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Non-market distribution serves society in ways markets cannot: A tentative defense of food charity from small-town New England

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Abstract

It has become fashionable to call for ending food charity. Anti-hunger activists and scholars advocate instead for ensuring through government programs that everybody has enough money or vouchers to purchase all the food they need. Their criticisms rightly denounce charitable food for being incapable of eradicating hunger, but they neglect the advantages that charity confers as a non-market food practice—that is, an activity that produces or distributes food that is not for sale. Our interviews with non-market food practitioners in the Brattleboro, Vermont, area demonstrated that distributing food for free strengthens relationships,

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fosters resilience, puts edible-but-not-sellable food to use, and aligns with an alternative, non-market vision of a desirable food future. Interviewees suggested that market food systems, in which food is distributed via selling it, cannot replicate these benefits. Yet food pantries and soup kitchens tend to imitate supermarkets and restaurants—their market counterparts—since purchasing food is considered the dignified way to feed oneself in a market economy. We suggest that charities might do well to emphasize the benefits specific to non-market food rather than suppressing those benefits by mimicking markets. But charities face limits to making their food distribution dignified, since they are essentially hierarchies that funnel gifts from well-off people to poor people. Food sharing among equals is an elusive ambition in this highly unequal world, yet it is only by moving in this direction that non-market food distribution can serve society without stigmatizing recipients.

Keywords
emergency food, non-market economies, food systems, decommodification, diverse economies, gifts, dignity, food bank, food pantry, soup kitchen

Introduction: The Critique of Charitable Food

The U.S. emergency food system of food pantries, soup kitchens, food banks, and food rescue projects arose in response to need in the early 1980s and grew, unplanned, as inequality intensified and the federal government cut social programs (Poppendieck, 1998). One in six U.S. residents received charitable food assistance in 2021, one-third more than before the COVID-19 pandemic (Feeding America, 2022b). While the proportion of individuals receiving food from charity held steady in 2022, anecdotal evidence suggests that rising prices sparked a spike in demand at food pantries and soup kitchens (Kelley & Kulish, 2022).

Critiques of food charity have grown right alongside the rise in food assistance (DeLind, 1994; Funicello, 1989; Riches, 1986). The foremost experts on charitable food often advocate for doing away with it (Butler, 2013; Fisher, 2017; Power, 2011; Riches, 2011). These researchers and activists hold that food charity will never end hunger and distracts attention from measures that could (Poppendieck, 1998; Tarasuk & Eakin, 2003). In her influential 1998 book *Sweet Charity?* Poppendieck observed that the expansion of charitable food allowed politicians to further dismantle the public safety net, as abundant charities feeding the poor give the appearance that hunger is being addressed. Critics argue that charities cannot solve hunger with food because hunger is a symptom of poverty; they call food charity a "Band-Aid" (Caraher & Furey, 2017; Lakhani, 2021; Tierney, 2014; Wilmot, 2014). Because so many people rely on food charity, however, even its harshest critics do not propose abolishing it immediately.

Some argue that food charity not only is palliative: it is corrupt as well. Anthropologist Maggie Dickinson (2020) notes that even as U.S. social spending has actually increased steadily since the mid-1980s, much of it now goes to voluntary, private organizations such as emergency food providers that, unlike public entitlements, do not offer poor people any enforceable rights. Anti-hunger leader Andrew Fisher (2017) contends that ever-expanding emergency food operations have become a "hunger industrial complex" that depends on the existence of food-insecure people (Azadian et al., 2022; Caraher & Furey, 2022). Fisher argues that food charities rarely take political stances on poverty-related issues such as the minimum wage because they receive money and food, as well as installing board members, from businesses that benefit from paying low wages to an impoverished underclass of workers that in turn relies on that same emergency food system (2017). Corporations thus appear generous even as they shift the costs of managing their food waste onto mostly unpaid laborers in the charitable food sector, who transport, sort, and prepare unsellable food and then feed it to the poor (Vansintjan, 2014).

Charitable food thus lacks dignity, according to its critics. It divides people by class—and often by race as well—into categories of giver and receiver (de Souza, 2019; Rosenthal, 2020). And it segregates the population into those who purchase proper food at stores and those who are given surplus food by charities (Poppendieck, 1998). A review of 20 studies on the experiences of people

in high-income countries who receive food from food banks found that they regularly report feeling shame and embarrassment as well as disappointment with the selection and quality of foods (Middleton et al., 2018). The screening process, sometimes called means-testing, humiliates impoverished people by making them prove that they are poor enough to merit food assistance.

At worst, charity functions to discipline the poor (Möller, 2021). Many religious food charities have traditionally forced beneficiaries to pray to the god of the benefactor or listen to a condescending sermon as a condition for being fed (Dachner & Tarasuk, 2002; Sager & Stephens, 2005). Poppendieck calls the proliferation of soup kitchens and food pantries a "retreat from rights to gifts" (1998, p. 12). Fisher writes that "individuals have an inherent dignity, which cannot be met through charity. Charity is a gift" (2017, p. 35). The critics of charity seem to imply that receiving food as a gift is itself demeaning.

We argue that it is inequality, not non-market food distribution as such, that is demeaning.[1] Outside the unequal relationships of charity, it appears that everyone appreciates receiving gifts of food. Free food is a typical tactic to spark attendance at any event, and there is some scientific evidence that it works (Segovis et al., 2007). People appear to enjoy the giving side of non-market food, too: in the U.S., "collecting, preparing, distributing, or serving food" is the most common volunteer activity (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016, para. 15) and food banks are now the leading cause to which people donate money (Barrett, 2022). Critics of charitable food blame the explosive expansion of the emergency food system partly on the fact that it feels so good, and so obviously right, to divert food from the garbage to hungry mouths (Poppendieck, 1998).

