

# RIC FOOD JUSTICE PROJECT

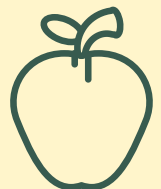
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Spring 2022



## FOOD JUSTICE IN RHODE ISLAND:

A review of the existing literature and civil society responses



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# ABOUT US

The Rhode Island College Food Justice Project was developed by students in the International Nongovernmental Organizations Studies (INGOS) Program at Rhode Island College in 2017.

INGOs 200 is an ongoing research class in community engagement at Rhode Island College led by Dr. Robyn Linde in the International Nongovernmental Organizations Studies program. This course explores the idea of social entrepreneurship through the lens of food justice. Over five years, each cohort has built on the research of the previous class by investigating the topic of food justice in Providence for the Rhode Island College Food Justice Project. This report is a collection of research gathered over five years, a comprehensive coverage of the literature on food justice as it pertains to Rhode Island, and preliminary introduction into key case studies. We hope you find this information useful and share it widely.

Sincerely,  
Rhode Island College INGOS students  
Class of 2021



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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While Rhode Island policy and practice is improving access to nutritious, local food sources via the combined efforts of individuals, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and government programs, poverty and food insecurity remain. Moreover, much progress in Rhode Island was reversed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the continuing economic crisis. This analysis is presented by Rhode Island College students as part of the RIC Food Justice Project to offer insight into efforts to reverse this trend. Our findings indicate that transportation issues must be addressed; partnerships should be expanded with large grocery chains; incentives should be offered to neighborhood stores to increase the availability of affordable and healthy food; and barriers to social services should be eliminated.

# INTRODUCTION

Food is an inherent part of Rhode Island’s history, whether considering the Narragansett Native Americans who farmed and fished throughout the area, Roger Williams’ English followers who farmed on (what is now) College Hill, or the many immigrants and cultures which arrived in later years. It seems counterintuitive that such a rich region, with ample marine life and a humid continental climate would experience food shortages. Yet a study conducted by the Rhode Island Community Food Bank in 2020 found that a quarter of households lack adequate food, rising from 11.5 percent in the pre-pandemic period (RICFB 2020). This report examines national, state, and local trends regarding the effect of unhealthy eating and limited accessibility to fresh food due to grocery store location and transportation-related issues. Moreover, the research project conducted by the Spring 2021 INGO 200 Community Engagement students, as part of the International Nongovernmental and Nonprofit Studies Program and the Rhode Island Food Justice Project, illustrates that minorities are affected disproportionately in terms of food justice issues, especially in terms of health and preventable diseases. The scope of this project was three Rhode Island case studies, two neighborhoods in Providence (Olneyville and South Providence) and Woonsocket. We, as Rhode Island College students, believe that access to healthy food is a right, not a privilege. Civil society and the government need to work together to overcome food injustices by taking into consideration the recommendations made in this report.



# DEFINITIONS

The following section clarifies terminology important to understanding the report: food justice, food desert, food apartheid, and food insecurity.

## Food Justice

This report on Rhode Island is about food justice. “Food” is a simple concept until it is put alongside terms such as “healthy,” “affordable,” “sustainable,” and/or “available.” The term “justice” complicates matters further with its connotations of “fairness,” “responsibility,” and “law.” Gottlieb and Joshi (2013) define food justice “as ensuring that the benefits and risks of where, what, and how food is grown and produced, transported and distributed, and accessed and eaten are shared fully” (6). This is concise, and yet the authors emphasize the need for defining the terms within, for creating a language around which to build solutions, the many approaches to the solutions, and a need to resolve the conflicts within the movement. There are philosophical differences between the eaters of meat, poultry, and fish with vegetarians, and even differences between vegetarians and vegans. Is justice to be granted to humans only, or to animals as well? Is it ethical to feed humans in whatever manner possible at this moment given the economic upheaval and spread of COVID-19?

Plentiful food sources are available to those with sufficient incomes, transportation, and ready access to supermarket choices. Despite a growing community garden movement in South Providence and a traveling market of fresh fruits and vegetables, access to healthy foods remains problematic on the South and West side of the economic dividing line of Interstate 95.

## Food Desert

The Food Empowerment Project (FEP 2021) expands upon the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) definition of food desert. The USDA concentrates



Photo Credit: Ciana Meyers

on distance from food sources. The FEP definition includes issues of racism and structural inequalities such as a correlation between minorities and the availability of healthy and affordable food as well as the impacts of being both cash poor and time-poor; the lack of culturally appropriate food options; the inability to grow food for oneself; and income disparities. The term, grocery gap, may be more accurate, in applying to non-urban areas of Rhode Island like West Warwick or rural areas near Woonsocket. Access to healthy, affordable food is not restricted solely by distance. There are economic, cultural, educational, and time issues that deny food justice to various groups, with poverty being the biggest culprit. Few supermarket chains compete for the “lesser” dollars of urban neighborhoods, a problem seen in both Providence and Woonsocket. These gaps in food access arose with the consolidation of supermarkets into megastores connected to highways rather than neighborhoods, national enterprises with computerized systems which calculate pennies per pound rather than local concerns.



