Quality, not Quantity: Exploring Food Justice in the United States

By Emily Cadman

Have you ever heard the expression, "you are what you eat?" Lately, I have thought about flipping the popular adage and adding a few words, to express an additional truth: "What you eat depends on who you are." A person's place within modern society generally dictates the quality of food to which they are given access on a regular basis.

As Americans, equality of opportunity is a value instilled in us from the time we are young. Yet although we are collectively among the most privileged people in the world, the impression that every U.S. citizen has equal opportunity to access this privilege is an illusion. Rather, opportunity is significantly predicated upon wealth. Think about it—the options available to you heavily depend on how much money you and, more importantly, your parents have. For example, those with money generally invest in their child's higher education; those without see more appeal in encouraging their child to enter the workforce and bring home wages. There are obvious exceptions to this generalization. However, in one way or another, a person's socioeconomic background has a substantial impact on their well-being.

This is especially relevant with regard to food.

As citizens of one of the wealthiest nation in the world, we would like to believe that every U.S. citizen is food secure; that is, that all households have access to nutritious foods that enable members to maintain healthy, active lifestyles (B-Sustainable Information Commons). However, our modern food system makes it increasingly

difficult for those with low incomes to obtain adequate nutrition. A United States Department of Agriculture survey reported that in 2008, 14.6 percent of U.S. households were food insecure at some point throughout the year (Food Security in the United States). One reason for this is that nutritious foods, such as lean meat, are relatively expensive compared to fast food "substitutes." Unlike McDonalds, which keeps items on its Dollar Menu $1.00 no matter what, basic economic principles dictate that other food vendors must alter their prices to meet fluctuations in supply and demand. According to the U.S. Institute for Agriculture Trade Policy, government subsidies of cash crops such as corn and soybeans— which are processed into high fructose corn syrup and hydrogenated vegetable oil, respectively— artificially deflate the cost of processed foods. As a result, farmers lose incentive to grow crops such as fruits and vegetables, and the cost of produce is driven up (Food Security in the United States).

During economic downturns, the rising price of food demands that households sacrifice an even greater proportion of their income to maintain their well-being. Hence, the number of food secure families is strongly associated with the nation's economic condition. A recent survey conducted by the USDA showed that the economic recession caused the percent of food secure families within the United States to increase by 3.5 percent between the years 2007 and 2008 (Food Security in the United States). In a thriving economy, characterized by high rates of employment, people are willing and able to spend more on groceries. However, in tough times, consumers sacrifice in order to make ends meet. Instead of dining out and splurging on name brands, people stay in and search for bargains. It is during times like these that the well-off get a taste of what the poor experience on a regular basis. Affluent Americans might now be able to identify

with the parent that opts to feed their hungry child an inexpensive, readily prepared meal instead of buying fruit at the local grocery store for an equivalent price.

Socioeconomics also impact what types of foods are geographically accessible to a community. Corporate aspirations have shifted from pleasing customers to making the largest possible profit. According to Charles Z. Levkoe, a member of York University's Faculty of Environmental Studies, a major problem with our food system is its "increasing focus on people, not as citizens, but as consumers"(Learning Democracy through Food Justice Movements). Therefore, stores are strategically placed where they can generate the most income— suburbia.

The migration of supermarkets, from poverty-stricken urban areas to wealthier suburban areas, is a major food justice issue. In 2006, Professors Latetia V. Moore and Ana V. Diez Roux, of the University of Michigan's Center for Social Epidemiology and Population Health conducted a study to investigate the impact of neighborhood characteristics and location on the types of food stores accessible to locals (Measuring the Local Food Environment…).Researchers used census data from North Carolina, Maryland, and New York, in conjunction with data on local businesses from InfoUSA Inc., to investigate whether there was an association between an area's racial composition and income and the number of stores in the general area (Measuring the Local Food Environment...). They made the logical assumption that local food environment impacts a neighborhood's general health and well-being. Researchers also inferred that supermarkets offer a wider variety of healthy foods—such as whole grain products, low-fat dairy, and produce— than a typical small grocer, although they conceded that that this

is not always the case. Race and ethnic segregation was also a significant factor in the study, due to its socioeconomic implications.