Critics of charitable food distribution generally argue that it should all but cease to exist. They advocate for addressing hunger by guaranteeing food as a human right rather than simply feeding people who lack access to food.[2] While some anti-hunger activists critique the commodification of food as such, many describe a desirable future in which everybody has enough money to buy all their food and does exactly that (Emery et al., 2013). They equate dignity with consumer choice and economic independence (Martin, 2021). If someone cannot access adequate food through markets, they argue that the state should be the feeder of last resort, preferably by means of vouchers for market food, such as the electronic benefits (often called food stamps) distributed by the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Charity's critics seem to imagine a food utopia that leaves little room for autonomous, community-scale institutions that circulate meaningful amounts of food in ways other than selling it.

Several authors have, without negating these critiques, called attention to the transformative potential of food charities as spaces of care where marginalized people congregate to meet their needs and volunteers are often activists (Cloke et al., 2017; Vansintjan, 2014). Even authors of books criticizing charity tend to include a section on how food pantries and soup kitchens could form part of a dignified, effective emergency food system (Dickinson, 2020, pp. 153–154; Fisher, 2017, pp. 232–235; Poppendieck, 1998, pp. 316–318). On a practical level, charities provide much-needed nourishment to people who cannot avail themselves of government programs like food stamps because of their immigration status (Mares, 2013) or their failure to qualify for assistance (Dickinson, 2020). To these tentative, partial defenses of charitable food, we contribute a perspective that situates food charities within the broader realm of non-market food practices and institutions.

Non-market Food Practices and Institutions

To separate food-related practices into market and non-market categories is to simply ask: Is the food

[1] To be sure, the critical scientists and activists with whom we intend to converse here—Poppendieck, Dickinson, Fisher, Tarasuk, de Souza, Riches, Garthwaite, and others—would likely agree with this statement (Poppendieck, 1998, pp. 305–307). Several of them whom we contacted by email indicated as much.

[2] All the authors named in the previous footnote, except Tarasuk, are members of Global Solidarity Alliance, which has the slogan #RightsNotCharity. See https://rightsnotcharity.org/theory-of-change/

for sale or not? We focus on food practices and institutions *without* markets, because markets—the places and practices of buying and selling—direct food toward money rather than hunger and force farmers to prioritize financial viability over other goals (Bliss, 2019; White et al., 2022). Of course, many non-market practices involve some element of exchange (Mauss, 1925/1967), just as some market exchanges can be entangled in gift relations or encompass qualities associated with gifts (Herrmann, 1997). Food economies are diverse and difficult to split neatly into categories such as alternative and conventional (Sonnino & Marsden, 2006; Wilson, 2013). Rather than make subjective assessments of food's proximity to ideal types like commodity and gift (Benson & Carter, 2008) or capitalist and non-capitalist (Koretskaya & Feola, 2020), we divide practices into two categories based on whether or not food is traded for money, in part because it is a simple criterion to apply impartially. In so doing, we follow Clare Hinrichs' distinction between alternative markets and alternatives *to* markets (2000).

Non-market food practices are the production and distribution of food that is not for sale, and include (i) growing or harvesting food not intended for sale, such as gardening, hunting, foraging, and gleaning, and (ii) transfers in which food is not exchanged for money, as in gifts or charity. Non-market food *institutions*,[3] for our purposes, are just the groups and organizations that do these practices repeatedly, in patterned ways, such as a municipal community garden or a church-basement food pantry. We categorize practices and institutions, rather than the food itself, as market or non-market, since marketness is not a characteristic of individual food items; a carrot, for example, may be grown for market and then become a gift or donation at some point in its journey to being eaten. Even if markets and charity are symbiotic institutions, we can separate individual practices—sales and gifts, for instance.

This study deals primarily with non-market food transfers, which we also call non-market food distribution. Our findings concern not only what differentiates non-market from market distribution, but also dissimilarities among various forms of non-market distribution. We discuss how different practices interact with values such as dignity. Each of the common terms for describing non-market transfers, such as charity, barter, and sharing, encompasses a range of practices, and is thus too vague to be useful in evaluating different non-market arrangements. Instead, we make use of a typology that distinguishes between distribution practices based on the logics according to which the practices work. For this purpose, we adapt the four types of gift relationships that social theorist David Graeber (2009) draws from Karl Polanyi (1944) and Marcel Mauss (1925/1967). In *reciprocal exchange*, what is given and what is received tend toward equivalence in value over time, as when friends take turns buying each other dinner or neighbors give each other homemade items. The parties are equals, and can walk away from the relationship at any time if they are reasonably evened up.[4] In *communistic sharing*, people give according to their means and receive according to their needs. This might entail treating food as a joint possession, as is often the case within households, rather than as property to be transferred between individuals. What is given and received do not necessarily even out, but communistic sharing partners are in theory equivalently willing to give. In *hierarchical relations*, gifts are repeated, not reciprocated. These relations include mothers breastfeeding their children and states extorting "gifts" from their subjects' grain stores through tax collection. *Heroic gifts* are status-seeking games of one-upmanship: rivals compete for prestige by trying to bestow on each other gifts that cannot be reciprocated. The philanthropy that

[3] "Institutions" in this paper refer more closely to what are usually called "organizations," in that they are bounded groups with *internal* institutions such as shared norms or written rules (Hodgson, 2006; Vatn, 2007). We refrain from using "organization" as a catch-all for the groups represented to prevent confusion, since many—mostly, the non-profits—would self-identify as organizations, while others are businesses or networks, entities that do not tend to go by "organizations" in U.S. vernacular.

[4] One might consider market transactions a form of reciprocal exchange that is denominated in money and characterized by immediate reciprocation or calculated debt obligations.

funds food charities might fit in this category. Partitioning non-market food transfers into these categories helps us make sense of the possibilities for, and limits to, making charity dignified.