Photo Credit: localfoodinitiative.com

## **Food Apartheid**

Apartheid is a Dutch word used to define a policy of the pre-Nelson Mandela South African government and denotes “separation” or “apartness,” the deliberate racist policy of dividing society into a white, privileged section, and a Black underclass. In 2020, due to the Black Lives Matter protests, awareness was brought to less overt forms of structural racism. The FEP (2021) and the Liberal Arts Action Lab (2018) have concepts of food deserts which relate to apartheid - of being set apart from healthy, affordable food by various mechanism in addition to distance. The Action Lab emphasizes the importance of codes of ordinance which favor the privileged or those with influence in government. The Green Dandelion (2021) explains food apartheid as a systematic problem; there is a structural reason for food deserts and food injustice based upon race, class, and economic status. This is the difference between Providence North and East of the Interstate (part of the food system) and Providence South and West of the Interstate (apart from the food system).

## **Food Insecurity**

National Public Radio (2020) suggests that, prior to the pandemic, food access was bad enough with 35 million Americans unable to meet daily nutritional needs and often uncertainty about where their next meal would come. The lack of proper



nutrition and the grinding uncertainty and fear concerning the “next meal” have doubled because of the pandemic, with nearly one-quarter of Americans now facing food insecurity with little end to the crisis in sight.

The USDA (2021) provides several definitions of food security unrelated to the pandemic; these were first offered in 2006, ranging from “high food security” to “very low food security.” Very low food security is defined as “reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake.” The government tends to write in unemotional terms, and “disrupted eating patterns” is a euphemism for a continuing problem in Rhode Island where people often go hungry. This leads to anxiety, depression, poor performance at work and school, as well as cynicism and hopelessness. The food insecurity issue needs to be dealt with now in its crisis mode and eliminated over the long term.



Photo Credit: Joshua Berson

# NATIONAL TRENDS

Noting national trends is key for Rhode Island, both in terms of what seems to be working well for other areas (Hopeful Signs) and what needs addressing (Troubling Trends).

## Hopeful Signs

Food insecurity, a result of poverty, racism, food deserts, and food apartheid, causes disrupted patterns of eating as described above. Various efforts around the nation have attempted to address this situation. At the University of Buffalo, Dr. Samina Raja's research helps local governments plan for specific conditions with policies that have proven effective elsewhere (UB 2021). Raja's initiative is the product of earlier work at Buffalo which concluded that trying to attract large supermarkets to urban food deserts might be futile (as seen in Los Angeles), and that a better strategy was promoting, supporting, and incentivizing smaller high-quality grocery stores (Gottlieb & Joshi 2010; UB 2021). Dr. Raja's research has many applications for Rhode Island and should be utilized as a guide. She stresses that food deserts that plague poor minority neighborhoods result from poor planning. Her proposals are intriguing. In particular, the goal of improving and expanding extant stores and incentivizing new ones where necessary seems more feasible than trusting national and even global food corporations to maintain promises.

In Detroit, Michigan, a Grocery Incubator project (Fair Food Network 2021) started in 2012. This initiative provided financial, management, and technical assistance to entrepreneurs willing to open a grocery store in a city devastated by the loss of automobile manufacturing, the urban poor abandoned to their fate. Goals included new stores, neighborhood revitalization, jobs, social stability, and sales points for local farmers. Detroit is different from Providence where there are numerous extant meat markets, bodegas, and convenience stores. In South Providence, for instance,

the goal might be to improve, upgrade, and refocus the existing stores rather than creating new stores. In addition to the Incubator Project for new stores, Detroit had a Great Grocer Project (DFPC 2021) focused on improving existing stores. This could be a model for Providence, save for less urban areas where there are few or no stores.

Another effort was the Healthy Corner Store Initiative of Philadelphia (The Food Trust 2021). This initiative found that even small corner stores could be partners in a wider effort to bring more and better food into food deserts. Given proper incentives and encouragement, small store owners were receptive to the necessary changes. The only parameters for the initiative were effective measures. As these were small stores and bodegas, the owners tended to live in the immediate area, knew their customers personally, and wanted to serve those customers in a manner that benefited all concerned. Of course, the store owners were interested in profit and a challenge for initiatives of this sort was to convince them that fresh fruits and vegetables were good sellers. Packaged donuts can sit on the shelf for months. Fresh foods have a rapid turnover. A simple, step-by-step process must be introduced which brings together farmers, store owners, and customers. The changes are more likely to succeed when brought about gradually.

Finally, double value Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) for fresh fruit and vegetables purchased at farmer's markets should be expanded to participating stores. The Healthy Corner Store Initiative found that investments in new equipment were relatively small and that the mindsets of store owners and customers were most important.



