



**Journal of Health Disparities Research and Practice**  
**Volume 10, Issue 4, Winter 2017, pp. 77 - 111**  
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## Situating Food Insecurity in a Historic Albuquerque Community: The Whorled Relationship between Food Insecurity and Place

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines conceptualizations of the relationship between food insecurity and place. We use an ethnographically inspired and community-engaged approach to situate our analysis of fluid dynamics at work in a community with high levels of food insecurity. We propose that the relationship between place and people's experience of food insecurity is recursive, dialectical, and "whorled." This relationship reflects complex, interconnected, and multidimensional processes with consequences for the health of residents. Our research demonstrates the key nature of the health-place nexus by exploring how food insecurity articulates with place in unexpected ways that go beyond discussions of food, food environments, food access, food practices or food systems that have become common in the literature.

**Keywords:** Food Insecurity, Place, Health

### INTRODUCTION

*It comes down to a spatial understanding of belonging. Our families have been here for a while so we have those roots, whereas people who migrated from other parts don't have an attachment to that particular space. Maybe that is why I say that other people aren't experiencing this understanding.*

Quote from a resident of Santa Barbara/Martineztown

### Incorporating Place in Research on Food Insecurity

Many people do not think about how the neighborhood where they live influences their health, or when they do, if the neighborhood environment has negative health consequences, they frequently do not have the power or resources to affect positive change. However, the connection between place and health is increasingly acknowledged in the public health literature and in our understanding of the dynamics of wellness (Raubal, et al., 2015). At the same time, we need to improve our conceptualization of the relationship between health and neighborhood environment to account not only for existing local social relationships or neighborhood built environment *per se*, but also for the specific historic, socio-economic, spatial, and relational dynamics of a neighborhood, and the everyday practices of people who live in those spaces. Food insecurity in the United States (Knight, et al., 2016; Pruitt, et al., 2016; Salvo, Silver & Stein, 2016; Knowles, et al., 2016; Libman, 2016) has been shown to be influenced by a variety of spatial-environmental factors (Heynen, Kurtz & Trauger, 2012). We know that neighborhoods influence the food security status of individuals and families, yet in a review of literature on food insecurity and place, Carter, Dubois and Tremblay (2013) were unable to identify a specific mechanism for how place and food insecurity are related, or to develop definitive conclusions for thinking about this relationship. In reality, we continue to have a shallow understanding of how place-based community dynamics are implicated in the incidence, experience, or production of food insecurity.

### Measuring and Defining Food Insecurity

The history and etymology of the concept of food insecurity reflects ongoing political and ideological debates about poverty and government responsibility (Page-Reeves 2014a). In today's parlance, "food insecurity" is the term that we use to refer to what in the past might have been called "hunger." Researchers and policy makers interested in understanding the dynamics of food insecurity and identifying solutions continue to debate about how food insecurity should be defined and measured (Page-Reeves 2014a; Jones, et al., 2013). Food insecurity in the U.S. is commonly measured using the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement (CPS-FSS) questionnaire. The CPS-FSS which is a validated instrument for use with general and Hispanic populations to assess household food security status and family coping strategies under conditions of low food security (Frongillo, 1999; Harrison, et al., 2003), yet there continues to be disagreement over how we should define who is food insecure (Pruitt, et al., 2016). Despite these debates over metrics and definitions, however, there is growing awareness that food insecurity is a multidimensional health issue. Food security status influences individual and family nutritional health (Olson 1999), overweight and obesity (Smith, et al., 2016), health care utilization (Sattler and Bhargava 2016), intimate partner violence (Ricks, et al., 2016), emotional and mental health (Davidson & Kaplan, 2017; Burke, et al., 2016), cognitive decline (Wong, et al., 2016), academic outcomes (Elzein, et al., 2017), housing status (e.g., homelessness) (Schure, et al., 2016), cardiovascular health (Leung, Tester, & Laraia, 2017), childhood adversity (Sun, et al., 2016), and toxic stress (Knowles, et al., 2016).

### Situating Food Insecurity: An Overview

Here we examine different conceptualizations of the relationship between food insecurity and place, and we use an ethnographic and community-engaged approach to situate our analysis of

fluid dynamics at work in a community with high levels of food insecurity. Research presented is from data gathered as part of a study of food insecurity and women's social networks in Albuquerque, New Mexico's historic neighborhood of Santa Barbara/Martineztown (SB/MT). New Mexico has a 17.3% food insecurity rate and is the fourth worst in the nation for childhood food insecurity (28.3%) (Gundersen, et al., 2015). Albuquerque is one of 25 metropolitan statistical areas ranked worst for food hardship among households with children (FRAC, 2014). We propose that the relationship between place and people's experience of food insecurity is recursive, dialectical, and *whorled*. This relationship reflects complex, interconnected, and multidimensional processes with consequences for the health of residents. Our research demonstrates the key nature of the health-place nexus by exploring how food insecurity articulates with place in unexpected ways that go beyond discussions of food, food environments, food access, food practices, or food systems that have become common in the literature.

#### Conceptualizing Place and its Appropriations

We originally intended our research on local dynamics of food insecurity to focus on how cultural meanings associated with food and social relationships between women influence the experience of not having enough to eat. However, we also recognized the need to conceptualize our analysis in relation to broader structural dynamics (Page-Reeves, et al., 2014a, 2014b). Yet we quickly became aware of the need to situate food insecurity in *place* by orienting our lens to include the story of the neighborhood and how social relationships ensconced in the landscape materialize in the everyday lives of residents. Places are "*made*" through dialectic processes involving myriad social actors, alternative and often competing narratives and identities, and an intricate labyrinth of political and personal agendas. Low and Lawrence-Zuniga (2003) conceptualize this using a political economy of space to understand local dynamics. They see history as inscribed upon spaces and places through lived experience. Echoes and memories of that experience intersect with the ongoing agency of individuals in ways that intertwine people, events, everyday activity, and public and private spaces.

As a concatenation of the personal, the social, and the material, this idea of *placemaking* is rendered particularly enthralling by contemporary realities. Liminality and precarity (Harris & Scully 2015; Neilson, 2015) associated with ascendancy of the neoliberal project creep into our collective consciousness, eroding our sense of wellbeing, cultivating insecurity, and reconfiguring expectations and sensibilities. These misgivings and reorientations reflect ideologically driven utopias that serve the needs of capital and elite stakeholders while not merely marginalizing average people, but actually making the lives of some irrelevant within a system trained on concentrating wealth and power. As such, locally driven *placemaking* can be seen as an appealing challenge to neoliberal hegemony by offering an alternative logic for creating meaning, belonging, and security that has the potential to empower people. But the paradigm of *place* is *en vogue*—appropriated as a marketing strategy by developers of "place as product" tourism,<sup>1</sup> embraced as a mechanism for economic growth promoted by developers, urban investors, and civic planners,<sup>2</sup> and celebrated as a strategic funding approach and business

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<sup>1</sup>[http://www.creativecity.ca/database/files/library/steven\\_thorne\\_place\\_product.pdf](http://www.creativecity.ca/database/files/library/steven_thorne_place_product.pdf)

<sup>2</sup><http://www.spur.org/publications/article/2007-05-01/civic-planning-america>

model by philanthropic grant-makers.<sup>3</sup> In this context, teasing out the multidimensionality of these interwoven dynamics and the myriad ways that place punctuates and condenses everyday social experience requires that we reimagine the relationship between food insecurity and place-based realities.

