Food Insecurity and COVID-19

In late March 2020, an image of a mile-long caravan of cars lining up to get food from the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank went viral on social media and in national media outlets. The image captured people lining up—seems for five hours ahead of schedule—for an emergency food distribution. The distribution happened at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic that shut down the country, leaving many people without their usual paycheck. The image was a striking example of the number of people dealing with food insecurity.

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only been a health crisis but has revealed just how vulnerable food-insecure people are. When people lose income because of business closures, they become unable to prepare meals, pay for mortgage payments and food. People who may have already been experiencing food insecurity had an even more difficult time during the pandemic.

But food insecurity isn’t just about having enough food to eat. It’s a problem that begins far before anyone sees food—a problem before COVID-19 halted business as usual.

Years ago, during research about food insecurity, Dr. Esther Bush, assistant professor of health services administration, University of Pittsburgh, realized quickly that no standard definition or measurement existed and that better data was needed to help people. The index includes five categories to measure food insecurity: access to food, affordability, dietary diversity, quality of food and food-insecure community. Food insecurity is not just about living near a grocery store or being able to afford food.

Food insecurity is multidimensional,” says Dr. Murrell, who is also professor of psychology, Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences, and of public and international affairs, Graduate School of Public and International Affairs. “People ask why we can’t just put a grocery store in a neighborhood that needs one. But can everyone afford the food inside? Does it supply people with healthy and culturally appropriate food? What if the grocery store closes—then what? We made the Food Abundance Index in a way so that doing foundational things—like putting a grocery store in a food-insecure community doesn’t eliminate the problem of food insecurity. People have a human right to access food. Doing the bare minimum isn’t innovative; it’s insufficient. In May, I encourage seeing food insecurity as a resilience issue—for people, their neighborhoods, cities and the food system. How can we build the capacity of a particular community to not only have food abundance but to be able to sustain abundance over time—even especially in times of crisis like a global pandemic?”

The COVID-19 pandemic showed us how vulnerable our food-supply chain is, says Dr. Murrell. “Food service companies and grocery store chains were disrupted. We saw companies having to literally destroy produce and waste milk because their products couldn’t get to people who needed them. When the supply chain is disrupted, we are ripe growing. People can’t afford the food in which they do have access. We need resilience in the food-supply chain.”

Dr. Murrell also highlighted how the pandemic has forced a change in the public’s perception of who is considered an essential worker.

“For the very first time, grocery store employees, food transportation workers and people delivering food are being seen as essential workers,” she says. “Like in the food-supply chain and the food system, particularly at the lower levels, are dominated by women and people of color. If that’s the case, then they ought to get paid as and get the health benefits of essential workers.”

According to Dr. Murrell, seeing food as a social, economic and environmental sustainability issue creates resilience in our food system. An updated version of her Food Abundance Index is being developed by the nonprofit organization Food Security Now and will have data about those issues.

When asked what we can do, she says, “To continue to do or to volunteering at local food banks or purchase from local suppliers, which people rely on when national food-supply chains break down, and use their voices to advocate for people who are food insecure, food service workers and farmers as essential workers.”

“Food isn’t a luxury, it’s a human right,” says Dr. Murrell. “We should all learn the responsibility of being advocates for building resilient food systems regardless of where we live, what we look like or what we do. That’s how we can ensure that everyone has access to the community.”

The Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh also spotlights how the pandemic has really told us about food insecurity data are the neighborhood prescriptions that give us a way so that doing basic, foundational things, like getting a medical prescription, turning on the lights, buying food, paying rent, picking up a child from school are all investments in the least of our social, economic and environmental sustainability.”

The Pittsburgh HEA for Emergency Food Assistance is online at https://www.eatinitiative.org.

Food Insecurity

In ADDITION TO NON-PERISHABLE ITEMS, Chef Clauzy Pierre, shown above, and others provided home-cooked meals to members of the Pittsburgh community on June 18. The event was titled “Third Meal,” with contributing partners Pittsburgh Gateways, Pittsburgh Green Innovators, the Energy Institute, College of Business Administration and professor of business administration. Audrey J. Murrell, PhD, says about community resiliency and capacity: “Take charge of your health today. Be informed. Be involved.”