

Local Government Coordination of Community Food Systems in Distressed Urban Areas

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ABSTRACT. This study examined public coordination of community food systems in fifteen distressed New Jersey cities with unusually high unemployment rates, large immigrant populations, high levels of poverty and an extraordinary reliance on school nutrition programs. Using key informant interviews with municipal officials and calls to school districts and city departments, we found a large variation in the ability of these city governments to coordinate food assistance programs, provide information about food programs to people in need, and plan for expanded food market choices. A few of the sampled city governments created local capacity to meet the nutritional needs of impoverished resi-

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dents, but many did not recognize food security as part of their mission. doi:10.1300/J134v11n04_03 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2007 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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INTRODUCTION

Food insecurity, hunger and poor nutrition remain persistent problems in the United States, especially in major metropolitan areas. According to the most recent figures available from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), 11.0 percent of American households are considered food insecure, meaning that at some time during the year they are uncertain of having, or are unable to acquire, enough food for all household members to achieve active and healthy living (Nord et al. 2006). About one-third of these households experience the most severe kind of food insecurity in which at least one household member goes hungry at least some time during the year because the household lacks money for enough food. Furthermore, food insecurity is associated with negative outcomes in terms of nutrient intake, feelings of well-being, and productivity. Food insecure individuals are significantly more likely to have low intakes of energy and important nutrients such as calcium, protein, and vitamins A, E, C, and B-6, which can contribute to fatigue, headaches, and illness (Rose 1999).

Food insecurity in high-income economies such as the United States occurs for reasons related to the entrenchment of poverty in a macroeconomic context of joblessness, low wages, and inadequate social safety nets (Riches, 1997). Closely related, globalization also impacts food insecurity as structural change contributes to the loss of jobs for workers who lack the skills and geographical mobility to find newly created jobs in other sectors and parts of the country. While most of these workers will eventually find new sources of income, their new jobs usually pay less, are more likely to be part-time, and usually offer no health insurance or retirement benefits (Lang, 1999, and Davis et al., 2001). Within this macroeconomic framework, social scientists are increasingly examining neighborhood effects in the geographical concentration of economic disadvantage and its associated characteristics, including single

motherhood, low rates of high school completion, weak attachment to the labor force, and food insecurity.

Neighborhood research has increased since the publication of *The Truly Disadvantaged* (Wilson 1987), and research on life in urban areas now examines the impact of concentrated poverty on individuals and households using measures of well-being and hardship. A growing body of work also examines how social mechanisms in urban neighborhoods can help to alleviate the hardships that residents face (e.g., Sampson et al. 1999). These mechanisms, which include local organizations and networks, serve as a type of social capital that meets the collective needs of urban residents who fail to reap the benefits of economic growth and development.

For the majority of persons in the United States, a highly advanced form of retailing and distribution has allayed most fears of missing decent and nutritious meals. However, this fear has not been resolved for the segment of the population whose income falls around and below the poverty line. Not only do economic circumstances and immobility work against households in this segment of the population, but there is also a noticeable spatial mismatch between market supply and demand for nutritious food in lower-income communities. Large supermarkets, the unparalleled supplier of fresh produce and nutritious food, are apt to locate in communities where their higher-risk investments in short shelf-life products are likely to be returned. Thus, poor urban neighborhoods have few economic allures with which to attract such large food markets. They are instead served by inner-city bodegas, food kiosks or corner grocery stores that stock more processed foods with longer shelf lives. This lack of accessibility to fresh produce and healthy foods in urban areas plays an important role in the perpetuation of food insecurity and poor nutrition among low-income households.

The U.S. federal government has a range of food assistance programs in place to reach food-insecure households, including the Food Stamp Program and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Also, the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program provide free or reduced-price meals to eligible children during the school day. Food-insecure households may also be reached through the efforts of private community initiatives such as food pantries and soup kitchens, many of which are supported by faith-based organizations and public agencies. Shut-ins and senior citizens may be served by Meals on Wheels programs or subsidized lunch programs in senior centers. Communities may also have communal gardening or farm-to-market programs to bring fresh fruits and veg-

etables into urban areas not otherwise served. These local government and private efforts, along with the well-established federal and state food assistance programs, together form *community food systems*.

The concept of a community food system is relatively new to the contemporary public sphere. Because the idea is new, scholars and practitioners have not reached a consensus on how such a system should be administered. Organizing community assets for food security has not historically been part of a local government's charge. In principle, however, city governments—especially their school systems, health, planning, and community development departments—can play a role in coordinating food assistance, owing to their participation in federal and state food programs and their familiarity with community assets and resources. This study sought to determine how deeply the concept of a community food system has taken hold among city governments that represent distressed urban areas with high levels of poverty and food insecurity. We believe ours is the first study to examine this issue. Because city governments vary in their political organization and ability to respond to new challenges, we expected to find significant variation in their acceptance of responsibility for the food security of their residents.