Photo Credit: Creative Commons

## Troubling trends

The local application of similar policies in Detroit and Philadelphia, such as the initiative from the University of Buffalo, were within major urban centers with large minority populations. However, the swath of dire food insecurity which stretches from New Mexico across Texas and throughout the Deep South shows this problem to be prevalent in rural areas as well as areas with large Native populations (Schanzenbach & Tomeh 2020). These national trends inform Rhode Island's rural areas and Native populations

The link between poverty and food insecurity is consistent across the country and should not be surprising. In 2018, forty percent of food-insecure homes were in the South (Feeding America 2018); in 2021, four of the top five states with the highest poverty rates are in the South. The fifth state is New Mexico (WPR 2021). The association between poverty and food insecurity is strong. However, wherever there is poverty, at whatever state rate, hunger exists. Feeding America (2019) projected food insecurity rates for certain states in 2020 with North Dakota being the lowest at 9.7 percent of the population, and Mississippi being the highest at 22.6 percent of its population. Massachusetts, generally a wealthier state, still projected an overall rate increase of 59 percent in 2019. California projected to have the largest number of food-insecure households at 6.2 million, a 1.9 million total increase over 2019 (Feeding America 2020a). Healthline (Plater 2021) reports

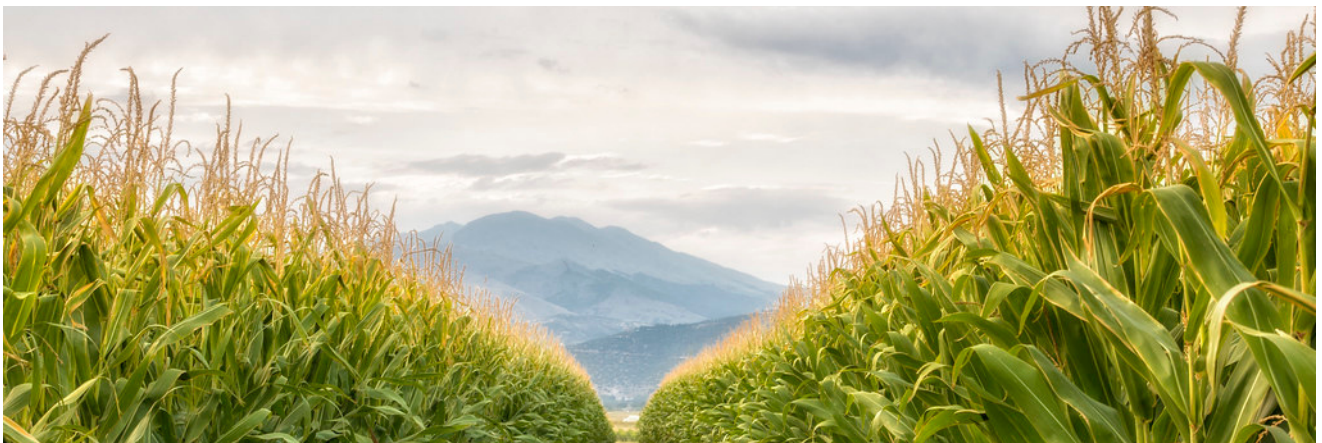


Photo credit: Theophilos Papadopoulos

the following national increases in the last year (2020 to 2021): three percent food insecurity rising to 14 percent; eleven million food-insecure children rising to 17 million; nationally, the damaging increases have come for the most vulnerable populations: children under the age of five and pregnant and breastfeeding women. Food insecurity in Vermont was “only” 14.2 percent in 2020, but in a state with a population of approximately 625,000 people, that projects to almost 89,000 people. Policymakers might be pleased with a low rate compared to other states, but urging immediate action to feed 89,000 people has a greater impact.

As seen above, food insecurity affects all races, but disproportionately affects minorities. Another group disproportionately affected is children, and this can cause a variety of issues during their growth years. Save the Children (STC 2021) reports that since the onset of the pandemic, national food insecurity has increased to where it affects more than 20 percent of American families, with more than 40 percent of single mothers with children 12-and-under not certain where their next meal might come from. Schools with subsidized or free meals, sometimes breakfast and lunch, have closed during the pandemic and eliminated a consistent source of meals for underprivileged children. Nationwide, this is a problem for urban and rural communities. The United States Department of Agriculture’s (Economic Research 2021) national statistics show food insecurity in every type of locale across the country: in nonmetropolitan areas (12.1 percent), metropolitan areas (12.4 percent), and suburban areas as well (8.3 percent).



Photo Credit: The Garden Conservancy.

## At-Risk Populations

While many people are vulnerable to food insecurity, certain populations face a disproportionate risk due to structural inequalities and deficiencies. Certain groups of people suffer more food insecurity than others; for instance children, minorities, women, and those from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) communities (Silva 2020; Williams Institute 2016). This acknowledgment is a starting point. Although location (distance from food sources) is a factor in determining food insecurity, race, gender, family structure and other factors play a role. Food insecurity impacts the poor, and poverty disproportionately impacts the groups previously mentioned. The disabled also suffer, due to poverty and lack of access (Coleman-Jensen & Nord 2013), and those with criminal records may be restricted from benefits (NIH 2018).

Odoms-Young & Bruce (2018) assert that many factors complicate the association between race and ethnicity with food insecurity: poverty, criminal record, and disability, as mentioned, as well as rates of unemployment. Social and economic disadvantages are concentrated among the groups mentioned above, and so the



Photo Credit: Lance Cheung



Photo Credit: The Garden Conservancy.

drive to eradicate food insecurity should have short-term goals (food) and long-term goals (eradication of consistent structural disadvantages). No one controls their race, ethnicity, gender, age, or sexual orientation, and these structural disadvantages should not be exacerbated by hunger. Criminal records also disproportionately affect minority communities, and those responsible for bad choices should not be punished beyond what the criminal justice system adjudicates.

