**Food Security in West Oakland:**

A qualitative study

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*Abstract*

Food insecurity is still a daily reality for residents of the West Oakland, CA community. Despite efforts of non-profit food organizations that exist in the community, such as City Slicker Farms, there is still much work that needs to be done in West Oakland to be considered food secure. In this qualitative study, findings from interviews with six West Oakland residents help expand current scholarship about the daily realities of obtaining food in West Oakland, a personal and varied expansion on the definition of “healthy food”, and a discussion about unique strengths possessed by the community of West Oakland.

*Introduction*

Food is not only a basic human need that we all require in order to go about our daily lives but it is also a significant aspect of culture that helps connect people and foster community. In this day and age is it hard to imagine that a lack of access to a variety of food is a problem for those living in the United States, especially in such urban locales as West Oakland which located in the heart of the diverse San Francisco Bay Area. But in fact, food insecurity or, a lack of access to a variety of quality and affordable foods, is a daily reality for residents in the West Oakland community (Fuller 1). There has been a severe lack of access to quality and affordable food in West Oakland, and this is usually illustrated by the lack of number of grocery stores in the area and a predominance of corner liquor stores (Fuller 3; Haletky 55; Harris 2).

In wake of this disparity of access to food, a number of food related non-profit organizations have flourished in the community, attempting to bridge the gap between the West Oakland community and quality and affordable food (Harris 2). Some such organizations are; People’s Grocery, an organization concerned with bringing a grocery store to West Oakland, City Slickers Farms, an organization utilizing urban agriculture to grow food directly in West Oakland and provides it to community members, OBUGS, an educational organization that seeks to promote healthy eating to the youth of West Oakland through the education system, and the Mandela Marketplace Co-op, a community member owned and operated food store that sells a variety of healthy foods in West Oakland. Because of the multitude of such organizations that seek to provide solutions to the food insecurity problems of West Oakland and due to the time constraints of this semester long Ethnic Studies 101A course that this paper is for, I will only be focusing on organization of City Slickers Farm.

My own complicated history with food and as an Ethnic Studies undergraduate student and scholar is what initially led me to this research area. I spent the beginning years of my life growing up in the city of San Pablo, located in the Eastern part of the San Francisco Bay Area, surrounded by the nearby city of Richmond, California. Growing up, I remember the valuation of unhealthy junk food by myself and my neighborhood friends, and a lack of proper nutrition training by my elementary school through the food provided for school breakfasts and lunches. I was fortunate to have parents with stable and well-paying jobs and access to transportation though a car. Without these things we would have been stuck with the lack of food options that exist in the area. There were, and still are, no major grocery stores within a mile radius of my old neighborhood (Food Desert Locator). At the time I thought nothing of the junk food I ate. One early and fond memory of mine as a child was saving up loose change from beneath the couch cushions and pooling the money together with my neighborhood friends to buy candy, chips, and soft drinks from the nearby liquor store. Even with the daily realities I faced of the diabetes my grandmother suffered from that eventually led to complications which led to her passing, the high-blood pressure my mother faces on a daily basis, the high cholesterol my father was diagnosed with, and the limitations obesity has cast on my life and the lives of many of my friends, family and neighbors; I still did not link where I lived to foods I had access to, and their influence on my health. Through personal connections and moving to the food-centric city of Berkeley, California as a college student, I realized what an influence lack of access to healthy and affordable food has had on my life up until that point. Food in Berkley is not a scarcity, in addition to restaurants throughout the city, there are also numerous large grocery stores that have some of the best selections of healthy fruit and produce in the country and additionally there exist three farmers markets that are held in Berkeley that also provide some of the freshest produce in the SF Bay Area.

Despite my now increased access, the feeling of being a not so distant outsider to this flourishing food culture still nagged me in the back of my mind. I was personally able to have better access to food, but what about my hometown? What about areas like my hometown? Why could there not be as much access to healthy, quality, and affordable food? These questions lead me to examine what life is like for community members living in West Oakland, an area and community very similar to the one I grew up in. I chose to focus on West Oakland because of its prevalence of food organizations in operation there in stark contrast to San Pablo where there are no such organizations in existence. I am seeking to examine what kinds of foods community members have access to in West Oakland, what issues they find problematic in obtaining healthy and affordable food and in doing so hoping to expand the definition of healthy food. In addition to this I seek to assess the effectiveness of City Slickers Farms through interviews with community members, and through personal observation of operations at City Slickers. I hope to expand current scholarship that notes the food security problems of West Oakland, but do not seek the voices of actual West Oakland community members and their daily realities of living in an area classified as having low access to food (Fuller, Harris 12, McClintok). With loftier goals, I hope to use some of this knowledge to bring back to my own hometown and see if we too can start to get food access organizations started there to help begin to bridge the gap between the community and their access to quality food.

