

Introduction

The Hastings-Sunrise Community is located in the northeast corner of the municipality of Vancouver; bounded by Burrard inlet on the north, Boundary Road on the east, East Broadway on the south, and Nanaimo St on the west (City of Vancouver, n.d.). Hastings-Sunrise is a multicultural community, as indicated by the diversity of languages spoken in figure 1 below (City of Vancouver, n.d.).

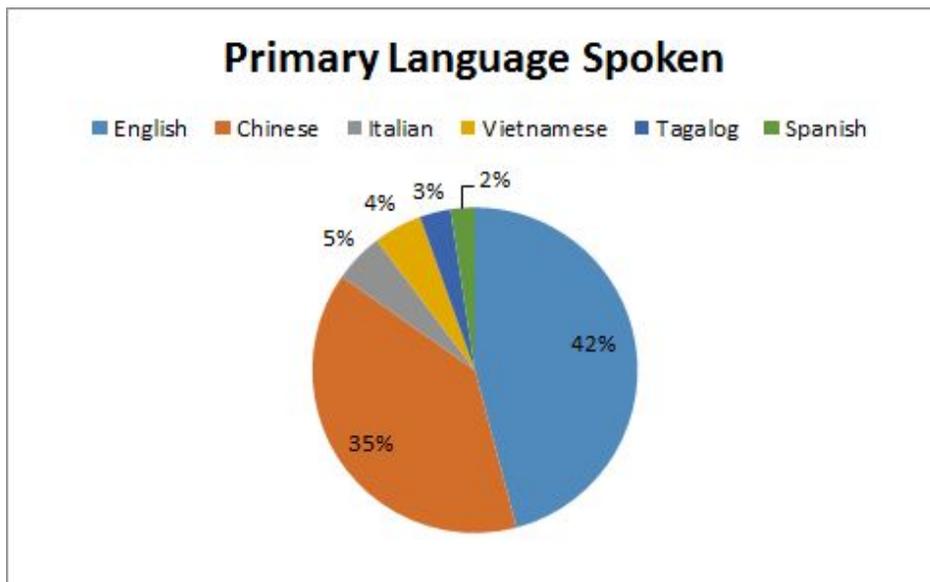


Figure 1. Languages spoken by residents in the Hastings-Sunrise Community. Adapted from City of Vancouver (n.d) *Hasting-Sunrise Community Statistics Census Data*. [PDF] Retrieved on October 05,2016, from <http://vancouver.ca/files/cov/Hastings-Sunrise-census-data.pdf>

Considering this diversity, meeting all the needs of the community members is challenging. Among 12,070 households in this community, 24% are single-person households and the average population in a household is 2.8 people per household. Approximately one-fifth of the households are low income status and the median income of the community is \$59,952. 16.3% of families are single parent families, which is significant considering that 43.7% of lone parent families in Vancouver live under the Low Income Cut Off and these groups are more vulnerable to food insecurity (VCH Food Security Profile, n.d.)

We conducted this project in collaboration with our community partner, the Hastings-Sunrise Community Food Network (HSCFN). Formed in 2012, their goals are to increase the capacity for community engagement and the accessibility of affordable, healthy food, in order to create a more just, resilient community food system (HSFN, 2003). They work to achieve this by learning about community needs and identifying gaps in programs, services and information, through an asset-based approach, which involves building upon pre-existing community assets in order to increase community engagement (Mathie and Cunningham, 2003). Our role in the project was to help facilitate and observe at focus groups in different neighborhoods of the Hastings-Sunrise community, to identify the main barriers that community members experience in their food system, and to suggest food programs that could be implemented to increase community food security. The focus groups also promoted more engagement and connection between community members and their food system. We will break this project down into a series of inquiry questions in order to more wholesomely tackle our objectives. These include:

- 1) What are effective ways to engage community members in the community food network?
- 2) What are the barriers in accessing healthy and affordable food?
- 3) What strategies can be implemented to overcome these barriers?

Methods

The project used a focus group strategy to qualitatively collect and interpret data where participants took part in a guided discussion about their community food system. A recent study in Vancouver looked at the implementation of community gardens and engaging community members by asking questions based on garden statistics, initiation and operation, structure of administration and

membership, as well as participant motivations and potential for improvement (Seto, 2011). Our approach followed a similar strategy of concrete, logistical questions to gain an idea of the existing framework. The first step was the facilitator training sessions where we established expectations and skills to host a successful focus group, and finalized the list of questions to be asked (see Appendix I). The 6-8 planned focus groups are ongoing through December, and although we will not be able to incorporate data from every focus group in this report, it will be amalgamated at the discretion of HSCFN for their own debriefing and interpretation. Following a similar case study framework of the Think&EatGreen@School Alliance, our research method combines input from community members and ourselves as food system academics in order to analyze and create new knowledge and locally-based solutions (Rojas *et al.*, 2011).