### Imagining the Food Environment:

#### *Deserts, Jungles, Swamps, Oases, and Mirages*

The concept of a *food environment* physically locates the way that we think about food. A food environment tethers our perspective to a place. This has implications for the way we conceptualize food insecurity in relation to place. Mainstream narratives that are commonly used in the media and by policy makers tend to frame food insecurity as a reflection of personal failure (Page-Reeves, 2014a). People who cannot afford to buy food are depicted as irresponsible, lazy, or underserving welfare “spongers” (Page-Reeves, 2012, 2014a). Research demonstrating that the nature of the food environment is a key factor influencing access to food offers a counter-framing by uncovering environmental challenges outside the control of individuals (Garasky, Morton and Greder 2006). Research using *food assessments* (Glanz, et al., 2007) has given us tools to document specific components of the food environment in a neighborhood and to reveal disparities when low- and high- food access communities are contrasted. The extensive and influential literature on *food deserts* (Walter, Keane & Burke, 2010) has improved our understanding of environmental factors that affect whether or not people have sufficient access to food. Food deserts are neighborhoods that do not have places or opportunities to buy, receive, or grow food. Widener and Shannon (2014) further expand the food environment lens to include time as a dimension of the food access equation. They ask “*when*” are food deserts?, or how specific moments in time and space coalesce to create the experience of food insecurity—for example, at the end of a pay period when low-income households struggle to buy food as they wait for the next pay check.

Recent works explore the excess of cheap, unhealthy food in impoverished communities and communities of color that might otherwise be categorized as food deserts, by conceptualizing these food environments as “*food jungles*” (Rose, 2014) or “*food swamps*” (Reel & Badger, 2014). These areas have food available, but it is an overabundance of inexpensive “junk food” or “fast food” rather than affordable, fresh, or healthy food. Phillips (2012) discusses how community food efforts such as gardens or local food co-ops can inspire “*food oases*” in these same neighborhoods, creating spaces of food refuge for people who otherwise would have no capacity to eat freshly grown fruits and vegetables. However, Fitzpatrick (2015) uncovers how gentrification creates high-priced and specialty markets that may be located in food desert communities but that are little more than “*food mirages*” for low-income residents who cannot afford to shop in stores designed and priced for middle and upper income customers who have moved in to their neighborhoods. These works provide new perspectives for thinking about the complexities of how the food environment operates in relation to food insecurity and nutritional health.

#### *Searching for Foodways in the Desert*

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<sup>3</sup><http://www.cof.org/content/approaches-place-based-philanthropy>

Alkon and colleagues (2013) go further in pushing the boundaries of how we think about food insecurity and the food environment. They provide an important critique of the concept of food desert and its focus on food access as over-emphasizing the supply-side dimension of food insecurity, ignoring existing *foodways*, and underestimating the agency of people in procuring food. The tendency has been for food desert literature to “produce static and fragmentary accounting of numbers of food sources without conceptualizing the ever-changing social, relational, and political nature of landscapes of urban food consumption” (Miewald & McCann, 2014: 539). Cannuscio, Weiss, and Asch (2010: 389) suggest thinking about foodways in relation to “the many associated pitfalls from production to purchase to consumption of food, [that] represent a complex challenge to the well-being of low-income residents across the life course.” Case studies by Alkon and colleagues (2013) from Oakland and Chicago, and works such as Page-Reeves’ (2014b) edited collection on women’s agency in the experience of food insecurity, provide insights into the everyday struggles that people face in putting food on the table, but also how people actively shape the nature of the meals they eat, and the ways that food and food practices enrich people’s lives.

People’s relationship with food is complex and reflects personal tastes and culturally derived preferences and values—a point often disregarded in relation to people who live in poverty. Phillips (2012) challenges researchers to recognize that a meal is not just anything edible. Food banks routinely distribute food that is considered unhealthy or unpalatable. Given that food-related illnesses (diabetes, obesity and hypertension) are generally a significant problem in low-income populations, this becomes a particular concern. But food quality is not the only issue. McEntee and colleagues (2013) mapped spatial patterns in food access using a “*Flavor Availability Index*” (FAI), emphasizing cultural appropriateness as a dimension of food choice. They discuss how flavor influences what foods people choose to purchase or avoid and how they construct the meals they eat. They demonstrate that low FAI is associated with negative health outcomes. Rose (2014) found that African American women who live in a food jungle in Detroit would rather do without than eat food that they believe to be unclean or old, and Stanford (2014) recounts how individuals who attend a food charity in southern New Mexico decline or give away items that they do not find appealing or do not know how to use. Stowers (2014) demonstrates the lengths to which women immigrants from El Salvador will go to obtain and prepare culturally sanctioned cuisine through an elaborated process she calls “*food grooming*.” Social and cultural practices within food deserts and inside of food insecure households occur in a context of poverty, but it is important to remember that they can also act to counter demoralizing and dehumanizing social dynamics associated with being poor.

#### *Social Construction of Food Access*

Failure to account for foodways and personal agency is not the only weakness of the food desert paradigm. A focus on physical manifestation of food access as food outlets in a given geographic location directs attention away from the extent to which the food environment is a socially constructed reality. There are a variety of ways that policy decisions restrict food access more generally through zoning and tax incentives related to grocery store siting (Bibby 2015). Zoning ordinances are often more restrictive of grocery stores in lower income than higher income communities (Chriqui, 2012). Housing development priorities (Bowen 2015) and limitation on eligibility for government-sponsored food support programs (Dickinson 2014) and food charity



(Stanford, 2014) further influence the food environment and the food security status of households in a neighborhood.

In addition, food access is often mediated by social relationships that buffer the experience of food insecurity or influence the ability of a family to have enough food to eat. Food insecurity has been studied in relation to the local social environment as social capital and the strength or content of individual social networks (Kimbrow, Denney, & Panchang, 2012), and as a reflection of the depth of local food systems knowledge (Mares 2013). The skill required to navigate financial, geographic, policy, social, cultural, and personal/relational landscapes in order to procure a meal—what Williams and colleagues describe as a “*dynamic, managed process*” (Williams et. al., 2012: 254) and what Page-Reeves (2014a: 19) calls women’s “*food access expertise*”—encapsulate the ways that food access is an embedded, socially constructed reality that requires an expansive lens.

*Foodscape: New Lens or Myopic Vision?*

Reflecting on this complexity, Passidomo (2013: 2) suggests

*“going ‘beyond food’ means considering seriously all of the other systems that are shaped by and reflect hegemonic ideologies; or, working in reverse, perhaps it is time to start thinking of food (systems) (including nonprofits, schools, housing, as well as the food system) as a lens through which systems, structures, and institutions of dominance are made visible and, subsequently contestable.”*

Others have taken up this idea in the concept of foodscape that has become popular for capturing the multifaceted nature of the food environment and the way it manifests in the interplay of social actors, institutions and dynamics (McKendrick, 2014). Miewald and McCann (2014: 538) argue that food should be more central in critical research to “address the decentering of this fundamental human need in discussions of urban survival by positioning food as a central lens and focus for analyzing the everyday experience of urban poverty and for generating critical examples, ideas, arguments and questions about how to better organize urban food systems and empower those whose daily survival depends on them.” Conceptualizing food insecurity through a lens of the foodscape has the potential to reveal relationships that structure what, when, and how people are able to procure food. However, we wonder about the ability of the foodscape approach to fully appreciate or explain how food insecurity is situated in a place or how it is continually reproduced. Panelli and Tipton (2009: 455) have argued that we must go “*beyond foodscapes*” to recognize the “critical significance of broader associations between culture, environment and well-being...for a more culturally complex reading of food and food practices.” However, this merely brings us back to foodways—a circular argument. Clearly, we need a different lens.

#### Overview of this Study

The research presented here was conducted as part of “Fiestas: Improving Food Security in an Urban Latino Community,” a two-year community-engaged study funded by a joint grant from the National Institute of Minority Health and Health Disparities and the Environmental Protection Agency from 2011 to 2013, with continued community engagement after the funding ended and ongoing to the present time. Here we report analysis of data obtained from 2011 to 2015. As indicated above, this study focused on gendered dynamics of food insecurity and the

social environment in SB/MT, a historic, urban and largely Latino community in Albuquerque, New Mexico. We gathered data on the local context, cultural meanings, and social dynamics that define women's relationship to food and their experience of hunger and food insecurity. We chose to focus on women's experiences and relationships because women in the United States, and particularly women in Latino culture, are generally responsible for food procurement, meal planning, and food preparation and serving. In addition, because these activities and responsibilities are linked to women's normative social roles and often to women's gendered sense of self, women's experiences and perspectives are key for thinking about and addressing food insecurity. Moreover, because research has demonstrated that social relationships have a significant influence on the food insecurity status of households, we were interested in exploring how women's social networks and social relationships in SB/MT more generally, are implicated in women's experience of food insecurity.