Charitable provisioning is far from the only non-market practice that feeds the hungry. In the U.S., people regularly give food to food-insecure neighbors through informal networks (Dickinson, 2020) and mutual aid groups (Lofton et al., 2022). Some evidence links food self-provisioning and sharing to improved nutrition and food security (Morton et al., 2008; Niles, Alpaugh et al., 2021a). In non-market societies such as remote fishing villages or hunter-gatherer bands, food sharing tends to work in ways that make sure everyone is fed, including by choosing recipients based on need (Nolin, 2010; Smith et al., 2019). Unlike charity, however, addressing hunger is not the goal but a byproduct of most of these other non-market food practices. People who share food informally tend to say they do so because it is joyful and sustains relationships in community (Jehlička & Daněk, 2017; Quandt et al., 2001). Non-market food practices meet more needs than just nutrition. Humans have been hunting collaboratively and sharing food for hundreds of thousands of years, after all. Evolutionary biologists argue that these non-market food practices coevolved with human cooperation, helping to make us the social beings that we are (Jaeggi & Gurven, 2013; Tomasello et al., 2012).

Although non-market foodways remain ubiquitous across countries and social classes, in high-income societies researchers are only beginning to study them as legitimate food systems and economic institutions in their own right (Bliss & Egler, 2020; Gibson-Graham, 2008; Jehlička & Daněk, 2017; Saito et al., 2018). In Vermont, the state that contains our study area, over half of households produce some of their own food (Niles, Wirkkala et al., 2021b), and about 40% received non-market food assistance in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic (Burke et al., 2021). By positioning charitable food within non-market food, we fill a gap in both literatures.

Methods

To learn about non-market foodways, we interviewed a diverse group of actors in the networks through which non-market food flows in the Brattleboro, Vermont area. We adapted methods used by Owen et al. (2021), using semi-structured interviews with key informants to provide an in-depth assessment of local food systems.

Site

Situated along the Connecticut River, Brattleboro had 12,184 inhabitants as of the 2020 census. There were once over 170 farms in the immediate area; today there are about a dozen. C&S Grocers, a food wholesaler, operates a large shipping and warehouse facility that is Brattleboro's largest employer. Our study site also encompassed the neighboring, less populous Vermont towns of Dummerston, Guilford, Putney, Townsend, Vernon, Newfane, Marlboro, and West Brattleboro, as well as Hinsdale, New Hampshire. Food was almost certainly not bought or sold in this region before European colonization.[5] Market food has overtaken non-market food over the past four centuries as settlers seized and enclosed the land (Cronon, 1983; Larkin, 1989).

Data

Twenty-five semi-structured interviews ranging from twenty to ninety minutes were conducted over five days from November 8 to 12, 2021. We conducted interviews as a group; multiple researchers were present and asked questions at each interview. We asked interviewees about where their

[5] One of our interviewees, an Indigenous elder who serves as a liaison for the local Elnu Abenaki Tribe, said, "Traditional societies had no money." White men have long assumed that Native Americans used strings of white and purple beads made from mollusk shells, *wampum*, as a currency prior to European contact (e.g. Ingersoll 1883; Szabo 2002). It was actually colonists who, upon seeing that Native people valued wampum so highly, started trading it for the things they wanted and eventually made it legal tender in various jurisdictions (Herman, 1956; Slotkin & Schmitt, 1949). Before settlers began purchasing land and furs from Natives with wampum, Indigenous peoples had used it not for buying and selling but as a ceremonial gift, a personal ornament, and a physical reminder of political agreements (Bradley, 2011). In any case, there is no evidence of wampum's presence as far north and inland as Vermont before the arrival of Europeans.

food comes from and who receives it, what they care about in their non-market food practices, how these practices have affected their relationships, and what, if anything, is special about food that is not for sale. Our complete interview guide is in Appendix A. After obtaining verbal consent, we recorded audio at the interviews and used Otter.ai to transcribe recordings.

Participant observation informed our analysis as well (Walsh, 2009). We took part in several non-market food practices, including dumpster diving at a chain supermarket, preparing a food-pantry garden for winter, and food warehousing and preparation at a soup kitchen. All members of our research team have considerable experience in non-market food practices (our demographic information and participation in non-market food practices are in Tables D1–D3 in Appendix D).

We interviewed at least one worker or client at all five food charities in Brattleboro, and at one out of five elsewhere in the study area. We also interviewed representatives of six other institutions that give food away but do not self-identify as soup kitchens, food banks, food pantries, or food shelves (food shelf is the regional vernacular for food pantry). Following Poppendieck (1998), we interviewed more staff and volunteers than recipients, in pursuit of understanding the logics according to which these institutions work (Friedland & Alford, 1991). Of the 19 interviewees who filled out a survey with information about their demographics and participation in non-market food practices, 13 grew vegetables at home, eight grew them at community gardens, six kept chickens for eggs, and several hunted, fished, foraged, bartered, sugared maple, raised other livestock, and dumpster-dived for food (interviewee demographic details and non-market food practices are in Tables B1–B3 in Appendix B). Our small, convenience-based sample of food self-provisioners and informal sharers sufficed to place charitable food in the landscape of local non-market food practices (short profiles of each institution and practice we encountered are compiled in Appendix C).

Our sample is the main limitation of this study. We did not talk to people who were only minimally engaged in non-market food practices; they may see things differently. While we did not measure interviewee food security, it is likely that many have never experienced hunger, as we talked to more people on the giving side of charity than the receiving. One participant suspected that her lifelong privilege "probably is a huge factor in why free food is fun versus stigmatizing for me."

Analysis

The research team reflected, together and individually, on the interviews and experiences while walking and riding buses between field sites, over meals, and during downtime. We identified and discussed emerging themes. This allowed for continual processing and iterative analysis of the data, in the tradition of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We chose whom to talk to and what to ask them partly based on what had emerged from previous interviews (Small, 2009).

