

## Environmental Justice and Food Insecurity: The Urban Gardens as Response of Black Communities in Urban Areas

Justiça Ambiental e Insegurança Alimentar: Os jardins urbanos como resposta das comunidades negras no espaço urbano

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### Abstract

This article aims to analyze the strategies created by low-income black communities to confront *food desert* in the city of Champaign, Illinois, through the creation of urban community gardens, as a form of resistance to food insecurity.

Keywords: food desert; urban gardens; environmental justice; food insecurity.

### Resumo

Esse artigo tem o objetivo de analisar quais são as estratégias criadas pelas comunidades negras de baixa para enfrentamento ao *food desert* na cidade de Champaign, Illinois através da criação de jardins urbanos comunitários, como forma de resistência à insegurança alimentar.

Palavras-chave: insegurança alimentar; justiça ambiental; jardins urbanos.

For this work, I decided to closely analyze the functioning of Randolph Street Garden, located in a black majority neighborhood, where with a symbolic monthly contribution the residents of the region have the possibility to plant their own food and, in this way, reduce the effects caused by limited access to quality food.

Working in contact and talking to Mother Dawn Blackman, one of the first problems faced by the community that made her start the urban garden was the lack of access to supermarkets and unavailability of vegetables in the extreme north of the city, where most of the black population is concentrated.

The limitations of access to food in the urban context have racial and social roots for its implementation. Just as in environmental racism the space where the most vulnerable social groups are located is subject to the disproportionate effects of environmental degradation, resource limitation policies are applied.

Debates on environmental justice and food insecurity in the United States have been fostered initially by food movement activists and by autonomous actions of black and low-income communities that collectively find solutions to the impending problem.

The concept of environmental injustice in the context of food insecurity also applies to the different opportunities for production and sale between small and large farmers, white and black.

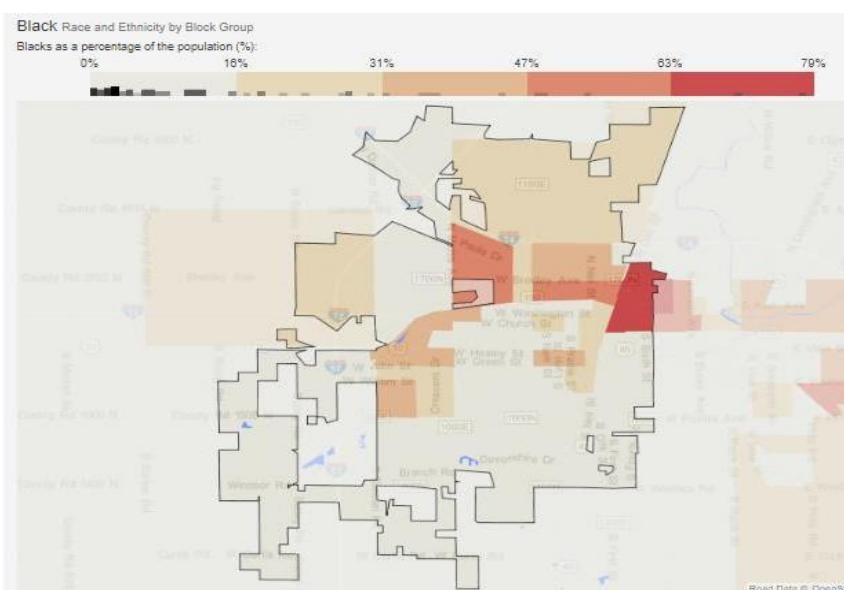
Mother Dawn's work at Randolph Street Garden is essential to restoring the community's sense of belonging to the place where they live through the knowledge of where the food comes from and its direct connection to the land. The possibility of planting their own food gives the community autonomy and the chance of contact with a healthier way of life and resilience to the structural impositions perpetrated by capitalist food production.

Through the movements for food justice, initiated within the poor and black communities of the United States, it is possible to establish some theoretical frameworks capable of clarifying the discussions about the racial and social character that composes the access to food. "Essential to the food justice movement is an analysis that recognizes the food system itself as a racial project and problematizes the influence of race and class on the production, distribution, and consumption of food." (ALKON and AGYEMAN, 2011, p.20). In the book, the authors also state the racial and social character of unequal access to quality food.

The food justice movement combines an analysis of racial and economic injustice with practical support for environmentally sustainable alternatives that can provide economic empowerment and access to environmental benefits in marginalized

communities. Its race- and class-conscious analysis expands that of the food movement to include not only ecological sustainability but also social justice. (ALKON and AGYEMAN, 2011, p.21)

Food justice is defined by equal production, access and consumption of food. In this work, from the spatial division of the municipality of Champaign, I will show the imposed urban limitations of the black population on access to food consumption, also revealing the social component of the affected population, using as a parameter of analysis of the neighborhood where the Randolph Street Garden is located.



**Map I. Percentage of the black population in the city of Champaign (2010).  
Data from US Census Bureau.**

The second stage of this analysis is based on the ZIP Code where these communities are located. Randolph Street Garden is located on North Randolph Street, which has ZIP Code 61820. According to the latest Census (2010), 12.4% of the population is black or Afro-American in the city of Champaign, and the region where the Urban Garden is located concentrates 34% of the city's black population.<sup>1</sup>

On the map above (Map I), it is clearer to see more clearly the racial distribution of the city, where the communities of black majority are highlighted color in red, more sited north of Champaign.