Unfortunately, the results of the study verified what the researchers hypothesized; "location of food stores is associated with neighborhood racial/ethnic and socioeconomic composition" (Measuring the Local Food Environment…). After considering geographic and population size, poor, racially diverse areas had half as many supermarkets as wealthy, predominantly white neighborhoods. Minority neighborhoods also had fewer specialty and natural food stores, bakeries, and produce vendors.

The fact that it is more difficult for poverty-stricken, ethnically diverse neighborhoods to access healthy food suggests that they are nutritionally disadvantaged compared to wealthier, predominantly white neighborhoods. Recent statistics support this claim. For example, according to the July 17 Issue of the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, both Hispanics and blacks experience a greater percentage of obesity prevalence compared to whites, at 21 percent and 51 percent respectively. The researchers explained this phenomenon by stating, "minority populations with high levels of obesity tend to live in areas where there is limited access to recreational activities, few options for healthy foods and lower levels of health education" (Obesity Statistics Reveal…).

Yet food injustice does not discriminate; rather, the U.S. socioeconomic structure as a whole causes people of all races to struggle with food issues. This is demonstrated through obesity statistics in West Virginia, the second poorest state in the Union (Christie). According to a 2009 study by the Center for Disease Control, the prevalence for obesity averages between 9% and 30% for non-Hispanic whites in the United States.

(U.S. Obesity Trends) West Virginia, a state dominated by poor, white, coal-mining towns, was the only state where the percentage of obese white adults was above 30 percent. This data implies that one's income and place of residence are more significant shapers of one's food fate than race.

Although the problems with our food system are seemingly overwhelming, increased awareness has helped food justice initiatives to spread throughout the United States. One way in which many major cities are helping to make fruits and vegetables affordable and accessible to the masses is through the creation urban gardens. Community members cultivate produce, which they later harvest and vend at reasonable prices at co-ops. Some of the most important participants in these programs are children. Not only do the gardens give students and their families access to plants and produce, but also give the students an appreciation for where their food comes from. Urban gardens serve as centers of positive interaction, helping to keep children involved in activities that are conducive to their development.

Yet even though food justice initiatives help decrease the gap between rich and poor, nutritional disparity within our capitalistic nation will always remain. The structure of our society dictates that some will always be deemed subordinate, and others superior. Therefore, the food justice issue may be perceived as an issue of secondary importance. Rather, society's tendency to marginalize those judged less worthy is the issue of primary importance. So what can you do to help diminish injustice within society? Challenge yourself to look past your natural, superficial perception of others. Do not simply deem the obese man you see toddling down the street, or the woman you see feeding her kids

fast food, lazy. Their situations might be a product of failures within the system. Our system.

Works Cited

B-Sustainable Information Commons. “Goal: Food Security.” Web. 23 Apr. 2010. <http://www.b-sustainable.org/social-environment/food-security>.

Christie, Les. "The Wealthiest (and Poorest) Places in the United States."Business, Financial, Personal Finance News - CNNMoney.com. 28 Aug. 2007. Web. 23 Apr. 2010. <http://money.cnn.com/2007/08/28/real_estate/wealthiest_states/>.

Levkoe, Charles Z. "Learning Democracy through Food Justice Movements."Agriculture and Human Values 23.1 (2006): 89-98. Web. 22 Apr.2010. <http://resources.metapress.com/pdf-preview.axd?code=e5015117mn00l656&size=largest>.

Moore, Latetia V. "Measuring the Local Food Environment and Its Associations with Diet Quality." Diss. University of Michigan, 2007. Web.<http://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/2027.42/55685/2/lvmoore_1.pdf>.

