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Trenton: A Food Desert in the Garden State

The city of Trenton was first recognized as a municipality in 1719. Over time it became a hub of industrial activity, while the surrounding flatlands were known for their agriculture; it earned the motto “Trenton Makes, the World Takes.” As the city proper grew, these farmlands became more developed. During the Civil Rights Movement, white flight became the status quo, and many of the remaining farmlands were overdeveloped into sprawling suburbs. As property values dropped, the New Jersey State and Mercer County governments began purchasing additional properties throughout Trenton; today, State and County offices occupy approximately 40% of the 8-square-mile city’s downtown area, and this has many implications for residents. Although New Jersey is known as “the Garden State,” and its roses, tomatoes, blueberries, and cranberries are abundant in neighboring municipalities, Trenton, the state’s capital, has become an economic wasteland with significant food insecurity among its residents. This paper will attempt to trace Trenton’s transition from affluent abundance to food desert, and will survey some of the religious and secular organizations working to rebuild the Capital City’s economy.

TRENTON: BLISSFUL, BOOMING, BARREN

The city of Trenton was settled in 1679 by Quakers, and then incorporated in the early eighteenth century by William Trent. In a diary dated October 1748, Swedish agricultural economist Peter Kalm described the quaintness of the city:

Trenton is a long narrow town, situate at some distance from the river Delaware, on a sandy plain; it belongs to New Jersey, and they reckon it thirty miles from Philadelphia.... The houses stand at a moderate distance from one another. They are commonly built so that the street passes along one side of the houses, while

gardens of different dimensions bound the other side; in each garden is a draw-well; the place is reckoned very healthy.¹

As a young and “healthy” city, Trenton soon played a substantial role in the Revolutionary War. George Washington’s famous crossing of the Delaware River, a mere three miles north of downtown, is still commemorated to this day, as are the First and Second Battles of Trenton, both of which were arguably a turning-point in the American revolution. The city was recognized as the nation’s capital for a short time in 1784, and it became the capital of New Jersey in 1790.

Trenton thrived economically during the nineteenth century due to its industry. Equidistant between Philadelphia and the ports of Newark and Elizabeth, and eventually due to its location along a busy railroad corridor, Trenton’s production of rubber, ceramic and steel was bolstered by the industrial age. By the beginning of the 1900s, the city’s slogan was “Trenton Makes, the World Takes.” The state government welcomed the industrial affluence and used the increased tax revenues to purchase any land that remained vacant downtown; new buildings for city, county, and state offices were constructed. Some of the older factories were also repurposed into expansive warehouses and shopping centers. The city was in its prime, until America’s racial turmoil of the 1960s came to a violent climax.

Trenton’s industry was still booming in the mid-twentieth-century, yet as African-Americans migrated from the South, they found limited work and housing opportunities. Shea and Gross recall, “African Americans were angry about being funneled into ghettos and inferior

¹ Quoted in Hamilton Schuyler, *A History of St Michael’s Church Trenton: In the diocese of New Jersey from its Foundation in the Year of Our Lord 1703 to 1926* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1926), 55.

schools, about being denied jobs in a city brimming with factories....”² Neighborhoods with predominantly white residents had well-maintained schools and public spaces, while African-Americans were isolated into lesser-maintained areas.³ As a result of these local conditions, in addition to the national turmoil over the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., violent race riots broke out in Trenton’s North Ward in April 1968. During the riots over 100 residents were arrested, countless first responders were injured, and a number of local business, restaurants, and homes were burned to the ground. Half a century later, many of these damaged properties still bear signs of destruction and division.

As the manufacturing industry began to decline nationwide in the 1970s, Trenton saw more large and small businesses close, property values plummet, and a gradual shift toward urban decay. Whites continued to abandon the city all together, and the neighboring suburbs of Hopewell, Ewing and Hamilton soon became conservative, white enclaves; today, Trenton city is estimated to be 50% Black or African American and 35.5% Hispanic or Latino.⁴ The city is now known to some as a place of slow economic improvement, social advocacy, and progressive politics; to others, however, it is known as a hub of crime, poverty, homelessness, vacant property, and unemployment. The city still boasts its industrial-age motto, yet most of Trenton has never again returned to its former grandeur.

² Kevin Shea and Paige Gross, “50 years later, has Trenton shed the scars of the MLK riots?” *NJ.com*, April 9, 2018. http://www.nj.com/mercer/index.ssf/2018/04/50_years_later_is_trenton_moving_past_mlk_riots.html.

³ Paul Mickle, “Civil rights history was made in Trenton 70 years ago,” *Trentonian*, January 30, 2014. <http://www.trentonian.com/article/TT/20140130/NEWS/140139970>.

⁴ “QuickFacts: Trenton NJ,” *United States Census Bureau*, accessed April 23, 2018. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/trentoncitynewjersey/IPE120216>.

Acknowledging this reality, however, it is helpful to consider how some specific areas are experiencing economic stability and even growth. One such neighborhood is Mill Hill, located in the southern corner of downtown Trenton. Only a few square blocks, the gradually-gentrifying Mill Hill area is along the Route 1 corridor with convenient access to Philadelphia, Princeton, New Brunswick, and Newark. It is the home to a number of small businesses and niche restaurants, a professional theatre whose productions focus on social change, and a seasonal farmers' market. Another anomaly in Trenton is the Cadwalader Heights neighborhood, located in the city's West Ward. If Mill Hill is to be considered new money, the area surrounding Cadwalader Park is old money. A suburb within city limits, the neighborhood takes pride in its Victorian-era mansions and expansive gardens, many of which are situated upon a hillside with a breathtaking view of the Delaware River. These neighborhoods, both predominantly white, are the visible signs of racial and economic stratification which remain today.

The state government further complicates this portrait of Trenton: as the state's capital, Trenton is home to a significant number of state and county buildings. A recent tax appraisal of city lands suggested that 40% of the city's downtown area is occupied with state offices; 51.2% of all properties in the Trenton are exempt from property taxes (compared to 13% statewide).⁵ Unbeknownst to many residents, these tax-exempt properties are responsible for a third of the police, fire, and medical emergency calls. That means the financial burden for the entire city is cast upon the taxes of only a fraction of the land. In 2015, Trenton's mayor Eric Jackson said, "I support the state through my fire system, my EMS, my water system ... There is an inequity. If

⁵ "Interactive Map: On the Trail of New Jersey's Tax-Exempt Properties," *NJ Spotlight*, accessed April 30, 2018. <http://www.njspotlight.com/stories/15/12/10/tax-exempt-properties/>.

