



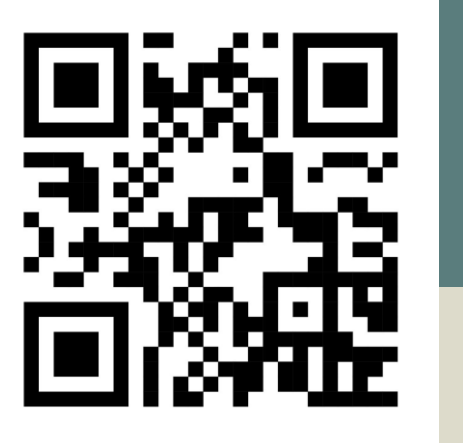
Food Justice: An Exploration of Charitable Food Networks in a Rural Area



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Special Thanks & References

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Discussion & Implications

- ✓ The extent to which pantries answered these questions related to the accessibility of the pantry and the ability of that pantry to adequately create an environment where needs could be met.
- ✓ An essential conundrum was exposed that questioned whose ultimate needs are met within these charitable food programs, the giver or receiver (Stern, 1984), given the confusing logistics and challenging barriers.
- ✓ Charitable food programs should be cognizant of these findings in developing policies and programs to help ensure people have their food needs met in ways that honor the humanity of those served.

Introduction

Food security is defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) as “having access, at all times, to enough food for an active, healthy life” (USDA, 2023, p. 1).

In 2022, only 87.2% of households in the US were food secure (Rabbit et al., 2023), with the remaining 12.8%, approximately 17 million households, food insecure, meaning that at times these households lacked the resources to provide enough food for all household members (Rabbit et al., 2023).

In rural communities, this is a greater challenge as while food resources in rural communities exist, they are often disconnected from larger social service systems (Pruitt, 2007; Jensen et. al, 2020).

Many available charitable food resources are located within churches, or as an outreach of congregations, who set their own parameters regarding eligibility and access (Ammerman, 2001).

Faith-based organizations and secular providers have the opportunity “to support each other as well as hold each other accountable as to how their unique perspectives contribute to effective poverty alleviation” (Martin et al., 2007, p 72).

However, many sectarian charitable food resources operate outside of and disconnected from traditional secular social service programs. Disparities in food access may be reinforced by a cultural system of charity that prioritizes the relationship of the giver to the receiver (Stern, 1984) instead of a human rights approach, which seeks to equalize access by addressing root causes of food insecurity (Ayala & Meier, 2017).

Background

While religious charities had always been a community staple in the United States (Karger & Stoesz, 2018; Tirrito & Cascio, 2003), particularly in early America, societal changes coupled with limited resources exceeded the bonds of local responsibility. Concern with addressing poverty – without developing pauperism—became a focus particularly of early reformers concerned about alms giving in the church (Katz, 1989).

The Charity Organization Society (COS) took hold of this narrative in their efforts to reform aid to the destitute. Their concern with reconceptualizing aid as a matter of properly assessed worthiness, rather than an entitlement, represented a shift in the application of assistance to the poor (Katz, 1996). They promoted the avoidance of outdoor relief (alms) due to the concern that it could diminish a person’s initiative and perpetuate the worst of humanity’s vices: indolence. To be clear, as Katz (1996) notes, the COS was concerned that “every possible safeguard” needed to be in place to both “check for abuses” and “re-examine” eligibility for outdoor relief regularly (p. 58).

In recent times, religious charities and congregations remain a part of the network of helping resources in many communities (Ammerman, 2001). However, in an interesting twist, many religious charities and congregations—who had in earlier centuries been accused of this indiscriminate almsgiving—have taken up this discriminatory mantle and continue to do so. Today, many charitable food resources continue to exist in churches as part of religious outreach programming. These church pantries tend to be “loosely organized, run by a small group of volunteers...[and] few are extensive, ongoing relief programs that serve the broader community” (Kapp, 2012, p. 201). Of the 3777 food pantries that were identified in a study by Riediger et al. (2022), over 63% of the pantries they surveyed were religious, specifically Christian and most were located in urban census tracts. Further, most food pantries were operated and staffed by volunteers. The volunteer nature of service at food pantries contributes to limitations around the hours and types of services offered to clients (Riediger et al., 2022).

