A NEW LEVEL OF COMPLEXITY: FOOD DESERTS IN MONROE, OREGON

by

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Eating is a human necessity and human right. For this reason, issues of food insecurity and malnutrition are only becoming more relevant with increased levels of inequality seen worldwide. Policy makers, academics, and nonprofit workers alike seek to alleviate issues of hunger, overnutrition, and undernutrition abroad as well as in the United States. Many academics and policy makers refer to the term "food desert" when attempting to understand challenges a community faces in accessing food.

This term refers to a community's proximity to a full-scale supermarket or grocer but fails to consider important factors such as community ties or vehicle ownership that also influence an individual's ability to access food.

Using the example of Monroe, Oregon, this narrative will examine the strong social ties that influence the way a community accesses food in addition to vehicle access in small rural towns. The information in this section comes largely from informal and unstructured interviews with key players in the food system and residents of Monroe and Southern Benton County. When possible, this information is supplemented with additional research. The narrative continues to discuss the relevancy of findings throughout the state of Oregon and the implications of these findings, proving that other factors influence food access that remain largely unnoticed outside of the local communities.

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Monroe, Oregon

Profile

Monroe, Oregon is an agricultural city with a population hovering around 650 that lies some 20 miles south of Corvallis and 25 miles northwest of Eugene on Highway 99. The surrounding area is mainly farmland, where a few prominent families holding large properties where they grow grass hay or evergreen trees. Less wealthy families own smaller parcels of land further from the city center. Although the city does have a Dari Mart, the nearest full-service grocery store is a Safeway in Junction City that lies almost 8 miles away on Highway 99.

Monroe has a traditional small Oregon town history. The Monroe City website states "At one point, Monroe had 5 gas stations, 4 grocers, 3 automobile dealers, a pool hall, a hotel, and several restaurants." However, the construction of I-5 in the 1960s directed traffic away from Monroe, causing the closing of all the gas stations, grocers, automobile dealers, and the hotel, turning it into the small rural farming town it is today.

Walking through the city, the poverty this area faces is apparent. The houses are small and yards are stark. A few broken plastic tricycles lay on the side of the road (for lack of a sidewalk) and the cars are mostly pre-2000. This feeling is represented in census data. According to U.S. Census Data, the average per-capita income in Monroe is about $15,000 and average household income is roughly $37,000. The Monroe School District Report Card release for the year of 2014-2015 showed that 70% of children in kindergarten through fourth grade were "economically disadvantaged."

Statistics also demonstrate that people in this area struggle with education. Only 88.4% of residents are high school graduates or higher. The high school (Monroe High School) has roughly 150 students. 42% of students are 'proficient or better' at English Language Arts and 25% of students are 'proficient or better' at Math. There are no AP courses offered.

Despite the low income and under educated demographic, there is an undeniable charm to the small town. People chat on the street and make jokes outside of the convenience store. I stopped for a bite to eat at the local 'J's Diner' in October before it closed and felt like I walked into a family gathering. The owners were chatting with their old middle school teacher who was in for a coffee during lunch while two couples by the window laughed about their elementary aged children's' budding romance. In the spring, I attended the High School graduation ceremony, where I ran into dozens of people who didn't have a child graduating- they just knew that this was the community event to attend for the month. This strong social network is what gives Monroe the small town twinkle that makes it so endearing.

South Benton County Gleaners

I pull my car into the parking lot by the Monroe City police station and wait nervously. I'm waiting for a man- James Templeton, director of the South Benton County Gleaners program. The building is nondescript and white, with blinds pulled down to cover the windows. In the window left of the door stands a handmade sign that reads 'South Benton County Gleaners.' I spoke to James on the phone last week and he seemed like an honest and no-frills man. He laughed when I called him 'Mr.

Templeton,' encouraging me to call him 'James' instead and was happy to meet with me on this cloudy Tuesday morning.

A rusty red truck pulls up and a man who I guess to be about sixty, gets out and pulls out a jangle of keys before finding the right fit into the door. He walks inside with an easy confidence and disappears. I wait a moment and follow him inside. After taking a moment to introduce myself, we sit down at a plywood tabletop and he begins to tell me about the South Benton County Gleaners.