From our notes and transcriptions, we created profiles of each non-market food institution and practice we encountered (Appendix C). We organized text from the transcripts into themes and reorganized these themes collaboratively. The themes ranged from patterns we perceived during the interviews to common threads that emerged when revisiting our notes and transcripts.

We also mapped the flows of non-market food between institutions using Gephi, freely available network analysis software.[6] Our network diagram shows food flows using directional categorized edges linking nodes, which represent institutions. The direction of food transfer—who sends food to whom—is shown using arrows. The diagram is a snapshot of this network in November 2021.

Results

The Brattleboro area non-market food network, like any food system, directs food from farms to consumers through various intermediaries. Figure 1 is a network diagram illustrating the flows of food between the institutions we interviewed (Table 1) and other institutions from which they receive or to which they send food (Table 2). The diagram's average path length (the mean number of transfers

[6] It is open source as well: https://gephi.org/users/publications/

it takes food to get from its origin to its end point, on all possible journeys it could take along the arrows in Figure 1) is 2.55. In most cases, this represents 1.55 institution-to-institution transfers within our study area and then a transfer to a household (the "Community" node in Figure 1).[7]

These paths tend to start at market food institutions. Supermarkets, restaurants, wholesalers, and

Table 1. Institutions Interviewed and Details on Food Acquisition and Distribution

In-degree is the number of other institutions from which the institution received food; out-degree is the number to which the institution transferred food.

Institution Interviewed		Food Acquisition			Food Distribution		
Name	Type	Origin of food	Mechanism	In-degree	Destination of food	Mechanism	Out-degree
Agape Christian Fellowship Foodshelf	church	purchased, donated	mixed	3	Everyone. "We don't say no to anyone."	non-market	1
Ames Brook Community Garden	nonprofit	grown	non-market	0	Community members with garden plots	non-market	1
Atowi Project	nonprofit	grown	non-market	0	Future goal: Abenaki tribal members	non-market	0
Edible Brattleboro	nonprofit	grown, donated	non-market	1	Everyone. "Even if you're a millionaire"	non-market	1
Everyone Eats	program	purchased from restaurants	market	18	Everyone "negatively affected by COVID"	non-market	24
Foodworks	nonprofit	purchased, donated, grown	mixed	10	Everyone. Record name but no ID or income verification	non-market	2
Loaves & Fishes	church	donated, purchased	mixed	7	Everyone. "Anybody who's hungry"	non-market	1
Nicole's Community Kitchen	catering	purchased	mixed	2	Everyone. "100% free, no questions asked."	non-market	1
Putney Food Shelf	nonprofit	purchased, donated, gleaned	mixed	6	Everyone.	non-market	2
Putney Mutual Aid	collective	purchased, donated	mixed	1	Everyone. Anybody can make a request	non-market	1
Retreat Farm – farmstand	nonprofit	grown, donated, purchased	mixed	4	Everyone.	mixed	1
– CSA	nonprofit	grown, purchased	mixed	1	Households on SNAP, WIC, or free/reduced school lunch	non-market	1
St. Brigids Kitchen and Pantry	church	donated, purchased	mixed	4	Everyone. "No criteria"	non-market	2
SUSU CommUNITY Farm	nonprofit	grown, gleaned, purchased, donated	mixed	5	35 BIPOC families in Windham County	non-market	1
Vermont Foodbank – warehouse	nonprofit	gleaned, donated, purchased	mixed	4	Organizations in the community	mixed	6
– Veggie Van Go	nonprofit	gleaned, donated, purchased	mixed	1	Anyone can pick up, including for other families	non-market	1
Vermont Wilderness School	nonprofit	gleaned, wild harvested	non-market	0	Students, staff and families	non-market	1

[7] Since our analysis includes only entities within the study site, on many paths the food "originates" not on farms but at grocers or other institutions that purchased it from elsewhere.

commercial farms either sell (green arrows) or give (red arrows) food to non-market institutions. Volunteers glean surplus produce from local fields. Grocers and bakeries donate what they cannot sell. Restaurants receive federal money for producing meals to be distributed for free through the Everyone Eats program. Vermont Foodbank warehouses local donations and cheap commodities to give and sell, respectively, to its partner organizations. Food pantries, church soup kitchens, and mutual aid groups receive food from all these sources and give it away to community members, in nearly every case without stipulations.

We identified 76 institutions through which non-market food flows in the greater Brattleboro area. Subtracting the 34 commercial enterprises that function mainly as donors, there is at least one non-market food institution per 780 inhabitants in our study area.[8] While the network diagram is not a comprehensive representation of the area's non-market food transfers,[9] it confirms the sheer magnitude of non-market food.

This snapshot of the local non-market food network looks different from what it would have been just 20 months before, in March 2020. Interviewees talked a great deal about changes in the

Table 2. Institutions Known to Give Non-Market Food to or Receive Non-Market Food from Interviewed Institutions

Restaurants	Grocery Suppliers	Community Organizations	Farms
Andrzej's Polish Kitchen	Aldi	Boys and Girls Club	Big Picture Farm
A Vermont Table	Brattleboro Co-op	Brattleboro Area Middle School	Circle Mtn. Farm
Bread from the Earth	C&S	Brattleboro Community Justice Center	Full Plate Farm
Delightfully Delicious Cafe	Hannaford	Brattleboro Drop-in Center	Harlow Farm
Dosa Kitchen	Price Chopper	Brattleboro Housing Partnership	Rebop Farm
Elliot Street Fish & Chips	Putney Co-op	Brattleboro Memorial Hospital	Rusty Plow Farm
Fast Eddie's	Shaw's	Brattleboro Union High School	Wild Carrot Farm
Hazel	UNFI	Bread of Life Food Pantry	Wingate Farm
India Masala House	Western Harvest	Dummerston Cares	
Jamaican Jewelz		Farmers Market	
Mama Sezz		Groundworks	
Newfane Market		Guilford Cares Food Pantry	
Pit Mistress		Guilford Central School	
Porch Too		Hinsdale Welfare Department	
Shin La		Leland & Gray High School	
The Works		Marlboro Cares	
Whetstone Station		Marlboro Elementary School	
Yalla		Our Place Drop-in Center	
		Project Feed the Thousands	
		Putney Central School	
		The Stone Church	
		The Works	
		Townshend Community Food Shelf	
		Turning Point	
		West River Valley Mutual Aid	
		Winston Prouty Center	

