

JAFSCD COMMENTARY

Food system activism and the housing crisis

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Abstract

The affordable housing crisis in the United States is leaving millions of Americans homeless or spending over one-third of their income on rent, a condition housing scholars refer to as ‘shelter poverty.’ This problem has clear linkages to the food system in terms of the cost and condition of food workers’ housing, the availability of food in low-income neighborhoods, the relationship between food and housing policy, and how much money households have available to provision themselves after paying rent. This commentary explores four aspects of the relationship between the U.S. food and housing systems: the contradiction between abundance and scarcity; the role of racism and coloniality in creating these systems; the role of the government and public policy in maintaining and supporting these systems; and how stigma affixes itself to both the

hungry and the shelter-poor. Incorporating housing as part of food system work can strengthen both ongoing movements and unite scholars and activists in exploring the on-the-ground living experiences of people across the country.

Keywords

Housing Affordability Crisis, Food System Activism, Unhoused, Housing Insecurity, Food Insecurity

Introduction

Both food pantries and homeless shelters are so commonplace across the U.S. that they are accepted as an unremarkable part of the landscape. However, the ubiquity of these institutions is evidence of the enormous problems that exist in both our food system and our housing system. Both are systems that are (1) highly capitalized but produce enormous inequalities; (2) deeply interconnected with contemporary and historical racism and coloniality; (3) places where government policy contributes to the unequal status quo; and (4) places where

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stigma is reproduced. Given the interconnections between food and housing, it is surprising that efforts to address these pressing social problems are often disconnected, with activists in each sphere using different strategies, alliances, and discourses to push for change. This commentary explores the connections between the U.S. housing affordability crisis and the food systems and asks if greater coordination between these two struggles—and the scholars who analyze them—could create better outcomes for all.

The housing affordability crisis in the U.S. refers to the nationwide lack of affordable housing, which results in 580,000 unhoused people each night and an astounding 62% of working-age renter households—19.2 million households—paying over one-third of their income in rent (Airgood-Obrycki et al., 2022), a condition defined as ‘shelter poverty’ (Stone, 2004). For low-income renters, these numbers skyrocket, with 70% of all extremely low-income households paying more than 50% of their income in rent (Aurand et al., 2021). Shelter-poor families often cannot afford other household necessities such as food, daycare, or healthcare because of the high cost of housing. The lack of affordable housing nationwide forces poor families to compete for the small number of affordable units available and to cut costs in other parts of their family budget in order to make ends meet (Airgood-Obrycki et al., 2022; Desmond, 2016). This situation has clear impacts on the food system: farm, restaurant, and grocery store workers need safe, affordable housing, and both unhoused and shelter-poor families experience high rates of food insecurity (Sprake et al., 2013). Further, neighborhoods defined by the USDA as food deserts are also areas with higher rates of affordable rental units (Pine & Bennett, 2014). Addressing these interconnections demands action from many institutions that shape community life, such as federal and local government and nonprofit organizations.

In the following sections I explore four important points of intersection between the food system and the housing system.

Abundance and Scarcity

The U.S. housing market is a completely commodified system, with its US\$33.6 trillion dollar value

(Gerrity, 2020) benefiting those with capital as opposed to those in need of a place to live (Marcuse & Madden, 2016). Thus when the housing market ‘improves,’ this means its market capitalization rises and that the wealth held by landlords and property owners has gone up, not that there is an increase in the amount of affordable housing available. However, this high level of investment has not resulted in adequate housing for all, since an estimated 6.8 million more affordable housing units are needed to eliminate shelter poverty (National Low Income Housing Coalition, n.d.). Similarly, our multitrillion-dollar food system creates large amounts of food, both for U.S. consumption and export, but does not forestall hunger for those unable to purchase food for their families; instead low-cost food contributes to health problems such as diabetes and obesity (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015; Patel, 2014). Increased production results in economic gains for food producers and new export markets and uses for food rather than an increased ability to address the needs of the hungry. As scholars of hunger have noted, our reliance on the overabundance of our food system to feed low-income people via the charitable sector is an unworkable and unjust system (de Souza, 2019; Fisher, 2018). In a similar way that overproduction of ‘surplus’ food is used in our massive foodbank system, our ‘trickle-down’ housing market provides older, low-quality homes for low-income renters (Lohnes, 2021; Rodríguez-Pose & Storper, 2020). In each system, the abundance of commodity production does not produce affordable housing or food security for the poor.