The Gleaners started 1985 in the neighboring unincorporated municipality of Bellfountain. The facilities were ideal, but many people faced issues arriving at the location. "Lots of people around here don't have cars, so it was tough for folks to get out there. Sometimes they carpooled, but that never works as good as people want it to…" James explains, looking vaguely frustrated recalling the challenges faced in the more remote location. He continues to describe their transition to their new location. The space was donated by the City of Monroe and is far superior to the old one as far as accessibility. The organization only pays for utilities, which the city bills at $100/month. I think to myself that this might be a little bit modest, considering that they run five freezers in addition to lights and heating.

When I ask how the organization receives funding, James tells me excitedly about a number of grants they've received recently. Recently, the group has received two grants from the Celeste Indian group, one grant from Oregon State University, and one grant from Pacific Power. He tells me that grant money is supplemented with money from events like spaghetti feeds, yard sales, and bake sales and is used to buy low-cost food and feminine hygiene products.

Most of their goods are donated, he continues to explain. Safeway and Market of Choice both donate foods that are nearing expiration dates. They collect from salad bars, deli sections, and bakery areas in addition to general food. As a result they have a wide assortment of food at any given time that includes meats, dairy products, produce, grains, breads, nuts and processed foods such as energy bars. Food with a longer shelf life is stored in shelves and food that is stored in shelves and perishables are housed in the refrigerator or one of the five freezers. I take advantage of a natural lull in the conversation and ask if it's OK if I take a look around at the facilities. He happily indulges me and walks me through to another room. The walls are covered in durable donated shelving loaded with rows of cookies, breads, pastas, and energy bars. The five fridge/freezers, James explains, were also donated. They're full of meats and frozen vegetables from different sources. "Sometimes someone slaughters a bunch of pigs and they have too much meat, so we can buy it real cheap," James says as he opens a freezer and shows me packages of neatly labeled pork parts.

As I'm looking at the wealth of food in the stores, I hear the front door open and someone walk in. I turn and see a middle aged woman enter and greet James. She looks at me and smiles, "Hi," she says. "I'm Nancy." I introduce myself and explain what I'm doing at the Gleaners. James explains that she's one of the volunteers who comes in weekly to help distribute food. She says that she was just stopping by to say that she wouldn't be able to make it that Sunday to volunteer- her husband needed a ride to the doctor.

After she leaves, James shows me the various materials he has for those who come in. One item in particular catches my eye- a cookbook titled *Diabetic Cookbook*.

It provides a wide variety of delicious recipes with step-by-step directions. It includes something for every occasion: stews, roasts, breakfast items, breads, entrees, and deserts. All recipes have nutrition info and exchange per serving information. It also includes a few healthy tips: information about liquid vs. solid fats, including fish in diets, and other info bits. There is also a helpful glossary in the back that defines unfamiliar terms like baste, simmer, and puree. It also recommends talking to a registered dietician for more personalized recommendations and has a variety of contact info (both internet and phone numbers) for those specialists and additional information. I ask if James would mind if I took a copy of it home and he encourages me to do so. That evening I make a vegetable stew in the cookbook for dinner and am the envy of my roommates.

Also on the table is the sign-in sheet for patrons. It's an impressively long list covering three pages. He explains that many people come to several of the nonprofits in town, as each nonprofit has a slightly different stock at different times during the week. James estimates that roughly 100 families benefit from the services offered at the Gleaners, many of whom frequent other nonprofits in the town. The conversation naturally flows, and James begins telling me about his life. He's worked in almost every industry and didn't find retirement to suit him well, so he started the Gleaners. Their new office space has really made a difference, he says. "You can really see the number of people we've been able to reach now compared to before. Lots of people, they don't have cars so it's important that we're in the town."

