

Setting the table for rural food access: Models from Appalachia and the Deep South

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Abstract


The Southeastern United States was built upon agriculture, but paradoxically its rural residents experience high rates of food insecurity due to

numerous intersecting socio-economic barriers. Food insecurity leads to higher rates of diet-related chronic disease in rural populations compared to their urban counterparts, further compounded by limited access to healthcare. Guided by the theoretical frameworks of assets-based community devel-

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opment and the culture-centered approach, this paper investigates existing program models that guide the establishment of community-derived programs to increase the availability and accessibility of locally sourced fruit and vegetables for low-income residents of the rural Southeast. Data were collected through document analysis and semi-structured interviews with leadership from twelve community-derived food access programs in Appalachia and the Deep South. Using a framework approach, data were analyzed to identify and characterize current models based on their structures and guiding values. Four program models were identified: the Charity Model, the Support Model, the Restructure Model, and the Market Model, which range from providing emergency food to restructuring the local food system. We present characteristics of each model, the challenges faced, and lessons learned by participating programs. In addition to identifying the four models, an unexpected result of this work was uncovering subtle yet important differences between Appalachian and Deep South programs that reflect their divergent, yet parallel cultural histories of marginalization and resilience.

Keywords

food access program, food insecurity, asset-based community development, rural communities, Appalachia, Deep South

Introduction

Over the past decade, comprehensive approaches to mitigate community food insecurity have become increasingly common (Coates, 2015; High Level Panel of Experts, 2019; Iannotti et al., 2024). These community-based initiatives seek to address the root causes of hunger and break the cycle of food insecurity by addressing the needs of whole communities and families. In an increasing number of communities, produce prescription programs have decreased food insecurity and health disparities by increasing program participants' access to fresh fruits and vegetables (Aiyer et al., 2019; Marcinkevage et al., 2019; Newman et al., 2022;

Slagel et al., 2023; Zhu, 2019). Often, these programs also provide education on nutrition, kitchen skills, and recipes to maximize the benefits of the prescribed fresh food (Bookhart et al., 2019; Joshi et al., 2019; Schlosser et al., 2019; Stotz et al., 2023).

Despite their success in urban settings, produce prescription programs rarely exist in rural¹ communities (Rodriguez et al., 2021; for an exception, see Burrington et al., 2020). There are limited data on programs that aim to expand rural food access, especially in the U.S. Southeast. What does exist suggests the need for additional research on rural food access (Fleischhacker et al., 2013; Holston et al., 2020; Hossfeld & Rico Mendez, 2018). In response to the research gap, this study identifies and describes existing program models that aim to increase access to locally sourced fruit and vegetables for low-income residents of the rural Southeast. Specifically, we examine grassroots food access programs, which are diverse in structure but united by the goal of increasing rural fresh fruit and vegetable access through a community-based approach.

Background

As of 2022, the food insecurity rate was 14.7% in rural America compared to 10.5% in suburban areas; food insecurity was also higher among those experiencing poverty (36.7%) and in the U.S. South (14.5%) (Rabbitt et al., 2023). Furthermore, the proportion of U.S. residents living in poverty is higher in rural and nonmetro areas than in metro areas (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2023). Although poverty is the most powerful barrier to food access, it is compounded by social and geographic barriers faced by rural residents. While most rural residents live in rural clusters (i.e., denser zones of development within largely rural areas), these clusters are unevenly supported by full-scale grocery stores. More accessible food outlets, such as rural corner stores, Dollar General stores, and gas stations, have limited selection, higher prices, and few if any fresh fruits or vegetables (Larson et al., 2017). To meet nutritional

¹ The U.S. Census Bureau (2021a; 2021b) defines “rural” as any population not in an urban classification zone. “Urban” has two classifications: “urbanized” zones with more than 50,000 people or “urban areas” with more than 2,500 but fewer than 50,000 people.

needs, rural residents commute to nearby urban centers with supermarkets. However, a significant portion of this population lacks consistent access to dependable transportation, impeding their ability to undertake the journey, which can often take over an hour (Bauer & Dolan, 2011; Gantner et al., 2011; MacNell, 2018). Having managed the long commute, many low-income rural shoppers strategically purchase shelf-stable, calorically dense, nutritionally deficient foods rather than more expensive, perishable fresh fruits and vegetables (McGee et al., 2011).

Food access strongly influences food consumption patterns which, in turn, impact the risk for diet-related health conditions that are more prevalent in rural areas of the US, including obesity, hypertension, diabetes, and heart disease (Ahern et al., 2011; Wang, et al., 2014). Because rural communities experience both diet-related health disparities and additional barriers to healthcare, access to healthy food is a key social determinant of health and well-being. (Brennan Ramirez et al., 2008; Koh, et al., 2011; Raphael, 2016).

There are also significant racial and ethnic disparities in the rates of food insecurity in the U.S.; Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic households consistently experience food insecurity at twice the rate of white households (U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service [USDA ERS], 2024). In rural communities, 30.7% of Black Americans were living in poverty in 2019, compared to 13.3% of white Americans (USDA ERS, 2021). Nevertheless, despite the ongoing social and economic inequities experienced by people of color in the South, beginning with forcible removal and enslavement, these communities have long used food production as a site for creative activism and resistance, through co-operative and regenerative farming models (Franklin et al., 2011; Leslie & White, 2018; White, 2018).

The dominant strategy for addressing gaps in food access in the U.S. is a corporate food regime that relies on charity-oriented food banks and pantries to distribute free food to recipients who have limited agency within the process (Bacon & Baker, 2017; Holt Giménez & Shattuck, 2011; Poppendieck, 1999; Vansintjan, 2014). This “top down”

approach can inadvertently reinforce established power hierarchies linked to race and class, doing little to dismantle the entrenched systemic social inequities that underpin food insecurity (Guthman, 2008). In contrast, initiatives that employ a community-engaged approach offer greater potential to target intersecting barriers and bring about transformative change (Freire, 1970; Wallerstein et al., 2018).

Since the mid-1990s, community-based and participatory approaches to research and community development have gained prominence as ways to “build on the strengths and priorities of the community for multilevel strategies to improve health and social equity” (Wallerstein et al., 2018, p. 3). Nevertheless, the term “community-based” often refers to the setting or target of an intervention that is largely guided by an external organization’s agenda (McLeroy et al., 2003). In this paper, we use the term “community-derived,” which draws from the theory of asset-based community development (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1996) and the “community as an agent” model of community-based initiatives (McLeroy et al., 2003), to describe food access programs that have been developed *within* local communities, and *in response to* unique local needs and resources—including cultural resources.

Applied Research Methods

Inspired by the mobilization of unique resources and networks within rural communities, our research is framed by the theories of asset-based community development (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1996) and culture centered approach (Dutta, 2007). Both theories share common objectives, recognizing local lived experiences as a form of expertise for discerning issues and solutions, reinstating power to communities and individuals, and harnessing the influence, privilege, and capabilities of external organizations to bolster priorities derived from the community. Although these theories were developed to guide the creation of programs, we use them here to inform our criteria for selection of programs to investigate, approach to data collection, and analysis. The project was reviewed and determined not to be human subjects research by the University of Georgia Institutional Review Board.