[the State] paid their fair share, based on our current tax rates, I would be in a surplus.”⁶ Tax abatement programs designed to offset these exorbitant costs, such as the currently-debated Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) program, have been legislatively blocked for several years.⁷ Furthermore, because these government-owned offices are only open “banker’s hours,” it is not financially viable for the few remaining downtown businesses and restaurants to be open at night or on weekends. That means that, while Trenton residents might have limited access to healthy and affordable foods during the work day, this ability ceases with the sunset and on weekends.

URBAN STUDIES

This paper’s primary focus is food access and insecurity in the capital of the Garden State, and I will soon present these specifics; however, it is imperative to acknowledge that this economic reality is not unique to Trenton. Many urban areas across the country face similar challenges, while other urban areas show signs of economic strength and resilience. What makes some cities desolate while others remain economically fertile? Sociologists and urban planners study the patterns and variables which may explain this range of realities. Urban theory is the field of study dedicated to the interaction between these variables and how they impact urban areas. While there are as many theories as theorists, I will present an overview of some common urban approaches and their sociological implications.

Urban theory is predominantly a sociological field, and cities have long been important as a lens to examine any microcosm of society. Urban theorists must consider not only how a given community was formed, but also how members of the community interact and function. Many of

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ For an in-depth explanation of New Jersey’s Municipal Tax Abatements, see http://www.nj.gov/comptroller/news/docs/tax_abatement_report.pdf.

current understandings, therefore, have socio-religious roots. In the book of Revelation, for example, we hear an apocalyptic vision of a New Jerusalem, a diverse and reconciled city in which “death will be no more. There will be no mourning, crying, or pain anymore.”⁸ The paradigm of a New City has been continued by many classical theologians, who use cities as a way to explore human achievement and depravity alike. In City of God Against the Pagans, for example, Augustine used cities as an analogy of human and divine will. Writing in the shadow of the fifth-century Sack of Rome, he “distinguished between the city of earth and the city of God. The former, based on self-love and transitory goods, is destined to perish. The latter, based upon the worship of God, is eternal.”⁹ A city could be seen as both the center of misdirected love and value, and the center of repentance and reconciliation. Moving to the early medieval period, we can also consider the writings of Thomas Aquinas. Although he presupposed a hierarchical order of creation, he also recognized the obligations of living within an ordered urban society: “The fundamental end of society is the common good in which the good of each is the good of all.”¹⁰ Aquinas believed that those with authority are compelled to “[provide] a sufficient supply of what is necessary for good living.”¹¹ This social hierarchy creates an obligation for the wealthy to care for the poor; this is especially necessary in urban areas where economic division is most obvious, but the need to respond is no longer so obvious.

⁸ Revelation 21:4, CEB.

⁹ J. Philip Wogaman, *Christian Ethics: A Historical Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 54.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 91.

Some notable nineteenth century sociologists such as Marx considered cities and urban life from the perspective of economics and social order. Karl Marx, for example, viewed urbanization “as the ‘natural’ outcome of the development of the productive forces, as well as a launchpad for sustaining that development.”¹² A generation later, Lukács attempted to dismantle this view by arguing against urbanization’s effect on the working class: “In order to produce commodities, working people themselves become commodities.”¹³ From both of these perspectives, urbanization has a negative impact on social order. Writing in the mid-twentieth century, however, V. Gordon Childe avoided economics and instead studied ancient cities to understand the genesis of urban social structures. Childe noted that the “urban revolution” was notably different from ancient rural life, and he suggested ancient urbanization was the basis for modern society:

The first step toward an urban society occurred when hunting and gathering societies shifted to food production in relatively stable and sedentary groups. Once the urban revolution began, civilization progressed and evolved to more complex forms of social life sustained by an urban economy based on trade and craft production.¹⁴

According to Childe’s urban theory, the earliest societies built cities predominantly to simplify food production and access. While these are merely theories, all of these perspectives on society and urban life continue to shape scholarship in the field. Urban theorists also seek to understand how civilized communities are formed and maintained, and whose responsibility it is to remedy inequity.

¹² Andrew Merrifield, *Metromarxism: A Marxist Tale of the City* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 22.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁴ Michael T. Ryan, Ray Hutchinson, and Mark Gottdiener, *The New Urban Sociology, fifth ed.* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 30.

As populations have grown, and thus the rise of ever bigger and more numerous cities, architects and urban theorists have mused on what contributes to a good city. Wade Graham, an architect and historian from Los Angeles, imagines cities as “expressions of ideas, often conflicting, about how we should live, work, play, make, buy, and believe.”¹⁵ In *Dream Cities*, Graham examines seven architectural categories and suggests how each characteristic “city” impacts the lives of its residents. These seven analogous cities are Castles (“the Romantic city”), Monuments (“the Ordered city”), Slabs (“the Rational city”), Homesteads (“the Anticity”), Corals (“the Self-Organizing city”), Malls (“the Shopping city”), and Habitats (“the Techno-Ecological city”). Some of these cities seem to succeed; in the Corals category, for example, a strong sense of community in a microcosm can exponentially impact the city as a whole: “successful streets generate successful neighborhoods, then successful districts, and then successful cities.”¹⁶ Other “cities” fall short; for example, in his discussion of Malls, he explains that marketplaces evolved as “spaces of commerce, but not strictly speaking spaces open to the public.”¹⁷ A city designed for economy may not be life-giving for all its residents. Graham’s theory is that a city can be shaped by the life of its residents, and the life of its residents can be similarly shaped by the city. This dialogue develops over time and, as Graham suggests, the architectural design of a city can shift the future of communal life for generations.

Many scholars use economics as a primary lens in studying cities. Leading this approach to the field is Richard Florida, an urban sociologist originally from Newark. He maintains that

¹⁵ Wade Graham, *Dream Cities: Seven Urban Ideas that Shape the World* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2016), vii.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 197.

urban segregation, and gentrification in particular, is not only causing widespread urban affliction, but destroying the middle class in the process. Florida distinguishes between gentrification and urban renewal by considering who benefits from such renewal. Eliminating the segregation within urban areas is only possible through economic policies which benefit all.

Florida writes,

Indeed, the real task of urban policy is not to try to stop the market forces that are leading to the economic revitalization of certain urban areas, but to improve the housing options, economic opportunities, and neighborhood conditions of those who are being left behind.¹⁸

To curb gentrification and strengthen the middle class, or to tackle what he calls “The New Urban Crisis,” Florida suggests we address this segregation: “To solve a crisis this deep and systemic, we must put cities and urbanism at the very center of our agenda for economic prosperity.”¹⁹ In other words, to rebuild an economically equitable America, we must begin with (and not end with) urban areas. In Trenton, this would require “strategic investments in the kinds of infrastructure that can underpin more clustered and concentrated urban development,”²⁰ which would optimistically radiate out into the surrounding suburbs.