Food Share

It's a drizzly and chilly Thursday morning late in March, and I've barely made it on time to meet with Janeece Cook from the Food Share Program. I drive down Commercial Street, passing the Gleaner's office. I see a light on inside and give James a friendly wave in case he can see me. Shortly after, I make a left and park my '98 Civic amidst a half dozen rusting trucks and sedans. As I park a rusted red truck pulls up with five adults squeezed into the cab- three in the front, two in the back. I remember doing the same thing as a small child and can't imagine they're comfortable as adult men. One by one they exit the vehicle and make their way, laughing and chatting, to the open garage door that holds a plethora of foods. They greet a pair of volunteers at the front door and sign in on a piece of paper before walking inside and joining the crowd of about a dozen others who are picking through goods.

"Molly?" A middle aged woman with short brown hair calls my name.

"Yes, you must be Janeece" I smile and extend a hand. I spoke to Janeece's husband, a co-director of the organization, on the phone earlier in the week and this woman seems just as jolly and enthusiastic as her spouse.

"So nice to meet you!"

She leads me inside of the two-car garage and points out various comestibles. Their shelves are full of more or less the same goods as the Gleaners such as breads, pastries, granola bars, and fruit snacks. I notice a slightly heavier presence of fresh foods- there's a cardboard box full of apples and a small pile of oranges sitting on a counter.

"We get most of our breads and pastries from Safeway. They also give us a lot of their produce that's about to go bad, and some of their meats too," Janeece responds after I ask where their food comes from. "It's more or less what the Gleaners get. We actually share a lot- they get too much of something, they give us some. We get too much, we give them some. The gardens next door give us a lot in the summer. We're all working towards the same mission I guess!" She laughs with a laugh that bounces off the walls.

We walk the two aisles of the garage. Most of the goods have handwritten signs below them reading 'Limit two per family,' or 'One per family please!' I ask if many people take more than they're encouraged to. Janeece smiles and explains that people rarely take more than their share, and when they do, it's because they need it. If something is about to go bad, she often encourages people to take what remains and share it with friends, family, or neighbors.

A volunteer asks for Janeece to come help her restock, so she walks away briefly.

As she's gone, a patron asks me what I'm doing here. Slightly startled, I explain to him my motivations- trying to understand the workings of rural nonprofits. He tells me that he "doesn't know what [he'd] do" if he didn't receive assistance from the nonprofits in the area. He recently lost his job and feeding his family of five is tough. Since his vehicle broke down, he usually carpools with some friends from nearby farms. He mentions the higher cost of gas in the area as well. There's no gas station in Monroe, but the nearest gas station is five miles north on Highway 99 and charges about fifty cents more per gallon than the going market rate. He explains that even if his car

worked, it gets such bad mileage that driving from his farm to here would be an expense.

Janeece comes back and apologizes for stepping out. “Oh- have you met the Lynn yet?” She waves at a woman with long gray-blonde hair who’s walking through the parking lot. “Lynn and Chris manage the community garden next door. They give us lots of produce in the summer and fall.”

“Hi, Lynn, I’m Molly. I think we’ve been playing a lot of phone tag recently. Great to finally meet you.” We share a laugh. Somehow, we’ve each managed to miss the other’s calls three times in a row. Janeece steps off and Lynn and I walk back down the parking lot to a yellow house and a few greenhouses.

Monroe Sharing Garden

I ask Lynn if she has a minute to talk. Lynn smiles and says that she’s more than happy to chat, if I don’t mind chatting and working. She briefly introduces me to her husband, Chris, who is working in the first greenhouse. We begin transplanting tomato starts and she tells me about the history of the gardens.

The organization started in spring of 2009 in Alpine, but moved to its current location in winter of the following year. The current location holds Lynn and Chris’s home as well as three greenhouses, two plots of garden soil, a shed, and a well. It has a central location between the grade school and a church, which has been helpful for spreading awareness about the program. In addition to the built structures, the property holds fruit and nut orchards. Lynn smiles as she accounts the generosity that has been afforded to them. “We loved the land, but we just couldn’t afford it. Luckily we knew

the guy who was selling it and he cut the price by $180,000. Can you believe that?" Chris and Lynn tells story upon story of donated machinery, time, and materials.