Confirming the racial disparities, a National Public Radio investigation found that 20 percent of Black households suffer food insecurity, slightly more than Hispanic households (nearly 16 percent), and both groups are disadvantaged compared to white Americans who suffer food insecurity at approximately an eight percent rate

(Silva 2020). The USDA asserts that 12 million children currently suffer food insecurity (USDA 2021), while others put the total as high as 18 million (Feeding America 2020a). Children living with a single parent, usually a woman, are particularly vulnerable.

Education level also affects who goes hungry. NPR's investigation (Silva 2020) found that those with only a high school education suffer five times the rate of food insecurity as those with a college education; this, too, is associated with racial disparities as minorities are less likely to hold a college degree. Ironically, those students in college during the pandemic, paid through work study funds, did not receive stimulus checks (Nguyen 2020). This exacerbated many of the trends mentioned above, in particular affecting women and parents (Stebbleton & Kaler 2020).

## **Comparing Regions**

Feeding America (2020b) maps the comparisons for 2016 - 2018. The most impacted states in 2018 were Arkansas, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana, however, Maine, Alaska, South Dakota and New Mexico showed clusters of dire need as well. Highlighting one example, Mississippi's food insecurity rate was 18.7 percent and it was estimated that \$275 million in food aid was required to meet the state's needs. Rhode Island's food insecurity rate (before the pandemic) was 11.4 percent with nearly \$70 million needed to close the gap. The American South is a rural area and generally the poorest area of the United States. The USDA (2020) confirms that rural areas - white, Black, Brown, Native American - from the Northeast to the Southwest and everywhere in between, suffer food insecurity just as urban areas do. This makes hunger a bipartisan issue of concern for Republicans as well as Democrats.



## Other countries

The U.S. is not the only country that endures hunger and food insecurity. A USDA report (Smith & Meade 2019) shows Sub-Saharan Africa suffering a more than 50 percent food insecurity rate, almost three times Mississippi's 2018 rate. Severe food insecurity in Africa below the Sahara afflicted more than 1 in 4 people. Latin America (and the Caribbean) had rates of 32 percent and 12 percent respectively (food insecure/severe food insecurity), with South Asia nearly the same at 30 percent and 13 percent respectively. North America, Europe, and Central Asia fared better but still had their own troubling rates. Hunger stalks the poor around the world as the global income inequality gap increases. This is even more pressing today in the context of the Ukraine war and global shortages of grain (Higgins and Solomon 2022).



# RHODE ISLAND CASE STUDIES

Rhode Island has a problem with food insecurity. Low-income families are most impacted and there are roughly 131,393 people living in poverty in Rhode Island, with 68,000 Rhode Islanders depending upon food banks and meal sites during the pandemic (Leslie 2020). In order to combat this problem, the state, cities, and civil society have created various initiatives discussed below through the case studies of Providence neighborhoods (Olneyville, South Providence) and Woonsocket.

## Providence

To understand Providence initiatives, we have to begin with the center of commerce in Providence, Interstate 95 (I-95). After decades of construction, I-95 was completed in 2018 (Griffin 2018), the last project financed under the 1956 National Interstate and Defense Highways Act. I-95 serves 110 million people along its 1900 miles and facilitates 40 percent of the country's gross domestic product. The vivisection of Providence by the highway is a result, perhaps, of poor planning, though other motives suggest themselves. Other major cities have highways which facilitate egress to the city and increase flow rather than cutting the city in half



Photo Credit: Creative Commons

and acting as a barrier, as is the case in Providence. Lower income families in South Providence and the West Side (Irish in the 1950s, though increasingly Latino and Black) were “set apart” from the rest of the city. I-95 separated Federal Hill from downtown, the highway built when anti-Italian prejudice remained



Photo Credit: Kenneth C. Zirkel.

strong. These minority areas were cut off from downtown, including the East Side (College Hill), and the (formerly) bustling waterfront along Allen’s Avenue. Access was possible but difficult, and certainly not encouraged by the city (Griffin 2018).

In Providence, there are 179,883 residents with a median income of \$45,610; however, nearly a quarter of residents live in poverty. What different cities have done to address poverty are examples of what can be done in Providence and elsewhere in Rhode Island. A 2019 case study was conducted in Providence by the Food Access Research Atlas to determine the type of provisions found in local grocers in both high and low economic areas. The study found that non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic communities have less access to healthier food choices than their white counterparts. Non-Hispanic Blacks and Hispanics also have higher levels of obesity from accessing cheap, low-quality food. In lower income areas, with fewer automobiles to access remote stores, there are fewer food outlets providing options for healthy alternatives.

## **Olneyville**

Olneyville is a Providence neighborhood in the southwest of the city with 64 percent of residents identifying as Latino, 11.5 percent Black, and 16.5 percent White (Statistical Atlas 2021). In 2013 and again in 2017, Olneyville was considered a low-income and low-access community because 33 percent of its population had no access to fresh produce within half a mile. Furthermore, approximately 4,620 people live below 185 percent of the federal poverty level, with children making up 877 of them. Moreover, many residents in Olneyville do not own a vehicle and rely on public transportation or shop in corner stores, even if the available food is not as healthy as they would prefer (ARCGIS 2021).