Sample Identification and Document Review

In accordance with our theoretical framework, we initiated our study by delineating a set of inclusion priorities to guide selecting programs for our sample:

- Programs *must* aim to increase fresh fruit and vegetable access within a community; however, this does not need to be the sole focus of the program.
- Programs situated in the U.S. rural Southeast² will be prioritized.
- Programs that are community-derived will be prioritized.
- Programs that support local agricultural production will be prioritized.

We broadly defined the term “program” to include nonprofits, local governments, informal community networks, or collaborations; we use “community-derived” to refer to programs established by or with a community to address self-identified needs.

An initial web search,³ conducted in Spring 2020, yielded 24 programs that appeared to meet our inclusion priorities. Public-facing documents encompassing the values, structures, goals, purposes, and strategic partnerships as well as news articles and blog posts, were collected on the programs via online searches of their websites and social media platforms. These documents were stored and organized in ATLAS.ti, then reviewed to establish a general foundation of knowledge about these programs and to select a subset of programs that most closely fit our inclusion priorities. As a result, we identified 12 community-derived

food access programs in rural communities in south-central Appalachia and the Deep South (Figure 1).

Documents pertaining to the 12 programs were analyzed in Atlas.ti to discern their structure, values, goals, purposes, and components in support of further data collection. Then we crafted a semi-structured interview guide to delve into aspects not typically disclosed in public documents. We contacted leadership from the 12 programs and secured interviews with program directors, board members, founders, and communication specialists from 11 programs.

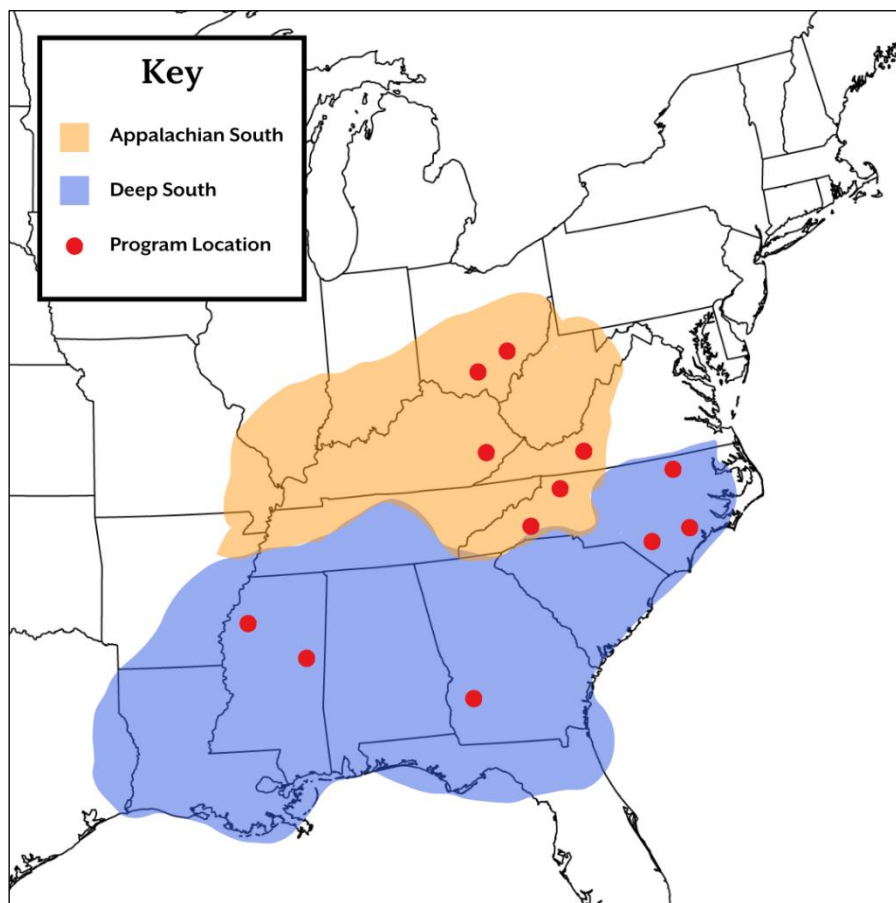
Data Collection

Fourteen representatives from 11 programs agreed to participate in a total of 12 interviews. (The one program that did not respond had publicly available interviews with the program’s founder available on their website. Since these interviews addressed many elements of our interview guide, although in less detail, and they were included in our dataset, our dataset thus includes all 12 programs.) All participants received an information letter and provided verbal informed consent at the beginning of their interview. Interviews lasted approximately an hour and a half and were conducted by Darwin via phone or Zoom. Participants were also invited to share any additional documents that would enhance our understanding of their program. Participants received a gift card to thank them for their time. Interviewees were mostly program directors but also included board members, founders, and communications specialists. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and cleaned by

² We used the U.S. Department of Agriculture definition of Southeastern states: Louisiana, Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Tennessee (USDA Agricultural Research Service, n.d.).

³ Search terms were derived from our research objectives and included—but were not limited to—combinations of the following: rural, fresh foods, food access, food hubs, food assistance programs, and food sovereignty. With no standard terminology for community-derived programs, we left the search terms intentionally broad. Other community food systems search terms, such as “teaching gardens,” were included because the results would often link to related programs relevant to the research. Peer-reviewed content was limited, and upon review it did not result in identifying any previously unidentified programs; however, Google Scholar did yield related articles on two previously identified programs. Keywords in these articles were used as search terms for further searches, but all results were situated in urban or non-Southeastern environments. The most successful method was using search terms in the public Google search engine, yielding local news sources and websites that identified multiple programs. Instagram was an unexpected resource for program identification, mainly because Instagram accounts of programs often follow the accounts of other programs doing similar work. Lastly, two programs were identified by attending conferences where program stakeholders presented their work.

Figure 1. Map of Community-Derived Food Access Programs Included in this Study (N = 12)



hand. The interview transcripts and any additional shared documents were uploaded to ATLAS.ti for analysis.

Analysis

Analysis was guided by the Framework approach, a qualitative research method designed to describe and interpret data generated in practical, real-world contexts (Gale et al., 2013; Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). Encompassing five sequential stages, the approach includes: 1) becoming acquainted with the data, 2) discerning thematic patterns, 3) indexing key concepts, 4) creating charts or matrices, and 5) interpreting the data to derive meaningful insights (Smith & Firth, 2011). The Framework approach is a robust approach to organizing and comprehensively understanding the intricacies inherent in qualitative data within applied settings.