Economics need not be the only change agent to improve urban life. Taking a slightly different approach from Graham and Florida is Charles Montgomery, a journalist, sociologist, and urban specialist from Vancouver, Canada. In his latest book, Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design, Montgomery studied cities such as Bogotá, Copenhagen, Mexico City, and Paris. Overall, his approach to urban theory stems from the question of happiness. He

¹⁸ Richard Florida, *The New Urban Crisis: How Our Cities are Increasing Inequality, Deepening Segregation, and Failing the Middle Class—and What We Can Do About It* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 78

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 191.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 189.

posits, “It is impossible to separate the life and design of a city from the attempt to understand happiness, to experience it, and to build it for society.”²¹ Throughout the book, Montgomery argues that common sources of urban decay can be addressed by recognizing some seemingly obvious statistics, such as commute times, accessibility for bicycles and pedestrians, access to nature, and neighborhood relationships. Focusing on these shortcomings can increase a community’s happiness which, as Montgomery maintains, can improve the quality of the city itself.²² One of Montgomery’s strongest positions for a revitalization of any city, which could be particularly helpful in Trenton, is the reframing of a city’s purpose. He writes, “Cities must be regarded as more than engines of wealth; they must be viewed as systems that should be shaped to improve human well-being.”²³ As long as Trenton is remembered as *what it used to be* – or merely seen as the seat of state and county government – the livelihood of its residents will languish.

A fourth urban theorist, Jeff Speck, is known for prioritizing pedestrians. In his recent book Walkable City: How Downtown Can Save America, One Step at a Time, he presents an argument for improving a city’s walkability. From an ecological and economic perspective, increasing the number of pedestrians can significantly reduce the amount of greenhouse gasses emitted in urban areas, and thus lower pollution and respiratory problems, while positively impacting the financial state of residents. For example, Speck cites a study in Portland, Oregon. Due to the city’s supreme walkability, residents drive an average of 20 percent less than residents

²¹ Charles Montgomery, *Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 18.

²² *Ibid.*, 6.

²³ *Ibid.*, 42.

of other urban areas. Although this sounds trivial, it has a significant impact on Portland's residents themselves: "this 20 percent (four miles per citizen per day) adds up to \$1.1 billion of savings each year, which equals fully 1.5 percent of all personal income earned in the region."²⁴ Speck continues to report that rush hour travel times have also fallen as a result. Even in light of the ecological and economic benefits, increasing walkability is not an immediate solution for most urban areas. Throughout Walkable City, Speck offers a number of risks to consider, such as inundating public transit systems and ensuring pedestrian safety. While walkability could impact resident health and wealth, and reduce urban pollution, it is not sufficient to simply eliminate vehicles. Significant changes to the infrastructure of the city and surrounding region must be considered as well.

Each of the theologians, sociologists, and scholars presented here has a unique perspective on urban realities and how to improve them. None specifically addresses food insecurity, but three lenses through which urban life can be observed emerge: (1) the importance of economics and commercial enterprise, (2) dynamics of race, ethnicity, and culture, and (3) transportation and pedestrian accessibility. When any of these becomes unbalanced, the overall wholeness of the community is challenged. Since this paper addresses food insecurity, I will now turn toward theological and practical assessments of food and hunger.

FOOD AND HUNGER

Though quite simple in terms of biological makeup, food surrounds – and significantly impacts – every aspect of the human life. Food is the energy of our every action, and for many, one key goal of our labor. However, save those who were raised or live upon agricultural lands,

²⁴ Jeff Speck, *Walkable City: How Downtown Can Save America, One Step at a Time* (New York: North Point Press, 2012), 29.

humanity no longer has an intimate relationship with the production of this precious necessity. Food has transitioned from something we grow to something we purchase; rather than speaking of harvest, we now speak of production. Food production is not to be wholly discounted: with a dramatic increase to the worldwide population in the most recent centuries, older agrarian (land-based) methods of cultivating a food supply simply would not be sustainable in modernity. The inexplicable reality is that, now, food is considered an economic vehicle rather than a human necessity. As theologian Norman Wirzba states, “Food is produced not with the aim of promoting nutrition, freshness, and quality of taste, but rather transportability, long store and counter shelf life, and uniformity of appearance.”²⁵ In other words, its value is viewed as a commodity; most agricultural innovation is aimed at increasing profits for the product and its producers. We acknowledge that food is crucial to survival and simultaneously attempt to capitalize on it. Due to this phenomenon of food access, sociologists have coined the phrase *food security*, which the Economic Research Service of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines as “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.”²⁶ Food insecurity is different from hunger; the USDA considers hunger to be a result of the sustained lack of access to healthy foods.

When considering urban areas, and inner-cities in particular, food takes on a unique role compared to suburban or rural areas. This is largely because North American urbanites have long lost their relationship to arable land. Arguably, as some scholars suggest, they have thus lost an integral piece of their human identity. An agrarian approach to creation from someone like

²⁵ Norman Wirzba, *Food & Faith: A Theology of Eating* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 23.

²⁶ “Food Security in the U.S.,” *United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service*, accessed April 23, 2018. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/>.

Wirzba rests upon the idea that we are created of the ground. Moreover, from a biblical perspective, we are drawn up out of the ground with one purpose: “In order to live, we must ‘work’ the land, manage it, take from it.”²⁷ Dwelling upon land which develops vertically rather than horizontally, nonetheless often living in borrowed or rented space, urban dwellers are reliant upon the generosity of others as food producers. That is, inherently, there is a disconnection between urban civilization and the rest of creation.

There is an additional aspect of urban hunger which should be considered, and that is the matter of economic privilege. A movement over the past two decades which favors local foods, appropriately called the Food Movement, attempts to shift food from a personal necessity to a political vehicle: “By transforming our food practices, the movement tells us, we can live healthier, more authentic lives while supporting positive social and environmental change.”²⁸ What the Food Movement neglects to address is that this “locavore” ideal is tremendously classist: people with enough economic means have access to the best food options, while people who cannot afford those foods become second-class eaters. Furthermore, since food is seldom produced in urban areas, food costs tend to be inflated in urban areas. Anderson concisely presents this problem: “Most of the world has little choice; they buy the cheap food because they lack the money to do otherwise, and in a world now largely urban, they also lack the opportunity to produce food for themselves.”²⁹ The Food Movement might be seen in urban areas, therefore,

²⁷ Ellen Davis, “And the Land I Will Remember: Reading the Bible through Agrarian Eyes,” in *Wendell Berry and Religion: Heaven’s Earthly Life*, ed. Joel James Shuman and L. Roger Owens (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 123.

²⁸ Alison Hope Alkon and Julian Agyeman, “The Food Movement as Polyculture,” in *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011), 2.

