



Food Justice, Food Security, and Climate Equity

Local Solutions for Food Access, Affordability, and Climate Justice



Communities have traditionally come together to socialize, mourn, and celebrate over dishes from their cultures. Older generations pass along dishes and kitchen skills to children and grandchildren. This shared basis for emotional connections nurtures and sustains families and communities, helping them remain connected and resilient.

Food insecurity puts this resilience at risk. Communities may lack access to the foods that represent their cultures and dishes; such foods may be unavailable in their neighborhoods or may be unaffordable. Families experiencing poverty may not have time to prepare the dishes they share, or may not be able to gather regularly due to long hours of work and commute times.¹

Food insecurity, hunger, and limited access to culturally and physically nourishing foods are not experienced equally in all communities. Food injustice is worsened by environmental injustices affecting access to food locations – transportation challenges such as dangerous or unhealthy air quality, heat, dangerous traffic conditions, and infrequent transit service..

Local governments can enact policies and programs that address food injustice, food insecurity, environmental injustice, and climate change. By supporting community-led efforts focused on access to culturally desired foods, while creating policies that ensure food suppliers divert foods from landfills, governments can remove obstacles to community connection, health, and wellbeing.

What Is Food Security?

Food security takes place when people have long-term access to sufficient affordable, nutritious, and safe food that supports them physically and culturally and enables an active, healthy life.²

Impacts of Food Insecurity & Food Injustice

Food insecurity causes mental and physical harm

Food insecurity can cause a range of types of physical and mental harm, including stress and anxiety, malnutrition, undernutrition, hunger, fatigue, anemia, and starvation, not to mention additional harms from related increases in health care and other costs.³ People who are food insecure experience higher rates of chronic illness,⁴ such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes.⁵

Food insecurity is about distribution and access

Providing food security requires producing sufficient amounts of nutritious food and ensuring it is available to everyone.

Producing sufficient food is not the problem: the US wastes up to 40 percent of the food produced, enough to feed 164 million people, three times the number of people facing food insecurity.⁶

And yet, high rates of food insecurity remain; 10 percent of households experienced food security in 2020.⁷

What Is Food Justice?

Food justice starts with the premise that healthy food is a human right and then looks holistically at food systems to identify the structural barriers to food security, which are often rooted in race, class, gender, and other characteristics. Food justice includes an emphasis on community-defined and community-led solutions.

As New York nonprofit Just Foods explains: “Food Justice is communities exercising their right to grow, sell, and eat healthy food. Healthy food is fresh, nutritious, affordable, culturally-appropriate, and grown locally with care for the well-being of the land, workers, and animals. People practicing food justice leads to a strong local food system, self-reliant communities, and a healthy environment.”⁸



Food insecurity contributes to food injustice

Food insecurity is particularly acute in certain populations:⁹

- In 2020, 21.7% of Black households experienced food insecurity, compared to 7.1% of White households, a gap that has widened since the start of the pandemic.¹⁰
- People without a high school degree are more likely to be food insecure than college graduates (27% vs. 5%). Adults with disabilities experience food insecurity at twice the rate of adults without disabilities.
- Food insecurity is also common among immigrant communities, where immigration status may make people ineligible for or afraid to access government assistance programs.¹¹

Some food injustice is caused by inequalities in food distribution systems. Fresh and minimally processed foods are often sent to grocery stores in higher income neighborhoods, while highly processed, less nutritious foods are sold in low-income neighborhoods – practices referred to by some as food apartheid.¹²

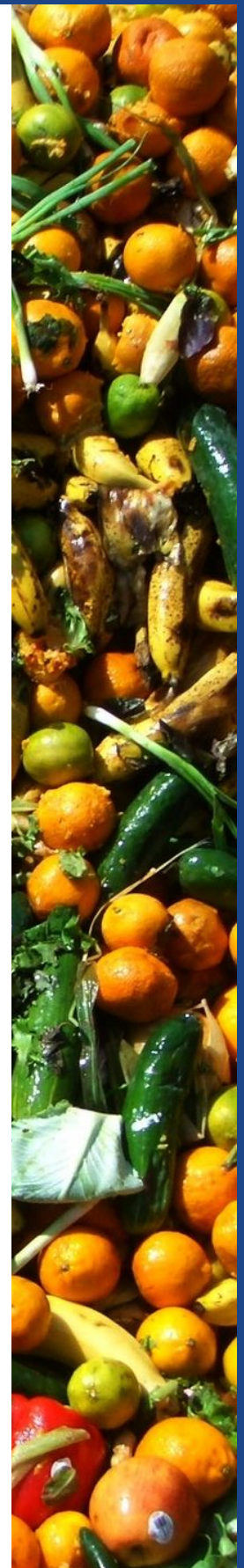
Affordability also contributes to food injustice: high poverty areas experience higher food prices and lower food quality.¹³ Despite food being available, neighborhoods like this are considered food deserts.

