



Food Experiences at Pacific Community Resources Society

FINAL REPORT

Group 9

Executive Summary

Located in East Vancouver, the Broadway Youth Resource Centre (BYRC) operates in conjunction with the Pacific Community Resources Society (PCRS) to provide meals, accommodation, and community-based mental and physical health care and other services to those who are “most vulnerable to homelessness: aboriginal youth, LGBTQ youth, and youth leaving foster care” (Pacific Community Resource Centre, n.d., para 3). The focus of this research project was to gather information about the food experiences of the youth who access the BYRC, and to a) gather their thoughts, opinions and concerns regarding food security and food justice, and b) gain a clear understanding of their experience with the BYRC meal program and how it can be improved. Interviews were conducted with 27 youth at the BYRC in October 2015; the interviews were transcribed, the responses were analyzed, and two major common themes were extracted. It was found that food insecurity was not an issue that was prevalent in the food experiences of those youth who were interviewed. 82% of the respondents reported obtaining enough food on a regular basis; 74% were eating from all four food groups; and 78% were able to access grocery stores by walking or using public transportation. A second commonality was that 67% of respondents lacked knowledge regarding where the food they consume comes from, and were unfamiliar with the general food system.

Regarding the BYRC’s meal program, responses were analyzed to determine areas for improvement. 70.4% of respondents were satisfied with the meal program, and 89% were satisfied with the meal portions. Most dissatisfied respondents suggested a simpler menu with more meat options and fewer carbohydrates. Improvements to the

BYRC's meal program can be achieved in various ways. Youth may benefit from a weekly dinner menu and information sheet regarding food sources. To reduce shortage or waste, the BYRC could consider developing a program wherein youth can sign up for meals ahead of time. Courses and workshops about food security and food justice could also be incorporated into the meal program, and may educate and interest the youth in these subjects about how topics regarding food pertains to their lives. The BYRC could also provide an open discourse with youth regarding its meal program by creating an anonymous discussion board where the youth can freely submit their comments.

Introduction

Food security has been defined as “when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food” (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 1996, para. 12). Though well-intentioned, it does not acknowledge the real life struggles around food provision. Research by Tarasuk et al. (2009) on the homeless youth in Toronto, Canada has revealed the day-to-day hardships in meeting their basic needs. For example, acquiring enough nutritious food regularly is challenging due to the sometimes unbalanced meals provided by charitable programs. The study revealed that regular use of such programs does not protect them from severe and chronic food deprivation, illustrating the need for more effective solutions.