²⁹ E. N. Anderson, *Everyone Eats: Understanding Food and Culture, second ed.* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 114.

as a monument to gentrification. Challenging the movement, Alkon and Agyeman conclude, “Communities of color and poor communities have time and again been denied access to the means of food production, and, due to both price and store location, often cannot access the diet advocated by the food movement.”³⁰

To challenge our assumptions about humanity’s overall relationship with food, Wirzba offers this idea: “Theologically understood, food is not reducible to material stuff. It is the provision and nurture of God made pleasing and delectable. It is the daily reminder that life and death come to us as gifts.”³¹ Food cannot simply be reduced to an exchange of molecules between one being and the rest of creation, but rather an exchange between humanity and the divine. Recognizing food as a priceless gift allows us to be humbled and mindful as we encounter the Holy One who provides for our sustenance. Food is not a privilege or a right but, with varying degrees of human intervention, it is provided by and in creation. Yet humans neglect to realize the importance of this precious exchange, and so have commodified and economized its production and distribution. If food is so important for humanity to survive – and thrive – why is hunger still an issue? Further, if the world can produce enough food for up to 30 billion people each year, and the worldwide population is approximately 7.4 billion, why are there still nearly a billion humans going to bed underfed or undernourished each night?³²

There are a number of factors that influence the answer to these questions, but we can already see that hunger and food insecurity are symptoms and not a disease in itself. The most

³⁰ Alkon and Agyeman, 5.

³¹ Wirzba, 7.

³² Anderson, 250-251.

obvious cause of hunger, food insecurity, and even obesity seems to be economic disparity and political influence. Ethicist Cynthia Moe-Lobeda suggests, “Famine often is not the result of insufficient food supplies. It is the result of maldistribution of land and income.”³³ We recognize that race also plays an economic role, and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor has written much upon this idea: “Poverty is but a single factor in making sense of the ever-widening wealth gap between African Americans and whites.”³⁴ Gottlieb and Joshi also note, “Links have been identified between limited or no fresh food access and health-related disparities based on race, ethnicity, and income.”³⁵ Addressing hunger and food insecurity, then, must be grounded in “respecting the dignity of every human being.”³⁶

Jason Corburn, a scholar in urban planning, effectively teases out the idea that food security is a broader issue of justice. He cites Fernando Ona, a director of the San Francisco Food Systems Project. Ona writes, “We recognize that food is at once a very personal and intimate thing while at the same time part of a political system that can at times unite and at others further stratify society.”³⁷ The implications of food access can further divide communities, especially when those communities are already divided due to economics or race. Access to healthy food then becomes an issue of equity, rather than segregation. Similarly, we recognize that food is a means of communal and religious identity, particularly among minority

³³ Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 34.

³⁴ Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 11.

³⁵ Robert Gottlieb and Anupama Joshi, *Food Justice* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), 43.

³⁶ “The Baptismal Covenant,” *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Publishing, 2007), 305.

³⁷ Quoted in Jason Corburn, *Toward the Healthy City: People, Places, and the Politics of Urban Planning* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009) 114.

communities: “Eating together means sharing and participating.”³⁸ Hicks writes about the effect food has on the religious identity of African Americans: “[the] religious life of African Americans includes a functional element of empowerment, allowing them to critically rethink the social reality. Food becomes one among other mediums through which this form of religious thought is expressed and promulgated in community.”³⁹ Access to healthy food can become secondary to the need for authentically ethnic or familiar food. This is clearly observed in some of Trenton’s historically ethnic neighborhoods. The Chambersburg neighborhood, which was predominantly Italian-American until the 1970s, still has Italian bakeries and restaurants; along the northwest Trenton border, an area which was historically Polish-American, still has Polish banks and Catholic congregations. Ironically, these neighborhoods are no longer representative of these nationalities, yet these establishments point to Trenton’s ethnic diversity.

Although eliminating poverty is a chief factor in preventing hunger, poverty is not new to civilized society. Yuval Noah Harari, an historical anthropologist, has posited that alongside evolution, poverty played a role in maintaining the survival of the fittest. Anthropologically speaking, those who lacked access to food and resources would not survive. Yet Harari argues that many, if not all, of the root causes of poverty are excisable by modernity. “Poverty is increasingly seen as a technical problem amenable to intervention,” he writes. “It’s common wisdom that policies based on the latest findings in agronomy, economics, medicine and

³⁸ Anderson, 172.

³⁹ Derek S. Hicks, “An Unusual Feast: Gumbo and the Complex Brew of Black Religion,” in *Religion, Food, and Eating in North America*, ed. Benjamin E. Zeller, Marie W. Dallam, Reid L. Neilson, and Nora L. Rubel (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 143.

sociology can eliminate poverty.”⁴⁰ The question then becomes why poverty and food insecurity are still so widespread in the twenty-first century. Trenton is no exception.

Trenton as food desert

After considering a history of Trenton, acknowledging the city as an economic wasteland, and exploring the importance of food in an urban area, it should be unsurprising that Trenton is an increasingly difficult place to live. As a metaphor for living in such a community, Wirzba discusses the notion of “exile.” He writes, “To be in exile marks an inability to live peaceably, sustainably, and joyfully in one’s place.... To be in exile is to find oneself in a world that is increasingly inhospitable or unlivable.”⁴¹ In many parts of Trenton, this definition is an accurate picture of the inhospitality cast upon its residents. Trenton is an exilic community for reasons beyond hunger: there have been at least 25 murders in Trenton within the last year, the city-wide unemployment rate is currently approaching 7% (compared to 4.7% in the rest of New Jersey)⁴², and the city suffers from a 27.6% poverty rate; only two cities in New Jersey rank higher in terms of poverty (Atlantic City at 36.6%, and Asbury Park at 30.6%).⁴³

Like other assumptions presented in this paper, this economic reality is not unique to Trenton. In fact, the capital city may present a sample of New Jersey’s economic diversity. A 1999 study found that, “since 1950 New Jersey has lost 51% of its farmland and is expected to

⁴⁰ Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (New York: Harper, 2015), 266.

⁴¹ Wirzba, 72.

⁴² “Trenton Area Economic Summary,” *United States Bureau of Labor Statistics*, accessed December 11, 2017. https://www.bls.gov/regions/new-york-new-jersey/summary/blssummary_trenton.pdf.

⁴³ “QuickFacts: Trenton NJ,” *United States Census Bureau*, accessed April 7, 2018. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/trentoncitynewjersey/IPE120216>.

lose an additional 12% over the next 20 years.”⁴⁴ The low standard of living in many parts of Trenton, however, is exacerbated by a lack of food access.

