While she still received the same amount of food assistance as she had previously living in New York City, the availability of food pantries meant that she could survive on the amount she was given.

### *In Summary*

The stories from the people in Kingston highlight that the main economic and policy barriers to accessing healthy food combine the inability of receiving and using food aid, policy limitations and regulations, and disparities between actual cost and perceptions of cost. Those who encounter barriers to receiving food aid generally experienced long wait times to get appointments, systematic inefficiencies, transportation barriers, or socio-cultural stigmas. Those who encounter barriers to using food assistance often face challenges finding nearby stores that accept WIC and SNAP and find that those that accept it, have lower quality produce and food options. Policy limitations and regulations generally consist of challenges related to what people can buy and having enough money to buy what they need. Disparities between actual cost and

perception of cost inhibit individuals from shopping at available locations due to the perception of high cost and exclusivity. Most frequently, these factors overlap and make accessing healthy, affordable food disproportionately challenging or virtually impossible.

One of the largest challenges for individuals was making their food assistance last the entire month. Individuals I spoke with indicated that they had challenges with this almost every month. Many devised a variety of ways to close the gap between the amount of money they received and the amount of food they needed to buy, which included relying on supermarket deals, using their FMNP checks, frequenting pantries, and creating elaborate food purchasing schedules. All individuals I spoke with went to pantries at least once a month, and the vast majority said that pantries were vital in having a sufficient amount of food for the month. While pantries are designed for emergency assistance, for many individuals, they are an important and vital piece in food purchasing and procuring. Many individuals mentioned that without pantries, they would not have enough food. In Kingston, pantries are becoming a significant part of the food system for low-income individuals and access to pantries is just as important as access to supermarkets. One individual said about government assistance: "the biggest issue is that it's not enough. The government is not keeping up with the cost of living." This demonstrates an inherent systematic flaw. Pantries, meant for emergency food assistance, are integrating themselves into the food system in order to fill the void of adequate government aid.

When thinking about food accessibility, it is important to consider the availability of all sorts of food-procuring institutions. Grocery stores play a large role in individual food access, but so do pantries, as do farmer's markets. The role of these institutions is tied with spatial, geographic, economic, and socio-cultural constraints. In addressing food security and access in Kingston, I found that different institutions held different weight for different individuals.

Additionally, inadequate amounts of food assistance intensified all existing food access barriers, as all individuals mentioned that they did not receive enough. Budget constraints inform all other decisions individuals make when purchasing food, and they determine how individuals interact with surrounding institutions and food systems. Existing policy structures and the availability of food assistance determines the way that pantries, supermarkets, and farmer's markets will impact food access experiences.

## **Chapter 4**

### **“Dressed Up, Cleaned Up:” Socio-cultural Disparities and Exclusivity in Alternative Food Systems**

#### *Introduction*

While policy, cost, transportation, and the geographical framework of the city impact buying decisions, a significant piece of food purchasing is tied to personal relationships with food, programs, and institutions. Eating is a complex social and cultural act, influenced by family, community, and tradition. Perceptions of choice, knowledge about systems, and family and community structures are determinants in how people choose where and what to buy. Additionally, relationships to food are deeply personal and tied to identity, which influences daily choices and decisions (Godderis, 2006). While buying food and eating food is habitual and routine, it is also emotional and personal. Individuals make decisions based on their families and friends, in addition to themselves. Through this, they create and contribute to complex community and familial dynamics rooted in cultural and historical components (Leppman, 2005). Knowledge, perception, and information networks determine if and how individuals interact with different aspects of the food system and notions about comfortability, exclusivity, and community determine the nature of those interactions.

The quality of food at different kinds of locations changes buying behavior; however too frequently, high-quality food is more expensive and less accessible than low-quality, processed food. My research shows that low availability of high-quality options has a significant impact on health and how individuals view food systems and food in their community. While alternative food systems can mitigate access barriers due to the potential for mobility, they can also be spaces of contention, as they have a legacy of existing as white middle and upper-class, heteronormative spaces (Pilgeram, 2015). Additionally, the language of sustainable agriculture

generally resonates less with people of color, often describing an agrarian past much more easily romanticized by whites due to America's history of slavery and the disenfranchisement of people of color (Alkon, 2014; Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010). Throughout this chapter, I will discuss how these factors manifest in individual decision-making and how they impact the greater food system. Additionally, I will address how these factors impact the Kingston YMCA Farm Project and what determines participation at the farm stand. Through my research, I examine the ways in which knowledge and perception, exclusivity and community, as well as personal history and culture determine food choices and experiences.