Food waste adds to food insecurity and climate injustice

As mentioned, 40 percent of food produced is wasted – that's 63 million tons wasted every year. Ten million tons never get harvested from farms. Of the remaining 53 million tons, food is wasted when grocery stores and restaurants order more food than is bought by customers. Consumers waste food when they buy more than they use, as well as when they misunderstand date labels and throw away edible food.¹⁴

Organic waste in landfills increases air pollution as it emits methane; landfills account for 16 percent of all US methane emissions. These methane emissions are 84 times more potent than CO₂. Methane also adds directly to local air pollution through its contributions to ozone and smog. This air pollution disproportionately affects low-income neighborhoods, where landfills and waste disposal facilities are often located.¹⁵

Wasted food also represents additional economic and resource losses: about \$165 billion, 300 million barrels of oil, and 21 percent of the US fresh water supply is used to produce wasted food.¹⁶





Actions for Local Government on Climate Justice & Food Security

Guided by community desires and input, local governments can take a variety of steps, from resolutions that establish a food and climate justice framework, to incentives, to other policy approaches that support climate-sensitive food justice solutions.¹⁷

Improve food access

- Prioritize the development of active and public transportation routes that connect food insecure neighborhoods with sources of nutritious, culturally appropriate food.
- Find ways of bringing more nutritious foods to communities without sufficient options (for example, library-based distributions, school lunch programs,¹⁸ and supportive food truck policies).

Increase food quality, affordability, and relevance

- Support food distribution in food desert-designated areas through tax and incentive programs.
- Support opportunities for community members to learn more and teach each other about nutritious and culturally grounded food options.
- Support community gardening efforts through education, plots, and supplies, recognizing that these may play a cultural role in food justice rather than becoming a primary source of calories. Remove administrative hurdles when possible to promote equitable access.

Provide more food assistance

- Provide multilingual promotion and sign-up help for food assistance programs to remove barriers for people who need food benefits.
- Work with farmers markets to accept SNAP, WIC, and other assistance program benefits.

Redirect food waste into food rescue programs

- Implement an organic waste ban to compel businesses to divert food waste; diversion should prioritize food donation organizations, backed up by compost facilities and anaerobic digestion facilities for methane capture and energy production.
- Provide support and incentives to organizations who run community food programs (food banks, kitchens, etc.), and make business benefits and liability rules clear to enable broader donor participation.
- In regions that produce food, connect producers with food banks to minimize food waste that cannot be sold at a sustainable price.
- Explore policies that address food waste including consumer education, supply chain and operational efficiencies, and secondary marketplaces.¹⁹

Address broader issues of injustice

Food injustice exists within the context of a large series of injustices, including unequal access to health care, economic inequity, environmental injustice, and more. Addressing underlying injustices is necessary to meaningfully working toward real food justice.

Developing Policies that Address Climate, Food, and Justice

Addressing climate change and food justice are urgent needs. Policymakers should follow the leadership of communities and consider effects on climate when developing potential food justice policies:

- **Policies must benefit low-income communities and communities of color:**

A food security policy needs to demonstrate effectiveness in reducing food insecurity in low-income neighborhoods. A policy should support the cultures of a community and allow members to thrive. For example, policies can anticipate the need to ensure that food distributions in a largely Islamic neighborhood support people's culinary restrictions and preferences.

- **Policies must benefit climate and the environment and reduce pollution:**

Policies should reduce greenhouse gas emissions by reducing the need to travel by car to get nutritious and affordable food. Policies should address questions such as: does a food truck policy increase the use of fossil fuels, and how can that be mitigated? Could a city-wide composting policy provide economies of scale for climate impact? Policies that improve food justice should also meet climate and environmental justice goals.



Resources

- ChangeLab Solution's [Seeding the City: Land Use Policies to Promote Urban Agriculture](#): This toolkit provides background, a framework, and model local land use policies to support urban agriculture.



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