*History of Food Insecurity in West Oakland*

Before we can delve into the findings of the research I have done, it is important to first get a sense of the long and diverse history of West Oakland that has led to the food insecure reality that exists there today. It is also important to define what exactly food insecurity is and how it relates to the West Oakland community. Lastly I hope to introduce the population of West Oakland today and some of the challenges faced in the field of food security as described by other scholars in the field.

In the 1940s, World War II brought in large influx of immigrants seeking jobs in shipbuilding and other war industries, a majority of who were African-American, originally from the Southern part of the United States (Fuller 8). When WWII ended in 1945, many of these new transplants to the area lost their jobs and the economy of West Oakland began to decline. According to scholar Andrea Fuller, who has done research quantifying the amount of grocery stores starting from the 1940’s to present day, during this era, “large grocery chains where not yet common. Small, independent grocers provided communities with a wide selection of food” (8).

In the 1950s, this practice of small grocers providing food to the community was still in full effect. At this time a major change was coming to West Oakland. Through the implementation of the Federal Urban Renewal Programs, the Cypress Freeway was constructed in 1957 (Fuller 8; McClintok 159). Fuller argues that the “construction of the Cypress freeway devastated the West Oakland community, ripping their community in half, in a literal sense” (8). Migration away from West Oakland ensued due to this splitting of the community. Fuller estimates that the total population of West Oakland fell from 76,000 in 1950 to 23,700 in 1960, and approximately “50,000 whites had fled West Oakland” (8).

Moving on to the 1960s, the construction of the Bay Area Regional Transit (BART) System in West Oakland along with the building of the 7th Street Regional Post Office further displaced several local businesses (Fuller 8; McClintok 159). At this time Fuller estimates that “the number of food stores dropped from 132 to 79” (9). Some of the reasons for this decline seem to be linked to such factors as, “a grocery retail movement towards larger chain stores.” It is also at the end of this decade, in 1969, that the Black Panther Party established the Free Breakfast for Children Program (FBCP) and additionally created programs that gave away food through the church network. The program was located centrally in West Oakland, based at St. Augustine’s Episcopal Church. Fuller argues that these “Breakfast and food programs addressed a need in the community that wasn’t being met elsewhere” (9).

In the beginning part of the 1970s grocery store numbers decrease from 79 to 46, and then in 1975 they decline again from 46 to 31 (Fuller 9). In the 1980s the number of grocery stores declined again to around 22 stores, staying in this range up until present day (Fuller 9).

Food security is defined by scholars as “all persons living in a community at all times having access to safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate food through local, sustainable, self-reliant, socially just, non-emergency, food system” (Haletky 50). Additionally, components that contribute to food security include the “location of food sources, the type of food available at those food sources, the prices of food items, and transportation to these sources” (Fuller 2). Before 2010, areas that were food insecure were colloquially defined as “food deserts.” Publications in print before 2010 acknowledged West Oakland as food desert (Green 37; McClintok 156). This concept was then formally defined in 2010 due to the launch of the Let’s Move initiative conceptualized and created by First Lady Michelle Obama, which is “dedicated to solving the problem of childhood obesity in a generation” (About Let’s Move). Through the creation of the Let’s Move initiative, the Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI) was created with its purpose being to “expand the availability of nutritious food to food deserts” (About Food Desert Locator). As the HFFI is partnered with the United States Treasury Department, Health and Human Services and the Agriculture Department (USDA), the term food desert had to be formally defined in order to “determine eligibility for Federal funds” (About Food Desert Locator). As such, the term “food desert” is defined by the HFFI as “a *low-income census tract* where a substantial number or share of residents has *low access* to a supermarket or larger grocery store” (About Food Desert Locator). Expanding on the criterion of a low-income community, the HFFI states, “the poverty rate of a census tract must have either a poverty rate or 20 percent or higher or a median family income at or below 80 percent of the area’s median family income” (About Food Desert Locator). Expanding on the criteria that qualifies as “low access”, the HFFI states that, “at least 33 percent of the census tract’s population must reside more than one mile from a supermarket or large grocery store” (About Food Desert Locator). What had previously been a term to describe any area that had low access to healthy and affordable food choices now has evolved to a formal term used by the government to determine where to best place its resources. It is crucial to note that though West Oakland pre-2010 (or pre-Let’s Move Initiative) was considered to a food desert, with the formal parameters now set by the HFFI, West Oakland is *not* considered to be a food desert and does not appear on the Food Desert Locator (Food Desert Locator). Despite this exclusion by the US Government, the number of non-profit food organizations and the history of food insecurity of West Oakland, clearly point to an area that still struggles to provide healthy food to its residents.

