

**RIVERDALE COMMUNITY AREA, CHICAGO**  
**Northeastern Illinois Community Food Security Needs Assessment Qualitative Interviews**  
**University of Illinois at Chicago and People for Community Recovery**

**Analytical Approach**

Six qualitative interviews were conducted with the Riverdale community across five sectors of the food system. The food sector groups and their participants are described below.

Food Sector	Number of Participants	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity
Retail Food Outlet	1	M	African American
Retail Food Outlet	1	M	Middle Eastern
CBO Farmer’s Market Community Gardeners Food Security Advocate	5	F	African American, Asian, white
Community Members	8-7	M/F	African American
Restaurant	1	M	Middle Eastern
Emergency Food Programs	1	M	African American

Separate interview guides were developed and used for each food sector, and all interviews were tape recorded. The verbatim transcripts were coded and analyzed using Atlas-Ti qualitative software, with the most frequently used codes for the Riverdale analysis listed below. These results reflect the analysis across all of the Riverdale food sector interviews.

Code	Frequency of Use
Barriers to food security	9
Participants most vulnerable to CFIS	8
Strength (of Program in addressing FIS)	8
Make healthy food available	7
Buy food where CM	6
Community food insecurity	6

**KEY FINDINGS**

**INTRODUCTION** A large range of issues emerged in the Riverdale data, with total of 19 themes identified across the Riverdale interviews. These included:

- Transportation
- Availability of Healthy Food
- Lack of Investment in Riverdale
- Neighbors Help Each Other: *Highly Social* Community
- Strategies to Acquire Food
- Community Resources
- Barriers to Sustainable Food Security
- Community Area Retail Food Outlets
- Better Use of Land
- Factors that Influence Food Insecurity

- Strategies to Make Food Last
- Knowledge and Perception of Community area Food Assistance Programs
- Improving Access to Healthy Foods in Riverdale
- Evidence of community food insecurity
- Government or other policies that affect the community's food security
- Barriers preventing Retail Food Outlets and Restaurants from offering more healthy foods
- Availability of Culturally appropriate foods in Riverdale
- Food Waste
- Getting Involved

### **KEY FINDINGS**

**Transportation** The major issue with regard to food security in Riverdale is transportation. The community is geographically isolated by the highway and manufacturing industry. There are limited Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) routes in the community. It can take an hour on public transportation to get to food stores. Relying on public transportation limits the amount of food you can purchase and then carry with you. This is made more complicated if one needs to travel with children. Thus it is hard to shop economically and buy in bulk. Residents have tried to come up with strategies to overcome the transportation barriers. Some community members charge \$15 to drive people to food stores. This service is facetiously called Project Cabs. The lack of adequate access to retail food stores results in the reliance on food items that don't spoil. These tend to be less healthy than perishable foods.

*"The isolation of this community in general. It's connected on the West (sic) Side to Indiana and other neighborhoods. But, I mean, transportation wise, it's not connected too much. Blocked by the highway and blocked by all the industries that are around it (Community-based Organization, 4/15/05).*

*"It's not connected by much CTA wise, except for the 34" (Community-based Organization, 4/15/05).*

**Availability of healthy food** Unlike other community assessments, there is a discrepancy between retail food outlet owners and community members in terms of the perception of accessibility of healthy foods in Riverdale. The Retail Food Outlet Owners feel that they offer fresh food that people want at reasonable prices. Community members say food stores in the community have limited variety and poor quality foods.

**Lack of investment in Riverdale** There was a general impression that Riverdale is not taken seriously by the City of Chicago. Investment in terms of improving food security is needed.

