

Understanding and Addressing Inequalities in the Food System

What are inequalities?
How do they play out in the food system?

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University of Missouri

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Interdisciplinary Center for Food Security

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Event Sponsor Introductions

Interdisciplinary Center for Food Security at the University of Missouri

- Research, teaching, and outreach at the intersection of food security and food systems

Community and Economic Development Food Systems Team, part of University of Missouri Extension

- Community engagement and education to build healthy, resilient, and equitable food systems
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Upcoming Webinars

Webinar II: Addressing food system inequalities in rural areas

- Thursday, October 15, 4:00–5:00 p.m.CST
- Margaret Krome-Lukens, Rural Advancement Foundation International. Pittsboro, North Carolina

Webinar III: Addressing food system inequalities in urban areas

- Thursday, November 19, 3:30–4:30 p.m. CST
- Erica Williams, A Red Circle, St. Louis, Missouri

More information at **foodsecurity.missouri.edu**

Webinar Format

Hear from our speaker ~ 30 minutes

- Guest mics will be muted

Question & Answer ~ 20 minutes

- Guest mics will remain muted unless you raise your hand
- Questions can also be submitted through the chat feature

Social Hour ~ 4:45-5:30 p.m.

- Informal conversation
-

Plan for today:

- Introduction
- How do we define inequality, generally? How do structural inequalities shape our food system?
- Illustrative case studies:
 - Inequality and agricultural producers
 - Inequality and consumers
 - Inequality and COVID-19
- Questions and discussion

*Please feel free to type questions in the chat throughout the webinar that we will address during Q&A!

*Please also note reflection prompts sprinkled throughout

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About me

- PhD (2018) in Agricultural Education and MPH (2013) from MU
- Former fellow in sustainable food systems at Stetson, current VAP
- Specific research/teaching areas: alternative food systems, race/class/gender in the food system, garden-based learning, carceral food systems
- Teach about food systems in prison with Stetson's Community Education Project; conduct research on prison foodways with incarcerated students
- Former AmeriCorps volunteer, SNAP recipient

How do we define inequality?

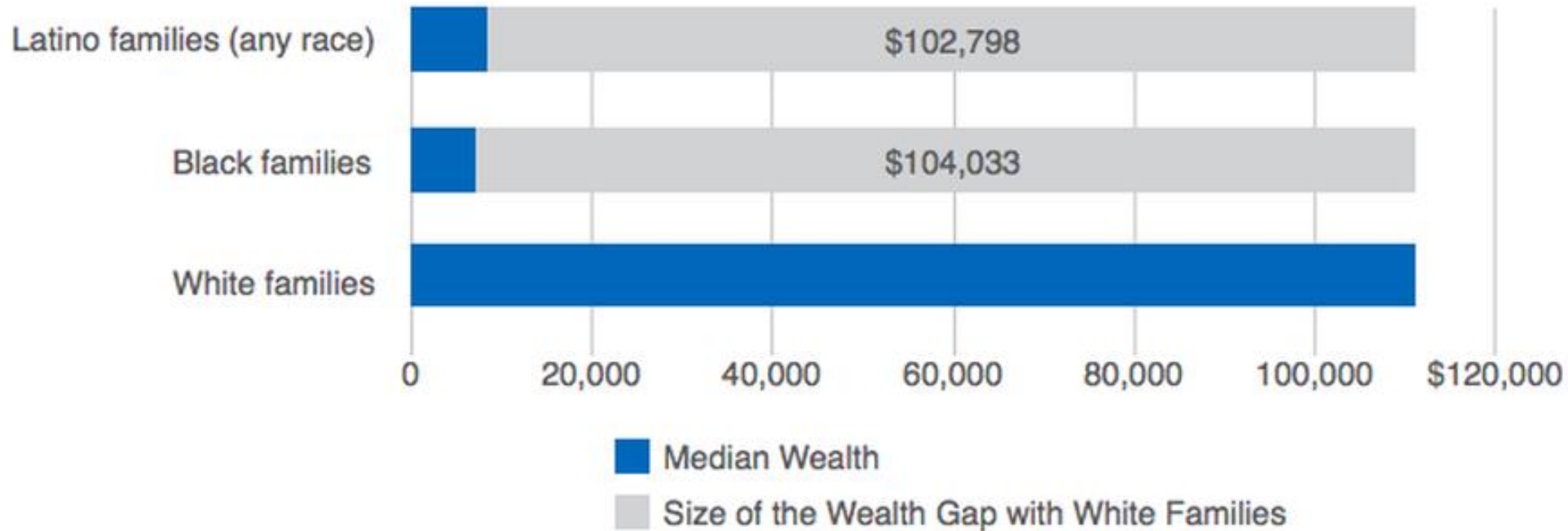
- **Social inequality:** Relational processes in a society that limit a certain group's power, and limit or harm their class, social status, and/or quality of life. Linked to social constructs such as race, class, and gender. Examples of social inequalities include disparities in voting rights, education, housing, transportation, and health care.
- **Economic inequality:** Disparities in the distribution of economic assets across groups of people, caused by unequal accumulation of wealth. Wealth \neq Income, though of course income is a contributing element to wealth. A factor in creating social inequalities, but considered a separate phenomenon.

