Maya Kurani

ES 149

Final Paper

Origins and Solutions of Food Insecurity In Mississippi

In Mississippi, food insecurity is a substantial issue that affects more than 16% of the population, or about 480,600 people, making the state one of the most food insecure in the nation. Over one in six people and one in five children reported being hungry, and it was estimated that Mississippi would need $300 million more per year in funding to be able to meet its food needs (*Map the Meal Gap 2018*). The state has an astounding overall food insecurity rate of 22%, with 34 of Mississippi's 82 counties having an even higher percentage(Hossfeld 2018).

To elaborate further, food insecurity, defined by USDA, refers to the lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life. It encompasses a range of experiences, from worrying about running out of food to skipping meals or going hungry due to financial constraints. In Mississippi, food insecurity affects individuals and families across urban and rural areas, with its more detrimental effects on significantly vulnerable populations.

Food insecurity has stemmed from environmental racism and discriminatory policies consisting of redlining, gentrification, and segregation. This has been going on for generations, particularly in Mississippi and the rural South, originating from a history of slavery and unjust policies targeting African Americans. Research supports that racism is one of the leading causes of food insecurity and poverty for particularly black and brown communities in Mississippi, which is the argument I will

defend in this paper. Additionally, I will explain potential solutions to address food insecurity, which require extensive government leadership. This includes social protection programs like in store price promotions and procurement policies, creating policies that prioritize farmers of color and match SNAP funds to local markets instead of large corporations, and building collective agency and community resilience through agri-food assemblages such as the Oktibbeha Food Policy Council (OFPC).

It is a fact that food insecurity disproportionately affects the poor, rural and minority residents. Based on Feeding America's 2023 report, "Map the Meal Gap," it was found that food insecurity rates are highest among Black or Latino individuals compared to white individuals. Notably, the number of food-insecure individuals in Hinds County, consisting of a 73.5% black population, total around 61,000(Sobol 2018). Reflecting the national trend, food insecurity rates in Mississippi's rural minority regions exceed those in urban areas, which are due to limited resources for accessing adequate food supplies.

Food insecurity, racism, and health inequities are intertwined as well. A study at Ole Miss showed that the odds of being food insecure were 3.5 times greater for African American students compared to Caucasian students. The researchers saw that there was a significant relationship between the degree of food security and depression severity(Reeder 2020). Additionally, adults experiencing food insecurity are more prone to achieving lower levels of education, lacking health insurance coverage, and experiencing obesity as well as other health-related issues. The

health inequities faced by individuals affected by food insecurity are connected with racial disparities and food insecurity.

Now, I will elaborate on the history of environmental racism and discriminatory policies in Mississippi that have promoted food scarcity and poverty, particularly for minority communities. The historical emergence of large-scale, export-driven plantation monocultures was significantly influenced by slavery and agrarian racism, and have created profound environmental repercussions. Plantation agriculture, characterized by monocultures, is environmentally fragile and susceptible to diseases and failures (Ross 2017). Due to this fact, many plantations resorted to intensive chemical methods and have struggled to attain food sovereignty.

In the research paper, *Pesticides, plantations, and environmental racism*, Brian Williams explains the continuities and discontinuities of previous modes of agrarian racism in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, a plantation region in the South. Anti-Black racism has shaped the politics of pesticides, creating policies that are destructive to both the environment and human welfare. Looking at the chemical sector in Louisiana, Huber (2017) argued that ‘‘an economic system based on slavery, and later exploitation of sharecropping and wage labor, was replaced by an economic system based on chemical production.” The pesticide politics of the Delta’s plantation bloc put the health of cotton and profitability of plantations above all else and disregarded black and brown community health and safety (Williams 2018). Due to this racist history, minority communities are surrounded by toxins and waste and lack food sovereignty.