*West Oakland today and City Slickers Farm*

Today, for the approximately 30,000 residents of West Oakland, food has a great potential to change the landscape of West Oakland (Haletky 54). West Oakland has high levels of “heart disease, anemia, lead poisoning, cancer and diabetes” and these are generally linked to poor diet (Haletky 54; Harris 2). While there are about 40 liquor stores in West Oakland there is only 1 dedicated grocery store, the Mandela Marketplace Co-op, and 32 emergency food sites (soup kitchens, food pantries, shelters) (Haletky 54). Liquor stores generally carry “processed junk food” and the prices of corner stores are more expensive than there supermarket counterparts, “typically…30-100% higher” (Haletky 54). It is estimated that food is “about 20% of retail sales and 20% of service jobs” in West Oakland but that “over 90% of the West Oakland purchasing power is spent outside of the area” (Haletky 51). Additionally, it is estimated by scholars, that about 25% of the West Oakland population is dependent on emergency food site which “is an indicator of low community food security” (Haletky 54).

City Slicker Farms is a non-profit urban agriculture organization that exists in West Oakland. Urban agriculture, “involves the growing of crops and/or livestock within urban areas or at their periphery” (Haletky 51). Scholars claim that “urban agriculture is a key component to developing a sustainable community food system and…can alleviate many of the problems of food insecurity.” (Haletky 51). Established in 2001, the mission of City Slicker Farms “is to empower West Oakland community members to meet the basic need for healthy food by creating organic, sustainable, high-yield urban farms and backyard gardens” (CSF Annual Report 2010). They believe “that access to healthy food is a basic human right and that the skills, knowledge, and ability to create a just food system exist within our community” (CSF Annual Report 2010). In order to do this City Slicker has a three prong approach to creating access to healthy food; 1. through their Community Market Farms program, 2. through their Backyard Garden program, and 3. through their Urban Farming Education program. City Slicker has seven Community Market Farms locations throughout West Oakland, “which are food production gardens” (CSF Annual Report 2010). The produce grown in these Farms are distributed to West Oakland community members on a sliding scale/donation basis at a weekly Farm Stand. In 2010, over 9,600 pounds of produce was grown and it was distributed to 725 people at the farm stand (CSF Annual Report 2010). The Backyard Garden program “builds food self-sufficiency by empowering…households to grow fresh produce where they live” (CSF Annual Report 2010). The Backyard Garden sets up West Oakland residents with two garden boxes, a fruit tree, plants and seeds after an initial social analysis to determine the level of lead and other heavy metals. Additionally, Backyard Gardens are partnered with a “garden mentor” to support them for up to two years. There are approximately 100 households that have Backyard Gardens set up by City Slicker Farms (CSF Annual Report 2010). Lastly, through City Slicker’s Urban Farming Education program, City Slicker offers programs in apprenticeship, internship, farm tours and service learning, workshops, volunteering and the publishes a “West Oakland Healthy Eating Guide” (CSF Annual Report 2010).

*Methodology*

The road to finding interviewees was much more rocky and filled with unexpected twists and turns than I initially anticipated. When I first began to conceptualize what I wanted to study for this project I thought about a West Oakland food organization I had heard about before through friends and family involved in the Bay Area food culture, but didn’t know much about, City Slickers Farm. I first went to my personal contacts to see if any of them had any connections to City Slickers. A friend was able to put me in contact with a Board member of City Slickers who also turned out to be a lecturer in the Geography Department at UC Berkeley, and I quickly set-up my first interview with him after getting in touch with him via e-mail communication. Since this individual was involved with City Slicker as a former Backyard Garden Mentor to two families, I thought it would be interesting to follow this lead and to focus my research on the Backyard Garden part of City Slicker Farms. I wanted to seek out interviews with both the Mentors and the families and individuals with Backyard Gardens in their homes.