Once, Chris picked up some free pallets alongside the road and left a thank-you note to the farmer who gave them away. The farmer gave Chris a call to tell him that he was the first person who'd ever left a thank-you note. "Then he offered to let us borrow his tractor too!" Chris says. "I still can't believe we were the first people to leave a thank-you note. Doesn't it just seem like common courtesy?"

Monroe Sharing Garden is a community garden in the truest sense. There are no individual plots and all harvest is shared. This allows them to water more efficiently, manage weeds and pests more easily, and save pure seeds. They are volunteer run and a registered nonprofit. During the summer they have about 9 volunteers who come in on a weekly basis, in addition to students at OSU who come weekly as part of a service learning class. For a while, some people took vegetables before they were ripe but they started putting up signs about how to know when vegetables were ripe and issues stopped. During the summer months, they tend to have an excess of produce. They donate all they can to the other nonprofits in the area, but still have leftovers. I ask if they've considered selling excess produce outside of the Dari Mart, and Chris looks slightly offended. He explains that selling produce for profit would contradict their model, violating the sharing principle that founded their garden.

The sharing principle goes beyond the garden and into the couple's private lives. They explain they support the community in some aspect, and the community supports them in other aspects. People regularly stop by and drop off homemade bread and extra canned goods in exchange for a few extra tomato starts or some string beans.

As we're chatting, the pair mentions the popularity of their website. I perused the website before giving them a call, and was amazed by the wealth of information it provided. The website has a regularly updated blog, the mission statement goals (listed below), 'how to' instructions, and a news section. The focus of the website is only a small part self-promotion. The rest of it functions as an educational resource, full of years of wisdom condensed to a few well thought out web pages. They operate with the following mission statement goals listed on the website:

> 1. To provide the inspiration, guidance, and expertise needed to ensure a bountiful supply of locally and organically grown fresh produce, herbs and fruits to those in need.
>
> 2. To provide meaningful activities related to organic food production, storage and distribution by offering hands-on workshops designed to empower young people and persons of all ages.
>
> 3. To promote an awareness and practice of recycling and re-using a wide array of materials that can be utilized in gardens and food storage and to coordinate donations of such for use in the project.
>
> 4. To establish a stable network of experienced farmers, gardeners and food-storage experts in our local communities and neighborhoods and encourage their participation.
>
> 5. To identify and utilize local resources of surplus fruits and nuts for gleaning, winter storage and distribution.
>
> 6. To create community-scale "canneries" for storing surplus food for winter months.
>
> 7. To support and expand upon existing food banks.
>
> 8. To create a local and sustainable seed bank.
>
> 9. To document each stage of this project and create a manual to assist other groups and communities.
>
> 10. To create an interactive website, on-line message board, skills-bank and info-sharing blog to distribute information about the project.

I arrive the next Tuesday morning to spend some more time at the garden. Chris informs me that we'll be planting potatoes this morning. We're working in the first

greenhouse, along the south facing wall. In the middle are the tomato starts we transplanted last week. I'm handed a cardboard flat full of potatoes in various levels of sprouting. We begin working compost into the soil and placing the potatoes in the soil before carefully covering them, making pleasant chitchat as we work. They explain how to bury the potatoes in trenches. As the roots begin to grow they'll re-cover the tops with more soil, leading to a higher yield come late summer.

After a few minutes, another woman appears to help who introduces herself and joins the conversation. She tells how she first met Chris and Lynn at the location in Alpine and continued to volunteer out here. Food insecurity isn't a pressing issue in her life, but she enjoys having something to do in retirement and likes the feeling she gets from helping other people. She volunteers about three times a week and has learned a lot about gardening and preserving food.

During the late summer, she explains, the Sharing Gardens put on canning and preserving classes to help keep the food throughout the rest of the year. The woman smiles as she talks about being able to enjoy 'the world's best tomato sauce' in the middle of winter. Chris and Lynn also serve as a resource for preserving tools. Lynn jokes that she magically attracts canning jars. Recently, people have started donating old ball jars to the organization or bringing miscellaneous funnels, tunnels, and pots by the house.