FRAMEWORK:

LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AS MEDIATING AGENTS

Community organizations and networks in urban neighborhoods have a strong potential to help low-income individuals and households to overcome the obstacles they encounter in difficult economic and social situations. Spurred by the work of Wilson (1987) and Coleman (1988), a growing body of cross-disciplinary research is focusing on the various forms of social capital that result when people work together in networks and organizations to achieve outcomes that would not be possible through individuals acting alone. Applied to problems inherent in inner city neighborhoods characterized by concentrated poverty, community organizations that provide various forms of assistance, training, networking, and outreach can help to mediate the effects of intense poverty and isolation. As in Sampson et al. (1999), the framework we develop for describing the community food system in urban neighborhoods focuses on the social capital that is inherent in the social-organizational structures found in local communities. Our premise holds that local governments form a crucial component in such structures through their work to help administer federal and state food programs,

to serve as an information conduit for people seeking assistance, and to plan future food retail development.

Food assistance programs at the federal level constitute a large portion of the food security safety net in the United States, with the bulk of this assistance taking the form of in-kind programs. A growing body of scholarly research indicates that these programs often have a positive impact on individuals' well-being. For example, Jolliffe et al. (2005) report that the U.S. Food Stamp Program has contributed to substantial reductions in children's poverty rates; Rose et al. (1998) found positive health outcomes for young children in households that participate in the Food Stamp and WIC Programs; and Borjas (2004) noted that public assistance reduces the likelihood that vulnerable households experience food insecurity. In addition, Daponte et al. (2004) found that food assistance in the form of food stamps has more significant impact on whether a household meets basic nutritional needs compared to assistance from food pantries.¹ Yet not all federal food assistance programs are associated with measured beneficial impacts, and individuals are still found to be slipping through the federal government's food safety net. For example, after controlling for selection effects, Gundersen and Oliveira (2001) reported that food stamp recipients and non-recipients have the same likelihood of being food insecure, and Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones (2003) found that participation in the School Lunch Program is not associated with improved child well-being or school performance. Closely related, Gibson-Davis and Foster (2006) found that food stamps do not lower the likelihood of individuals being food insecure, but there is some evidence that participation in this federal program can reduce the severity of the hardship.

Another issue with federal assistance is that since the 1980s, efforts to reduce the size of the federal government have led to the contracting out of many social services from public agencies to non-profit organizations (Marwell 2004). In addition to this increasing privatization of social services, decision-making power regarding how to spend public funds on social services has been decentralized to state, county, and municipal governments. These changes imply that the delivery of social services by private non-profit agencies, including emergency food assistance, has grown tremendously since 1980, just as these organizations have been competing for public sector resources that are increasingly controlled by local authorities (Marwell 2004).

As a result of this privatization and decentralization of social services, food-insecure households are increasingly reached through the assistance of non-profit community organizations such as food pantries

and soup kitchens, many of which receive additional support from faith-based organizations. Supporting evidence in Sommerfeld and Reisch (2003) indicates that nonprofit organizations that provide emergency assistance with food and shelter have seen a growing demand for their services, particularly since the 1996 welfare reform.² More generally, community-based organizations are increasingly seen as a powerful force for providing services to meet the needs of poor households and for building communities in distressed neighborhoods. Yet because community-based organizations are often allocating publicly-funded services to individuals in need, they are also political agents and closely involved in local decision-making processes regarding public funds (Marwell 2004). With these changes, local government agencies have gained the growing responsibility of directing resources and citizens to the community-based organizations that increasingly are the main providers of emergency food assistance.

Through their social service provision, these public and private agents (federal government, local government, community-based organizations) all contribute to the community food system. Another important element in the community food system is the geographically-specific production and allocation of food by small-scale enterprises, often with a focus on linking farmers with consumers (Hinrichs and Kremer, 2002). Yet food distribution in urban communities faces a number of challenges in providing those in need with access to fresh produce and nutritious food at reduced cost. Limited storage space, lack of parking space for trucks, and lack of incentives for farmers are among the many logistical difficulties of delivering fresh, healthy foods on a timely basis to low-income communities in urban areas. Planning for new infrastructure requires building new or expanding and refurbishing existing supermarkets in inner-cities, improved transportation networks to reach the food markets in the suburbs, and improved access to fresh produce via creative programs. The logistical difficulties faced by local governments have spurred some individuals and community-based organizations to coordinate gleaning programs, create backyard gardens, school gardens, and community agricultural programs. These initiatives utilize nutrition strategies to bring fresh produce directly from farmers and gardeners to urban residents, thus improving food choice and access to fresh, nutritious foods. A growing body of evidence points to the success of these types of community food programs in improving vulnerable individuals' access to food, with an emphasis on fresh fruits and vegetables.³

City governments are uniquely positioned to augment the community food system through a city's base food infrastructure, made up of private food markets that directly serve the city's population. Food insecurity is exacerbated by a noticeable spatial mismatch between market supply and demand for nutritious food in lower-income communities. The relationship of private food markets to a city is primarily profit-oriented rather than need-based, and the lack of sufficient economic mass can fail to attract large supermarkets. Without ample accessibility to fresh produce and healthy foods, distressed communities offer their residents little recourse for a wholesome, food-secure lifestyle. Some cities do host farmers markets, an initiative that brings together producers and consumers of fresh produce in urban areas. While farmers markets and cities share a capitalistic relationship, these markets can be used to bring fresh produce to areas where the food market infrastructure is lacking.