Inequality or inequity?

While inequality fundamentally refers to unbalanced or disparate conditions, ***inequity*** asserts that these unbalanced conditions are the result of unfair or unjust conditions. When we describe inequities in our society, we acknowledge that social and economic inequalities result from unjust and unfair policies, conventions, or decisions by those in power.

Inequalities can seem passive or inevitable, while inequities result from active decision-making

Figure 1. Wealth Accumulation and Size of the Racial Wealth Gap, 2011



Source: Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), 2008 Panel Wave 10, 2011

Reflection prompts: Have you seen this chart before? If you teach, do you teach about the wealth gap? If you are a food systems practitioner, how does the wealth gap shape your work? What caused the wealth gap?

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/laurashin/2015/03/26/the-racial-wealth-gap-why-a-typical-white-household-has-16-times-the-wealth-of-a-black-one/#1d74f65a1f45>

How do structural inequalities/inequities shape our food system?

- It is important to remember that our food system is not a separate part of our society, but rather integrated into our social, economic, cultural, and environmental systems. Meaning, inequities in our society yield inequities in our food system.
- **Food inequity** refers to the adverse effects of both the production and distribution of food that marginalized communities face. We currently have an inequitable food system that disproportionately burdens and denies access to communities of color and high poverty. In an equitable food system, race, class, geography, and other social identities would not be indicators for whether or not you have a voice in and access to a nourishing food system.

(definition from ISU Extension <https://www.extension.iastate.edu/ffed/resources-2/food-systems-equity/>)