Our research approach was ethnographically inspired. We used multiple, integrated data collection methods. Through our community-engaged activities, we connected with key community leaders and local charismatic personalities, but we also established relationships with women residents who do not tend to participate in meetings or groups, and we maintained a holistic perspective in the way we gathered the data and in our analysis. We listened closely to what people had to say but we thought critically about how their perspectives could be understood in relation to the larger political and economic context. We believe that ultimately, our ethnographic and community-engaged approach led us develop a more expansive lens for understanding and thinking about food insecurity. Although we gathered rich participant narratives and our published work has suggested evocative interpretations of women's experience of and relationship to food insecurity (Page-Reeves, et al., 2014a; 2014b), in the analysis we develop below, we are less concerned about presenting further explorations of the details of these data, and less focused on food. Rather, we use food and the historical, cultural, political, and economic context of SB/MT as a neighborhood as a taking off point for reconsidering the way we tend to think about the relationship between food insecurity and place.

## **METHODS**

This study was approved by a full committee review by the Human Research Protections Office at the University of New Mexico (UNM). Even though the study qualified for expedited review, the funder required that all studies funded under that particular grant mechanism obtain full committee review. All study participants provided signed informed consent.

As a key feature of our community-engaged research design, we convened a five-member Community Board (CB) of women residents of SB/MT (Page-Reeves, et al., 2014a; 2014b). Members were women with some experience with food insecurity who were identified by the SB/MT Learning Center, a local agency partnering with us on the research. Most of these women did not know each other prior to the study. At the time, three members were single and had no children, one member had a blended family with children who were young adults and middle/high schoolers, and one member had adult children. All of them are women of color and have lived in the community for many years. The CB met with researchers over a shared dinner in the home of one of the CB members (author #5) twice a month in years one and two with support from the funded project, and once a month without any funding support in year three.

These meetings developed CB-researcher relationships, nurtured CB understanding of research approaches, and provide CB input and guidance for the design and direction of the study.

Data considered in the analysis presented here include: (1) transcripts from iterative interviews, (2) results of a household food security, (3) a community food assessment, (4) notes from observation of community meetings, (5) CB meeting notes, (6) notes from and outcomes of five “Fiesta” events with women from the neighborhood, (7) social network analysis with women from the Fiesta events, and (8) contextual research on the neighborhood.

We used a holistic approach to conduct a rigorous, disciplined, empirical analysis of all data according to Hammersley’s (2008) criteria for qualitative research based on plausibility, credibility, and relevance. We followed Creswell and colleagues’ (2011) standards for mixed method studies using an embedded design by integrating data from different components of the study in an iterative fashion. Interim analyses of different data sets were used to inform the design of subsequent data collection tools and methods. Analytic integration occurred during interpretation. We *braided* analyses of different data sets to enhance the emergent quality of our interpretations to increase meaningfulness of our findings. This iterative approach contributed to our conceptualization of the *whorled* relationship between food insecurity and place. We used Gläser and Laudel’s (2013) framework for theory-driven qualitative content analysis. We identified conceptual categories and patterns related to specified domains of inquiry, extracted data, and developed conceptual summaries. Following review and summary, we coded extracted data for systematic themes and sub-themes within identified domains. We explored interconnections between theme categories and developed a holistic interpretation of the data (“constant comparison” [Perry 2003]).

## RESULTS

Interviews: We conducted 72 interviews with 25 women and three men who are residents of SB/MT. Interviews were done in six iterative phases and some participants were interviewed multiple times. Information gathered in earlier interview sets and through project activities with neighborhood residents was used to define the questions asked in subsequent sets:

- *Set #1:* We interviewed 12 local women and obtained information regarding their perspectives on and experience with food insecurity.
- *Set #2:* In our analysis of Set #1 interview transcripts, we identified a need for more information about neighborhood dynamics to contextualize our understanding of women’s experience. We asked these questions in Set #2 interviews with 22 participants (19 women and three men). We included men in this interview set because we wanted to speak with some key community members who had significant historical memory of the neighborhood or knowledge of recent local events.
- *Set #3:* In our analysis of Set #2 interview transcripts, we identified a need for further information about why interviewees believe that people in their community struggle with food insecurity, what they think could be done about this problem, and a description of the types of community action activities in



SB/MT that they are aware of or have been involved with. We asked these questions in Set #3 interviews with 13 women.

- *Set #4:* In our analysis of interview transcripts from Sets #1, #2 and #3, we identified a need for more personal information about individual participants. In interview Set #4, we invited women who had shared significant personal experiences with or perspectives on food insecurity to tell their stories in detail and describe their own personal histories and trajectories.
- *Fiesta Event Evaluation Interviews:* The themes and agendas of Fiesta events were informed by knowledge we gained through interviews regarding what information women thought would be helpful for them to think further about or do something about food insecurity in SB/MT. Fiesta events were designed by our CB members with this in mind. At the end of the project, we conducted 13 evaluation interviews with women who had participated in the Fiesta events as a way to evaluate the appropriateness and impact of project activities.
- *CB Member Interviews:* At the end of the project, we conducted interviews with the five CB members regarding their experience participating in this project—what they had learned and what their experience had been like.

From these different types of interviews conducted in an iterative fashion, we obtained a wealth of data about participant perspectives and experiences and about community dynamics. We learned about the cultural dimensions of women's relationship with food (Page-Reeves, et al., 2014a; 2014b), the struggles they experience (Page-Reeves, et al., 2014a) and the ways that they structure their lives to be able to provide or attempt to provide a tasty and healthy diet for their families (Page-Reeves, et al., 2014b). We discovered the complex ways that history and policy intersect with women's lives. And, we revealed the extent to which our community engagement positively influenced the lives of our CB members and the women who participated in our Fiesta events (Page-Reeves, et al., n.d.).

The narratives we gathered describe women's struggle with the emotional and physical challenges of not having enough food to feed their families (Page-Reeves, et al., 2014a). Women we spoke with connect shame, fear, stress, family conflict, the potential for child abuse, feelings of failure, having to sell beloved family pets, the risk of becoming homeless, not knowing where to turn for help, and actual physical distress with food insecurity. Women routinely hide food insecurity from family and members of their social network. But women also develop strategies to mitigate the experience of food insecurity by cultivating relationships and social networks for sharing, utilizing food safety net support services and resources, and employing imaginative meal planning, food shopping, and cooking to “stretch” benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) (commonly known as Food Stamps), food dollars, and food itself (Page-Reeves, et al., 2014b). Women's creativity in developing this “food access expertise” (Page-Reeves, et al., 2014) redefines the nature of their families' food insecurity, but they are nonetheless unable to escape the historical, economic, political and social forces that create dynamics of food insecurity in their homes (Page-Reeves, et al., 2014a).

Food Security Survey: The U.S. Department of Agriculture identifies SB/MT as a low-income, low-food access community. The community has 1,155 households with 2,287 total

people. We conducted a household food security survey with 49 households representing 140 individuals (Moffett & Page-Reeves, n.d.). We used the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement (CPS-FSS) questionnaire, which is a validated instrument for general and Hispanic populations (Frongillo, 1999; Harrison, et al., 2003) to assess food security status and family coping strategies under conditions of low food security. The CPS-FSS was administered in-person to households within the SB/MT neighborhood in conjunction with a UNM Research Service Learning course focused on the relationship between food deserts and food security. Students from the course canvassed the neighborhood at varying times of day and on two weekends to attract a broad representation of people living in the area when administering the CPS-FSS.

