

**PORTAGE PARK COMMUNITY AREA REPORT Qualitative Interviews
 Northeastern Illinois Community Food Security Needs Assessment
 University of Illinois Chicago and the Portage Park Community Committee
 Summer 2007**

Summary of interview groups:

Food Sector	Interviews
Retail Grocery Outlet	3
Community Members	2
Restaurant	1
Emergency Food (Food Pantry)	1

Analytical Approach

After extensive review of both the code book and primary documents to assess the nature of the research inquiry, the approach to the analysis comprised of four components:

- Extensive Code Analysis
- Interview Question by Food Sector Analysis
- Analysis of Marginal Issues
- Analysis of Memos

The codes used most commonly across food sectors were analyzed first presuming these represented the salient issues.

A quantitative analysis of frequency of codes suggests that of the 229 codes, excluding the codes serving to flag interview questions or descriptive information, the content codes that were used most frequently in the coding of the Portage Park primary documents include:

Code	Frequency of Use
Barriers to food security	11
Nutrition Program Problem	10
Expired Food	8
Buy Food Where	8
Food Last Longer CM	6
Access to Food When no Money	6
Buy Food Why	6
Community Food Insecurity	5

Queries were then conducted and network views implemented to determine the nature of co-occurring codes and identify any important relationships between codes.

Organization of Report

The report begins with an overview and profile of the food sectors in Portage Park whom served as interviewees for this analysis. A summary of study challenges and strengths is then presented followed by Key Findings.

The bulk of the report then details Emergent Themes. When a quotation from the interviews is provided, the quote is in italic followed by the name of the food sector and date of data collection.

The Emergent Themes fall into seven major categories.

KEY FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION

A total of 7 major themes were identified across the Portage Park interviews. These included:

- Availability and Accessibility to Healthy Foods
- Strategies for Accessing Food among Food Insecure Residents
- Role of Economic Diversity in Portage Park on Community Food Insecurity
- Food Insecurity Issues among Community Residents
- Problems Experienced by Local Food Sector Representatives
- Unique Role of Restaurants
- Proposed Solutions

FINDINGS BY EMERGENT THEMES

Access to Health Foods

- Availability of stores There was general agreement that availability of stores that sell healthy foods was not a problem in the community. In fact a long list of area stores was compiled across the interviews including several major chains such as Jewel, Dominick's, Costco, Cub Foods and Sam's Club. However, there was concern that access to these food stores was difficult for special populations such as the elderly or those with large families without their own car. Community members expressed a desire for specialty stores such as Trader Joes.
- Strategic shopping Community members described the use of strategic shopping in which a variety of stores are visited with store-specific coupons in an effort to find a good variety of high quality foods at fair prices.

My husband and I have some coupons. We go and get the coupon book to see what's on sale and then we go to different stores and we get different stuff. If Jewel's too high, we'll maybe get wax beans at [Family] Produce. We just shop around and look for deals (Community Member, 5/11/06).

Also, strategic shopping was described with regard to being selective about what meat counters to use as there are some that were considered not to be trusted. It was suggested that these meat counters would deceive you by selling lean meats that had more fat than advertised.

- **Transportation** Transportation was not identified as a major problem among the community member interviewees with the exception of one member who due to lack of dependable transportation does a great deal of walking, by choice. Concern was expressed again for seniors who may have to rely on public transportation or walking to get to the above stores.

Transportation was perceived to be a problem however among the food pantry participants. While public transportation exists it may be complicated for seniors or those who *are not well physically or even emotionally... you know? ... it is too much for them it has to be easy... living is hard enough for some of them (Food Pantry Representative, 5/3/06)*. Transportation was also a problem for seniors whose children had moved out of the community.

... seniors, most of them don't have vehicles to be driving around in. and nowadays, people's kids move away and they don't have a child or anyone to take them to the store. Not like it used to be (Food Pantry Representative, 5/3/06).

- **Restaurant Use** There was considerable use of restaurants by community members on a daily or weekly basis. These were mostly fast food Mexican or Chinese restaurants.