Responses were analyzed by taking into account the proportions and frequency of the barriers mentioned. Regarding ethical considerations, researchers ensured selected participants had full disclosure about how their contributions were to be used and purposed. Confidentiality was an important consideration, so facilitators preemptively clarified that each participant's responses would be shared with others in the group. Participants were encouraged to keep what they heard and discussed among the focus groups confidential, while the data collected was kept anonymous.

Results

We were able to attend two focus groups held at Thunderbird and Kiwassa neighborhood houses respectively. The focus group participants at Thunderbird were mainly single, caucasian elders and born in Canada while the participants at the Kiwassa focus group were more diverse in culture, age, and family size. The common barriers identified in both focus groups were distance of local food stores, transportation and pricing. The Thunderbird participants also mentioned safety as an issue, related to their mobility state and/or weather and they also mentioned the lack of community food gardens and difficulties in preparing meals for only one person. In addition, financial support and budgeting welfare and pension monthly cheques was a barrier to accessing healthy food for the participants. For those at the

Kiwassa focus group, they were experiencing difficulties planning their food shopping; the ingredients they knew how to cook with were culturally different than what local vegetables were available at grocery stores, and they often had to travel to multiple stores with different hours of operation to get everything they needed. Commuting to food outlets was time consuming, and public transportation could be unreliable or unaffordable.

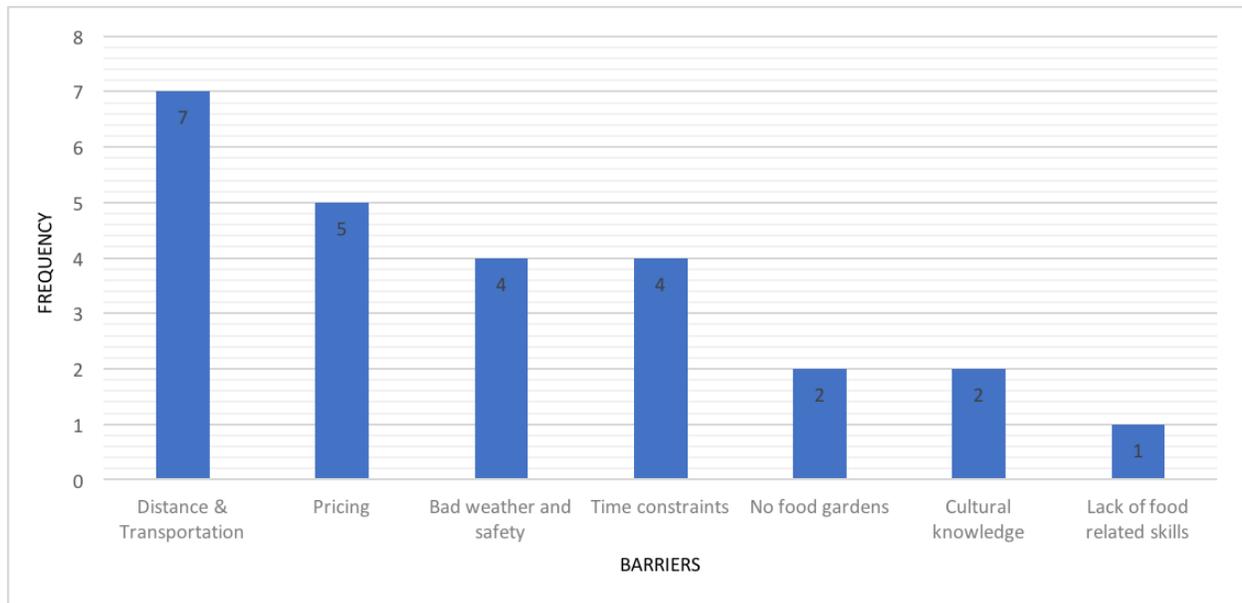


Figure 2. Frequency of barriers to food accessibility mentioned by focus group attendees at Thunderbird and Kiwassa focus groups.

In addition to barriers, the focus groups attendees discussed some potential solutions. The Thunderbird group suggested shuttles to the food outlets as a solution to unreliable transportation, unsafety due to mobility issues, and bad weather. Another suggested solution was a mobile vegetable and fruit truck to increase accessibility of healthy food. Prepackaged meal kits was suggested as a solution for time constraints. In both groups, they mentioned that community kitchens and food gardens could be beneficial to improve food security, and gardening and cooking educational programs could increase the community capacity for food utilization.

