

More than Money: Understanding Farmworker Food Security

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INTRODUCTION: THE MANY MEANINGS OF FOOD SECURITY

In April 2014, my research assistant and I arrived at the door of Elena's trailer on a rainy spring day. Elena is the mother of an especially precocious young daughter, and over the two previous years we had gotten to know her family well through our work with Huertas, a collaborative kitchen gardening project that works to increase food access for migrant farmworkers in the state of Vermont. We were there to discuss

what she would like to plant in her garden that summer and to begin a series of in-depth interviews examining food access within farmworker households. We knew from our previous visits that food security was no simple matter for Elena and her family. Coming from the state of Chiapas, Elena is one of the few Mexican women in Vermont who has found regular work in the dairy industry, which was her original purpose for migrating. She has lived in Vermont for almost seven years now, and in that time, she has contributed in important ways to her household economy as she has raised her daughter

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within an isolated rural environment that she describes as “beautiful” and “tranquil.” Explaining her decision to migrate simply, “Because there in Mexico, there’s no work for women; only the men work in corn and beans,” Elena has created a new life for her and her family, though it is a life where insecurity and irregularity continue to shape their access to basic needs. Amidst all of this, Elena also regularly sends money to support her extended family in Mexico.

This was our first visit to Elena’s new home, a small but tidy trailer where she, her husband, and her daughter are kept company by the constant stream of Spanish cartoons and *telenovelas* streaming from their television. Working seven days a week, she and her husband Gregorio spend what little free time they have doting on their daughter, preparing home-cooked meals, and on rare occasions, visiting with her niece, Juana, who lives on a different farm in the same northern county.

Juana is a mother of four, with two children being cared for by family members in Mexico, and has also found work in Vermont’s dairy industry. However, her work schedule and earnings have been more sporadic, in part because of her husband’s opposition to her working outside the home and the need to care for their two sons under the age of five. What unites Juana and Elena, beyond kinship, is their shared love for gardening, their love of Mexican food, and their deep love of their children. Sadly, they also share continual anxiety about leaving their homes given how close they live to the U.S.-Canadian border, long histories of being exploited in food-related work, and ongoing difficulties in accessing basic needs. Neither woman has a driver’s license or a registered vehicle and both are continually dependent on a third party to access food for their families, a dependency that often results in inadequate supplies of fresh and healthy produce.

In this article, I draw upon Juana and Elena’s stories to explore the multi-valent meanings of food security for undocumented workers, who are currently upholding both Vermont’s agricultural economy and the U.S. food industry as a whole. For farmworkers and other workers along the food chain, food insecurity is a serious problem with significant

consequences for health and wellbeing. This disparity points to a serious case of injustice: specifically, that those who put food on our tables are disproportionately experiencing food insecurity in their own households. As I will argue, the injustices of food insecurity are compounded by the methodologies used to measure it and the narrow meanings used to define it. As social scientists have long argued, the very meaning of food security, the alternative terms to describe it, and the best way to measure it, remain points of contention, especially cross-culturally.¹

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) currently defines food security as “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.”² Every year, statistics on food insecurity reveal the startling disparities in food access that persist in the United States. The most recent figures collected by USDA researchers show that 14 percent of people in the U.S. experienced food insecurity at some point in 2014, with nearly 5.6 percent experiencing “very low food security.” For “Hispanic” households, the incidence of food insecurity in this same year was 22.4 percent, with 6.9 percent experiencing very low food security.³ Researchers have repeatedly documented the severity of food insecurity and other inequalities in food access among farmworkers.⁴ Collectively, these studies reveal that the incidence among farmworkers is as high as three to four times the national average, with a disproportionate number of households experiencing “very low food security with hunger.” These reported numbers are not only higher than the national average, but also higher than the average for “Hispanic” households writ large.

LABORING ALONGSIDE THE BORDER

As the U.S. state with the highest dependence on dairy production for agricultural revenue, Vermont has experienced significant shifts in the labor force toiling amidst the rolling hills and red barns that still dominate the pastoral working landscape. Once a bastion of small-scale family farms, the state’s dairy industry has been subjected to the same industrializing and consolidating pressures that pervade the entire U.S. food system. Over the past 75 years, Vermont has lost more than 90 percent of its dairy farms, yet continues to produce milk at record levels. The increased production of milk, which comes at significant ecological and social costs, is directly facilitated by Latino/a farmworkers who migrate in search of employment and the chance at a better life for their families.

Vermont has seen a steady increase in the number of migrant farmworkers since the late 1990s, and of the estimated 1 200 to 1 500 Latino/a migrant dairy workers in the state, the vast majority are undocumented men from central and southern Mexico. As one of the least racially diverse states in the nation, these demographic changes have not gone unnoticed, particularly given the proximity of many dairy farms to the U.S.-Canada border and the active presence of immigration enforcement in these rural areas (see the article by Aaron Lackowski in this issue). Significant disparities in access to basic needs are compounded by the anxieties and fears that farmworkers experience while working and living alongside the federal border.

ACCESSING BASIC NEEDS IN THE BORDERLANDS

Both Juana and Elena live and work within the 25-mile expanse along the border known as the “primary operating domain” for ICE personnel. For both women, accessing food, healthcare, and other basic needs is necessarily and almost entirely mitigated by third-party actors. These actors include farm owners and managers who provide groceries using poorly translated lists of foods, unscrupulous pizza delivery men charging a premium for their services, and a patchwork of entrepreneurial men and women who bring Mexican goods from locations in distant cities. Juana and Elena are not alone in this regard, and for the majority of families and individuals that I have met in the northern counties, this is the daily reality of accessing food.