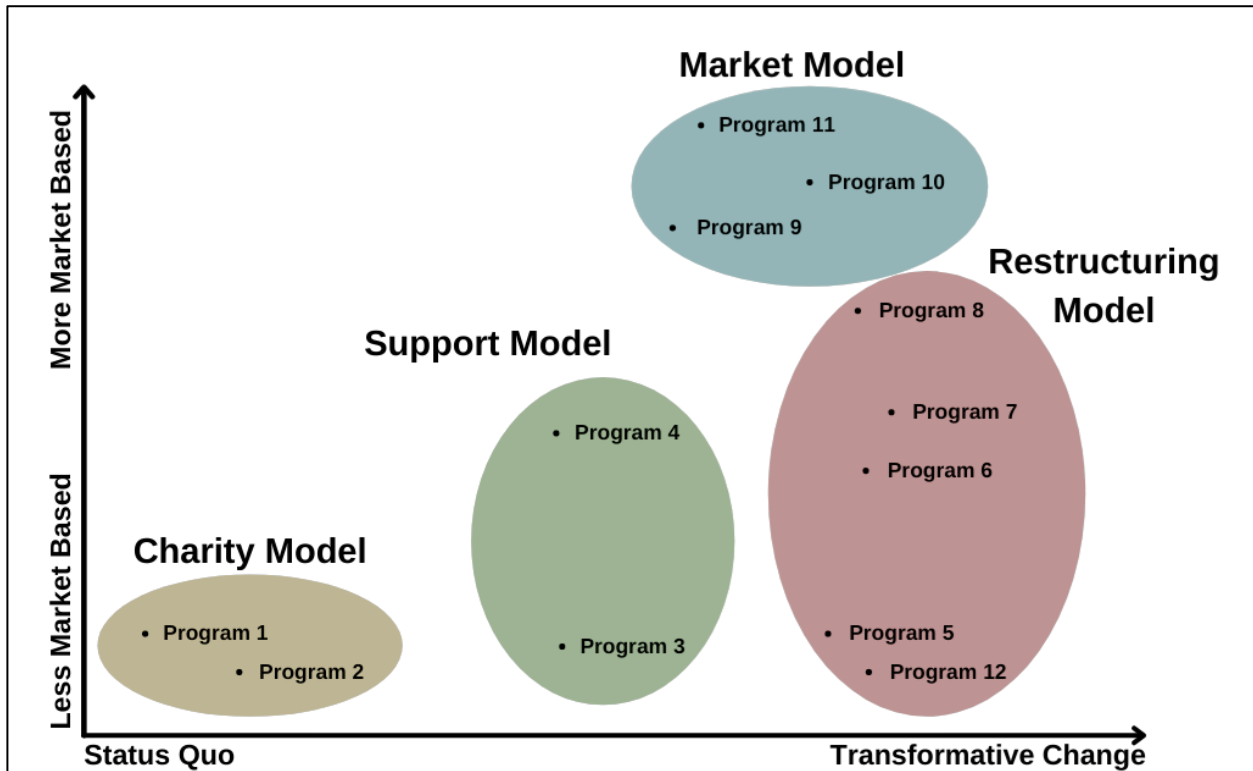
Data analysis was led by Darwin, in constant

consultation with Thompson. During data collection and transcription, Darwin familiarized herself with the data, identified preliminary themes, and expanded the codebook established during the document review to include elements specific to the interviews, such as program structures and characteristics, as well as challenges faced, keys to success, and insights shared by program leadership. Based on this codebook, Darwin systematically indexed the interviews and documents in ATLAS.ti and met with Thompson on a weekly basis to discuss coding decisions. Nunoo further reviewed the data and coding during the writing process. Following coding, Darwin organized the data with a charting process

that allowed the research team to compare program characteristics to identify generalizable models based on patterns in the data.

We mapped the programs based on two dimensions of interest: adherence to a market-based approach and intention to transform the local food system (Figure 2). These dimensions were selected because several programs explicitly self-identified in these terms. A market-based approach (Figure 2, Y-axis) involves strategies or programs that utilize market mechanisms like supply and demand, pricing, and competition to achieve their objectives (Wang et al., 2017). Programs that ranked low on the market-based dimension generally did not rely on exchange of money for food, and did not seek profitability as a program goal. In contrast, programs that ranked high on this dimension employed a business model that focused on the economic success of the initiative

Figure 2. Identification of Program Models



Distribution of community-derived food access programs across two dimensions of interest: adherence to a market-based approach (Y-axis) and intention to transform the local food system (X-axis).

as a primary goal.

The second dimension refers to program alignment with existing structures and practices that shape the contemporary food regime (Figure 2, X-axis). Programs that rank low on this dimension are content to work within the status quo, to focus on broadening access for those underserved within the current system without challenging the fundamental ways in which the food system operates. In contrast, programs that rank high aim to fundamentally transform the system through which food is produced, distributed, and consumed. This dimension parallels the hierarchy of food movements described by Holt Giménez and Shattuck (2011), ranging from neoliberal to radical.

Programs closer to the axis intersection (i.e., low on both dimensions) primarily provide emergency food, and programs furthest from the intersection (i.e., high on both dimensions) aim to transform local food systems by addressing the root causes of hunger, while also drawing on

market-based approaches. Programs were located on the grid according to their relationship to each dimension and in reference to one another. Once plotted, spatially proximate models were grouped together. We drew upon our qualitative understanding of these programs to develop generalizable descriptions for each program model, which we named according to their principal attributes.

Results and Discussion

Sample

All programs in this study were community-derived efforts to increase access to fresh food distributed across Appalachia and the Deep South (Figure 1). At the time of the interviews, ten of the 12 programs sourced locally grown food, and seven had gardens on-site to supplement distributed food or to serve as a teaching garden. Eight programs had educational components, with two more in developmental phases. All programs defined their com

munity by county boundaries; therefore, our use of “community” refers to the county in which the program is situated. Nevertheless, as one interviewee reminded us during data collection, we recognize that such a broad definition of community oversimplifies complex relationships between overlapping and independent sets of social relations that co-exist in a single space. Table 1 provides an overview of community demographics and a brief synopsis of significant characteristics of each program, including its formation, structure, guiding values, and keys to success. In the sections below, everything in quotes represents direct quotes from participants.

Four Models of Community-Derived Rural Food Access Programs

Our analysis identified four different community-derived food access program models: the Charity Model, Support Model, Restructuring Model, and Market Model (Figure 2). The Charity Model provides emergency food assistance, sourcing from food banks. The Support Model also provides emergency food assistance but sources locally within the community. The Restructuring Model increases food access for the whole community by redefining local food systems. The Market Model also increases food access for whole communities by increasing availability within the market. We discuss each model in detail below.

Charity Model

Programs aligned with the Charity Model (Programs 1 and 2) temporarily increase food security by providing emergency food, with limited effort to addressing the root causes of food insecurity and the circumstances that directly or indirectly influence it. Such programs source food through food banks, and may or may not screen clientele for income, although those that screen do so to track impact and qualify for additional funding. These programs are well-received and supported by their communities, as demonstrated by community financial and volunteer support, and testimonies from clienteles as shared by the interviewees. Nevertheless, this model is characterized by a distinct separation between those who serve and those being served.

Although the Charity Model programs in this study were not directly associated with a church, partnerships with local churches support their funding, volunteer needs, and food distribution. Notably, the interviewees from these programs were guided and motivated by their religious beliefs, participating in their programs because they saw it as their religious duty to address the needs of their communities.