Discussion

In order to tackle such a complex issue like community food security, it's important to understand how communities interact with resources in their social and physical environments (McCullum et al., 2005). The pre-determined focus group questions listed in Appendix I guided discussions amongst community members to directly align with our project objectives and inquiry questions aimed at increasing community engagement, identifying pressing barriers, and then potential solutions to overcome barriers. The barriers identified, as indicated by Figure 2, show the need for food related education so that all community members, upon obtaining food, are able to utilize it safely and effectively if their social environment had not already equipped them with the necessary skills and knowledge.

Some of the proposed strategies would directly address food accessibility through the shuttles or cooking kits, or address food knowledge barriers through community gardens and kitchens. Similar in idea to the current Wheels to Meals program that transports seniors out into the community and provides them with a nutritious meal, this service can be expanded or adjusted to instead or additionally provide services which deliver food to the home, demonstrating how current pre-existing assets exist and can be built upon to increase community engagement (Mathie and Cunningham, 2003). In addition, community gardens also provide a social center to bring community members together and increase engagement within their community food system (Dixen, 2014). As conduction of focus groups are still in progress, our results are not complete but can still be utilized by the HSCFN as a stepping stone in their ultimate goal of applying for funding to implement and improve community resources and potential solutions that community members would appreciate and utilize.

A limitation of our method included the small sample size from which results were collected. We attended only two of eight focus groups as two were cancelled due to low registration. Due to community diversity, we cannot be sure the capacity in which barriers were discussed accurately represents experiences of the entire population. More focus groups should be conducted to gather sufficient and significant data. Moreover, since focus groups are in-person discussions amongst strangers, the

participants may be hesitant in sharing their personal stories. Such behavior can be an obstacle in collecting data, so various methods should be utilized to achieve more comprehensive results.

Conclusion

Our project has shown that while there is an array of demographics within the Hastings-Sunrise community, there is a lot of overlap in what residents struggle with and what resources they would like to see from community providers. The food circles we attended allowed some insight into the barriers against food security and added to preexisting knowledge and assumptions about the status of food security within the community. Although this project as a whole extends past our involvement via LFS, and will continue on through the new year, our suggested next steps begin with facilitating more focus groups or other methods of data collection from the community. The idea is to validate the aforementioned barriers we extrapolated from our focus group attendances and bring key others to the foreground so the HSCFN can prioritize their agenda accordingly. While we had no question unanswered at the focus groups, larger sample sizes (i.e. more focus groups) are recommended to create a more wholesome response representative of community needs. Common solutions suggested by residents in focus groups (that may therefore aid the majority best) included transportation services to food and community kitchens or gardens to increase food literacy. If these suggestions are further echoed by residents in more food circles it is our recommendation that the HSCFN consider implementing a preliminary grocery shuttle or communal kitchen and see where the feedback takes them from there. However, without compelling evidence, we cannot suggest a resolute answer to the food security situation in Hastings-Sunrise. Instead, we can only propose what we hope to be an approachable and functioning framework for the HSCFN to continue their next steps from.

Critical Reflections

Student 1:

I expected community based experiential learning project to push my boundaries as a student, and I wasn't disappointed! I have read so many papers on research methods, on food security, and on food programs, all of which have come from an academic perspective and certainly a place of privilege. For that reason, being able to then attend focus groups and talk to community members came with more educational value. It was a truly humbling experience to come into a room filled with people wanting to change the food system, and although I have been trained at university to be a food system "expert", I was far from being an expert amongst the individuals in that room.

The project has never been something I thought of as fitting in the flexible learning schedule. That time for me was to work on the institutional grunt work and parts of the project that I was doing to receive a grade, like the proposal, the blogs, the infographic, and the report. I think our project was unique in that it evolved beyond the boundaries of the course in a wonderful way; I would have loved to volunteer as a focus group facilitator on my own and not through this course. I feel disappointed that some of our deadlines and crazy student schedules held us back from being more engaged, and was unsatisfied with the balance between community work and formal papers (though I realize this can't be helped). I look forward to seeing what the HSCFN does next and helping them in any way I can!

Student 2:

This community based experiential learning project (CBEL) was an experience I'm genuinely grateful for. Prior to working with the HSCFN, the goal of community food security seemed far-fetched as I was clueless as to what steps could be taken towards achieving it. This project showed me the various complexities and sheer hard work and determination required to actually initiate and implement community wide improvements. This CBEL project gave us all the opportunity to meet and collaborate with the most knowledgeable individuals on the topic, community members themselves. It was an eye-opening experience to be trusted with their personal insight and first-hand experiences which truly

built my genuine connection to this project. Learning in academia often consists of reading lengthy scholarly articles and sitting passively in a lecture hall and in my opinion this will never measure up to the active learning and invaluable experience we gained outside the university when working with the HSCFN.