Figure 1: BYRC's main entrance

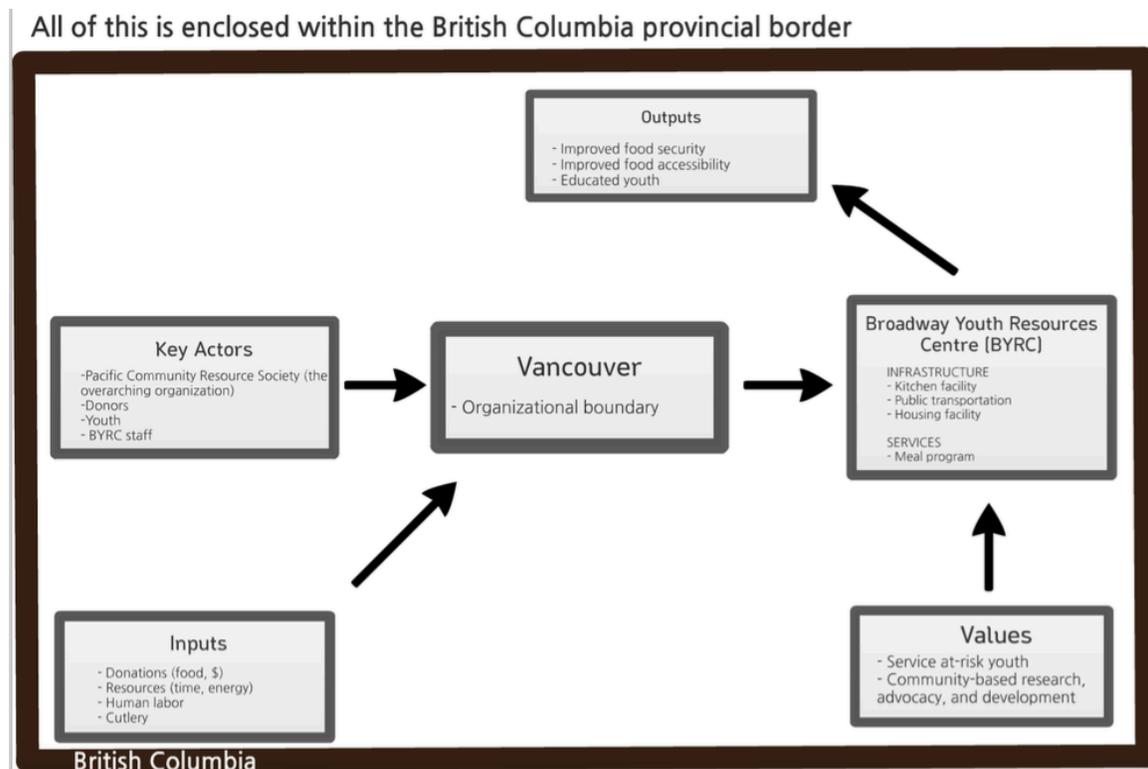
This is why the goal of this CBEL project is to inquire into the food experiences of at-risk youth in Vancouver.

Focusing on the food experiences of youth who access the BYRC, the project aims to gather the youth’s perceptions of food security and food justice, as well as to gain an understanding of their experience with the meal program and how it can be improved.

Background

The food procurement options available to homeless or at-risk youth are partially due to the chief responses from the community (Li et al, 2009); located in East Vancouver, the BYRC is one such response. With assistance from the PCRS, the BYRC provides meals and other services to at-risk youth aged 14-24 (including but not limited to homeless, LGBT, and aboriginal youth) with the intention of increasing food accessibility and security.

Systems Diagram



Significance

One organization doing similar research is the Urban Health Research Initiative (UHRI, n.d.). Based out of St. Paul's Hospital in Vancouver, the UHRI's mission is to improve the health of individuals and communities through community-based research. They have published much research focused primarily on homelessness, mental illness, drug addiction, and other health-related or social issues (UHRI, n.d.). However, a major gap exists in regards to the food experiences of at-risk youth, which our project hopes to address.

This project examines something new as it looks at a specific population in a specific location; we are therefore bringing forth new information that will contribute to the current knowledge base, and aid the BYRC in improving its meal program.

Limitations

Our primary limitation was the project's time frame. Data was collected on one day and then analyzed over the course of one month. Owing to this limitation, we were only able to conduct a preliminary analysis of the data. Moreover, this limitation restricted our ability to build a rapport with all participants. At times, the team sensed a feeling of resistance from participants. While they were few and far between, it is noteworthy considering the size of our dataset (n=27). Posing questions differently (perhaps as an anonymous questionnaire) might provide respondents with the anonymity perhaps required to answer questions truthfully.

Project Objectives

The objectives of this project are to: a) detect common themes about the youths' notions on food security and food justice; and b) identify any concerns they may have regarding food provided by the meal program (portion sizes, variety, etc.). The BYRC wishes to know more regarding the youths' experiences with and struggles around food, and to gain an understanding of how the meal program is being received and what improvements can be made.

Inquiry Questions

The inquiry questions were separated into categories and include, but were not limited to:

- How do youth feel in terms of their food security and food justice?
- How is the food provided by the meal program received?
- Do they feel that they get enough food on a regular basis?

