

# A DEEPER LOOK AT FOOD APARTHIED:

*Insight from Mon Valley Residents and Community,  
Members of Clairton, Duquesne, and McKeesport, PA*

**Fawn Walker-Montgomery, MS**

*CEO Take Action Advocacy Group and Consultant*

**Justine Lindemann, PhD**

*Assistant Professor of Community Development and Resilience*

*Penn State University*



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <b>Introduction and Methodology:</b> ..... | 2 |
|--|---|

Justine Lindemann<sup>1</sup> and Fawn Walker-Montgomery<sup>2</sup>

|                                      |   |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| <b>Overview of Key Themes:</b> ..... | 3 |
|--------------------------------------|---|

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Declining Food Infrastructure Over Time.....   | 4 |
| Building and Strengthening Community Connections, Networks, and Relationships.....                 | 4 |
| Community Safety: Exploring the Intersections of Violence and Trauma.....                          | 4 |
| Examining Systems of Injustice and Racial Equity in the Food System.....                           | 4 |
| Examining Economic and Policy Factors in the Post-Pandemic Period.....                             | 4 |
| Promoting Dignity in the Food System / Addressing Quality, Nutrition, and Availability Issues..... | 5 |
| Improving Transportation Infrastructure for Enhanced Access to Amenities.....                      | 5 |
| Trust in Government and Political Processes.....   | 5 |
| Advancing Future-Focused Solutions to Build Food Sovereignty and Self-Determination in Food.....   | 5 |

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <b>A Deeper Exploration and Analysis of Key Themes:</b> ..... | 6 |
|---|---|

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Declining Food Infrastructure Over Time.....   | 6  |
| Building and Strengthening Community Connections, Networks, and Relationships.....                 | 6  |
| Community Safety: Exploring the Intersections of Violence and Trauma.....                          | 7  |
| Examining Systems of Injustice and Racial Equity in the Food System.....                           | 8  |
| Examining Economic and Policy Factors in the Post-Pandemic Period.....                             | 9  |
| Promoting Dignity in the Food System / Addressing Quality, Nutrition, and Availability Issues..... | 11 |
| Improving Transportation Infrastructure for Enhanced Access to Amenities.....                      | 12 |
| Trust in Government and Political Processes.....   | 13 |
| Advancing Future-Focused Solutions to Build Food Sovereignty and Self-Determination in Food..      | 13 |

|                         |    |
|-------------------------|----|
| <b>Conclusion</b> ..... | 15 |
|-------------------------|----|

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor of Community Development and Resilience, Penn State University, University Park, PA

<sup>2</sup>Executive Director, Take Action Advocacy Group, McKeesport, PA

# INTRODUCTION TO METHODOLOGY

Beginning in 2021, faculty, staff, and Extension educators from Penn State University Park and Penn State Greater Allegheny began discussing the condition of the food system in Pennsylvania's Mon Valley, with the intention of engaging community residents from the most impacted communities.<sup>3</sup> Discussions centered on three municipalities: Clairton, Duquesne, and McKeesport. Through partnerships with local advocacy organizations including the Black Women's Policy Center and, more recently, Take Action Advocacy Group, this collaboration hosted a total of 10 listening sessions and several short individual interviews with over 100 community residents from across these three municipalities to gain insights into their experiences with food, food insecurity, emergency food services, and related issues, and to learn more about what solutions or actions they would like to see in their communities to address this complexity of issues.

To facilitate these discussions about the experience of food insecurity among residents in Clairton, Duquesne, and McKeesport, we asked open-ended questions, some of which were guided by the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC).<sup>4</sup> Questions explored topics including cost of food, access to food pantries, residents' involvement in supplemental nutrition programs such as SNAP or other benefits, quality of food and food retail outlets, access to transportation, and the difficult choices residents may face in prioritizing food purchases alongside other essential expenses such as medicine, rent, and utilities.

During each listening session, we provided space for open and free-flowing discussion, which allowed for related topics to emerge organically. This approach gave our team a sense of the many pressing issues that intersect with food security. An important part of each listening session also included discussions of potential solutions to identified challenges.

This report gives an overview of key themes that emerged from the ten listening sessions, along with some preliminary analysis of these themes. The discussions highlight the intersection of food with many other systemic issues – including transportation, health and healthcare, race/ism, space and spatial equity (that is, the extent to which quality of life conditions and social determinant of health are equitable across communities and neighborhoods), business and community development, government and policy, and many others. This illustrates just how deeply linked food justice is to achieving social and spatial justice, and how important it is to seriously grapple with the significance of structural racism, and how it has contributed to the persistence of food disparities.

The term “food apartheid” underscores intentional and systemic inequities in food access, stemming from historical injustices like redlining, segregation, and discriminatory economic practices. Communities are intentionally situated without adequate transportation to food retail, increasing the challenge of accessing food in spaces where few or no food retail outlets exist. Without access to reliable, safe, convenient, and affordable transportation, residents will continue to struggle to obtain adequate food. This underscores the need for improved transportation infrastructure to enhance food access for the most impacted communities. Similarly, discussions around structural and spatial inequities pointed to disparities between food retail outlets across neighborhoods. When food retail outlets offer higher quality and more affordable food options in more affluent, predominantly white neighborhoods and communities as compared to what is generally offered in lower income, predominantly Black neighborhoods, this not only lowers the food security for impacted residents but reinforces and perpetuates systems of structural racism within those communities.