Around the same time, I contacted City Slicker Farms with information about myself and my project. While waiting for a response back from the organization, I heard about a last minute farm tour that the Board member, David, was going to be attending and he invited me along on. Since, at this point I had not yet been out to West Oakland, I believed it would be a wonderful opportunity to see the operations and to introduce myself in person to the organization. It turned out that the tour was for prospective new Board members, but everyone greeted me with open arms. I was very fortunate to go along the tour with the executive director of City Slicker Farm, Barbara Finnin. She was very open to answering any questions I had while we drove around West Oakland visiting a few of the Community Market Farms. As the trip was unplanned and unexpected, I did not bring a list of formal questions to ask or a recording device to do so with. It was still, in my mind at that time, a great opportunity. I will use some of the observations from that day in the data analysis portion of this paper.

After this farm tour, I had no doubt in my mind that the path to finding interviewees from the Backyard Garden program would be less difficult. Unfortunately, I received bad news via e-mail from the City Slicker Farms Program Assistant. I was informed that they did not have the resources to help with my project. From the response I received, I thought it was possible that the wording from my original message could have been misunderstood. I then re-worded an information request to clarify that I was not interested in necessarily interviewing the staff of City Slicker, but rather people who were involved in the Backyard Garden Program. I then received another disheartening response that stated, “We usually reserve access to this type of information to current or past interns.  The reasons behind this are two-fold (1) to prioritize our interns' undergraduate/graduate research and (2) to limit the amount of survey/interview requests or participants receive” (Archuleta).

While conducting my first interview with David, I mentioned the trouble I had been having trying to find interviewees with the help of City Slicker Farms. He was able to get me in contact with another Backyard Garden mentor, Melissa, who agreed to talk to me. As David passed along this information to me through a forwarded e-mail from the Backyard Garden Organizer, and from a City Slicker Farms official e-mail address I had not seen on their website, I e-mailed this new e-mail address. My response back from this organizer not only once again shot me down, but also mentioned that they had spoke to the Program Assistant I had been in contact with, and thought that they had made it very clear they could not help me. In addition to this, I was referred to online resources of secondary information on the organization, even though in each piece of correspondence I directed to City Slicker, I made it very clear that the research I was doing had to be based in interview data. I replied back one more time, this time unable to hide my frustration, trying to make clear that I needed interview data with contacts that they certainly had access to and which I did not as an outsider. Strangely, I then received an e-mail back not from the person who I had originally been in contact with but with the Program Assistant who I had previously been in contact with to once again say they could not help me. This being the final word from City Slicker, I gave up trying through that route. I conducted my second interview with Backyard Garden program mentor, Melissa, and wondered how I would find more interviewees.

Instead of scrapping the data I had so far from the first two interviews, I decided to expand my research topic a bit to include a discussion of food throughout West Oakland and not limit it to those involved or knowledgeable about City Slicker Farms. I thought that it could also be interesting to talk to community members who had not heard of City Slicker Farms because the reasons behind not being involved with them seem very interesting to me as well. Through the research I did about food insecurity in West Oakland, I realized that it is such a pervasive issue to all community members living there because of the state of food insecurity and that I could still access individual’s experience with food in this specific location.

In order to find more interviewees with this new expanded research topic, I placed an ad in the “community” section of the website Craigslist.org. I explained who I was and what I was researching and who I was interested in talking to. Through this method I was able to get in contact with 5 more West Oakland residents to interview with. Of course I knew there would be limitations to people who would be able to respond to me, such as only individuals who had computer and internet access and individuals who frequent that particular website, etc. If I had more time, and if I had known the problems that arose through my communication with City Slicker, I would have considered becoming an intern with the organization in order to gain a better insider status, and to have better access to people involved with the organization.