In practice, city planning departments are the most important public agencies within the community food system capable of influencing a city's base food infrastructure. Planning departments are familiar with community needs since their responsibilities include creating a strategic and comprehensive plan for guiding economic development. Although planners cannot dictate the placement of private food infrastructure, they can perform spatial analyses to identify areas of concern as well as offer economic incentives to prospective private food markets. In addition, city governments serve as intermediaries, channeling federal, state and county funds (including Community Block Grants) to many soup kitchens and food pantries. Since these public funds are typically under the exclusive administration of city planning departments, planners have a powerful tool with which to shape the community food system. Thus, planning departments' awareness of local private resources is crucial for the optimal distribution of federal funding within the community food system.

Interdepartmental communication within city government is also important for community food systems to work well. The coordination of inter-departmental information sources and functions enhances a city government's ability to identify areas of concern and plan interventions. For instance, records of the locations and types of food vendors in a city, presumably held by the health department for inspection purposes, can be strategically analyzed by city planners to improve spatial efficiency and overall effectiveness of the community food system. In a well-functioning and coordinated system, city departments involved in human services have the ability to refer citizens to the food-assistance resources of other city agencies as well as community-based organizations.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

We selected the nation's most densely populated and diverse state, New Jersey, and within that state we selected the largest and most distressed of its cities as our study area. Then, using key informant interviews and systematically interviewing employees in the school systems and multiple city departments, we examined the extent to which these urban areas have established coordinated and well-organized community food systems that meet the needs of local residents. We categorized the ability of each city government to coordinate food assistance programs, provide information about food resources to people in need, and plan for expanded and improved food market choices. In other words, we examined the degree to which local governments of poor, densely-populated urban areas accept their responsibility for coordinating their community's food system.

Selection of Sample Cities

New Jersey ranks as one of the highest per-capita income states, yet it has high income inequality and deep pockets of poverty, urban decay and food insecurity. In 2003, for example, four of New Jersey's twenty-one counties—Cumberland, Essex, Hudson and Passaic—had poverty rates exceeding the 12.5 percent national average, at 14.9, 14.4, 15.0 and 12.6 percent, respectively (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2006). Poverty rates for children reached even higher levels, at 20.8 percent in Hudson and more than 16 percent in Cumberland, Essex, and Passaic Counties (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2006).

To identify the poorest urban areas in New Jersey with the greatest need for food assistance, we followed the guidance of several state entities: the New Jersey Department of Education (DOE), the New Jersey Judiciary and the New Jersey Legislature. The DOE formulates rankings of urban school districts by socioeconomic status using a composite index of seven indicators from decennial census data: percent of the population with no high school diploma, percent of the population with some college, occupational status, population density, income, unemployment, and poverty. In 1997, the New Jersey State Supreme Court used these rankings and ruled that school children in the most distressed urban communities were not receiving adequate nor beneficial education (*Abbott v. Burke*, 1997). The Court identified 28 disadvantaged municipalities as "Abbott" districts based on the DOE's composite index and other criteria such as test scores and disadvantaged students

who required additional education services. In 1998, the New Jersey Legislature designated two more school districts as disadvantaged, bringing the list of Abbott districts to 30. As the Abbott districts correspond to municipal boundaries, we selected half (15) of the communities on the list, those with the largest populations as determined by the 2000 Census (Figure 1). This sampling framework allowed us to identify 1.5 million urban residents, about 17 percent of New Jersey's total population of 8.4 million people, as residing in the most disadvantaged communities. Our sample of disadvantaged municipalities includes Union City and West New York, cities with population densities of 53,000 and 45,000 people per square mile. These two locales are the most densely populated in the nation, with densities exceeding those of New York City and Chicago. Our sample cities are also highly diverse, with large proportions of racial and ethnic minorities (Table 1).

Table 1 shows that household incomes within the sample cities fall far below the state median (\$55,000), especially in Camden and Newark where median incomes are less than half that amount. Only one city in the sample, Plainfield, ranks higher than the overall national median household income of \$42,000. All of the sample cities have above-average rates of unemployment and poverty. Six of them, including Camden and Newark, have unemployment rates that exceed the New Jersey and the national unemployment rates by more than a factor of two. Similarly, all of the cities have at least 14 percent of the population living below the poverty level, a percentage share that exceeds both the New Jersey and the national averages. The percent of people below poverty is almost 30 percent in New Brunswick and Newark; and above 35 percent in Camden. All but two of the fifteen cities have at least 10 percent of their households classified as female-headed households with children present, compared to a state average of 6 percent and a national average of 7 percent. The high poverty rates are also accompanied by indicators of food insecurity, as measured by data in the Food Security Supplements of the Current Population Survey (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2003 and 2004). Residents in the greater Newark and Camden areas reported an above-average incidence of food insecurity as indicated by the screening questions on that survey that were related to running short of food money and not having sufficient quantities of food to eat or the types of food they wanted to eat in the past year.