Before I know it, it's time for me to head back to Eugene to my afternoon class. I smile at the dirt under my nails- it feels nice to get my hands dirty. I apologize for having to leave and head to my car. "Molly, wait!" Chris jogs after me. "You forgot to take some starts!" He hands me another flat full of six-inch high plants and explains the

different varieties to me. “Determinate tomatoes stop growing at a certain height, indeterminate keep on growing. Here’s a nice determinate heirloom tomato, this one is great for canning, here’s some Dinosaur Kale, this is our favorite bell pepper,” he tells me in an informative and helpful tone of voice while pointing out different plants. I thank him profusely and head on my way.

I head back to the garden weekly, each time learning more about the organization and food in Monroe. Sometimes it’s just Lynn, Chris, and I, other times another volunteer or two is there as well. There’s a pleasant air about working- people share jokes and stories while chatting about their lives. One time, I ask why more people don’t garden. Most of the houses in town have front yards, yet I’ve only noticed one or two garden plots. A volunteer explains that water prices in Monroe are much higher than in Eugene, which makes maintaining a garden during the summer difficult. Beyond that, not everyone has a refrigerator or freezer to the produce fresh.

Another week, we begin to discuss how relevant the issues of poverty are when thinking about food. One of the volunteers says “You know, I work at the grade school. Let me tell you, at least half the kids are on free or reduced lunch.” Later, a call to the school tells me that 62% of the students at the grade school are on free/reduced lunch. The volunteer continues to say that a large number of students are pulled from classes during hunting season, ask elk tags are issued per person. Tags for elk are issued per person, so a parent can hunt more elk if they bring more people (including children) out hunting. The volunteer explains that you can’t blame the kids for missing class, and you can’t really blame the parents for wanting the extra food. I ask how many people are food insecure in Monroe, and the group stops to think for a moment. “About one in five

can't always put food on the table I'd say. I know a lot of people who can't make ends meet, even with help from us," Chris says.

South Benton Nutrition

"Can we help you?" a woman in her mid seventies approaches me as I walk into the old building. It's full of round folding tables, with about fifteen elderly people chatting and laughing. It's obvious I don't belong- the room went a little bit quieter when I pulled open the heavy oak doors. I wait for the conversation to resume before answering. "Hi, I'm Molly. I called Dave last week and he said we could chat today. Is he around?" It's a Tuesday morning in late March around 11:30. The woman I'm speaking to smiles politely and apologizes. She explains that Dave couldn't make it to the meal this week but should be by later to pick her up. I ask if she has a little bit of time to spare to chat and she looks around worriedly. I see other volunteers running around in a back room and realize that they're already thinly staffed. She gives me an apologetic look- "I'm so sorry, honey, but we're already running behind schedule! If you want to take a look around you're more than welcome to." I thank her and walk to the back room.

"Can I help?" I ask. Someone looks at me like I'm a saint and hands me a burlap sack full of potatoes. I stagger slightly under the weight. "Peel and chop those into eighths." They say, before running of to complete some other task.

I find some counter space and a peeler and get to work. Before too long, a forty-some year old joins me in my efforts. We begin chatting, and I ask him how we've been volunteering for. He looks puzzled for a moment. "I'm not quite sure. My grandma used

to come here before she passed away, and that's when I first learned about them…. I started volunteering after that." We spend the rest of the time making small talk.

After we've prepared the potatoes we sit down to eat- a delicious stew with fresh salad and ham sandwiches. I sit next to a woman who I estimate to be in her early seventies and we make polite conversation over the course of our meal. She tells me that she lives by herself, and finds it difficult to make food on her own. "I can do it," she explains, "it just takes a lot of work. I keep dropping things and it's hard to pick them up." She finds that the two meals a week make sure that she gets at least two well-balanced meals a week and give her an excuse to spend some time with her friends. She can't drive, but her neighbor usually drops her off on his way to work and a friend gives her a ride home.