A logistical problem arose during my second interview with Melissa. Not only are grocery stores scarce in West Oakland, but I came to find out that there are not many cafes or restaurants suited for public meetings. Because I do not drive, I was limited to transportation via BART or bus. While looking on-line for public places to meet interviewees, I found 1 café, Revolution Café, located a few blocks from the West Oakland BART Station. This was convenient for my second interviewee, Melissa, who lives within walking distance of the Café. Though the interview was conducted early in the afternoon, the music in the Cafe was on quite loud during the first part of the interview and was even cranked up louder during it. While transcribing this interview, I found it hard to hear Melissa’s responses to my inquiries. Additionally, as Revolution Café is located on 7th Street in West Oakland which is parallel to the BART tracks, the loud sound of passing trains interrupted every few minutes, making those portions of my audio-recording inaudible. Scheduling my 3-7th interviews, I mentioned the problem I had with meeting at Revolution and asked interviewees for suggestions of other quiet places to meet. I was able to meet with interviewee’s 3 and 4 at a Café located in the Uptown area of Oakland. Interview 5, took place in the interviewee’s home, which is also a converted warehouse shared with 5 other roommates. Normally I would not have met with an interviewee in a non-public location, but Interview 5, was female and lived with other people who would be present at their home during the interview. Interviewee 6 acknowledged a lack of good public meeting spots, and suggested we meet at Revolution Café anyways, and if it were too loud we could walk a few blocks to his home and interview outside on his front porch. Interviewee 7 works in Berkeley and we were able to meet at the downtown location of the Berkeley Public Library.

*Findings*

All of my interviewees except one are residents of West Oakland. The one person who is not a resident of West Oakland is David, the City Slickers Board member, but he is a 30 year resident of Oakland and currently resides in East Oakland. I was hoping for a diverse racial and age group make-up, but due to the time constraints of the semester, I was not able to be very picky with selecting respondents to my internet posting. After my first interview, my only major criterion was to only interview people who lived in West Oakland. I choose to do this because I am not interested in perceptions of what it like to live in this particular place or shop there for groceries as viewed by outsiders, but rather I am interested in the day to day goings on of people who live in this food insecure location.

All but 1 of my interviewees identifies as white; the one person who does not, is black. Most of my interviewees were 35 years old or younger, the one outlier being David, who is in his mid-40s. I was also hoping to interview a varied group of people in terms of time actually lived in West Oakland. The longest resident of West Oakland out of my interviewees was 4 years and the shortest was 6 months, with varying times of residence of everyone else falling somewhere between. Lastly, it was interesting to discover that most of my interviewees have been personally involved with food or with the food justice movement. Melissa, my 2nd interviewee, studied food justice during her undergraduate course work, and has been involved with the SF Bay Area Food culture being employed as a vendor at farmer’s markets located in the East Bay. Samuel my 3rd interviewee self-describes as a “career chef” and has worked in many restaurants throughout the Bay Area. He and his girlfriend, Fiona, my 4th interviewee have also been heavily involved in a food co-operative and have been involved with the distribution of food in the Occupy Oakland kitchen. Seth, my 6th interviewee was previously involved with CSAs in his former hometown of Atlanta, Georgia, and has had experience with urban agriculture through growing his own food. Paul, my 7th and last interviewee, was an apprentice for City Slicker Farms for one year, and currently works as a gardener to households throughout North Berkeley and has extensive experience with urban agriculture. All interviews were at least one hour long and were audio recorded on my laptop and resulted in 40 pages of transcription.

*Strengths and Weaknesses of City Slicker Farm*

Though City Slicker Farms has taken on the big task of trying to provide healthy food to the community, there is still much headway and growing that needs to be done for it to not just be successful as an organization, but as an organization that is helping the community thrive.

Beginning with the Backyard garden program, City Slicker is giving individuals the opportunity to have a hands-on approach to growing their own food. Interviewee David notes that “City Slicker Farms does not own the gardens, we give people gardens, the day we build a garden it is yours…we never take it away.” This concept of ownership is crucial as it is linked to self-sustainability and sovereignty, ideas that not just make the organization responsible but the individuals themselves to their success of their gardens. What is also interesting is what is entailed in the role of the mentor. Both David and Melissa have been mentors to West Oakland residents with Backyard Gardens. What they both mentioned was that one can become amentor, “even without any garden knowledge” and that the role of the mentor is one of “cheerleading” and a way of “being supportive of the process.” This goal of being supportive rather than a process where one more knowledgeable person is passing on information to the Backyard Garden illustrates the partnership nature of the program.