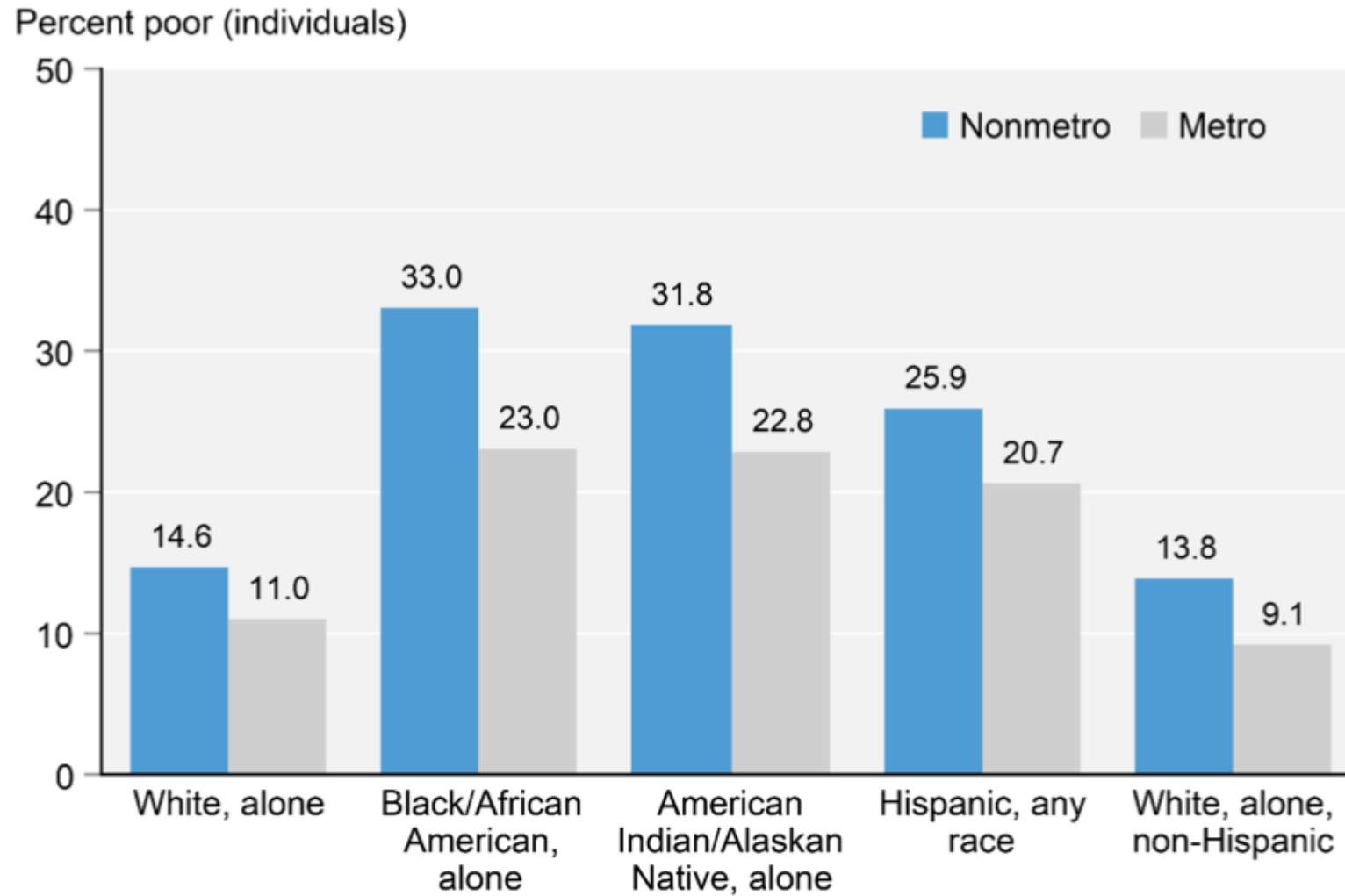
Case 1: Producers



Reflection prompts throughout this case:

- What barriers keep marginalized people from becoming farmers?
- How does the wealth gap translate to production agriculture?
- Who is able to accumulate wealth in the realm of production agriculture? Who is not?
- How do these inequities shape other elements of the food system?

Poverty rates by race/ethnicity and metro/nonmetro residence, 2016



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2016.

Principal farm operator household finances, by ERS farm typology, 2015

Item	Residence Farms	Intermediate Farms	Commercial Farms	All Farms
Number of farms	1,215,011	631,942	185,346	2,032,300
	Income, median dollars per household			
Farm income	-2,100	788	146,466	-765
Off-farm income	82,987	55,750	40,250	67,500
Earned Income	62,500	31,789	22,500	38,270
Unearned Income	24,000	25,013	9,000	25,013
Total household income	82,925	59,102	197,980	76,735

Source: USDA Economic Research Service. Accessed at

<https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/DataFiles/48870/table02.xls?v=42704>

**Intermediate and Commercial farms – operator identifies farming as primary occupation; Intermediate is <\$350,000 in sales and Commercial is >\$350,000 in sales*

**“Unearned income” is income from stocks or investments rather than farm sales*

Farming is
expensive



An average new chicken house costs \$300,000 to build, and the average chicken farm today has at least 4 houses. \$1.2 Million investment