One of the most important concepts in the debates on food justice is food desert. The term can be applied differently depending on the context in which the author decides to apply it.

<sup>1</sup>Available at Social Explorer: <https://www.socialexplorer.com/explore-tables>. Accessed on November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

However, members of the food justice movement use it as a metaphor for natural deserts, when comparing regions where there is production and access to fresh and healthy food, allowing more space for fast food franchises, causing other health problems.

A report made by the United States Department of Agriculture (2009), through analysis and population research, revealed that:

Overall, findings show that a small percentage of consumers are constrained in their ability to access affordable nutritious food because they live far from a supermarket or large grocery store and do not have easy access to transportation. Urban core areas with limited food access are characterized by higher levels of racial segregation and greater income inequality. (United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2009, p.3)

In addition, the study reveals that there is a direct relationship between economic inequality and spatial segregation where these communities are located and their access to grocery stores.

The areas where grocery stores are concentrated are characterized by a population with greater purchasing power, and consequently distance themselves from poor neighbors, a problem that is also characterized by the variety of means of transportation that provide access to quality food.

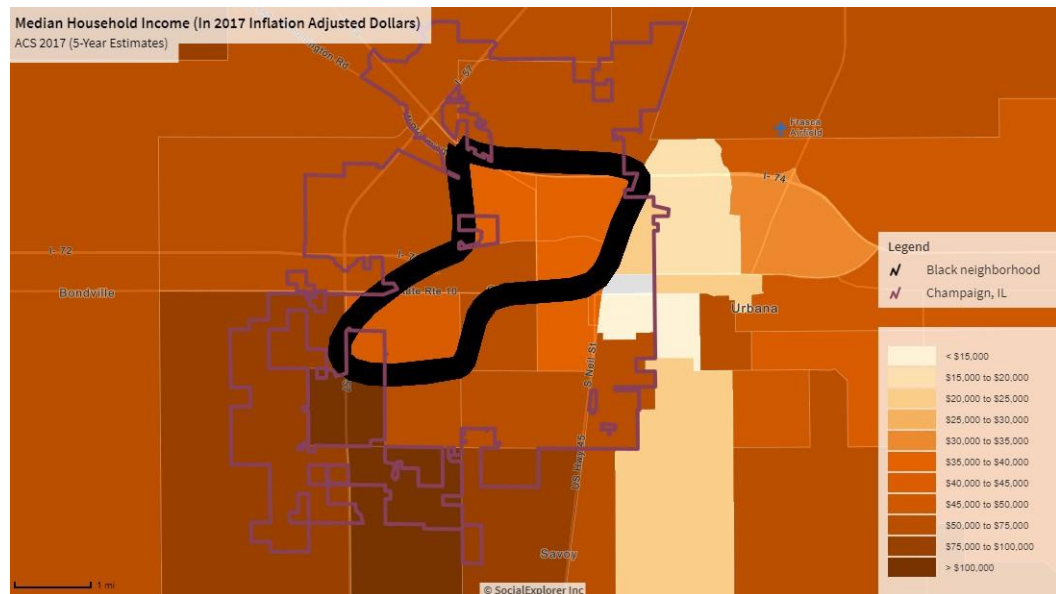
Access to consumption of quality food is measured by the possibilities of transport to where the food is sold, as well as by its prices.

Supermarkets and large grocery stores have lower prices than smaller stores. A key concern for people who live in areas with limited access is that they rely on small grocery or convenience stores that may not carry all the foods needed for a healthy diet and that may offer these foods and other food at higher prices. (United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2009, p.6)

The following map<sup>2</sup> shows geographically the division of family income in the city of Champaign. The area delimited in black is where most of the Afro-American population is concentrated.

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<sup>2</sup>Available at Social Explorer: <https://www.socialexplorer.com/explore-tables>. Accessed on November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2019.



**Map II – Median Household income/Emphasis on the areas with the highest concentration of Afro-American population (2017). Data from American Community Surveys**

By relating the data from Map I and Map II, it is possible to analyze that the average income by families in black communities is lower than in the neighborhoods with the highest percentage of white population, located south of the city. The average income in the delimited region is between \$35,000 and \$50,000 per year, while in the other regions it is between \$50,000 and \$100,000.

In the city of Champaign there are currently around 33 different grocery companies. However, as mentioned, the superstores are more affordable to the population, even though they do not have a wide variety of healthy foods. Therefore, I will use Walmart as an analytical parameter.

In Champaign there are two Walmart franchises. The first is located 2.50 miles away from the neighborhood where Randolph Street is located and the second is 4.56 miles away. The easiest way to get there is by bus, at intervals of 30 minutes, with a journey of about 20 minutes. The other public transport lines only run until 7pm and the journey takes more than 30 minutes.