### *Knowledge, Perception, and Information Networks*

Information networks and community relationships are an important determinant of food access experiences, particularly when it came to finding discounts, new places to shop, or food pantries. Many individuals relied on stores geographically close to them for food, but when finding new places to shop that were not geographically close, information was passed by word-of-mouth. These information networks, defined as groups of individuals who share knowledge and experiences, are vital in finding food with ease and at reasonable prices. Networks are a vital part of individual community, which I am defining as groups of individuals who live in the same place or who share common characteristics, attitudes, interests, or goals. Knowledge of local deals and sales was passed on through community information networks and was an important way that individuals connected with local, affordable options. Many individuals mentioned they heard about the best food pantries through members of their communities, and they often learned about sales at grocery stores through friends and family. One individual mentioned that, when she first moved to the area, "A friend took me in and drove me around Kingston, Poughkeepsie,

all around, so I could food pantries. When I first got here, I found fifteen food pantries that were ample. I would go there and get two or three bags.” Since so many individuals rely on friends or family for transportation, those networks play a large role in determining where individuals buy food. Food decisions are connected to others’ decisions, and relationships and experiences with food are connected to those decisions.

While useful, helpful information was passed through community and knowledge networks, so was misinformation. This misinformation influenced community behaviors in similar ways to helpful information. I found that perception and knowledge, while separate, were often convoluted as perceptions were circulated as fact. The perception of farmer’s markets as exclusive and expensive was widespread among individuals who did not go to the Kingston Farmer’s Market or the Kingston YMCA Farm Stand, despite each organization's attempts to make the markets inclusive. A 60-year-old woman of color from Midtown said,

“It’s too expensive, because it’s coming straight from the farmer’s market. I’ve passed there, and I’ve heard stories. It’s very expensive there. That’s the same as the farmer’s market. If it was less expensive, I’d want to use it, but it’s too pricy.”

When I followed up with this individual, she said she had not actually gone to the farm stand, she just knew this was the case from people who had told her. This represents a complicated issue, rooted in exclusivity. Misperceptions of price are likely based on the fact that alternative food systems, like local markets and farmer’s markets, are experienced by many as exclusive due to historical inability to accept food assistance and their legacies as white, middle and upper-class, heteronormative spaces (Pilgrim, 2012). Misperceptions about pricing are likely rooted in perceptions of farmer’s markets as spaces for only middle and upper-classes and these perceptions pass through information networks and impact the buying decisions of others.

The ease and comfortability of communication, as well as language fluency, can be a barrier to some individuals. Farmer's markets generally require a greater level of communication than supermarkets for several reasons. First, items are less frequently labeled at farmer's markets, so individuals must ask what the product is instead of reading a description on a sign. Secondly, and related to the first, farmer's markets frequently highlight native but unfamiliar varieties, creating a greater necessity for explanation. Finally, interaction and communication is much more frequent and much more personal. Instead of putting items in a cart and checking out all at once, individuals must instead buy at many different vendors, communicating separately with each one. While these may not seem like barriers to some, they can be alienating to those who do not speak English, or who already feel uncomfortable or out-of-place in the space. One individual, a 70-year-old African-American man from Midtown, mentioned the difference between the supermarkets and farm stands, saying "in a supermarket you walk in and there are all kinds of foods along a wall. All the veggies are along the wall with labels and little notes about them, saying which ones are the sweet ones and which are the tart ones." Grocery stores and supermarkets generally enable you to shop in a more anonymous space without interacting with anyone. For individuals who do not feel immediately comfortable in the space, these components make shopping at farmer's markets challenging and intimidating.

Experiences with food are also limited to what individuals know how to cook. Farmer's markets generally sell food that requires cooking knowledge. Additionally, some of the less well-known produce may require learning different ways to cook it. So knowledge of cooking, as well as time to prepare, will influence how and where people buy food. Supermarkets have a variety of food that requires little preparation time and less knowledge about cooking; some even have the recipe included on the packaging. Individuals with time constraints or limited knowledge or

desire to cook will choose to shop at places that increase the ease and accessibility of food preparation.

Knowledge and perceptions about food are socially influenced and constructed (Godderis, 2006). Knowledge about existing food systems is greatly influenced by how different food purveyors make their food available and accessible. An effort to make a space inclusive and beneficial can make it that more attractive to someone. Food pantries and farmer's markets can be places to foster or inhibit inclusivity. The perception of inclusivity is affected not just by individual action and practices, but by larger systemic and institutional factors. A 2006 Chicago study in a low-income neighborhood, primarily of people of color, found that residents were more satisfied with access, quality, variety, and prices of products available at their neighborhood farmer's market than they were of products available at their local grocery store. Yet, this market attracted fewer farmers. There were generally five farmers compared to twenty to fifty farmers at upper and middle-class dominated markets (Suarez-Balcazar et al. 2006). It is not that low-income communities are uninterested in local produce, but that markets are unsuccessful in creating inclusive and equitable spaces for all income, racial, and ethnic demographics.