Strategies for Accessing Food among Food Insecure residents

Findings from the community members' group interview reveal a pattern of strategies to supplement food in addition to those given as examples by the interview facilitator (stealing, dumpster diving, begging, prostitution or other ways of exchanging sex for food, going on dates to have someone else pay for food, offering services such as cleaning for food). These includes getting free food or food samples at bank openings, stores, and even weddings and funerals. Some may even purchase a Costco membership for one month and then use the card for entry and eat free food samples but don't make a store purchase. It was suggested that people who use these strategies are among the working poor. They may also rely on free food provided at their worksites. The working poor may also sign their families up to volunteer to serve meals to the homeless around Christmas in order to be offered a plate themselves after the homeless eat.

While there is a presence of panhandling in Portage Park, there is also evidence of soliciting money by offering to help customers with bags at grocery *stores for fifty cents or something (Food Pantry Representative, 5/3/06)*.

Lastly, interviewees described common practice of using fillers to make food last longer.

And how do you stretch the ground beef? My kids are old enough now that I can tell my secrets. What I used to do was to take a whole loaf of bread and mix it with the ground beef to try to make it stretch longer. She told me: "Mom, this ground beef is terrible!" I said: "Don't worry, its okay." I had to doctor it up some more, with some more sloppy joe mix or maybe more meatloaf seasoning or

something. But that's how I would stretch that. (Community Member Interview, 5/11/06)

While the food sector representatives from the retail and restaurant industries did not have many specific examples of community food insecurity, many did explain that they have locks on their dumpsters to discourage dumpster diving and have seen people attempting to acquire food in their dumpsters.

Role of Economic Diversity in Portage Park

We have a mix of people here. We have people that have money; we have people that don't have money. We have people that are middle-class. We're a big community here so it's hard to really say (Community Member 5/11/06).

With less than 10% of residents living below the poverty level compared to 44% in a community are like Englewood, it was sometimes difficult for interview participants to generalize with regard to Community Food Security. Instead specific vulnerable populations were discussed including the homeless, working poor, people with medical problems and seniors.

While broad generalizations were difficult with regard to the general population, food sector representatives were able to give examples of food security within their own lives and jobs. For example, both of the restaurant representatives and a grocer described instances in which they were approached for a handout of food.

The homeless were discussed in nearly every interview, with the Food Pantry representatives being most detailed on the subject especially with regard to the kinds of food supplements they can receive.

Female Voice: ...People that are homeless, that are living in the Forest Preserves, that are living under the tracks, and they can only take things that they can consume immediately, because they can't take things that the rats will get out (Food Pantry, 5/3/06).

The homeless were also described as increasing in number and mostly living on the street because shelter-living can be dangerous with the prevalence of *drug addicts* and *alcoholics* who can be violent.

With regard to seniors being vulnerable to food insecurity, three issues emerged. First Portage Park, like many other Chicago neighborhoods, has experienced gentrification leaving long time senior residents particularly vulnerable.

This is a pretty high priced area. A lot of elder people are just hanging onto their homes and barely able to afford anything else (Food Pantry Representative, 5/3/06).

A second issue was that seniors were more likely to be isolated in their homes, especially in the winter and thus were dependent on eating what was in their homes. This was perceived to be nonperishable foods of inferior quality. Third, it was suggested that a great number of community area seniors reside in low income housing such as the housing offered by the YMCA. Concerns included that they did not have proper accommodations to cook healthy food and thus likely resorted to eating nonperishable fast foods. Representatives from the food pantry explained that they witness this problem on a daily basis as YMCA residents will turn down healthy foods in exchange for more processed foods, as they do not have the capacity to store or prepare the healthier varieties.

Female Voice: Our old neighbor used to [get help from] my mom, because nobody else would do it. The old lady used to have my mom go buy her food. If my mom didn't do it, she would just eat anything. Chips. Anything. I think that's a big problem for the senior citizens. During the snowstorms, especially. Many times they don't drive anyways, so the snowstorms are a moot point, but people forget about them because they've been shut up. I think there are a lot of people who would care, but they don't see them, so they don't know them. (Community Member Interview, 5/11/06)

Some of the community member interviewees also suggested that a portion of the community residents may have access to healthy foods but make poor food choices based limited experiences with lower quality, processed foods, lack of experience in purchasing, preparing and cooking food, and an acquired taste for fast foods. One of the retail food owners suggested that from his experience LINK users make poor choices with regards to healthy foods for their family.