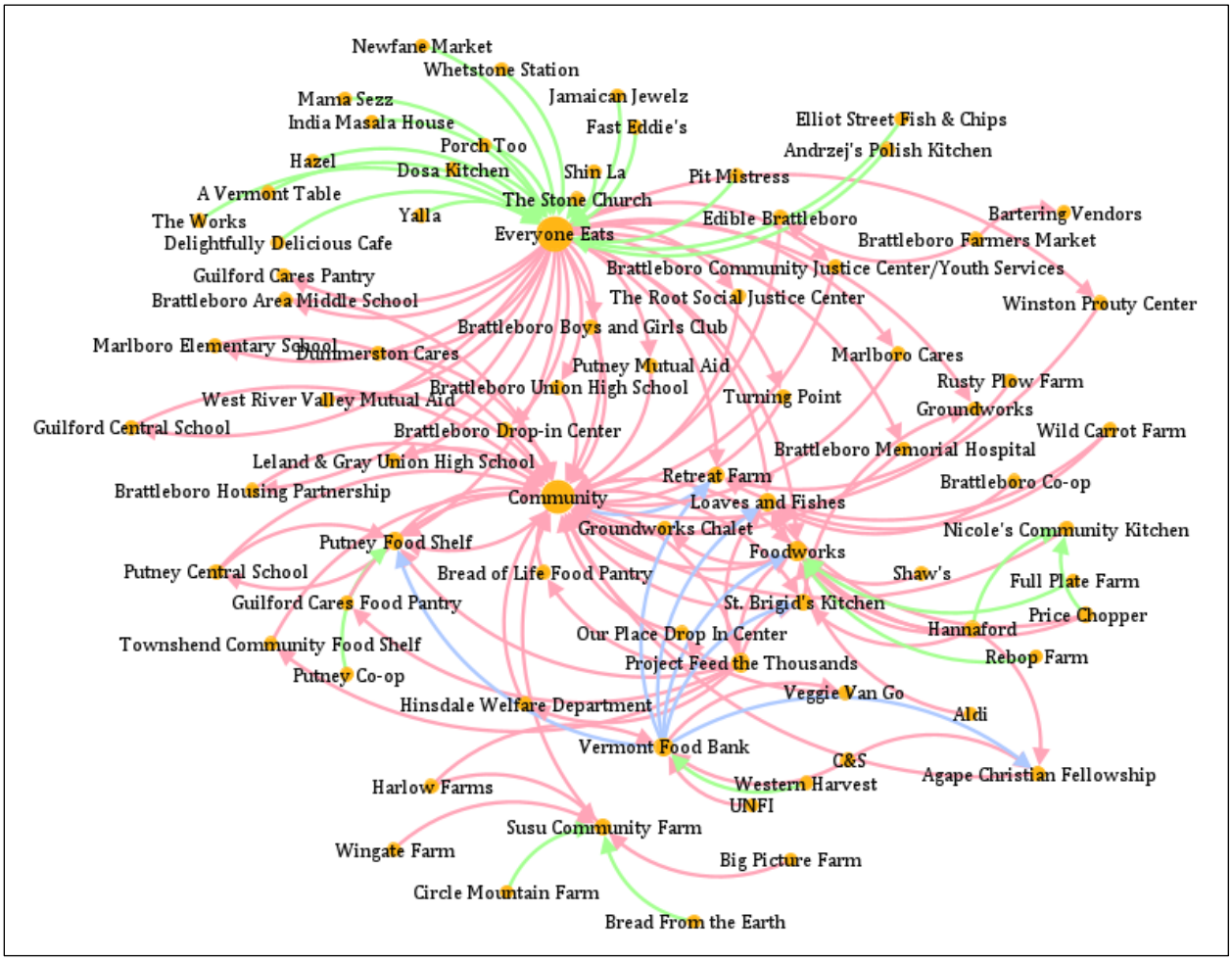
[8] As of the 2020 Census, the combined population of the Vermont municipalities Brattleboro, West Brattleboro, Dummerston, Guilford, Putney, Marlboro, Townsend, Vernon, and Newfane, plus Hinsdale, New Hampshire, was 32,821. Our network diagram includes institutions in all these communities. Divided by 42, this is one non-market food institution per 781 inhabitants.

[9] Since the diagram nodes represent institutions rather than individuals or households, it lacks any depiction of household-to-household food transfers, which are numerous. Moreover, the network diagram certainly misses some institution-to-institution food flows too, since some institutions appear as nodes not because we interviewed anyone involved with them, but because they were mentioned as non-market food sources or destinations by people we did interview.

charitable food landscape in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Non-market food institutions multiplied considerably in number and size. There was more hunger, more volunteers, more funds, and, ultimately, more projects sharing more food. Charities reorganized to distribute greater volumes of food with minimal physical contact. Newly unemployed people both needed help and wanted to help. Neighborly goodwill and federal emergency-relief grants ignited new non-market food institutions, from mutual aid networks to the Everyone Eats program, which pays restaurants to make meals that are then distributed for free. The major food assistance organizations in the area started communicating with each other more, coordinating their efforts to avoid waste and ensure that food needs were covered. People from unincorporated operations and run-of-the-mill church pantries complained that all the additional resources went to businesses and large non-profits.

