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Growing Relations:  
The Intersection of Food and Farm Security in Chittenden County, Vermont

Claire Tylke

Anthropology Department

University of Vermont

2020

Faculty Advisor:  
Teresa Mares, PhD, University of Vermont

## **Abstract**

Chittenden County, Vermont is experiencing the national phenomenon of food insecurity. While the visible majority of residents in this area are active in and place a high valuation on the “local food market”, there is a population of individuals experiencing food insecurity within the same county. This demographic is prevented from accessing these markets due to various limited resources. While conversations surrounding this issue exist, they often exclude the perspective of individuals who are producing food. Additionally, the existing conversations do not thoroughly address the insecurities that producers are themselves facing. Using qualitative research methods, this study explores how farmers within Chittenden County understand “local food systems”, food insecurity, and farm insecurity, as well as, how they locate themselves within these topics and how the topics relate.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank all those who participated in my study and podcast. They generously shared their time and knowledge with me so I could explore and better understand issues concerning food and farmers insecurity. Additionally, I would also like to thank my advisor, Teresa Mares, for her guidance and support throughout this process. And my committee members; Luis Vivanco and Vicki Brennan for their time and interest in my project. Lastly, I would like to thank my friends and family who listened to me talk and stress about this project for months, lent me their cars, and encouraged me throughout.

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## **Introduction**

I moved to Burlington, Vermont from the metropolitan area of Chicago four years ago as a first-year student at the University of Vermont. As a food focused individual, it did not take me long to recognize that food is different here in Vermont. As I spent more time here, eating and thinking, it became increasingly clear to me the value and enthusiasm with which Vermonters interact with food. What also became increasingly clear to me were still hardships present within this vibrant food system. These challenges do not negate the vibrancy of Vermont's food system, but they do warrant investigation. The themes that my research centers around include the issues of food insecurity and farm security and the ways in which these concerns intersect. While there is substantial literature on food systems and food insecurity, the vast majority of research is conducted through the lens of consumers or food access programs. I was eager to explore these same issues from the perspective of food producers. The role of farmers is imperative in the food system and their perspectives should be included in the discussion. Moreover, the concepts addressed in this project are complex and multifaceted and should be studied through multidisciplinary and varying perspectives.

This project is located primarily in Chittenden County, Vermont. I chose this county for a number of reasons. Namely, it is the county in which we can easily see different food system players intersecting. Chittenden is the most densely populated county in Vermont; containing numerous restaurants and grocery stores, over 500 farms, and a large wealth gap (USDA, 2017, 1-2). While Chittenden County has the highest average income in the state, about 11.7% of residents are food insecure, equating to more than 18,000 people (Feeding America, 2018, 1). This synthesis of food system factors provided me with a variety of interacting parties and perspectives; all of which aided me in my research.

The topics discussed in this project are relevant to all because even individuals who are not involved in the farming industry or are not experiencing food insecurity are still engaging with the food system and are, therefore, connected to these concerns. Because of this, I felt it was important to make this research publicly accessible. The findings of this project have been published in a podcast titled “Growing Relations.” I chose this media format because podcasts are not guarded by pay walls, they are written with the intent of public consumption and are easily shareable to various interested parties. The intended audience of this podcast is not necessarily the producers. It was designed with the goal of being informative and interesting to two different demographics of listeners. Firstly, for individuals who are already invested in food systems work through employment or volunteering, as an opportunity for them to be exposed to these topics through a new lens. Secondly, for listeners who enjoy informational podcasts but don’t have previous investment in the food system, in the hopes that this series sparks a new interest or awareness of our food system and its related issues.

The purpose of this study is to explore how farmers, who produce and sell their food primarily in Chittenden County, understand the issue of food insecurity. Additionally, I examine how this community of farmers view their role in this issue. This project also explores how they understand farm security, as well as their concept of a local food system. Furthermore, this study asks questions about how these farmers relate themselves to these topics. Ultimately, this research will fill a gap in existing literature on food and farm insecurity by addressing these issues from producer perspectives. It will identify how farmers understand these concerns to be related. This thesis argues that farmers in this community view local food systems as something that communities should strive for, regardless of the fact that there is not a consensus on what a local food system is. Additionally, they see food and farm insecurity to be systemic issues of

justice. They feel a sense of moral responsibility to engage with increasing food access but simultaneously feel limited in doing so to maintain their businesses and support themselves.