Methods

Data Collection Approach

On October 14, 2015, Group 9 conducted 27 individual interviews with BYRC patrons from 4-6 pm, before and during dinner service. A script that had been approved by the BYRC was used to guide interviews. Interviews were conducted in a private room and recorded for future transcription using the team's personal cellular phone devices.

Procedures

Two team members recruited respondents in the BYRC's main lounge while three conducted interviews. Once a team member completed an interview, another was brought in the next respondent, which worked very well as it facilitated a continuous flow of interviewees! Furthermore, the BYRC staff encouraged the youth to speak with us by providing gift cards upon interview completion. Youth were further incentivized to participate as candy was also provided by the research team as a participation reward.

Analysis

Once interview results were compiled, transcribed and organized, common themes were extracted from the data set. Areas for improvement were identified, and we were able to propose recommendations to the BYRC.

Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of interviewing marginalized youth, we obtained consent from all participants using consent forms provided by the LFS 350 teaching team. Each respondent was debriefed on the nature of the project prior to signing, and no identifying information was taken to ensure complete anonymity. Sensitivity on our part as interviewers was also required as we were working with a vulnerable population.

Results

Meal Program

Table 1. Frequency of visits and level of satisfaction of BYRC meal program recipients.

Level of satisfaction/Frequency of visits	Somewhat dissatisfied	Satisfied	Number of respondents
Regularly (4-5 times/week)	3	7	10
Occasionally (2-3 times/week)	2	6	8
Infrequently (1-2 times/week)	1	5	6
First visit	2	1	3

Table 2. Youth's opinions on meal portion sizes.

Respondent opinions on meal portion sizes	Number of respondents
Satisfied	24
Dissatisfied	3

Table 3. Presence of food sensitivities or allergies in BYRC patrons.

Food allergies or sensitivities present?	Number of respondents
Yes	2
No	25

Table 4. Desired changes to the BYRC Meal Program

	More Variety	More Meat	More Vegetables and Fruit	More Beverages	No Changes
Number of people who desire this change	5	9	4	2	10

Food Security

Chart 1. Food sourcing knowledge

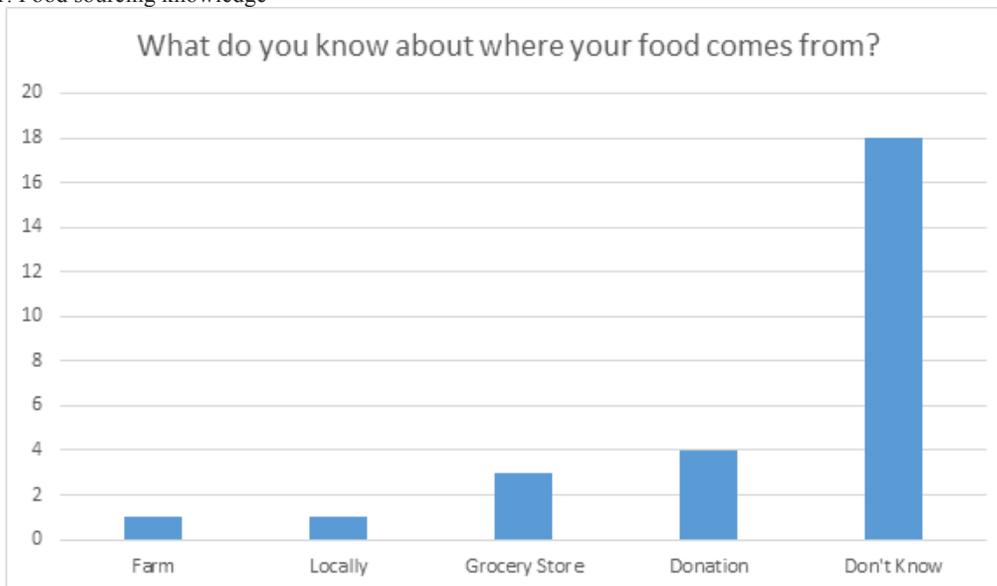


Table 5. Number of youth who obtain food from conventional sources (home, grocery stores) and community sources (youth services, school, churches, shelters). Some of the community services mentioned include Directions, Union Gospel Mission, Covenant House, and Blue Bus.