### *Exclusivity, Inclusivity, and Community*

Perceptions of food system institutions as exclusive are unintentionally reinforced in many alternative food systems. A 60-year-old Latino man from Uptown said,

“The people that have money will go there [the Kingston Farmer's Market], but people who are poor are not going to go there and buy stuff, because you go up there, and it

seems like everyone's a little bit more dressed up and cleaned up, and you can't bring your kids, and I don't know if they take food stamps.”

While this quote was mentioned in Chapter 3, I bring it up again to examine the factors that affect his perception of exclusivity. The observation that people dress differently illustrates how this individual feels like he fits in. In this instance, he is identifying a class divide and this perception of class division prevents feelings of belonging in the space. Additionally, while children often come to the Kingston Farmer's Market, the perception that they are not allowed, or will make things more difficult is an important one for families who cannot afford child care while they go out shopping. Finally, this individual is unclear if the market accepts food stamps. This is reasonable as the ability to use food stamps is relatively new at many markets, but it is a sentiment mirrored in many other discussions of barriers to alternative food systems (Kropf et al., 2007; Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010; Pilgeram, 2012). The acceptance of WIC and SNAP is a key factor in the perception of farmer's markets as accessible to low-income communities.

Acceptance of food assistance is vital in creating spaces that are perceived as inclusive and accessible; however, the process of using food assistance at farmer's markets is equally important, as a too-challenging or conspicuous process will be a deterrent. In a study of a market in the Pacific Northwest, Pilgeram observed that using one's SNAP card was a three-step process, which involved standing in three lines and using a color-coded card (2012). Using WIC entailed standing under a sign that announced you were a WIC recipient while you took a class to teach you how to use your vouchers at the farmer's market (Pilgeram, 2012). Even though this market accepts food assistance, the process of using the assistance was challenging, and there was no level of anonymity.

The process is easier at the Kingston Farmer's Market but has some similarities. Individuals have to go to the market manager stand in order to receive tokens to use at the different vendors. The manager slides the EBT card with a card-reader and gives the individual tokens in the amount that they want to spend. While this process is much less involved than processes in other places, individuals who use SNAP or WIC are the only ones who use the tokens, so when they buy food, they can be easily identified as SNAP or WIC recipients. This process differs from the process at supermarkets, where individuals slide their EBT card just as they would a credit card. The difference in processes can be significant to someone who is uncomfortable being identified as a WIC or SNAP user. Not only does acceptance of food assistance determine participation in farmer's markets, but the processes at each individual location can determine comfortability in the space.

Pantries are places that create, reproduce, and define community for individuals who go regularly, with many indicating a significant difference between relationships found at pantries and relationships at grocery stores and supermarkets. The relationships at grocery stores and supermarkets are virtually non-existent, but the relationships formed through pantries are based on trust and perceptions of shared experiences. Individuals believed that people there would look out for them, a sentiment reinforced when an individual said, "[The pantry] is a community. They know people, they get to know people, they know my name, which I think is very endearing. And, they look out for me. If I need something, they'll help me." It is significant that no one mentioned relationships or community at supermarkets, grocery stores, or farmer's markets, making pantries unique in this quality. The space they created is one of trust and comfortability, and they shared this through receiving food week together week after week.

A few individuals compared levels of community in different kinds of stores and in different areas of the country, noting that Kingston had especially strong community ties, and pantries created stronger relationships than grocery stores. One individual, who previously lived in New York City said, “I’m coming from a rich city. And, I’m just seeing the community here, how they help and focus on each other, and that’s really important to me. I have a lot of appreciation for that.” She noted that in Manhattan, there was not the same level of community, even though many areas have generous amounts of resources. She indicated that pantries weren’t successful in reaching all the people they needed to, and it did not seem like people were looking out for each other in the same way as they do in Kingston. Another individual, a 60-year old woman of color from Midtown, described the community,

“When I go there, I get along very well with everyone. We joke around. It’s a little family thing. You see the same person; you have connections with some people. And you smile, you laugh, and you go about your business. Outside of work, I get to see people, and I like to go there.”

The pantry becomes a place for people to socialize, to see family and friends, and also to get food. It is generally the same people working there week after week. These people know the patrons, know how to help them, and want to help them. Trust is an important part of the experience, as it is important for in relationships and community, but we also value it in our food. While farmer’s markets are spaces many people go because they trust the people who are selling them food, the reasoning is similar for people who go to food pantries. Individuals buy food in places where they find comfortability and trust, so a successful food system is one that creates levels of comfortability and trust for all.

