

FOOD SECURITY AND CHOICE

POUGHKEEPSIE PLENTY COMMUNITY FOOD ASSESSMENT

This document presents research undertaken from 2010 – 2012 related to the food system of the City of Poughkeepsie that focused on the situation of food security, how households choose food and what choices they have.

More than one in four households in the City of Poughkeepsie is food insecure, with reduced quality, variety or desirability of diets, or hunger. This level of food insecurity outpaces levels for the U.S. as a whole, all U.S. inner cities, and the U.S. Northeast region.

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INTRODUCTION

This Community Food Assessment, undertaken to understand and *characterize* how people experience Poughkeepsie's food system, was conducted for a broader initiative called Poughkeepsie Plenty. Toward building the City's capacity to ensure the right for all to access sufficient and nutritious food and transforming Poughkeepsie into a city where everyone can secure, prepare, enjoy and benefit from healthy food, Poughkeepsie Plenty set out to:

- Create a research-based community food assessment
- Mobilize community participation and input to create an action plan (for *improving* the City's food system – not contained here) through community food forums and a city-wide action planning forum
- Establish a Community Food Coalition that facilitates and oversees the implementation of the action plan toward realizing our mission and vision by coordinating projects and monitoring and advocating for policy

This document presents the research undertaken from 2010 – 2012 related to the food system of the City of Poughkeepsie focused on the situation of food security, how households choose food and what choices they have.

The assessment was driven by two research questions:

1. How do residents access healthy food in the City of Poughkeepsie?
2. How do City of Poughkeepsie residents make decisions about what to eat and what constrains their choices?

To this end, we developed statistically significant, city-wide baseline measures (with $\pm 5\%$ margin of error) for food security, food access and food preferences by administering a survey to a random sample of City of Poughkeepsie households.

We conducted seven focus group interviews with particular segments of the City's population at risk of food insecurity, in order to clarify and contextualize their concerns within the baseline measures for the City as a whole.

We conducted fieldwork, interviews, archival research and secondary data analysis to assess broader features of the City's food system. This additional research shed light on the points of food distribution (how residents get food), supporting infrastructure (how transportation and other physical elements of the City affect residents' food access) and institutional influences (how programs and policies shape what residents eat). This report presents the research undertaken and key findings.

POUGHKEEPSIE PLENTY

The mission of Poughkeepsie Plenty is to build the City's capacity to ensure the right for all to access sufficient and nutritious food. Our vision is that Poughkeepsie will be transformed into a city where everyone can secure, prepare, enjoy and benefit from healthy food.

COMMUNITY FOOD ASSESSMENT

According to the Community Food Security Coalition, a Community Food Assessment is "a powerful way to tell the story of what is happening with food in a community, and to mobilize efforts to improve the food system."

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The key findings of the assessment research are summarized herein.

Food Security in the City of Poughkeepsie

MORE THAN ONE IN FOUR HOUSEHOLDS ARE FOOD INSECURE

Our survey research estimates that less than three quarters (73.2%) of the City's households are **food secure** by USDA standards. This means they have no food-access problems or limitations, or so few as to not affect their diets or food intake.

Another 15.8% can be characterized as food insecure without hunger. These households reported reducing the quality, variety, or desirability of their diets frequently over the last year, although with little or no indication of reducing overall food intake.

The remaining 11.0% qualify as food insecure with hunger. These households reported disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake frequently over the last year.

Taken together, the 26.8% rate of food insecurity in the City of Poughkeepsie is very high, outpacing levels for the U.S. as a whole, all U.S. inner cities, and the U.S. Northeast region.

POVERTY AND FOOD INSECURITY ARE CORRELATED

The key factor causing food insecurity among City of Poughkeepsie households is poverty.

2008-10 American Community Survey data indicate the City's median family income is \$44,595 – about \$17,500 less than the U.S. figure.

Furthermore, 26.0% of City residents, and 41.0% of children under 18, live on incomes below the poverty level, which again exceed the national statistics (of 14.4% and 20.1%, respectively).