*Like I said, I think the city taking this area seriously, taking these people seriously. It's the biggest joke. It's the biggest slap in peoples' face. I still live in the city, but just because it – who cares about the [unintelligible] south side? (Community-based Organization, 4/15/05).*

*One of the most important things because we're not recognized or because we don't give*

*the attention that is need to be recognized – and that’s what we need to do as a community as a whole, is engage in this whole process and talk about food security, transportation, health issues and that stuff from a community perspective. Because then that will change some. One of the things – and then you have to deal totally – because of the economic disparity in this community, you have to improve the personal economic [unintelligible] because that determines how a person eats – good or bad [eating]” ? (Community-based Organization, 4/15/05).*

**Neighbors help each other: Highly Social community** There was consensus that everyone should have access to quality food. The interview participants suggested that in Riverdale people are raised to know that you share when you have food, and can get food from neighbors when you need it. As such, the stigma of asking for food is not as prominent in Riverdale. It was suggested that if you need food you go next door.

**Strategies to acquire food** Community members acknowledged witnessing stealing, dumpster diving, and going on dates to have someone else pay for the food. Many reported that when they see dumpster diving they offer that needy person fresh food. The community-based organization representatives did not see evidence of these strategies in Riverdale. Other strategies include local stores giving credit for food and giving produce away when it is near expiration. Some people come by and offer to clean a house or the yard for food or money. Participants were willing to give food if someone asked, rather than make them work for food.

**Community resources** When people have used up all their own food supplies for the month the community-based organization representative interviews refers them to food pantry and the truck that is sent from Greater Chicago Food Depository first Tuesday of month with food to distribute to residents.

**Barriers to sustainable food security** The representative from the community based organization suggested that quality of food in community not good, but is affordable. There is a general lack of education about healthy foods and budgeting toward eating healthy. Thus while the availability of healthy foods is not ideal, there is not enough demand for healthier foods driving their availability.

At the time of data collection the community was undergoing a great deal of change. There was some uncertainty as to a public housing plan to improve quality of public housing in the city by creating more mixed income housing. The thought was that the uncertainty created a general sense of insecurity and thus things were stagnant in the community. Residents didn’t want to spend time on community issues if they wouldn’t be around in a year.

**Community area retail food outlets** There is real concern, expressed by community members, about the lack of quality food items at local retail food outlets. There was a case described in which the store owner was repeatedly told to improve the quality of his food items to no avail.

*Facilitator: So why wouldn’t that person just shop at a neighborhood store?*

*Male Voice: That's what I was fittin' to say. If you - why would we have neighborhood stores if we always got to go out? If we got neighborhood stores, everything in the neighborhood store should be in all the rest of the stores. We shouldn't have to go way across town to shop for our kids when we got a store right here (Community Member, 2/11/05).*

*Facilitator: So what are some of the solutions to this, these barriers? Do you think our neighborhood stores should add more healthy foods, better access, sales?*

*Male Voice: Exactly.*

*Male Voice: I honestly believe that the only way that you can - because they have been told several times - I'm just speaking about this store in particular. They have been told -*

*Facilitator: [Inaudible] speak about that store in particular.*

*Male Voice: Okay, but they have to been - they've been told several times by several consumers - me, myself, I know I told them, you know, that their food is substandard. You know what I'm saying? You have to take into consideration of your consumer and what it's probably going to take is for us to rally together as consumers and just say enough.*

*Female Voice: Or quit shopping.*

*Female Voice: Right. That's exactly what I'm getting to... enough is enough and just stop shopping there.*

*Female voice: Boycott it*

*Facilitator: Boycott it?*

*Facilitator: You think y'all force them to do better?*

*Female Voice: I think it would force them to do better or it would force them out of the neighborhood.*

*Male Voice: I don't think it would force them to do better because if they ain't done better in all this time, they ain't never going to get better. This store been here since I've been living out here and I've been out for like nineteen years. It been the same people running it and it ain't changed really a bit.*

*Male voice: I honestly think that a boycott would do it.*

*Male voice: So I think every year it get worsen, if you ask me.*

*Female Voice: [Inaudible] There are certain people to go over there and eat that stuff where some of us don't buy because I don't buy no meat up there. I buy – (Community Members, 2/11/05).*

**Better use of land** In addition to relating concern about lack of education about healthy foods, budgeting, “what am I eating; why am I eating it” knowledge, the community-based organization and food security advocate spoke more broadly on better land use issues, such as the strategies of having community gardens and a farmer’s market.