Respondent: I think there's a lot of our customers that start from the beginning raising their kids and not teaching them correctly to eat the right foods. They give them whatever they want (Retail – Grocer, 5/25/06).

Food Insecurity Issues among Community Residents

Several causes of food insecurity were discussed, mostly by the community members. These included problems of the working poor such as not having enough money, experiencing bouts of unemployment and having family problems such as alcoholic family members and those with gambling problems. Several interviewees suggested that food choices are made in light of broader budgeting concerns, weighing the cost of food with that of health care including prescription drugs, housing and the costs of family pets. More expensive, higher quality foods may be passed up in order to accommodate other family financial obligations.

Two concerns emerged across the interviews with regard to community residents who experience food insecurity and use community programs. The first among community residents involves the quality of foods offered at emergency food programs including home delivered supplemental foods for the elderly. Personal experiences were shared in which food offered was expired of unacceptable taste and quality.

The second issue that was raised was the burden of qualifying for public aid programs such as LINK. These included the experiences of the working poor in which one does not meet certain income criteria for LINK and food stamps, but still experiences food insecurity. Also applying for public aid was perceived to be a hassle. Some discussed the need to pull one's child out of school to demonstrate need to the public aid office. Others discussed the requirement that you have an address and a phone number to receive public aid was perceived as a barrier to participation. Also some were frustrated with the behavior of public aid officers and government staff who seem to look down upon those in need of services.

Female Voice: No. When I had to go to my Public Aid office, no. There was a lot of paperwork. There was a lot of IDs and a lot of proof of income. It's a hassle.

Male Voice: Then the people treat you like you are nothing. "I'm doing you a favor. You're lucky." The government people, they treat you like you're nothing. They're like: "I'm superior."

Female Voice: Right. I agree with that.

Male Voice: It isn't too friendly then?

Female Voice: It is not. They treat you terrible.

Male Voice: Why do you think some people don't use these resources when they need them?

Female Voice: Because they don't want to deal with the hassle.

Female Voice: They don't want to be treated less than what they are. They want respect. I've been in Public Aid offices. They treat them terrible. They've got [unintelligible] that I didn't even want to apply. My husband said: "No, no, you're entitled to it. You don't have to be black or Spanish or whatever to get it. You're entitled to it." In some of the Public Aid offices that I've been to, like the one on North Avenue over there by [Orr] High School, they're coming in with fur coats and jewelry and all that. They treated them with respect. But when I come in and I'm white, they're treating me like: "What are you here for?" They give you an attitude. It's terrible. (Community Members, 5/11/06).

There was a perception among community member interviewees that federal supplemental food programs such as Women, Infants and Children (WIC) and Mothers and Children (MAC) were underutilized by community residents perhaps due to an unfamiliarity of the programs and relevant eligibility criteria.

Problems Experienced by Local Food Sector Representatives

- Food Pantry Challenges The Food Pantry representative in addressing Community Food Insecurity questions described the disadvantage of needing to go through Chicago Food Depository both in terms of the distance and the (volunteer) manpower needed.

Female Voice: there is food out there...here and there, but the big problem is getting it, you know? It is a big tax and we don't have the time and energy to be running around to different places. So the depository is probably better at doing that kind of stuff, although ... the one thing is... the one problem is: I know there has been times in which we have been able to get large quantities of frozen something or another, and we don't have storage for that...and the storage in the area well they won't store it for us one time someone wanted to give us a couple hundred turkeys because we were closer. The nearby store didn't want to take responsibility so we had to take it to the depository... so we had to bring it down there, and then going back to get it...

Facilitator: Yeah, because it's kind of far...

Female Voice: And we need to have manpower to do that...If you look at the age of our manpower around here...

Female Voice: Yeah, one man is like sixty-five, so... (Food Pantry Staff 5/3/06).

Knowledge of the Chicago Food Depository among retail food sector representatives in Portage Park was poor (discussed below). However, a problem identified by local retail representatives involved food retail corporate policies for disposing of expired or damaged foods prohibiting any consideration of donating these goods to food pantries.

Interviewer: Okay. What about expired deli products? What happens with those?

Respondent: Most of the time the company has to go dump them.