Despite the lengths they must go to as they secure food for their families, neither Juana nor Elena is categorized as food insecure according to the results of the USDA Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM). This survey, specifically designed to rapidly assess food security at the household level, inherently narrows the actual experience of food access to a series of pre-determined, decontextualized choices and narrow categories. Even more problematic for Vermont’s farmworkers is the exclusive emphasis it places on the linkage between access to money and the presence or absence of food security. For example, on the three-stage version that we use, all of the preliminary questions rest on one assumption: that food security is measured merely by the proxy of having enough money. While there are very real economic challenges confronting farmworkers in the state, dairy workers

receive relatively higher wages as compared to seasonal farmworkers in other agricultural sectors. Yet, both women have described the significant challenges they experience in providing culturally familiar foods to their families, particularly foods that are fresh and obtained through dignified and fair means.

The plight of dairy workers has only recently begun to attract attention from activists and scholars, whereas the working and living conditions of farmworkers in other sectors, deplorable as they often are, have long been scrutinized. My preliminary experience in conducting the HFSSM has revealed to me its significant weaknesses in understanding farmworker food security. In addition to the narrow focus on available cash reserves, the survey module pays little attention to the cultural relevance of foods that households can access, the time they must spend on securing food, or even how they define families and households. For migrant workers who may be supporting household economies on both sides of the border, the concept of “household” itself demands deeper inquiry. For example, Juana and Elena’s households in the United States are helping to support family members who still live in Mexico by sending regular remittances. Because of these methodological inadequacies, in my research I take care to triangulate this quantitative assessment of food security rates based upon the HFSSM with richer and deeper ethnographic research.

In my research, I have seen the continuation of, yet differentiation between, the food insecurities that workers confronted in their countries of origin and the insecurities they experience in Vermont. These factors and the risks that workers face as they migrate are particularly gendered. For all of the workers I have interviewed, factors related to poverty, unemployment, and the need to provide for their families led them to come to the United States. For many, Vermont is only the most recent stop in a long pattern of migration, more often than not following other employment in the agri-food sector. Juana and Elena, for instance, previously worked on farms and in restaurants in other states, including California, Kentucky, and New York. Yet, unlike the single young

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men that make up the majority of Vermont's foreign-born workforce, these women have had to balance reproductive work, particularly caring for their children, with their obligations in the workplace.

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY AND
THE QUESTION OF CHOICE

During a recent interview with Juana, she reflected upon the differences between accessing food in Mexico and in the United States, saying,

Well, I have to think about what I have here, because if I don't have things, now that I can't go to the store whenever, I have to cook with what I have.... In Mexico there are many stores nearby, so if we need something, we go buy it, but here, no. Here I have to buy 15 days' worth, and if we run out of ingredients, I have to do what I can.... here we can buy the food that we want. The problem is that we cannot leave.

While Juana's family regularly enjoys meals that remind them of home, the lengths that they must go to as they access food through third-party providers and the premium they must pay for food present entirely different complications compared to the poverty they experienced in Mexico. Furthermore, given Vermont's small Latino population, the availability of culturally appropriate foods, particularly fresh vegetables, fruits, and herbs, is especially limited.

What I have learned in my ethnographic research has regularly been enhanced and expanded through my collaborative and applied work with the Huertas project. In the summer of 2015, Huertas worked on 44 farms across the northern half of Vermont, planting kitchen gardens with farmworkers in a collaborative effort to increase access to culturally familiar vegetables, fruits, and herbs, as well as staple crops. As Huertas has expanded over the last few years, we have become increasingly guided by and committed to a food sovereignty framework.

As defined at the 2007 Forum for Food Sovereignty, food sovereignty is defined as "the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts those who produce, distribute, and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations."⁵ The promise of a food sovereignty framework stems from its bottom-up perspective that demands a deeper conversation about rights, control, and choice. Perhaps most importantly, food sovereignty moves beyond a focus on food security to advocate for a deeper connection to food that challenges a narrow consumer-commodity relationship. As I am now well aware, this narrow relationship is all the dominant food security instruments seek to measure.

Through these experiences, I have had the good fortune to witness how farmworkers and their families claim a sense of agency and a connection to meaningful meals in a borderland region that is far from welcoming. I have also observed the challenges of working toward greater autonomy over one's sustenance in an environment beset by so few choices. It is my ultimate goal to both document these cases of food injustice and disrupt them through designing better research tools that are more attuned to the lived experiences of migrant workers and their families and to contribute to applied solutions designed with the many meanings of food access in mind. **NM**

NOTES

¹ Laurie DeRose, Ellen Messer, and Sara Millman, *Who's Hungry? And How Do We Know? Food Shortage, Poverty, and Deprivation* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 1998).

² Alisha Coleman-Jensen, Matthew P. Rabbitt, Christian A. Gregory, and Anita Singh, *Household Food Security in the United States in 2015*, ERR-215, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, September 2016, http://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/err215/err215_summary.pdf.

³ Alisha Coleman-Jensen, Matthew P. Rabbitt, Christian A. Gregory, and Anita Singh; *Household Food Security in the United States in 2014* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 2015).

⁴ Sandy Brown and Christy Getz, "Farmworker Food Insecurity and the Production of Hunger in California," in Alison Alkon and Julian Agyeman, eds., *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2011), pp. 121-146; and Laura Anne Minkoff-Zern, "Knowing 'Good Food': Immigrant Knowledge and the Racial Politics of Farmworker Food Insecurity," *Antipode* (Online First), 2012.

⁵ *Declaration of the Forum for Food Sovereignty*, Nyéléni 2007, February 27, 2007, Nyéléni Village, Sélingué, Mali, <https://nyeleni.org/spip.php?article290>.