There is one traditional (yet over-priced) grocery store in the downtown area which sees city and state government workers as its regular customer; there are a handful of other grocery stores within city limits, and countless corner markets offering sundries and snacks. However, access to healthy food in Trenton is dreadful. The Economic Research Service of the USDA defines *food deserts* as “neighborhoods that lack healthy food sources,” and among others, includes these three factors: (1) accessibility of healthy food measured by distance to or number of stores in an area; (2) individual resources, such as income or owning a vehicle; and (3) neighborhood resources, such as average income and public transit.⁴⁵ By this definition, the majority of Trenton’s residents live in a food desert.

A 2014 study by the Trenton Health Team, a community health collaboration between the St. Francis Medical Center and Capital Health Regional Medical Center, argues that this lack of food access is a public health issue. The study found that “approximately 39 percent of Trenton residents [are] obese, compared to 19.7 percent in Mercer County and 23.7 percent in New Jersey as a whole.”⁴⁶ This is because of an insufficient number of supermarkets, with the healthiest food access options, in Trenton. The study maintained:

⁴⁴ Mustafa Koc, Rod MacRae, and Luc J.A. Mougeot, eds. *For Hunger-Proof Cities: Sustainable Urban Food Systems* (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 1999), 56.

⁴⁵ “Food Access Research Atlas: Documentation,” *United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service*, accessed December 12, 2017. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/documentation/>.

⁴⁶ “Community Health Improvement Plan,” Trenton Health Team, accessed April 8, 2018. <https://trentonhealthteam.org/wp-content/uploads/THT-Community-Health-Improvement-Plan-2014-Jan.pdf>.

The lowest rates for being overweight or obese in the U.S. are found where people have easy access to supermarkets and grocery stores. Those who live farther away from grocery stores than from convenience stores or limited service restaurants have significantly higher rates of premature death from diabetes. Overall, most Trenton area supermarkets are inaccessible without a car, representing a major disparity. Many residents do not own cars and, while public transportation in the city is unreliable, it is also costly.⁴⁷

Put simply, “There is considerable evidence that having more supermarkets correlates with better health.”⁴⁸ Gottlieb and Joshi also maintain, “Purely on a price per calorie basis, and thanks in part to various government-related subsidy programs, junk foods and fast foods (high-calorie foods) become more attractive to those with limited incomes available for food purchases.”⁴⁹ It is understandable, then, that the Trenton Health Team’s findings in 2014 about hunger and food access were largely unchanged from reports in 2006 and 2012 (although there was noticeable progression in other public health categories, such as substance abuse resources and access to community healthcare). This suggests that, even though there are other improvements noted in Trenton’s overall health, food access has not improved in the past decade.

The American Community Survey of the U.S. Census Bureau presents a bleak statistical view of Trenton: the median household income in 2016 for Trenton residents was \$34,412 (compared to \$73,966 for all of Mercer County); out of 27,549 Trentonian households, 16.4% of these households reported income of less than \$10,000 per year; the largest demographic living in poverty is women aged 25-34.⁵⁰ Furthermore, use of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Irwin S. Stoolmacher, “Trenton needs more supermarkets.” *Times of Trenton*, November 23, 2017. http://www.nj.com/times-opinion/index.ssf/2017/11/trenton_needs_more_supermarket.html.

⁴⁹ Gottlieb and Joshi, 54.

⁵⁰ “Data USA: Trenton, NJ,” accessed April 23, 2018. <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/trenton-nj/>.

(SNAP) program, colloquially known as “food stamps,” has significantly increased in the state of New Jersey over the past ten years: “In July 2008, there were 216,000 New Jersey households receiving SNAP benefits, compared to about 430,000 in July 2016.”⁵¹ This is in spite of a national 1% enrollment decrease between 2014 and 2015, a 5% enrollment decrease between 2015 and 2016.⁵² The decreases do not indicate improved food access, but analysts suggest this decline in SNAP enrollment is a result of federal and state legislation which requires employment for benefit eligibility.

There is an additional aspect of health and food access in Trenton which this paper will mention, but not address at length: water quality. Trenton Water Works supplies water for 225,000 residents in Trenton and its surrounding municipalities. According to routine testing in November 2017, haloacetic acid 5 levels were found to be above normal drinking water standards. This group of chemical compounds, also referred to as HAA5, is a byproduct of the disinfection of drinking water.⁵³ This result was not classified as an emergency, although a public letter from the Division of Water warned, “If you have a severely compromised immune system, have an infant, are pregnant, or are elderly, you may be at increased risk and should seek advice from your health care providers about drinking this water.”⁵⁴ This is the second string of

⁵¹ Susan K. Livio, “Food stamp use down in N.J., but not as much as the rest of the U.S.,” *NJ.com*, September 16, 2017. http://www.nj.com/healthfit/index.ssf/2016/09/food_stamp_use_down_in_nj_but_not_as_much_as_the_rest_of_the_us.html.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ “National Primary Drinking Water Regulations,” United States Environmental Protection Agency, accessed May 5, 2018. <https://www.epa.gov/ground-water-and-drinking-water/national-primary-drinking-water-regulations>.

⁵⁴ “Important Information about your Drinking Water,” letter from the Trenton Water Works, December 26, 2017. <http://www.trentonnj.org/documents/Haloacetic%20Acid%20-%20English.pdf>.

quality issues for Trenton Water Works, as Department of Health statistics from 2014 showed “11 cities and two counties had a higher percentage of children with elevated lead levels than Flint did in 2015, as shown by Michigan state statistics.”⁵⁵ Trenton is one of those eleven cities, with 6.3% of children testing with higher lead levels than the maximum standard set by the Center for Disease Control. Clean water access is only one possible cause for these elevated lead levels, but the issue has yet to be formally addressed by the state of New Jersey. Regardless of the cause, the lack of clean water access is also an economic issue; it can force families to spend more money on bottled water, reducing the available money for healthy and fresh food items.

Food access in Trenton is clearly a complex paradigm. Substantial poverty, a limited number of food stores (with severely limited business hours), a sub-par public transit system, and thick ethnic and racial divisions between the city’s individual wards and its suburbs, create a perfect storm for hunger to abound. Yet hunger and food and water insecurity do not have to remain rampant in the Capital City. Working to care for the symptoms of hunger must also address its causes and implications. The next section will investigate how some organizations are actively fighting the injustices that make Trenton a desolate urban area.

HUNGER RESPONSES IN TRENTON

What might food security look like in Trenton? Or how might Trenton’s food supply be more self-reliant? Reflecting on San Francisco, Corburn has a number of suggestions for addressing hunger in an urban area: “Local food self-reliance might include supermarkets, farmers’ markets, gardens, transportation to food outside the neighborhood, community-based food processing ventures, and urban farms, while related regional, state, and international issues

⁵⁵ Ben Horowitz, “Why 11 N.J. cities have more lead-affected kids than Flint, Michigan,” *NJ.com*, February 3, 2016. http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2016/02/11_cities_in_jersey_have_more_lead-affected_kids_t.html.

might include agricultural subsidies, institutional food purchasing contracts, and trade agreements.”⁵⁶ Some of these options are more practical than others, but relationships outside the community are key. In order to be food self-reliant, a community needs help from its neighbors.