However, in the same city there are 3 stores of 1 dollar. 2 franchises of the store Dollar Tree and a Family Dollar<sup>3</sup>. Randolph Street Garden is only 0.32 miles away from the Family Dollar, or approximately 9 minutes walking.

<sup>3</sup>A Dollar Tree and Family Dollar are two kinds of stores easily found in the peripheral regions analyzed, where they offer to sell products for up to \$1 without taxes. Consumers can find everything from cleaning products to canned food, snacks, candy, and other types of food with low nutritional value.

This reality is a demonstration of what we call Food Desert, because although there are some transportation options to Walmart, the region where Randolph Street Community Garden is located is more accessible to unhealthy and cheaper options, which would be more compatible with the income of the surrounding families.

The city of Minneapolis in Minnesota has a history of community engagement and public policy initiatives for sustainable development and environmental stewardship. In 2003, the city started a sustainability program in order to design future actions for environmental care. In addition, in 2010 they created the Community Garden Program Piloted that made leases available for community gardens on 21 City-owned vacant lots. Groups gardening for the first time were eligible for one-year leases, while experienced community garden groups were eligible for up to five-year leases. The project successfully reduced barriers related to land access for local food production.<sup>4</sup>

Currently there are a range of initiatives where the city supports the creation and development of community gardens, from programs to provide support for soil fertilization for the development of agricultural production as well as financial support for the creation of new gardens.

One of which is called Minnesota Brownfields, which Environmental Response Fund funding in 2014 to provide small grants for environmental assessment and clean-up of property in contamination levels at proposed redevelopment and community garden sites. The fund is intended to be used for unexpected environmental issues, to prepare for a larger funding request in the County testing cycle, or to identify/clarify and, in some cases, remediate suspected environmental concerns.

Conwill, W. L. (2007), in his text *Neoliberal Policy as Structural Violence*, concerns about the concept of global North and South, which became more popular during the Cold War. Nevertheless, since the imperialist campaigns, through a capitalist vision of geographical division, determines the nations from owning the means of production and those that will be exploited.

The North stands as the core or capitalist class and is seen as controlling the means of production and extracting the surplus from production. The South stands as the periphery or the proletarian class having limited control over its labor and receiving minimal compensation for it. (Conwill, W. L., 2007, p.132)

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<sup>4</sup>Available at Minnesota government website <http://www.minneapolismn.gov/sustainability/homegrown/WCMS1P-129871>. Accessed on December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2019.



The concept of global North and South extends by establishing the power relationship between different regions. Within a global geographic vision, the countries that were located in the geographic North eventually served as a source of exploitation, as in the case of Brazil, which was colonized by Portugal. Meanwhile, it is possible to use the expressions South and North to designate in the relations of power, who has control and who is controlled.

In other words, both the global North and South and the global North and “South in the North” exist within an intricate system of complicities and internal power imbalances between blocs within the broader groupings, this relationship has been demonstrated traditionally through the attribution of differential valuations of labor by race and gender. (Conwill, W. L., 2007, p.132)

Within this perspective, by analyzing the maps of the city of Champaign and the geographic location of the groups most affected by income distribution and access to the variety of healthy food, it is possible to affirm that there is a "South in the North" of the city of Champaign, and it is located in the extreme north of the city where the highest concentration of black people and Afro-Americans is located, with lower family income than the population concentrated in the south.

It is for this reason that the community garden is installed in this region, being a form of resilience for not only the neighborhood where it is located, but also for other neighborhoods around. Currently, the Randolph Street Community Garden has, besides the possibility of the residents to receive a 16'X4' size garden bed, also receive classes on how to plant and care for their garden. There are other community support actions such as Mother Dawn's meeting with volunteers to make the necessary trip to the markets, divided by the unavailability of making the trip to the nearest markets.

The possibility of planting one's own food gives the oppressed peoples the opportunity to avoid a series of impositions of the system to which they are subjected, it means freedom. It means having control of what you eat and thus the consequences that your body will suffer. To limit the access to a healthy community is to deny other possibilities of human development.

One of the most beautiful initiatives I have ever witnessed was the program where Mother Dawn teaches the children of the community how food is grown, that is, the origin of what they are eating. The children learn how to plant, how to care for their garden and how to cook. The opportunity to take care of a plantation makes the children create a sense of responsibility and belonging. They see that the work they are doing has more than symbolic value, when they realize that the work in their hands has become something they can feed themselves, people

feel they have done something productive for themselves and this is empowering, especially when it comes to where you live.

Finally, I believe that initiatives implant as in the city of Minneapolis could be implanted not only in Champaign, but in the whole state. It is impressive to see how the inequality of becomes evident how much, in a state that has agricultural production as its main economic source, in a city close to a university with specialization in food science is still needed autonomous efforts of communities in order to supply the lack of access to food.

The creation of urban gardens is a response not only to food injustice, but also to the creation of another possibility of living away from capitalist food configurations.

Public incentives, such as the creation of possible plantation spaces, the creation of free and open educational programs for the population, so that they acquire all the knowledge necessary to create their own food crops in partnership with the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and public incentives such as the financing of healthy food sales programs among low-income neighborhoods, are public incentives that favor the development of marginalized populations, giving them the right to continue creating their own methods for connecting with one another.

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