<sup>3</sup>This is an ongoing initiative in collaboration with Take Action Advocacy Group and Penn State University. If you are interested in getting involved, especially with food advocacy and action, please contact either Fawn Walker-Montgomery (takeactionmonvalley@gmail.com) or Justine Lindemann (jlindemann@psu.edu).

<sup>4</sup>The IPC is a collaborative initiative that evaluates the severity and scope of acute and chronic food insecurity.



It is not only in the issues themselves that we notice intersections. There is a deep interconnectedness in many of the key themes and subthemes that emerged from discussions between residents. For example, the theme of food infrastructure, or the availability and locations of food retail outlets or food pantries, was frequently interwoven with themes of spatial justice, structural racism, the indignities residents often face, and the desire for collective advocacy at multiple levels.

One of the threads that was evident in much of what residents expressed is a desire for more grassroots community and place building efforts grounded in the views and experiences of community members. This theme is not often explicitly stated as such, but rather shows up in several different ways. Residents express a desire to “come together” and advocate for more just, equitable, and collaborative community-building processes, for more of a voice in what happens in their community spaces, and to collectively build places that are safe, wholesome, and supportive of the needs of people of all ages. In discussing how things “used to be” in their communities, residents agree that a deep sense of community they used to feel is not nearly as present now but could be rebuilt through a series of concerted and collective community efforts. This vision for collective and collaborative community action also relates to a strong sense of place and attachment to place felt by many residents. One resident remarked, “I could go somewhere else but if you have roots here, you don't want to just leave. Why should I have to?” Several others spoke about how long they had been in the same community, that they had grown up there and raised their children and grandchildren there and spoke of deep community ties and relationships within these communities. The Mon Valley starts outside the City of Pittsburgh in Allegheny County and refers to a series of small towns and cities bordering the Monongahela River as far south as West Virginia. Mon Valley towns along the Monongahela River corridor in Allegheny County include Braddock, Braddock Hills, Brentwood, Clairton, Dravosburg, Duquesne, East McKeesport, East Pittsburgh, Edgewood, Rankin, Forest Hills, Elizabeth, Glassport, Homestead, West Mifflin, Lincoln, McKeesport, Munhall, North Braddock, North Huntingdon, Irwin, North Versailles, Pitcairn, Port Vue, Wilmerding, Swissvale, White Oak, Versailles, and South Versailles.

Pittsburgh is the largest city in Allegheny County, with a population of about 300,000 people. Most Mon Valley municipalities have populations of less than 20,000 people. Partly because of this difference in population, the Mon Valley is often overshadowed by Pittsburgh when it comes to policy making, reform, and leadership development. As Pittsburgh did, Mon Valley towns relied on the steel industry and other manufacturing industries for employment and economic well-being for decades. Since the sharp decline of the steel industry in the 1980s and 1990s, the towns in the Mon Valley have struggled with high rates of unemployment, shrinking populations, food insecurity, fewer social and economic amenities, and the high crime rates and other social problems that often follow such stark economic decline. Despite this the people in the Mon Valley remain resilient, rooted in tradition, close-knit, and take pride in their communities.

During the listening sessions with residents of Clairton, Duquesne, and McKeesport, several key themes emerged regarding the issue of food apartheid in these communities. As you read the remainder of this report, you might notice some redundancy in our discussion and analysis of these themes. This is intentional as an attempt to emphasize the intersection between issues, challenges, and solutions that residents discuss and propose. We include direct quotes from resident participants in this report, although names have been removed to preserve confidentiality. We first give an overview and brief description of the key themes, and in the second section of this report we diver deeper into these themes and issues.

# OVERVIEW OF KEY THEMES

## **Declining Food Infrastructure Over Time**

One of the main themes that emerged from our listening sessions is that a decline in food retail establishments plays a big role in preventing residents in the Mon Valley from achieving food security. In other words, a lack of access to affordable, healthy, fresh foods for residents is a significant barrier to food security. The themes in this report all relate to the question of food infrastructure in some way: the impact of declining food infrastructure and the reasons why this is happening, community responses to mitigate the challenges in accessing food, the ways in which this reflects and amplifies structural racism in these places, and so on. These themes are not just about a lack of something, but about the vision that residents have for alternative food futures and how they want to build that future in their communities.

## **Building and Strengthening Community Connections, Networks, and Relationships**

Building connections, networks, and relationships among community residents and between communities is key to residents in developing strategies to addressing food insecurity, and for accessing other goods and essential services. For residents, relying on one another is a main strategy for overcoming challenges that inhibit access to food such limited transportation. There is also a widely held desire for more political and civic involvement, but not everyone has the knowledge of where those spaces of engagement are, or how to build consistent community-level political and civic engagement. Residents rely on relationships and networks to learn about opportunities for community and civic engagement including attending city council meetings, community gardening, and other mechanisms for (re)building a sense of community.

## **Community Safety: Exploring the Intersections of Violence and Trauma**

Residents note that the violence they see today is both a cause and effect of many of the issues communities are grappling with. Transportation, employment, food retail including grocery stores, and other types of infrastructure (lack of commercial banks, for example) can all be linked to the ongoing violence in the community, but they are also a cause of the violence in a sense. Residents list traffic, crime, and outdated or crumbling or non-existent infrastructure as both a cause and a result of the lack of food infrastructure. Food banks, grocery stores, farmer's markets, and church food pantries were all listed as places where people access food, and a feeling of being unsafe inhibits people's access to these places.