The impact of the lack of access to food is better understood when considering that Providence residents in wealthier socioeconomic areas of the city have a life expectancy nine years higher than residents of Olneyville (Central Providence HEZ 2020). In fact, neighborhood residency has more influence on lifespan than genetics. Additionally, according to the Rhode Island Community Food Bank, Rhode Island is the state with the highest food insecurity in the senior community at a rate of 9.6 percent (RICFB Seniors 2021). The senior population is vulnerable to food insecurity because of the inability to walk long distances and lack of access to a car. However, Federal Hill House does provide daily meals to seniors and manages the Olneyville Food Center (Fed. Hill House 2021). Community Action Partnership of Providence County, St. Teresa of Avila Food Pantry, and Maranatha Food Pantry of Church of God are among the food pantries that serve this large neighborhood; however, unemployment has increased in Rhode Island and there are more families relying on food pantries.

## South Providence

South Providence, which includes Elmwood, the West Side, and Upper and Lower South Providence (collectively referred to as the South Side) includes some of the poorest census tracts in the state. Median income ranges from \$16,411 (South Side) to \$37,366 (West Side), significantly lower than the state median at \$58,387 (HousingWorksRI 2016). Fifty-eight percent of residents identify as Latino (HousingWorksRI 2016). A HousingWorksRI study found that 69 percent of households earned less than \$50,000 a year (2016). A 2011 study of the area found that less than a third of interview participants had diets considered healthy (HealthRI.gov 2011). A new public health study of South Providence is needed and should be compared with the findings of the 2010 results. Eighty percent of stores in Providence were found to be compliant with the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) rule that stores must carry 36 items, according to a study conducted by Yuyao Huang (2019) examining the quality and quantity of food in 30 retailers in Providence. During the study, however, in order to meet the proposed rule of 84 items, almost 67 percent of the stores would need to expand offerings. Dairy products displayed the lowest variety. Many stores did the bare minimum to alleviate food deserts.



Photo credit: Gian-Carlo Rossi

## **Woonsocket**

South Providence and Olneyville are Rhode Island's most prominent food deserts; however, other areas face obstacles as well. Woonsocket, for instance, deals with poverty, high rates of trauma, teen pregnancy, domestic violence, accidental overdoses, and a lack of access to healthy foods. There are 41,751 people living in Woonsocket with a median income of \$42,595, and approximately 21.8 percent of Woonsocket residents live in poverty (Census 2021). Many Woonsocket residents rely on governmental programs like SNAP and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) which often do not suffice. Families and individuals face food insecurity - disrupted eating patterns- which leads to snowballing complications. Thundermist Health Center, the Rhode Island Department of Health, Karen Karp & Partners (KK&P) and other local groups work to raise awareness of these issues, and take actions to transform the food system in Woonsocket.

To develop a food access plan, Woonsocket's Health Equity Zone collaborated with KK&P to conduct surveys and focus groups with over 350 participants (American Planning Association 2016). The results were telling. This project resulted in a three-year plan. The survey questions focused on food insecurity, alternate methods of food access, transportation, social services, and envisioning Woonsocket as a healthier community. KK&P's first step was carrying out a needs assessment which evaluated the accessibility of healthy foods throughout Woonsocket. More than half of respondents answered "Yes" to concerns about running out of food, and, of those respondents, seventy-six percent were SNAP users (Woonsocket HEZ 2016a). Even those receiving benefits often wondered where their next meal might come from. More than four out of ten reported running out of food and not being able to obtain more; eight-four percent of these respondents were SNAP users.

These numbers raise questions about SNAP reaching everyone in need, and whether assistance was sufficient. Why would someone in need not access assistance? One answer is that 62 percent of respondents cited uncertainty of eligibility to qualify for social service programs. Nearly 30 percent said they felt embarrassed about reaching out for help. Respondents also cited a lack of transportation, complicated application processes, not being able to take time off from work to apply, and that the application process was time consuming.



Photo Credit: Kenneth C. Zirkel

# FEDERAL, STATE AND CIVIL SOCIETY EFFORTS IMPACTING RHODE ISLAND

This section covers interventions to food insecurity through policy, charity, and advocacy, federally and within the state of Rhode Island.

## Federal Efforts

Food insecurity does not exist in isolation: low-income families are affected by issues such as lack of affordable housing, health conditions, low wages and high medical costs. This proposal focuses on food insecurity, but the overall context should be kept in mind. Many states have food stamp programs utilizing electronic benefit transfer cards: the average benefit, pre-pandemic, was \$133 per person per month. WIC benefits low-income pregnant, breastfeeding and postpartum women. There are benefits for infants and children at nutritional risk up to age five such as vouchers to purchase specific nutritiously-dense food.

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) provides nutritious meals to school children. NSLP is a government funded program that provides breakfast, lunch, and after school snacks that are low cost or free. Congress passed the National School Lunch Act in 1946 to improve child nutrition. School districts that take part in this program receive reimbursement from the USDA for served meals. According to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education in 2011, “the .