After the meal I stick around and strike up conversation. The first woman I spoke to introduces herself as Linda who explains that she runs the program with her husband, Dave. After retirement the pair started coming to the meals, then joined the board, and then started running the program. Almost on cue, a man of about the same age walks in through the door. He sees me chatting to his wife and apologies for forgetting about our meeting. I assure him it's all right, and Dave joins our conversation. I ask if the pair enjoys their work, and they respond enthusiastically. Dave explains the camaraderie he's found- "We're like one big family. We have a lot of fun, you bet it. We all love each other and help each other out." His spouse echoes his views. They also enjoy the wide range of people who attend weekly. Some of the richer farmers come in for the meals in addition to low-income elders. When Linda and Dave first started working as directors about ten years ago, clients had to pay for the meals.

Now, they accept donations but don't require them as, as Dave puts it, "there's a lot of people here that don't have too much of anything," and making people pay seemed immoral. They say that the program never has much, but they always make ends meet. Dave smiles and says, "We always have enough for people to take what they want, and some for their neighbors too." All of the leftovers are given to patrons to take home, most of whom give it to neighbors.

The organization operates using donated food from the other nonprofits in the area in addition to purchased food from the Linn Benton Food Share. The food at the food share is sold at a very low cost, and purchased with money acquired from two anonymous donors in the area and events the organization creates. They say that they "try to make money [with events] but don't make much," relying heavily on the donors. The raised and donated funds also pay for the rent and utilities.

I ask how long the program has been running for, and the current directors aren't exactly sure, but they think it was sometime in the early 1970s. Regardless, they are able to name the two previous directors, indicating a long history. They've been housed in the same location since their founding. To attend the meals, people drive and carpool. As "lots of [the patrons] are over 90 years old," carpooling is the only way they can attend the meals. Other needs for carpooling include high gas costs and lack of vehicle, according to Linda.

Eight volunteers help prepare the meals twice a week, in addition to two or three cooks, depending on time of year. One cook doesn't work during the summers, as her children are home from school then. Most of the volunteers live in Monroe, and most

have been volunteering for a while. David and Linda again re-emphasize the fun atmosphere in the group.

"We have bingo nights twice a month, those are fun. Usually we get around thirty or forty people then, so more than usual," Dave explains. Everyone gets a prize during those nights. Prizes include things like dog food, candy, or household goods that were donated but not in large enough quantities to distribute to everyone. During the summer, the Fire Department usually buys a couple cows from the auction and gives some to the program. Most of the beef is used to cook with, but some choice cuts are given away as prizes.

Linn Benton Food Share

Linn Benton Food Share is a 501(c)(3) registered nonprofit. It works under the goal stated on their website that "Everybody eats." To serve this goal they work have worked as a regional bank for Linn since 1981 and Benton counties and help provide food to 74 member organizations (including South Benton County Gleaners). They receive over 14,000 hours of volunteer time annually and handle millions of pounds of food annually and donate to emergency shelters, food pantries, soup kitchens, child and senior care centers, shelter homes, and gleaning groups. Last year they donated 5.4 million pounds of food ("About Linn Benton Food Share").

Food and funding are donated by individuals, families, church members, school children, civic organizations, and service clubs. These community members are essential to the operations of the Food Share program. In 2013-2014 they had roughly 3730 volunteers come in to donate time. They receive funding through various grants and use that funding to purchase bulk foods that are re-packaged and re-distributed.

The nonprofits mentioned before gather here weekly to purchase food and other goods. Purchase cost is very low, as the organization only charges to cover the cost of renting the space. There's usually large bins with canned fruits and vegetables, and once a month there is aisle shopping- Dave from the Nutrition Program describes the "cases of chili you can buy for practically nothing" during this monthly event.

These weekly gatherings also serve as a opportunity to catch up with other groups in the area. James from the South Benton County Gleaners describes the meetings in Junction City as an opportunity to "hear what people are up to." He says that during these times, he often hears about volunteer needs and is able to send a few extra volunteers over to another organization or receive a few more if he's short on help.