**Factors that influence food insecurity** Several factors were delineated by community member participants that cause food insecurity among area residents. First the lack of meal planning and knowledge of healthy cooking contributes to food insecurity. Second, likely due to transportation barriers, people focus on quantity instead of quality when purchasing food. Third, there is a poor level of understanding of budgeting or following a budget.

**Strategies to make food last** Community residents suggested that people water down ingredients, eat cheaper foods like potatoes or pasta rather than meat, and tend not to serve more nutritious foods because they are more expensive. Parents tend to serve children nutritious foods but eat less nutritious foods themselves to save money.

The community-based organization representative suggested that of all the fresh fruits and vegetables more cabbage, carrots and potatoes are consumed because they last longer.

**Knowledge and perception of community area food assistance programs** There was a general lack of knowledge of food assistance programs and their availability. Most people perceived that there was no senior meal program and they were largely unaware of other food assistance services. It was suggested that the programs, if they exist, are not well advertised.

Some residents who need the services don’t use them because they have too much pride. Even the school-based breakfast program was stigmatizing for children. Others would rather steal or hit to get food. It was suggested that food assistance program staff should have positive attitudes; that the programs are in a good location, and good distribution of marketing information is involved.

Some community members suggested that they experience problems when using or trying to use the emergency food programs. These include program volunteers taking food before residents get it; and both the staff and the recipients taking more food than they are allowed.

*Facilitator: Has anyone ever had a problem with one of these programs?*

*Female Voice: I have. I'm not even going to lie. I have volunteered for the food giveaway. I have seen people stack they carts like they was going grocery shopping. Now, I'm not defending raggy products. I'm not - look, I'm keeping it real.*

*Facilitator: You mean the staff, the volunteers?*

*Female Voice: The volunteers.*

*Female Voice: Right. They go shopping themselves, huh?*

*Facilitator: So they are taking the food before the residents can get it?*

*Female Voice: Because I used to look out my back door when they used to be giving it down there at the community building and see them car trunks full.*

*Male Voice: Right. They put it in they trunks and then they give what's left out to the people who come (Community Member Interview, 2/11/05).*

This idea that food assistance program staff and volunteers may help themselves to some of the food items generated a great deal of dialog and debate among the community members.

*Male Voice: Okay, but let me throw a question on that question. Some people that are volunteering are going through the same thing as the people that they're helping. Are they exempt just because they volunteering [unintelligible]?*

*Female Voice: No, no, that's not the thing, baby.*

*Male Voice: I'm understanding what you're saying. I'm understanding perfectly what you're saying and I shouldn't have - I thought I wouldn't have to say that I understood that question. I'm asking, my question is, am I exempt because I volunteer for a program from obtaining a bag when I'm going through the same situation? Just because my heart is good, I can't have one of the - if I'm passing out water, I can't have a water for myself?*

*Female voice: You can have water, but you can't have all the water.*

*Male Voice: You can have a water, but you can't have four and give everybody else one.*

*Female Voice: That was point, which I'm explaining to the people, people got frustrated. I'm explaining to the people the food is free, just get you a bag and I'm going to fill it. Now, I see people take three or four bags. You know, just taking it. I had to really tell them, would y'all look at the people taking the stuff like they was in a grocery store. That's not right.*

*Facilitator: Okay. Were these the people that were volunteering in doing this or the people that you were passing or both?*

*Female Voice: Both.*

*Facilitator: Both, so it was like the staff was helping themselves before the residents or after?*

*Male Voice: Before and after. And they still get what's left over.*

*Female Voice: The volunteers get theirs first and then after they get theirs first, then they said you coming in, people be taking more stuff.*

*Male Voice: They still get to divide what's left between them some more, like, well, this is left, so you take that, I'm going to take that (Community Member, 2/11/05).*

It was discussed that better organization and ground rules would solve this problem.