## **Examining Systems of Injustice and Racial Equity in the Food System**

There is a strong sense shared by residents about the racial injustices they experience. Many people described experiencing or witnessing differential treatment between Black people or predominantly Black communities and white people or communities. Stereotypes and prejudices about Black people impact not just residents' daily experiences, but the economic conditions of their communities. Residents point to examples such as hiring practices of large chain businesses that often exclude Black people and the lack of grocery stores in their majority-Black neighborhoods as compared to an abundance of food retail options in majority white communities.

## **Examining Economic and Policy Factors in the Post-Pandemic Period**

Over the past few years, the cost of food has increased by between 25 and 40 percent at the same time that benefits such as SNAP have been cut. Residents report that starting during the COVID-19 pandemic, prices have gone up on everything from gas to bread and eggs. Residents often commented that increases in the cost of food have risen much more than pay, and that the public assistance that so many people rely upon in the Mon Valley often does not cover their basic needs. Increases in the cost of food, together with

decreases in SNAP benefits are compounded by other increases in cost of utilities, rent, transportation, and others. Many residents noted that they are forced to make difficult decisions about whether to spend money on food or other necessities such as medicine, rent, or utilities. Racism in the economic system comes up in other themes as well, but residents want to have greater say in what their local economies look like. There is broad recognition that current models of local and regional economics are not always concerned with people in the community and their direct needs, but rather are driven by a capitalist profit-oriented model. The larger question of what constitutes a just economy underlies many of these conversations, and is something that merits further exploration.

### **Promoting Dignity in the Food System / Addressing Quality, Nutrition, and Availability Issues**

Residents describe wide discrepancies between the food that is available at grocery stores in low-income neighborhoods and those in more affluent places. Residents said that in addition to food available at current and former grocery stores (such as in downtown McKeesport or the now-closed grocery store in Duquesne) the food available at the Produce Markets or other Food Bank supported locations is lower quality than at other places. Residents claim that produce from the Produce Markets goes bad within a day or so or is already bad when they purchase it. “I’m finding that stores are using less local food and when it comes from further away, it goes bad faster. Maybe it’s just me, but it seems like you’re getting food from out of state and that it doesn’t stay fresh, or it goes bad faster.” In addition to the lower quality, food retail outlets in Duquesne, McKeesport, and Clairton are more expensive than at other grocery stores in wealthier neighborhoods.

### **Improving Transportation Infrastructure for Enhanced Access to Amenities**

We consistently heard from listening session participants that the food infrastructure in Clairton, Duquesne, and McKeesport has been decimated over the last several decades as industry left and the population shrunk as well. Grocery stores and other food retail outlets have closed over time, and the quality of remaining stores (or newly opened stores) has decreased. To mitigate the lack of food and transportation infrastructure in these communities, residents either relied upon or proposed different kinds of informal networks to bring food to people or to bring people to food.

### **Trust in Government and Political Processes**

Across the communities where we hosted listening sessions, residents shared many concerns related to local government, governance processes, and whether they have any power or control over those systems or processes. Many residents share a lack of trust in local government or believe that local officials don’t always act with their best interests at heart. Several people believe that local government doesn’t have the power (or the will) to fix the problems in their communities, and that community leaders must be the ones to step in and create solutions. Some residents indicated that they do want to become more involved in local politics or that more community members should become involved in local politics, but many also feel powerless to either enter that system or to help make needed changes in their community.

### **Advancing Future-Focused Solutions to Build Food Sovereignty and Self-Determination in Food**

Proposed solutions to these complex issues mainly relate to building food sovereignty (community control over where food comes from, how and what is produced, and how and where it is sold) greater capacity for political advocacy, more and stronger neighborhood and community networks, and better transportation and food infrastructure. Food sovereignty, while not necessarily the dominant language used by residents, was evoked through suggestions for more robust community agriculture, and individuals growing their own food.



**“ When [my son was murdered], I started going to the city county meetings in Duquesne and I was really disheartened at the fact that there were 10 of us there. And so, you're upset that the grocery store is closed, or you upset about not going to the city county meeting, then you could have voiced your opinion about the closure and maybe changed things. But how does the community even know that there's city county meetings? ”**

One example of desired community-level engagement is around growing food, being more self-determined in food, and using food production to build community relationships. Residents commented that building food resiliency is only achievable through collective action. Speaking about what happens once a building is knocked down, one resident said, “you can take the property and make community. Everyone buys their own seeds and you go in. And it does bring the kids in, it brings everyone together. And so we sit and talk about something, a safer place.” Other residents commented that you can “make community on the land:” “the [the community garden] is beautiful because the children get involved and everything. It's a community thing.”

Many residents reflected on or described how community used to be, and that over the past several years there have been changes in communities to where people don't know each other as well anymore, or don't bond together the way they used to. A few people remarked on how they had been “parented” or raised by the entire community – and therefore couldn't get away with causing trouble – but that it's not like that anymore. This was always said with a sense of nostalgia, demonstrating a desire for more community involvement in people's lives.

### **Community Safety: Exploring the Intersections of Violence and Trauma**

The above quote about using gardening as a convening space, and that convening people is a way to create safer spaces is a thread that also ran through our discussions. Thinking back to “how things used to be” residents note that the violence they see today is both a cause and effect of many of the issues communities are grappling with. Transportation, employment, food retail including grocery stores, and other types of infrastructure (lack of commercial banks, for example) can all be linked to the ongoing violence in the community, but they are also a cause of the violence in a sense.