Moreover, since the 1860s, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has engaged in racial discrimination concerning credit assistance, program delivery, and employment, resulting in land loss among Black farmers particularly in the South. For example, policymakers have deliberately excluded Black domestic and agricultural workers from the Social Security Act of 1935, even though the NAACP said it would affect 3.5 out of 5.5 million Black workers (Linder, 1986). This act left an entire generation of workers with little to no retirement income, perpetuating a cycle of limited wealth accumulation for future generations (Giancatarino and Noor 2014). Additionally, through this initiative, politicians did not establish minimum wages for jobs predominantly held by African Americans and withheld federal farm assistance from Black landowners (Ayazi and Elsheikh 2015). These federal policy choices contributed significantly to the drastic decline in the number of Black-owned farms, plummeting from 900,000 in 1930 to a mere 6,996 by 1978 (Ayazi and Elsheikh 2015). The total acreage of U.S. Black-owned farmland diminished substantially as well, dropping from 14 million acres in 1920 to 2 million by the close of the century (Gilbert 2002).

The Farm Bill has also had a large influence, particularly impacting farmers of color. Since the 1930s, the Farm Bill has undergone restructuring aimed at bolstering corporate agribusiness, which ultimately disadvantages communities of color. Although this act allocates funds to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Farm Bill contributes to structural inequality by ensuring profits for major food retailers such as Walmart, which funnel wealth away from local communities. Furthermore, the Farm Bill contradicts efforts to address structural

racism and poverty by favoring large-scale, industrial agriculture, further creating a food system that forces producers to cut costs in every way(Isaac Sohn 2018). This results in unjust, racially motivated labor practices and the production of toxic environmental hazards disproportionately affecting communities of color (Downey 2015).

Even though some may think that this history of discrimination has been resolved, environmental racism and gentrification practices still happen today. Numerous investment funds and affluent individuals are drawn to Mississippi land, even though its availability for purchase stemmed from the appropriation of Black and indigenous communities. In, “The Paradox of Hunger—Rural Mississippi,” design critic in architecture Cory Henry explains how, “in Mississippi, you have some of the most arable land in the country. Over 30 percent of the state is farmland—a percentage which is growing—but the state consistently ranks as one of the most food insecure in the country.” The prioritization of profit over addressing food insecurity is apparent; a mere 45,000 acres out of the total 10.4 million are allocated for cultivating fruits and vegetables(Shafaieh 2023). Due to this lack of fresh produce, the state imports most of these products and it is difficult to access due to the lack of grocery stores. Dollar General stores, which often lack healthy options, frequently serve as the closest option for food in rural minority areas.

It is a fact that low-income minority communities in rural areas have much lower access to food retailers. Research indicates that poor neighborhoods possess fewer supermarkets compared to other regions, and even when there are equivalent poverty rates, Black neighborhoods exhibit the lowest supermarket accessibility.

Within counties in the Lower Mississippi Delta, greater than 70% of low-income households are located more than 30 miles from a supermarket or large food retailer(Carol 2007).

Scholars have argued that these disparities in food access result from racism and explain how food retailers engage in "retail redlining" or "supermarket redlining," purposefully avoiding Black neighborhoods and subjecting them to discriminatory treatment based on customer demographics(Shaker 2023). For a long time, there have been discriminatory policies that have fueled residential segregation and prompted supermarkets to withdraw from certain areas. These regions are labeled as "food deserts," which consist of communities of color lacking affordable, healthy food options (Barker 2012). In these food deserts, communities deal with worse produce quality and smaller stores, limiting the amount and variety of the food and thus contributing to the deterioration of health. Additionally, even if communities are supported by stores offering affordable, culturally relevant food, they often face gentrification and are replaced by supermarket chains like Whole Foods.

The significant lack of transportation is also a massive issue regarding food insecurity and attaining SNAP benefits in rural areas. The United States Department of Agriculture reported in 2015 that half of the individuals receiving food stamps nationwide lack access to transportation. Although SNAP offers some assistance to individuals facing food insecurity as well as financial support, accessing these benefits prove to be a daunting task for many citizens. Residents encounter transportation challenges, since just 5% of SNAP transactions by Issaquena County residents occur within the county(Connell 2007). Holmes County, spanning over 765

square miles, has only four grocery stores serving the entire area, requiring one in four residents to travel over 10 miles to redeem their benefits. Mississippi also imposes the strictest eligibility requirements for SNAP in the nation, so the lack of stores and public transportation make it a difficult issue within their community.