School district indicators provide further evidence of above-average needs for food assistance in these communities (Table 2). Most dramatic is the high percentage of students in Abbott districts who are eligible for free lunches through the federal government's school nutrition

FIGURE 1. New Jersey's 15 Sampled Abbott Districts

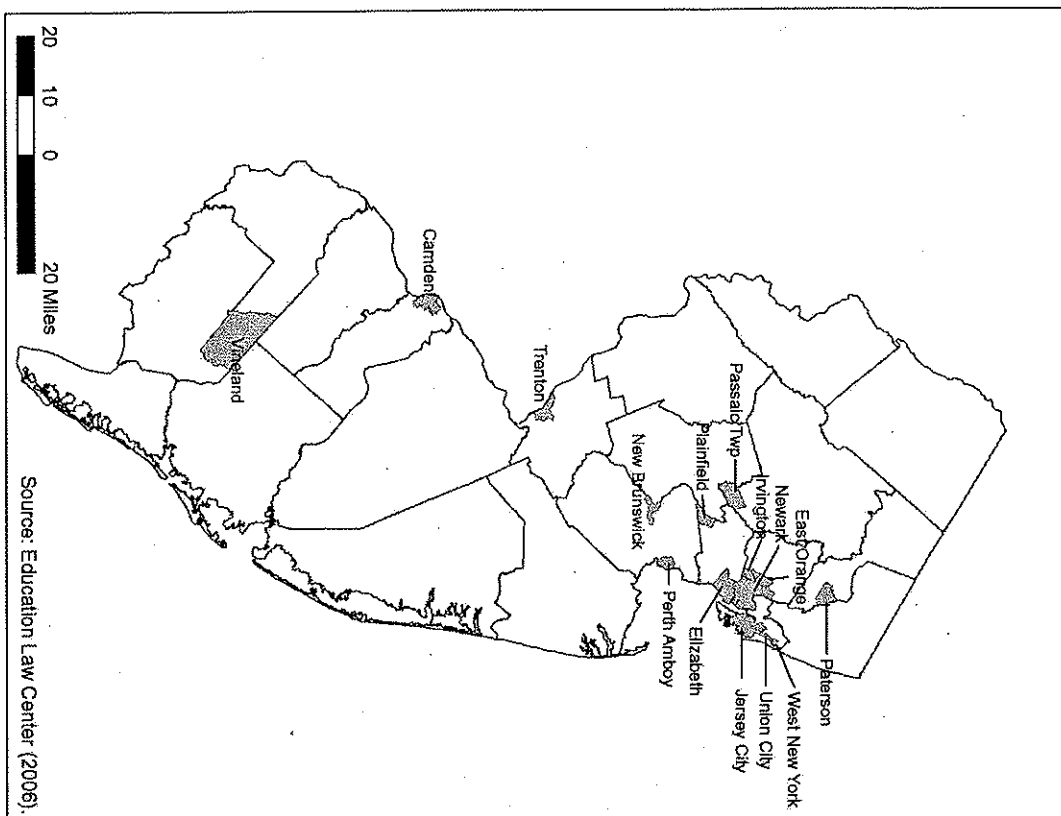


TABLE 1. Sample Characteristics, City-Level Indicators*

City	Population	Population per Square Mile	Median Household Income	Unemployment Rate	% of People Below Poverty	% of People White and Non-Hispanic	% of Households Female-Headed with Children
Camden	79,904	9,057	\$23,421	15.9	35.5	7.1	24.5
East Orange	69,824	17,777	\$32,346	13.3	19.2	2.7	16.7
Elizabeth	120,568	9,866	\$35,175	9.0	17.8	26.8	10.7
Irvington	60,695	20,528	\$36,575	12.5	17.4	5.7	15.6
Jersey City	240,055	16,094	\$37,862	10.0	18.6	23.6	11.2
New Brunswick	48,573	9,294	\$36,080	10.6	27.0	32.9	10.0
Newark	273,546	11,495	\$26,913	16.1	28.4	14.2	17.1
Passaic	67,861	21,805	\$33,594	10.3	21.2	18.3	12.5
Paterson	149,222	17,675	\$32,778	13.1	22.2	13.2	15.7
Perth Amboy	47,303	9,892	\$37,608	10.8	17.6	18.9	12.2
Plainfield	47,829	7,922	\$46,683	7.9	15.9	11.5	13.0
Trenton	85,403	11,154	\$31,074	10.5	21.1	24.6	15.7
Union City	67,088	52,978	\$30,642	12.4	21.4	13.3	11.1
Vineland	56,271	819	\$40,076	10.7	13.8	54.8	9.6
West New York	45,768	44,995	\$31,980	10.0	18.9	15.5	8.5
New Jersey	8,414,350	1,134	\$55,146	5.8	8.5	66.0	6.4
United States	281,421,906	80	\$41,994	5.8	12.4	69.1	7.2

*City boundaries conform to school districts

Source: Constructed from Census Data in U.S. Bureau of the Census (2006).