Although official food security data is not assessed at the neighborhood level in Albuquerque, our food security survey identified the prevalence of low food security in SB/MT at 32.7% and very low food security at 12.2% (Moffett & Page-Reeves, n.d.), more than twice the already high state levels of 12.3% and 4.6% (Coleman-Jensen, et al., 2014). Compared to the 1-in-6 families who struggle to buy food in the rest of the U.S., 1-in-3 families in SB/MT have trouble feeding their families. Moreover, the nearest food store is greater than one mile away. Because SB/MT lacks a full-service grocery store, 71.4% of the households we surveyed reported having to travel outside of the neighborhood to buy food. Yet 16.1% of the households were without vehicles. This means that it is more likely that families without access to transportation struggle to have access to food (Moffett & Page-Reeves, n.d.). These statistical facts played out in the lives of women we interviewed, and we have discussed their experience with food insecurity and their stories in detail in our published work (Page-Reeves, et al., 2014a, 2014b).

Community Food Assessment: Our Community Food Assessment (Linder & Page-Reeves, 2013) identified dynamics and components of the local food system. We documented that, in keeping with food-related environmental disparities demonstrated in the literature (Gustafson, Hankins & Jilcott, 2012; Walker, Keane & Burke, 2010), SB/MT is an urban food desert. Access to affordable, healthy food is low. As indicated above, there is no full service grocery store in the neighborhood or close enough to the neighborhood to shop without transportation. But SB/MT is also increasingly demonstrating qualities of a food jungle/food swamp in that food stores and restaurants that have been built on the periphery of the neighborhood in recent years are quick mart stores and fast food restaurants. These establishments sell mostly processed food with low nutritional value and high calorie content, and what nutritious food they do sell (*e.g.*, milk, cheese) is significantly more expensive than it would be to buy at a grocery store. Moreover, we compared grocery stores nearest to the neighborhood with grocery stores in a wealthier area of Albuquerque. We found that the quality of food available near SB/MT is lower and prices for food near SB/MT are actually higher.

Observation: Observation of community meetings included monthly Neighborhood Association meetings and meetings called by residents, policy makers, or City officials to discuss specific issues of concern to the neighborhood. The lack of community engagement and participation beyond a handful of residents was notable, meaning that more expansive voices of community members were not well represented. Those who did participate often did so with a particular narrow ideological or personal agenda. The tenor of community meetings tended to be

adversarial and in our interviews with residents many individuals expressed the opinion that these meetings were always hijacked by and dominated by the same people, and that this dynamic made them avoid becoming active in community activities or informed about community issues (Page-Reeves, et al., forthcoming).

CB Meeting notes: We took notes at the regular meetings we held with our CB. The members of our CB were lively participants in learning about the things that influence health in their community and discussing ideas for improving nutritional health for families that struggle to put food on the table (Page-Reeves, et al., n.d.), and our notes included these processes as well as insights suggested by CB members in our group discussions. This experience helped them begin to think about strategies to improve food security, nutrition, and better health for themselves and the families in their community, including: 1) a women's supper club, 2) a bulk-buying initiative, 3) a walking group, 4) a multidimensional grocery store pilot, 5) a community kitchen, and 6) a community garden.

Fiesta Events: We held five "*Fiesta*" events involving presentations and interactive discussion led by CB members with 23 women from the neighborhood. The women involved in the CB and the Fiesta events developed social connections with each other, and learned about factors that influence the health and wellbeing of people in SB/MT and resources that are available to help people who find it challenging to afford food (Page-Reeves, et al., n.d.).

Social Network Analysis: We conducted a social network analysis with 20 Fiesta event participants who were asked to complete a short social network survey (Page-Reeves, et al., n.d.). The survey results were then entered into a software program that analyzes social networks. The analysis found that after having participated in the project, Fiesta participants expanded their social networks, that social networks among participants were denser, stronger, and more interconnected, and they reported that they were more likely to access the resources discussed at the events such as local farmer's markets and Food Stamps/SNAP, or to consider becoming involved in the community such as attending or participating in the SB/MT Neighborhood Association.

Contextual Research: We conducted contextual research on a variety of historical, political, economic, and social issues affecting the neighborhood through conversations with local residents, policy makers, elected officials, and representatives of nonprofit agencies. We also reviewed literature available on the internet, historical archives at UNM, and documents and reports produced by local policy organizations such as New Mexico Voices for Children and the New Mexico Center on Poverty and Law. Contextual research helped us "fill in the blanks" and make connections between different dimensions of our data, but also led to think more broadly about how these connections reflect place-based dynamics that influence food insecurity for families in the neighborhood. This contributed to our thinking about these things as *whorled*.

## DISCUSSION

In our published work on food insecurity in SB/MT, we describe the struggles that women experience and the strategies they develop. However, the process of conducting this research as a community-engaged, ethnographically inspired study led us to acknowledge a need to understand how these process are related to SB/MT as a specific place. This required us to situate our

analyses in a broader neighborhood history, culture, politics, and economy. We conceptualize this complexity as the whorled and interconnected nature of the relationship between food insecurity and place

#### Results of a Situated Analysis of Food Insecurity in SB/MT

##### *Historical Considerations*

SB/MT is a historic neighborhood in Albuquerque. *Martineztown* (MT), Albuquerque's second oldest settlement, was founded northeast of the original Old Town center in the 1850s by a prominent Protestant citizen (Dodge, 2012). Fearing the formation of a Protestant enclave, in the early 1900s the Catholic Bishop encouraged establishment of *Santa Barbara* (SB), a Catholic community north of MT. Both settlements "were characterized by simple, single-family adobe structures laid out in a dense, often irregular, housing pattern" (Dodge, 2012: 6), and each built its own corresponding church. The two became connected as a neighborhood—SB/MT. Because of its unique architectural, historical, and social character, SB/MT is what residents and other locals call a "village within the city."

MT was dramatically influenced by the arrival of the railroad to Albuquerque in 1880 and construction of the transcontinental tracks along the flank of the neighborhood. The proximity of the railroad transformed the landscape, igniting decades of volatile land speculation that created tangled land tenure patterns involving local and national investors anticipating further economic development and land price windfalls (Sanchez & Miller, 2009). As a railroad hub, Albuquerque became a center for lumber, livestock (especially sheep), wool processing, machine products, ice, and beer. Mills and warehouses in and adjacent to MT and later SB/MT were built, employing local carders, spinners, weavers, tailors, seamstresses, machinists, tanners, mill hands, and stock handlers (Dodge, 2012), helping to fuel a vibrant local economy.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, SB/MT was a thriving blue-collar Hispanic community. One interviewee said,

*You should have seen the neighborhood in its heyday! It was vibrant, self-sustaining. We had our own credit union, our own stores, both churches. There were opportunities for employment because of the surrounding heavy use businesses. A lot of our people worked for the railroad or the mills or the batching plants or the ore mills—that provided a lot of opportunity.*

Despite commercial and industrial development, much of SB/MT retained the feel of a historic community with winding streets and adobe structures that "[echoed] pre-railroad Hispanic patterning" (Dodge, 2012: 34). Life in SB/MT was deeply rooted in Hispanic tradition, made strong through social and religious affiliations. Hispanic cultural practices such as *compadrazgo* (ritual kinship relations that create extended social networks), *matanzas* (large celebrations involving the slaughter and roasting of a pig), and use of archaic local forms of spoken Spanish language continued to be important SB/MT traditions even as the City and its leadership became increasingly Anglo (De Maria Leary, 2004, Girard Vincent, 1966). Interviewees spoke about their emotional connection to SB/MT and a feeling of community rooted in place through stories of playing in the neighborhood as children and through memories of *fiestas*, attending mass, family cooking traditions, *matanza* celebrations, and funerals.