While food pantries were comfortable for some, others mentioned that they were a source of embarrassment for themselves or people they knew. One individual believed it was generational. He said,

“The biggest thing is that the younger generations get embarrassed. Like my daughter and some of her friends, they don’t want to go to the pantries. But, I go. Whatever it takes. At the pantry, they make you feel good there. They’ll talk to you, but they’re not intrusive, that’s the biggest thing.”

For this individual, the staff and the community of other shoppers made him feel comfortable and welcome, eliminating the chance of embarrassment. Another individual mentioned that she felt embarrassment at first, but it went away quickly because of how comfortable the space was. While the embarrassment of going to food pantries can exist, it is also possible to combat that with inclusivity and comfortability in the space.

Other studies found that the existence of shame and embarrassment in pantry use, while possible to overcome by fostering inclusivity and comfortability, can be a large enough barrier to stop individuals from going to a food pantry at all (Daponte 1998). Since I met many of my interviewees at pantries, I found comparatively low levels of individuals who did not go to pantries due to embarrassment or shame. All individuals I spoke with went to food pantries regularly. However, a few spoke about how they had to overcome feelings of embarrassment at the beginning, or that friends or families would not go to pantries due to shame. Some individuals address feelings of embarrassment by relying on support networks of friends to go with them. One woman mentioned that her friend will only go to pantries if she has someone to go with her. When embarrassment around using food assistance is so prevalent, spaces that ease

the use of SNAP or WIC are going to be much more inclusive than spaces that make using SNAP or WIC challenging or conspicuous.

As we examine the way farmer's markets create community, we must ask who they are creating community for, and who they envision that community being. Individuals I spoke with felt strongly about their connections with their food pantries but did not have the same relationship with farmer's markets. This is likely due to the fact that the community the pantry tries to create are individuals who share an experience facing food access challenges. Since farmer's markets are regarded as spaces for white, middle and upper-class communities, the level of inclusivity a low-income person of color is going to feel is likely going to be very different unless the space is making an active effort to eliminate those connotations. The majority of individuals at farmer's markets generally do not share the same experiences of facing food access barriers. Individuals who struggle with finding food will not go to farmer's markets and feel as if they have shared experiences with the majority of people there.

While there is potential to mitigate disparities in inclusivity and exclusivity, this must be directly addressed by market programming, as it is unlikely to disappear on its own. Though individuals indicated that they did not feel a sense of community at the Kingston Farmer's market or the Kingston YMCA Farm Stand in the same ways they felt it at pantries, there is potential to create this community at both of those locations with direct and pointed action.

### *Choice*

Perception of choice is an important determinant in where individuals buy food. People value choice and will choose situations in which they have the greatest amount of agency. Additionally, individuals avoid and often resent situations in which their choice is

limited. Choice is a necessity for many people, but it is also empowering and affirming. Diminishing individual choice can feel personal and disempowering; however, individual choice is diminished frequently in our food system. Within food assistance programs, there are regulations of what, where, and how much of something you can buy. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, WIC for example, limits the size and kind of milk containers people can purchase. Supposedly, this is a way of helping instill healthy buying habits, though it often feels inconvenient and disempowering. These regulations eliminate agency in deciding what is healthy and important for one's self and one's family and can feel like the decision-making is being given to a detached organization.

Food assistance like SNAP, is designed for supplemental assistance, not full aid, so individual choice is limited by cost. Many individuals reported wanting to buy certain kinds of food, but were unable to make those choices because of cost. Cost determines what people buy, where they buy it, and how their food assistance is used. Individuals choose places where both cost and choice can be maximized or places where they perceive their cost and choice are maximized. Smaller markets are less likely to fit into this perception, because they are generally more expensive with fewer options. While an individual may value fresh, local produce, if cost and choice rank higher, they are less likely to choose small markets or farmers markets.

Many individuals were less likely to choose farmer's markets because they perceived fewer options than supermarkets. Many individuals mentioned that, due to transportation limitations, they preferred to shop at places where they could get all of their produce at once. Especially in the winter when produce in upstate New York is particularly less abundant, the farmer's market generally has less variety. Additionally, perception of cost, discussed earlier in the chapter, determines how individuals weigh decisions to go to the farmer's market. In the

winter, when choice and variety at farmer's markets are low and the perception is that cost is high, supermarkets tend to be chosen instead of farmer's markets. The winter market occurs every two weeks, and there were a few times in the 2-hour spans of time I was there that not one SNAP or WIC recipient came to the farmer's market management table to use food assistance credit. However, the number of WIC and SNAP users greatly increase at the Kingston farmer's market in the summer. This demonstrates that the change in choice and variety likely impacts the decision to choose the farmer's market over or in addition to supermarkets.

