

PASS THE GRAVY: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY
ON FOOD INSECURITY DURING THE U.S.
FALL AND WINTER HOLIDAY SEASON

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ABSTRACT

During the fall and winter holidays in the U.S., groups typically gather for a meal, granting them a sense of warmth and belonging. But, what if there were no food to begin with? In Hays County, Texas, one out of every seven people experiences food insecurity year-round, including the holidays that generally require people to spend and eat in excess. The societal pressure to provide an expensive feast along with presents during this season generally places an equally emotional and financial burden on the household. I investigate how the food insecure population of Hays County, Texas combats food insecurity during the holidays, negotiates holiday traditions, and manages other difficulties associated with the holiday season. It accomplishes this through the implementation of ethnographic methods consisting of nine qualitative interviews and demographic surveys from the population who seeks assistance from Hays Count Food Bank. Two central questions guiding the research are: what holiday traditions do participants engage in and value?, and how does being food insecure affect their experiences with these holiday traditions? My research aims to uncover specific issues from in-depth accounts of food insecure households in order to fill a gap in the social scientific literature, inform policy in Texas, and improve services provided by the Hays County Food Bank. This research was funded by the Undergraduate Research Fellowship at Texas State University.

Keywords: Food Insecurity; U.S. holidays; poverty; Texas.

1. WHO'S HUNGRY? THE BREADTH OF HUNGER IN THE U.S.

Although large organizations like Feeding America and UNICEF among others, have disseminated knowledge widely about the issue of food insecurity both nationally and internationally, there still exists little to no literature on how food insecure populations, or populations who cannot always obtain enough food for their household, negotiate the societal demands of a holiday season (Long, M. et al, 2017). Radimer et al (1992) delineates that the three common aspects of food insecurity are: worrying often about having enough food, changes in diet to make food last longer, and adults decreasing their own food intake to insure children have enough to eat. This last step is followed by children limiting their food intake in severe cases. Many residents in the U.S. combat food insecurity year-round, but I hypothesize it may be more pronounced during the fall and winter holiday season because of the additional cultural demands of providing excessive and lavish feasts, gifts, and the appearance of overall well-being. The general research questions guiding this study are: what holiday traditions do participants engage in and value?, and how does being food insecure affect their experiences with these holiday traditions?

Historical and Societal Contexts

When the weather grows colder, it is also the time when people prepare for gathering during the fall and spring seasons in the U.S. The two largest holidays are Thanksgiving and Christmas (this holiday time also allows for other celebrations, such as Hanukkah and Kwanza, but Christmas remains the most widely celebrated in the U.S.), which call for a congregation of loved ones and friends. Groups might engage in some traditions like watching a football game, talking about the past year, providing activities

for children, or opening gifts (especially this last one, since most magazine and newspaper articles concentrate on consumer and company profit predictions). But one constant remains the most central activity—the group feast.

For many holidays, people old and young gather and face each other, interacting and sharing an, often times, large meal. Typically, hosts choose food and drinks that project the holiday’s message and values. And, eating this meal typically allows the consumers to engage in the message of the holiday: displaying general well-being (and even affluence) (Long, 2016).

Thanksgiving falls on the fourth Thursday of each November, the eleventh month in the 12-month calendar year. The history of this U.S. holiday began with quite a large amount of variation surrounding the season, foods, and activities, and as Long points out in her chapter on days of thanksgiving, the Puritans fasted, ironically. Other people, such as the pilgrims held feasts around times of good harvest. In the 1800s, thanksgiving days were held on different dates proclaimed by each state and shifted into a new purpose for feasting and leisure. In fact, Thanksgiving also became a time for “’begging’ by the poor” (Long 2016). By the 1850s, Thanksgiving was a holiday focused on the family group. It was officially declared a holiday by Abraham Lincoln in 1863 to bring the nation together in the midst of the Civil War. It was at this point that Thanksgiving become a time of celebrating abundance (Long, 2016). The standard for a Thanksgiving meal was set as “roast turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes, gravy, and cranberry sauce with sides of green beans, corn, succotash, bread, and pies for dessert—especially apple or pumpkin” (Long, 2016). Though many people aim for this standard, there are wide variations among ethnic groups and regions, as I present later on in my results.

