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Hungry at the Banquet:

Food Insecurity in Louisiana

By Fred Kammer, S.J.

Last week, we released a report on food insecurity and food deserts entitled Hungry at the Banquet: Food Insecurity in Louisiana 2018. The report reminds us that, in a state which celebrates rich and varied food traditions that are famous worldwide, there are many people without enough to eat. The condition is known as "food insecurity," and Louisiana has the second highest rate of food insecurity in the United States.



An employee of Sankofa Fresh Market in the Lower 9th Ward helps a customer buy fresh, local produce.

Authored by Kathleen J. Fitzgerald, Ph.D., the report helps us to understand the scope of food insecurity, its causes and its cures, the realities of food deserts, and the nature of food justice. Some key findings follow:

Louisiana has the second highest rate of food insecurity in the nation and it is rising faster than in the rest of the country.

- Here, 783,400 people—258,630 of whom are children—struggle with hunger, according to Feeding America.One in six children—17.9 percent—live in households without consistent access to adequate food.
- Forty-six of the sixty-four parishes have food insecurity rates of 15% or higher, and some as high as 34.4%. The national average in 2017 was 11.8%.
- Food insecurity rates are higher in small towns and rural areas than in cities, as they are nationally.

Louisiana is replete with food deserts, places with a dearth of healthy and affordable food options, such as full-service grocery stores and/or farmers markets, within a convenient travel distance.

JSRI Future Activities

January 25-27
Fr. Fred Kammer and Ms. Baudouin will co-direct the mid-year social justice retreat in Texas for the Jesuit Volunteers of the mid-America and southern states.

JSRI Recent Activities

November 28
Dr. Dennis Kalob attended the new member orientation and regular monthly meeting of Step-Up Louisiana, a multiracial and multigenerational organization fighting for economic and racial justice.

November 29
Dr. Sue Weishar and Dr. Stephanie Gaskill of the Louisiana Interchurch Conference's 7Times70 program co-organized a Teach-In on Mass Incarceration at St. George Catholic Church in Baton Rouge.

November 30
Dr. Weishar participated in the monthly meeting of the Baton Rouge Immigrant Rights Coalition at the Charles R. Kelly Community Center in Baton Rouge.

November 30
Dr. Weishar spoke at the Women Resource Center's Feminist Fridays gathering on how proposed Federal Rules regarding how public charge is defined for individuals seeking to immigrate to the U.S. will create barriers that only the most affluent applicants can overcome.

December 1
Fr. Kammer participated in a meeting of the Members of the Loyola Corporation, together with President Tetlow.

December 2
Café con Ingles, an ESL and community-building program at St. Anthony of Padua Church co-directed by Dr. Weishar, held its last Service Learning session of the semester.

December 4-7
Dr. Weishar collaborated with Dr. Patricia Boyett and Women's Resource Center students who collected 172 written comments from Loyola students and faculty in opposition to Trump Administration's proposed rules that would expand the definition of what it means to be a "public charge" at tabling events in the Danna Center.

December 11
Dr. Weishar worked with leaders of Mujeres Luchadoras in organizing a Catholic
Teach-In on Immigration at St. Francis of Assisi Church in Uptown New Orleans. JSRI Executive Director Fr. Kammer, S.J., spoke about the Church's teachings on migration at the event.

December 13
JSRI released its new report Hungry at the Banquet: Food Insecurity in Louisiana 2018, authored by Dr. Kathleen Fitzgerald of the University of North Carolina and designed by JSRI staffer Kelsey McLaughlin.

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- Research links food deserts to poor health; and Louisiana is one of the least healthy states, with one of the highest rates of adult obesity, diabetes, and hypertension.
- Nationwide, the prevalence of food deserts increases in low-income zip codes and in racial minority communities. Food deserts are disproportionately found in the American south
- Louisiana's poverty and racial demographics make it ripe for the prevalence of food deserts and much of the state qualifies as such.
- Two metropolitan areas—New Orleans-Metairie and Baton Rouge—land in the top ten Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs) in the nation struggling with food insecurity.

Food insecurity in Louisiana like the rest of the nation is being addressed, albeit incompletely, by three federal programs: SNAP, WIC, and the National School Lunch Program, as well as some local initiatives.

- One in four Louisiana families rely on SNAP to meet their monthly food needs; two-thirds of SNAP recipients are children.
- Thousands of food-insecure residents are not eligible for the SNAP program and, for those that are, more than 90% of benefits are used by the third week of the month.
- Food banks, including mobile food pantries, are helping meet the needs of the food-insecure population in some areas of the state
- Food activism proliferated in New Orleans in the post-Katrina era, in the form of urban farms and farmers markets; yet the white, middle-class food movement largely failed to connect with the low-income communities of color facing the highest rates of food insecurity.

A food justice movement emphasizes equal access to food, ending structural inequalities to food access, specifically those related to race and racism, and an emphasis on a wider distribution of environmental benefits.

- The right to food tops the list of specific human rights in Catholic social teaching because hunger is a fundamental assault on human life itself—and so widespread.
- It is impossible to address food justice separately from economic and racial justice.
- The state needs to make food policy a higher priority, including offering incentives for grocery stores to open in underserved communities

Dr. Fitzgerald concluded, "Addressing food insecurity in Louisiana must be understood as a social justice issue of the highest priority, requiring attention from all levels of government, the business community, local activists, and the faith community."

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Monthly articles reflect the opinions of the authors and not necessarily those of Loyola University New Orleans. Please send feedback to jsri@loyno.edu

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