A Deeper Look at Food Apartheid:

Insights from Mon Valley Residents and Community Members of Clairton, Duquesne, and McKeesport, PA

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Introduction and Overview

Beginning in 2021, faculty, staff, and Extension educators from Penn State University Park and Penn State Greater Allegheny began discussing the condition of the food system in Pennsylvania's Mon Valley, with the intention of engaging community residents from the most impacted communities. Discussions centered on three municipalities: Clairton, Duquesne, and McKeesport. Through partnerships with local advocacy organizations including the Black Women's Policy Center and, more recently, Take Action Advocacy Group, this collaboration hosted a total of 10 listening sessions and several individual interviews with over 100 community residents to gain insights into their experiences with food, food insecurity, emergency food services, and how these intersect with other issues they face in their communities. We also wanted to learn more about what solutions or actions they would like to see in their communities to address this complexity of issues.

To facilitate these discussions about the experience of food insecurity among residents in Clairton, Duquesne, and McKeesport, we asked open-ended questions exploring topics including cost of food, access to food pantries, residents' involvement in supplemental nutrition programs such as SNAP or other benefits, quality of food and food retail outlets, access to transportation, and the difficult choices residents may face in prioritizing food purchases alongside other essential expenses such as medicine, rent, and utilities.

This summary report introduces the key themes that emerged from listening sessions and interviews. More in-depth analysis can be found in the full report. Discussions highlight the intersection of food with many other systemic issues – including transportation, health and healthcare, race/ism, space and spatial equity (that is, the extent to which quality of life conditions and social determinant of health are equitable across communities and neighborhoods), business and community development, government and policy, and many others. This illustrates just how deeply linked food justice is to achieving social and spatial justice. The report emphasizes the importance of grappling with the significance of structural racism and how it has contributed to the persistence of food disparities.

The term "food apartheid" underscores intentional and systemic inequities in food access, stemming from historical injustices like redlining, segregation, and discriminatory economic practices. Communities are intentionally situated without adequate transportation to food retail, increasing the challenge of accessing food in spaces where few or no food retail outlets exist.

This underscores the need for improved transportation infrastructure to enhance food access for the most impacted communities. Similarly, discussions around structural and spatial inequities pointed to disparities between food retail outlets across neighborhoods. When food retail outlets offer higher quality and more affordable food options in more affluent, predominantly white neighborhoods as compared to what is generally offered in lower income, predominantly Black neighborhoods, this lowers the food security for impacted residents while reinforcing and perpetuating systems of structural racism.

An important thread that cuts across themes is a desire for more grassroots community and place building efforts grounded in the views and lived experiences of community members. This was not often explicitly stated as such, but shows up in several different ways. Residents express a desire to "come together" and advocate for more just, equitable, and collaborative community-building processes, for more of a voice in what happens in their community spaces, and to collectively build places that are safe, wholesome, and supportive of the needs of people of all ages. In discussing how things "used to be" in their communities, residents agree that a deep sense of community they used to feel is not nearly as present now but could be rebuilt through a series of concerted and collective community efforts. This vision for collective and collaborative community action also relates to a strong sense of place and attachment to place felt by many residents. One resident remarked, "I could go somewhere else but if you have roots here, you don't want to just leave. Why should I have to?" Several others spoke about how long they have lived in their community, having grown up there and raised their children and grandchildren there, and spoke of deep community ties and relationships within these communities.

Geography

The Mon Valley starts outside the City of Pittsburgh in Allegheny County and refers to a series of small towns and cities bordering the Monongahela River as far south as West Virginia. Pittsburgh is the largest city in Allegheny County, with a population of about 300,000 people. Most Mon Valley municipalities have populations of less than 20,000 people. Partly because of this difference in population, the Mon Valley is often overshadowed by Pittsburgh when it comes to policy making, reform, and leadership development. As Pittsburgh did, Mon Valley towns relied on the steel industry and other manufacturing industries for employment and economic well-being for decades. Since the sharp decline of the steel industry in the 1980s and 1990s, the towns in the Mon Valley have struggled with high rates of unemployment, shrinking populations, food insecurity, fewer social and economic amenities, and the high crime rates and other social problems that often follow such stark economic decline. Despite this the people in the Mon Valley remain resilient, rooted in tradition, close-knit, and take pride in their communities.

"It does make me wonder, Mount Lebanon has grocery stores, in [...] we got two grocery stores, so why is it so hard for the Black community to get a grocery store? It's not rocket science, I'm not asking for your first-born-child, we're asking for access to food. So why is that so hard to get? In Mount Lebanon, they have people that steal too, I promise you that. They steal all the time."