After Thanksgiving, Christmas occurs on December 25th of each twelve-month calendar year. Unlike Thanksgiving, many celebrate this holiday internationally with their own cultural customs. The holiday is characterized by cold weather or snow, Christian symbols, comfort, warmth, family, and gift-giving. Associated foods often follow this imagery, such as cookies with snowmen or snowflakes, candy canes shaped in a “J” for the Christian figure, Jesus. Long states in her chapter of *The Routledge History of American Foodways, “Holidays and Festivals,”* that the feast menu often holds much of the same items as the Thanksgiving menu, but is not associated with harvest. In turn, it stands as symbolic of sociability, generosity, and merriment surrounding social gatherings often of family groups (Long, 2016). Foodstuffs are often shared or gifted throughout the season.

The National Breadth of Food Insecurity

The description of these winter holidays involve activities rooted in tradition and are sentimental to many of the U.S. As a culture, those who celebrate holidays typically prioritize the meal as the quintessential event of the gathering. Knowing that the meal is hugely important to many, large companies have capitalized on this fact. Indeed, U.S. Census Bureau Retail and Food Services Data indicates a four percent increase in food and retail spending from 2015 to 2016, which is nearly a \$35 billion increase (U.S. Census...Food Services Data, 2017). Economists found that this trend continued during the 2017 U.S. fall and winter holiday season as the U.S. experienced a 5.7 percent increase from 2016 to 2017 in food and retail spending (United States Census Bureau News, 2018). This trend, in fact, has been persistent since 2008’s fourth quarter (United States Census Bureau News, 2018). Companies have been able to accomplish this

through influencing consumers to purchase pre-prepared foodstuffs and to also include their ingredients into favorite holiday recipes, like Campbell's cream of mushroom soup in their famous green bean casserole (Long, 2016). This process has been repeated and sold to the public so much so that now, one could consider purchasing such foodstuffs a tradition in itself...But, what if a family or individual possesses little to no purchasing power to begin with?

This tends to be a point where food insecurity and social stigma intersect. Because food insecurity is defined as the "lack of available financial resources for food at the level of the household," the household finds itself stretching further to meet the outlined, middle class holiday standards above (United States Department of Agriculture Economic Services).

Though poverty and food insecurity do not necessarily go hand-in-hand in all cases, poverty is certainly a contributing factor to the hunger issue in the U.S. The U.S. Census Bureau defines poverty as a line or income threshold for households with various numbers of residents. For example, for a four-person household with two children under 18 in residence, the poverty threshold is \$24,339, and thresholds increase or decrease with the number of individuals and dependent children in residence (United States Census Poverty Thresholds, 2017). Feeding America (2017), the largest, domestic hunger-relief organization in the U.S., estimates that a national average of 12% of households (a residence housing a range in number from one individual to a multi-generational, extended family) in the U.S. experience food insecurity (Feeding America, 2017). This amounts to approximately 15.6 million households containing 41.2 million people (12.9 million children included) facing food insecurity (Feeding America, 2017).

The majority of households, however, do not fall below the poverty line threshold for their household. Falling slightly above the poverty line diminishes access to federal and local resources, as noted in section three.

As the second largest state in the United States with over Twenty-Seven million people in residence, Texas holds the eleventh highest food insecurity rate among the states (United States Census Bureau (2017); Feeding America (2017)). With such a large population, the 15.4% food insecurity rate reaches across the vast regions of the Lone Star State (Feeding America, 2017). Centrally located, Hays County, Texas comes close to that rate with approximately one in seven residents struggling with food insecurity. The cities of San Marcos, Kyle, Buda, Neiderwald, Dripping Springs, and Martindale make up Hays County, one of the largest growing areas in the nation with over a thirty percent estimated increase from April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2016 (United States Census Bureau, 2016). In a county with a large university, and a bolstering economy from tourism of its many natural areas and large, commercial shopping centers, food insecurity continues to prevail. As mentioned previously, an impoverished condition does not always equate with food insecurity; Thirty-Five percent of the food insecure population in Hays County do not meet income-eligibility for federal programs like SNAP (Feeding America, 2016).