Residents are overwhelmingly seeking more responsive and just food policy and community and economic development policy across their communities and would like to see more a resilient and local urban food system in their communities. Growing local and resilient urban food systems is inherently a civically engaged process, demanding that residents be politically involved. The idea of political and civic engagement emerged frequently in our discussions, with one resident in McKeesport noting that these kinds of meetings, “is where politics happens, (because it’s) where people are.”

## **A Deeper Exploration and Analysis of Key Themes:**

### **Declining food Infrastructure Over Time**

Participants in the listening sessions consistently reported that the food infrastructure in Clairton, Duquesne, and McKeesport has been suffered significant decline over the last several decades due to the departure of industry and a decrease in population. Grocery stores and other food retail outlets have closed over time, and the quality of remaining stores (or newly opened stores) has decreased. McKeesport is the only of the three to have a full-service grocery store. Duquesne and Clairton both have a Dollar General or another similar retailer, but these do not sell fresh produce. Additionally, there is a Giant Eagle in McKeesport that sells higher quality foods, but that has been described as much more expensive than similar stores in other areas, as well as a Shop ‘n’ Save in downtown McKeesport that has been described as “disgusting” and “dirty;” many people say they would rather not shop there because food is often past its expiration date or has gone bad.

“When I grew up. We were self-sufficient. We had grocery stores. We had movie theaters. We had everything. We didn't have to go outside, we had two bakeries. We didn't have to go outside to do anything unless we wanted to. And that's the problem. We had stores, clothing stores. We had everything that the big city has, Clairton had it. Then sometime in 1970, when all the gas was gone, you didn't know this was the United States still. Darin and I graduated together, the guys went to the mill because they could make as much money, more than white collar guys. The women generally went to a trade score or something. But then when the bottom dropped out. They [workers] weren't educated, dropped out that way. They dropped out with it.”

All of the themes in this report are linked to food and food access by way of issues such as community building, safety, race/ism, and transportation. Residents understand how access to food and self-determination in food are intimately related to these broader issues.

### **Building and Strengthening Community Connections, Networks, and Relationships**

Building connections, networks, and relationships among community residents and between communities has proven key to accessing many life essentials and is a main strategy for addressing food insecurity. Residents rely on each other to overcome challenges including inequitable access to transportation and other spatial inequities that inhibit access to food. Through these networks and relationships, residents come to know better what is happening across the community, including the details of others' lives: for example, how many children are in a family, which households are struggling at a given point in time, and which families might need extra support to ensure everyone has enough food.

There is also a widely held desire for more political and civic involvement, but not everyone has the knowledge of where those spaces of engagement are, or how to build consistent community-level political and civic engagement. One resident stated:



Residents list traffic, crime, and outdated or crumbling infrastructure as both a cause and a result of the lack of food infrastructure. Food banks, grocery stores, farmer's markets, and church food pantries were all listed as places where people access food, and a feeling of being unsafe inhibits people's access to these places. Commenting on the relationship between transportation and community safety and violence, one resident said:

**“Until people really feel safe again, I don't know whether transportation, these changes would work or not, seriously, because we have to address the violence that's in the area. We have to unify as a community and stick together and say, ‘We're not going to go along with all this nonsense that's been happening in McKeesport because we know how McKeesport can be, how it used to be, we would love to have that back again.’ And I can guarantee you, and I'll stand on this, that when transportation changed in McKeesport, it changed due to the amount of violence that was beginning to occur.”**

Another resident spoke to the perceived expectations from local officials and other authority figures that community members will continue to participate in community events amidst ongoing violence, but that – simultaneously – building community is a way to counter the violence.

**“All this violence happening around us and then people expect us to go to this [thing and that], go take our kids to school, show up at PTO meetings like everything is okay and shit. And then when we don't, then they try to blame us like we're the reason why our community looks this way. I'm always going to say the answer is us collectively coming together.”**

There was a strong sense among some residents that there is a lack of accountability for police to help “clean up” the crime and violence:

**“They see the activities right in their face. I don't know what laws it's going to take, but there's no respect for the law, but the law seems to not care. There was a time nobody sold in front of the cops, nobody sat on the curb and got high in front of the cops. They're doing it outright in public. That's another [thing] because soon as you go in the store, you can get robbed, you can get caught in a shootout. It's so prevalent. Where is Protect and Serve at?”**

### **Examining Systems of Injustice and Racial Equity in the Food System**

In almost all the listening sessions we facilitated, there was a strong sense of the racial injustices experienced by residents. Many people described experiences of differential treatment between Black people or predominantly Black communities and white people or communities. Residents described how stereotypes and prejudices about Black people impact not just their daily experiences, but the economic conditions in communities:

**“ I think it's race, you know?” Speaker 2: “No doubt, because there ain't nothing here. They closed everything down here. there ain't no... things for... like the little pubs and everything. They shut everything down over here. There ain't nothing. Shit, from when I was a kid, it ain't half as good as it used to be.**

**”**

Another resident commented on the lack of grocery stores in predominantly Black communities, while there are nearby predominantly white neighborhoods that have more food retail outlets:

**“ I heard that also, they don't a big, giant, evil chain that will come here because they're saying our population is low. There's not enough community. But they have Walmarts, they just have small Walmarts, right? Everybody's not a super Walmart, right? And I want to say a small Walmart. So why couldn't they do something like that, as opposed to the big chain? I had heard one time before, it was the argument that we want to have it up in town or have it on State Street. Because if it was on State Street, people are coming to State Street all day long, so why can't we get something on State Street? ”**

Related to the impact of stereotypes on individuals' experiences in stores (as shoppers or as employees), residents spoke to the racist perceptions that some people have. There was commonly held belief that predominantly Black communities are being treated differently specifically because of the racial makeup.

