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Food Insecurity for the Immigrant Population During the Novel Coronavirus-19

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Food insecurity (FI) has long been an issue that affects a huge segment of the United States. Simply put, FI is defined as a lack of nutritious food that is available to individuals, or when access to healthy food is limited or impossible (Miller et al., 2018, p. 194). But FI affects some segments of the population more than others. The same authors used the results of the 1998 Early Childhood Longitudinal Study: Kindergarten Cohort, conducted over several years, to determine if there was a higher level of FI among children of immigrants (COI). The children were observed in kindergarten, third, fifth, and eighth grades. Using growth-curve modeling and data from the study, and adjusting for economic and social factors, the authors concluded that in a comparison of first- and second-generation COIs with children of U.S.-born par-

ents, there was a greater level of continuing FI for the COI. In addition, FI rates were even higher for poor families. (Miller et al., 2018, p. 195).

Social scientists and researchers have determined through research and studies that FI is indeed higher for immigrant families. A key reason for FI is the existence of sub-standard schools. These schools, often located in poor or marginal neighborhoods, are typically under-funded and lack resources, including trained English second language (ESL) teachers. Education and poverty are interrelated: Families who live in poverty may not have enough food to give a nutritious breakfast or lunch to their school-age children, and their schools may not have the resources to provide meals, either. As COIs learn English, they often serve as interpreters for their parents or caregivers, who do not speak English. But if the COIs' schools are not equipped with a trained and welcoming ESL staff and well-designed ESL program, then the COIs struggle to learn English. They may not even know that food support programs exist or may feel embarrassed or uneasy to ask for information or help. A result often is the continuation of FI. At the same time, the process of disconnecting from learning English can also start for COIs. As these students struggle in school to learn English, they may feel frustrated, defeated, and drift away from learning. By contrast, good schools with English Language Learners (ELLs) have strong teaching English as a second language (TESOL) programs that are taught by competent educators. These teachers and staff, at a minimum, know and observe best teaching practices, and their schools support and help their students to learn. Enormous gaps in quality exist in our education systems. Dr. Wayne E. Wright

wrote with great clarity about the English Language Learners (ELLs) whose schools and teachers were woefully inadequate. These schools use a “sink-or-swim” approach. There is no specialized instruction, nor teachers who are certified to teach English to language learners. (Wright, 2019, p. 117). These ELLs languished because they received a substandard education, which often leads to the outcomes indicated above. Yet, people who are educated also learn about food and nutrition, the benefits of vaccinations and exercise, and the importance of clean drinking water. Educated people often secure jobs that provide health-care benefits and higher wages than the jobs of less educated individuals. A higher income translates to the financial capacity to buy better foods and additional health services. By comparison, low-paying jobs may not be secure; when difficult times and unemployment occur, these often lead to FI, loss of housing, and an inability to pay for medical services. (Virginia Commonwealth University Center on Society and Health, 2015, pp. 3-4). This is a lost opportunity for all. We can and must do better.

Food insecurity also has its deep roots in other factors: systemic discrimination; broad marginalization; limited English skills; few opportunities for ongoing training and education; and a lack of economic opportunity, including the practice of “redlining” neighborhoods in cities. In an article he wrote for *MoneyWatch* in 2020, Kristopher Brooks provided an historical context to redlining, which is the longstanding practice of banks denying mortgages, primarily to people of color who lived in cities. The United States government supported redlining, and people could not secure a mortgage or even a home-improvement loan.

The practice was widespread in many cities, including Atlanta, Chicago, Tampa, and other cities that had a significant population of resident minorities (MONEYWATCH, CBS News, June 12, 2020, para. 2 & para. 5). Other factors present obstacles to food security and overall economic stability for immigrants. For example, immigrants may decide to reside in neighborhoods with extended families or near former residents of their birth country because it feels safe and welcoming there. There are social service programs in immigrant neighborhoods that provide a safety net. Paradoxically, even though they may have a great need for these services, including food support programs that mitigate FI, immigrants may decide that they are not going to access the available services. Abstract but readily understandable, a pervasive sense of fear can influence immigrants and prevent the exploration of services that could be available to them. This includes food support programs and other initiatives that can lead to a healthier life and to a more complete and full participation in American culture. In December 2019, before the pandemic, The Urban Institute conducted a Well-Being and Basic Needs survey to evaluate the level of fear and its corresponding effect on the willingness of immigrant adults to use government-sponsored programs that provide non-cash benefits and services. Close to half of the families responded that they did not participate in the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, or the Children’s Health Insurance Program, while one-third reported that they did not participate in programs that offered housing subsidies because of their concern that they then could be eliminated from obtaining a green card in the future. (Bernstein et al., 2020, para. 7).