Meals Mean More

Much of the argument of this thesis relies upon the reality that food means more than just food. Yes, its prime purpose is to nourish and provide energy to the body, from a scientific standpoint. But, as Counihan (2009) elucidates in her book, *A Tortilla is Like Life*, food intertwines rich histories of ethnicity, race, gender, and family. The women of

Antonito explain their memories through stories of food, and one can see that certain foods have symbolically come to represent heritage. In studying the narrated lives of women through ethnographic methods, Counihan finds that food is an integral part of the body, culture, and ritual (Counihan, 2009). Food and activity surrounding it can represent many aspects of culture, like how one generation hands traditions off to the next generation. And, it is often more meaningful than at first glance. U.S. culture has made a routine of three-meals-a-day, and if two people share a meal, it is more than a meeting of friends; it is an invitation for intimacy. We see this when a potential employee is invited out for a lunch interview, potential romantic partners go out on a date at a restaurant, a group makes a toast at a celebration, and of course, when family gathers for a holiday. Essentially, every person has a body, and the intake of food into the body often means acceptance of what is happening around them. Whether this is love, or friendship, or community, or all of the above, the shared experience of consuming food strengthens all other simultaneous interactions.

Food is also love (Roberts, 2015). As Roberts (2013) studied in Ecuador during the early 2000's, mothers who loved their children gave them sweets in a show of love, and some withheld sweets as a show of love. As she notes, society that contains both of these scenarios are not mutually exclusive (Roberts, 2015). Roberts (2015) explains how the U.S. market capitalizes on love via food, selling sugary products to those who want more for their loved ones. This is problematic because if the U.S. pushes for more financial gains in the food market, the more competition drives for lower prices, thus, lower wages for the worker. The greater the competition, the less the workers and lower-income civilians have access to food, and if the impoverished cannot afford food, there is

an absence of love through this particular channel. This can have many implications for mental (as well as physical) health in food insecure populations (Shah et al, 2012). And, the more the food industry capitalizes on food, the work force who produces said food earns less, potentially eats less, and there may be an absence of love in this respect on both the production and consumer side of the market.

Methodology

The methods for this project include getting IRB approval, recruitment of participants, interviews and demographic surveys, transcribing, note-taking, coding for themes, and analyzing the data. I obtained IRB approval on January 8th, 2018, and began recruiting participants the following day. The recruitment process entailed setting up a table at each HCFB food distribution in one week, handing out flyers, speaking with those interested, and scheduling a time to meet in an accessible and public place. I gave each participant a thank-you in the form of a Twenty-Five Dollar gift card from H-E-B granted by the Undergraduate Research Fund at Texas State University. I conducted nine, 30-minute to one-hour interviews, and those participants also completed a brief, demographic survey before the interview to give the results more context. I've included my semi-structured interview guide in Appendix I. Before the interviews, I obtained informed consent to record the interview on a digital recorder and take notes. I then transcribed all of the interviews using Microsoft Word and Windows Media Player on my personal laptop. I coded the transcripts for themes, and the most prominent themes are included in my results section. The data were kept confidential by password protection on the laptop, and the physical copies were kept in a locked file box.

The sample includes eight women and one man for this study, ranging in age from twenty-five to sixty-eight years old. I sought a diverse crowd, and the only college student willing to participate happened to be the one male participant. The eight women in this study were all mothers, most with grown children, and three with younger children. Eight of the nine participants identified as “Hispanic” and one mother of a young child identified as “white.” The average size of the participants’ households was 4.5 people, and household size ranged from two to seven people. The participants had a range of annual income from \$9,600 to Thirty thousand dollars, \$19,700 being the average. All of the participants were recipients of services from the Hays County Food Bank. For confidentiality purposes, names of the participants have been changed.