USDA does not require schools to serve or not serve any particular foods and the school meals must meet federal nutrition requirements” (School Meals FAQs 2019). It is the school’s responsibility to decide which food to serve and how to prepare that food. The School Breakfast Program is similar to NSLP and is concerned with children who arrive at school hungry, providing low-cost breakfast meals.

The Child and Adult Care Food Program reimburses child care and nonresidential adult day care centers where meals and snacks are provided. The Older American Act provides funding for nutritional programs targeting older adults. Food distribution programs distribute commodity food, or agricultural products purchased by the government, and provide nutritional assistance to low-income households, emergency feeding programs, Native American Reservation Disaster Relief programs, and older adults.

### **The State of Rhode Island**

Rhode Island was on its way to reducing food insecurity when the pandemic set back efforts. In 2011, just over fifteen percent of Rhode Islanders were food insecure; by 2017, that number was reduced to approximately 11.5 percent (RI - DOH 2017). The pandemic and subsequent recession have deeply affected the food politics of the state. The Rhode Island Community Food Bank’s 2020 summary revealed that one in four households (25 percent) lacks adequate food (RICFB 2020). Andrew Schiff, CEO of RICFB, bemoans the halting of progress against food insecurity caused by the pandemic. The Food Bank’s network of 159 food pantries provided for 537,000 people before the pandemic; by April 2020, 68,000 more were in need. This increased need necessitated 16 million additional pounds of food, including 330,000 meals supplied by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island and the Brown University School of Public Health also reported that 25 percent of households were concerned about not having enough food (Brown.edu, 2019). These are the highest levels of food insecurity recorded in Rhode Island in 20 years.

Rhode Island is the first state to designate a person to lead food strategy efforts. In 2016, Governor Gina Raimondo announced a Director of Food strategy, Sue AnderBois, who developed a comprehensive food strategy which anticipated increasing the local food economy. Julianne Stelmaszyk was appointed to Anderbois' position in 2021, tasked with seeing Rhode Island its food policies through the pandemic.

The Rhode Island Food Policy Council (RIFPC) was formed in 2011 to advocate for an improvised local food system, to grow the food network, and to steer policy efforts. In partnership with the DEM, RIFPC issued an update to the RI Food Assessment: 2011-2016 and Beyond, providing a framework to evaluate progress and identify gaps. It was reported that synergies and links among aspects of the food system should be increased and interactions between public health, the environment, local food, and economic growth should be investigated. This update laid the foundation for the development of the RI food strategy. Now headed by Nessa Richman, target areas of the RIFPC include growing food industries in the state; improving the climate for food and beverage businesses; creating and sustaining markets for those businesses, including food tourism; reducing food insecurity; and reducing food waste which enters the waste stream (Johnston Landfill; Narragansett Bay).





Photo Credit: Millie Rosenbloom

RIFPC focuses on racial inequalities which are part of the Rhode Island food chain,, promoting the ideals of food equity and justice by optimizing two goals: First, building and maintaining a network of organizations and stakeholders (consumers; Black owned businesses) committed to the shared ideal of food justice. Secondly, RIFPC utilizes this network to promote the larger initiative of committing to a food system that is environmentally and economically sound, and provides affordable products to communities of all economic backgrounds. In July 2020, the Rhode Island Black Business Association (RIBBA) projected that more than 50 percent of the minority-owned businesses in Rhode Island would face closure due to the impacts of COVID-19 (Ahlquist 2020a). This vulnerability resulted from pre-existing inequalities in the state. RIFPC seeks to expand equitable food access to all of Rhode Island, improve minority employee and employer conditions, and mitigate negative impacts upon the Rhode Island food supply ecosystem (RIFPC 2021).

A government task force was formed to decrease food waste by ten percent and provide technical assistance to divert organic waste from the landfill and redirect it to Rhode Islanders in need. State grants help tackle problems related to crops grown in the Ocean State. Up to 100 bills passed by the General Assembly provided potential impact on the food system. Since mid-2020, Rhode Island’s administration of the SNAP program provided pandemic-related increases in payments to improve healthcare, work support, food assistance, housing support, and provision of assistance for youth at risk (H&HS 2021). Efforts are needed to eliminate the root causes of food insecurity throughout the state: the creation of new jobs, the introduction of training programs to improve agriculture; expansion of food purchasing power and support for incentive programs at grocery stores; and increasing funding for food banks.

## Transportation

The Rhode Island Department of Transportation (RIDOT) proposes to separate RIPTA's bus stops in Kennedy Plaza (Ahlquist 2020). Kennedy Plaza is vital to minority communities, a disadvantaged population which relies on public transportation to access supermarkets outside of the city center. More than 50 percent of the riders make \$15,000 or less (RIPTA 2020), less than the 2021 national poverty level of \$17,420 for a two-person household (ASPE 2021). The dismantling of Kennedy Plaza will necessitate that riders with disabilities must travel significant distances to make connections. Sunrise Movement PVD, Uprise RI, and GrowSmart RI highlight the negative impacts the RIDOT Multi-Hub plan will impose on the community. In January 2021, GrowSmart RI and the South Providence Neighborhood Association filed a Title VI complaint against RIPTA and RIDOT (Ahlquist 2021). Governor McKee has not commented on this matter.