The State Is an Important Yet Contested Site of Activism

The federal government provides generous incentives for the production of market-rate housing. For example, the mortgage interest deduction costs the federal government US\$30 billion in 2020, providing a generous benefit to these homeowners (Keightley, 2020). Similarly, cities use single-family and exclusionary zoning to prevent the development of affordable housing and encourage market-rate housing (Einstein, 2021). This creates a housing market subsidized by the

federal government that is responsive to the needs of high income homeowners as opposed to the needs of renters and those experiencing shelter poverty. Housing activists are pushing against federal and local policy that prevents affordable housing development. Similarly, the USDA provides millions of dollars in subsidies to support industrial food production (Carolan, 2018) and also supports a set of anti-hunger programs such as the Supplemental Nutritional Access Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) to provision—albeit poorly—the millions of Americans who experience food insecurity each year. In both cases, housing and food activists are struggling against a state whose power shapes both the terrain of activism and the types of strategies proposed.

Hunger and Housing Are Deeply Racialized Phenomena

The housing system is built on white supremacy and continually reinforces coloniality and racialized benefits (Pine & de Souza, in press). Redlining, which prohibited mortgage lending to BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) neighborhoods and was legal from the 1930s until the passage of the Fair Housing Act of 1968, combined with racial covenants to produce a city that marginalized BIPOC residents and subsidized white residents (Goetz et al., 2020). These policies, combined with other actions such as guiding highway investments into BIPOC neighborhoods and underfunding public parks, decreased the quantity and quality of housing stock available to BIPOC communities. The long-term effect was the creation of a city that used the tools of planning and zoning to limit the housing option of BIPOC residents (Brand & Miller, 2020). BIPOC communities have substantially higher rates of shelter poverty than white households: a remarkable 20% of Black households, 18% of American Indian households, 14% of Latino households, and 10% of Asian households are extremely low-income renters, while only 6% of white households fit into this category. And this shelter poverty reinforces the lack of access to resources such as education, healthy food, and employment that are often

attached to prosperous neighborhoods and municipalities (Lipsitz, 2011). Colonial land expropriation is directly linked to higher rates of unhoused Indigenous communities, as generations of racist decision-making now shapes urban space (Dorries & Harjo, 2020). Similarly, the national food system does not benefit everyone equally, because it is itself a tool of racism operating through a variety of structures that do not distribute the benefits of our food system equally (Pine & de Souza, in press). Structural racism refers to public policies that appear racially neutral, but have clearly racially disparate impacts when they are put into place (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). We can see this through higher rates of food insecurity for BIPOC households, as well as the lack of aid from the federal government to BIPOC agricultural workers (White, 2021). The close relationship between racism and both housing and the food system illustrate the need for racially cognizant activism around these conjoined issues.

Stigma Is Currently Built into Affordable Housing and the Food System

Poor access to shelter and food insecurity are conditions that affect the material ability of people to take care of themselves and their families and are imbued with stigma and shame. Although less than 1% of U.S. housing stock is federally financed affordable housing, it is stigmatized as “the projects,” as are other areas of affordable housing, such as trailer parks and core urban areas. Location is used as a proxy for class, education, and social standing, which creates a situation where the act of survival comes with a label that defines the recipient as less than a full citizen (Vassenden & Lie, 2013). Likewise, food sources for people experiencing low incomes, such as food pantries and SNAP benefits, are stigmatized, as volunteers look down on food aid recipients, and food-shelf users are forced to wait in dirty and disheveled spaces for enough food for the week (de Souza, 2019; Poppendieck, 1999). Given the importance of housing and food to identity, these systems must be designed in ways that promote human dignity and empowerment, as opposed to simply bread and temporary shelter.

Conclusion

The affordable housing crisis is a national emergency that affects many aspects of our food system. How people are housed has a direct impact on how they access food (Shabazz, 2017). As Maggie Dickinson (2020) writes about the food-

shelf clients she studied in Brooklyn. “their struggles for food were intimately linked with their struggles for housing” (p. 22). By addressing these interconnected struggles, we can better understand how to house and shelter our most vulnerable citizens.

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