## Literature Review

Discussions around our food system span many topics and are conducted in many forums. Some of these common topics include food insecurity, local food systems and how these topics – not only relate – but often contradict one another.

The valuation of local food systems originated in the Local Food Movement of the 1960s and continues today (Aucoin and Fry, 2015, 3). Localized food systems are branded as being a stronger, healthier food system than the centralized system under which we largely operate. Decentralized systems are argued to be more environmentally sustainable, producing healthier and higher quality food and strengthening consumers sense of place and community (Aucoin and Fry, 2015, 3). Additionally, they contribute to the local economy and lower transport costs for farmers (Martin and Horst, 2017, 37-38). Opposite of this praise for decentralized food systems, there are deliberations around accessibility that arise within this type of system. Engaging with one's local food system, through things such as farmers markets or Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), is often limited to individuals with access to resources such as transportation, disposable income, and leisure time (Schupp, 2016). This is especially problematic for individuals who are experiencing food insecurity. Additionally, local food is commonly perceived as more expensive than its non-local counterparts on a serving by serving basis regardless of whether or not the monetary breakdown supports this belief (Hewitt, 210). Locally grown products often result in access disparities due to their higher price, perceived or real (Mares and Alkon, 74). These understandings contribute to preventing food insecure individuals from participating in their local food system.

Thomas Macias expands upon this idea in his piece “Working Toward a Just, Equitable, and Local Food System: The Social Impact of Community-Based Agriculture.” His field of study

overlaps with my own research as both address food systems in Vermont. In his research, Macias discusses programs in Burlington that are in place to promote local food consumption. He found that there are monetary, time, and proximity barriers coinciding with these local food programs that make them inaccessible to limited-income populations (Macias 1088-1089). He comes to the conclusion that local food projects should be focused on creating programs that give local food access to a broader demographic of people, not just the college educated, middle class demographic that they currently target (Macias 1098). In particular Macias points to a market-based programs, such as farmer-to-family coupons, that support accessibility better than CSAs or community gardens (Macias 1098). Aside from these statements, he does not further address farmer viability.

In her article “Of Bodies, Place, and Culture: Re-Situating Local Food”, Laura B. DeLind addresses what she claims are the two main arguments for promoting local food consumption. One of which is that local food consumption is seen as an economic and political move to develop and support small scale farmers. She acknowledges that “Local food and eating locally become both the symbol and substance for structural change from which flows enormous social and environmental benefit” (DeLind 2006, 123). She also says that local food encourages farmers to make more niche, value added products and encourages consumers to want and buy those products; meaning that the value and success of people is based on their ability (or inability) to partake in these transactions (DeLind 2006, 124). She does not continue this argument in the rest of the paper, but she indicates that these relationships and values are problematic. This claim demonstrates one understanding of what a local food system is and does as well as how food and farm insecurity concerns intersect within the system. The data collected

in this project reflects some of these notions, while opposes others. Additionally, this project expands upon the relationship between local food systems and structural change.

Another issue in our food system is the issue of farm security. This issue can be seen in Vermont as well as across our nation. The landscape of Vermont farming has changed from that of smaller, self-supporting farms to larger, industrially focused farms and from dairy farms and grain crops to a variety of produce and specialty goods (Albers, 2000-01). This transition has put small-scale farmers at risk of losing their land, their business, and the ability to take care of themselves and their families. This problem co-exists and is intermingled with food insecurity concerns, but their intersection is rarely explored. The literature that does examine the intersections focuses largely on the concern that localized and community-based food systems, which are based on goals of both farm security and food security, are often contradictory (Mares and Alkon, 74).

One of the few studies that explores the overlap of these security matters is “Squaring Farm Security and Food Security in Two Types of Alternative Food Institutions” by Guthman et al. This study explores the compatibility of addressing food and farm security goals through Alternative Food Institutions (AFIs), specifically farmers markets and Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs). Guthman et al. do this by interviewing managers at various farmers markets and CSAs in California during 2004 and 2005 (Guthman et al., 664). The paper states that these AFIs are constructed and branded to be a “win-win” situations for both producers and consumers, but the actual outcome serves only the producers (Guthman et al., 683). The study found that most of the managers who were interviewed were interested in issues of food insecurity, yet the programs themselves did not address these concerns in large because of practical limitations and perspectives about food assistance (Guthman et al., 682).