The “heyday” of SB/MT was the period from the 1930s to the 1950s (Macias 2007: 72). However, Albuquerque’s central role in the development of nuclear weapons and construction of Interstate 40 brought significant changes to the local economy that undermined the railroad-based foundations of SB/MT prosperity. One interviewee said,

*With modernization the railroad suffered a lot of setbacks with heavy and semi-vehicles—the railroad left. There is a big old train station that doesn’t function anymore. The mills left, the tanners left. All of that dried up. The blue collar type jobs diminished—because of the economy and because of the location.*

Increasingly, Anglo City leadership pursued development strategies emphasizing growth in ways that were often at the expense of historically Hispanic working class neighborhoods. SB/MT was one of a few Albuquerque neighborhoods that became what Macias (2007: 74) calls “stable ‘pockets of refuge’ from an American society hostile to people of color...[with a] distinct sense of cohesion and identity and proud of their homes and neighborhood.”

Yet a strong sense of community was not enough. Beginning in the 1950s, SB/MT was seen by City leadership as an area of urban “blight.” In the name of “progress,” it was targeted for “improvement.” Existing structures would be demolished and residents would be “relocated” using funds from Urban Renewal, a federal slum clearance program. With a new City Zoning Ordinance (1954) as a mechanism to prepare for downtown expansion, the city designated SB/MT for commercial and high-density residential development. This zoning designation did not reflect the existing use pattern in the neighborhood where large swaths of land were primarily residential. This zoning decision had implications that continue to reverberate today, as we discuss below.

At the same time, the community resisted enacting an agenda that would primarily benefit City elites in what Macias (2007:71) calls a “triumphant struggle to preserve their homes and claim public space as proud Chicano/as in a changing urban setting.” She describes the history of this effort. In 1967, an opportunity for a path to avoid demolition and relocation was presented by the federal Model Cities Program (MCP) that provided funds for communities to rehabilitate dilapidated structures rather than tear them down, but required community participation in a Model Cities Citizens Board (MCCB) and re-zoning from commercial to residential use. The SB/MT Neighborhood Association was selected to represent the community on the MCCB. Members of the Neighborhood Association included a number of prominent local individuals who were not in support of re-zoning (described by some interviewees as “*patrones*”—from the historical term used to refer to the elite/ruling class and landed aristocracy who maintained control of resources and used politics for their own enrichment, and whose wealth and power was predicated on exploitation of impoverished peasants and workers). Some had significant commercial interests and believed that re-zoning would lower property values, limit future options, and increase property taxes. Others argued that any re-development would destroy the traditional nature of the community, which was a source of pride for residents. Ultimately, the SB/MT Neighborhood Association voted to decline MCP funds.

However, support for this decision was not uniform. Although the vote had been taken by what was known as the SB/MT Neighborhood Association, its members were an influential, tight-knit group who resided primarily in the north section of MT and did not necessarily



represent the views or interests of residents of other parts of the neighborhood. So, when following the vote, City officials began discussing the southern part of MT as a site for locating various new civic buildings, residents of South MT became defiant. They launched what has since been seen as an epic battle to resist urban development that they believed would destroy their community in the name of urban expansion. South MT stakeholders strategically engaged decision-makers and used local social networks based on kinship and religious affiliation to develop a base of support. Ultimately, they split with SB/MT, developed an independent decision-making process, and voted to move forward with rehabilitation and renovation. Cordova (2002: 346) sees the action of community members as demonstrating a “high level of oppositional consciousness,” one of the characteristics of environmental and economic justice activism, where “strategic intervention in the process of urban development poses the possibility of alternative values, decision-making processes, and formations of urban space.” However, although hegemony of mainstream “progress” was thwarted, the integrity of local community affiliation was weakened by the competing interests and visions for the community. One of our interviewees said,

*[In South Martineztown], they decided that they weren't going to be relocated. They protested. They found [Model Cities] as an option to keep their community intact and redevelop the community. Here, [in SB/MT], we decided that we wanted to remain as a community...that created another rift between the neighborhoods.*

The fallout from this history continues to influence dynamics in the neighborhood into the contemporary period—inherently woven into the fabric and everyday lives of residents. Perhaps this whorled reality is not immediately apparent to a casual observer, but its manifestation is just below the surface of community politics and consciousness.

#### *Competing Visions, Conflicting Agendas*

Alkon and Traugot (2008) examined how socially constructed narratives about place provided a foundation for local cooperation to promote food system transformation in Oakland and Chicago. In SB/MT, however, we found that there was not one place narrative but rather multiple, competing narratives and agendas rooted in the historical and physical reality of the neighborhood. This competition between narratives and agendas shapes the social, economic and political landscape in SB/MT in ways that have reduced community integration, make cooperation untenable, and negatively impact the functioning of community structures. As indicated, in the 1950s SB/MT was zoned for commercial and high-density occupancy uses even though much of the neighborhood was residential with mostly single-family housing stock. This has resulted in a mixed-use pattern that many residents find to be detrimental. In Albuquerque, the City creates small area zoning documents to establish regulations that can go beyond the zoning code to protect residential space. These “Sector Plans” are created through a process involving public input. The current Sector Plan in SB/MT was created in the 1970s, applying the zoning logic from the Urban Renewal era that the area would eventually fully convert from residential to commercial and high-density occupancy uses.

In 1990 and 2008-2012, there were separate contentious attempts to “down-zone” the SB/MT Sector Plan to create rules for mixed use that would protect residential areas from some

commercial uses while grandmother-in commercial use that does not negatively impact residential space or use. However, stakeholders described “*an adversarial process*” with “*personality clashes within the neighborhood [hamstringing] the project.*” There are multiple groups representing different sectors of the community that have different, often competing or conflicting agendas. One stakeholder said the Sector Plan process in SB/MT was the worst experience of her life, with people screaming and yelling at meetings that lasted hours but got “*nowhere.*”

Property owners in SB/MT interested in commercial development see zoning entitlements as directly impacting the value of their property, but many are absentee landlords. Property owners who reside in the neighborhood are divided. Some agree with emphasis on rights for commercial development. Some recognize that livelihoods in the neighborhood depend upon some types of business uses, but want to see residential uses protected. Others insist that the only acceptable option is to limit use to single-family residential only. Hard-line views have made negotiation and compromise impossible. Yet the importance of the outcome of SB/MT Sector Plan negotiations is clearly evidenced by the interest of external stakeholders. Huge, unprecedented amounts of financing from commercial interests flowed into a recent election of the City Council Representative for SB/MT, a city-wide faith-based organization has actively engaged in community organizing around zoning in SB/MT, and a nonprofit “dedicated to revitalization of Albuquerque’s urban neighborhoods through developing quality affordable and market-rate housing opportunities”<sup>4</sup> that has built multi-unit housing in the neighborhood has been involved in local informal “lobbying” related SB/MT zoning and land use.

Interestingly, players on different sides all employ the same language and the same narratives. They see their own efforts as promoting the rights of the community and representing the current incarnation of the authentic *spirit* of the neighborhood, while those of other factions are framed as demonstrating corruption, self-interest, and greed. In fact, the word “*patron*” was used by multiple stakeholders when describing each other. Such negative views are supported and further solidified by well-documented cases of local community leaders misappropriating community funds for personal benefit, repeated reports of local leaders secretly investing in business or multi-use housing projects in the neighborhood or being awarded lucrative construction contracts associated with these projects, enacting agendas that benefit stakeholders outside of SB/MT, colluding with individuals from outside the neighborhood to disrupt community meetings, or being involved in questionable personal behavior related to substance use or inappropriate activities involving minors and alcohol.

As part of our research about food insecurity in the neighborhood, we identified conflictive interpersonal dynamics and competing visions of community surrounding the issue of zoning as a factor affecting the food security status of households. Divisions in the community around this issue have contributed to a general sense of apathy and distrust, making people avoid becoming involved in community issues and not want to attend important community meetings. This squelches participation in community decision-making. As a result, people are isolated. Many do not interact beyond their own personal social networks. Drug and gang activity, which

are problems in the neighborhood,<sup>5</sup> are seen by residents as a reflection of this social fragmentation. Our finding that women believe their personal experience with food insecurity reflects their own individual failure, even as others in their community are suffering the same experience (Page-Reeves, et al., 2014a), further reveals this social isolation and disconnection. Members of our CB attempted to bring leaders of factions in the neighborhood together to learn about and discuss the issue of food insecurity (Page-Reeves, et al., n.d.). The CB believed that despite vitriolic battles over zoning, everyone cares about the community. The idea was that by getting leaders of the factions to work together to think about and do something to reduce food insecurity, personal relationships could be built that would create an improved climate for negotiating zoning changes and developing shared visions of the community. Unfortunately, this de-factionalization process was not viable.