2. FINDINGS

Significance of Food

Participants chose to speak about the meaning of food most times when prompted about their holidays. As I asked about their favorite things to do during the holidays, or even their favorite holiday memories as a child, participants generally talked about the food and the preparation of the food. Here, Miranda, self-described as a thirty-nine-year-old mother of five, explains her typical holiday:

“We sit down at the table. I have already prepared all the food... we sit down and actually have nice, fancy glasses that I like to use to let them get their sprite and let them sit down with us, with their mom and dad. We just sit down and eat. Fellowship.” –Miranda

Like the example above, most of how the participants talked about their holiday meals involved the table and its symbolism as the place of meeting. As Counihan (2009) covers in her novel, the lives of women are often intertwined in their work and in their food, food being critical as well as symbolic of sharing in whatever is happening around them. Miranda said it best, “fellowship” was at the core of the holidays’ meaning for most of the participants.

Another example that exemplifies the root of the participants’ sentiments about food was spoken by Yolanda, self-described as a sixty-four-year-old, Hispanic mother and grandmother. I asked her if her family gathered together often. She explained that it’s “[her] job to keep [her] family together,” and depicted exactly how food plays an

imperative role during the holidays:

“I believe we’ve gotten apart, and we just have to get back to it, and we did...[we did] not give too many presents, but our food stayed the same. Usually our food is the main part of our family. Isn’t that weird? It’s our food. Like, if you go to somebody’s house, you cook for ‘em, and it makes ‘em happy...So really food is the center of it all. My sister would tell me, ‘all y’all think about is food.’ And I’m thinking, ‘yeah, but in the midst of all this food, everybody’s laughing and giggling, and [there’s] fellowship. I love it.” –Yolanda

Yolanda brings to light the reality that food often holds more weight than solely a substance for nourishment. The way she sees it, “...food is the center of it all.” It brings together her family group in a shared activity that they enjoy. Although this phrase contains a biblical origin, “breaking bread” is known more colloquially as this concept of “fellowship,” or “brotherhood” (Bouvier, 2018). This breaking of bread in Yolanda’s family depends on her and her children making the food that produces the fundamental activity in their holiday gathering.

Transmission of Customs from Female Elders to Female Children

As we would be about halfway through the interview, the participants spoke about their typical holidays both now and as a child. They generally had particular features in common, such as serving turkey, gathering around a table, cooking homemade dressing, and, for many Hispanic families, making homemade tamales or tripas, a Mexican cultural

dish. Even if they had small differences, most all of the participants noted the mother or female elder's integral part in the holiday. And, my sample being mostly women, they themselves had learned the traditional dishes from their mothers or other female elders in their families. As Kim, a Forty-Three-year-old, white, mother of a young child, remembers it, her aunt began telling her at a young age that, "You girls need to start paying attention to what we're doing, because one of these years, we're not going to be one of the ones that can cook. It'll need to be you guys." As she recalled her childhood memories, she recounted with pride how she picked up her skills from the women around her:

"I was the only one that took the initiative to stand in there and watch how things are made. To this day, I make her cornbread dressing the way she made it. Mm. This last thanksgiving, we had it at my mom's house, and [my aunt] came. It was the first time since she taught me how to make it that she ate my version of her cornbread dressing, and I was so nervous."

-Kim

Kim outlines how the process of transmitting customs through generations both begins and ends. Kim took an interest in the activities of her elders while her elders have now allowed her a valued position in taking over the family holiday customs. As her aunt now enjoys sitting and eating without all of the preparation involved, many other participants expressed similar sentiments about letting their grown daughters take over the joint position of host and cook. Penny, a sixty-year-old, Hispanic woman, explained to me

about the difficulties and the amount of effort hosting, cooking, and buying food for the holidays required. In the following statement, she relates how her daughter is transitioning into her former role:

“...she’s beginning to do the stuff, and so I’m like, ‘just let me know what you need me to bring... and I’ll join y’all for thanksgiving.’ ...you get to a point where you start getting to the point where, ‘you know, I need a break. Let me come over to your house.’ So, it worked out really nice this year. Both holidays were [at my daughter’s house]...” –Penny