However, there was also evidence of retailers discounting foods to customers. This seems less of a policy and more of a consumer-driven exchange.

Interviewer: Okay. What about products that are slightly damaged but safe to eat?

Respondent: Sometimes the customer sees it and we give them half a price.

Interviewer: Discount or something? (Grocer 5/25/06).

Another problem with restaurants that are part of a corporate franchise is that the menu is predetermined. Changes to the menu to offer healthier foods are difficult to make given the corporate bureaucracy. Also the items for the predetermined menu are often made from frozen versus fresh products, limiting the extent to which local growers could be utilized.

The Food Pantry representatives delineated several barriers to being effective. These included an increase in demand for food, a decrease in the amount and quality and variety of food they receive to distribute.

We don't get in anymore... we don't get enough vegetables, we don't get enough meat...you know there is plenty of junk food, and pasta (Food Pantry Representative, 5/3/06).

That said the Pantry did make efforts to reach special populations. For example, special foods were stocked for people with health problems such as diabetes. Also, the special food needs of people of Islam faith were considered.

A significant Islamic contingent group and of course they don't eat pork, so we try to get something for them, but we don't have a lot of choice about what meat we carry, but we have to work with the food depository to get food for them (Food Pantry Representative, 5/3/06).

The food pantry faces financial strain. While supported by a Feinstein Grant, a bulk of the food pantry funding comes from churches some of which are in *dire straights*. The Food Pantry thinks a reduction in food donations may be due to the effects of an increasingly sensitive food safety environment.

Any kind of food rescue, there are so many restrictions and public health issues so I don't know any way to get around them. I am sure there are catering companies everywhere that probably would donate food to us, but everyone is worried about health issues, and lawsuits, and all that kind of (staff) stuff...(Food Pantry Representative, 5/3/06).

Food Pantry staff describe the small dent that their supplemental food plays in larger food security issues for families,

Female voice: What we give out only provides about 10% of their food...we can only cover ten percent of the food needs.

Facilitator: Ten percent?

Female voice: Ten percent, yeah, and the other ninety percent they got to come up with themselves and some of them aren't on food stamps (Food Pantry Representative, 5/3/06).

Due to the small quantity of food provided by the Food Pantry to individual families, Food Pantry participants may even *pantry hop*, or visit multiple area food pantries in order to secure adequate food.

Female Voice: well, there are a lot of people who work [missing word] or even work for (more) cash, you know? Or have family members helping them. Oh,

gosh! I don't know...they might go to other pantries, although they aren't supposed to, if they are desperate enough they will find ways to pantry hop. (Food Pantry Representative, 5/3/06)

However, it is notable that users of the local food pantry reported being pleased with the way they were treated by Food Pantry staff given that requesting food supplements can be an embarrassing and uncomfortable process.

Unique Role of Restaurants

While the Portage Park restaurant representatives did not necessarily consider themselves as playing an important role in Community Food Insecurity issues, suggesting that their role is to *serve healthy food... and follow health recommendations (Restaurant, 5/25/06)*, they shed light on a couple of potential intervention areas. First, there is a great deal of waste in the restaurant industry much of it due to corporate restaurant policy.

Interviewer: What do you do with foods that are close to expiration dates?

Respondent: They throw them out.

Interviewer: And what about dented cans?

Respondent: I'm not sure on that one.

Interviewer: Okay.

Respondent: There's [unintelligible] [our kitchen manager deals with] all that stuff.

Interviewer: Okay. What about expired deli products?

Respondent: Those go in the garbage. (Restaurant, 5/25/06)

Another example of the waste is the policy that any mistake made with a menu item must be thrown in the garbage. A restaurant representative suggested that even allowing the restaurant staff to consume the item would make a dent in community food insecurity.

Interviewer: Right, is there some way to get that food to people who need it?

Respondent: Right. Well, see, if it were my restaurant, I would say, "Let's do that," because it would make sense to give it to somebody rather than waste it. Because this way, even if you make a mistake -- like if they make a mistake with an omelet -- instead of letting us eat it, we have to throw it away. They throw away a whole omelet --

Interviewer: Right.

Respondent: -- rather than letting somebody eat it.