	Conventional Sources Only	Conventional and Community Sources
Number of Youth	13	14

Table 6. Youth's opinion on whether they could get enough food from the different food groups.

	Yes	No
Number of people who said they get enough or not from the different food groups	20	7

Table 7. Participant's opinion on how food that has passed the expiry date could affect their health.

Doesn't impact health	Depends	Impacts health	No response	"I don't know"
19%	26%	19%	30%	7%

Food Justice

Table 8. Primary Sources for acquiring food and groceries

	Number of people who acquire food from this source
Grocery stores (such as Superstore, No-Frills, Quest)	17
Home	6
School	2
BYRC	8
Other resources (such as church)	6
Income Assistance/Welfare	6

Table 9. BYRC's participants opinion on whether they get enough food on a regular basis

	Yes	no
Do you feel like you get enough food on a regular basis	22	5

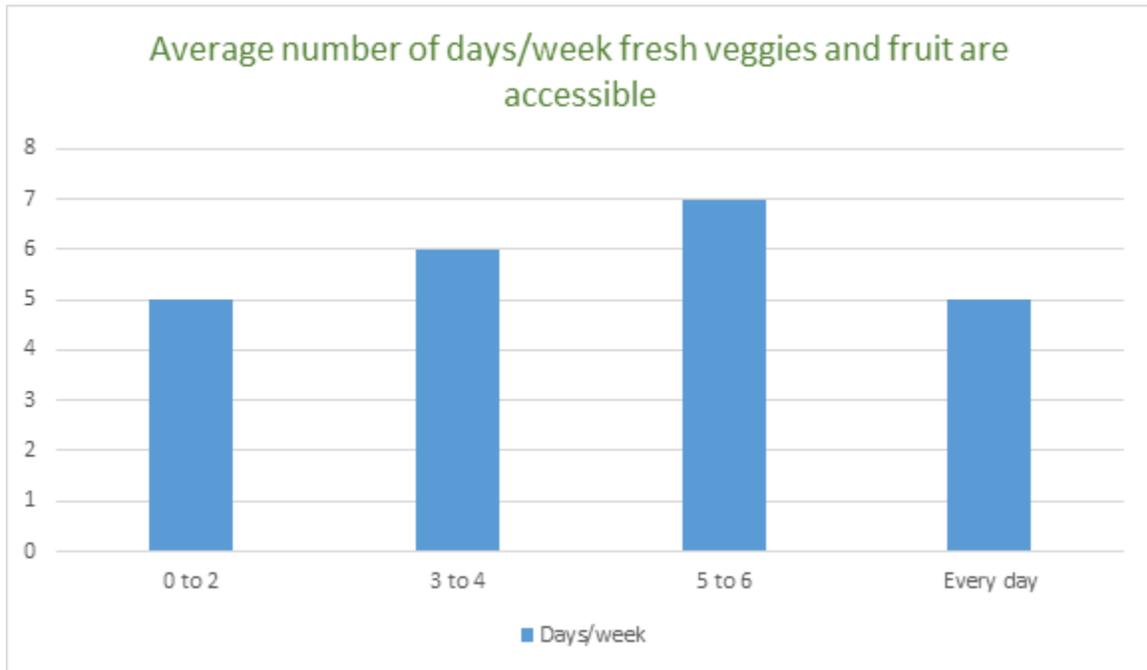
Table 10. BYRC participants that experience or do not experience barriers accessing food.

	No barriers	Barriers exist
Number of youth who have some barriers to accessing food	17	10
percentage	63%	37%

Table 11. Barriers accessing food experienced by BYRC participants.