TABLE 2. Sample Characteristics, School District Indicators*

City	Number of Students	% of Students Eligible for Subsidized Lunch Programs			Average Classroom Teacher Salary	Graduation Rate (%)	% of Students Limited English Proficiency	% of Students in Individualized Education Programs
		Free	Reduced-Price	Total				
Camden	17,266	77	3	80	\$50,653	43	7	19
East Orange	11,762	56	12	68	\$58,495	64	3	16
Elizabeth	21,024	57	15	72	\$48,710	64	21	12
Irvington	8,307	56	12	68	\$57,525	47	5	16
Jersey City	31,259	58	14	72	\$56,709	59	8	16
New Brunswick	6,105	69	11	80	\$52,835	71	25	20
Newark	42,395	68	8	76	\$60,471	51	9	16
Passaic	11,267	66	10	75	\$61,514	50	28	22
Paterson	26,193	69	11	80	\$56,945	46	13	16
Perth Amboy	9,365	62	17	79	\$50,812	58	16	12
Plainfield	7,816	55	15	70	\$52,113	53	12	12
Trenton	13,231	46	9	55	\$53,279	94	6	20
Union City	10,024	79	8	87	\$53,793	74	43	12
Vineland	9,616	43	13	55	\$50,166	72	6	20
West New York	6,591	56	15	71	\$60,468	68	17	15
New Jersey	1,367,449	21	6	27	\$53,761	89	4	16

*School districts conform to municipal boundaries

Source: Constructed from Common Core of Data for 2002–03 in United States Department of Education (2006); Abbott Districts Data for 2000–01, 2001–02 in Education Law Center (2006); and Vital Education Statistics for 2000–01 in New Jersey State Department of Education (2006).

program. As many as 79 percent of students (in Union City) are eligible for free lunches, compared to the New Jersey average of 21 percent. Even the city with the lowest proportion, Trenton, still exceeds the state proportion by a factor of two. In the combined figures, at least 70 percent of the students in most of the sample cities are eligible for free or price-reduced lunches, compared to the state average of 27 percent. Table 2 also shows that the sample cities have relatively large proportions of students with limited English proficiency due to the strong presence of immigrant populations. Finally, as few as 43 percent of students graduate from Camden's public school system, and all other cities except Trenton have graduation rates that fall well below the state average of 89 percent. Thus, the statistics in Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate the entrenchment of poverty in the sample communities, as well as the likely need for supportive services, including food assistance.

Data Collection and Analysis

To assess the public coordination of community food systems in New Jersey's lowest-income urban areas, we began by contacting two sets of key informants: directors of city planning agencies and school superintendents. We mailed personalized letters of introduction along with a description of the study to each of the people holding the respective positions in each of the fifteen cities. We included a targeted list of questions on a separate sheet of paper. For example, questions for directors of city planning agencies asked about the locations and numbers of soup kitchens and food pantries, whether or not the city has a farmers market, and the extent to which plans are underway to develop more food options for residents in underserved areas (bringing in new food markets, expanding or upgrading existing food markets, providing new transportation to food markets, or providing community garden plots). We also asked whether the city has a referral service for residents needing food assistance. Our questions to school superintendents included information about any subsidized food programs in which the school participates, how the programs are administered, and whether there was a referral service for families in need of additional food assistance. Each letter requested that if the person opening the letter was not the appropriate agency contact, that they pass the questions along to the person in the agency who could answer them. Finally, we asked that the appropriate person contact us via fax or email as soon as possible so that we could schedule telephone interviews to obtain answers to our questions.

Before making calls to key informants, we did background research on the resources available for food security in each of the targeted cities. Using telephone books and the Internet, we created a database listing all the food pantries, soup kitchens and community-based organizations that provide food-related programs. We then contacted each of these entities to be sure they were still functioning and asked them about the numbers of people they serve, their hours of operation, and the types of services provided. In particular, we asked whether they provided meals, vouchers, or other types of programs in helping local residents achieve greater food security. We believe that our database reflected publicly-available information on the food resources within each city, information we felt should be readily available to local governments.

Interviews with key informants in each target city's agencies (community development, health, planning, and social services) were conducted by a single research intern over a period of three months in early 2005. Our calls had two purposes: (1) determining whether the agency was organized to provide referrals to local residents needing food assistance, and (2) determining the extent to which the agency accepted responsibility and planned for the food security needs of its residents. We persisted with our efforts to contact city agencies until we had responses from at least two departments in each of the fifteen cities. Responses from the calls were then coded and entered into a database. Analysis included the use of simple descriptive statistics from the coded database of calls to city agencies and organization of the anecdotal information obtained from the key informant interviews.

RESULTS

Officials from the city planning departments in eight cities (Camden, East Orange, Elizabeth, Irvington, Jersey City, New Brunswick, Newark, and Paterson) and nine school districts (Elizabeth, New Brunswick, Newark, Paterson, Perth Amboy, Plainfield, Union City, Vineland, and West New York) responded positively to our first round request for key informant interviews. In several instances, we were referred to the city's health department for an additional key informant interview. In our second round of calling city agencies, we often had to make multiple calls in order to reach specific individuals trained to respond to public requests for information. In other cases, the first person to answer the telephone was quite helpful and eager not only to respond to our questions, but to provide additional information. We were successful in contacting

at least two governmental agencies in each of the fifteen cities. In total, we reached 63 separate departments.