Findings

The food system in Monroe and Southern Benton County cannot be understood without taking into consideration factors related to transportation and strong social ties. The term 'food desert' largely ignores these factors and fails to fully capture the true food realities that can be found in this environment. Carpooling remains a necessity for many people in accessing food assistance at the various nonprofit organizations in the area such as the Nutrition Program, the Gleaners, and the Food Pantry. It's worth noting that after three phone calls and two e-mails to the Oregon Department of Motor Vehicles over the course of two weeks, I was told that information regarding vehicle registration by city was not available to the public. However, both anecdotal evidence and previous research indicate that vehicle access and transportation are large issues in Southern Benton County. As part of an article conducted by Oregon State University

researchers, a woman identified as ‘Patty’ identified gas a large expense in her home. Many representatives from the various nonprofits in the area mentioned difficulty with vehicle access, high gas prices, and long distances.

‘Patty’ continues to discuss the generosity of loved ones in keeping her family afloat. All of her meat is given to her. Elk comes from her spouse’s father and seafood comes from her father on the coast. Authors Jean Gross and Nancy Rosenberger continue to tell of trades of trout for elk steaks between friends. Other tales of generosity lead the authors to state “The overwhelming generosity of many of our informants who lived close to the poverty line put middle class charity to shame.” This generosity and sharing mentality is found in the previous narrative. The culture and kindness found in this rural area is demonstrated by nonprofits cooperating rather than competing and donating extra food and volunteers to each other. The caring culture can also be found in the generosity of the organizations to donate to their fullest extent. Leftovers and extra produce are always put to good use by sending them home for neighbors. When people were taking produce without permission of the Sharing Gardens land, Chris and Lynn were not upset that the produce was stolen. They were only upset it was taken before it was ripe.

Gross and Rosenburger describe the importance of the social networks nicely: “When one lives in a poor rural community, social capital is often what brings food security and a sense of wellbeing.” The strong social fabric found in this rural community is woven into the food system. Volunteers for the nonprofit organizations view volunteering as a time to catch up with friends and clients of the nonprofits view the time as the same. The first volunteer at the Sharing Gardens who I spoke to did not

need additional food, she simply enjoyed building social capital within the community. Because of the importance of social connections within the community others were able to enjoy the fruits of her labors. This collaborative culture encourages the active sharing of a multitude of resources across nonprofits and individuals.

These findings tell us that the food systems in Monroe has more facets than are captured in the term ‘food desert.’ While this term captures a geographic distance from a supermarket retailer, it failures to fully capture the food realities facing this rural community. Considering the strong social ties that support the movement of food in this environment is important to truly understand the food system, as is considering challenges in vehicle access.

Analysis

These findings hold true across areas of rural Oregon, not only in Southern Benton County. The rural communities of Klamath, Josephine, Sisters, Wascow, and Sherman echo these same principles of need supplemented by strong community ties in food systems in addition to difficulty with transportation.

According to a Community Food Assessment (C.F.A.), Josephine County in Southwestern Oregon, "is like much of the rural part of the state economically depressed" and holds high levels of food insecurity. Feeding America noted in 2009 that 20.6% of the population was food insecure, a similar number to Chris' estimate for Southern Benton County. The 'Plant-A-Row' project in Josephine County places an "emphasis on the diversity of the small ways in which people can contribute," such as planting an extra row of plants. The grassroots principles that support this organization needs strong social ties to support it. In a Community Food Assessment, the authors note "Part of thriving in an agricultural culture is knowing your farmer and knowing who is farming in the community." This supports the idea that strong connections are necessary to function in this rural environment.

Two gardening programs, the 'Small Farms Program' and the 'Josephine Masters Gardeners' thrive in this county. The 'Small Farms Program' provides services such as consultation and educational resources to small farms to help create sustainable local food systems. The Master Gardner's program is largely educational and requires a volunteer hour minimum. This educational program provides evidence for a general learning environment in this area as many Master Gardeners "contribute their time and knowledge to local horticulture projects," as described in the C.F.A. The Master

Gardeners in Josephine is “heavily involved in school gardens” and has helped plant and maintain eight school gardens. This learning environment found in the Master Gardeners and the Monroe Sharing Garden serves as resources for their communities. The information that these organizations provide is a crucial resource for residents who wish to engage with horticulture practices. The current attitude towards ‘food deserts’ ignores the ties created by food systems and the ties that help encourage food security.