Barrier Type	Number of participants	Number of participants as percentage
Transportation	3	30%
Lack of money	4	40%
Welfare not enough	2	20%
Not explained	1	10%

Chart 2. Average number of days/week fresh veggies and fruit are accessible to BYRC's participants.



Summary

- ✚ The majority of participants are satisfied with meals at the BYRC, although they would like to see more meat, vegetables and fruit, and variety.
- ✚ Most do not know where their food comes from.
- ✚ 78% said it is easy to get their groceries by walking or using public transit.
- ✚ Participant’s opinions on how the consumption of expired food could affect their health are diverse: nearly 20% believe it does not affect their health and 20% believe it does. The remainder either didn’t answer or didn’t know.
- ✚ 37% stated that they have barriers to accessing food; those barriers include



Figure 2: A box of food at the BYRC

transportation, lack of money and welfare.

Discussion

With respect to the BYRC meal program, 70.4% of respondents were satisfied with the provision of healthy, filling, vegetable-based meals and 89% found the portions to be filling because seconds were given out. The dissatisfied minority (11%) desired a simpler menu with more meat and fewer carbohydrates. One attributed his dissatisfaction to strange flavour combinations, citing “curried Shepherd’s pie” as an example; another lamented that broccoli and onions are served in most dishes. 7% reported having food allergies, but said they do not experience any issues as the centre does not utilize said allergenic ingredients. 82% reported getting enough food on a regular basis, eating regularly from the four food groups (74%), and accessing grocery stores by walking or using public transit (78%). There is a lack of knowledge among respondents about where food comes from (67%).

These results are somewhat surprising as we expected a greater proportion of respondents to report inadequate food intake. The discrepancy between our expectations and the interview results may be attributed to our methodology, which was to conduct interviews face-to-face. Naturally, participants may have felt uncomfortable with disclosing their struggles around food. Compared to current literature, our results appear to follow a different trend. A study inquiring into the experiences of food deprivation of homeless youth in Toronto found that 43% of females and 28% of males experience food deprivation (Tarasuk et al., 2009), but our findings suggest that 82% of BYRC youth are

able to fulfill their caloric needs by utilizing a combination of community resources (school, charity meal programs) and conventional sources (home, grocery stores). Although BYRC respondents reported adequate food intake, many reported stress from spending so much time procuring food. Although at-risk Vancouverite youth are accessing enough food on a daily basis, its nutritional quality remains unknown. It must be noted that the scope of our research is smaller (n=27) compared to the Toronto study (n=261). In other words, we focused on at-risk youth at the BYRC; that is, youth who are better able to find resources in the city, which might not be representative of all at-risk Vancouverite youth. Our data is rich, but we were only capable of doing a preliminary evaluation of the data collected.

Understanding the sociocultural milieu food insecurity arises from is paramount to this discussion. BYRC youths' experiences are inextricably linked to the greater sociocultural context of living in Vancouver. An analysis of this setting allows us to identify problems and to propose amendments accordingly. As an organization, the BYRC makes their patrons' wellbeing a priority, providing both housing facilities and a meal program along with other services. Furthermore, the BYRC acknowledges the unique struggle that Aboriginal peoples experience surrounding food security (the BYRC is known by its Musqueam name: the Kwayatsut building).

Owing to a history of colonization and forced assimilation, Aboriginal peoples are at greater risk of food insecurity (Elliott, Jayatilaka, Brown, Varley, & Corbett, 2012). Reserves are typically isolated, so food accessibility is hindered by distance and transportation barriers. Genuis, Willows, First Nation, & Jardine, (2014) investigated food security issues at a reserve intended to be representative of Western Canadian

reserve conditions; it was found that the closest grocery store to a reserve was 18 km away. Altogether, indigenous reserve conditions and the nutrition transition have substantially decreased the consumption of fresh produce and traditional foods within Aboriginal populations. As a result, the consumption of processed Westernized foods has increased, giving way to a host of diet-related diseases such as cardiovascular disease and obesity (Elliott et al., 2012). Off-reserve, 33% of Aboriginal households report experiencing food insecurity compared to only 9% of households in the general population (Health Canada, 2006). Given the large proportion of aboriginal youth at the BYRC, our research design neglected to incorporate culturally appropriate methodology. To overcome both our time and cultural appropriateness limitations, the timing of our visits could have been amended. For example, a workshop should have been conducted with the youth prior to conducting interviews to establish a rapport. Moreover, a culturally appropriate workshop (e.g. basket making), would have helped foster trust between respondent and interviewer.