Responses to hunger in Trenton are plentiful. In this section, I explore a number of organizations that impact food insecurity in Trenton. These responses can be divided into two principal categories: sacred and secular; both approaches have positive and negative implications. The racial segregation of Trenton, discussed earlier, will be important in evaluating these hunger responses. For example, as Ona argues, “Food co-ops, health food stores, ‘buy organic and local’ campaigns can be elitist practices often associated with white privilege.”⁵⁷ As Trenton experiences hints of gentrification, especially downtown in the Mill Hill neighborhood, there are negative consequences of economic development in such a small geographical area. Finally, I will consider large-scale responses that influence not only the symptoms of hunger, but some of the systemic problems which cause them.

Religious responses

Faith-based organizations play a significant role in weaving the fabric of a community. It has been suggested that faith-based initiatives are much more effective in local communities than secular organizations.⁵⁸ In fact, as Wald and Calhoun write, “One estimate suggests that the typical congregation contributes more than \$184,000 per year to the local community.”⁵⁹ This

⁵⁶ Corburn, 114.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Corburn, 113.

⁵⁸ Kenneth D. Wald and Allison Calhoun-Brown, *Religion and Politics in the United States, fifth ed.* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 174.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 173.

statistic is surprising, given that faith-based organizations are often restricted from receiving public funds to maintain programming due to constitutional challenges; in fact, some congregations form external non-profit organizations to be eligible for these government funds. The value of such an influence in a given community is further increased when considering the social capital contributed as well. A faith-based organization's impact on its surrounding community is therefore immeasurable.

There are other scholars, however, who present a different position, suggesting that faith-based responses are not a complete response to issues such as poverty and hunger, especially when they are seen as acts of charity. Ecofeminist liberation theologian Ivone Gebara has stated, "The poor are looking for security, identity, and consolation, and the churches offer moralistic preaching, an often literal reading of the Bible, the saints, and so on. We are almost immediately tempted to claim in response that the 'product' we offer is the one that the poor need in order to go on living."⁶⁰ From this perspective, Gebara is arguing against both a patriarchal, charity-based approach, as well as a poetic, salvific approach. Between Wald, Calhoun-Brown, and Gebara, we recognize that a healthy and wholesome faith-based response to hunger will consider both tangible action and prophetic hope for the community.

There are many religious organizations responding to hunger in Trenton. Arguably the oldest is Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Trenton, which claims to provide "essential services to more than 100,000 New Jersey residents every year."⁶¹ Catholic Charities has been in Trenton since 1913 and has grown from a food pantry to a multi-faceted, bilingual service

⁶⁰ Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 125.

⁶¹ "About Catholic Charities," *Catholic Charities, Diocese of Trenton*, accessed December 7, 2017. <https://www.catholiccharitiestrenton.org/about/our-history/>.

agency. They offer basic needs (such as food, clothing, and emergency housing), substance abuse addiction treatment, domestic violence resources, adult and children's mental health services, immigration services, and more. Limiting their impact in Trenton, however, is a rather extensive list of requirements to access Catholic Charities' services: photo identification, birth certificates and social security cards for all members of the household, proof of income, and proof of residency. Many of Trenton's transient residents lack these documents and are therefore ineligible for housing and basic needs services. Support from the Catholic Diocese of Trenton allows services in four New Jersey counties; Catholic Charities also has resource networks in surrounding municipalities.

Another early attempt to battle hunger in the city was The Rescue Mission. It was founded in 1915 by an evangelical couple seeking to spread the gospel to the homeless; the family quickly realized that hunger was not just a problem among the transient, but also among residents. By the 1920s, over 100 meals were served each night. As the economy in Trenton slowly collapsed in the 1930s, this number radically increased. As the Rescue Mission lost considerable funding, like so many other faith-based organizations, the association to any particular denomination or religious tradition was severed. The Rescue Mission now functions as a secular organization, but its mission and presence in the community remains: "While the Rescue Mission of Trenton has undergone many changes during the past nine decades, our focus has always been to help those in need to help themselves."⁶² Emergency food and shelter are the primary programs of the Rescue Mission, in addition to free clothing, substance abuse addiction services, GED preparation, and mental health services.

⁶² "About the Rescue Mission," *The Rescue Mission of Trenton*, accessed December 7, 2017. <http://www.rescuemissionoftrenton.org/about.php>.

A somewhat new endeavor addressing food injustice in Mercer County is Princeton Theological Seminary's Farminary initiative. This 21-acre farm, which was purchased by the institution in 2010, has evolved into "one of several seminary-based projects across the United States that are exploring the role of food in the formation of ministers."⁶³ The focus of such a project is threefold: ecumenical training for religious leaders in an agricultural setting, placing ecological and agrarian theologies at the center of the Christian experience, and strengthening community. Since its inception in 2014, the Farminary has begun to address tangible food needs in its surrounding community through participation in farmers' markets, including within the city of Trenton, as well as offer continuing education opportunities for clergy and lay leaders through the Seminary.

Since 2011, Trinity Episcopal Church in Princeton has hosted a monthly dinner program called One Table Café, which is "a community supported restaurant where all are welcome regardless of race, gender, country of origin, religion, sexual orientation or ability to pay."⁶⁴ Although not in Trenton, a significant number of homeless and transient residents attend the meal each month. Following dinner, a brief lecture is shared by a local community organization. Recent programs have been presented by the Trenton Literacy Movement and the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen. Additionally, the free-will donations collected are directed toward hunger-based ministries such as the Mercer Street Friends, Trenton Area Soup Kitchen, Bread for the World, and Episcopal Relief and Development.

⁶³ Kendall Vanderslice, "Farminaries," *Christianity Today*, January 25, 2018.
<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/january-february/farminaries.html>.

⁶⁴ "One Table Café," *Trinity Episcopal Church*, accessed April 21, 2018.
<http://www.trinityprinceton.org/events/2016/4/15/one-table-cafe>.

A final faith-based resource to consider for food access and security is amorphous and difficult to study: parochial food pantries, soup kitchens, and clothing closets. In Trenton, these are typically found in urban churches, but often are tied to larger denominational networks. For example, Resurrection Lutheran Church in the nearby Hamilton suburbs maintains a successful food pantry, but many of its resources come from other congregations in the New Jersey Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. St. Michael's Episcopal Church hosts a food pantry, but only insofar as it allows an independent congregation to use its downtown space. St. Bartholomew Lutheran Church, in the eastern Trenton neighborhood of Franklin Park, is home to a clothing closet, but its contents are donated from countless other organizations. Westminster Presbyterian Church has done some work to eradicate hunger in Trenton through food distribution and political influence, although this is secondary to their considerable immigrant services and English as a Second Language programs. Notable in many of Trenton's parochial services is the irregularity of distribution; the schedules change faster than public agencies can publish updates. Quite often, these lists are obsolete as soon as they are distributed. A fascinating phenomenon is observed in these food pantries and clothing closets: the communal relationship built among those who frequent these services. There is a strong sense of comradery in connecting people to the services they need, even when the organizations themselves are unaware of these schedule changes.