\$350,000 and up

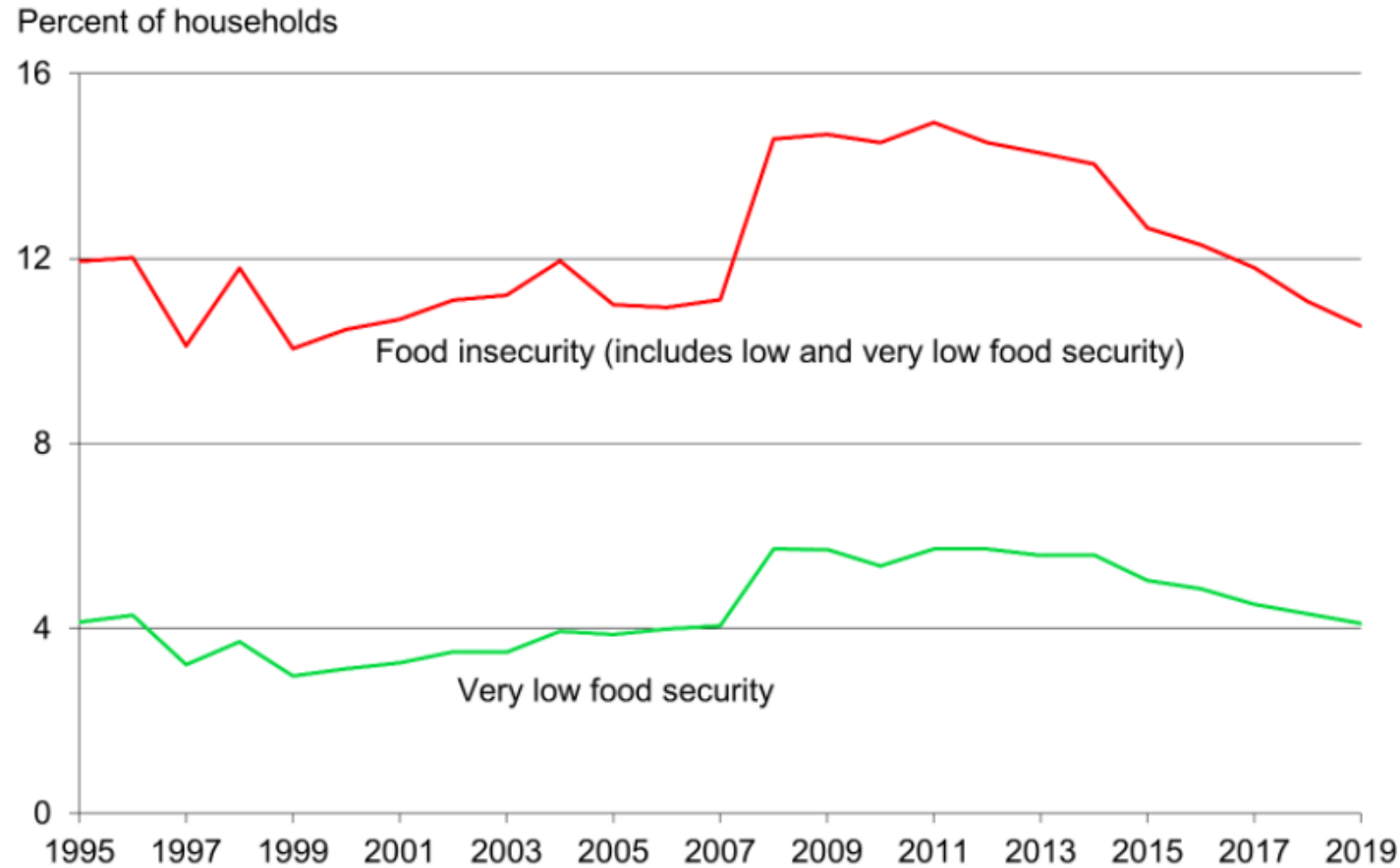
Case 2: Consumers



Reflection prompts throughout this case:

- In what ways is hunger in the US a symptom of structural inequalities?
- How is food access connected to food production?
- How might alternative food movements (farmers markets, “buy local” campaigns, organic agriculture) perpetuate inequalities among consumers?

Trends in prevalence rates of food insecurity and very low food security in U.S. households, 1995-2019



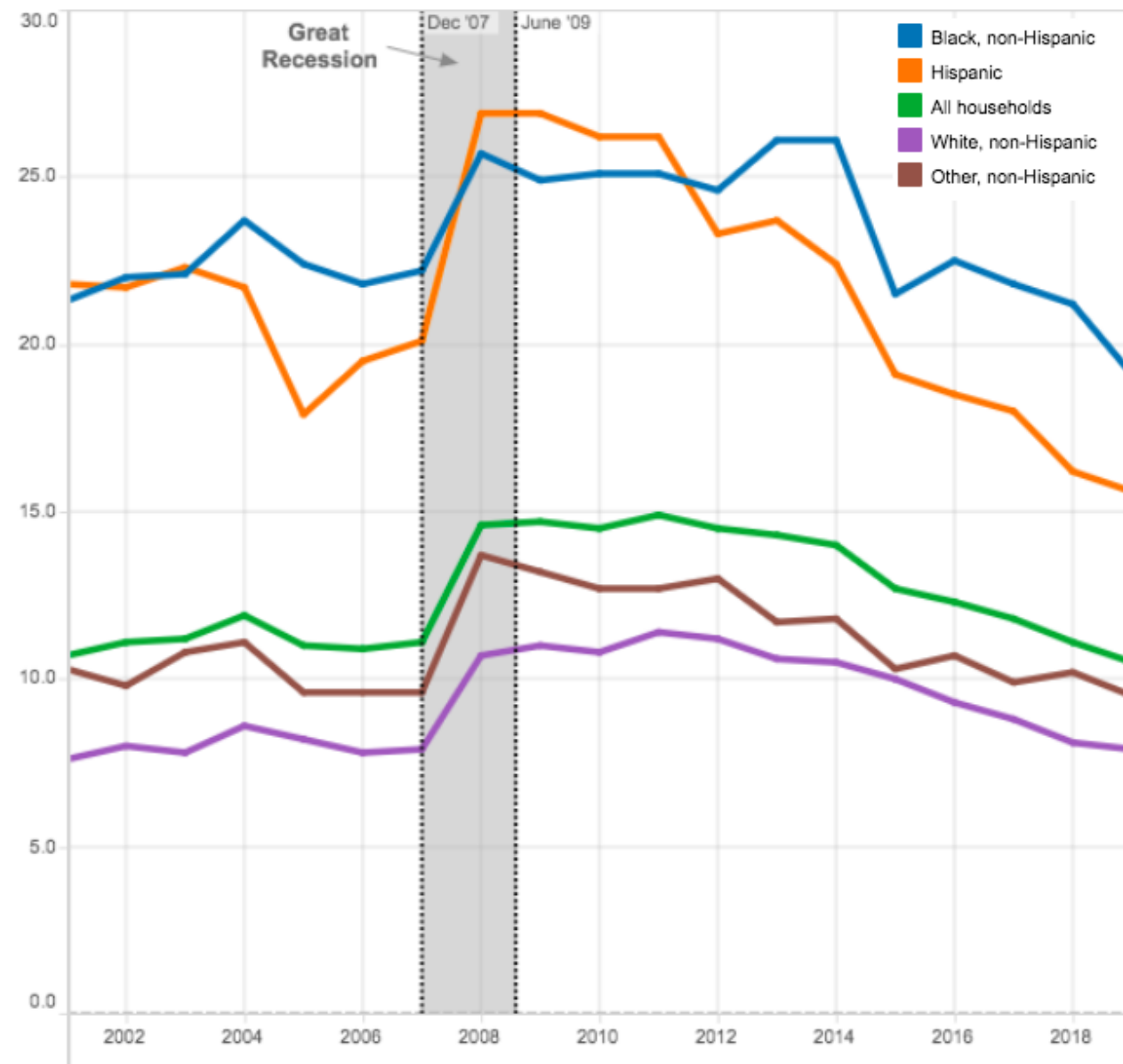
Note: Prevalence rates for 1996 and 1997 were adjusted for the estimated effects of differences in data collection screening protocols used in those years.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service, using data from the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement.