Our findings are significant as they provide a basis for evaluating the appropriateness of the use of asset-based community development (ABCD) at the BYRC. ABCD argues that assets for community development include individual skills and interpersonal relationships (Mathie & Cunningham, 2012). The feeling of community was apparent during our visit to the centre; as agents of this community, the youth are an untapped asset. Our findings suggest that providing youth with the appropriate tools and knowledge can empower them to improve their food security status.

Conclusion

Recommendations have been drawn from the preliminary data analysis. Based on feedback from the youth, increased variety in meals, with more vegetable, fruit, and meat options is desired. Thus, it would be beneficial for the BYRC to incorporate more food groups into their meals. One pescatarian respondent expressed a wish to know what is being served ahead of time. Posting the menu in advance may help recipients plan their meals according to their needs (such as diet choices, allergies, or preferences). A program could be implemented wherein youth could register for meals ahead of time, reducing the likelihood of shortage or during mealtimes or waste. It was also suggested that the BYRC purchase more utensils (mugs, knives), and appliances. Kitchen staff/volunteers involved in food preparation could potentially benefit from Food Safe certification as well.

A major theme in our findings was that respondents lack knowledge about food security and justice. To address this, the BYRC could consider hosting workshops on these topics as there is profound interest: several participants wanted to learn more about where their food comes from. The BYRC could also make a fun information sheet on such topics for the youth to read during meals. In addition, it might be helpful to provide an anonymous suggestion box, allowing patrons to submit their suggestions for improvement directly.

A surprising result was that 82% of respondents reported accessing food regularly. As we expected the opposite to be true, this information raises more questions than it answers, and forced us to question our research method. Namely, did our interview format preclude participants from fully disclosing their harsh food experiences? It would

be beneficial to cross-reference our findings with other studies and do more data collection after modifying the method for cultural appropriateness. In doing so, a more representative set of responses might be obtained, or our current results could be corroborated.

In summary, the significant Aboriginal population who access BYRC services may benefit from having a more culturally appropriate environment; for example, youth could create aboriginal art with materials provided by the BYRC. Based on our results, we suggest that the BYRC incorporate more variety into the meal program, along with a meal sign-up program and a menu made available prior to meals being served. Workshops on food security and food justice may pique the youths' interest on such topics, and a suggestion box could be provided to maintain open conversation with patrons regarding the BYRC and its services.

Critical Reflections

“J”

This project was initially presented to us as one that would be full of conflicts, ups and downs, trials and tribulations, but which would ultimately be very rewarding. For me, this proved to be a fairly accurate prediction, though not nearly as dramatic as they made it out to be, which was a relief! Though there was one conflict situation that arose from miscommunication within the group, we were able to move past it quickly and work together in a very harmonious manner from that point on. The project went much more smoothly and successfully than I had anticipated, which I attribute mainly to having such

a collaborative team dynamic. The workload was fairly and evenly divided, deadlines were set and met almost every time, everyone took responsibility for their tasks and we were very efficient during our visit to the BYRC as well as in our meetings during the flexible learning sessions. I learned about the importance of establishing harmony within a group from day one, and about better approaches to conflict negotiation.

In addition, our visit to the BYRC opened my eyes and my heart to youth at risk, and surprised me in unexpected ways. For example, I was surprised and touched at how readily the youth spoke with us, by their positive attitudes, and their appreciation of healthy food and the meals provided by the BYRC. It made me realize that there is so much more to these individuals than the images portrayed of them by the media.