Choice is also limited by the quality of low-cost or free options. Many individuals experience low-quality produce at places where they buy food. While most individuals have changed cooking patterns to accommodate food that is about to expire, it can be a strain on time and energy, as most people have to cook or prepare the food to freeze it right away. This can often be hugely time-consuming, and one individual mentioned that if he does not prepare with the food right away, he risks it expiring and being unable to eat it. Another individual, a 60-year-old woman of color from Midtown, describes the food she gets from pantries and donations:

“What happens by the time we get it and it's half bad, you have to be in a hurry to fix it.

Sometimes, I have to cook three pots of something to make sure it doesn't go bad, and that takes time. If you had the money and went to Adam's and picked the stuff yourself, it would be fresher and would last longer.”

Low-income individuals disproportionately experience the most challenging parts of our food system and must figure out how to make the lower-quality, less fresh food work for them. Many feel like, because they do not have enough money, they must forgo quality and nutrition in order to have adequate food.

Knowledge about food preparation can be a significant barrier in accessing fresh produce, especially when individuals have to prepare food that is close to expiration. If people do not know how to prepare a specific kind of food or do not value the health benefits it may provide, they are unlikely to purchase it. The same can be said about the Kingston Farmer's Market; while the market may provide a significant amount of variety, if individuals do not know how to prepare it, they will not buy it. Additionally, unfamiliar foods can be challenging. Some vegetables, such as kale, have seen a surge in popularity among middle and upper-class demographics. These demographics are generally more comfortable letting the farmer know they are unfamiliar with this particular vegetable and asking ways to prepare it. However, for people who are uncomfortable in the space and uncomfortable talking with the person who is selling them food, they are less likely to want to buy and learn how to prepare an unfamiliar food. So, the existence of unfamiliar foods may be intimidating and thus reduce the likelihood of purchase.

The disconnect between enough food and enough high-quality food is illustrated in Robert Gottlieb and Anupama Joshi's discussion of the difference between antihunger and food justice (2010), discussed previously in chapter two. The authors quote Ken Hecht, from a California antihunger group, who said "What we wanted to do in the past was get more calories to people. Now we find it isn't more calories. It's more of the right calories" (Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010, p. 206). Previous efforts have focused on providing individuals with enough food, regardless of the quality of the food. However, my research shows that the disregard of quality has a significant impact on people, not just related to health, but related to how they view food systems and food in their community. Most feel that they do not have other options than to eat lower-quality food, and that the only solution is to have more money. This is an inherent systematic flaw, as it is possible and crucial to create systems where low-income individuals

cannot only access enough food, but can access high-quality food. The disconnect between who can access high-quality food is a critical element of food injustice that exists nationally and locally in Kingston. The next section of this chapter will address actions taken by the Kingston YMCA Farm Project in order to address food justice challenges in the Kingston Midtown community. This study shows us the ways that alternative food systems can address the shortage of produce in urban areas and the challenges faced when working to mitigate food access inequities.

### *Implications for the Kingston YMCA Farm Project*

Due to its accessible location in the lobby of the Kingston YMCA, The Kingston YMCA Farm Stand is able to overcome some perceptions of exclusivity. In the time I spent at the Farm Stand, I observed significant ethnic and racial diversity in the people who came to the YMCA, both to buy vegetables and to participate in programming. Alternatively, the Kingston Farmer's Market was much more homogeneous, consisting primarily of white, seemingly middle and upper-class individuals. This same farmer's market demographic is illustrated in Ryanne Pilgeram's research and is not unique to the Kingston Farmer's Market (2012). These observations demonstrate that the location of the Kingston YMCA Farm Project is enabling it to overcome some class and racial barriers that exist at other farm stands and markets. Additionally, the farm stand is able to reach individuals who are not going out of their way to buy produce but are instead participating in YMCA programming. While the Farm Project experiences perceptions of exclusivity, there also exists significant inclusivity, which was mirrored in some of the individuals I spoke with. This exemplifies the significant role that location and place play in determining inclusivity and exclusivity.

While the farmer and director of the Kingston YMCA Farm Project works to directly combat class-based perceptions of farmer's markets and food insecurity in Kingston and has achieved a level of inclusivity, issues of exclusivity persist. I witnessed mixed feelings about levels of inclusivity at the Kingston YMCA Farmer's market. Some individuals, the individuals that went the most often, believed it to be a largely inclusive and a comfortable space. Others, frequently individuals who had never been to the farm stand, perceived it to be too expensive. Others were unclear if it accepted SNAP and WIC. One individual, a 65-year-old woman of color from Midtown, said,

“I don't go to the Kingston YMCA Farm Stand. It's too expensive...I've passed there, and I've heard stories that it's very expensive there. The farmer's market is the same. If they were less expensive I'd want to use it, but it's too pricy.”