**Improving access to healthy foods in Riverdale** Several ideas were generated in the community member interview.

- Make foods we want available in stores we have
- Establish and enforce standards of cleanliness for stores
- Provide public transportation to the large supermarkets
- Start a food co-op
- Start farmers' markets in the community
- Establish a community garden
- Receiving more assistance (e.g., more food stamps, WIC vouchers, universal school meals, etc)
- Increase the availability of healthy foods
- Better/more/foods from emergency food system

Interestingly increasing incomes so assistance programs are no longer needed was offered by the facilitator, but the group members said this was not needed.

**Evidence of community food insecurity** The community based organization and food security advocate suggested that some people report having to sell food to pay rent. The retail food outlet representative suggested that many people run out of money for food at the end of the month. The representative from the restaurant sector described people coming to the restaurant daily to ask for food, with no money. And the emergency food program staff described people on the streets not eating for up to days at a time, large families in need, and inadequate quantities of food stamps to meet need.

*Male Voice: Yes. You've got people that's less fortunate as others. This program is needed because you have people on the streets. There are people who have come to me that didn't have anything to eat in two days. We have women that's raising children out here, I'd say seven to ten children. They don't have enough money as far as food stamps to provide for their family. So this is very much needed for the less fortunate (Emergency Food Program 9/19/05).*

The retail food outlet representative reported giving away food to the hungry or homeless as well as allowing a customer to be a little short in their bill. The restaurant participant described giving people sandwiches if they know they have no food.

**Government or other policies that affect the community's food security** A range of issues were considered by the participants, ranging from government conspiracy, to failure of public schools to teach nutrition education, to better and more local resources. The current food stamp office in the area is two bus-rides away.

**Barriers preventing retail food outlets and restaurants from offering more healthy foods**

The retail food outlet was not able to identify a barrier except to suggest that the profit margin is tight. Prices cost smaller stores double what Jewel buys. All food ordered had delivery charges on top of the cost of the food items. The restaurant hadn't considered offering healthy foods but may be interested if consumer demand necessitated. Both the Retail Food Outlet and the Restaurant would consider offering locally grown foods in their stores, but have not been asked about it before. Offering local foods would depend on quality of product and cost. Local growers would need to come to them to make it work.

**Availability of culturally appropriate foods in Riverdale** Overall it was discussed that African American foods such as soul food, BBQ, pork (some kinds) chitterlings, smoked meats, chicken, sausage, greens, green vegetables, fruits were widely available in Riverdale.

**Food waste** The restaurant participant reported that leftover food is sometimes given away to someone who helps sweep up outside. Otherwise leftover food is taken home by the restaurant owners. Items that are close to expiration dates are returned to the distributor or disposed of by the retail food outlet, although some of it is put it on sale. The restaurant may sell dented cans that are not leaking or give them to the church but the owner throws away expired deli products. The restaurant participant was uncomfortable contributing food that is safe, but you that can't sell to food banks or food rescue operations, but relented after probing by the interviewer.

**Getting involved** There was some interest in a community wide food security effort, although there was concern by some with the local politics. The retail food outlet insisted there needs to be an organized approach to improving food security with all businesses in community involved, as one business can't afford to do this alone. He articulated a possible solution that includes all businesses going to Sam's Club, loading up buses/trucks and handing food out in community. The benefits to making change in the community would include less stealing and fewer people hanging around for nothing.

*Respondent: You'll have less stealing, that's the first thing. You'll have less people just hanging around for nothing. That would be for the area, you know? I mean, it would make a big difference, trust me.*

*Interviewer: It would make a big difference, okay. Like, lots of benefits?  
(Retail Food Outlet, 1/25/05)*