While this study poses questions that are similar to my own, they explore them through the lens of those working to facilitate the interaction of producers and consumers. While this is a different perspective than many of the other studies exploring these issues – most of which have been conducted from the perspective of consumers – it does not fill the void in the literature that my research aims to. Through my research, I will further the discussion of the intersection of food and farm security by inquiring how farmers understand these challenges and their role in mitigating them, as well as their understanding of a local food system.

## **Methods**

This study was done using qualitative ethnographic methods in the form of interviews. Interview participants were found through online searches, farming databases (from Vermont Farm to Plate) and through personal recommendations. These individuals were chosen because, with the exception of one individual, all had extensive farming experience and a knowledge of the food system in Chittenden County. The one individual who did not have a farming background had a unique understanding of the Chittenden County food system as a result of their involvement with a particular community garden. Generally, participants are involved with small scale farms that produce primarily fruits and vegetables, with some additional meat products and value-added products. These individuals are passionate about farming, most of them started farming as a choice and rather than inheriting a family business like many farmers elsewhere. Moreover, the location they chose to pursue farming and farm related work is in an area – Chittenden County – that has a hyper awareness of local food and food systems. This awareness is evident through food institutions such as restaurants, food stores, and farmers markets that focus on the locality of the food they sell. Participants’ engagement with these institutions indicates how they value food and the locality of food. This is not a universal value within the county; there is demographic of producers who farm because they have inherited a family business. While this is important to acknowledge, participants in this study do not fall into that demographic. Within the context of this study we can discuss food systems in relation to the values held by the category of farmers that the participants fall within.

After seeking and acquiring IRB approval, I contacted potential participants via phone calls and/or emails. Phone numbers and email addresses were publicly available on the internet. Interviews were conducted over the course of two months, February and March of 2020, and

were done in person with the exception of Interview 8 which was held remotely over the phone due to the COVID-19 pandemic stay-at-home guidelines. Interviews ranged from 19 minutes to 36 minutes during which participants were asked a set of questions based on a standard set of 11 predetermined questions. The specific questions posed in each interview varied slightly depending on their relevance in relation to the participant's positionality, expertise, and subsequent answers. Additional questions were also posed as they arose in conversation. Each interview was recorded, then transcribed and hand coded for analysis. Due to processing and time limitations linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, Interview 8 was recorded but not transcribed; instead notes were taken post interview and the notes were coded for analysis.

These data were then presented in a hybrid format comprised of both a writing component and a podcast component. The decision to do the podcast was reached in order to increase the accessibility of the project results. The podcast, titled "Growing Relations", is comprised of six 5-10 minute episodes each focusing on a particular theme associated with this subject matter. The podcast draws on previous read literature and primary data from the interviews to provide analyses of these various topics. Interview participants have been deidentified using pseudonyms in both the podcast and this paper. This podcast will be accessible, via Anchor and Spotify, to the public and interested parties in order to contribute and grow the conversation around food and farm insecurity in Chittenden County, Vermont.

## **Discussion**

While some analysis of data can be found in the associated podcast “Growing Relations,” this section will further highlight the themes addressed in the podcast. Before addressing the specific topics, it is necessary to acknowledge the positionality of everyone involved. This is essential to qualifying the data because peoples’ experiences effect their views. Here we understand positionality as how a person’s experiences – both past and present – and social positioning – race, class, gender, etc. – shape their understandings and views.

When thinking about my own positionality, I have to state the fact that I have no farming or food producing experience. I am entering this project with minimal background in food systems beside an interest. Additionally, my previous experience with food insecurity comes from a summer job in which I worked for an organization that provided lunch to kids in the summer. I have never been food insecure nor have I worked long term with this subject matter. While this does not diminish that validity of my research, it is important to recognize because I am the person making and asking the questions and my previous experience may affect what questions I chose to ask or how I asked them.