COORDINATION OF FOOD SECURITY PROGRAMS WITHIN SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Food assistance programs for schools are relatively advanced in the public sphere. Government officials and the public recognize that many families may not have the resources to consistently provide meals for their children. They also recognize that nutritious and healthy eating patterns encourage a positive lifestyle and sustainable academic performance. Thus, there is strong federal and state support for school-related food assistance measures, including several heavily subsidized programs that target economically disadvantaged families. The three largest federal food assistance programs for children in school—the National School Breakfast, Lunch, and After-School Snack Programs—must meet federal nutrition standards, and schools that successfully apply for the program are cash-reimbursed for expenses on a per meal basis.

Since the food service departments within each school district have a clearly designated role, our task in evaluating program administration was relatively straightforward. School nutrition programs serve a fixed population that is spatially centralized during fixed times of the day. Food is typically shipped in bulk to a centralized warehouse belonging to each school district and then disbursed to school locations. Although the size of the school districts varied significantly, our analysis revealed that participation in all three federally subsidized nutrition programs was consistently high. The administrative structure of handling funds and the distribution of food showed only slight variation. Several school districts, notably Plainfield and West New York, opted to hire the services of contractors outside the Board of Education in order to streamline the handling of federal reimbursements and district procurement of food.

While all those interviewed praised the National School Breakfast, Lunch and After-school Snack Programs, their satisfaction may have hindered the potential for innovation in ways to improve the nutritional value or to diversify their sources of food. Specifically, schools in the Abbott districts are not mandated to provide enhanced nutrition programs. Instead, such programs are included in the Abbott district legislation as services to be provided on an as-needed basis. Because the state government is responsible for complete implementation of the

Abbott programs, new initiatives that require local government coordination can fall by the wayside. For example, the director of food services for one Abbott district considered the logistics of farm-to-school initiatives, in which schools procure fresh produce from local farmers, too troublesome. The backpack program, another fairly recent initiative which allows food-insecure students to take food home in backpacks, was deemed risky by the director of food services in another Abbott district.

Our analysis did reveal some notable programs related to nutrition education within the Abbott districts. In the New Brunswick and Perth Amboy school districts, there is interdepartmental interaction designed to better educate children about a healthy lifestyle. Coordination between the local health department and the Department of Food Services in Perth Amboy aims to provide students with information about proper nutrition, such as the importance of fruits and vegetables, within the classroom setting. A similar collaboration in New Brunswick supports students with diabetes by teaching the principles of counting carbohydrates and administering insulin injections. Overall, the school-based food needs of students were well-coordinated within the sample cities.

Coordination of Food Security Programs Within City Hall

The results of our interviews with city hall personnel are summarized in Table 3. The columns reflect how municipal government fulfills its role as the intermediary between urban residents and the various resources that comprise the community food system. "Referrals" contains two columns that reflect the fundamental bridge between persons in need and the community food system. The first column, "Public," reflects the ability of government officials from a variety of city departments such as health, planning or social services to refer individuals to public resources, such as a municipal food bank. The second column, "Public-Private," reflects a municipal government's ability to refer individuals or families to private sector resources that address food security, such as church-based food pantries.

The three columns under "Planning" reflect only the planning department's involvement in the community food system. The column labeled "Professional Awareness" indicates that the respondent has an understanding of the community food system as a planning concern. "Part of Referral Network" indicates that the planning department is involved in referring those in need to appropriate resources. "Food Retail Development" means that the planning department is actively pursuing a plan to

improve food quality and quantity for city neighborhoods through an economic development plan. The maximum score of five "Yes" answers indicates that a municipal government is completely involved in the community food system, coordinating and planning for the food security of its citizens. A city with the maximum score has achieved a holistic community food system with strong local government awareness and coordination of available public food assistance programs; an extensive referral service for private food assistance resources; and a mobilized planning department active in food infrastructure development in under-served areas. In contrast, a score of all "No" answers indicates that a municipal system has no coordinated involvement.

Table 3 shows that two of the sample cities, East Orange and Perth Amboy, attained the maximum score. The health departments in both cities maintain an extensive referral network of community-based organizations involved in food assistance efforts, including a number of churches, private organizations involved in administering food stamps, and food pantries. Both health departments administer the Summer Food Program, and in Perth Amboy that agency also runs a farmers market. Thus, East Orange and Perth Amboy are strong examples of well-coordinated local governments that are thoroughly aware of the public and private food resources within the community food system.

The planning departments in both of the top-scoring cities also acknowledged their responsibility for maintaining food security in their communities, and they represent two of three cities in the sample (along with Elizabeth) that have achieved a high level of intervention in planning for expanded local capacity to provide food resources. Their distribution of Block Grant funds to community-based organizations is guided by a keen awareness of private food assistance resources. In East Orange during a ward analysis, the planning department identified an unmet demand for larger and higher-quality food markets. Consequently, financial incentives for a large food market were included in the city's master plan and shortly thereafter, a newly-constructed supermarket added more options for fresh produce and healthy foods. The fine-tuned operations of these planning departments serve as a role model for planning intervention and a holistic approach to community health and development.