Even though Penny also has a son, hosting the gatherings and most of the food preparation responsibilities have fallen onto her daughter. Even without children, many women find themselves in a difficult position of handling most holiday tasks by themselves. This is the case for Tina, a Fifty-Five-year-old, Hispanic, married woman, who hosts gatherings at her house nearly every year. While her husband “help[s] because he wants to eat,” Tina has put on the thanksgivings and Christmases for most of her adult life. Here, she explained to me the demands of putting on a holiday:

“Now, it’s like my brother wants me to cook all the time. I finally stopped doing thanksgiving because it’s too much [doing both] thanksgiving and Christmas. I talk to other people and they say ‘well, I take over a dish.’ They don’t want to bring over anything. They just want to sit down and eat. It’s too much for me to do it, and my husband wants everything from

scratch. He just doesn't [only] want turkey; he wants turkey, ham, and brisket. That's just meat alone. And then he wants stuffing and he doesn't just want stuffing; he wants gizzards in the stuffing, he wants nicks in the stuffing. That's a lot of work, doing all that. And then he wants more; he wants little sausages. He wants more and more; he wants three side dishes. It's too much. So, I was doing thanksgiving and Christmas, and then I told my family finally, 'I can't any more. I'm getting older. I can't do all of that. So, now we just have Christmas.' –Tina

Throughout the interview, Tina expressed how frustrated she was with her family, specifically with the lack of help and empathy on their part. While her frustrations were evident, she explained that she “think[s] it's important, because if [they] don't do that, [then they] don't do [anything] all year long;” without her sacrificing money and effort, her family wouldn't get together at all. Later on in the interview, she guessed the potential reasons her family seems to place all holiday responsibilities on her. Tina, who was only working part time this past year, said, “that's the reason they came up with, and that I was the girl. The guys can't have it at their house[s].” Women seem to be central to the U.S. holidays according to the participants of this study

These participants and others explained how food and life as a woman are intertwined in our culture. Many definitions of culture include learned behaviors by watching. It starts from a young age, learning from elders. This gives children a guide to acceptable behaviors, as Kim told me in our interview; she learned by watching, essentially completing the cycle when she cooked her aunt's cornbread dressing for her

aunt. Penny and Tina explained exactly how this has affected them in later life stages. Counihan (2009) found that the women she interviewed would explain their lives through the years in terms of the food they made. They took pride in providing something so essential for the body, and even more, food that gathered the essential people in their lives. The elder women in her study expressed concern about the younger generations losing their Mexican culture. The one thing that seemed to keep it alive for them was their food (Counihan, 2009). Though the women I interviewed do not have the same cultural heritage as the women from Counihan's novel, they keep their traditions through food; many of the women who identified as Hispanic continued to make homemade tortillas, tamales, or tripas. Even if their ancestors had immigrated a long time ago, the women took pride in keeping the traditions of their ancestors' culture through their food. Food, on a theoretical level, stands as a symbol of culture, but also one that plays a definitive role in uniting. Familial groups gather to share food that enters the body, the intake of food being symbolic of accepting and cherishing what is happening around the metaphysical table. The intimacy of the individual's body, culture, family, and nourishment intersect in these moments, which gives reason to why food is so significant.

Societal Demands to Provide “Extra” during the Holiday Season

Being food insecure brings more challenges to a society with ever-increasing demands. It can bring forth de-humanizing stigma, nutrient-deficient diets, and associated mental and physical health risks among others (these issues are often exaggerated in children growing up in food insecure homes) (Shah, Mullainathan, and Shafir, 2012). But, being food insecure during the holidays typically brings forth further financial and stigmatic hurdles, as participants conveyed. While talking about the struggles of food

insecurity, Miranda told me that she had a side-business she organizes around the holidays solely for the purpose of buying presents for her five children:

“How I do make a little bit of money is by selling sweets, homemade sweets and stuff like that. But that’s if I have food...just so I can get my kids presents and stuff...My husband works, but he works for paying the house, paying the car bill, paying the insurance, and at least getting a little bit of food. But not mostly any... [There’s the] demand to try and buy your kids something. Just to even have to save for it.” –Miranda