Although this model resembles the dominant food bank to food pantry approach to emergency food provision, the programs were embedded in their local communities. During their founding stages, program leadership assessed community needs and resources before establishing the programs, without external assistance. Providing emergency food offers immediate assistance within communities and can produce effective short-term food security from limited assets. However, given the priority of meeting a community’s immediate need, this model’s capacity to develop a long-term strategy aimed at restructuring the food system is limited.

The lessons learned from this model reflect the challenges of a charity approach. For example, Program 1 demonstrated how efforts could be unsustainable if too “grant dependent.” The program’s attempt to establish home gardens relied solely on local grant funding, and all operations were halted once funding was depleted, illustrating the need for diversity in funding sources to sustain initiatives. The model demonstrates the importance of community engagement for program success: while Program 1 offered a creative alternative to community gardens, home gardening was not a priority of their clientele. Thus, focusing efforts on community priorities may have yielded more impactful results as well as continued funding.

Facilitating community engagement is also a challenge for Charity model programs. Program 2’s overarching goal is to provide resources to elevate its community from poverty, and the food pantry is one element of this work. Although the program offers a suite of services toward this goal, the charity approach has presented challenges surrounding community involvement. The interviewee from Program 2 explained, “We’re noticing that all our services are completely free, but it’s hard getting

Table 1. Characteristics of Community-Derived Food Access Programs Included in the Study (N = 12)

Program #	State (Region)	Formation	Year Est.	Structure	Guiding Values	Keys to Success	Model	County Population	Racial Demographics	Poverty Rate (%) ^a
U.S. (total)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	328,239,523	76.3% white 18.5% Latino 13.4% Black 5.9% Asian 1.3% Indigenous	10.5%
Program 1	North Carolina (Appalachian Region)	Created by residents to address immediate needs of a rural community.	N/A	Food pantry and soup kitchen, sourcing most of the food from a national food bank. Previously had a program that provided gardening resources for individuals and families in lieu of a central community garden.	Guided by religious belief in serving neighbors.	Local grants, core group of volunteers	Charity	27,203	95.4% white	14.6%
Program 2	North Carolina (Deep South)	Food programs were adopted to benefit youth scholastic outcomes and assist families experiencing food insecurity.	2007	Food pantry and distribution of food to network of churches. A community garden is used as a teaching tool and to supply fresh produce.	Guided by religious belief in serving neighbors	Support from regional churches	Charity	34,823	44.6% white 38.9% Black 12.8% Indigenous	28.5%
Program 3	Virginia (Appalachian Region)	Founded to provide a more formal pathway for community food sharing and support.	2011	Provides emergency food to county residents and operates a teaching garden. The food is sourced from the on-property garden, donations from gardens and local farms, and salvaging food.	Established community culture of sharing abundance between neighbors.	Landownership, large volunteer network, integrated into the community	Support	15,749	95.5% white	11.4%
Program 4	Ohio (Appalachian Region)	Founded by a regional organization to connect emergency food operations to locally grown food and provide a safety net for farmers.	2007	Purchases locally grown food through community donations. Aggregates and distributes to local emergency food operations. Additional gleaning operation.	Belief that local food should be accessible to all community members.	Robust local food system, access to wholesale prices from produce auction, community donations	Support	65,327 (stationed in an urban hub of rural area)	92.1% white 3.1% Asian 2.8% Black	26.6%

continued

Program #	State (Region)	Formation	Year Est.	Structure	Guiding Values	Keys to Success	Model	County Population	Racial Demographics	Poverty Rate (%) ^a
Program 5	North Carolina (Appalachian Region)	Founded by community members to grow the produce needed for a local soup kitchen.	2009	Family style garden that distributes produce through pop-up events and local emergency food organizations.	Community tradition of sharing garden harvests with neighbors to promote food as a right for all.	Guidance available through a network of community gardens, community volunteers	Restructuring	18,069	96.4% white 5.5% Latino	14.2%
Program 6	Mississippi (Deep South)	Founded in partnership with a regional organization to improve community health and economy through food system revitalization.	2010	Youth education centered on agriculture, nutrition, and data collection; mobile market to address accessibility; resources for local farmers to support direct sales.	Values community voice and direction, provides support and resources for community to drive its own change	Long-term relationships within community, history of agriculture in the area	Restructuring	30,628	63.7% Black 34.2% white	36.6%
Program 7	Georgia (Deep South)	Established after a set of countywide goals were identified around revitalizing the food system.	2017	Operates a community garden that supplies produce for a mobile market, provides community education on growing food, and supports local farmers with direct sales.	Values increasing produce availability in an economically and environmentally sustainable manner.	Partnerships throughout the community and city government, deep agricultural history	Restructuring	87,956 (stationed in an urban hub of rural area)	71.0% Black 26.3% white	27.6%
Program 8	Kentucky (Appalachian Region)	Efforts were initiated by the collapse of the local coal economy to provide self-sufficiency through growing and selling food.	2013	A group of programs collaborating to create a localized food system. Efforts evolved from teaching individuals how to grow food to supporting economic opportunities for new growers.	The programs aligned their values of health and increased access with the community value of economic self-sufficiency.	Dedication and networking abilities of the spearheading individual, donation of a physical space	Restructuring	21,553	98.2% white	28.9%

continued

Program #	State (Region)	Formation	Year Est.	Structure	Guiding Values	Keys to Success	Model	County Population	Racial Demographics	Poverty Rate (%) ^a
Program 9	North Carolina (Deep South) Sandhills Farmers and Heritage Market ^b	Formed to preserve both land ownership and culture of the local African American community.	2006	The market provides an income opportunity for local landowners, increases access to produce, and acts as a platform for nutrition education and cultural events.	Values a system that allows community members to remain resilient, such as ownership of land and ties to traditional food ways.	The buy-in of the city council to adjust the city ordinance to allow a farmer's market	Market	335,509 (12,005 population for the city alone)	51.1% white 39.1% Black 12.1% Latino	18.0%
Program 10	Mississippi (Deep South)	Founded to create local jobs by growing produce to sell to a casino's restaurants and staff cafeteria.	2013	Uses income from casino purchases to provide affordable produce for those on reservation. Has an educational component to encourage renewed connection to foodways.	Values the wellbeing of tribal members, physically, mentally, and economically.	The support and shared values of the local casino	Market	29,118	58.8% white 21.3% Black 17.5% Indigenous	21.7%
Program 11	Ohio (Appalachian Region)	Founded as an effort to increase the clientele base and provide financial security for local farmers.	2010	Aggregates and distributes local produce to corner stores, hosts produce pop-up stands.	Values the livelihood of farmers.	Wholesale produce prices from local produce auction	Market	14,508	92.4% white 3.8% mixed race 3.1% Black	15.7%
Program 12	North Carolina (Deep South)	Founded through a local pastor's efforts to increase health and quality of living in a small community.	2007	Volunteers use church land to grow crops which are shared in the community, prioritizing those most in need.	Guided by religious beliefs and the desire to improve community health.	Available land, church that brought together the whole community	Restructuring	51,472	57.8% Black 39.7% white 5.0% Latino	21.0%

N/A = Not applicable

^a Poverty rate is the % below poverty line.