In order to find pathways out of food insecurity, there is a strong case for government leadership, and effective engagement with other sectors to deliver a coordinated, collaborative, and cooperative response. Prioritizing the regulation of employment and labor conditions, coupled with expanding educational access, is crucial for breaking the cycle of poverty. Better educational access can include educating children and adults on how to grow, cook, and eat healthy food. It also includes increasing the amount of local food in schools and fostering a learning space depicting accountable and ethical food systems. Equally important are urban development policies and social protection programs aimed at redistributing power and resources.

Such social protection programs consist of in-store price promotions and procurement policies, which promote nutrition-focused food banking. For instance, in Australia, there is an exemption of healthy foods from the Goods and Services Tax and in-store price promotions. Targeted food assistance programs and corporate social responsibility initiatives are also used to access fresh produce. In different parts of Australia, there are ‘Too Good to Waste’ boxes selling 5 kilograms of slightly damaged but edible fruit and vegetables for just £1.50(Pollard 2019). There are even alternative approaches to food assistance, known as "More than food" models, that offer emergency relief alongside integrated support services aimed at guiding

individuals out of food insecurity. These models prioritize three fundamental principles of placing the client at the center, empowering individuals by promoting autonomy and facilitating healthy food selection, and offering pathways for social interaction and support(Booth 2018). The US, especially the rural South, should implement some of these models and look at existing systems in other countries that actually work.

Moreover, there should be more funding for land access initiatives, such as the Funding for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers or the Transitions Incentive Program, which prioritize farmers of color and create proposals aimed at increased food access and economic autonomy in communities of color. Decoupling SNAP benefits from the Farm Bill and redesigning them to benefit community retailers rather than corporate ones is essential as well(Leslie 2018). States should encourage institutional food purchasing from local farms, match SNAP funds at places like farmers markets, and make vacant public lands available for cultivation by local food justice organizations.

Finally, I believe that people need to build collective agency and community resilience. Food activism and community initiatives such as food policy councils or agri-food assemblages can increase agency and overcome structural injustices created by the current and former dominant industrial models of food production. Agri-food assemblages help create food sovereignty by addressing the “relationships concerned with the production, consumption, and distribution of food, connecting consumers with producers” as well as other problems(Leslie 2018). They strengthen the connection between food consumers and producers, who can decide

to work together inside and outside of their structured meetings. Additionally, partnering community-based nutrition interventions aimed at improving food choices and nutritional adequacy with small/medium food retailers can impact residents' healthy food choices within stores.

A great example of a food policy council or agri-food assemblages is the Oktibbeha Food Policy Council (OFPC). Here, a group of scholars from a land-grant university held periodic meetings to address food insecurity, food access, and local food systems development (Thomspson 2020). The OFPC aims to increase food security and access to healthy foods, raise awareness of local options, and promote the reduction of food deserts. The council works towards these goals by exploring various mechanisms and partnerships, with a focus on connecting local minority farmers with low-income residents in need of fresh and healthy food.

The OFPC has implemented several projects, including the development of a cookbook featuring local food recipes and the establishment of a farmers' market in a low-income Black neighborhood. Despite challenges such as limited financial resources and the impact of COVID-19, the council has made significant progress in addressing food insecurity and empowering marginalized communities. The partnership between community scholars like social workers or community developers, and community stakeholders composed of a significant number of women and people of color had an important role. This inspired other community members to visualize and create new opportunities together such as the development of a new community garden in Maben, Mississippi(Thompson 2020).