As you read through the overview of these themes, note that they reflect not just a lack of something, but a vision that residents have for alternative food futures and how they want to build that future in their communities.

Overview of Key Themes

Changes in Food Infrastructure Over Time

A decline in food retail establishments plays a big role in preventing residents in the Mon Valley from achieving food security. In other words, a lack of access to affordable, healthy, fresh foods for residents is a significant barrier to food security. Other themes in this report also relate to the question of food infrastructure in some way: the impact of declining food infrastructure and the reasons why this is happening, community responses to mitigate the challenges in accessing food, the ways in which this reflects and amplifies structural racism in these places, and so on.

Building and Strengthening Community Connections, Networks, and Relationships

Building connections, networks, and relationships among community residents and between communities is key to developing strategies that address food insecurity, and for accessing other goods and essential services. Relying on one another is a main strategy residents use to overcome challenges that inhibit access to food such as limited transportation. There is also a widely held desire for more political and civic involvement, but not everyone has the knowledge of where those spaces of engagement are, or how to build consistent community-level political and civic engagement. Residents rely on relationships and networks to learn about opportunities for community and civic engagement including attending city council meetings, community gardening, and other mechanisms for (re)building a sense of community.

Community Safety: Exploring the Intersections of Violence and Trauma

Residents note that the violence they see today is both a cause and effect of many of the issues communities grapple with. Transportation, employment, food retail, and other types of infrastructure or the lack thereof (commercial banks, for example) can all be linked to the ongoing violence in the community. Residents list traffic, crime, and outdated or crumbling or non-existent infrastructure as both a cause and a result of the lack of food infrastructure. Foodbanks, grocery stores, farmer's markets, and church food pantries were all listed as places where people access food, and a feeling of being unsafe inhibits people's access to these places.

> ***"When I grew up. We were self-sufficient. We had grocery stores. We had movie theaters. We had everything. We had two bakeries. We didn't have to go outside to do anything unless we wanted to. And that's the problem. We had stores, clothing stores. We had everything that the big city has, Clairton had it. Then sometime in 1970, when all the gas was gone, you didn't know this was the United States still."***

Examining Systems of Injustice and Racial Equity in the Food System

There is a strong sense of racial injustice shared by residents. Many people described experiencing or witnessing differential treatment between Black people or predominantly Black communities and white people or communities. Stereotypes and prejudices about Black people impact not just residents' daily experiences, but the economic conditions of their communities. Residents point to examples such as hiring practices of large chain businesses that often exclude Black people and the lack of grocery stores in their majority-Black neighborhoods as compared to an abundance of food retail options in majority white communities.

Examining Economic and Policy Factors in the Post-Pandemic Period

Between 2021 and 2024, the cost of food has increased by between 25 and 40 percent while social service benefits such as SNAP have been cut. Residents report that starting during the COVID-19 pandemic, prices have gone up on everything from gas to bread and eggs. Residents often commented that increases in the cost of food have risen much more than pay, and that the public assistance that so many people in the Mon Valley rely upon often does not cover their basic needs. Many residents noted that they are forced to make difficult decisions about whether to spend money on food or other necessities such as medicine, rent, or utilities. Racism in the economic system emerges in other themes as well, but residents want to have greater say in what their local economies look like. There is broad recognition that current models of local and regional economics are not always concerned with people in the community and their direct needs, but rather are driven by a capitalist profit-oriented model. The larger question of what constitutes a "just economy" underlies many of these conversations and is something that merits further exploration.

Promoting Dignity in the Food System / Addressing Quality, Nutrition, and Availability Issues

Residents describe wide discrepancies between the food that is available at grocery stores in low-income neighborhoods and those in more affluent places. Residents said that in addition to food available at current and former grocery stores (such as in downtown McKeesport or the now-closed grocery store in Duquesne) the food available at other locations (including at food distribution sites) is lower quality than at other places. Residents claim that produce often goes bad within a day or is already bad when they purchase it. In addition to the lower quality, residents report that food retail outlets in Duquesne, McKeesport, and Clairton are more expensive than at other grocery stores in wealthier neighborhoods.