^b The founder of Program 9 (Sandhills Farmers and Heritage Market) specifically requested that their program name be included in materials resulting from this project.

the community to engage with those services. ... How do we get the people to want these services when they know they need it?" The challenge of engaging clientele with services, even when offered by community members, was unique to programs in the Charity Model. While community relationships in this model may alleviate some of the stigma of charity work, prior research has shown that recipients may perceive receiving charity as mentally and socially exhausting, as well as stigmatizing (Salonen et al., 2018). This may be further exacerbated by the lack of overlap between those served by the programs and those doing the service. Interviewees also stated that they have difficulty securing national funding, as it is challenging to set their programs apart from larger agencies doing similar work.

Support Model

Like the Charity Model, Support Model programs (3 and 4) focus on providing emergency food assistance; however, this model is characterized by deep commitment to community engagement, giving it greater transformative capacity. Both programs within this model evolved from a community tradition of growing food and sharing it between neighbors, and they continue to source food locally by purchasing directly from farmers, receiving donations from local farms and individuals, and glean-ing. Local sourcing requires time and effort to build relationships and rapport, but it can extend program benefits by building the resilience of the local food economy (McEntee & Naumova, 2016; White, 2018). Support Model programs are driven by the goal of serving the community by filling gaps with local resources and capacity. They are characterized by an ethos that deeply values individuals—including clientele, volunteers, and growers—as agents in the local food system. Viewing education as a tool to increase individuals' control over their food environment and expand the impact of their efforts, these programs also incorporate gardening, nutrition, or food preparation education into their structure.

The primary challenge faced by the Support Model is the inconsistency in the amount of food available for distribution. Due to the limited shelf life of fresh food and the variability of food and

financial donations from week to week, there is constant worry that client needs may not be met. This stress is exacerbated in programs that distribute food to individuals rather than to organizations in bulk, because they want to ensure that all in need are offered the same resources. For example, the program manager from Program 3 stated that they struggle to ensure an "equal choice" for all clients, since their local donations are diverse and of limited quantities. The program addresses this by asking clients to take only what they need, such as taking a quart of strawberries but leaving a bag of plums for someone else, a solution that is only successful due to a culture of mutual respect between community members.

Lessons demonstrated by the Support Model highlight the value of maintaining trust and relationships within the community. As the program director for Program 4 emphasized, "cultivating relationships is key." Support Model interviews were filled with narratives about the programs' reliance on community relationships to address challenges and needs. For Program 4, ongoing financial donations demonstrate how the community values their local food economy in ways that align with Program 4's ideal of "local food for all." With Program 3, program headquarters has become a gathering spot for the community to receive both food and fellowship, "feeding not just their bellies, but their sense of community." The boundaries between volunteers and clientele are fluid, with many serving as both depending on their capacity and need. Offering clients and other community organizations opportunities for involvement further increases awareness of the program's services and expands its impact. The program director of Program 3 illustrates this insight: "[Our program] really is the favorite mascot of the nonprofits of the area. And I think it's because everybody gets to put their finger in it in some way at the end. And I think back to sustainability, it's about getting those tentacles out."

When asked to share guidance for other programs, Support Model interviewees emphasized the significance of formulating strategic plans that can sustain the programs and guide decision-making. For example, due to Program 4's success it faced external pressure to expand or replicate the pro-

gram in a neighboring county. While the program director was not opposed to this, they also saw the risk of exceeding capacity. Thus, the program director worked to ensure that the program could “strike a balance between growth and sustainability.” Furthermore, despite recognizing need in a neighboring community, the program director was hesitant to expand if it would divert resources from the needs of the program’s current community. Similarly, Program 3 is working to establish internal guidelines and policies to ensure their longevity as a nonprofit; nevertheless, the program director also emphasized that “true success” would be achieving an environment where their services are no longer needed: “Our goal isn’t to brag about how many people we feed; we really would like to see our numbers go down. We really would like to help people overcome their barriers and poverty, so they don’t have to go to a food bank.”

In short, while the structure of the Support Model resembles the Charity Model of food distribution, the Support Model is distinguished by its commitment to remain embedded within its community by addressing relevant needs and practicing flexibility when needs change. Despite this intention, this approach is limited in its transformative capacity as it does not address structural issues that underlie the prevalence of food insecurity.

Restructuring Model

Building on the intentional commitment to community of the Support Model, the Restructuring Model (Programs 5–8 and 12) differentiates itself by striving to recreate or restructure the local food system, rather than filling gaps within an established system. It goes beyond traditional approaches to food provisioning to address root causes of food insecurity and access inequities in access. Restructuring Model programs spend significant time—often multiple years—holding community-wide conversations to determine the (in)availability of community-based resources (Alison & Gord, 2003). Furthermore, they also work with their communities to identify feasible solutions and ways that members can contribute. A board member of Program 6 put it this way:

I believe it is a huge part of the reason that

we’ve gotten to where we’ve gotten, with very little money for seven or eight years was because it’s never been about “Oh, hey, we want to turn a great profit, making a great, shiny community food system.” It’s always been about, “We want to shift the long-term conversation in our communities.”

This in-depth understanding of community needs and assets creates a secure foundation on which programs can build. Paradoxically, however, many Restructuring programs in this study were established with external support. For example, Program 6 received support from a national-level organization piloting local approaches to programming. Still, the external organization dedicated extended time to building a relationship with the community, soliciting continuous feedback and respecting residents’ agency and experiential knowledge. This strategy has resulted in flexible programs better suited to serve the evolving community needs.

The Restructuring Model is further characterized by a comprehensive approach to the food system, which, as a founder of Program 8 explained, begins with understanding that an individual’s food environment is influenced by unique barriers and personal preferences while also “look[ing] at the local food as a common denominator and a unifier for community.” The Restructuring Model also incorporates elements of food justice (Alkon & Ageman, 2011), enacting the guiding value of “good food for all” through comprehensive efforts to strengthen the local food economy while also fostering community members’ agency in their food system. This model nurtures community agency by providing education and supplementary resources for growing food, and, as the director of Program 5 explained, it destigmatizes food access by encouraging a community culture of sharing food to “challenge the idea of [food provisioning as] a transactional relationship.”

Food sharing has a deep history within these communities, often sustained as an act of community identity, resilience, and resistance. For example, Program 5 expressed pride in their Appalachian history of neighbors sharing food, rooted in narratives about traditional practices of the

Cherokee Nation that once farmed in this region.⁴ The program drew upon this cultural tradition, even reviving cultural acts of food sharing that had lain dormant for several generations. In this context, sharing is not limited to those who cannot purchase or grow their own produce; it aims to strengthen the whole community by expanding both food access and interpersonal connection. The director of Program 5 explained, “We believe that good food is a right and that we as a community have the resources to be able to grow this food and share it generously. And that when we share there’s enough for everyone.” While programs in other models reported a culture of food sharing, it generally meant sharing abundance among friends or sharing as an act of charity. In contrast, Restructuring Model programs share food among all community members without differentiating between those who can and cannot afford local produce.