Figure 1. Non-Market Food Flows in the Brattleboro Area

Each node in the network represents a farm, business, organization, or other entity that produces, receives, and/or distributes non-market food. Each arrow, or edge, represents food moving from one entity to another, in the direction of the arrow. The color of each arrow indicates whether food flows through market exchange, non-market transfers, or both. Non-market food transfers, where food flows in one direction without money flowing back, are red. Market food flows, where institutions purchase food to distribute for free, are green. If an institution both buys and receives free food from another institution, the arrow is blue. The size of nodes corresponds to the number of connections. Individuals are represented as a single node in the network, labeled "community." Thus, institutions that distribute food to dozens or hundreds of households appear less connected than they actually are.



These changes are consistent with findings from Vermont-wide studies (Burke et al., 2021; Niles et al., 2020) and research elsewhere (Babbin et al., 2021; Carson, 2020; Ollove & Hamdi, 2021; Taylor et al., 2022).

We proceed to present the main themes from our interviews. First, we describe the attributes of non-market food practices that differentiate them from markets. Then we turn to the primary standard by which interviewees judged non-market food practices: dignity. We identify three approaches to making non-market food dignified: distributing high-quality food, emphasizing human equality, and imitating markets.

Non-market Food is Special

Interviewees described four main advantages of non-market food practices: that these practices strengthen relationships, enhance resilience, rescue food that would otherwise be wasted, and align with a vision of a desired future in which food is not for sale at all. These are benefits unique to situations where food is not for sale, positive attributes that markets cannot imitate. While describing non-market food as "special" seems unscientific, it is the most precise word we can use to indicate that non-market food practices and institutions do things that market food practices and institutions do not do.

Participants, for their part, called non-market food magical. A gleaning coordinator said that harvesting unmarketable crops with volunteer labor was a magical act. "I feel like Santa Claus every day," said a food shelf worker about giving food away. A mutual aid organizer said some see her "as a miracle worker." She insisted that she is not, but then inadvertently said, "It was like I parted the seas" when she would deliver donated meals to her town. Volunteers at one church food pantry said they were doing the work that "God chose us to do."

Several interviewees differentiated non-market food by articulating the deficiencies of market-based food systems. The most obvious difference is that commercial food systems do not feed people who cannot pay. One interviewee said, "Business is going to go where the money is, not to the poor." A participant of Mi'kmaq and European heritage pointed out that markets do not assign value to the nutritional, cultural, and ecological roles of food: "I see money as a proxy for power and control. It's no longer real. Food is real. Food cannot be thought of in terms of money. It's something we're in relationship to." Multiple participants described buying and selling food as transactional, in that it creates relationships designed to end immediately: after money has been traded for goods, the parties can go their separate ways.

Relationships

Participants said that non-market foodways, by contrast, create lasting and nurturing relationships. "Connection" came up often: connection to people, to where food comes from, to those who grow and prepare it, to ourselves, to the natural world. A forager said that receiving food as a gift, whether from other people or directly from the land, is an "invitation into an awareness of the chain of the web of relationships that brought this nourishment to me." He included relationships with non-human beings: "Starting to relate to a plant as something that you can eat, that can sustain you, that can help you survive, is an entry point into relationship with that specific plant and with that species."

Care was another common sub-theme within relationships. Non-market foodways consist of, to paraphrase our interviewees, caring for and about each other. A gleaning coordinator said, "The only reason we're there is because the farmer cares to donate the food instead of it going to waste. The volunteers care about helping to feed their community, so they're donating their time." Many appreciated that non-market food is given with care "even when it's done poorly."

The notion that relationships were more important than the food itself was a common refrain. Workers at non-market food institutions talked about the importance of kindness, generosity, and fostering togetherness. A woman who organizes a church soup kitchen said, "You can burn the meal, forget to show up if you're a volunteer, do the wrong thing. But those are not mistakes here. The mistake is if you mistreat somebody with a lack of dignity."

More than half the interviewees described sense of community as a special feature of non-

market foodways. At a soup kitchen, before the pandemic, "people were rubbing elbows and talking to each other and becoming a community, which is really what these things are all about," according to one volunteer.

Resilience

Seven interviewees commented on how these non-market foodways bring security to individuals and communities. In part, the relationships formed through food sharing protect community members through individual misfortunes or economic crises. "My concept of my own security in this community has increased just by knowing that there are people taking care of other people, even if it's not directly me," said one participant. "I live in this place where if I had a need, then I would also be taken care of, which is really, that's priceless." Fishers, foragers, hunters, and gardeners described their ability to harvest food from the local landscape as protection from the fragility of market supply chains.

Few participants mentioned "resilience" explicitly. However, a food bank employee said, "When you introduce diversity into a system, it becomes more resilient" to explain his organization's support for other non-market food institutions. A Black-stewarded farm delivered free weekly "Boxes of Resilience," full of their non-market produce and other local food products, to 35 BIPOC families in Windham County. A volunteer at a food pantry said that the commercial food system "isn't necessarily the one that will help folks survive" through economic and environmental crises.

Rescue

Non-market institutions keep edible food from rotting uneaten. A new employee at a food pantry said, "There's so much waste at these grocery stores … that would otherwise just get thrown away." He would know, having worked at a grocery store until several weeks before. He pointed out that even if the government were to provide enough food for everyone, there would still be enormous amounts of "still great" food produced originally for market but unable to be sold profitably.

The Brattleboro area's extensive network of non-market food providers rescues only a fraction of the excess of commerce. Our foray into the dumpsters behind two large grocers and a Dunkin' Donuts demonstrated that businesses generate more edible leftovers than they donate. Another pantry worker who had come to charitable food from the grocery industry expressed disbelief at the volume of supermarket surplus: "It's hard for me to wrap my head around, why so much production is happening. … If something is a certain item, and it's not selling, why would you continue to make it?"

