



Gardening for Change: Community Giving Gardens and Senior Food Insecurity

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Introduction

- The number of seniors in the U.S. is projected to more than double in size by 2060 (Mather & Kilduff, 2020).
- An estimated 5.3 million of today's seniors are food insecure, a number that is only likely to grow (Ziliak & Gunderson, 2020).
- Seniors consistently demonstrate low participation rates in both public and private food assistance programs due to a variety of awareness and access, however overcoming food insecurity for seniors also involves seniors acknowledging their food insecurity and overcoming the negative social stigma associated with hiding hunger and avoiding assistance.

Community Gardening as a Potential Solution: Historically, community gardens have been a critical tool in creating food access, generating social capital, and contributing to the food security of vulnerable populations (Kurtz, 2001). Local food production and community garden projects can provide much-needed support to our food system. For over 15 years, the Orono Community Garden (OCG) staff and volunteers have delivered an average of about six to eight pounds of produce each week to over fifty senior households in need.



Purpose

This research aims to better understand the underlying factors that affect how community giving gardens can play a role in creating equitable food access. This work looks to expand the research regarding seniors' perceptions of their own food insecurity and the potential of community giving gardens to increase rural food access and reduce food assistance stigma.

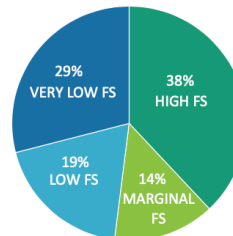
Methods

The study used a mixed-methods approach including a survey and two series of interviews. All interviewees were residents of two low-income housing projects in Orono, ME. Two sets of semi-structured interviews were conducted during the harvest seasons of 2015 and 2017; the first set with current OCG recipients and the second set of interviews with residents who had not participated in the OCG that year. Interviews focused on the seniors' motivation for involvement with the community garden, personal experience and perceptions of food security, food habits, and current participation in food assistance programs.

Results

The Orono Community Garden program = Much needed resource

- 9 out of the 11 participating seniors indicated the supplemental fresh produce augments their normal diets and gave them additional options in budgeting for food and other expenses, 63% percent of seniors reported that deliveries often provided otherwise unaffordable vegetables.
- Choices to opt-out of OCG deliveries were found to be driven by health limitations (e.g. medications restricting diet, physical constraints to food preparation) and by concern that others were in greater need and that they didn't want to waste food resources.



A constellation of programs helps these seniors: The majority of the seniors interviewed utilized a combination of public and private assistance programs; all 21 seniors were utilizing at least one food assistance program, with a majority of the seniors participating in multiple programs in order to meet their needs.

Food insecurity: All seniors indicated that they were currently food secure when directly asked during their interviews, however, more than half of all of the seniors interviewed noted anxiety about food access and almost a third of all seniors were found to fit the definition of having very low food security.

Discussion



Although unable to wholly relieve insecure seniors, the much-needed deliveries functioned as a consistent source of food that alleviated anxiety about food sufficiency and played a role in how seniors are defined in their food access. It can be incredibly challenging for seniors to personally acknowledge their level of insecurity, which is often associated with strong feelings of embarrassment or discomfort (Wolfe, Frongillo, & Valois, 2003).

Seniors participating in the OCG did not report feeling uncomfortable or feeling judged in receiving food from the garden, stigma that is often attributable to other forms of food assistance (Frongillo & Horan, 2004; Martin et al., 2003). Despite intermittent hesitancy and disdain for some assistance programs, our work suggests community garden programs can effectively decrease the stigma associated with accepting help.

Implications

Rather than think about community gardens solely as spaces of civic engagement and social centers, our interviews indicated support for the capacity for community gardens in functioning as a food assistance program and suggests that giving gardens offer a destigmatized source of increased food access. Future solutions to senior food insecurity must not only understand the nutritional adequacy of senior's diets and how seniors are accessing food, but also their perception of their own relative food security or insecurity. To begin to solve social justice issues within our food systems, we must focus on the variety of ways healthy food can be made accessible to all in equitable, inclusive, and culturally conscious ways.

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