“The defining characteristic of very low food security is that, at times during the year, the food intake of household members is reduced and their normal eating patterns are disrupted because the household lacks money and other resources for food.”

Trends in food insecurity by race and ethnicity, 2001-19

Percent of households



Source: Calculated by USDA, Economic Research Service, using Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement data.

<https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/>

Structural inequalities at the point of consumption:

- Disruption of traditional/Indigenous foodways
- Food access/obesity interventions that perpetuate “White” constructions of food, health, weight
- Stigmatization of “poor” food choices *in a structurally inequitable food landscape*
- Contemporary “food apartheid” with historical roots in redlining, restrictive covenants, and disinvestment in urban Black communities (rural White communities have also seen public disinvestment, but these issues manifest differently across racial and geographic lines)
- These issues even play out in “elite” food spheres – Bon Appetit magazine scandal, high profile chefs

Case 3: COVID-19

ECONOMY

How The COVID-19 Pandemic Is Deepening Economic Inequality In The U.S

August 16, 2020 · 7:59 AM ET

Heard on [Weekend Edition Sunday](#)

Reflection prompts throughout this case:

- What structural economic issues existed before the pandemic that have been exacerbated by COVID-19?
- What pre-existing issues within the food system have been exacerbated by COVID-19?
- What new challenges in the food system have emerged due to COVID-19?

Impacts of the pandemic on the food system:

- Agricultural production has remained relatively stable
- Fear of food shortages early in pandemic, most retail supply chains have leveled out since spring (still structural challenges in diverting products in an inflexible food chain)
- Many previously food insecure individuals are in high risk categories for COVID-19
- Food service workers are more likely to be food insecure and are at greater risk of food insecurity due to business shutdowns, lack of paid sick leave, etc
- Since the beginning of the pandemic, overall household rates of food insecurity have doubled
- 34.5% of households with children 18 and under are food insecure, an increase of 130% compared to pre-pandemic rates

Concluding thoughts:

“There are currently over twenty million workers in the food system, most earning low or poverty wages and more likely than workers in other industries to be receiving social welfare such as food stamps. In particular, people of color and women are more likely to earn lower wages and hold fewer management opportunities than their white and male counterparts. These food-chain jobs are in some of the most dangerous industries in the United States, especially farming and food processing, which are overwhelmingly performed by a Latinx and undocumented workforce.” (Sbicca, 2018)

- Systemic (or structural) issues are called such because they are *everywhere*. We can shine a light in any community in the US and see these same dynamics play out.
- Systemic issues present us with infinite entry points for addressing them. Structural issues were built and can be un-built.

Thank you!

Mary, Bill, and I will now be happy to open the conversation up for Q&A.

Feel free to follow up with me via email –
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