“That's the biggest deal. It's too much racism. Because they always think that a white person is honest, there's a lot of Black people that are honest and that's where they go... They always lead like that, everything is led by color and it just... It do. It just take away from a lot. Because you got a lot of smart, Black, honest people. It's just greed.”

This kind of stereotyping and prejudice often inform more systemic and structural injustices. In the following quote, a resident compares Duquesne with a nearby township, Mount Lebanon, which is almost 90 percent white and only just over 1 percent Black:

“It does make me wonder, Mount Lebanon has grocery stores, in [...] we got two grocery stores, so why is it so hard for the Black community to get a grocery store? It's not rocket science, I'm not asking for your first-born-child, we're asking for access to food. So why is that so hard to get? In Mount Lebanon, they have people that steal too, I promise you that. They steal all the time.”

Several comments pointed out racism at a systemic level, from discriminatory hiring policies, to a lack of diversity in proprietors of businesses, to the extent to which the interests of BIPOC groups are represented in local politics. Listening session participations described corporate policies that discriminate against Black people and communities in their hiring practices, saying, “And now [...] discrimination is out, they don't

have to hire no Blacks. There is a lot of companies around here that don't even hire Blacks, they don't have to. (Because no one makes them.) And people are afraid to apply to certain companies because they are afraid of racism. They are.”

In addition to hiring practices, residents want to see local businesses owned by a more diverse group of people. One resident commented that it’s not just about Black people, but “put any race here in this issue. I would like to see some of my people represented in some of these businesses. We paying to be here, we ran everybody and this is getting bad man, it's getting real bad.” Finally, systemic racism also emerged as an issue in local politics, with local officials not always listening to the experiences of Black and brown people:

“And then we have the administration that is not standing tall to the things that are occurring in the community where you have mostly the Black and brown folks living. We're right now in the throes of things where it's very serious. And like Teresa was also saying, you're just afraid. Everybody's afraid. People don't want to walk, people don't want to sit on their porches, people don't want to do any of those kinds of things.”

### **Examining Economic and Policy Factors in the Post-Pandemic Period**

Over the last few years, the cost of food has increased significantly at the same time that benefits such as SNAP have been cut. Many residents spoke up about how it has caused them a lot of pain and stress to navigate such a difficult financial situation.

“So everything soared after the pandemic, so it has gotten worse. I would say it has gotten worse, because eggs sky-rocketed. Gas sky-rocketed. Bread. Everything just seems to be... I went to get... I usually buy a half-a-dozen eggs, it was three dollars and something. I was like, whoa. It went from 99 cents to three dollars, I said, ooh this... So you know what I did? I put them back.”

“Because since the pandemic, when the pandemic started, and then everything went up, and a lot of things are still up. So, it's harder now than it was pre-pandemic, because everything is so much more expensive. Why did everything go up just because we went through a pandemic? And a lot of people lost their businesses. A lot of things happened in pandemic. A lot of people lost family, it was just... I'm happy it's over, or on the way to being over.”

With the cost of living having increased so much, residents commented that pay has not kept pace.

“People don't want to work for \$8. That's the thing. Make the pay better. You don't want to go at a job and you get \$6 an hour or \$8 an hour. You can't help your family and then they cut you off your food stamps. (Medical, food stamps...) You don't mind working, but they don't want to work for that amount of money because... and that's part of the racism.”

Noting the disproportionate percentages of people living in poverty in Mon Valley cities, residents commented that “a lot of people in this community do receive some form of public assistance. With that being said, you would think you would have access to a lot more things because of those numbers, but no, you don't.” Commenting on both poverty and the end to COVID-era SNAP expansions, a resident commented that whatever positive impact expanded SNAP benefits had during the pandemic were now over: “They cut our food stamps too. We got ahead on that a little bit, and now they [cut them]. I was getting 250, they took 222 and then they took the old ones from the end of the month we get twice a month.”



Some policies allow SNAP dollars to extend further, and many agreed they would like to see more policies like this: “At some farmers markets, if you spend your food stamps on produce, they'll give you vouchers back to get some and that really helps but I'd like to see that expanded more. I can't do that at the downtown farmer's market. Some are a few of my valued farmers markets that exist because we don't have access to that to the same extent.”

Increases in the cost of food, together with decreases in SNAP benefits are compounded by other increases in cost of utilities, rent, transportation, and others. On utilities: “We also had a rate increase with Duquesne Light, and one with the gas company. Most of us had the sewage in our area, sewage increased as well, which impacted the water.”

A consistent theme throughout our discussions was the cost of medical expenses and the many difficult choices that residents must make between paying for food, medicine, rent, or utilities. We include several quotes here to illustrate:

“[My son,] he has a job. This is only for medical. So that was the only reason why I had him on [my benefits], because the medical's so expensive for him as an adult, to get his own medical, it's just too expensive. So I had him on mine. And they wanted to give me \$7 for stamps. So I'm striving now, I'm getting \$150 a month, that's not enough. [...] I'm just struggling in that area, in the food area, because down there, you go out here to the grocery stores and the [prices] went sky-high.”

“I had a medicine and the copay was \$100. And so when you talk about how do you work things out? I went to the food banks, and sometimes I have some friends that have went to the farmer's market and will ask me, “Teresa, what can I get you?” or something like that. So I take help from wherever I can get help, I'm not too proud, not too prideful.”