Through my interviews and through my observation I found some areas that could be improved on by the organization. It seems that while City Slicker Farms exists in West Oakland in many aspects they are out of touch with the needs of the community. My personal experience with this was when I observed on my Farm Tour of City Slicker that the majority of the staff is white and is not from West Oakland. Steven notes that “change needs to come from inside the community, from strong community leaders.” Paul, who was employed by City Slicker as an apprentice, notes that this disconnect between the needs of the organization and the needs of the community leads to a “paternalistic” nature of the organization. He further elaborates that this leads to “people making middle class salaries off of problems they’re never going to fix” and there is a tendency to follow “the goals of the people in the organization” and not “the goals of the community.” This is problematic especially if the main goal of City Slicker Farms is illustrated to be for the community but then comes off as not to people in the community. In another example, interviewee Fiona felt like attempts of City Slickers were misguided when she attended the Farm Stand Market where City Slicker provides the food grown in their Gardens to the community at a sliding scale. She notes that in an attempt to connect with the community the supposedly urban slang terms, “broke”, “baller”, and “pimp” where being used by City Slicker to describe the different levels of the pay scale, and she felt these terms to be out of touch and “offensive” to the community. Trying to use these terms in their attempt to connect instead exacerbate the racial and class divides between the organization and the community further widens this gap.

*Access to Healthy Food*

As the US Government does not officially define West Oakland a “food desert” the assumption that can be made is that food security is not a problem there (Food Desert Locator). In fact, through my interviews I found that this is not to be the case. All of my interviewees who are residents of West Oakland have stated that a majority of their grocery shopping is done outside of West Oakland. Melissa, a mentor for City Slicker Farms who recently got her own Backyard Garden, does the majority of her food shopping at “farmer’s markets” and sometimes shops at “Berkeley Bowl” and notes that “there are currently no farmer’s markets in West Oakland.” Stephen and Fiona, two homeless youth who live in a camper on Mandela Parkway in West Oakland, note that they grocery shop at “Whole Foods by Lake Merritt”, “Safeway”, or the “farmer’s market in Jack London Square”, but also note that “farmer’s markets are not accessible to anyone” because they are not close to modes of public transportation. Additionally, they note the importance of being able to use EBT (food stamps) at farmer’s markets, but mentioned that not all of the ones in Oakland yet accept them. Lily mentions that she recently joined a CSA (community supported agriculture) because of the lack of available fresh produce in her neighborhood, but that the closest pick up spot for their weekly box is by Lake Merritt. She mentions the necessity of her car when she states, “when I took my car in last week and was just on my bike…I didn’t go grocery shopping the entire time because it was a pain to bring it back on my bike.” Interviewee Seth mentions he used to grocery exclusively at the 99 Cents Only store located on 7th St. in West Oakland, but due to the limited availability of healthy foods there that led to a “near hospitalization” and a “diagnosis of hypertension” he has since had to travel to Emeryville and Jack London square to shop for more healthy food options. Lastly, interviewee Paul does shop often at the one grocery store in West Oakland, the Mandela Marketplace Co-op, but without access to a car and due to employment in Berkeley does most of his grocery shopping at Berkeley Bowl and Monterey Market. Though there are approximately 40 liquor stores in West Oakland, not one of my interviewees stated that they went there to grocery shop. My interviews illustrate a West Oakland that is still struggling to provide community members with healthy food.

*Healthy Food*

Perhaps the most interesting finding I came across in my interviews is an expansion on the definition of “healthy food.” The HFFI’s definition of “food desert” places heavy emphasis on household incomes and number of grocery stores in a particular location (About Food Desert Locator). And while in the last section we see that not having grocery stores in the community is a very real problem residents face there, a definition of what kind of “healthy food” should be available in them is absent in the assessment of the HFFI. It is not enough to just provide the tools (in this case grocery stores) to provide healthy food to a community but it is important that a discussion is present amongst community members where future grocery stores will be placed and to carry the kinds of foods they want. I present here what my interviewees envision healthy food to be.

David believes that healthy food is “clean, pesticide free and whole food” and that food that he cooks himself is healthy because “it means I bought raw food” and that he “tries to stay away from processed and prepared foods.” What is interesting here is that David makes the distinction between “organic” and “healthy” because it is possible to have processed junk food made with organic ingredients.

To Melissa, healthy food is all about “good quality ingredients.” A observation made by Melissa is even if she is eating something that is traditionally considered unhealthy such as “a fried egg on toast” she considers it healthy because she knows she is personally connected to the people who provide her with the bread and the eggs. In this case healthy food is not solely reliant on the kinds of ingredients that go into food, but also on a personal connection and relationship.