This quote, addressed also in chapter two, demonstrates that perceptions of price were a deterrent in shopping at the farm stand, and she believed the same to be the case at the farmer's market. This is an example of perceptions that can manifest in a community and change the experiences of people living there. She indicated a desire to shop at the farm stand but believed she was unable. This woman later mentioned that she had never been to the farm stand, suggesting that these perceptions were based solely on what she had heard from others. This disconnect was common in my research. Individuals who had never been to the Kingston YMCA Farm Stand spoke as if they knew for a fact that prices were high and would inhibit them from purchasing anything. They were quick to speak about perceptions that the stand and other alternative food systems were not for them. For individuals who went to the farm stand often, the sentiment was the opposite. All felt comfortable and mentioned that the produce was affordable and accessible.

This demonstrates that perceptions of exclusivity about farmer's markets and local food were barriers that prevented individuals in the Midtown community from going to the farm stand.

Individuals I spoke with indicated that the most valuable aspects of the Kingston YMCA Farm Project were location, price, and acceptance of food assistance. While these same factors can inhibit accessibility, for others they were the factors that made accessing fresh, local produce possible. The Farm Project works to increase accessibility by bringing a mobile market to a senior residential center, which for some, was hugely important in food access. This individual mentioned that the residential center receives a high amount of food donations, which usually consist of canned and packaged food. The mobile market made a big difference to him, because it gave him the ability to buy fresh vegetables without having to leave home. Additionally, the mobile market accepts SNAP and WIC just like the farm stand, so low-income food assistance individuals can use their benefits to purchase fresh produce right outside their doors. The Farm Project works to eliminate barriers of transportation, exclusivity, and comfortability by bringing produce to places where people with limited mobility live, work, and feel comfortable. Through this, the project can combat some of the challenges of providing fresh produce to individuals who feel uncomfortable going to a farmer's market.

However, one individual notes that only a small percentage of people who live at the senior center buy food from the mobile market. Even though many access barriers have been significantly minimized, some people still do not purchase the produce. The same individual indicated that the timing of the market may be challenging to those who have irregular work schedules or that individuals who have low-incomes but do not have food assistance for a variety of reasons may not be able to spend any extra cash on fresh produce. Through my research, I found that knowledge, perception, and comfortability are determining factors in food purchase.

Without the knowledge of food preparation or the knowledge that the mobile market accepts food assistance, individuals are unlikely to buy produce there. Additionally, the senior center receives food donations frequently, so if there is such a high amount of free food available, it is less likely that individuals will prioritize buying food. This is an example of the ways barriers work together to make food access challenging. Knowledge plays a significant role, as does comfortability with cooking, and the perception of value.

While the mobile market does not reach everyone at the senior center, it did change food purchasing patterns for the individual I spoke with. I met him at the Kingston YMCA Farm Stand in the lobby of the YMCA and he said, “I previously bought food from supermarket. I didn’t know about the farm stand until [the farmer] came to the senior center. Now, I go to the YMCA in the weeks that she doesn’t come to the senior center.” The mobile market was valuable for him in that it created a desire and dependence on local produce, which he did not have before. While the mobile market has yet to reach a majority at the senior living center, it makes a significant impact to those it does reach. So while the mobile market has yet to reach a majority, its existence alone proves vital in creating systems to equalize food system access among class levels.

### *In Summary*

My research demonstrates the importance of perceptions of exclusivity in alternative food systems. For many, it is one of the largest barriers to food access, and it has a significant impact on perceptions of local food systems. Perceptions of exclusivity create the notion that local produce is for some and not for others. This is damaging from a health, equity, and sustainability standpoint. Low-income individuals participate in alternative food systems at lower rates than

middle and upper-class individuals, creating a health divide as well as community divides. Even when institutions increase efforts to mitigate levels of exclusivity, exclusivity is rooted deep in perceptions about alternative food systems. Future efforts must directly address these perceptions and create spaces where all feel comfortable and have agency.

Space and place are significant in feelings of exclusivity, as selling the same food in a new, comfortable location increases perceptions of agency. This suggests that the construction of spaces like farmer's markets hold an inherent level of exclusivity, but bringing produce to an area where people live, work, and feel comfortable minimizes this barrier. Additionally, language surrounding alternative food movements is inaccessible to many and often alienates people who are unfamiliar with it. Efforts to increase sustainability in the food system are vital; however, they must be addressed with a lens on equity in order to ensure that all individuals have a share in food system improvements.