Many residents described having to figure out a balance from month to month, sacrificing paying one bill one month and a different one the next:

“When my bills go up, the water go up, sewage bill, different things, and you budget your money and doctor bills, co-payments, things come into play. You don't have that same money. There's times you might have a little more than others, regardless if you have the same amount of income coming in. You spend more in certain months than others and it might be holiday time and you really don't have anything. And so, that's why I said sometime more than others. Sometime just depend on health issues, doctors, if you have to pay somebody to take you there, which I find paying somebody is a lot. That's a lot. \$20 to go to the mall, 20 back. That's a bill for me. That might be the sewage bill, water bill, something.”

“Food is expensive. It's either food or the medicine, food or the rent, food or the light bill. I mean, you have to eat to live. You don't live to eat. You know what I mean? It's always going to be the food for me. Then I think that's the most important. I can't put... I'm trying to think what's going to come next after that? Rent, lights, or what? It's a struggle.”

“[It's] food or paying the bill, or paying the bill, paying food, or putting half on this and half on that. You know what I mean? It's like, as they say, robbing Peter to pay Paul.”

The discussions about individual and community economic conditions pointed to a strong perception that the current economic system is not adequately or justly serving Mon Valley communities. Racism in the economic system comes up in other themes as well, but residents want to have greater say in what their local economies look like. There is broad recognition that current models of local and regional economics are not always concerned with people in the community and their direct needs, but rather are driven by a capitalist profit-oriented model. In a discussion of wages, one resident reflected, **“They're saying if we go up to \$9.25 to \$15, then we'll really be without jobs. So, I think they're just trying to scare people.”**

Residents also relate this to processes of development that don't always benefit low income or poor people: **“The reason why we have a lack of resources here is because the people who are investing money in redevelopment need the property valued.”** This person was discussing riverfront redevelopment and how for development to be “worth it” to a municipality, the tax base has to be robust enough to support the development. This resident continued:

**“They (local officials) believe in stripping down instead of building up. [...] So the reason why we live in a (food) desert and a depressed area and an oppressed area and a suppressed and every other “pressed,” is because...the property value(s) go down, meaning people will move away. [...] Sometimes you have white flight, people who are paying a certain amount of taxes. And then you could have the poor and the poor is not going to be able to keep it up.”**

By and large, residents believe that economic investment in place only happens in relatively wealthier communities. Residents see decisions being made in Harrisburg or Pittsburgh that don't impact them or that negatively impact them and their communities, and believe that they don't have a significant voice in how economic and community development processes unfold. The larger question of what constitutes a just economy underlies many of these conversations and is something that merits further exploration.

### **Promoting Dignity in the Food System / Addressing Quality, Nutrition, and Availability Issues**

In our listening sessions across all three cities, residents describe wide discrepancies between the food that is available at grocery stores in low-income neighborhoods and those in more affluent places. Residents said that in addition to food available at current and former grocery stores (such as in downtown McKeesport or the now-closed grocery store in Duquesne) the food available at the Produce Markets or other Food Bank supported locations is lower quality than at other places. Residents claim that produce from the Produce Markets goes bad within a day or so, or is already bad when they purchase it. “I'm finding that stores are using less local food and when it comes from further away, it goes bad faster. Maybe it's just me, but it seems like you're getting food from out of state and that it doesn't stay fresh or it goes bad faster.” In addition to the lower quality, food retail outlets in Duquesne, McKeesport, and Clairton are more expensive than at other grocery stores in wealthier neighborhoods.

This sense of spatial injustice was described by several different people about the types of food available (for example comments such as, “You'll have a lot more health-conscious things when you move into more affluent neighborhoods.”) as well as the quality of the emergency food services available in different neighborhoods. One resident said quite simply, “I want to get what they got up there in them white neighborhoods, food and stuff.”

Residents shared their perspectives on the food they receive from food pantries, and how it doesn't always taste good, and is often not the higher quality brands. There is also a perception that even food pantries in higher-income areas provide higher-quality food.

“It's the type like she said, it's not Jiff so it's peanut butter, but it's the poor quality, generic, greasy, oily, yeah. It's the quality of food that people... And in the society, in the world that we live in, everybody is trying to do better. With eating healthier, eat better, but the food bank hasn't caught up to that. Hasn't caught up to that exactly. Because it's government commodities, right. This is it's subsidized by the government. And so that's not necessarily a priority for them. And so I get it and I agree. And some of the middle, higher upper income, especially when it comes to meats and things like that. There are some food banks that you actually get a meat, you get some ground beef, you get some chicken.”

“So you got to have prices that are... Even food that you would eat, like quality food. I hate when they just throw food like... Would you serve that to your family? So don't serve it to me. So it's just like they throw whatever the leftovers are and you need to... Marketplaces or whatever you want to call them.”

Many residents had a “make do with what you have” attitude. One commented that, “If it's that nasty, you're not hungry enough.” Others shared techniques to make otherwise unpalatable food taste better: “You add the little bit of sugar and the water to get the can (metallic) taste out of it. When you put the little water, some butter, we put a little bit of sugar in the vegetable. And it gets rid of that metal can taste. So even in green beans, not enough to make it sweet, but just enough to absorb that metal.” One resident described an intense perception of the inequities in food services available, while simultaneously feeling grateful for what is available to them:

“I feel all the food banks aren't getting the same treatment. I just feel when it comes to here. [...] You not getting the same stuff that other places are getting. [...] the other places have (so much) and you come back here and you just getting this here and that there, it's like, ‘ummm..’ but (anything) is a blessing.”