A mismatch between the actual needs of food pantry participants and food and support offered exists. Pritt et al., (2018) found that many customers of food pantries remain food insecure after visiting the pantry for a variety of reasons. Graham et al (2018) note that many households experiencing food insecurity may feel compelled to prioritize calorie dense foods over healthier, less filling options. The “nutritionism” which considers food only in terms of its health value creates “[...]an inherent contradiction between charity dictates that ‘beggars can’t be choosers’ and nutritional advice that beggars should make healthy choices” (Graham et al., 2018, p. 1869).

The fragmentation of the charitable food system has ramifications for hungry families.

“I really try to do my calls by case by case, I had a lady last week she was not currently desperate because what happens is we will have people that call that are not desperate, and they can wait. And I could tell in their conversations that they can wait.” –Monthly Church Pantry

Methods

Study Design: This qualitative case study explored rural food pantries (mostly sectarian in nature) in rural parts of one PA county, including resource access, connectedness with other systems/services, and other potential barriers that may limit their effectiveness. A purposive sample was used, as the researchers sought to include pantries that were perceived (by the researchers and locals) to be disconnected from other resources, and operating independent from systemic collaboration.

Study Site: The site for this study was rural Lancaster County. Approximately 47,150 Lancaster County residents experienced food insecurity in 2022.

Data Collection:

1. Develop schema to identifying rural and disconnected pantries utilizing the Center for Rural PA’s data.
2. Identify all of the available charitable food pantries in the identified areas using Facebook, internet, school social workers.
3. Craft a spread sheet of contacts. Our final sample included sixteen (16) respondents.

An initial finding was how challenging it was to locate accurate information about contact persons, eligibility, and hours of operation that a person in need might simply give up.

Interviews ranged from 30-75 minutes and were conducted in-person and audio recorded or conducted in-person via Zoom, recorded, and transcribed with OtterAi. Surveys were collected via Qualtrics and the data sorted on Excel.

Data Analysis: Survey data and interview data were organized and uploaded to Dedoose and coded (line by line) by multiple coders. The main themes of our study were discussed and interpreted by the research team through an iterative group process. From here, codes were folded into three (3) themes which helped to describe the environment of the charitable food network.

Interviews	
Program Representatives	5
School Social Workers	3
Senior Center & Food Pantry	1
Food Program for School-Aged Kids	1
Total Interviews	10
Surveys	
Program Representatives	6
Total Surveys	6

Findings

Our initial distinction regarding the nature of disconnection was inadequate, however, “connection” with the larger charitable food network did not mean efficiency or standardization. What we found was that most pantries were neither connected nor disconnected but all seemed to be a secret third thing: **insularity**.

Insularity became our first overarching theme. The programs that we studied gave the impression of independent autonomy and that connectedness with other organizations had an unspoken threshold.

After grouping and collapsing our initial codes, we found three overarching themes in our data that presented as dichotomous questions or major conflicts small independent feeding programs face.

Each critical question represented the continua of an issue which had the propensity to become a client barrier if left unchecked.

Themes

Three Essential Questions:

1. **Collaboration vs. Insularity [Community Relationships]**
2. **Individualization vs. Paternalism [Client Relationships]**
3. **Vision vs. Practicality [Practice]**

Collaboration	Insularity	Individualization	Paternalism	Vision	Practicality
Connected with Central Food Bank	Unfriendly vibe	Personal Connections	Client Stories	Ideology & Philosophy	Outreach
Listed in 211	Narrow Boundaries	Authentic Relationships	Judgment	Religion	Policies
Conversations with other pantries/resources regularly	Giver vs. Receiver Mentality		Thinking they know what client needs better than what they do	History & Mission	Process or Procedures
	No systemization or script				Food Offerings
	Lack of technology				