"Food should be free"

Unprompted, six interviewees suggested that *all* food should be non-market. A White fisherman stated, "What we know about Native Americans is they didn't charge each other for food. I also don't think people should have to pay for food." A volunteer at a charity said, "It feels special to have free food but it should really just be normal. It's how it should be all the time in my opinion." Another participant stated, "An ideal world is one in which all food is non-market food and everyone has access to food they need through mutually beneficial relationships in their community." One person said simply, "Food should be free."

Producing and sharing non-market food enticed people to dream of worlds where food is not bought or sold at all. Their utopian vision contrasts with that of charity's critics, who describe ideal futures in which poverty is eradicated and everyone purchases virtually all their food.

Dignity

Interviewees who were involved in giving away food ascribed importance to doing so in a dignified way. In response to critiques of food charity, they spoke of striving for dignity. Strategies for making the provision of non-market food dignified encompassed three broad approaches, which we call the dignity of quality, the dignity of equality, and the dignity of commerce.

The dignity of quality

Dignity involves high-quality, healthy food. Interviewees often criticized the quality of food offered by *other* programs. One spoke of the "stigma grow-

ing up being a poor kid" in the 1980s, when food stamps were paper, Monopoly money-like coupons that could be traded for low-quality food. "Everyone deserves good food" captured a common sentiment. The dignity of quality was unanimously important to respondents and did not explicitly contradict either of the other conceptions of dignity.

The dignity of equality

The Brattleboro area's non-market food institutions also fight stigma by treating everyone as equals, and as equally worthy recipients. Only two of the 15 distribution projects in our sample imposed binding conditions regarding who could receive food (Table 1).[10] Edible Brattleboro wants to feed not just food-insecure people but everybody, "even if you're a millionaire." Some groups are trying to blur the line between givers and receivers, in the spirit of mutual aid. "I shop here all the time," said a volunteer at a church kitchen and pantry. Most institutions reported some overlap between contributors and recipients, but the constraints that put people in the position to need help often make it hard to give help.

The dignity of commerce

Another way institutions strive to give their non-market offerings dignity is by imitating markets. Charitable food workers often referred to recipients as "shoppers" or "customers," and explicitly rejected terms like "beneficiaries." "Choice is dignity," said several interviewees. They described how charitable food has evolved from a "canned green beans mentality" of "you should be happy with whatever food," to an environment where diverse dietary needs are met. During the pandemic, some food pantries preserved consumer choice as they shifted from indoor "shopping" to ordering systems. Black and Indigenous interviewees discussed choice as culturally relevant food and food sovereignty, meaning community control of food systems (Wittman et al., 2011). But for most participants, choice meant something closer to supermarket shelves or a restaurant menu—*consumer* choice.

Interviewees also associated dignity with anonymity, abundance, and aesthetics. Some commended programs such as 24-hour free farm stands and the federally funded Farmers-to-Families food boxes for providing non-market food in more anonymous settings than small-town pantries. Other interviewees mentioned wanting to make food feel abundant, telling participants to "take as much as you're going to use" or "as much as you need." There was also emphasis on sharing beautiful food in beautiful spaces. A worker was repainting a church's non-market farm stand during our visit, although the paint underneath was in good condition. Overall, many participants in our study considered food distribution dignified if it was marketlike.

Discussion

Our interviewees identified benefits of non-market foodways that researchers have found elsewhere. Across cultures, food sharing comes with relational intimacy (Koster & Leckie, 2014; Miller et al., 1998; Wang et al., 2021) and perceived resilience in the face of environmental and economic disruptions (Ančić et al., 2019; Berkes & Jolly, 2002; Ferguson et al., 2022). Indeed, charity in the U.S. goes by the name "emergency food" for its role in helping people withstand and recover from crises. By meeting nutritional needs with food that would otherwise be discarded, non-market practices obviate the need to produce more food with additional land, labor, water, fuel, and fertilizer (Penalver & Aldaya, 2022). The idea that all food should be non-market food has been put forward by numerous social theorists (Kropotkin, 1893/1913) and utopian fiction authors (Mumford, 1922/1962). Poppen-

[10] Both were CSA-style programs in which households signed up to receive weekly boxes of free food. One program required that participants qualified for some sort of government food assistance: SNAP (food stamps), WIC (food assistance for women, infants, and children), or free or reduced-price school lunches. The other program served exclusively Black people, Indigenous people, and other people of color. Other programs had symbolic requirements to qualify to receive assistance, such as the stipulation that one had to have been "negatively affected" by the COVID-19 pandemic, because these projects received government funds that obliged them to means-test beneficiaries.

dieck, who famously criticized food charity, argued elsewhere that school lunch should be free for all students, not just kids from low-income households (2011). This study's contribution is to express these already-recognized attributes together, as services that non-market food practices offer to society.

Interviewees also echoed critiques of charity from the literature, calling the charitable food system a "local solution" and a "Band-Aid" that "doesn't fix the larger problem." One pantry worker said, "I'm really glad that food shelves exist but of course I'd like to see them not exist." By contrast, another said they think food pantries "could be a hub for advocacy for anti-poverty work." In Brattleboro, as elsewhere (Wakefield et al., 2013), charitable food institutions have implemented many of the best practices to reduce stigma. For example, nearly every program lets recipients self-determine their need rather than making people prove they are poor to get food. However, according to Poppendieck (1998), these efforts reveal the limits to making charity dignified.

Perhaps charity cannot fully deliver what we are calling the dignity of equality because charity is founded on inequality. In the eighteenth century, moral philosopher William Paley wrote, "I use the term Charity … to signify the promoting of the happiness of our inferiors" (1785/2002 [Book III, Part II, chap. 1], p. 133). Charity has retained that meaning. Modern charitable food systems distribute gifts with the expectation that the action will be repeated rather than reciprocated; this is the distinguishing feature of hierarchical gift relations in Graeber's typology (2009). Economic inequality forces non-market food institutions to operate in this hierarchical fashion: some people have little to give and many unmet needs, while others have much to give and seem to need little; therefore, gifts tend to flow only in one direction, from haves to have-nots.