Many residents spoke to the large proportion of households relying on emergency food supports like food pantries as an opportunity for food redistribution. Food is often distributed that does uneaten (it's either undesired, or there are health concerns such as allergies). These food items could end up being wasted; however, one resident suggested a way to reduce food waste:

“Sometimes when you go to food banks there's a lot of things in there that you really don't use but they give it to you anyway and a lot of people probably toss it instead of giving it to maybe somebody else that needs it. Maybe they can have it to where people can choose. They can choose what they're going to use instead of it getting wasted and if they can't use it... Or some of the places now that's giving away stuff that people don't use, if they could just have a place to return back to another food bank or something to where that food bank can let people pick out what they want instead of all of the food getting wasted.”

The option to choose which foods you receive at a food pantry offers people dignity in a context where there can be associated shame or stigma.

### **Improving Transportation Infrastructure for Enhanced Access to Amenities**

The relationship between transportation and food security is a perspective widely shared by residents who participated in listening sessions. The lack of public transportation infrastructure, especially in Mon Valley communities, inhibits resident access not only to food retail outlets, but to employment, healthcare, and education. The public transportation (bus) routes that do exist do not service communities sufficiently, and many of the bus lines have been cut or reduced. One resident explained, “I hear a lot of people complaining also about them cutting out the routes and the time that it takes for the buses to get there. Sometimes they're standing there for an hour, hour and a half.” In a joint listening session with Pittsburghers for Public Transit, one resident described losing two job opportunities because the bus was late or did not come at all.



To mitigate the lack of food and transportation infrastructure in these communities, residents either relied upon or proposed different kinds of informal networks to bring food to people or to bring people to food. Several residents relied upon family, friends, or neighbors to help them access grocery stores. Another described informal rideshare services in McKeesport that, while offering a possible solution to people who lack their own transportation, also costs money:

“One of the things that I have noticed around McKeesport is a lot of folks, and especially a lot of older folks are, I don't want to call it rideshare, but they're getting those rides where these folks, gentlemen, or women sometimes, are just sitting outside of these various stores, whether it's Shop 'n Save or Giant Eagles or wherever and giving folks a ride to the store and back to their homes so that they do not have to struggle with carrying their groceries. And I'm sure that those folks who are giving them a ride are charging them, that's not a free service either. So the situation's compounding because if you only have a limited amount of funds to work with and you're trying to make a decision between transportation, your food, your medicine, whatever, that's really digging deep into somebody's pockets.”

Another remarked that she either relies on friends or on formal rideshare services, both of which she pays for:

“And being in the Mon Valley I am at the top of a hill, my bus... I mean, you know that 59 bus (is no longer in service.) Anyway, so if my friend is available to take me, that's cool. It helps. I have to pay for my transportation, it's not free, and then make sure I can get several stops because my medicine's over, my food is over here, and to make sure I can get shoes or anything else for the kids I have to go. So it's three, it's a lot.”

### **Trust in Government and Political Processes**

An important theme that cut across many of our listening sessions had to do with a lack of trust in local government, or the belief that local officials do not actually have the community's best interests at heart. Similar to this, several residents described the sense that people in government were not going to be the ones to fix the problems residents are experiencing.

**“Unfortunately, we've let our communities get to a place where we're looking for somebody from the government. We looking for somebody with the big suit. It's not them. [They're not] coming to save our communities.”**

“The politicians are the barriers in the community. And the community leaders are the ones left to, I guess, take that burden. But the politicians and the leaders are left off the hook. It seems like if they're not working together or don't want to work together and they have their own personal agendas... the community suffers.”

In addition to feeling neglected by local government, some residents felt that local officials are making choices that don't benefit community residents, or made promises to community residents that they did not keep:

“I think new people that we elected in office, including me, that thought they will do things how it was before they came in office to make us feel safe, I feel that's when the changes started, taking away things, schools tearing them down, making things look empty and deserted, things closing down, no stores. So you're just not safe anymore because there's nothing there surrounding you to make you feel safe. You feel deserted, you feel alone.”

Partly because of this, many residents commented that they want to be more involved and active in local politics; however, there is also a widespread feeling of powerlessness to impact government processes:

**“We need to bombard these council meetings and whatever. We have to go in strong and in numbers. But right now we don't do that. Everybody talks a good game, but when it comes time to stand together, nobody wants to stand, okay, or they will permit only one... or not permit, but only one person will speak. And then the rest of the folks, they're like head nodders, but nobody will say anything. They'll say something like after the meeting, "Oh..." But it was like, "You had the opportunity in the meeting to speak up, but you didn't.”**

## **Advancing Future-Focused Solutions to Build Food Sovereignty and Self-Determination in Food**

Throughout all the listening sessions we facilitated, we gave space for residents to talk about the futures they want to see in their communities, and how they might envision getting there. Residents are overwhelmingly seeking more responsive and just food policy and community and economic development policy across their communities. This broad theme is interwoven in all of what we have written thus far, and in the more specific suggestions for solutions we highlight below. The main themes for future-oriented solutions have to do with building food sovereignty, greater capacity for political advocacy, more and stronger neighborhood and community networks, and better transportation and food infrastructure.