In this local context, we found a strong statistical correlation between household income and food security.

Less than half (46.8%) of City households earning \$15,000 or less, and just over two-thirds (68.2%) of households earning \$15,000-35,000, could be characterized as food secure.

Importantly, we identified no statistically significant correlations of either household size or the presence of children under 18 with food security.

This last finding underscores how food insecurity is experienced among a variety of City of Poughkeepsie households, from large families with many mouths to feed to elderly individuals living alone.

	FOOD INSECURE	
FOOD SECURE	WITH HUNGER	WITHOUT HUNGER
73.2%	11.0%	15.8%

N=354

In the City of Poughkeepsie, food security seems less connected to different food values or nutrition knowledge than to inequalities of material resources and geographical mobility.

How Do City of Poughkeepsie Households Choose Food?

Despite local inequalities in socioeconomic conditions and food security, our surveys revealed wide consensus among City of Poughkeepsie households regarding what's important when choosing a store and buying certain foods.

FOUR REASONS TO CHOOSE A STORE

Around 90% of households identified four reasons as important (i.e., either "very important" or "somewhat important") when choosing a store for most of their food: the store in question "has healthy foods," "has better prices on the food I want," "is easy to get to," and "is close to home or work."

TWO REASONS TO CHOOSE CERTAIN FOODS

When ranking reasons "other than low prices" why they buy certain foods, 87.1% and 77.0% of respondents rated "food that stays fresh longer" and "food that's easy to prepare," respectively, as important.

CONSUMER SUB-GROUPS

There are significant consumer sub-groups within the City of Poughkeepsie.

Notably, two out of every five households (or 39.0%) ranked "the store accepts WIC/food stamps" as important.

One third (33.6%) said WIC/food-stamp acceptance was "very important," while one half (49.4%) of households reported it was "not at all important," when choosing a store. This issue was one of the strongest points of *divergence* in how City of Poughkeepsie residents make decisions about accessing food.

Over half (52.4%) of households identified "the store sells foods from my family background" as important (which indicates co-ethnic or co-religious identification with the store's products or clientele).

NO CORRELATION BETWEEN INCOME LEVEL AND NUTRITIONAL AWARENESS

Healthy food choices correspond to another consumer sub-group.

For instance, organic food was ranked as important when buying certain foods for almost half (45.4%) of City of Poughkeepsie households. A similar number (42.3%) reported they always look at food labels to decide if the food is nutritious or healthy.

Importantly, we found no statistically significant correlations between these two items and household income, despite the common myth that nutritional awareness is the province of higher socioeconomic groups. Households in any income bracket seem, for all intents and purposes, no more or less likely to make healthy food choices of these kinds.

In the City of Poughkeepsie, food security seems less connected to different food values or nutrition knowledge than to inequalities of material resources and geographical mobility.

What Food Choices Do City of Poughkeepsie Households Have?

Inequalities of material resources and household access highlight how the City's food security situation is influenced, in a variety of ways, by the kinds and distribution of food retail and assistance found in and around the City of Poughkeepsie.

SUPERMARKETS AND GROCERY STORES

Supermarkets and grocery stores are especially critical, since these retailers are most likely to contain the large volumes that offer variety in cost, quality, and desirability in the different food items that households seek.

Significantly, the City of Poughkeepsie has only two bona fide grocery stores — Associated Supermarket (opened in April 2011) and Casa Latina — both located at the eastern edge of city limits.

Of course, other grocery stores lie just over the City's borders. Yet convenient access to these markets as well as easy transport of goods from them cannot be assumed for large segments of the City's population.

In fact, the USDA has recently classified large areas of the City (specifically, two Census tracts covering most of the City's north side) as a "food desert," which it defines as areas with poverty levels of at least 20% that are located more than a mile away from a supermarket or large grocery store.

During focus group interviews, we heard that City of Poughkeepsie households across socioeconomic and linguistic divides recognize that no single supermarket generally satisfies all their household needs. The need to travel to multiple stores to cost-effectively buy goods as different as fresh produce, family-size packaged foods, and non-food necessities underscores the criticality of transportation in household shopping.