Representing the second tier of high scoring cities in Table 3, Elizabeth and Plainfield exhibited only minor inconsistencies in what are otherwise exemplary community food systems. The local governments in both cities possess strong public-private referral services and well-mobilized planning departments. Elizabeth's planning department

TABLE 3. Role of Local Government in Coordinating the Community Food System

City	Referrals ^a		Planning Involvement ^b			Total Yes Score
	Public	Public-Private	Professional Awareness	Part of Referral Network	Food Retail Development	
Camden	no	no	no	no	no	0
East Orange	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	5
Elizabeth	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	4
Irvington	yes	yes	no	no	no	2
Jersey City	yes	yes	no	no	no	2
New Brunswick	no	no	yes	no	yes	2
Newark	no	no	no	no	no	0
Passaic	yes	yes	no	no	no	2
Paterson	no	no	yes	no	yes	2
Perth Amboy	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	5
Plainfield	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	4
Trenton	yes	yes	no	no	no	2
Union City	no	no	no	no	no	0
Vineland	no	yes	no	no	no	1
West New York	no	no	no	no	no	0

Note: All cities participate in federal and state food assistance programs.
^aFor Referrals, Public indicates that local government agencies refer individuals to the public component of the community food system. Public-private indicates that local government agencies refer individuals to private resources for food assistance or social service organizations in their area.
^bFor Planning Involvement, Professional Awareness indicates that the city planning agency has knowledge of the community food system. Part of Referral Network indicates that the planning department is part of the public referral network for food assistance. Food Retail Development indicates that there is a planning intervention in place to augment the existing food infrastructure through local business development.

provides the only food assistance referral service available in the city, a superior offering that includes social service providers in all of Union County. However, no other city department directors interviewed knew of its existence, indicating a breakdown in interdepartmental awareness which resulted in Elizabeth's failure to achieve a perfect score.

The planning departments in both Elizabeth and Plainfield claim a direct role in identifying unmet demands for food availability and have taken direct action in guiding business development to improve the existing capacity for meeting residents' food needs. In Elizabeth, for example, a new supermarket is planned for the city's downtown port area which has been traditionally under-served. According to the director of the Plainfield planning department, the need is severe as the city does not have a modern supermarket despite a population of 48,000 people. The department has recently adopted a redevelopment land-use plan that favors large food market chains. As the Plainfield planning depart-

ment has no connection to the referral network in the city's health department, it received a total score of four "Yes" answers.

Six cities in the study sample—Irvington, Jersey City, New Brunswick, Passaic, Trenton and Paterson—received two "Yes" scores. These cities represent local governments that possess interdepartmental awareness of the community food system and provide public-private referrals but lack planning involvement, or vice versa. Despite this lack of coordination, these cities have developed some innovative programs. For example, the assistant director of the health department in Jersey City claims his department is a "Community Action Agency"—one dedicated to serving the poor—that possesses extensive knowledge of available food pantries and soup kitchens and offers a wide range of high-quality public food assistance programs. Poor individuals and families are regularly referred to these resources, but senior citizens and shut-ins are not overlooked. For example, the city's health department runs a farmers market through which senior citizens can redeem food vouchers. The Meals on Wheels program consolidates meal deliveries by including one hot meal with several others that are frozen. With this delivery system, Jersey City is able to serve 2,700 daily meals to approximately 900 participating seniors.

Passaic fills in service gaps by coordinating its senior nutrition program with those administered by the county. In a good example of inter-governmental coordination, seniors in Passaic have the choice of eating one meal delivered by the Meals on Wheels program and another at a local senior resource center in the same day. In contrast, Irvington has delegated the role of food assistance to a private community-based organization (the Irvington Neighborhood Improvement Corporation) that is heavily involved in social services. This model of external administrative coordination of food assistance can help an impoverished community by offering centralized information services, especially if the city planning department cannot be mobilized.

The five remaining cities in the study sample—Camden, Newark, Union City, Vineland and West New York—represent local governments that have little or no interdepartmental coordination of public food assistance programs or awareness of private resources that could address this need. Interview results indicated a general lack of awareness of local food assistance programs. All of these cities have delegated food assistance to county-wide entities, a process which has effectively removed their city governments from responsibility for the local community food system. For example, food assistance in West New York is primarily delegated to the North Hudson Council of Mayors, a regional

food assistance organization that receives funding from the county with matching funds from municipal governments within Hudson County. Interviews with West New York officials showed little evidence of knowledge of regional public food assistance or local private food assistance within the municipality. Similarly, in Newark, top officials within the Homeless Health Care Division were unable to make a referral for information about food pantries and soup kitchens.

Planning departments in the five cities with the fewest "Yes" scores showed little awareness of their community food system, and those interviewed insisted that their role in building capacity to expand food markets is strictly through land-use regulation. With the lack of local government involvement in the community food system, these cities are deprived of the fundamental bridge between county-level resources and local community-based organizations. New initiatives for bringing produce to urban areas, food market development for under-served areas, and referrals to food assistance resources all fall by the wayside. These cities need improved inter-departmental coordination if they are to develop an active role for city government in the community food system. Simple measures, such as developing lists of public and private food-related resources and circulating the lists to both city and private health and social service agencies would go a long way in this regard.