Access and ease of transportation is key to solutions of food deserts and grocery gaps. Pringle (2013) finds that “low-income areas have... fewer... supermarkets and twice as many convenience stores” (46). Mark Winnie (2008) argues that public transportation limits riders via the lack of space to carry much food. Additionally, there are an insufficient number of routes available for these communities, making

grocery shopping laborious and time-costly. The result is for low-income families to rely on smaller stores as their main source of food. Possible solutions would be to reroute buses and having racks for riders to hold their groceries.

We can see this play out in Providence as well. Given that an Olneyville resident - as an example - might have to, at present, take a bus downtown and switch buses to reach the Price Rite at Eagle Square, and make the return two-bus trip with groceries in tow, it seems unreasonable to force that person to travel some distance on foot to make the bus transfer downtown. Currently, they would only need to cross the bus plaza. City planning efforts can alleviate extraneous burdens on acquiring food.



Photo Credit: Jef Nickerson

## **Civil Society Efforts**

There are a number of civil society efforts by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), nonprofits, and churches that address food insecurity. While an exhaustive list is not possible here, we have focused on some of the central actors present in our case study communities.

### **Farm Fresh RI (FFRI)**

FFRI, based in Providence, has been a non-profit organization since 2007. Starting as a student project at Brown University, FFRI transformed into a hub for fresh and local food, incorporating the community at all points of the food cycle. FFRI creates a place where local farms sell products to the community and acts as a hub of information and awareness for an equitable and sustainable mission of accessible and affordable fresh food. Educational programs such as Farm to School and Community Education engage people of all ages throughout Rhode Island with hands-on learning about the benefits of leading a local and healthy food lifestyle. Community members are encouraged to engage with local agriculture. All the while, FFRI promotes a systems approach to food in which one looks at the cycle of food and its interaction with its environment. The ultimate goal is to have a state that prides itself in local, fresh food (FFRI 2021).

### **Henry P. Kendall Foundation**

HPKF reflects the ideals of a New England entrepreneur whose goal was to raise and address environmental concerns. Since 2011, the foundation has tightened its focus from general environmental awareness to the more specific goal of fresh, local, sustainable food systems, funding colleges, programs, and organizations that hold the same values. Since 2018, the New England Food Vision Prize has encouraged Rhode Island colleges to engage in food justice. The College Harvest

Project helped RISD and Johnson & Wales partner with FFRI to source local condiments (HPKF 2021), developing an awareness at these universities that local and sustainable foods can be a part of Rhode Island's future. Due to COVID-19, the Henry P. Kendall Foundation wisely suspended some programs to concentrate on the impact the pandemic has had on the New England food supply.

### **Rhode Island Healthy School Coalition (RIHSC)**

RIHSC advocates for a healthy lifestyle in schools through programs that focus on food and exercise, gathering together and facilitating Rhode Island community-based programs that are accessible and free. RIHSC endorsed FFRI's Farm to School Program which brings locally-grown produce to school cafeteria tables across Rhode Island while developing collaborations with local school boards. RIHSC also collaborated with Farm Fresh RI to create the Local Food Ambassador Program which conducts on-the-job training with Rhode Island citizens of all ages, teaching about and engaging with the diverse produce of Rhode Island's farms (RIHSC 2021).



Photo Credit: Creative Commons

## **Food on the Move (FOTM)**

FOTM is a program run by the Rhode Island Public Health Institute which serves Providence with its FOTM truck, enabling SNAP participants to buy fresh produce and reduce food insecurity in their own neighborhoods. When SNAP participants utilize this mobile service, they receive a 50-percent discount up to \$25 on produce, translating into more produce for less money. Moreover, FOTM has a Customer Loyalty Card program which awards 1 point to the customer for every \$2 spent on fresh produce. When the customer earns 100 points, they receive \$5 off the next purchase (RIPHI 2021).



Photo Credit: Creative Commons

## **Southside Community Land Trust (SCLT)**

SCLT recognizes that grocery stores moved out of urban areas, leaving low-income communities without access to fresh fruits and vegetables. SCLT provides land through low-cost leases so people may cultivate their own food. It also trains nascent farmers and educates people about eating healthy and the environmental impact of community gardens. These garden plots are located throughout Providence, Central Falls and Pawtucket, providing a diverse Rhode Island community with the chance to participate. People benefitting from these leases are those who otherwise would not have accessibility to fresh produce ( SCLT 2021).





Photo Credit; Robyn Linde

## **Thundermist Grows**

Thundermist Grows, a community garden and educational program implemented by Thundermist Health Center (THC), enhances access to organic foods and builds knowledge of gardening practices within disadvantaged populations (THC 2021). THC helped integrate these programs in Woonsocket by working with Farm Fresh RI to facilitate year-round farmers markets that accept WIC, credit cards, senior coupons, and SNAP Bonus Bucks. Culinary medicine can be beneficial in assisting shoppers to adopt a healthier diet by targeting individual nutritional needs. With 22 percent of respondents wanting farm fresh foods available in local corner stores (Woonsocket HEZ '2' 2016), small retailers can be supported in offering healthy food choices. Individuals then have more of an opportunity to attain nutritious meals closer to home. Communities can improve the network of emergency food providers to increase efficiency and become centralized points to promote food access. The access points are seen as hosting areas where events provide information. These strategies benefit the underserved in Woonsocket and other locations in Rhode Island. To become a reality, funding and effort from local lawmakers is necessary.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations have been drafted by students affiliated with the Rhode Island College Food Justice Project based on studies, many included in this report, on successful programs in other urban areas. These recommendations are presented as local- and state-level initiatives, although most of the local initiatives should be supported or supplemented by state programs. Likewise, many of the state-level recommendations regarding policy should be implemented at the city level as well.