Food sovereignty, while not necessarily the dominant language used by residents, was evoked through suggestions for more robust community agriculture, and individuals growing their own food:

**“We got to lot of empty land in our community. Do you all know who owns that empty land in our community? Seventy-five percent of the empty lots in our community are owned by the county. Seventy-five percent of the empty lots in Duquesne are owned by the county. Not our city. Not our residents. Not people who pay their taxes, by the county. Now we can get the county to give us back that land, if we had a plan for it. In the past we have asked the county to give us back the land, but we didn't have a plan.”**

**“One of the other ideas that we talked about is if we can grow our own food. One of the ideas is if we had all these empty fields, would you as residents be willing to tend the field next to your house [...]” Speaker 2: That's beautiful. We're going to have to learn how to do it anyway. We can't go to stores, and the stores are getting cut or whatever, cause of the government, we're going to have to learn how to farm it anyway.”**

Growing local and resilient urban food systems is inherently a civically engaged process, demanding that residents be politically involved. The idea of political and civic engagement emerged frequently in our discussions, with one resident in McKeesport noting that these kinds of meetings, “is where politics happens, (because it's) where people are.”

Many people recognized the importance of coming together as a community to discuss issues that are important to residents. Many labeled it as the responsibility of community residents:

**“Now I'm sitting here to speak what I see in this community. I live here so I'm going to participate. So I don't know nobody in this group but this young man right here and that young man, but I live here right now so I'm going to participate. If I don't participate, I can't say nothing. [And] like I said, it starts right here man. It's going to take people, it's going to be another meeting like this, it'll be other people but sooner or later man, that's what it's going to take. If you don't have this meeting right here, it ain't going to start nowhere. So this is a good start.”**

Per our discussions, the responsibility of political and civic engagement entails putting differences aside in part because many residents don't trust local government to have their best interests at heart. In one listening session, a resident said strongly, **“We got to come together,”** and another described why this is so important, **“because they (local politicians) can conquer us when we're divided. And that's exactly what happens in our community.”**

The lack of trust in local officials and governing processes was often described as a feeling that the only way things can change is through building community resilience and collective action. In that vein, people talked about who was really “of” the community or had deep ties to their community as opposed to residents who might come through and be there, but not stay for long. For those who are truly “of” the community, long-standing ties to neighbors, family, and friends were often described as part of what builds community resilience. In other words, it's in knowing your neighbors and friends, who they are and where they come from, that helps to build community connection and resilience:

**“We all know each other in real life, but we can put that to the side and come together for a common good, which is making sure that our communities are safe the way they used to be. Because when I was a kid if my mother wasn't able, her mother or her mother's mother stepped in and her cousin, I didn't get left hungry. [...] And if we don't learn how to take our little personalities and fold it up in a bag and be calm and sit down at the table and have some conversations with one another, instead of about one another. Our communities are going to stay in the state of disrepair.”**

**“I just think, as a culture, we are not resourceful enough, and we don't collaborate and we're working sideways, and that's the problem. Because if everybody just worked together, then we would be in a better place. But that's not going to happen because the lack of funding that there's actually not a lack of.”**

In terms of concrete suggestions to make improvements across communities, residents would like to see better communication and information sharing about events, opportunities, services, and general community happenings, and more robust transportation to support what food infrastructure does exist. There is a sense among many residents that things are happening within their communities, but that the information just isn't getting out to people. Several people cited a need for more robust social media as well as physical public bulletin boards to communicate information about community happenings. One resident called out a lack of communication as a reason for the lack of forward motion in her community, **“because that's one of the reasons we don't move forward, because what is happening, we don't get the information correctly out here for people to know and how they can go about doing it.”**



Like the need for better communication and information sharing about already-existing resources and events, residents are aware that there are food resources out there, but that it can be difficult to get to these places, especially for older adults and people with limited mobility. Expanding public transportation, as we wrote above, was a constant and consistent theme across listening sessions. However, innovative approaches to expanding public transportation included things like a “resource bus.” One resident described it this way:

**“I'd like to see a bus that caters to the resources so that way, like you said, if a person can't get to certain things. If there was one route was specifically meant, strategically meant to go past certain PCPs, past certain groceries stores, past certain places. And you didn't have to transfer to catch multiple buses, I think that would help a lot of people.”**

## **Conclusion**

Throughout all our interactions with residents in Clairton, Duquesne, and McKeesport, several things were made abundantly clear. Despite the difficulty that many residents face in accessing food and food infrastructure in their communities, residents are highly aware of both the challenges and what potential solutions could be. Residents are actively engaged in imagining what alternative futures could look like in the Mon Valley, through alternative land use, expanded public transportation systems, grocery retail improvements, and grassroots organizing and advocacy. While this report focuses directly on the voices and experiences of Mon Valley residents, there are policy recommendations and alternative and innovative urban planning practices that can be enacted to achieve a more just, equitable, and self-determined food system for residents across the Mon Valley. What is most important is that peoples’ voices need to be heard, and their perspectives considered in all aspects of local decision making.

A concluding observation is that the urban food system points to a series of integrated and interdependent issues. We cannot talk about food access without also talking about transportation, the larger economy, and systemic racism. Business and economic development has important implications for access to food and for broader community vitality. This is an issue that we believe warrants further exploration – especially taking into consideration what kind of economic development residents would like to see take place. Local business development is also closely related to the question of structural racism: local retailers and other businesses aren’t fully serving the community, with hiring and location practices disproportionately excluding residents of color. The lack of opportunities for economic growth for Black and brown residents must be a focal point of these discussions. Residents are eager to participate more fully in economic and entrepreneurial spaces, and from what we are hearing, struggle to find support to pursue these goals.

We conclude with the belief that community and economic development – including the development of the food system – should be approached from a participatory perspective. This approach should empower and assist all communities, particularly those that have been historically and habitually marginalized and excluded from decision-making, in shaping and building the economies and cultures they want to build.