In summary, food insecurity in Mississippi has stemmed from environmental racism and discriminatory policies that consist of redlining, gentrification, and segregation. This has been going on for generations, particularly in the rural South, originating from a systemic history of unjust policies targeting African Americans. Even today, racism is one of the leading causes of food insecurity and poverty for rural minority communities in Mississippi. Potential solutions in order to address these issues of food scarcity include social protection programs, creating policies that prioritize farmers of color and matching SNAP funds to local markets, as well as building collective agency through agri-food assemblages similar to the Oktibbeha Food Policy Council (OFPC). The state of Mississippi will require extensive government leadership and collective agency in order to finally become food sovereign.

Sources

Hossfeld, Leslie H., and Gina Rico Mendez. "Looking for food: Food access, food insecurity, and the food environment in rural Mississippi." *Family & community health* 41 (2018): S7-S14.

Hossfeld, Leslie, Laura Jean Kerr, and Judy Belue. "The Good Food Revolution: Building Community Resilience in the Mississippi Delta." *Social Sciences* 8.2 (2019): 57.

“Definitions of Food Security.” *USDA ERS - Definitions of Food Security*, (2017).

Sobol, Zachary. “Why Is Mississippi the Hungriest State in the Nation?” *Move for Hunger*, (2018).

Reeder, Nicole, et al. "Food insecurity, depression, and race: Correlations observed among college students at a university in the Southeastern United States." *International journal of environmental research and public health* 17.21 (2020): 8268.

Huber MT. “Hidden abodes: Industrializing political ecology.” *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 107(2017): 151–166.

Williams, Brian "That we may live”: Pesticides, plantations, and environmental racism in the United States South." *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 1.1-2 (2018): 243-267.

Linder, Marc. "Farm workers and the fair labor standards act: racial discrimination in the new deal." *Tex. L. Rev.* 65 (1986): 1335.

Giancatarino, A., & Noor, S. “Building the case for racial equity in the food system.” *Center for Social Inclusion* (2018).

Ayazi, H., & Elsheikh, E. “The U.S. farm bill: Corporate power and structural racialization in the United States food system.” *Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society* (2015).

Charles Shafaieh. “Designing Food Security in America’s Hungriest State.” *Harvard Gazette* (2023).

Gilbert, J., Sharp, G., & Sindy Felin, M. “The loss and persistence of Black-owned farms and farmland: A review of the research literature and its implications.” *Southern Rural Sociology* (2020).

Leslie, Isaac Sohn, and Monica M. White. "Race and food: Agricultural resistance in US history." *Handbook of the sociology of racial and ethnic relations* (2018): 347-364.

Downey, L. “Inequality, democracy, and the environment.” *New York, NY: NYU Press,* (2015).

Connell, Carol L., et al. "Food supply adequacy in the Lower Mississippi Delta." *Journal of nutrition education and behavior* 39.2 (2007): 77-83.

Shaker, Yasamin, et al. "Redlining, racism and food access in US urban cores." *Agriculture and Human Values* 40.1 (2023): 101-112.

Barker, C., A. Francois, R. Goodman, and E. Hussain. (with American Civil Liberties Union). “Unshared Bounty: How Structural Racism Contributes to the Creation and Persistence of Food Deserts” *New York Law School Racial Justice Project* (2018).

Pollard, Christina M., and Sue Booth. "Food insecurity and hunger in rich countries—it is time for action against inequality." *International journal of environmental research and public health* 16.10 (2019).

Booth, S.; Pollard, C.M.; Coveney, J.; Goodwin-Smith, I. “Sustainable Rather Than ‘Subsistence’ Food Assistance Solutions to Food Insecurity: South Australian Recipients’ Perspectives on Traditional and Social Enterprise Models.” *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health* (2018).

Leslie, Isaac Sohn, and Monica M. White. "Race and food: Agricultural resistance in US history." *Handbook of the sociology of racial and ethnic relations* (2018): 347-364.

Thompson, Diego, et al. "Assemblage, food justice, and intersectionality in rural Mississippi: the Oktibbeha Food Policy Council." *Sociological Spectrum* 40.6 (2020): 381-399.