As we were preparing this manuscript, a City of Albuquerque policy analyst told us that a new Sector Plan planning process is in the works that will create mechanisms to help get beyond contentious community politics, and that SB/MT will be one of the first communities engaged, but that “*it will be up to the neighborhood to work as a united group with the City.*” Currently, there is little evidence that this can occur and little confidence among community members that it will. Continuing factionalization influences the social and policy environment in SB/MT in ways that negatively affect the ability of food insecure households to find social support, to be supported through decision-making processes in the community, or for individuals from food insecure households to participate in community meetings and feel like their voices and contributions matter (Page-Reeves, et al., forthcoming).

#### *Contemporary Political Economic Considerations*

In addition to historical geopolitics of the neighborhood, we also found that food insecurity in SB/MT reflects political economic dynamics that influence and shape life in the neighborhood. Many of the interviewees used words like *quiet*, *peaceful*, *tranquillo* (*tranquil*), and *carefree* to describe SB/MT. However, despite long-standing cultural assets that lend cohesiveness to the neighborhood environment, life in the community reflects the complicated and often conflictive history summarized above, and embodies contradictions of urbanization in the context of ongoing neoliberal restructuring. The quaint historic character of the neighborhood’s buildings and streets is something that is lauded and glorified as the physical manifestation of an “authentic” New Mexican community (Price, 1992). Multiple buildings in SB/MT are listed in the National Registry of Historic Places. While we were conducting this study, a “culture consultant” gave an enthusiastic community presentation in SB/MT about place-based economic development, encouraging residents to find ways to “*leverage*” their local culture and traditions, and to “*package authenticity*” by developing some sort of SB/MT craft industry, opening local shops to sell SB/MT crafts, opening local restaurants with SB/MT cuisine and cafes with open air tables to maximize the SB/MT experience, or designing SB/MT neighborhood walking tours to attract tourists.

Yet over the past 50 years, SB/MT has become a poster child for urban disintegration. Since 1950, SB/MT has been identified as blighted and targeted for tear-down and re-development, declared a superfund site because of groundwater contamination from the dumping

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<sup>5</sup> Stop ABQ Gangs. <http://www.abqgahp.org/>

of toxic solvents (trichloroethylene [TCE]) by a dry cleaning business that operated in the neighborhood from 1940-1970, declared a local disaster area following the rupture of a major sewer lateral line that caused flooding, and routinely listed as an “area of persistent poverty” (USDA ERS, 2012). The median household income in SB/MT is \$28,351 and the poverty rate is 37.7%, more than twice the rate for the City of Albuquerque (18.5%) (US Census Bureau, 2010). The crime rate in SB/MT is significantly above that for the City, with violent crime more than 15% higher in SB/MT (8.96 vs 7.75 per 1,000 population),<sup>6</sup> and SB/MT is one of a handful of communities identified as having serious and increasing gang and drug activity.<sup>7</sup> Interviewees described the stigma they often feel associated with living in SB/MT. But the economic reality in SB/MT must be understood as a crucible of dynamics at work not only in SB/MT locally, but also in Albuquerque, in New Mexico, and in the broader U.S. economy.

In the years following World War II, economic growth in the U.S. created a generally shared prosperity. However, slowed growth in the 1970s had a particularly negative impact on lower income families while the incomes of the wealthy grew substantially, thus concentrating wealth and deepening the gap between rich and poor (Stone, et al., 2015). Since 1972, stagnant hourly wages have not risen to keep up with inflation, and national wage and salary income during the period of this study was at an all-time historical low of 42.6% of GDP (Norris, 2013). At the same time, CEO compensation has grown to be 263 times greater than that paid to the average worker.<sup>8</sup> Not surprisingly then, between 1979 and 2012, income for the poorest fifth of American families decreased 12.1% while income for the top five percent rose 74.9%.<sup>9</sup> Although during the 2009 recession all incomes declined, since the recovery the top 1% have captured 95% of total income growth (Saez & Zucman, 2014) with the richest 5% having an average income 13 times higher than the poorest 20 percent of households (McNichol et al., 2012). The top 3% of American families now hold 54.4% of the nation’s wealth and the top 10% hold over 85% of the nation’s financial assets.<sup>10</sup> The wealth divide for families of color is even greater, with white non-Hispanic households 10 times wealthier than Hispanic families (Kochhar & Fry, 2014). Stone and colleagues (2015) refer to this widening income inequality as the “loss of shared prosperity.”

In New Mexico, the loss of shared prosperity is stark. New Mexico is among 10 states in which the top 1% captured between half and 84% of all income growth (72.6%) between 1979 and 2007.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, New Mexico is the state with the highest rate of child poverty (45%) and the second highest overall poverty rate (21.9%) (Bishaw, 2014). New Mexico was one of only three states in which poverty increased between 2012 and 2013 (Bishaw, 2014). Although poverty among Hispanics is falling nationally, it is increasing in New Mexico (Wallin, 2014). During the economic downturn in 2009, New Mexico lost 6% of total employment (Voices 2010). Among Hispanics, the impact was more dramatic. In 2010, unemployment among

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<sup>6</sup> Area Vibes. <http://www.areavibes.com/>

<sup>7</sup> Stop ABQ Gangs. <http://www.abqgahp.org/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://inequality.org/income-inequality/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://inequality.org/income-inequality/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://inequality.org/income-inequality/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.epi.org/publication/income-inequality-by-state-1917-to-2012/>

Hispanics rose to 11.3% compared to 7.2% among non-Hispanic whites (Bradley, 2012). Hispanic income fell to 69% of white income between 2008 and 2011 (Bradley, 2012). In Albuquerque, the situation has been even worse. Albuquerque has had steeper job losses (6.9%) compared with state (6.7%) and national (6.3%) rates (Domralski, 2012a), and was ranked 282<sup>nd</sup> out of 300 U.S. cities in economic performance (Thompson, 2012). Albuquerque has been unable to meaningfully emerge from the recession (Quigley, 2013).

These statistics embody a policy environment that has promoted income inequality and leeched away the last hint of shared prosperity. Neoliberal tax policy—nationally, in New Mexico, and in Albuquerque—has shifted tax responsibility from high-income earners and corporations to middle and low-income households and consumers (Bradley, 2013). Under the guise of making the state more competitive for jobs, in 2013, the New Mexico legislature decreased the top tax rate from 7.6% to 5.9%—which decreased state corporate income tax revenue by 25% (Bradley, 2012.). Ideologically, these tax cuts are in-line with neoliberal prescriptions for economic growth, but the evidence demonstrates that these types of corporate tax cuts do not result in long-term retention of jobs (Ljungqvist, 2014, Mazerov, 2010). However, as a result of the cuts, revenue that supports state and local infrastructure and services has been reduced. Additionally, New Mexico is one of only a handful of states that allows deductions of all local and state taxes that filers use in determining income for federal tax purposes to be retained when reporting income to the state. This results in \$65 million of lost revenue to the state general fund (NM Voices, 2010). New Mexico Voices for Children points out that this “perk” is only available to taxpayers who itemize deductions on their federal returns—primarily high-income tax payers (NM Voices, 2010). In a report on tax fairness, New Mexico was identified as the 17<sup>th</sup> most unfair state, with the lowest 20% of earners paying a 10.9% rate and the top 1% paying a rate of only 4.8%.<sup>12</sup>

But the policy environment is more than just taxes. Eligibility and support levels for safety net programs have an enormous impact on the daily lives of low-income families, including in relation to food insecurity. Not surprisingly, the need for safety net program supports increased dramatically following the recession. Food stamp/SNAP usage in New Mexico increased 66% between 2006 and 2011 (Rodriguez, 2011). When people lose a job, they have trouble paying for food, rent, and utilities, but they often also lose their health benefits (if they had any) and their ability to afford childcare. Many who lost a job in the recession have not been able to find a job equivalent to the one they lost and have had to take a position that pays less, does not allow for full-time work or pay benefits, or for which they are overqualified. One interviewee described her struggle to go back to school to get more education after she lost her position as a supervisor with a company she had worked at for years. As a “mature” student, she was struggling with just learning to use the computer to be able to complete the course requirements. Interviewees in SB/MT who had never previously used Food Stamps/SNAP reported that they found that they needed the assistance when the recession hit.