## Conclusion

Through my interviews and observations, I examined the experiences of accessing food among low-income individuals. I sought to determine what barriers individuals faced on a day-to-day basis and how low-income communities interacted with their food systems. While existing literature demonstrates that low-income communities experience food access barriers at disproportionately higher rates than middle and high-income communities, I sought to evaluate how these barriers manifested and how individuals interacted with these barriers. Additionally, I examined the way that alternative food systems, such as farmer's markets, can address access barriers in low-income communities and how they can be a tool to mitigate food insecurity. Through my interactions with individuals and organizations, I gained insight into experiences and processes specific to the Kingston food system. Food access experiences depend on geographical, institutional, and social structures and are influenced by cost, space, comfortability, exclusivity, knowledge, language, and many other interwoven components. These findings demonstrate that low-income communities disproportionately experience barriers to food access and that exclusivity is engrained within alternative food systems. However, I propose that alternative food systems, once they are made inclusive, can and should be used to mitigate food access barriers in low-income communities.

My evaluation of the geographic availability of food options demonstrated that Midtown Kingston has high numbers of convenience stores and fast food restaurants, but few or no affordable grocery options. This reinforced existing literature which shows that low-income communities suffer from higher density of poor-quality food options and low density of healthy, affordable options (Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010; Galvez et al., 2007; Block et al, 2004). Interviewees indicated that the few grocery stores that did sell produce frequently offered lower-

quality vegetables than supermarkets or farmer's markets and cost was always higher. Midtown mirrors other low-income areas of the country with its fewer options and lower quality.

Due to the sparse surrounding food environment, I found that car ownership plays a pivotal role in the ways low-income individuals purchase food. Car ownership allows people to shop for food without relying on other people or on public transportation, and it also eliminates the need for walking long distances. This is a huge advantage, as public transportation systems are often inefficient and groceries are heavy. Due to the fact that many low-income neighborhoods lack accesses to affordable grocery stores, walking is frequently impossible. Yet, low-income individuals have lower rates of car ownership than middle and upper-class individuals, and as a result, have a harder time getting to stores. This sentiment was expressed frequently among interviewees, as individuals cited repeatedly that their neighborhoods did not have affordable grocery stores, but they did not own cars and public transportation was challenging. Thus, lack of affordable grocery stores in low-income areas creates numerous transportation barriers that make access disproportionately challenging.

Low availability of food options, lower quality produce, and significant transportation barriers manifested in time and energy constraints in addition to lower choice and agency over food options. Individuals from Midtown indicated that they spent a lot of time and energy planning access to food, finding transportation to grocery stores and supermarkets, and preparing food. Individuals also explained that their choice was diminished due to poor neighborhood options coupled with budget constraints. The availability of offerings in low-income areas leads to more frequent experience of food access barriers, which manifest as transportation inefficiencies, cost disparities, and diminished choice.

Through my evaluation of policy and economic structures, I found that the availability of food assistance and the process of applying for and using it were significant in individuals' experiences purchasing food. Many individuals in Kingston encountered barriers when applying for food assistance, such as long wait times or lack of transportation. Others encountered barriers when using food assistance, such as neighborhood stores not accepting it, or too many restrictions on what they could buy. All individuals who received food assistance mentioned that they did not receive enough to last them the entire month. This specific policy limitation was widespread and affected individual experiences and the larger Kingston food system. This experience manifested in a variety of ways; the first being that many individuals felt like they needed to buy lower-quality, less expensive options in order to make their food assistance last. All individuals used food pantries to supplement their food assistance, and many mentioned that they could not imagine having enough food without reliance on pantries. This reliance on private emergency assistance is significant, as it demonstrates that the public government policies are not sufficient.

Cost was a factor that manifested in a variety of different ways throughout all individuals' food experiences. It was limiting and restricting, and it changed behaviors, choices, and perceptions of the local food system. Perceptions of cost had significant influence over what choices individuals made, and perceptions were more significant than actual cost. Frequently, if an individual believed that cost was high at a specific location, even if they had never been there, they would not shop there. Perception replaced fact, which speaks to how important comfortability and inclusion were. It demonstrates that locations need to prove that they are spaces for all, instead of assuming that the space will define that for itself. It also demonstrates the importance of cost and that cost alone frequently determines choice. In order to address food

access challenges, markets must make food affordable, but they must also create spaces that highlight affordability and establish equity.

Exclusivity, often generated through lack of diversity and high cost, inhibited experiences at farmer's market due primarily to perceptions of high cost, but also due to limited comfortability in alternative food spaces. While grocery stores require few interactions and hold a degree of anonymity, farmer's markets require interaction at each different vendor, which proves challenging to those unfamiliar and uncomfortable with the space, the offerings, the language, or the other shoppers. Food pantries, alternatively, create inclusive spaces where individuals experience belonging, comfortability, and community. Individuals frequently indicated much stronger relationships with pantries than they did with supermarkets or farmer's markets. While supermarkets will likely maintain anonymity and a level of detachment from personal lives, farmer's markets have the potential to provide a space of connection and community. However, since they so frequently cater to middle and upper-class, wealthy individuals, they often lose their ability to include low-income communities. Due to nationwide perceptions of alternative food systems and the language used to describe them, low-income communities are left on the periphery of sustainable food movements. In order to include all race, ethnicity, and class demographics, alternative food institutions must work to actively eliminate these perceptions.