I personally found the flexible learning period to be less flexible than intended as we often spent this time working on upcoming assignments and reports. Outside the allotted flexible learning block was when most of our work with the HSCFN took place. Unfortunately, the timeline of HSCFN project and LFS 350 did not always agree. We often felt short on time and this made it difficult to give this project the attention it truly deserves. Despite this difficulty, I am hopeful that the HSCFN will be able to utilize the information gathered for the better and I'm excited to see what will come from this project and happy to help however I can!

Student 3:

Participating in a real community based case is eye-opening and getting to know how our work will help to make the Hasting sunrise food environment better encourages me to do more for the society. I was in a mist at the beginning of the project because I could barely imagine how the project would be like and where it would end, but the mist eventually dispersed as I discovered more during the project. Focus group is the real time for me to get to know needs and struggle of the community members and what does food security mean to normal people, and it is an experience that I would never get from reading thousands of related journal articles and researches, standing at a privilege place. Community involvement is extremely important as nobody know the needs better than the community members themselves. Working in the community is more complex than I thought, and there is usually no straight or single answer for a problem just like the multiple choices questions we have in exams. Since the project schedule seldom fit in our flexible learning, my groupmates and I usually work on the course assignments. There are also irresistible conflicts between my academic works and project throughout the

term. Such conflict allows me to learn more about how to balance my workload, but it is still disappointing as I cannot attribute more to the project due to time restraints. I am looking forwards to see how our work will be utilized by the HSCFN to develop a better food environment in Hasting sunrise.

Student 4:

Coming into LFS 350 I had no idea what to expect from our project. I had heard some good stories and some horror stories from previous students, thus although I was excited for the opportunity of experiential learning, I was also nervous to see how our project would unfold. However, I was pleasantly surprised at how emotionally invested I became in the project and how much knowledge I gained, that was unique from any other University course.

The opportunity to put a face to communities and individuals that do experience a high amount of food insecurity was invaluable. It is easy to become emotionally distant and disconnected from the issues present in the food system, that we learn about from a theoretical perspective and behind the veil of academia and privilege. However, when you get the opportunity to interact with community members, you realize even more so the importance and reality of what we're learning. Sitting in at the focus groups was also an extremely humbling experience. The community members had an extensive knowledge of their needs, their food system and potential solutions that could help them. This knowledge was not learned through books, but from experience, which speaks to the power of tapping into these knowledge systems present in the community. I hope that the work we did will continue to evolve and benefit the community and I look forward to seeing what kind of impact it will have!

Student 5:

Coming into this project I drew upon my experiences from LFS 250 and assumed it would be a similar sort of CBEL project. However, I was pleasantly surprised by how much more integrated I became with the HSCFN and how it felt like I was really applying somewhat nebulous concepts (e.g. food

justice) learned in 350 into real world situations. One great thing about this project is the fact that we were actually contributing to something greater and networking with people, so that if we wanted to continue working with the HSCFN there would be an open door to do so. Getting involved in such a direct way and hearing personal stories from residents made me feel like I had a responsibility to create change which really resonated with me as an LFS student. After doing so many readings and essays on things like food security and food injustice it's easy to become desensitized to the problem and acknowledge it but feel unmotivated to create change. This project really made me see how the problem is real and persistent in somewhere so "ordinary", not just happening in places like the DTES.

Our community partner held daytime working hours and so our flexible learning time was always used as time to get our group together and work on assignments. Because of this, most of our project's work occurred outside of school hours, either evenings or weekends which made it feel like it took up a lot of time. Despite this, I believe that my team had great synergy and we worked together efficiently and effectively, and I am so grateful to have had them as my teammates.

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Appendix I: Focus group questions

Hastings Sunrise Community Food Network Food Circle

Focus Group October to December 2016

Date: _____

Group _____

Facilitator/s _____

Number of participants _____

Focus group will take about 90-120 minutes

Introduction and gathering community members info (nationality, first language and family size) at the beginning

Each question takes approximately 12-15 minutes followed by subsequent questions.

QUESTIONS

1. What does a (typical/nutritious) meal look like for you?

You can supplement the word Nutritious to healthy

Do you or someone in your family cook at home?

What kind of food do you eat?

Can you provide some example? (can/frozen/fresh whole food)

Is it enough for you (your family)?

2. What food/garden resources and services are you aware of?

(free or low-cost)

From where did you find out or hear about them?

Which ones do you use...what is your favorite?

What makes it easy to use?

What services would you use if they were available to you?

3. What kind of barrier/challenges do you face accessing food/garden services?

e.g. transportation/time issue....other)

What support do you get to overcome your barrier/challenges?

What do you need to get access to food?

4. How do you find in strength to ask for support?

(Alternative question: if you stuck without food, who do you ask for help?)

What support is provided from your community?

Which resource is your favorite?

5. Do you grow any food? Do you eat local food?

Would you like to know how to grow or manage food garden?

If you are given seed and soil, would you plant it?

If you have space, will you share it?