### LOCAL-LEVEL INITIATIVES

- Rather than encouraging grocery chains to open stores in unprofitable areas, grocery stores should be incentivized to open stores near downtown transit hubs. This will not only provide fresh fruits and vegetables to those that use public transportation in Rhode Island (usually those of lower economic status) but serve other downtown shoppers and office workers. This would reduce the stigma associated by using public assistance by offering fresh produce to everyone and widely accepting food program payment methods, such as SNAP and WIC.
- Groceries should be delivered to elderly and disabled SNAP shoppers. Food distributors and city programs could utilize existing services, such as Meals on Wheels, to provide deliveries.
- RIPTA should coordinate with state food councils and offices to streamline routes with grocery stores and develop creative ways to address carrying capacity issues, such as providing hooks for grocery bags.
- Local farmers markets and other civil society initiatives should utilize existing bodegas and corner markets to sell its produce with incentive programs offered by state and local programs. Farmers markets could sell their produce, or even weekly leftovers, directly to improved neighborhood stores, saving the farmer time and expense, and perhaps providing a more certain, reliable price for the farmer's goods.

- Cities should incentivize growth via zoning reform such as easing parking requirements and transform residential to commercial permits where beneficial to food justice.
- Cities should incentivize the purchase and maintenance of empty lots as community gardens.
- Cities should create community awareness through afterschool programs, churches, community centers and mailers about area stores that carry fresh fruits and vegetables and accept SNAP and WIC.
- Cities and neighborhoods should coordinate festivals that celebrate the grand “opening” of upgraded neighborhood stores and connect with cultural festivals tied to an increase of foods familiar to the neighborhood’s immigrant community.
- Awareness by grocery stores of holidays that immigrants celebrate should be fostered along with stocking foods associated with these holidays.
- Youth should be educated about fresh produce via community gardens, raised or patio beds, and hydroponics.
- Bodegas and corner markets should be incentivized to carry healthy food and display them prominently.



Photo Credit: Irina Feldman

## State-level change:

- Laws mandating visible prices and expiration dates should be required in all grocery stores, corner stores, and bodegas to make shopping convenient and informative. An earlier Rhode Island College Food Justice study in 2017 found that the many of bodegas did not price their items clearly and expiration dates were missing or difficult to find.
- Laws mandating the advertising of bonuses offered through EBT should be displayed clearly and consistently.
- WIC/SNAP should be widely accepted in all smaller markets that have fresh produce. EBT/SNAP should be widely distributed, used, and accepted, and, over time, limited from use for sodas and snack foods.
- Doctors should be encouraged to write prescriptions for fresh vegetables and fruit, perhaps offering incentives via SNAP.
- New construction of middle and high schools should not be allowed in close proximity to fast food restaurants.
- Industries which leave Rhode Island to chase non-union labor should pay extra taxes to sell products in RI.
- 
- The minimum wage should continue to rise in relation to the dollar's spending power, even beyond the \$15/hour set for 2025.

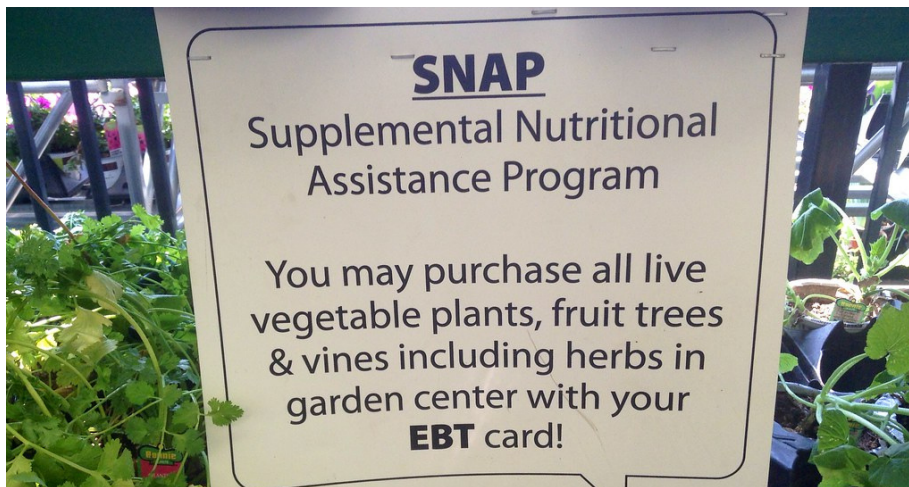


Photo Credit: Mike Mozart

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# RIC FOOD JUSTICE PROJECT

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International Nongovernmental and Nonprofit Studies Program

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