Now, with the onset and continuation of the pandemic and the confluence of political and economic strife and turmoil, immigrants may find that they are at the intersection of competing forces, and that is often an uncomfortable place to be. This is especially true if you are a language learner who also is trying to adapt to the complexities of American culture.

A Closer Look at Challenges to FI Mitigation

Immigrants, especially those who are English language learners or who are older, must navigate a maze when trying to access networks of social services, including food pantries and programs. These challenges often influence how a person buys and receives food and has access to it. Many elderly ELLs mistakenly believe that they are not qualified to receive food-related services, or that they must pay for the services. In addition, federal, state, and local governments offer different programs with varying eligibility requirements (Calvo, 2020, p. 593). Here we see a vital role for advocates and advocacy organizations and their importance as interlocutors for immigrants. Advocates can inform and educate immigrants about available options for food support and other services, including health care options. They can provide an important service for immigrants by communicating and establishing a baseline of trust and understanding and dispelling fear about accessing these services. This also highlights the importance of providing opportunities and programs for language learners, at all stages, to continue to learn English.

In addition, the colliding realities of a fixed income and an abundance of needs can make it impossible for seniors to buy a computer or to pay for Internet

access at home. These two realities make access to information difficult for seniors who may be unfamiliar with computers and how to obtain information. They need to understand how to participate in food-related services, and where the services are located. America is a technology-driven culture; it can be extremely helpful, if not essential, to learn how to use technology and to understand how to access helpful and necessary information. As written above, this information includes the location and availability of food resources. But in addition, seniors need to learn about the availability, location, and eligibility requirements for health-care services. Information can be a powerful equalizer, but how can seniors acquire it? Public libraries offer a potential solution to this dilemma. Libraries have expanded their identity and mission in communities, and now they play a significant role as providers of training and technological resources (computers and the Internet). Most, if not all, of these services are free. Older adults, including language learners, can access these services. Librarians are veritable repositories of community information and can direct immigrants to an array of helpful sources and learning tools. Yet another possibility exists: the state and the Federal governments could collaborate with nonprofit organizations to offer financial incentives to provide used computers, tablets, and training that is focused on the needs of adults (Yoon et al., 2018, p. 109). Working in tandem with local organizations and through targeted outreach efforts, public libraries can become welcoming sources of training and exploration. This could be especially true for immigrants who seek to reduce their FI.

Community members know where the gaps in essential services and the areas of greatest needs exist.

Therefore, it is the community itself that is in the best position to propose ideas and approaches that inform those who provide services and create policies. The ideas of the community will help to facilitate relevant solutions and plans that fit the needs of the community. (Calvo, 2018, p. 593). This strategic approach underscores the mandate for clinicians, social workers, community leaders, and agency representatives to build trusting relationships with community members, ask and seek to understand their perspectives on potential strategies to reduce FI, and work together to create solutions to the community's problems.

In November 2021, the nonprofit news organization, *Truthout*, featured a photograph of a line of several hundred people, bundled up against the cold New England weather, who were waiting in a very long line for food that the La Colaborativa Food Bank was distributing. La Colaborativa is in Chelsea, Massachusetts, an old city with a Latino and Hispanic population of 67.7%, a foreign-born population of 47.1%, and a poverty level of 19.1% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). *Truthout* paired the photograph with an article that detailed the astonishing increase in Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) enrollment in the past two years: seven million. The total number of Americans who now rely on food stamps is forty million. Tellingly, four in ten people on SNAP are also members of families, where there is at least one person who is working (Abramsky, 2021, para. 8).

SNAP is the largest federal food assistance program and provides funds to eligible lower-income individuals and families to purchase approved foods from authorized food stores. We see again how food insecurity affects a huge segment of the population throughout

the country. But it is also an issue that disproportionately affects immigrants. Before the pandemic, immigrant families often had to overcome barriers or were outright ineligible to participate in government support programs, including Medicaid and SNAP. Four in ten adults (42.4%) related that in the past year they experienced food insecurity (Bernstein, et al., 2020, para. 4).

Alleviating Hunger and Food Insecurity

“The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and the global recession . . . is the most serious economic crisis in the world economy since the end of the Second World War” (Smith & Wesselbaum, 2020, p. 2855). Increasing food prices and decreasing supplies have heightened food insecurity and underscored the need for immediate action.

There are ways to reduce, if not alleviate, the lack of availability of nutritious food. The following are potential solutions to consider for test programs and subsequent evaluation of the outcomes. Some of the suggestions lead to questions that are beyond the scope of the current study. Still, thoughtful consideration and assessment of the recommendations are warranted.