The participants positionality is equally important to acknowledge. While my understanding of their positionality is not as extensive as their own personal understanding, the background information they provided allow me to identify their lens at least somewhat. Their positionality was seen in what they chose to speak on, what they chose to refrain from speaking about, and how they understood the presented concepts and issues as a whole. Participants who had prior experience with the issue of food insecurity focused their discussion of it around the component that the experience had focused on. For example, Marissa who had previously worked with gleaning programs focused on food security as an issue of farm to table access

whereas Michael, who had previous experience with food insecurity in relation to legislation discussed it as more of a systemic concern. Moreover, those without previous relationships to the issue of food insecurity gave shorter responses and, in some cases, included statements about not feeling like they could speak to the issue. Additionally, when they talked about farm security, they focused on particular concerns to which they felt most connected to. Another aspect of positionality that we must acknowledge, is these individuals' valuation of food. These producers are individuals who have chosen to be involved in the farming community in Chittenden County; through their own farming as well as engaging in food-oriented community institutions such as markets, selling to local restaurants and food access programs. Moreover, they see this choice as a lifestyle. This demonstrates that they personally value the connection between the production of food and community, emphasizing the role food has in our lives. This is relevant when exploring the data because these beliefs are directly related to the participants views on the food system.

When talking about a local food system, participants expressed a variety of different understandings. Some individuals felt that a local food system was when all components of a food system were contained within one local location. Participants expressed this as including producers, food processing, markets, and customers. Contrary to this notion, others understood a local food system as how different food systems interact with one another and with people in a specific location. In addition to these interpretations, participants also identified a series of security goals as being included in a local food system. They mentioned things like equal food access to all consumers, and fair wages, safe working conditions, housing and healthcare needs met for workers and farmers. This indicates that participants understand a local food system as including mitigating food and farm security.



Another reoccurring sentiment was the notion that we have not yet achieved a local food system, but we should strive to. Regardless of what a person understood a local food system to be, they spoke of it as something that should be a goal to work towards. Their use of normative language when describing local food system concepts indicated a shared assumption that local means better. This assumption is an example of the values these individuals have regarding food. By equating local to superior, we can understand that these producers value the connection between food and place as important and necessary in relation to the advancement of the food system.

In their discussion about food insecurity, participants pointed to a few different components. Firstly, a few argued that being food secure means not just having access to food but having access to culturally appropriate foods. Sarah and Amy both talked about this. Sarah focused on the custom slaughter services of the community farm she was associated with; she refers to the farm as

...filling a void in terms of food access for new Americans in terms of a particular, you know protein sources, not just accessing them but also having them, again that I like that term agency you used, like being able to have the hide and the blood and everything, just like, that's just not possible in a market place environment so its a really kind of unique and important piece, having access to the whole animal and being able to use all those products in whichever way is important to you, culturally and um nutritionally, etc.

Amy discussed how the farm she works with now, as well as a previous farm, worked with specific communities to grow “specific crops that came from their homelands. And varieties that people may be more used to then what’s grown here, and I think that’s great.”. In addition to culturally appropriate foods, others expressed that having food access meant access to the same quality of food as those who are food secure. Aly in particular focused on this issue; “I like any program where more people are getting the same experience, you know what I mean, so

members that have a subsidized share at [the farm], they come to the farm just like everybody else, I check them in at the desk, I don't know who they are, and they get the same quality of products as everyone else. They should feel equal and they should get the same friendly, fair treatment." In relation to her last comment regarding fairness, participants also acknowledge the stigma attached to needing to use food assistance programs. While they did not express what that stigma was or how to go about destigmatizing, they do express a dislike that the stigma exists. These sentiments are representative of individuals' moralities in relation to food. Participants see food access issues as justice issues; demonstrating that, for them, food and food reflects larger themes of equality and fairness.