Samuel believes that healthy food is “something you prepare yourself, with a minimal amount of process.” An interesting statement he made in regards to healthy food is the “the less the corporate machine is involved, the better the food.” In this case healthy food is not just about healthy ingredients; there is something about doing it yourself, a personal involvement, the opposite of which Samuel states is corporate and outsider involvement.

Fiona discovered through her journey as a homeless youth what healthy food is to her. She was couch surfing and dependent on the food she could get for free. She then moved to a vegan household, where the only food provided was vegan. After leaving this living situation she began to eat animal products again but it left her feeling in a “lull” with “low energy” whereas when she was on strict vegan diet her body “felt amazing.” In this case Fiona describes her idea of healthy food as food that makes your body feel good and full of energy, and that “it is important to go with what your body calls for.”

Lily’s idea about healthy food is “a lot of produce” and that she often feels “like she should be eating more” but that is it also about “balancing out what you eat….I eat kind of a ridiculous amount of sugar” but tries to eat “more produce and whole grains.” For Lily, healthy food is a goal that needs to be worked at to be obtained that that there is room for “unhealthy” aspects of food in a healthy diet as long as these are balanced out with healthier things like produce.

Seth also discovered what healthy food means to him through a personal journey. He was previously a strict vegetarian but had to “adapt” his diet to the West Oakland reality when he moved there 6 months ago. He was eating “salami and living off of chorizo for a while because it was….plentiful and cheap.” But the diet resulted in a diagnosis of hypertension for Seth who, “didn’t realize I was taking 300% of my daily sodium intake” and “stopped buying … questionable meats…and the lowest common denominator food.” In this case healthy food is foods that keep your body physically in good condition.

Paul works professionally as a gardener and has the ability to grow food in the gardens of his “rich” clients for himself. He states that healthy food is, “foods that are grown in biological system…not weird modern varieties that are bred for food science not nutrition.” He also notes like some of the other interviewees that he avoids “processed foods” and when he eats meat he chooses “lamb or goat, or some of the stuff that is less industrialized.” For Paul healthy food is not only based on nutrition but it is also grown in a way that is healthy for the environment.

*The Strengths of West Oakland*

A surprising discussion of the unique strengths of West Oakland also arose from my interviews. The historical background of West Oakland seems to be fraught with the negativities and challenges the area faces when it comes to food security. It was interesting to hear from interviewees that there exists in West Oakland a strong sense of community. I was told many times by different interviewees that in West Oakland there exists, “a real sense of community, I know all of my neighbors, I know all the kids on my street”, there are “close-knit neighbor groups”, “I see people out and talking on the streets in a way that I don’t elsewhere”, there is a “tight-knit community here”, there is a “great artist community”, there is “lots of space to grow”, there is a “strong church community”, and “people have pride for West Oakland.” I think that it is important while we are discussing a very real problem for West Oakland to also keep in mind this strong sense of community. If the food insecurity problems of West Oakland are going to be really challenged it should start with this strength of the community first.

*Conclusion*

Through my interviews I have come up with some very interesting findings that seek to expand the scholarship that is available at the moment about food insecurity in West Oakland. I have learned that knowledge of City Slicker Farms is widespread amongst the community, but there are improvements that can be made in terms of connecting with the community to meet their unique needs. Though City Slicker Farms seeks to increase access to fresh produce in West Oakland, there is still a need for more access to food felt by residents. Perhaps my most interesting and important finding that arose through interviews is a personal and varied outlook on what the very subjective “healthy food” means to individuals living in West Oakland today. I believe this data can help to expand and build on topics of food security and to the definition of “food desert.” Lastly, through my research I have read about so many challenges that West Oakland faces in the fight for food but I was surprised when a discussion of the strengths of the community arose with my interviewees. I believe my work in this research paper can help expand the United States governments idea of “food deserts”, because though West Oakland is not formally defined as such by the HFFI, it certainly is struggling from many of the same issues faced by areas classified as food deserts. Lastly, it was also my hope to bring some of the knowledge that I gained from this project to my own community. I have learned how important it is to first assess what the real needs of the community are through discussion with community members. Only with their unique perspectives and through their support can we hope to create a real and lasting change to the food systems currently in place.

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