Abstract

Searching for (Just) Food:
A qualitative case study of the food environment in a low-income micro-neighborhood in
Long Island City, NY

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Problems of food access, food insecurity and hunger, are linked to numerous adverse health outcomes including increased rates of morbidity and mortality due to diet related diseases. In addition, these inequities highlight social justice problems, such as spatial segregation and neighborhood deprivation, among others, within the larger food system – the conventional retail infrastructure, which supplies food to the general public. This project aims to explore the links between food systems, access, and food practices among low-income residents living in an underserved food environment.

This project focuses on the Queensbridge micro-neighborhood located within the larger neighborhood of Long Island City, in Queens, NY. Given the complexity of the issues surrounding the food system and how it impacts people across various socio-economic statuses differently, the aims of the research study include gaining a better understanding of the issues and processes involved among low-income community members related to the ways in which they source and consume food in the conventional and alternative food systems. The primary research questions informing this dissertation are: what are participants’ perceptions of their food environment(s), particularly around the areas of quality, value, and taste of available products? What are the socio-cultural
factors present in the micro-neighborhood that gets inscribed into the food environment, and how do these characteristics influence purchasing decisions? And, what is the level of awareness, attitudes toward and use of alternative food networks (AFNs) among community members? I will address these questions through conducting participant observation, in-depth interviews, and archival research with members of the Long Island City Food Action Board (LIC FAB), as well as community members living in and around the Queensbridge micro-neighborhood, and staff members and volunteers of area community-based organizations.

Findings in this dissertation focus on participants’ perceptions and experience of the food environment in this community utilizing a food justice framework to interrogate the forms of race and class based differences that undergird residents’ food practices. First, the food environment in this micro-neighborhood is presented in relation to the discourse of food deserts, which is currently a dominant trope in public health and food policy. Through this lens it emerges that distribution of food resources, and supermarkets in particular, do not sufficiently addresses issues of access and instead highlights complications and other modes of marginalization in this food environment. In addition, participants’ experiences were featured through the approach of “food voice” to highlight the challenges of sourcing food in this locale. Finally, the Long Island City Community Supported Agriculture was utilized as a site to illustrate the role of AFNs and the obstacles and possibilities for food access through these channels among low-income residents along with and against explicitly food justice oriented rhetoric.