Participants also repeatedly talked about healthy food, but they did so in different ways. Sentiments about increasing access to healthy food for food insecure individuals was common. Moreover, some felt that there was too much time spent on "educating" food insecure individuals on healthy eating when the issue was their inability to access healthy foods. Ellen spoke on this issue; "I think you know maybe sometimes there's too much emphasis on 'oh we need to educate people on what healthy eating is' in terms of like food insecure." She emphasized that the issue was not a lack of understanding but a lack of access. This particular conversation led to Ellen also addressing the fact that food insecurity is more than just an affordability problem;

...a lot of people who are food insecure are working two or three jobs and don't have the time to, you know, cook and a lot of the advice is like buy bags of dried beans cause they're so, you can get so much more for your money, it's like it takes a really long time to make and like that's really hard to ask of someone who is you know is a mom of three kids or has three jobs like, planning that far in advance is really, is really tricky and so I think that some of these tips that we give to moms is, or to families is really tricky and another one I hear often is like "oh you can make your own yogurt" cause like WIC recipients get a lot of milk but they don't get a lot of yogurt in their benefits so one of the tips given from WIC is like "oh you can make your own yogurt" and like yeah who makes their own, who makes their own yogurt, just cause it's a lot of time, it's a lot of thought, and a lot of resources and a lot of food insecure families don't also have

the supplies to cook , like pots and pans, so I think there's a lot of layers of food insecurity that we don't think about, we just think about the food and the healthy eating but we don't think about these other, other layers and how to support people in those other, other layers that are all related to food.

Other participants echoed these beliefs. Similarly, participants expressed the notion that food insecurity was a macro level problem. They largely felt that while food assistance programs had a positive impact on the issue, they were not the ultimate solution to food insecurity; Amy states "there's all these great programs but they are a band-aid to, you know band-aid solutions to a much bigger problem". Participants understood food insecurity as a systemic issue and something that could only be fixed by systemic changes.

The last topic addressed in the interviews was farm security. This too led to varying responses. Most people, in one way or another, addressed the long-term viability of a farm as the primary concern. They felt that having farm security meant being able to make a living off of the farm without having to get an off-farm job. They also saw it as being able to have healthcare, housing, long term land access, and food security, but beyond that being able to spend time with family; Amy says "I think also when you talk about farmer security, its being able to feed yourself, being able to take a vacation, being able to hang out with your kids, like go pick them up at 4 and not having to work till 8pm, being able to go to their soccer games, um and yeah just having the money to live and not be so stressed out about finances". A few participants referred to this as being able to do what "normal people" do; connecting farm security to getting benefits from their farm that others get from non-farm jobs. There was the overwhelming sentiment that, while produce growers experience farm insecurity, the dairy industry experiences it far worse. They attributed this to milk being a commodity good and because produce is not, it is more viable on a small scale.

In relation to a farmer's ability to participate in food access mitigation, many expressed that they wish they could do more than their currently level of participation and feel guilty that they cannot. This indicates that they feel a level of responsibility when it comes to increasing food access. They attributed their inability to limitations such as labor, time, and money. They also expressed the struggle of balancing making their food accessible and making a living for themselves. Like food security, participants saw farm security as being a large-scale issue. Many discussed how the expense of complying with new regulations fall on farmers and, while regulations help keep food safe, it places the producers in a difficult position because they don't have the income to justify the updates. Another macro level cause was the undervaluing of food. Some attributed this devaluing to America's adoption of a cheap food policy, while others claimed it was something that was socially conditioned in us. Regardless, the general devaluation of food in our country was seen as contributing to farm insecurity; Emily emphasizes

...it doesn't just matter that you get your 1500 or your 2000 calories a day, it matters what those calories are made of too, you now and we can't just have people living on fast food and take out and um you know relying on door dash and grub hub to bring us anything and everything we want when we want it, you know we've got to reconnect with growing food, cooking food, sharing food, and I think once we do that we become, we inherently value others right to do that as well.

Individuals called for safety nets and a revaluation of food in order to improve farm security. This opinion, like the understanding of food access as a justice issue, exemplifies participants' moral beliefs in relation to food.

The way in which participants describe farm insecurity – as well as food insecurity – as systemic issues, demonstrates that participants characterize food as a political matter. These problems were often explicitly linked to a critique of capitalism, the dominance of big agriculture, and societal devaluing of food. From these statements, it is likely that participants

understand their participation in small scale agriculture to be a political choice. This type of agriculture is what Lyson calls civic agriculture; he says, “civic agricultural enterprises contribute to the health and vitality of communities in a variety of social, economic, political, and cultural ways” (Lyson 62). By participants choosing to participate in these enterprises, they are demonstrating that they uphold the values and politics that civic agriculture works to strengthen and promote. This choice is political, but the question remains whether participants made the choice to engage with their food system values or if they chose the lifestyle out of a passion for farming and food activism is a side effect. Without producers explicitly answering this, it is hard to determine.