While her husband pays for the regular bills on his income, Miranda puts forth extra effort to be able to buy gifts and food needed for a festive meal. Like Miranda, Penny likes to have the ability to buy presents and create a warm environment for her family. In her interview, she expressed how much she enjoyed getting together with family, and that it took more resources to be able to make the holiday special:

“[I like] having the decorations to make the environment in the home Christmas-like to get that Christmas feeling. You know, it’s depressing for me, because I don’t have enough money to buy Christmas presents, but I always somehow scrounge up something to at least get my immediate family a little something and my kids a little something.” –Penny

As Penny related her story to me, she conveyed having mental health issues revolving

around her financial situation and when trying to provide and squeeze more out of her budget during the holidays. When Yolanda could not afford and arrange a gathering for her family, they “went their own way.” She, too, experienced mental health struggles. She explained to me how she told her kids, “‘I’m going to start saving my money for Christmas’ because I’m not doing this again. It’s too lonely. Or start early on buying presents.” In order for her to afford presents on her annual income, she would have to start buying or saving early on for presents.

When asked about the Hays County Food Bank and their holiday meal services, many of the participants expressed great contentment with the holiday meal boxes filled with canned good, dressing mix, and a turkey. Often times, participants spoke about how this service allowed them to purchase some gifts or extra holiday things for their families. In Margaret’s case, “[the food bank] helps out because sometimes I don’t have the extra money to buy some extra [holiday] stuff...” She explained this in the context of how her holidays were in relation to the food bank.

Food and resources are equitable to love (Roberts, 2015). The absence of ‘love,’ in this case, left the participants squandering with mental health hurdles and attached additional stigma onto their bodies. The embarrassment and shamefulness that they related to me stemmed from the lack of finances for things that ultimately demonstrate ‘love’ in the eyes of family members. These can be items like, presents, “decorations,” “big meal[s],” and gas for traveling to see family members. All of the participants had annual incomes of \$30,000 maximum, so providing such an extravagance is a challenge for them. A lack of doing so produces shame and guilt. What are they to do when either option comes with obstacles that are difficult to subdue?

3. IMPLICATIONS AND AREAS OF FURTHER STUDY

Mental Health and Mind Frames

During interviews, the participants elicited words to describe how they were feeling during the holidays, some of the words being “depressed,” “sad,” and “lonely.” A few even cried at some of the questions about family members and childhood memories (Appendix I). Penny, when speaking about her life and her financial situation, was tearing up while trying to convey how difficult it’s been for her:

“...I wish I could just get back on my feet and have that extra income to really not worry every month and every day get depressed about it, and it’s awful. It’s just plain awful...I get so depressed. I get depressed about the whole big picture. (tearing up) I just have got to stay strong. (pause) just stay strong and keep praying that things get better.” -Penny

Here, she spoke about depression and the mind frame that helps her get through. Yolanda had a similar mind frame when talking about how she gets past challenges in her life:

“To overcome them, (pause) I’m going to have to have that mind frame to overcome it. That no obstacle is too big that you cannot do. And family is the most important thing...” -Yolanda

Other participants did not speak specifically on this topic, but sometimes spoke in clichés, or commonly spoken phrases. One participant, who was a full-time student and

also worked full-time, mentioned phrases, such as “you have to roll with the punches,” “life is hard; you have to deal with it,” and “it is what it is” numerous times when I asked him to tell me about how he handles his everyday life. The mechanisms he used were also used by others when speaking about their everyday lives. Though this is one of the smaller themes that arose from the data, it is absolutely worth further research to understand the participants’ struggles, and provide services for them.