Notably, several Restructuring Model programs were in communities with the poorest health outcomes in their region or state, and, as the interviewee from Program 8 explained, had been founded to address community health “with food being at the very core starting place of that.” And although no interviewee directly said that their program goals were to improve mental health, there were many efforts to improve “wellbeing” and “community”—including through efforts to bring joy into the act of growing and sharing food. These programs utilized the tight-knit sense of community to support diet and lifestyle changes through canning classes, walking programs, and community meals. Notably, this model also includes supporting the livelihood of local farmers as an important element of community wellbeing. Programs that worked closely with community youth also include efforts to demonstrate economic opportunities in agriculture to reclaim cultural pathways and enhance community.

Several challenges of the Restructuring Model appear paradoxical. First, although successfully implementing the model requires significant time

and effort, there is pressure from both community members and external funders to see immediate results. Further, despite efforts to foster community cohesion by incorporating diverse cultural traditions, Restructuring programs experienced challenges navigating cultural differences—including those associated with race and ethnicity, political views, or even church affiliation—that can result in reluctance of some to participate in the program or interact with one another. The example below, which references the program director’s brother who works in the coal industry and attended a pickling class hosted by Program 8, illustrates this point:

He’s partnered with somebody from the Sierra Club. And that would not be his choice if you said, “Do you want to partner with somebody who wants to save the environment?” You know, he would say, “I don’t want to partner with somebody who wants to put everybody out of work.” But they’re then talking about how much spice to put in their pickles. And you know they have a good conversation and meet each other as neighbors that live beside each other, that didn’t know each other, and then meet each other. So, for me, it’s a long way of saying the local food is as much about growing community as the food aspect of it.

The challenge can be exacerbated in regions where the community is more heterogeneous and may be better represented as a set of communities with different histories and cultures sharing the same geographic space. Yet, as the episode above illustrates, this tension also presents an opportunity to bring together members of the broader community in new ways. While there can be elements of a program that appeal to shared values, to truly engage and serve diverse communities requires extended efforts.

Paradoxically, the key strength of the Restructuring Model—its rootedness in community needs

⁴ Acknowledging that this was a primarily white community, the program coordinator stated that the Cherokee Nation exemplified food sharing to the white colonizers of the area as an act of community during the initial winters. Many current residents can trace their lineage back to the colonizers, and they continue to practice the act of food sharing to pay homage to both their ancestors and the Cherokee Nation.

and assets—suggests that these programs may not be readily replicated everywhere. Restructuring programs draw heavily on their community traditions of food sharing as a resource for addressing community needs. Without shared food histories, the programs may not have formed in this way or had the same impact. When asked to share advice for other programs, the advice across this model centered on slowing efforts down in order to identify resources and absorb the lessons that come from mistakes. Leaders from Programs 6 and 8 explained:

It would not have been possible if we hadn't spent, you know, seven years building relationships ... the things that haven't worked, the things we've learned from, that's just part of being messy, but I mean, that is actually a big part of our strength. ... It's not easy. It's complicated, more complicated than anyone thinks it is. (Program 6)

Probably would have been better to go slower. And you know, working out some things beforehand, instead of after the fact. Sometimes I do say that it feels like a Sudoku puzzle. ... And, you know, I've just got 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. I got this, I got this. I got this. Then you get down to the last two rows. And it's like, oh, that doesn't work. Oh, that doesn't work. Oh, that doesn't work. So, some days feel like there's way too many that doesn't work, and you wonder, what could I have done differently to make it work. (Program 8)

Finally, these communities may have been highly motivated due to their desire for self-efficacy and resilience for themselves and their neighbors, as the most radical programs developed in communities with the greatest apparent need.

Market Model

The Market Model (Programs 9–11) emphasizes working within the current market system to increase fresh produce availability within whole communities. Depending on the specific community's needs, resources, and capacities, some Market Model programs created entirely new markets, and

others buttressed systems already in place by providing aggregation and distribution services. In either case, Market programs aimed to minimize the disconnect between growers and consumers. Like the Restructuring Model, the Market Model relies upon its understanding of community culture and history to align program structures with community values. In contrast, Market programs prioritize benefits to local growers; improving the wellness of the community is a secondary goal. The interviewee from Program 9 stated, “Well, the number one goal is to have a place where the landowners, the gardeners, and the farmers will have a place where they can sell their produce. But at the same time, it gives access to locally grown foods for those people in the community.”

The focus on growers distinguishes the Market Model from the other models we identify, but it directly reflects the priorities of the historically agricultural communities where these programs are situated. For example, Program 11, located in a community that highly values supporting farmer livelihoods, aggregates and distributes local produce to corner stores and hosts pop-up produce stands. Because corner store owners already value the livelihood of local growers, Program 11 did not have to compensate or incentivize owners to carry local produce. This same value encouraged consumers to purchase the produce, making it economically viable for the store owners while expanding access to more vulnerable community members. For this model, untapped markets are a powerful community asset. Programs 9 and 11 identified locations with customer bases that would benefit their existing networks of growers. Program 10 identified a local casino as a potential buyer and developed a growing operation to create jobs and support the local economy while also subsidizing the cost of produce for residents of a nearby reservation.

The primary challenges faced by the Market Model involve pricing, marketing, and logistics, which in many ways go hand-in-hand. Market interviewees repeatedly raised the issue of price, particularly the disconnect between the value of produce to growers and its worth to consumers. For example, the Program 10 interviewee explained that “in Mississippi, organic production is not very

important to people.” The perception that organic produce is overpriced is so widespread that this program calls their produce “naturally grown” and allows consumers to “forget that it’s organic.” Similarly, despite the community’s high regard for local produce, it still directly competed with other products sold at convenience stores. The limited refrigerator space, short shelf-life of perishable goods, and customer spending habits all presented a challenge for Program 11’s partnership with corner stores:

But a corner store has “X” amount of real estate that they have to try to make money off of. ... And there really has to be some commitment from the store owner that he or she see the value that it [the fresh produce] brings to the community. And often it can be a loss leader for other products.

Every Market program also referenced the challenge of competing with the price of processed foods at partnering corner stores, and with cheaper produce from stores like Wal-Mart and Dollar General. Furthermore, it can be even more challenging for customers familiar with highly standardized products to accept, as an interviewee from Program 11 explained, “local produce that does not always look like produce from the global food system.” These challenges were addressed by providing comprehensive education about health, nutrition, and food preparation, as well as about the benefits of eating locally for both farmers and consumers. As the founder of Program 9 stated, the interwoven educational components bring consumers to the food and encourage them to engage with it:

I think by having all of these different things on the site, under that farmer’s market shelter, it keeps them focused on the area, the food, the nutrition, the growers, and then the whole process of learning about why you need to eat fresh, locally grown food. I think that helps in terms of getting them to come to the market.