These brief profiles are just a small sampling of the responses to food insecurity in Trenton. Faith-based organizations impact the community in a myriad of ways, many extending beyond hunger. This is not unique to Trenton but speaks to the importance of keeping active faith communities in urban areas, especially when the individual congregations may not be (financially) sustainable from a denominational or judicatorial perspective. Wald and Calhoun

suggest that, “Regardless of religious background, those [faith-based organizations] that are most active have a strong commitment to civic involvement. In this way, churches not only develop intangible qualities such as social capital, civic skills, and social trust but can contribute to the financial bottom line of a community as well.”⁶⁵ Can secular organizations also impact the communities in which they exist?

Secular responses

Philosophical theologian Charles Gutenson has rightly stated, “While we should be happy to see churches taking on ever increasing roles in the alleviation of the suffering of those in crisis, we simply cannot preclude government from being involved in this work.”⁶⁶ This position suggests that, although a faith-based response to injustice is appropriate and influential, government (and non-government) organizations also must play a vital role. In Trenton, there are a significant number of secular organizations which work to fight hunger. Additionally, many of these organizations have programs to address other economic injustices as well, viewing hunger as a symptom of a larger systemic imbalance.

Since 1981, Isles has been a Trenton-based environmental and community development non-profit. The four primary aims are to: (1) train and educate, (2) build wealth, (3) promote green, healthy living, and (4) revitalize communities. There are numerous tangible ways in which the organization directly impacts the community:

Urban agriculture combines the benefits of fresh food, health, civic connections, beautification. Healthy housing makes homes energy efficient and less expensive, and improves the health, intelligence and behavior of children. Community planning and development strengthens social and physical assets in

⁶⁵ Wald and Calhoun-Brown, 173-174.

⁶⁶ Charles E. Gutenson, *Christians and the Common Good: How Faith Intersects with Public Life* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011), 150.

neighborhoods.... These are all core ways that we meet our mission – to foster self-reliant families and healthy, sustainable communities.⁶⁷

Isles is known as an active change agent in Mercer County, and views Trenton as a rich home for its influential work. Isles claims to support “more than 70 community gardens [many of which are in downtown Trenton] ... by providing technical and organizational assistance to local residents and other community-based organizations.”⁶⁸ Isles also educates Trenton residents that, due to a long growing season in central New Jersey, “an 800-square-foot plot can provide enough vegetables to feed a family for an entire year.”⁶⁹ This focus on urban agriculture not only provides fresh and healthy food for city residents, but the program also increases air quality, replaces urban blight with arable land, and their new Bee Colony Project is increasing the awareness for protecting natural pollinators. Among all the organizations profiled for this paper, Isles is by far the most productive and respected in the community.

A familiar organization in the downtown area, the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen (TASK), is a “private, non-sectarian, charitable organization [which] provides more than 3,000 free meals per week to people in need in the Trenton area.”⁷⁰ Although other areas of justice and advocacy are important to TASK, their first priority is hunger relief. In addition to its downtown location, which serves lunch Monday through Friday and dinner Monday through Thursday, TASK also maintains multiple satellite locations: North Trenton (dinner on Wednesday), South Trenton

⁶⁷ Martin Johnson, letter from Isles’ CEO, November 22, 2017.

⁶⁸ “Urban Agriculture,” *Isles*, accessed April 23, 2018. <https://isles.org/services/urban-agriculture>.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ “About Task,” *Trenton Area Soup Kitchen*, accessed April 19, 2018. <http://www.trentonsoupkitchen.org/about.php>.

(dinner Monday through Thursday, at different locations), West Trenton (dinner on Thursday), Hamilton (lunch Monday through Friday), Yardville (dinner on Tuesday), Hightstown (dinner on Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday, at different locations), Bordentown (dinner on Tuesday), and Princeton (dinner on Tuesday and Wednesday, at different locations). Partnering with the Mercer Street Friends Food Bank, TASK also provides 325 children with weekend meals through their Send Hunger Packing program and distributes over 3,000 jars of peanut butter and jelly each school year.

An organization which links hunger to homelessness is Homefront. Unique among other homeless shelters in Mercer County, Homefront places “family preservation” as a foundation for improving the quality of life. The Family Campus in nearby Ewing Township can accommodate 38 families with “on-site access to childcare, job training and other services.”⁷¹ The Family Campus also boasts a state-of-the-art teaching kitchen, dedicated to educating families about the benefits of healthy eating. Faith-based and secular organizations are also regularly invited to use the kitchen to provide meals to the families staying at the Family Campus.

Since they are dependent upon the needs and desires of the community, as well as access to arable land, public community gardens are scant in downtown Trenton. Isles creates community gardens where possible, but most of the vacant properties in the city have succumbed to blight or have been razed to gravel lots. Yet in 2015, an abandoned two-acre rail yard was purchased and converted into the Capital City Farm. Not a true community garden, the farm’s produce can be found at a few local restaurants and two downtown farmers’ markets. Additionally, during the summer the farm serves a free lunch for local children each Wednesday.

⁷¹ “Homefront Family Campus,” Homefront NJ, accessed December 5, 2017. <https://www.homefrontnj.org/family-campus/>.

Beginning in 2018, the Capital City Farm will now offer some plots to “Trenton residents who wish to grow for entrepreneurial or community purposes,”⁷² stabilizing the food security of the neighborhood. Most important, however, is the farm’s commitment to Trenton’s revitalization: “The agricultural production of Capital City Farm is intended to increase access to fresh produce and ultimately to increase health and wellness in Trenton.”⁷³

A brand-new business venture, which just opened in December 2017, is a community-focused Starbucks restaurant. Trenton was previously one of four state capitals in the U.S. without its own Starbucks location, partly because of its modest economic status; a traditional café simply would not be profitable in such an area. There are currently eight of these new community-based locations, which all “host an ‘opportunity café,’ a program that identifies, recruits and offers job training for young people in communities who may otherwise be unemployed.”⁷⁴ Some opponents of gentrification are concerned with a large corporation like Starbucks opening a store in Trenton. However, this Starbucks will also be an option for access to healthy prepared food, such as ready-made sandwiches, salads, and high-protein packaged meals. Additionally, this community-focused Starbucks location is holistically working to better the lives of Trenton residents with the same job training and community development programs which have been proven successful in other opportunity cafés.