Low Efficacy of SNAP

One of the questions I asked the participants was about other resources they could rely on, beside the food bank. Some brought up federal aid like CHIP (Children’s Health Insurance Program), WIC (Women, Infants, and Children; aid program for families), Social Security/Disability, and Medicare. They did not bring up SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program; formerly Food Stamps) as frequently as anticipated. Three out of the four participants who spoke about SNAP had negative experiences. Two participants who were both retired both received less than twenty dollars per month from the program. Penny spoke about how she couldn’t do without the food bank. Though she was displeased with SNAP, she still accepted what little aid they provided her:

“The money that I get from disability and the fifteen dollars from the SNAP program, there’s just no way I would make it without [the food bank]. ...the fifteen dollars they give me from the food stamp program is not much.” -Penny

Like Penny, Yolanda had a negative experience with SNAP while she was raising her two sons. She began to tear up while talking about how she could not get aid from them no matter how diligent her efforts:

“...I got divorced and I had two little boys at home...When I asked them for help, they wanted to know how I bought soap, how I bought this. Just a pain in the neck, so they gave me the third degree. (whispers) it was so hard to get food stamps, and I really needed them because of the boys...I remember, I was so mad, because I could not get food from them to feed my two little boys. Because my child support, to them was too big. And that irritated me, and I never went back... I just feel like you go on food stamps, they want to know all your life.” –Yolanda

Both of these participants felt de-humanized during the process of applying for SNAP. In fact, Yolanda related that the specific reason she like the food bank was because, “[she would] rather go to the food bank and get [her] little food and no questions asked.”

However, Kim, a white woman with a young child, felt that her experience with SNAP had been adequate. The anecdotal nature of this collective theme should not overshadow the large-scale data that is out there, but an evaluation of SNAP should be conducted to see how it affects people of color and the retired and senior community.

“They” and “The System”

As I was transcribing the interviews, a small linguistic theme appear. When a couple of participants used “they,” it seemed to mean something different contextually.

Many times “they” or “them” appeared to mean ‘those that gave the resource(s),’ which was often the government, the food bank, or “the system.” Penny said the latter of these to depict how undignified she felt after “...trying to fight the system or get[ting] the system to help [her]” get better medical insurance to see a doctor for her pain. Yolanda also used “they” when speaking about the food bank’s turkey meal box service. When she said, “...they give us turkey and stuff that we use,” she was employing the singular English “they” in reference to the food bank, or the giver of resources. Penny does this repeatedly in the previous long quote on page twenty-two. Sometimes, “them” was used in an ‘us versus them’ nature, but mostly, to refer to ‘the nameless thing that provided a service.’ In a way, this tactic allowed the participants to disassociate with the service that is so stigmatized by the public. It is also of note that many of the participants grew up in poverty or in food insecure homes. Further researchers should look at the systems in place and the role of poverty in this phenomenon.

Stigma

Described as “difference plus deviance,” or a marked difference in a demographic trait that is also looked down upon, stigma thrives in marginalized communities, because it is closely associated with pre-existing power structures (Goldberg, 2017). While the data from other themes appeared only in a certain context, stigma appeared throughout a variety of topics. For instance, while speaking about the turkey meal box service the food bank provided, Yolanda spoke in a positive manner, but expressed underlying, everyday stigma:

“On Christmas and thanksgiving that puts the big meal on the table, the main thing. So, we feel like everybody else. Everybody’s having turkey; we are, too. And since we cook, we know how to spread out our food. So our food could be sandwiches the next day. But the food bank is an everyday thing for us.” –Yolanda

Yolanda and her family “fe[lt] like everybody else” when they, too, were able to enjoy a holiday meal, implying that she did not feel left out or marginalized by having this service. She then described her everyday reality by saying “the food bank is an everyday thing for us.” She felt warmed and maybe even symbolically ‘loved’ (Roberts, 2015) when she was included in this celebrated holiday. In a different context, Miranda told me about some neighbors who would not seek assistance from the food bank because of the stigma of not being a US citizen. She first explained how hard they work and then said:

“[My neighbors] don’t have no cards, and they don’t have no IDs. So, I can’t let those kids go hungry. So when I got to the food bank, if there’s anything free, I take it for them, and for my other neighbors, too, because there’s a lot people that are from Mexico that are afraid to go get help.”
-Miranda