Proposed Solutions

Several solutions were proposed by the food sector representatives interviewed. These include the establishment of a food co-op (community members); financial training budgeting for food pantry consumers (food pantry staff); and, changing restaurant policy so that cooking mistakes made in the kitchen are not thrown away but instead offered to those in need (restaurant), discussed above.

- **Food Co-op**

Male Voice: What about starting a food co-op? Maybe you can describe it better than me.

Female Voice: I've done one. When I lived in Atlanta, they tend to be [shared.]

Male Voice: It's like a grocery store owned by the community. Instead of going to Jewel and letting them charge you whatever price they want for food, the community would own its own store.

Female Voice: Like a discount store.

Male Voice: It's kind of like a discount store, but you would own part of the store. You all would own parts of the store.

Female Voice: So everyone has a financial stake as well as a shopping stake. I think Hyde Park has a couple of them.

Female Voice: They used to, I think, in the '70s (Community Members, 5/11/06).

- **Budget Training** Financial training was suggested as being important to offer to low income residents particularly in light of diminishing federal funding for the poor so that finances are really tight and budgeting decisions are important.

Female Voice: One thing I didn't mention, that I think would be important to tell you, although it has nothing to do with ... it's a side issue but... There has been several times in which we have tried to go to financial seminars. There are a couple of places that do them, but you have to go there, and some people aren't as persistent, you know? If the pantries could have people come in... and this is part of what [name of UIC Food Stamp Nutrition Education representative] does but she does it on a small scale. Teaching people how to use coupons...where people can get the most bang for their buck; teaching them how to manage their money, I mean that has everything to do with food security, even though is not exactly

food security. I mean, people could stretch their dollars, they could use coupons... anything that would help them, you know? Stretch their money; that would be an important part I think. There isn't much of information available... we tried a few times. We had someone come in once but it didn't go that well. I think if we... I think there's a way of... Like with the dietitian seminar... they were able to make food and take it home, there's ways to [Unintelligible] the center is gets people to come, so if they are here, and they are able to listen, maybe they can take one thing away. You know, that's a good thing, you know? (Food Pantry Representative, 5/3/06).

- **Educating Residents About Healthy Eating** A class for residents on healthy food preparation was recommended. In fact, the meal would be prepared and then shared with the participants that day. Other suggestions included advising low income residents to rely on beans as a low cost, high protein food.

People in this area aren't brought up in a culture of beans. The Hispanic people (in Mexico) are brought up in a culture of beans but [unintelligible] others they don't know what to do with beans...(they) two thirds are really non-bean eaters...they don't know what to do with beans. We can educate them all you want, but they really aren't bean eaters. It's hard to get them to switch over and to see that as a big source for protein for them (Food Pantry, 5/3/06).

Potential Intervention Areas

In addition to the proposed solutions above, the analysis pointed to some key interventions with significant potential to make change.

- **Chicago Food Depository Educational Campaign** There is a glaring lack of knowledge of the existence of the Chicago Food Depository or Northern Illinois Food Bank by most interview participants.

Participants in the Restaurants, Grocers and Retail Food shops interviews simply did not know about the Chicago Food Depository or Northern Illinois Food Bank. A simple public education campaign with this audience could have great potential in building a community infrastructure toward improving food security. For example, in the Grocer Interview:

Interviewer: Have you ever communicated with, or considered, the Greater Chicago Food Depository? Are you familiar with that organization?

Respondent: No.

Interviewer: In that organization they will collect food from businesses that the food businesses can't sell. And then they will give it to the needy.

Respondent: No. We never....

Interviewer: Never? Would you consider doing something like that, do you think?

Respondent: After the 17 years we've been here, we never did it. I don't think now it is necessary to do that.

- **Restaurant and Retail Policy Changes** Corporate policy changes on the disposal of expired and damaged foods could make a big difference in the area. Also a better food sector infrastructure could potentially be built as a result of policy changes by building relationships between the Chicago Food Depository and community food retailers and restaurants.
- **Improving inspection and quality of foods at emergency food programs** Many interviewees felt that the supplemental food programs in their area should be better regulated to insure quality and variety of distributed foods.

Also involving the local food pantry with both the farmers markets in the summer and with community gardeners was suggested as well as providing the local food pantry with a garage and a freezer for better storage.