

## **Community perceptions of food insecurity and an online grocery business model in Camden, New Jersey**

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The purpose of this study is to understand public perceptions of food insecurity and food equity and gain a more profound knowledge of the systemic causes of food insecurity in Camden, New Jersey. The study has four goals: (1) to understand how residents and community stakeholders perceive current issues of food access and security in their neighborhoods; (2) to identify action steps all members of the community can take to address those issues; (3) to explore the potential of an online grocery business model as a viable solution; and (4) to gauge residents' willingness to adopt such a model. Eight students from a cross-listed course (Planning Studio) completed a pilot study from Jan to May 2022 under the guidance of Dr. Meenar and produced a report based on the initial analysis. Dr. Meenar partnered with a Camden-based nonprofit (Invincible City) and served as the PI on this project, securing approval from the Institutional Review Board for human research activities. As an RCRL research fellow, Dr. Meenar will collect additional data, conduct an in-depth analysis, and write an article for a peer-reviewed journal. Dr. Meenar will include three graduate students as co-authors whose contributions to the spring semester report were significant.

Many residents in low-income and minority communities experience a high level of food insecurity and food inequity. Food insecurity is “the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire foods in socially acceptable ways” (Smith & Richards, 2008, p. 550). Food equity is one of the intended outcomes of remedying food insecurity, and it is achieved when “all people—regardless of identity, positionality, or power—have the right to grow, procure, and/or consume healthful, affordable and culturally preferred foods” (Mui et al., 2021, p. 354). Many U.S. communities are known as food deserts, which refer mostly to a community's proximity to a major food retailer (i.e., a supermarket), without much consideration for the transportation options that the community has available to them that could influence the convenience of grocery shopping.

State and local governments and nonprofit organizations offer varieties of programs to address community food insecurity, but most programs are often discontinued due to a lack of funding or donation. Most programs rely on volunteers, but community interest/involvement fades with time. Are there market-driven solutions that invest in responsible business practices? Can a locally-owned online grocery business model successfully address these problems in low-income and minority communities? While many households have explored online shopping during the COVID-19 pandemic, many consumers are skeptical of the quality and reliability of this model. From a business standpoint, such a model presents slim profit margins because the process can be cost-, time-, and labor-intensive. To summarize, more research is needed to understand community perceptions of food insecurity and potential market-driven solutions. In particular, research on the online grocery business models is scant. This study anticipates filling these gaps.

Findings from this research are expected to have direct implications for residents, community-based organizations, and local food-related businesses. In particular, the study will generate recommendations for Camen Invincible City and other similar nonprofits or for-profit

agencies to carefully consider public perceptions of and hesitations about online grocery business models.

This study will not only analyze the community perceptions of food insecurity but also discuss the potential roles and responsibilities of local nonprofit organizations and socially-responsible business entities, explaining how those entities could demonstrate responsible leadership in addressing this issue while being sensitive and responsive to the feelings and expectations of the community.

This project relates to SDG #2 which mostly focuses on ending hunger, achieving food security, and improving nutrition. Historically, the city of Camden has experienced varying degrees of food insecurity following its economic downturn in the mid-twentieth century, with neighborhoods like Waterfront South and Bergen Square experiencing some of the most profound effects. Residents of these neighborhoods lament the loss of local food delivery services from their childhoods, where individuals would provide specific groceries (e.g., fish, milk, and fresh produce) from a mobile truck daily. This loss, when coupled with the current insufficiencies of the local food environment, has resulted in a persistent lack of access to healthy foods, options for grocery retailers, and public transportation. Achieving food equity in Camden will take sustained, collaborative efforts from community organizations, local government, investors, academic institutions, and the residents themselves. The project also responds to a few other goals such as SDG #3: Good health and well-being (by discussing the negative impact of food swamps—areas mainly offering unhealthy, processed food—on people’s health and well-being), SDG #11: Sustainable cities and communities (by discussing community-driven market-oriented solutions to unhealthy food environments), and SDG #17: Partnerships (by discussing local capacity development and multi-stakeholder partnerships).

## References

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