CONCLUSION

Our analysis found little variation in the administration of school-based food assistance programs in the poorest New Jersey urban school districts, but a high degree of variation among their municipal governments' ability to coordinate their respective community food systems. Indeed, only four of the fifteen sampled cities have municipal health and planning departments with referral services capable of providing local residents with complete information about the public and private food resources within the community food system. These same four cities also have planning departments with a high level of intervention in planning for expanded local capacity to develop the food retail sector. At the other end of the distribution, four city governments completely ignore their responsibilities for supporting the nutritional needs of their residents. In between these extremes, seven municipal governments have made some attempt to actively plan for the development of the community food system and to provide information services for food assistance from federally-funded programs and from non-governmental organiza-

tions. However, these attempts are incomplete and leave large gaps in the food security safety-nets of these impoverished urban neighborhoods.

The findings of our study reflect some stark political realities. For instance, Perth Amboy achieved a perfect score in our research. On further examination of that city's management style, we found a culture of open government, with a goal of civic improvement and a dedication to public service instilled in city employees. The city is revitalizing its waterfront, improving housing stock, upgrading its schools and health care facilities, and encouraging new businesses to locate in Perth Amboy. While the city is still struggling with deep pockets of poverty, it is actively trying to improve the lot of all its citizens, including those with food security needs. In contrast, Camden scored at the bottom of our rankings. The culture of political corruption was so rife in Camden that in 2001 the mayor was sentenced to seven years in federal prison for bribery, racketeering and money laundering. To break the cycle of corruption and mismanagement, the State appointed a manager to oversee city government for at least five years. As the city undergoes political reorganization, some of the issues that we uncovered related to the lack of communication between city agencies may be resolved. It may take longer for the culture of corruption to be swept out of all the city's departments, however. As recently as 2006, the Camden schools were embroiled in a scandal involving manipulation of the results of standardized tests. Given these realities, it is not surprising that we found that cities with good management and dedication to their residents perform well on issues related to food security whereas those without such leadership do not.

This research focused on the coordination of food assistance in fifteen of the most impoverished cities in New Jersey. We spoke with service providers at dozens of food pantries, soup kitchens, and other private resources for food assistance in the sampled cities. We also spoke with all fifteen school districts about food assistance in the local schools, and with at least two agencies in each city that we felt might be able to refer their citizens for food assistance. As we did not take a random sample, we cannot claim that our results reflect the coordination of food assistance in other New Jersey cities, nor can we claim they reflect those located in other states. However, our findings at the local government level are consistent with survey results for New Jersey in Bellows et al. (2005) at the individual level: among 407 people considered food insecure who were interviewed in urban locations away from the proximity of emergency food providers, 35 percent of respondents were not familiar with the location or even the concept of a food pantry or soup kitchen.

Municipal governments can be a positive force for helping to build community food systems that improve the food security of their residents. Evidence reviewed in this study indicates that some individuals are left out of reach of federal food assistance programs and are hampered by a lack of information or ability in visiting local soup kitchens and food pantries run by community-based organizations. Recommendations to improve this gap in the safety net revolve around reforms within municipal governments. First and most broadly, local governments can achieve improved responsiveness to the needs of urban neighborhoods with concentrated poverty by defining their community food systems and actively planning interventions to achieve community-wide food security. Such planning interventions include implementing and improving computerized referral services for food assistance, providing resources and incentives to broaden the network of food banks, consulting with local public and private organizations in order to coordinate their food resources and fill service gaps, implementing new programs to bring farm produce to urban residents, and designing urban redevelopment plans that include expanded food retail options.

The study's findings also have important policy implications for social workers. Social workers historically have emphasized the importance of a social safety net to help vulnerable households and individuals meet their basic needs in the face of economic hardship. As discussed in Rank and Hirschl (2002), the concept of a safety net applies not only to marginalized and disenfranchised Americans, but to the majority of Americans who at some point in their lives will utilize a social safety net program. In support of this argument, Tapogna et al. (2004) find that income shocks associated with high household mobility and job loss are the most important determinant of variations across the states in their rates of hunger. Such income shocks, particularly when combined with high housing costs, are enough to put upward pressure on hunger rates even in states that do not have high poverty rates. Hence the efforts of social work professionals who advocate for more comprehensive safety nets are having impacts across a large segment of the U.S. population. Reforms such as support programs for displaced renters, improved information sources in print and electronic format about the location of emergency food providers, counseling services to provide information about the federal government's food assistance programs, expanded resources for nutrition education programs, and the training and hiring of multi-lingual social workers to reach migrant families at risk of food insecurity will all go a long way toward achieving integrated community-based food systems.

NOTES

1. Other recent studies to find generally positive impacts of federal food assistance programs on well-being include Bhattacharya et al. (2004) and Herrman et al. (2004).
2. For studies on who attends and benefits from food pantries and soup kitchens, see Curtis and McClellan (1995), Poppendieck (1998), Biggerstaff et al. (2002), and Martin et al. (2003).
3. Broad issues related to community food security programs are put forth in Bellows and Hann (2003), Kantor (2001) and McCullum et al. (2002). Specific programs are covered by Vallianatos et al. (2004) on farm-to-school initiatives, Hoisington et al. (2001) on field gleaning, and Twiss et al. (2003) on community gardens.

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