While alternative food systems can be exclusive, they are also valuable in mitigating access inequities created by the lack of supermarkets and affordable food options in low-income areas. Farmer's markets and urban farms create food system transparency that is much more challenging to find in supermarkets. Additionally, farmer's markets have the ability to be mobile, and thus can exist in low-income areas to provide fresh produce where there are limited options.

Supermarkets require substantial amounts of land, and creating new supermarkets in urban areas often requires tearing down old infrastructure and building new infrastructure, which is costly. Alternatively, farmer's markets require no new infrastructure due to their ability to exist in closed-off streets or public spaces. This flexibility in space is powerful in urban areas where space is limited and expensive. So, farmer's markets can be a tool to mitigate food inequity at relatively low cost, while supporting local food systems.

The Kingston YMCA Farm Project provides a valuable resource in its community by providing affordable, local produce in an area with few options. Its commitment to affordability and its offering of mobile markets is unique and innovative in mitigating access challenges in its community. While the Project works to create an inclusive and accessible space, it is not always utilized by members of the community. I found that its work to eliminate barriers was successful, and any low participation rates of low-income demographics were due primarily to lack of knowledge or broad perceptions of exclusivity. Even if farmer's markets are creating infrastructure to make produce available to low-income communities, perception of exclusivity is powerful and a frequent determinant in choices. This research demonstrated the existence of food access barriers in low-income communities, the importance of affordability and accessibility of farmer's markets, and the need for increased inclusivity in alternative food systems. Alternative food systems must create dialogue with their communities, as well as create systems that make produce affordable and accessible for individuals. However, once those components are achieved, alternative food systems must make a concerted effort to reduce exclusivity and create food systems that are accessible to all people regardless of race, class, and ethnicity.

These findings demonstrate the shortcomings and failures of the conventional food system and government aid programs. Low-income communities are excluded from both

conventional and alternative food systems and suffer from food related diseases at higher rates (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2016; Joyce, 2005; Moore, 2006). The food system, from production to consumption, is broken and it effects low-income communities significantly more than wealthy communities. Middle and upper-class individuals have spaces for them to escape some of the failures of the food system, but low-income communities are excluded from these spaces and left to fully experience the health detriments of the industrial food system. This is what makes systems like the Kingston YMCA Farm so powerful. They work to combat race and class food injustices by bringing healthy food at affordable prices to communities without any. While this is powerful, in order to make a substantial difference, we need more similar systems in order to demonstrate that healthy food can be a reality for all and to eliminate inequity in the food system. The Kingston YMCA Farm Project demonstrates that healthy food is possible at affordable prices, and provides a model that can be replicated elsewhere. Project proves the successes of alternative food systems, but also the substantial room for growth, particularly in terms of inclusion.

I advocate for better private systems, but also improvement in public systems. As one interviewee pointed out, “the government is not keeping up with the cost of living.” The fact that all individuals mentioned that their food assistance was not enough is substantial. Until we can create a food system where healthy food is affordable to all, we need to create better government policy that supports those unable to purchase healthy food. The Farmer’s Market Nutrition Program is successful in increasing the amount of fresh fruits and vegetables that individuals who qualify consume (Conrey et al., 2003; Kropf et al., 2007). This demonstrates that these policies have power to change consumption patterns, but there are not enough resources to make this broadly successful. Given more attention, energy, and resources, these programs could have

a substantial impact on the health of low-income Americans and also on the resiliency of local food systems. In order to address the complex challenges of our food systems, we must enhance the efficiency of government food assistance programs and also the systems that bring individuals food, whether private or public. This research demonstrated the existing inequity, but the hopeful potential to mitigate inequity through better government programs and creative alternative food programs.

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## Appendix

### 1. Interview Questions

- a. How old are you?
- b. How long does it take you to get to go to places where you purchase food?
- c. Can you walk me through a week of food purchasing?
- d. How do you respond to your family's requests for certain foods?
- e. What are challenges to getting the kind and amount of food you need?
- f. Do you see your friends and family making similar choices about food?
- g. Why or why not do you choose to buy produce at the Kingston YMCA farm stand or Kingston Farmer's Market?
- h. How long have you been receiving food assistance?
- i. How does it impact your food purchases and buying patterns?
- j. What effects where you use your food assistance?
- k. How would you describe its benefits and limits?
- l. What do you know about the Farmer's Market Nutrition Program (FMNP)?
- m. What are the reasons you do or do not participate in the program?
- n. What are ways that it is beneficial or limiting to your food purchases?
- o. What are your experiences with food pantries?