Systematic responses

⁷² “Capital City Farm,” accessed March 1, 2018. <http://capitalcityfarm.org>.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Paige Gross, “Trenton's first Starbucks shows off its local flavor,” *NJ.com*, November 30, 2017. http://www.nj.com/mercer/index.ssf/2017/11/trentons_first_starbucks_to_open_with_local_employ.html.

One final approach is to consider systematic and systemic realities. For example, there are significant ecological repercussions when considering the sustainability of food production. In addition to increasing pollution, obesity, and general malnourishment, the mass-production of commodified foods has also tremendously affected climate change; moreover, these ecological issues acutely impact already-economically-depressed communities. Moe-Lobeda reminds us that climate change has “Catastrophic impacts on food production ... and [these impacts] will increase for already-impooverished people.”⁷⁵ A motivated response to climate change, therefore, should include consideration of food production and food access, which would positively impact one’s own immediate neighborhood.

Responding to surveys and dialogues led by the San Francisco Department of Public Health in the 1990s, “community members stated that crime, unemployment, access to healthy food, and housing conditions were their priority ‘environmental’ concerns.”⁷⁶ Even though the survey focused on the environment, access to food was a primary concern. The University of California has also studied how food access was related to crime, and found a startling result:

Many residents noted that corner food markets were the only locations for residents to buy food and that these stores were seen as unsafe because they were also the locations of illicit drug sales and violence. In addition, according to community members, the corner stores sold high-priced, poor-quality foods.⁷⁷

We also see here that crime can play a role in the creation of a food desert; therefore, crime prevention becomes a step in eradicating a community’s hunger. This has been seen in many urban areas across the country, and Trenton is no exception. The primary food source for many

⁷⁵ Moe-Lobeda, 31.

⁷⁶ Corburn, 105.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 106.

Trenton residents are corner convenience stores and one overpriced urban grocer. Ironically, these same stores become access points for illegal goods and activities, such as straw gun sales (a common situation where guns are purchased by a person able to pass a background check, then immediately resold to a third party) and drug use. A systemic response to this problem might include an improved relationship between police and the community, a result which the decades-old Capital City Community Coalition is still seeking. Note that an *improved* relationship is not the same as an increased police presence within the relationship. Although strengthening this relationship may not directly impact access to reasonably-priced, healthy food in the city, it could reduce crime, raise property values, decrease food waste, and provide for more local economic activity.

Overall, it is clear that ecological justice, economic justice, and the plight of those most vulnerable intersect. Any response to a social justice issue, sacred or otherwise, should impact other areas of justice. Similarly, working to eliminate hunger in a community can have a positive impact on the local economy, the regional ecology, and so forth. Organizations at any level have the ability to improve their communities and the lives of those around them.

THE NEXT BATTLE OF TRENTON

In late December 1776, the Battle of Trenton became a turning-point in the American Revolution. George Washington led a surprising victory against Hessian soldiers who were barricaded between what are now North Warren and North Broad Streets. This successful battle afforded downtown Trenton the nickname, “the Crossroads of the Revolution.” It was upon these crossroads that the colonialists were given hope, and it will be upon these crossroads that the Garden State’s Capital City might once again triumph. The urban theorists outlined above have suggested many possibilities for urban renewal. Yet, advocacy experts believe that eliminating

injustice requires “civic engagement, shaping public opinion, and advocating for public policies....”⁷⁸ Therefore, if Trenton is to regain its dignity and pride, a new Battle of Trenton must be fought: access to fresh and healthy foods must become a personal, communal, and political priority.

One avenue for addressing food access in Trenton must be grounded in personal and communal actions: residents and those who long for improvements in Trenton must become their own advocates. Supporting programs such as the Capital City Farm and Isles’ urban gardening initiatives may be a viable first-step, as many scholars praise the effectiveness of community gardens, community-supported agriculture, and farmers’ markets: “Farmers’ markets or community-run farmers’ markets (in which local residents run a farmstead, selling several farmers’ goods) are vehicles to improve the economic sustainability of local fresh food while increasing urban access to it.”⁷⁹ This not only strengthens community within the urban area but can create relationships between the urban-suburban and urban-rural divides: “Increasing the amount of local, farm-based fruit and vegetable production would create opportunities to develop rural-urban linkages through pick-your-own harvesting and other initiatives.”⁸⁰

Another approach to addressing hunger in Trenton, perhaps more important and potentially effective than personal actions, is political influence. This does not simply imply the work of elected officials, but it also requires a shift of public opinion. As Koc, et al., suggest, “If food security means access to nutritious, affordable, safe, adequate, and culturally acceptable

⁷⁸ “Advocacy: Faith in Action,” *Lutheran Episcopal Advocacy Ministry of New Jersey*, accessed April 21, 2018. <https://www.leadnj.org/>.

⁷⁹ Koc, et al., 57.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

food on a daily basis and is to be a right, rather than a privilege, for ourselves and for future generations, then the broadest cross-section of our communities must meaningfully participate in efforts to ensure it.”⁸¹ From a public opinion standpoint, for example, making nearby suburbs aware of the food insecurity which threatens the Capital City’s residents can change Trenton’s reputation; this can also bolster the local economy by challenging the stigma of Trenton as violent and poverty-stricken. As local businesses thrive, the downtown area might also become more attractive to larger businesses, which would ensure competitive pricing and increased tax revenue. Alternatively, from a public policy standpoint, reducing crime can increase pedestrian accessibility, which in turn reduces the necessity of private autos; this can lessen the residential economic burden, increase revenue from public transit, improve the health of residents and commuters alike, and eventually elevate local air quality.

None of these suggestions will guarantee success, but they aim to illustrate the severe issue which faces Trenton. Moreover, they offer what the First and Second Battles of Trenton provided centuries ago: hope in place that seems hopeless.

CONCLUSION

Trenton is the capital of the Garden State. It is ironic, and unfortunate, that the city is rife with urban problems: food insecurity, homelessness, crime and gang activity, underemployment and unemployment, below-average literacy rates, and an insufficient tax base. Yet, as we have considered in this paper, food is perhaps the most important of all these justice issues because it impacts aspects of everyday life. On a humanitarian level, as Wirzba reminds us, “Eating is the

⁸¹ Ibid., 58.

daily confirmation that we need others and are vulnerable to them.”⁸² For a community to be strengthened, literally and figuratively, it must accept and celebrate this vulnerability. Access to healthy, affordable food is not a right nor a privilege; it is a necessity for humanity to thrive, and it is a gift freely given in creation. In order for Trenton to truly prosper, there is still much work to be done.

⁸² Wirzba, 77.

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