TRANSPORTATION

A critical feature of the food system here is the fact that more than one quarter (26.8%, according to the 2008-10 American Community Survey) of City of

Poughkeepsie households don't have a private vehicle.

In this local context, our survey revealed statistically significant correlations between household modes of transportation and food security.

Less than one half (47.8%) of households who "usually" take the public bus, and less than one quarter (23.1%) of households who "usually" walk to grocery stores, qualify as food secure.

Additionally, fully one half (50.0%) of City of Poughkeepsie households who said it was "difficult" to get to a grocery store were food insecure.

Moreover, 81.5% of all the households who said it was "difficult" to get to a grocery store cited transportation as the main reason.

SMALLER RETAILERS

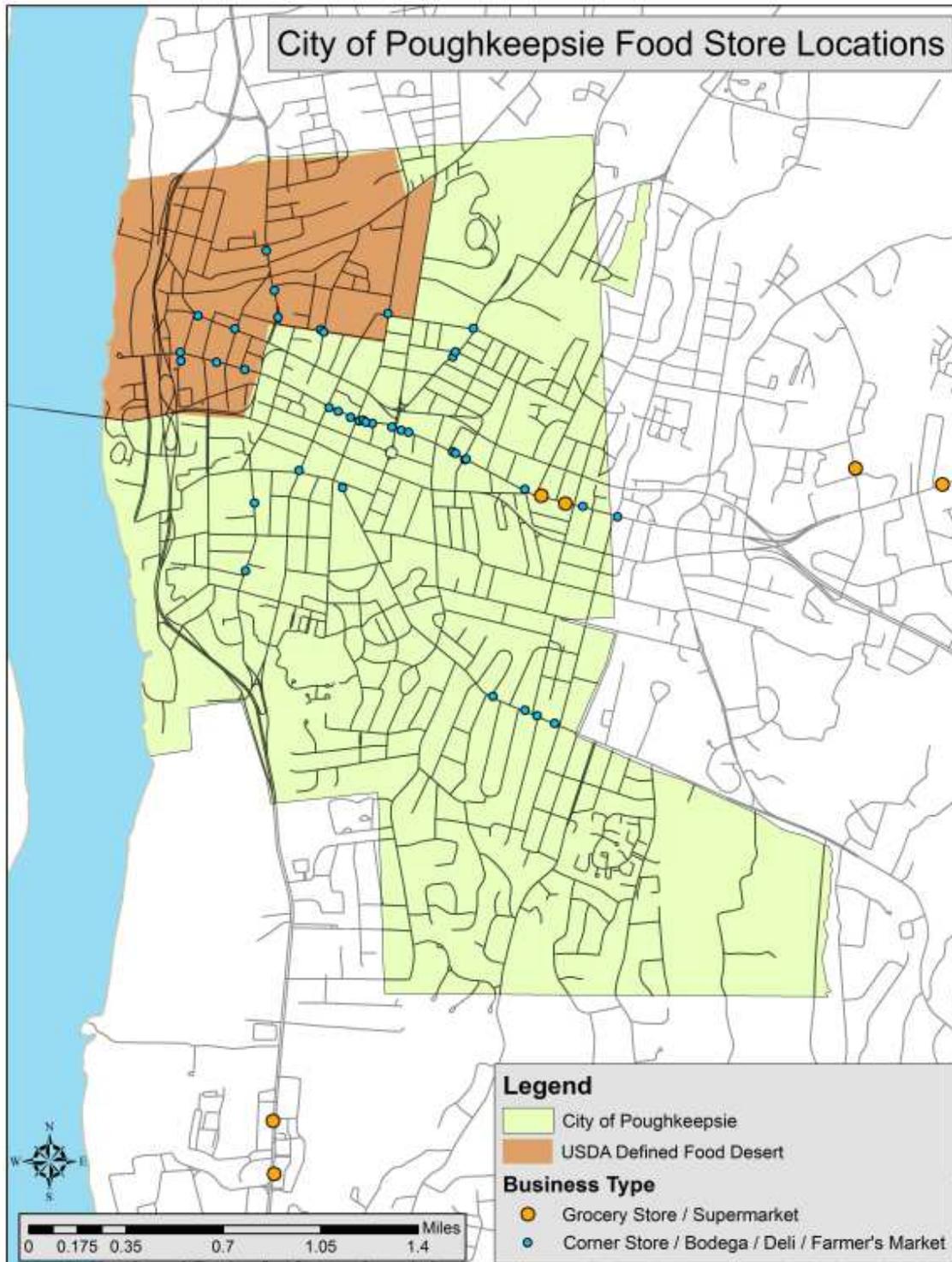
With so few supermarkets located within or close to city limits, smaller retailers like corner stores, bodegas, dollar stores, and delicatessens dominate the food market sector in the City of Poughkeepsie.