Another strategy the Market model uses to combat the perception that local produce is

unattainable is by accepting SNAP and EBT. Some of these programs also incentivize SNAP purchases by, for example, doubling the first ten dollars spent.

When asked to share advice for other programs, the founder of Program 9 described an unanticipated challenge they faced when setting up their market: “We thought we could just go in if we owned the property, just set up a farmer’s market. But you can’t do that. You do have to get approval from the town, and you have to get a business permit in order to operate.” Although this was overcome by working with the town to amend policy and permit the market, their founder advocated “engaging every segment of the community at the very beginning to get them to buy in.”

Regional Differences and Racial Healing

In addition to identifying four models of community-derived food access programs, an unexpected result of this work was uncovering subtle but important differences between programs located in the Appalachian Region and the Deep South—reflecting their divergent, yet parallel cultural histories of marginalization and resilience.

The six Appalachian programs are organized by and serve majority low-income white communities that bear the weight of historical marginalization and exploitation by extractive industries and governmental policies (Biggers, 2007; Ivancic, 2021; Peine et al., 2020). This enduring legacy has left the region with limited employment opportunities and gaps in social services, exacerbating the challenge of accessing healthy and affordable food. According to Pine and colleagues (2024), food insecurity is deeply intertwined with political and economic marginalization within these communities, where local geography, environmental factors, and economic structures intersect to shape the landscape of hunger. The director of Program 4, for example, underscored this history:

[Our] county has one of the highest poverty rates and highest food insecurity rates in the state of Ohio. So, it’s just, it’s a major issue locally, related to systemic things ... with a long history—like our reliance in this region

on extractive industries, for example, and a downturn in the economy related to that. So, we have especially high rates of poverty and food insecurity here.

Leadership from Program 11 also drew the connection between the region's social and economic history and the community's relationship to food: "So, we're situated, you know, in like Appalachian Ohio, the poorest region in the state, pretty rural, high hunger incidents, like old coal mining towns...[and] we're thinking about serving populations that didn't grow up cooking or maybe only have a microwave."

Despite the backdrop of historical exploitation, economic hardship, and widespread food insecurity, Appalachia harbors a robust tradition of community resilience and creativity, exemplified by vibrant local food movements that include small-scale farms, year-round farmers markets, independent restaurants, food trucks, and artisanal businesses producing an array of local foods (Batey et al., 2023; Chapman & Perkins, 2020; Engle, 2019; Purnell & Paulanka, 2008; Zgonc, 2021). Accordingly, the programs from this region present their histories of small-scale, subsistence gardening and food sharing as "synonymous...with community care" (Program 5). The director of Program 5 further explains:

The garden was started in a tradition in this part of the country called 'a garden that gives,' [where] everything that is grown [here] is then shared with the community without cost. It was started as a kind of a family style garden, so that there weren't individual plots where people were rented garden spots, that it was kind of communally-tended, and at that point with a volunteer manager. And then the food was shared to the soup kitchen and a food pantry in the county. So, that's the origin story...and we've kind of continued from that origin story. By uplifting the importance of people's dignity, when in fact they are in a food crisis, and then also bringing together community resources to address food insecurity.

Although the Appalachian programs were spread across the four models of food access programs, a common feature was their ethic of care, embodied in a commitment to "neighbors helping neighbors" (Program 3) as a means of also sustaining small-scale farming. Scholars such as Biggers (2007) and Catte (2018) have shed light on the region's rich history of grassroots activism as a beacon of hope, driving efforts to "build up community resources" (Program 5) in the face of systemic inequities. Appalachia serves as a microcosm of broader socio-economic struggles, where the pursuit of food security intersects with narratives of resilience that demonstrate the transformative potential of place-based approaches to addressing food insecurity (Pine et al., 2024). This point is illustrated by the founder of Program 8:

So, you know, gardening, it's always been a part of life. My mom was the youngest of nine children. ... Her dad died in '43 in a coal mining accident and my grandmother had nine children at home to raise and maybe she got \$149 a month social security benefits or something from them. But there wasn't a grocery store. I mean, they really grew everything that they ate. There was one little community store that maybe they would get soup, beans, and some things at. But, from just hearing those stories, I know the value of food and farming and gardening. And from being a child, and going to her house, and everything on the table coming out of their garden, meal after meal, after meal, after meal, you know. That was what was natural. So, I know that it can be done. And I know that it was done here. So, the community understood what our limitations were and what we needed to keep the program going successfully and they honor that.

In comparison, all six programs in the Deep South are organized by and serve majority non-white communities, specifically Black and Indigenous communities shaped by racialized social and agricultural histories that involve removal, enslavement, sharecropping, and land loss (Alkon, & Agyeman, 2011; Asch, 2011; Chang, 2010;

Hinson, 2018), as well as what White calls “collective agency and community resilience” (2018, p. 6). Several interviewees described the ways that these brutal histories have led people of color to associate farming with being “back in the ways of labor work” (Program 10). A board member from Program 6 further explained that “in the Delta, farming is the last thing that any Black parent would want their child to even have an interest in.”

Nevertheless, these programs—five of which align with either the Restructuring or Market models—have embraced small-scale farming as a source of resilience-as-resistance and self-determination (Penniman, 2018; Reese, 2019; White, 2018). The founder of Program 12 describes this tension between positive and negative perspectives on farming in a published interview (Toner, 2016):

I didn't have a good experience with the soil growing up. My family, we were sharecroppers. We grew up eating from the garden. But it was more of a process of pain. I can literally see this guy getting out of this pickup truck, telling my father that he didn't make any money for the year. It was so painful to watch my father be oppressed, to watch him walk away with nothing. That's why I did not like the land.

When I came back to the land, I had to deal with my anger. And I'm still coming through that process. But for me, working in the garden has been a healing place.

Responding to the violent legacy of agriculture in the Deep South, these programs seek to address and heal the collective trauma experienced by program members themselves and across generations in the community (Penniman, 2018). This is commonly addressed through youth education, because “kids teach the parents” (Program 7). Several Deep South programs, particularly Restructuring Model programs, include educational components that not only teach growing skills but encourage youth to embrace the opportunity to “make a living growing food” and emphasize the “dignity in it and the way that it improves the community” (Program 6). These programs work to rewrite the narrative and redefine youths' relationship with growing food as

a component of food justice (Leslie & White, 2018; Reynolds & Cohen, 2016). In teaching the history of suppression and resilience of Black growers in their region, Program 6 aims to ignite youth to reclaim agriculture, evidenced by their increased participation in program events. The founder of Program 9 discusses the multidimensional benefits of its educational component:

And these are middle and high school teenagers who learn to go out on the farm and they learn to start with the seed. They actually plant the seeds, they grow the food, they harvest it, and then they bring it to the farmer's market. ... So we tried to go through that whole gamut to teach them how to grow food. And at the same time, keep their connection to the land so that they know this is where your food comes from. And this is what goes into the process of getting that food from the field to the table.