However, at the same time that the need has increased, resources available through safety net programs in New Mexico have been reduced. Local, state and federal revenue streams have

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<sup>12</sup> [http://www.itep.org/whopays/full\\_report.php#ExecutiveSummary](http://www.itep.org/whopays/full_report.php#ExecutiveSummary)



been diminished by the recession, but also because of repeated tax cuts that require deep contraction of government budgets, and because of an ideologically charged neoliberal political environment that has become ensconced as hegemony in public discourse and policy. For example, cash assistance to single mothers with children through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program (TANF), commonly known as “welfare,” has been cut by 15% and allowances for children’s school clothing (\$100) or transitioning off the program (\$200) are no longer provided (Rodriguez, 2010). In addition, states have discretion in setting eligibility criteria for benefit programs. Even though the federal government allows states to provide Food Stamps/SNAP to individuals making up to 200% of the Federal Poverty Level, New Mexico opts to set the ceiling at 165% (Pein, 2009). In addition, it has been widely reported, that in New Mexico applicants for Food Stamps/SNAP routinely experience “irregularities” in the way that they are treated by case workers in the Food Stamp/SNAP office or in the way that their case is handled (Page-Reeves, 1997, and personal communication 11/15, Food Stamp/SNAP Advocate). Interviewees in SB/MT described difficulty qualifying for benefits that they believed they should have been able to receive based on their circumstances or changes in circumstances, and they recounted the strategies they have had to develop to get around the structural barriers that exist within the system (Page-Reeves, et al., 2014a)—but often without success.

In addition, national “welfare to work” policies that require that people work to qualify for benefits, including expanded work requirements enacted in 2014, have made access to Food Stamps/SNAP more difficult (Dickinson, 2014). Because of the high unemployment rate in every county throughout the state, New Mexico qualifies for a waiver of the expanded federal work rules. However, despite public input that such work requirements would be an enormous burden and reduce Food Stamp/SNAP eligibility for more than 80,000 New Mexicans (NMPL, 2014), New Mexico decided to implement expanded work rules anyway. It has been widely reported that the former Secretary of the New Mexico Human Services Department justified this decision at a state legislative hearing saying that without the work rules, *those people would just sit on the couch*. Although the decision to require expanded work rules has been blocked by a court order as a result of a lawsuit brought by a variety of organizations representing low-income New Mexicans (NMPL, 2014), the attempt to implement expanded work requirements in a context of high unemployment and the Secretary’s justification for why such action was necessary are illustrative of the ideological content of the safety net policy environment that influences the everyday welfare of families in SB/MT.

The impact of these economic conditions and policy decisions is further exacerbated by dynamics of the housing market that reflect historical, local, and national dynamics. Nationally, home ownership has fallen to 1993 levels with the obverse that the rental market is booming (JCHS, 2015: 1). Increased challenges of home ownership have created a bull market for rental property owners. But rising rents in the context of lowered incomes has led to an increase in *rent burden*. Households that spend more than 30% of their income on rent are considered to be “rent burdened,” households that spend more than 50% are “severely rent burdened.” In 2013, 50% of all renters in the U.S. were rent burdened and more than 25% of those were severely rent burdened (JCHS, 2015: 5). Severe rent burden is a huge problem in New Mexico where one third of all households spend more than half their income on housing (Martinez, 2013). SB/MT, where 74% of households are renters and 63% of renters pay more than 30% of their income on rent,

has been identified as a rent burdened community (City of Albuquerque, n.d.). This is important in the context of this study, given that low-income families with severe rent burden spend only two thirds as much on food as non-rent burdened households with comparable income, half as much on clothing, and 150% more on healthcare costs (JCHS, 2014). Families with high housing costs are more likely to be food insecure. Fletcher, Andreyeva and Busch (2009) examined the effect of increasing rent burden on food insecurity. They found that a \$1,000 annual increase in rental cost was associated with a 5.2% increase in food insecurity. Clearly, the issue of rent burden cannot be ignored as a factor when considering food insecurity in SB/MT.

One interviewee beautifully captured how all of these economic, policy, and housing dynamics form a nexus in the lives of SB/MT residents:

Interviewer: Why do you think that people have a hard time affording food?

Interviewee: *Just the economy...they are losing a job they have had. I think a lot of the people are laborers and those jobs have been diminished and they have just learned to do without. I think it is getting worse because the job market isn't going up, it is going down. People are losing their homes because they can't pay [for their housing]. They are ending up homeless. They can't feed themselves...and it is all because of job loss, not that they don't have an education. They probably have a high school diploma but jobs nowadays want more or they just can't find one, and some people are overqualified. They have a degree but they can't get a job—no money, no jobs. My sister-in-law lost her job and is on unemployment and they applied for Food Stamps but they denied her, so the guidelines don't make sense.*

## CONCLUSION

### Food Fetish

Food research is an incredibly extensive and vibrant field of study and food has become a topic of interest for journals and conferences, and a focus for funders of health promotion interventions interested in encouraging healthy eating and local food sourcing. Within the food studies and health literature, food insecurity in the U.S. now receives a great deal of attention. Yet we propose that the story of SB/MT that we reveal here highlights the extent to which food insecurity is not really about food. Understanding the forces at work in the creation of food insecure households requires that we employ a new conceptual paradigm.

McKendrick (2014: 18) notes that “eating is political.” But clearly, not having enough to eat is also political. The two are relational and interconnected—what we call *whorled*. One must be synthesized with the other. The foodscape approach captures some of this complexity by focusing the analytic lens on the components of the food system in a geographic area and how they are connected into broader systems. But what allows some people to have enough to eat while others go hungry? Moragues-Faus and Morgan (2015) argue for “*reframing*” the concept of foodscape to focus more on political configurations and food system narratives. But despite such attempts to suggest otherwise, the concept of foodscape is ultimately too narrow for understanding the dynamics of food insecurity and its root causes. Food is too limiting of a lens

at this point. In his classic study of the social life of sugar, *Sweetness and Power* (Mintz, 1985), Mintz brilliantly pioneered using historical, social, political, economic, and cultural dimensions of commodification, production, distribution, and consumption to illuminate dynamics, relationships, and meanings that go beyond our understanding of a particular food or commodity itself. However, while he demonstrated that following the social life of a thing is *one way* to reveal dynamics hidden from view—he did not suggest that it is *the only way*, nor did he suggest a need to further focus on sugar itself as a food product. We propose that in the current context where “all things food” are perceived as *fashionable*—and significantly, *fundable* and *publishable*—an involutioned logic has emerged encouraging investigators to seek new and creative ways to maintain a focus on food in food insecurity research even when the data demonstrate broader factors at work. Food has become an academic fetish.