Rural Wasco and Sherman counties share the same issues of transportation and food insecurity as Southern Benton County. This C.F.A. identified transportation and food insecurity as being large issues facing the two counties. Transportation was regarded as the fourth most common response to the question “What (if anything) makes it hard for you to get the food you need?” in both counties. The most common answer was “Nothing,” followed by cost and time for shopping. In Warm Springs the same C.F.A. found that 58% of residents identified transportation as a primary barrier to food access**.** Warm Springs is one of the areas with the highest difficulty accessing food because of transportation. In Curry County, roughly 20% of residents reported transportation as a factor that affected their ability to access food. The issues of transportation hold through in both Southern Benton County and rural counties throughout Oregon.

A significant proportion of rural communities benefit from a generous culture within the area. This culture manifests itself in numerous nonprofits and food sharing. In Wascow and Sherman counties, a significant amount of people site altruistic secondary sources to acquire food outside of grocers as documented in the C.F.A. In the survey conducted, some of the more popular secondary choices provided included

specialty or small stores, farmers' markets, orchards, and home gardens. However, when respondents had the opportunity to provide their own alternative food sources, both Wascow and Sherman counties offered sources such as friends' gardens, neighbor exchange, and family/friends. This informal sharing that occurs between friends, family, and neighbors is an important consideration when evaluating food systems in a rural environment. This sentiment is echoed in evidence from Monroe, Oregon and Dr. Gross' findings in Southern Benton County. Chris and Lynn tell how the would trade bread and canned goods, and Dr. Gross gives the example of 'Patty' receiving meat from family.

In a C.F.A. titled 'A Food System with Deep Roots,' author and researcher Hannah Ancel describes the food banks and food pantries that operate in Grant County. The Grant County Food Bank serves 130 households a month and the Prairie City Food Bank serves 30 families. Ancel describes "there are farmers in the county who are willing to donate what is left over from their crops or their seconds, both of which they can give away without much detriment to their bottom line" and how "The pastor at the Methodist Church will put a food box together for someone if they need it outside of the normal distribution hours." In an interview with author Sydney Leonard of another C.F.A. a representative from the Sisters Brown Bag program reiterated similar kindhearted themes. This representative, when interviewed about motivations for working stated "We have enough food now that I can bring them down on off days and give them a box of food. I will come down because I don't want anybody to go without." Examples of human compassion such as this demonstrate the social ties found in rural communities and their influence in food security.

Conclusion

My goal was to consider other facets when using the term ‘food desert’ as this term cannot fully capture the food system that many rural environments face. While physical access to a supermarket retailer is important, equally important to consider are the social ties and transportation.

The rich social fabric that is found both in Southern Benton County and other rural counties throughout Oregon helps provide food to those in need, maintain operational nonprofit organizations, and provide educational services. The numerous nonprofits found in rural communities with low population levels are proof of the community support. Anecdotal evidence from volunteers, directors, and patrons both in and outside of Southern Benton County describes people involved with these communities who go above and beyond by providing large discounts on property (in the case of the Monroe Sharing Gardens), food boxes after hours (in the case of the Grant County Food Bank), or leftovers to neighbors of patrons (in the case of the South Benton County Nutrition Program). The importance of gathering together and sharing what resources can be shared is a hugely influential factor when considering food, particularly in rural communities.

Many people struggle with transportation as a result of lack of vehicle access, high gas prices, and/or disability. The same cultural norms that help nonprofit organizations thrive are found outside of these organizations. Those who do have a car are happy to carpool to a food distribution event or drive a neighbor in need to a weekly meal. Everyone knows each other in town and is genuinely interested in their lives, their children, and their well-being. Extra goods are shared between friends and family.

Knowledge is shared to help those who never had the opportunity to learn how to preserve food or learn how to garden.

In summary, the term ‘food desert’ is a term that is more complex than the current thinking suggests. While proximity to a supermarket is an important factor in influencing a person’s ability to access food, other factors significantly influence the same ability. The strong social ties and difficulty with transportation found in many rural communities in Oregon are two factors that should not be ignored when considering issue of food security and food access.

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