Proposal #1: Provide Financial Support to Ethnic Markets in Immigrant Neighborhoods

Joassert-Marcelli et al. (2017) found that ethnic markets had a higher rate of participation for federal assistance programs; electronic benefits transfer (EBT); and women, infants, and children (WIC) programs and suggest that ethnic grocery stores play a central and significant role in neighborhoods with large immigrant populations (pp. 1653-1654). EBT is a food stamp program and WIC is a federal assistance

program for low-income and pregnant women, mothers, and their children up to the age of five. The authors also wrote persuasively that the concept of “food desert” needed additional study and analysis, and that we are not considering the contributions that smaller, ethnic markets make to their communities. “We argue that this metaphor (food desert), which implies an absence of food, is misleading and potentially detrimental to the health of poor and racially diverse communities” (Joassert-Marcelli et al., 2017, p. 1642).

For the purposes of this study, I have defined a supermarket as a large store that is part of a chain of stores and sells a variety of fresh and frozen foods, meats, and dairy; and an ethnic market as one store with a smaller footprint that features a variety of fresh and frozen food, dairy products, and bread, as well as food from countries where neighborhood immigrant residents were born. I question if a large supermarket, financed and managed by individuals who live outside the community, will produce the much-touted benefits, including tackling food insecurity. Instead, let us suspend judgement, and take the time to understand how immigrant neighborhoods are supplied with food, where and what residents buy, and then work together to create a solution (Joassert-Marcelli et al., 2017). Ethnic markets in immigrant neighborhoods typically offer fresh produce, vegetables, and foods at a competitive price. The grocers stock food products that their customers know and buy. The market’s workers may even live in the same neighborhoods as their customers. Many ethnic markets are often within walking distance to immigrant homes and, therefore, very accessible. These markets sell familiar food items and often prepare dishes for takeout, using ingredients and

recipes that reflect the culinary history of their customers. Why not build upon these existing ethnic markets to increase food security instead of spending valuable capital and resources to try and bring in chain grocery stores? State and local governments, non-profit organizations, and foundations can enlist the support of ethnic markets in the battle against food insecurity. For instance, a grant program or loan program can be created to absorb some of the cost of more fresh fruits and produce. The stores can also use grant money to remodel their stores; acquire more efficient and energy-saving refrigeration units to increase storage capacity; explore better supply chains and networking; advertise on social media; and host community events, including cooking demonstrations (Joassert-Marcelli et al., 2017, p. 1657).

Proposal #2: Start or Expand Existing Gardens and Assess the Results

A garden offers many benefits to participants, including food. There is not yet a consensus that gardens are a reliable and consistent solution to food insecurity. But, as the research from the Twin Cities’ Garden Group Project shows, there is evidence that gardens, either in one’s yard or in a community setting, can indeed be nutritious sources of food and can benefit participants in ways that extend beyond food production (Hartwig & Mason, 2016, p. 1157). In the Garden Group Project, local churches introduced, offered, and helped to manage the community garden programs for refugees, who were primarily from Myanmar and Bhutan. The researchers surveyed participants several times throughout the summer and evaluated the program from several perspectives. They determined that

most of the gardeners used the vegetables that they grew, traded produce with other gardeners, or gave it to friends. A likely outcome of the project was a reduction in food insecurity during the months when the gardeners harvested the produce. Again, Hartwig & Mason (2016) found that regardless of their ethnicity, all gardeners indicated that they planned to use the vegetables primarily for their own families and to share or exchange with friends; a total of 92% reported that they did not spend as much money as they typically would have in the gardening season (p.1158). The benefits of gardening extended to the emotional well-being of the gardeners, who enjoyed being outside, working in the gardens, meeting and making new friends, and chatting with each other. Not only did the garden project achieve its objective to produce food and increased food security for participants, it also brought happiness and helped relationships to grow into friendships. While many of the gardeners had suffered trauma in their home countries before relocating to the United States, the gardens had a therapeutic effect and lessened their depression (Hartwig & Mason, 2016, p. 1158).

For those who are considering starting, or who already have an existing community garden project, it is important to assess the roles of individuals, who may represent funders - other nonprofits or government agencies, - but who may not actually live in the neighborhood. It is essential to manage the different voices, opinions, and stakeholders who participate in the project. Using components from the Gardening Group Project in the Twin Cities and from successful immigrant gardening initiatives in other cities, I listed below elements of a plan to organize a new gardening

group as a test site.