She spoke about how they’ve worked in unbearable conditions for years, but will not seek help because of the stigma. In another instance, Miranda was talking about her everyday life as a member of the food bank community. She mentioned that she

encourages people to go, but sometimes, they would not. Next, she told me her views on getting food from the food bank:

“There’s nothing wrong for us to be getting food for our families. You know, what people need to understand is that we’re not stealing, we’re not drug addicts, we’re out there honestly waiting for us to get some food. Some of these people are the nicest people, man.” –Miranda

The ‘deviant’ aspects of this statement, “stealing” and “drug addicts,” are images that Miranda felt had been projected upon her and her food bank community by society. Although she talked about ‘not doing anything wrong’ by seeking assistance, Miranda felt prideful in breaking “...the chain of getting any assistance from the government.” She felt pride in not receiving assistance, and felt shamed by the public for receiving assistance.

Implications

This study has many local and direct implications for the participants and their community. I will give a copy of this document to Hays County Food Bank along with my raw dataset. This will offer them a more nuanced glimpse into their clients’ lives, and how they can improve their services.

If this study were to be executed with a much larger sample with a further refined methodology, it could have potential implications for mental and physical health, SNAP policy, and accessible counseling services.

Limitations

This study is limited in both scope and sample diversity; the sample size was nine participants, eight of them women. It is not very far-reaching, however, it is very specific to the local population. For the participants and their community, these realities are very real, or even corporeal in some instances. For those who offered their time and stories, this study speaks volumes.

Conclusion

Through interviews and demographic surveys, I found several major themes came from the data. Almost every participant expressed something about the significance of food, the transmission of customs from female elder to female child, and the societal demand to provide “extra” during the holiday season. In the context of the holidays, these subject came with both positive and negative connotations. The minor themes to come from the data are mental health and mind frames, low efficacy of SNAP, “they” and “the system,” and “stigma.” The purpose of this study was to better understand how food insecurity operates within the household during the U.S. fall and winter holiday season. The voices captured surpass this project’s goal by a thousand fold.

APPENDIX I

Semi-Structured Interview Guide:

1. Let's start with the beginning. Tell me about some of your favorite holiday memories as a child.
 - a. Who do you remember being there?
 - b. Where would you and others meet?
 - c. What activities did you enjoy most?
1. Can you remember the atmosphere of a holiday gathering?
 - a. Tell me about the types of clothing, food, conversations held, etc.
2. Do you continue some of these traditions? Which ones? (trying to get at practice)
 - a. How are they different/the same now?
3. How did you prepare for gatherings?
 - a. Do you do the same things now?
 - b. What foods did you prepare?
4. How important is the meal in your typical holiday gatherings?
 - a. Maybe question: who buys and cooks the food?
 - b. Which foods are expensive?
 - c. Which do you have to have?
5. Give me the process of your typical favorite holiday gatherings from beginning to end.
6. What images appear when you think of the perfect Christmas?
 - a. Thanksgiving?
 - b. Other celebrated holiday?
7. To what extent are you able to re-create that each year?
8. Have there been any challenges in doing so?
 - a. Like what?
 - b. Or, what does that look like?
 - c. Could you give me an example?
9. What have you done to try and overcome those challenges?
 - a. Has anyone helped along the way?
10. (if not addressed in detail, yet) Are you expecting any challenges this year?
 - a. Like what?
11. What is it like to experience food insecurity year-round?
12. How does that compare to the fall and winter holiday season?
13. And, do you have access to resources for help?
 - a. Which ones?
 - b. (for the food bank's knowledge) To what degree does the HCFB help/not help?

14. (if they've marked that they're employed) Does your place of work offer any type of help (i.e. Christmas bonus)?
 - a. Do you typically work extra hours during the holiday season?
 - b. Does this help accomplish your goals for the holidays?
 - c. Tell me about why or why not.
15. (if they've marked parent boxes on survey) Tell me about your experience as a parent during the holidays.
16. What do your children enjoy most about holidays?
 - a. Do they ask for certain things?
17. Do you buy gifts for close friends and family?
 - a. What do you like to buy for them?

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