Improving Transportation Infrastructure for Enhanced Access to Amenities

The lack of public transportation infrastructure, especially in Mon Valley communities, inhibits resident access not only to food retail outlets, but to employment, healthcare, and education. The public transportation (bus) routes that do exist do not service communities sufficiently, and many of the bus lines have been cut or reduced. In a joint listening session with Pittsburghers for Public Transit, one resident described losing two job opportunities because the bus was late or did not come at all. To mitigate the lack of food and transportation infrastructure in these communities, residents either relied upon or proposed different kinds of informal networks to bring food to people or to bring people to food. Several residents relied upon family, friends, or neighbors to help them access grocery stores. Another described informal rideshare services in McKeesport that, while offering a possible solution to people who lack their own transportation, also often cost money.

Trust in Government and Political Processes

Across the communities where we hosted listening sessions, residents shared many concerns related to local government, governance processes, and whether they have any power or control over those systems or processes. Many residents share a lack of trust in local government or believe that local officials don't always act with their best interests at heart. Several people believe that local government doesn't have the power (or the will) to fix the problems in their communities, and that community leaders must be the ones to step in and create solutions. Some residents indicated that they do want to become more involved in local politics or that more community members should become involved in local politics, but many also feel powerless to either enter that system or to help make needed changes in their community.

Advancing Future-Focused Solutions to Build Food Sovereignty and Self-Determination in Food

Proposed solutions to these complex issues mainly relate to building food sovereignty (community control over where food comes from, how and what is produced, and how and where it is sold) greater capacity for political advocacy, more and stronger neighborhood and community networks, and better transportation and food infrastructure. Food sovereignty, while not necessarily the dominant language used by residents, was evoked through suggestions for more robust community agriculture, and individuals growing their own food.

Residents are overwhelmingly seeking more responsive and just food policy and community and economic development policy across their communities and would like to see more a resilient and local urban food system in their communities. Growing local and resilient urban food systems is inherently a civically engaged process, demanding that residents be politically involved. The idea of political and civic engagement emerged frequently in our discussions, with one resident in McKeesport noting that these kinds of meetings, "is where politics happens, (because it's) where people are."

Conclusion

Throughout our interactions with residents in Clairton, Duquesne, and McKeesport, several things were made abundantly clear. Despite the difficulty that many residents face in accessing food and food infrastructure in their communities, residents are keenly aware of both the challenges they face and what potential solutions might look like. Residents are actively engaged in imagining alternative futures for the Mon Valley, through alternative land use, expanded public transportation systems, grocery retail improvements, and grassroots organizing and advocacy.

As we have noted throughout, the urban food system points to a series of integrated and interdependent issues. We cannot talk about food access without also talking about transportation, the larger economy, and systemic racism. Business and economic development has important implications for access to food and for broader community vitality. This is an issue that we believe warrants further exploration – especially taking into consideration what kind of economic development residents would like to see take place. Local business development is also closely related to the question of structural racism: local retailers and other businesses aren't fully serving the community, with hiring and location practices disproportionately excluding residents of color. The lack of opportunities for economic growth for Black and brown residents must be a focal point of these discussions. Residents are eager to participate more fully in economic and entrepreneurial spaces, and from what we are hearing, struggle to find support to pursue these goals.

While this report focuses on the voices and lived experiences of Mon Valley residents, changes to local policy and innovative urban planning practices can be enacted to achieve a more just, equitable, and self-determined food system for residents across the Mon Valley. In our view, it is crucial that peoples' voices be heard, and their perspectives considered in all aspects of local decision making. We conclude by reinforcing our view that community and economic development – including the development of the food system – should be approached from a participatory perspective. This approach should empower and assist all communities, particularly those that have been historically and habitually marginalized and excluded from decision-making, in shaping and building the economies and cultures they want to build.

The full report can be downloaded at www.takeactionadvoacygroup.org or by reaching out to Justine Lindemann at jlindemann@psu.edu.

Suggested Citation: Lindemann, J. and Walker-Montgomery, F. 2024. “A Deeper Look at Food Apartheid: Insights from Mon Valley Residents and Community Members of Clairton, Duquesne, and McKeesport, PA.” Executive Summary Report. Penn State’s Center for Economic and Community Development. aese.psu.edu/cecd

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This work was partially funded by Penn State Extension. **Penn State Extension** is a modern educational organization dedicated to delivering science-based information to people, businesses, and communities.

This report was prepared by Justine Lindemann, Fawn Walker-Montgomery (Executive Director of Take Action Advocacy Group) with invaluable support from Eric Ewell (Community Foundations Consulting, LLC.) and Theodore R. Alter. Many thanks to Rochelle Jackson for her work on the initial phases of this project. The authors would also like to thank Simone Miller, Elena Kochmaruk, and Kendall Van Son for their work on this initiative.

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