One addition theme that I identified, stretching across all topics, was agency. This was seen in conversations about local food systems as being able to give customers the option of buying local versus global. Ellen expresses her farms efforts in “really trying to offer a year-round local berry product to the customers and give people an option when they’re at the store of local organic or berries from Chile, Mexico but always just keeping that option available to our customers.” In food insecurity conversations with Marissa, Amy and Sarah, it was addressed as giving those who need food assistance the same choice in products as those who are food secure, as well as giving people the ability to choose culturally appropriate foods. Lastly, it is seen in farm security and farmers being able to choose the value of their product and choose whether or not they want an off-farm job. Even having agency to the extent of having the ability to continuing farming until they choose not to. Ellen confronts this concern in her interview “that’s probably our biggest challenge right now is can our farm support a family of four and that’s proving to be very, very difficult. Um, most farms, I think its 90% of farms one, one spouse has an off-farm job and we are trying to maybe not go that route if we can, just because both of our

passions has been to be farmers”. This commonality could possibly be attributed to people’s desire for control and piece of mind. Having agency over your food and your business, provides people with those comforts.

## **Opportunities for Future Research**

The research has the potential to be expanded in a few ways. Firstly, each of the issues and concepts addressed in this project could be broken down further. These topics are large and complex, and one could very easily spend a whole project on one of them. There is potential for further research on farmer understandings of local food systems; this could include a discussion of the definition of a local food system, the local food movement and decentralized food systems as a means of a more sustainable food system. In relation to food insecurity, there are opportunities to engage with preexisting discussion on farmers experiencing food insecurity. Lastly, there is very little discussion on farm security and the personal experience of those who are farm insecure. The literature on this matter is almost exclusive related to the Farm Security Agency or something that is mentioned in passing as a result or side effect of a different focus. Moreover, this minimal literature does not include farmer voices.

Beyond these subject matters, there are opportunities to continue using podcasting format for food system discussions. Research is often it published behind paywalls or written in formats that are not conducive to a wide audience. This results in information only being read and discussed by individuals within narrow disciplines. The issues addressed in my research effect all of us and therefore should be accessible to the public. By using an accessible format such as a podcast, information can be consumed by a wider audience and a greater attention brought to these issues.

## **Conclusion**

Over the course of this research, I was able to understand how producers see food and farm security and also to identify the ways in which these issues are connected and in what ways they are not. From conversations with producers, it is clear that they feel a sense of responsibility in contributing to food assistance. However, they too are dealing with insecurities and challenges and this often limits what they can do. So, while food and farmer security issues sometimes overlap in specific spaces, they do not interact in ways that mutually solve one another. The way in which food and farm security are related is that they are both understood to be macro - systemic issues within our food system, as well as moral and justice issues. Participants discussed both food and farm security through their own experiences and perspectives, but ultimately described them as problems that require large scale change to fix. Through their discussions, we can see a particular set of values and moralities that participants express in relation to food. Additionally, we can understand participants' choices to engage in civic agriculture as a political choice.

As important and relevant as these issues always are, they are going to be even more so going forward. With the current COVID-19 pandemic, issues of food and farm insecurity are likely to increase. Increasing unemployment places even more people in challenging economic situations. Additionally, farmers are preparing for their busiest season but are unable to sell their products by the usual means due to quarantining and social distancing. Lacking in resources such as transportation, labor, and money may prevent them from altering their distribution methods, leaving many small farms at an even higher level of insecurity or unable to continue business.

The issues of food and farm security affect us all. Even if you yourself are not a farmer or experiencing food insecurity, we all engage in the food system in which these things are



occurring. Moreover, individuals experiencing these insecurities are our fellow community members. It is important for these issues to continue to be discussed and engaged with so as to bring attention to these concerns and ultimately resolve them.

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