Overall, 9.6% of the City of Poughkeepsie households we surveyed reported they do not get most of their food from supermarkets or grocery stores.

In contrast to supermarkets, smaller food stores typically have reduced variety in food items, although some stores may carry ethnic foods or other specialty items that supermarkets sell less frequently.

Smaller food stores provide a valuable service to many City of Poughkeepsie households.

Some of these establishments sell fresh foods like produce or meats – 38% of the small food stores we observed sold produce of some kind. Their location is convenient to City of Poughkeepsie households, particularly along the Main Street corridor.



Smaller food stores also play an important role in **community connections**.

They often have strong community basis, particularly in relation to the City's Latin American, West Indian, and Middle Eastern immigrants. Ethnic entrepreneurs have contributed to the City's economic development and represent a potential source of local leadership with an economic interest in community well-being.

Smaller stores' concentration along Main Street means they support a measure of social order by offering "eyes on the street" with an interest in maintaining street side safety.

However, the relatively high rate of failure among smaller food stores (such as the Spicy Peppers produce store on Main Street, which went out of business during our research period) undermines food access among the many households who shop regularly at these establishments.

Smaller food stores' significant contribution to many residents' diets is indicated by our survey finding that almost one of every 20 households (4.4%) in the City of Poughkeepsie reported getting "most of their food" from these kinds of establishments. Likewise, one in five (19.9%) households report shopping "often" at smaller food stores.

AFFORDABILITY

In this landscape, the problem of food insecurity isn't necessarily the result of households finding no food markets whatsoever within city limits.

A more relevant question is how affordable are the foods that households can find at food markets, particularly in light of the correlation between food security and income.

Our comparison of average prices among Town of Poughkeepsie supermarkets and the smaller food

stores in the City of Poughkeepsie reveals no clear patterns.

On the one hand, a gallon of milk or a box of cereal costs on average more in the City's smaller stores than in Town supermarkets. On the other hand, the average loaf of bread costs less in the City—not taking into account the reduced variety of bread products sold in smaller food stores.

We also observed that about one in three (35%) of the City's smaller food stores accepted EBT and/or WIC benefits, another way that food is made affordable to low income residents.

QUALITY AND NUTRITIONAL VALUE

If the contribution of food unaffordability to the problem of food insecurity in the City of Poughkeepsie seems inconclusive, a more important factor is the quality and nutritional value of food sold in the City.

This issue is closely associated with the characteristics of smaller food stores, which typically emphasize snacks, soda, processed foods, and other items of questionable nutritional value.

In smaller stores where fresh foods are sold, these offerings are often limited. For instance, while 38% of the small food stores we observed sold produce of some kind, only two sold heads of lettuce.

Some focus group informants reported that produce in these stores sometimes remained on shelves past peak freshness.

RESTAURANTS

Retail food markets aren't the only outlets through which City of Poughkeepsie households obtain their foods.

There are also the many restaurants in and just outside the City, a high number of which serve fast

food, take-out food, and other cuisines or styles of food that are priced to fit lower-income budgets.