“J”

In terms of group work during our CBEL project and flexible learning times, we worked very well with each other. We were efficient and made the most of our time during meetings. We made sure to discuss everything that needed to be discussed before our meetings were adjourned, and each tried our best to follow the work breakdown and deadlines that were set during the meeting. For me, this project has taught me to be more open-minded. I can say that I am better able to listen and to compromise when others give me feedback, whereas before, I'd become irritated and take suggestions for improvement in a more negative way. Our community research was not as challenging as I'd anticipated, mostly because the youth at the BYRC made it so easy for us. They were very open and friendly, and were enthusiastic to answer all of our questions. The most

challenging thing about bringing everything together into this coherent report was trusting group members to do their share of the work, to do it well, and in a timely manner. I've noticed as I move forward with my education, there really is a limit to what I can do on my own, and collaborating with others almost always gives better results. This project is no exception, and while it was stressful at times to work with others, getting through everything together also made the work a little bit more enjoyable.

“O”

Overall, it was a really valuable experience for me to work on this community-based project. After each meeting, one of our group members would send out an agenda email to everyone in our group which included workloads assigned to each member and deadlines. Sometimes the work was collaborative,, so if one member didn't finish her part on time then another could not complete the next section. Thus, the agenda email was a very effective way to keep the workload progress updated and made for more efficient teamwork.

This project also made me realize how important it is to be adaptive and open-minded; and in life, there are a lot of situations that require these abilities. For example, while we were at the BYRC we realized that there was only one room available for 3 interviewers, so instead of having all five group members conducting interviews simultaneously, we changed our plan accordingly and assigned two group members to recruit while the others held interviews. In this way, we saved a lot of time and the participants readily participated. Learning through such community interactions give us

the chance to apply our knowledge in a real-life situation. This project illustrated the old adage that the best learning happens outside the classroom!

“J”

Working on this project was interesting and stimulating on many levels. Firstly, to work in teams is always challenging due to diverse levels of commitment and expectations. After some initial misunderstandings, we devised a strategy to clarify expectations regarding team members' work for the project: every time we distributed the workload we sent a collective email specifying what each of us needed to accomplish and the deadline. This facilitated improved communication and reduced tension. Secondly, working on this project helped me to reflect on the role academics play when engaging with communities. Prior to starting the fieldwork for this project, I was concerned with treating the project's participants as a mere means to an end, which was the result. The youth we interviewed who are meant to benefit from our research were not included in the process of designing this research other than as mere objects of our study. I think that as students we were in a position of power relative to the study participants that we did not properly recognize. Therefore, we did not make room for participants to appear as agents of their own knowledge. I feel this interviews could have been designed to reveal more relevant aspects related to food justice and food security, rendering research findings more useful.

“J”

Over the course of our project, I learned a lot about online etiquette. Personally, I had my own learning curve this semester as our group corresponded solely by email. In

the past, Facebook was my primary communication tool for student projects. Given how compulsively I check social media, I never had an issue with replying to group members before. Comparatively, email is more formal and I felt embarrassed sending emails out at 2 am and would try to reply during regular working hours the next day instead; ironically, this only exacerbated the problem as it delayed my responses which frustrated the team. It was a challenging time as there were differences in our expectations. Eventually, however, Group 9 agreed upon a standard for e-mail replies: respond within 36 hours. This experience taught me to set community agreements from the start to ensure that everyone has the same expectations.

Working with homeless youth forced me to confront my own set of privileges; namely, class privilege and the privilege of being a university student. As a UBC student, I was entering into a new community as an outsider. By virtue of being a student, I am more privileged as I have the time and monetary resources to pursue a post-secondary education. Moreover, my experiences with food are primarily limited to *what* to eat today, not *whether* I'm going to eat. This project helped me deconstruct my own misconceptions and further my understanding of food insecurity in Vancouver.

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