"Obesity Statistics Reveal Glaring Health Disparities among Minorities."The Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies. Web. 22 Apr. 2010.

<http://www.jointcenter.org/hpi/news/obesity-statistics-reveal-glaring-health-disparities-among-minorities>.

United States Department of Agriculture. Economic Research Service.Food Security in the United States. Web. 23Apr.2010. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/FoodSecurity/>.

"U.S. Obesity Trends."Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Web. 23 Apr. 2010. <http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/trends.html>.

Process Notes:

"Quality, not Quantity: Exploring Food Justice in the United States"

By Emily Cadman

My documented essay, "Quality, not Quantity: Exploring Food Justice in the United States," was one of my favorite pieces to write. I was careful not to make the same mistake I had made with my critical essay—choosing something I cared little about—and thus I chose a topic that was of real interest to me. My passion for social justice issues is reflected in this documented essay. After coming to class with a general idea for a topic—food—I settled on combining my recent experience in Appalachia with my interest in food and therefore, I decided to explore food as a social justice issue.

Although many people probably do not find research papers to be pleasurable reading material, I believe I structured my piece in a way that makes the essay both informative and interesting for a reader. The topic I chose was also unique in that food justice is probably not a subject you would ponder without some prompting. I think that my paper was thought provoking for both veterans and newcomers to the issue of social justice.

I implemented what we learned about research databases at our library session to research food justice issues. I was surprised that there was so much literature on a topic that seems to have only recently become an area of public concern. After finding reliable resources off which to base my writing, I constructed a first draft of the paper. I used the free writing method to get my thoughts onto paper, and then revisited my writing to rearrange paragraphs, sophisticate the language, correct grammatical mistakes, etc.

Before this class my experiences with peer editing were limited to times when my friends and I would swap papers after we got tired of searching for our own mistakes. But in this class, the revision process included both peer and teacher feedback. Peer groups and conferences helped early traces of papers emerge from obscurity to become well-developed drafts. Blackboard was another key part of the editing process. Although the idea of posting my semi-developed paper on the Internet for everyone in the class to scrutinize was rather daunting, nothing helped me more than the feedback from my peers. The comments of my classmates were invaluable because they not only identified places where my papers were unclear, but they also suggested solutions that teachers might not have ever thought to propose. Blackboard posts of essays by my peers also helped me to look at my own papers in a different light; interestingly, those posts helped me avoid making the same mistakes as my peers.

This process of extensive revision improved the quality of my documented essay immensely. Fortunately, at this point in the semester I had yet to post any of my essays on Blackboard, so I volunteered to post this one because I felt it could benefit from some peer criticism. After reading feedback from my classmates, I wished that I could post essays for all of my classes to Blackboard. They pointed out elements of the paper that I probably would not have thought to improve on my own. For example, the general consensus in the class was that I was "kidnapping" (my professor's language) some pieces of research because I did not incorporate the sources I used directly into the writing.

A few other factors complicated my presentation of knowledge. I am from a rural area of Connecticut and I already knew some things about the topic. In the first

drafts I incorporated some of the knowledge I have picked up through general conversation into my paper, but a reader couldn't trace where my knowledge ended and an expert's might begin. There was also a part of my paper where I came to an important conclusion based on knowledge I had gained from an economics class here at BC, but I initially had failed to validate this conclusion with a credible source. Hence, through multiple revisions, I improved my paper by naming the sources in my sentences, and confirming my findings with the conclusions of more reputable researchers. After revising my essay based on reader feedback, I was very pleased with the final results.

I honestly see many research papers in my future. As a soon-to-be history major, I have a feeling that I will spend a significant portion of my undergraduate career writing documented essays. If I were to give myself advice, it would be to incorporate free writing into the writing process more often. Like other writers, I often struggle to get my words onto paper if I am asked to answer a complicated question. However, the only way to move past this mental block is by allowing my thoughts to flow onto the paper. I have realized this through practice, and I plan to incorporate what I have learned in this class in my future writing assignments.