- Search for a project site and find land that is suitable for gardening. Secure funding beforehand or have a promising idea to finance seeds, garden tools, and other items. For example, consider if the local town or municipality, a church, or a non-profit will pay either the start-up cost or a portion of the garden project.
- Involve influencers from the immigrant community and other stakeholders at the very beginning of the garden project discussions and conceptualization. Solicit their feedback and listen carefully to their input and perspectives. These influencers may be from churches, ethnic markets, schools, neighborhood organizations, and gathering places. They, too, may have ideas for funding and garden locations. This step is essential.
- Consider enlisting the support and help of local corporations and non-profits to assist in launching awareness campaigns and publicity about the gardens and for a financial or an in-kind donation.
- Collaborate with local schools to create a service project for children who want to help with the gardens. There are many tasks that children can do in a garden. If the children's parents are also garden participants, this will be an additional incentive to continue with the garden project.
- If the local schools cannot participate, approach local colleges and kindergarten- through-12 schools about organizing a service-learning project with students and integrating it into

their curriculum. The focus is to reduce food insecurity and hunger. That is a powerful and readily understood goal that any organization can understand. But beyond that, as colleges and schools seek to become more involved in their communities, collaborations like this can help to encourage a sense of community and break down community and school barriers.

- Survey participants so they may decide that individual, backyard gardens are the best way to proceed instead of a centrally located garden area. Children, family members, and others still can help with the backyard gardens and receive the benefits of growing, harvesting, and cooking one's own food.
- Recommend that participants attend at least one class on plant selection, area growing conditions, and ongoing garden maintenance, and that participants attend a class taught by a local chef or experienced cook, who provides recipes and instructions on preparing and cooking local fruits, vegetables, and herbs.
- Assess and evaluate at the end of the growing season, again soliciting feedback from all the participants. The central ideas of reducing food insecurity and providing a sense of well-being for individuals through harvesting the fruits of one's own labors. Still, it is essential to foster a sense of ownership so that the gardens will continue indefinitely.

Proposal #3 Arrange for Technologically Savvy Community Volunteers or Social Workers to Provide Help for Older Latinx

Older adult Latinx are a sub-group with specialized needs. These individuals often live in their own homes and apartments, not in assisted-living or nursing homes (Ebor et al., 2020, p. 585). The extended shut-down during the pandemic has created food shortages for many. They may not understand how to find food assistance programs or to determine their eligibility to participate. Community, social, and church workers could connect directly with older adults to answer and resolve questions and issues about food resources and other challenges and help to provide instructions on using a computer. There also are volunteer programs that work with the elderly, deliver food supplies, and provide other services. A local school, church, or social service agency can arrange to enlist groups of trained volunteers to partner with an older adult, provide technical assistance, and make wellness telephone calls to ensure that there is ample food. They also can spend time socializing. According to Ebor et al. (2020), telehealth medical and social services can be initiated for older adult Latinx, and food and health-care needs can be monitored for individuals who struggle with mobility and access to transportation (p. 587). By tailoring approaches to individual healthcare and social needs, older Latinx could realize better health outcomes, less anxiety, and an improved sense of wellbeing. As a final observation, each group featured in this paper, in the community, and beyond that requires a thoughtful focus to achieve the desired outcomes of food security along with emotional and physical health, while tending to their distinct and unique needs.

Finally, I included several suggestions for government agencies to continue with specific practices or to consider implementing as a part of their vital and essential work to help reduce the level of food insecurity.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) usually has restrictions in place that accompany its funding program for school meals. Due to the pandemic, the USDA lifted those restrictions on the waiver program. Hetrick et al. (2020) state that the USDA should continue to lift the waiver restrictions; simplify the waiver application process; and provide schools with additional support, especially around logistics and outreach to at-risk children (para. 6).

Furthermore, all levels of government and non-profits that work in areas with food insecurity must increase their outreach and communications to inform immigrants and family members about rules for eligibility and who is, or who could be, eligible for government-funded food programs. As discussed throughout this paper, immigrants may not know that their children or other family members potentially can receive benefits. Both non-profit and for-profit organizations use innovative marketing and communication strategies to reach their stakeholders. Non-profits, especially, are adept at creating communication and outreach plans that leverage their limited resources and expand their spheres of influences and support. In much the same way, social service agencies must take stock of their existing resources; create targeted, strategic plans that utilize new and traditional, multiple channels; and expand their messaging to reach as many families and individuals in their service area as possible. These expanded efforts can help to build a pathway to immigrant families, who need public and private food as-

sistance programs, while creating a foundation of trust and communication between families and service providers.

Finally, there is a multitude of approaches and activities we can pursue to reduce the effects of the pandemic on food insecurity for immigrants who struggle daily to provide food for their families and for others. Their communities are also our communities. When we work to reduce the food insecurity that COVID-19 has caused in our immigrant population, we are helping to make a real and lasting difference in the lives of a defining and remarkable part of our communities.

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