A notable theme of the Deep South programs involves imparting agricultural knowledge and cultivating a sustainable livelihood among youth. Implicitly woven into the fabric of these initiatives is a profound acknowledgment: to ensure the longevity of agricultural traditions and cultural practices, there must be a concurrent commitment to economic sustainability. This recognition is particularly vital for communities grappling with enduring cycles of economic inequality. Embracing White's concept of economic autonomy (2018), these programs underscore the interconnectedness of agricultural education, cultural preservation, and economic empowerment as integral components for fostering resilience and prosperity within BIPOC communities. Notably, while several programs mention the necessity of healing collective racial trauma, this history is not framed as a deficit or a “barrier” (Leslie & White, 2018). Rather, the cultural history and experiential knowledge of Black growers as teachers and elders are reclaimed and embraced as important resources, as the founder of Program 9 discusses:

And then we also have what we call our African heritage diet, which goes all the way

back to Africa to show the healthy way to prepare those same foods. ... So these are certified instructors that prepare foods in their church cafeteria or different places to promote healthy eating and still eat your heritage foods. Because to me, there are certain things that I like. I'm not a fancy eater. I've always loved my collard greens, my sweet potatoes, black eyed peas, stuff like that. I eat several, but these are the things that I love. And I just learned how to prepare them in a more healthier way.

Program 6 builds upon the values of Black farmers in the region who "actually [farm] because they love the whole process of, that farming process, and then helping their community get their product." This exemplifies farming as an act of love for both the land and the community. Similarly, the founder of Program 9, which is established on a former plantation site, stated that many local farmers grow entire fields of produce to give away to the community—specifically, produce with cultural value, such as sweet potatoes, which many growers distribute around the holidays. The theme of embracing self-sufficiency and resilience as a form of resistance embodied by BIPOC growers is woven throughout all Deep South programs included in our sample.

Operating within a tribal nation presented additional challenges for Program 10. Although founded by tribal members, the program was not initially accepted by the local Indigenous community. Societal dependence on industrial farming over multiple generations had severed the community's relationship with traditional agriculture and, thus, the program's focus on organic practices made the community skeptical of its potential for success. Early on, farm operations were led by a non-Indigenous staff member who did not have the capacity to address the community perceptions while also managing a farm. Due to the lack of community engagement, our interviewee was hired "to create a better relationship within the tribal community so that people can know and see what they have right here under their nose." As a tribal member who could speak with the community's elders in their own language, they have been able to

cultivate a deeper connection via cultural identity and language: "We've noticed a lot of tribal members in general feel like they relate more to another tribal member. But we're hoping with me and some of the others, my coworkers that are tribal members, we can break that barrier feeling and bridge the gap."

With increased community engagement, Program 10 was motivated to create an educational component that embraced growing food on the reservation as "returning to our ancestral roots" and bringing "back the ability to do everything from scratch...make everything homemade." This is an example of how education is framed as "re-learning" and "re-education" within the Market Model; these programs tie their support for local growers together with a specific support for traditional/culturally appropriate/heritage foods and foodways.

To summarize, while both Appalachian and Deep South food access programs reflect the resilience of their communities in the face of marginalization and exploitation, they also manifest differences that reflect their unique cultural and social histories. Although the Appalachian programs aligned with all four program models, they draw collectively on a rich regional history of grassroots activism and resist the dominant corporate food regime (Holt Giménez & Shattuck, 2011) by decoupling local food from monetary value. In building on longstanding traditions of food sharing among neighbors, they are carving out a radical niche (Avelino, 2017) that works to sustain agriculture and address food security in the region. In comparison, the Deep South programs exhibit resilience as a form of resistance, particularly within communities of color (Reese, 2019; White, 2018). Broadly aligned with food justice movements (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Holt Giménez & Shattuck, 2011), most Deep South programs are enacting a kind of transformative power to "renew" and "reconfigure" the relationships between communities and their agricultural heritage (Avelino, 2017, p. 509) in ways that replace racial trauma with agricultural reclamation, youth involvement, and an emphasis on heritage and traditional foods.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Drawing on examples of community-derived food access programs across the Deep South and Appalachia, this study identifies and presents four models of rural food access programs, aiming to serve as a resource for communities interested in establishing similar initiatives. The Charity Model focuses on emergency food sourced from food banks, the Support Model utilizes local assets for emergency food, the Restructuring Model redefines or creates a new local food system, and the Market Model enhances community food access through established markets. As the first study of its kind, this research builds upon and extends the food system typologies presented by Holt Giménez and Shattuck (2011), offering a qualitative framework to evaluate and understand community-derived food access programs. While intended to inspire, these models are sufficiently flexible to accommodate communities' unique needs, goals, and cultural considerations.

Recommendations derived from this study are intended for two audiences: for community-based stakeholders who are developing or running food access programs, and for external stakeholders, such as food systems researchers, policymakers, and funders. Our interviewees shared several recommendations for program practitioners. They emphasized the importance of starting by identifying and leveraging community resources, particularly the time and knowledge of residents, which enables the community to identify additional resources, solutions, and cultural practices essential for a program's success. While community involvement is crucial, the interviewees also noted that external organizations could play a complementary role by filling resource gaps that the community cannot address alone. However, it is important for community stakeholders to define the extent and nature of external involvement. Our interviewees suggest approaching this work as an investment in uplifting the entire community, blurring the lines between those being served and those providing service, with equity as a guiding principle. Finally, our interviewees frequently highlighted the importance of patience, noting that meaningful and sustainable change takes time. Allowing space for learning and growth, even if it seems to slow pro-

gress, is vital for long-term impact.

We recommend that external stakeholders focus on ways to “reinforce” the work of community-derived programs (Avelino, 2017, p. 508). First, we advise continued research into the strengths and limitations of community-derived food systems programming and planning. Additionally, increasing attention to effects of community-derived programming in domains beyond the food system can help to normalize the approach and redefine the support of external organizations—redistributing power back to communities and lightening the burden when communities need to “push back” against top-down interventions. Taking this a step further, particularly as we argue that community members can be their own resources, we recommend that external organizations prioritize funding to compensate community-based stakeholders for their time and contributions to synergistic work. This alleviates financial burdens—a barrier identified in every interview—and allows community leaders to invest more of their resources in local work and programming.

Our final recommendation is for internal and external stakeholders to collaborate to address the research gap and increase the scalability of community-derived work. Future efforts would create resources to facilitate the exchange of knowledge among rural communities and assess the effectiveness of community-derived programs in contrast to traditional top-down approaches to food access. The barriers affecting rural communities' access to fresh foods also includes a gap in cross-community knowledge exchange, suggesting that some rural communities might be addressing challenges that have been resolved in neighboring communities. Hence knowledge sharing is vital to addressing those challenges.

Each model we identified has strengths and limitations, but collectively they offer a robust strategy for addressing the intersecting barriers to accessing fresh produce in rural America. Despite the cultural and historical differences between the Deep South and Appalachian region, by embracing food as a “common denominator,” “unifier,” and “starting place,” these models have the potential to reach beyond food access and contribute to broader improvement in economic and health inequali-

ties. Additionally, they can serve as adaptable frameworks for fostering community-derived efforts that endorse creative solutions and empower communities through decision-making autonomy.



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