#### Recognizing Food Insecurity as Actively Produced Rather Than as a State of Being

We propose that continuing to turn our lens toward food itself—through a study of food deserts, foodways, or foodscapes (*re-framed* or otherwise), creates analyses of dynamics that, while originally revealing, are now out-of-focus in relation to critical understanding of food insecurity as a phenomenon that is produced. Yet this is an understanding necessary to counter mainstream framing of food insecurity as a state of being about which there is little that can be done. Critical literacy of the dynamics of food insecurity requires explicit, clear, and certain conceptualization in order to be useful for changing or challenging the existing food insecurity landscape. Page-Reeves (2014a: 4) refers to these dynamics as “*off the edge of the table...the people who are not at the table because they do not have food and the extent to which a meal that ends-up on the dinner table...[are both] profoundly influenced by processes, activities and power relationships that perhaps appear only indirectly related to the food itself.*” Importantly, while these *off the edge of the table* dynamics need to be explored in relation to the dinner table, they cannot be understood *only in relation to the dinner table*. In most cases, the table and its wares are not central to the dynamics at play in a neighborhood.

Herrera, Khanna and Davis (2009) and Alkon and colleagues (2013: 133) found, “eating habits of low-income people are restricted not so much by geography, but by price.” This seemingly obvious fact, obscured by the tendency in the public health literature to tiptoe around issues of poverty by focusing instead on food access, must have implications for how we think about food insecurity. In an otherwise absolutely exceptional study of women’s food practices in what she calls “kitchenspace,” Christie (2008: 7) writes that, “I do not like to use the term “poverty” or “poor” to describe the communities or people who live there. Such a term seems to deny the resourcefulness that I observed.” This position acknowledges the agency of women in her study and recognizes the importance of how we frame the content of academic discourse. But as Goode and Maskovsky (2001: 15) suggest,

*[Such] political correctness may short-circuit a materialist analysis of the dynamics of poverty. In fact, academics and others are making political, not just scholarly, choices when they elevate the goal of identifying improper naming the goal of exploring avenues of political agency among that heterogeneous group that is still productively referred to as the poor. Moreover, in the present conjuncture, projects such as these collude with the regime of disappearance that*

*seeks to erase poverty from popular and political consciousness.*

This is an important perspective to consider when conducting research on food insecurity, an issue that is routinely hidden in individual households and kitchens and therefore, under-documented. Goode and Maskovsky (2001: 16) further propose that “using new theoretical approaches that situate different groups’ experiences of poverty in dialectical relation to global, national, state and local political-economic change and to the interconnected ideologies of race, class, gender, sexuality and nationhood...[to] treat poverty not as a static “moral” *condition* but as a dynamic historically and geographically contingent *process*.” With this in mind, price is clearly a dimension of the food system, but whether or not people have the resources to afford to buy food at a particular price is not. “*Re-centering food*” in our analyses will continue to produce some interesting insights, but it will only go so far in contributing to a critical understanding of *food insecurity and its root causes*.

At this point, we now have a *wealth* of works (including our own) exploring the dimensionality of the food environment in impoverished communities, revealing the foodways of the poor, and more recently illuminating how foodscapes condense and insinuate operational dynamics of the food system into everyday lives and environments. The food dimension of food insecurity has become a major field of study. What we need now is, in Passidomo’s (2013: 2) words, to go “*beyond food*.” Her suggestion in 2013 was that food and the food system could be a lens that would expand the purview of our analyses to include the ways that food environments, foodways, and foodscapes articulate with, evince, and embody broader social, political and cultural process and structures. However, given the large body of food literature that has since emerged, we now require a more complex paradigm to help us really move “*beyond food*” to analyze the whorled nature of the relationship that defines food insecurity and place.

#### A Political Economy of Intersections

In research on food insecurity it is time to reintegrate analysis of a layered social reality. As indicated earlier, Carter, Dubois and Tremblay’s (2013) review of literature on food insecurity and place came up empty. They could not explain how the two are related. As a result, they call for a social ecology of food (in)security with “finer grained definitions and a specific focus on place” that can reveal how social environmental and socio-economic factors intersect with the food environment (Carter, Dubois & Tremblay, 2013: 110). Cummins and colleagues (2007) propose a relational approach to place that recognizes that geography does not impact health uniformly. Delormier, Frohlich and Potvin (2009: 224) conceptualize individuals and environments in a recursive relationship—the recursive relationship of rules, resources, and food choice practices. Jackson and Neeley (2015: 48) propose a political economy of health approach that “triangulates” multiple forms of analysis and intersecting interests as “relationally intertwined, produced over time, inherently political, and always simultaneously material and symbolic.” They believe that understanding the “situated, uneven, and historically produced” (52) health geographies that exist within communities will provide novel insights. Agyeman and McEntee (2014) see urban political ecology as a frame for integrating these different agendas in food research. It appears that the emerging consensus for understanding health and place—and *we argue, food insecurity and place*—whether from within anthropology, epidemiology,

geography, or public health—is to embrace complexity and integration in the way we conceptualize and design our research.

### Situating Food Insecurity in SB/MT

Although food is mundane, it is intricately insinuated into every aspect of our lives and our communities. Yet, as we found in SB/MT, food insecurity is concealed (Page-Reeves, et al., 2014a)—it is hard to identify all of its victims or the nature of its borders. Understanding food insecurity in SB/MT required that we *locate food insecurity in SB/MT*—by accounting for local food practices, historical and cultural processes that have influenced the shape of community structures and experiences, the agency of social actors with conflicting visions of community and competing agendas, and the influence of contemporary local, state and national economic dynamics that affect income, income inequality, financial security, tax policy, access to safety net supports, and housing markets. We love the way that food has become a theme in so much research and we applaud and celebrate the large body of literature exploring multiple dimensions of food and health, but food insecurity research cannot be positioned to exaggerate the role of food or even the food system. In a place like SB/MT we cannot understand the production and reproduction of food insecure households through an exclusive focus on local food environments, local food practices and foodways, local or regional foodscapes, or even the larger food system.

We began our study of food insecurity in SB/MT by privileging cultural meanings associated with food and local social relationships between women. In our previous work (Page-Reeves, et al., 2014a, 2014b), we revealed important dynamics that influence how food insecurity is played out in quotidian ways in households in SB/MT and in the lives of women who shop for, cook, and serve food. We also demonstrated how food insecure households are directly linked to larger political and economic realities outside of SB/MT as a community. Here we situate our analysis to show the intersection of place-specific forces, historical moments, and local relationships, and how these articulate with local, state, and federal economic trends and policy decisions. An ethnographic, holistic approach incorporating multiple, braided data collection techniques, and intensive community engagement with neighborhood residents over an extended period of time allowed us to work at this intersection of food insecurity and place, going beyond that which would have been possible using an analysis solely emphasizing food.

We propose that these techniques provided vehicles for crystalizing our analyses of the dynamics of food insecurity and place. In contemporary health research, ethnography in its traditional guise as living in a particular place for an extended period and conducting full-time participant observation is rarely feasible in terms of intensity, time, or funding. Many studies in health research only fund a small percentage of a researcher's FTE over a limited period of time. A one- or two-year study working part-time is unlikely to allow for sufficient understanding of multi-dimensional community dynamics or to develop deep community relationships. A basic tenet in anthropology is that when you begin a project, you do not know the right questions to ask or have the relationships with people to be able to find out what the right questions are—you can only ask the right questions by talking and engaging with people and beginning to understand their reality. This was our experience. Shankardass and Dunn (2012) warn that this type of research is hard to do in terms of funding, time, and methodology, and difficult to get



published because the complexity of the analysis eludes simple presentation. We recognize this dilemma. Few journals allow space for the type of analysis we presented here. But we have demonstrated it is not only feasible, but essential. Only a holistic approach can provide the data we need to improve the lives of people who struggle to have enough to eat. However, as Phillips (2012: 65) suggests, fault lines for research lie between the agendas of those interested in food insecurity as a health problem and those interested in poverty. We believe that situating food insecurity in a place allows for research that can contribute to our understanding of the *whorled* dynamics that produce both.

## FUNDING SOURCE

Research reported in this paper was supported in part by a joint award from the National Institute on Minority Health And Health Disparities of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) under Award #P20MD004811. The content of this article is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the NIH or the EPA.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank all of the community members who participated in this research in different ways.

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