Restaurants' significant contribution to many residents' diets is indicated by our survey finding that more than one out of every 20 households (5.4%) in the City of Poughkeepsie reported getting "most of their food" from these food outlets. Likewise, more than one in four (27.3%) households reported "often" eating out or getting food from restaurants.

From focus group interviews, we have anecdotal evidence that two types of households are most likely to eat primarily from restaurants:

1. Households where someone works at restaurants and brings back food to share with the rest of the household, and
2. Non-family households that prefer to spend earnings eating out or bringing home take-out food.

Our study didn't look in further detail at how restaurants influence the nutritional intake of City residents, but we note that the Dutchess County Department of Health's 2007 Trans Fat Survey estimated that almost half (44%) of City restaurants prepared foods containing trans fats, which may contribute to weight gain and to health problems like heart disease and diabetes.

FARMERS' MARKET

At least one seasonal outlet in the City focuses on fresh food retail: the Poughkeepsie Farmers' Market. A stated aim of the market is to provide locally-produced, fresh and nutritious foods to the community.

The chief produce vendor is the Poughkeepsie Farm Project, a non-profit organization that manages the market (which also spearheaded the Poughkeepsie Plenty initiative).

The fresh produce vendors have enjoyed the strongest sales amongst the vendors, in part because they are able to receive forms of public assistance that have steadily increased as a percentage of the market's overall produce sales – from 26.1% in 2009 to 34.4% in 2011.

The market's experience reinforces assessment findings that many low income residents value and seek out high quality fresh food, which can be difficult to access in the City of Poughkeepsie.

During the course of the assessment, the market relocated from a vacant lot on Main Street to a City park several blocks away, increasing its proximity to high density neighborhoods and shifting from operating at lunchtime to a more convenient time in the late afternoon and early evening.

FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

In addition to the market, there are many other ways City of Poughkeepsie residents get food from food assistance programs or use these programs to subsidize their retail food purchases.

Almost certainly, the most widely-used food assistance program is the City's schools.

The Poughkeepsie City School District reported that, in the 2010-11 school year, 63% of its students were eligible for free lunches, and another 11% were eligible for reduced-price lunches (or 49.2% of school age children in all City households, according to our survey).

Considering that eligibility for these programs is based on low household incomes, this statistic suggests that three of every four students (74%) face some form of food insecurity due to their household's socioeconomic situation.

Furthermore, the City of Poughkeepsie contains 12 food pantries and free meal services at last count.

About half of these establishments are organized by City churches, with hours limited to specific days of the week. Others are operated by non-profit groups like Dutchess Outreach and the Salvation Army. These establishments are typically open five or more days of the week.

Still other non-profits provide free or donated meals in three emergency shelters in and around

the City, for domestic abuse victims (Grace Smith House), runaway youth and the homeless (Hudson River Housing).

Several of the food programs operated by non-profits are supported by donations of fresh produce from the Poughkeepsie Farm Project, which also provides subsidized shares of fresh produce to low-income families.

What Possibilities Exist for the Future?

COMMUNITY ASSETS TO BUILD ON

While the City of Poughkeepsie faces a daunting food security situation with roots in several elements – from the population's socioeconomic conditions, to the food market landscape, to the public transportation system – we also identify several community assets to build upon in future efforts to improve the food system.

The rich foundation of non-profit organizations, educational institutions, and dedicated community leaders has been long recognized as a valuable community asset in the City. Organizations currently at work on food justice issues, such as the Poughkeepsie Farm Project and Dutchess Outreach, are hardly the only groups with a stake in food security.

In this report, we have further suggested the potential leadership and affinity of smaller food store proprietors in the broader effort to reform and enhance the food system.

We think it important also to note the assets provided by residential groups themselves, such as ethnic communities of which there are several in the City of Poughkeepsie. The grassroots formation of a ride-sharing system (the *raite*) by Latino immigrants is an excellent example of a social capital strategy based in residential networks to ameliorate challenges specific to the City's food system. So too we can take heed of ethnic traditions that these groups might share: culinary education, gardening practices, and general traditions of neighborly outreach.