The Equality of Commerce

Yet, in a sense, the dignity of commerce *is* a dignity of equality (Sewell Jr., 2021). In markets, everyone pays the same prices and everyone's dollar is worth $1. Exchange is reciprocal. People who are in quite unequal economic states interact as equals. This is, to some, a source of markets' *un*fairness: many people cannot afford enough market food to meet their nutritional needs while others pay to overeat, waste food, and direct crops to livestock and biofuel production (Bliss, 2019). But, if equality begets dignity, then commerce is dignified at the level of the individual transaction even as it generates an extremely unequal world. That our interviewees set up non-market endeavors to resemble their market counterparts seems to contradict their assertion that non-market food distribution provides unique benefits, but perhaps charitable food institutions emulate commerce in part to feign interactions between equals.

Imitating commercial establishments is widespread in charitable food. Soup kitchens often intentionally look like buffets or cafés (Garthwaite et al., 2015). Food pantries are designed like grocery stores. In Europe, some "social supermarkets" distribute fake money—which some might call a single-purpose currency—to clients, who use it to purchase foods with made-up prices.[11] Conflicts arise as distinct moralities clash in this mishmash between a gift setting, where people are expected to act with gratitude and generosity, and a market setting, where the behavioral norm is to take as much and give as little as one can—to seek "deals" and sell to the highest bidder (Andriessen et al., 2022).

Other solutions to the problem of stigma involve actually selling food to the poor. Most "social supermarkets" work with regular money, selling donated food to people in poverty at reduced prices (Holweg et al., 2010). Fisher praises anti-hunger "innovations" like market farm stands and cash incentives for businesses to open grocery

[11] It is worth acknowledging here that all prices are "made-up" in the sense that price is not a physical property of products. Even in the theoretical market of perfect competition, humans still determine prices. We call these prices at the social supermarket "made-up" because "customers" pay for food with a special currency that is destroyed at the moment of purchase (that is, the social supermarket does not in turn use that special currency to pay workers or buy supplies) and so the prices are set to mimic prices at regular supermarkets, to simulate a normal shopping experience, rather than in relation to any revenue needs of the establishment.

stores in food deserts (2017). While these initiatives cannot make food accessible to people who literally have no money to purchase it, they do confer real participation in markets. In market society, purchasing food is the socially accepted, non-stigmatized way to obtain it (Byrne et al., 2023).

When charities imitate markets in the name of dignity, they affirm that buying food is the dignified method of feeding oneself. Celebrating anonymity reinforces the narrative that to receive free food is embarrassing. Glorifying "economic independence" entrenches the myth that paying someone for something does not mean depending on them (Fineman, 2000). Fetishizing consumer choice supports the notion that people exercise freedom by picking from the products that agroindustry offers (Patel, 2012).

Furthermore, when charities mimic markets, they diminish the unique benefits they can offer as institutions that distribute non-market food—relationships, resilience, food rescue, and alignment with a positive vision of a world where food is not bought and sold. If, as our interviewees suggested, markets do not provide these co-benefits of food distribution, then the ability of non-market institutions to provide them is presumably hampered by acting like market institutions. If the food pantry adopts the aesthetic standards of a supermarket, for example, it will be unable to make use of what the supermarket discards for aesthetic reasons. And contrary to the relationships of resilience associated with non-market distribution, emulating markets means constructing a psychological environment not just of anonymity, independence, and choice but of self-interest, isolation, and calculation (Bowles, 1991). In market settings, people act in ways that they would consider unethical in any other setting (Falk & Szech, 2013). Merely prompting people to think about money in experiments makes them generally less generous, cooperative, caring, and warm (Vohs, 2015). It comes as no surprise that interviewees identified the relationships of care and resilience that emerged from their projects as values specific to non-market foodways.[12]

We are not arguing against selling food as such. We are cautioning against *pretending* to sell food. When the fake-supermarket model includes prices and budgets, for instance, it can reinforce stigma about poor people not knowing how to manage their money (Andriessen et al., 2022). What if, rather than mimicking markets, charities were to emphasize their advantages as non-market distributors: caring relationships, community resilience, waste reduction, and the notion that food should be free? And if charity is founded on inequality, how might non-market food institutions transform so as to realize the dignity of distributing food among equals?

The Equality of Sharing

Exchanging gifts as equals is not straightforward in an unequal world. It is to be emphasized that when people's roles are fixed as givers and receivers, gifts make hierarchies. It is insulting to channel surplus food exclusively to the poor. When volunteers and recipients cook together or eat at the same table, on the other hand, they approach the "dignity of equality." But it is unrealistic to expect that people with large differences in means can engage in reciprocal gift exchange, where what is given and received approach rough equivalence over time.[13] Instead, non-market food networks can work toward equivalence in *willingness* to give. This, again, is the defining characteristic of what Graeber somewhat provocatively called communistic sharing (2009). Sharing is an everyday, non-ceremonial resource conveyance that is not necessarily reciprocal and ideally does not come with hidden obligations (Belk, 2010). People tend to share resources in this way among family and in mutual aid networks.

Rather than imitating supermarkets or restau-

[12] To be clear, of course purchasing food connects the buyer to the seller, distributor, grower, and farmland; our argument, based on our interviews and in line with Marx's (1867/1977) concept of "commodity fetishism," is that markets tend to make these relationships ephemeral and invisible—the shopper need only see a product and its price. (Gunderson argues that local, organic, and fair-trade markets exacerbate rather than ameliorate this tendency (2014).)

[13] Another way of thinking about this issue is that reciprocal giving cannot help the poor, as those who have little to give end up receiving little as well (Komter, 1996).

rants, food charities can learn from groups that practice non-hierarchical, communistic sharing. Egalitarian societies often have norms that intentionally counteract concentrated social power, such as the custom of insulting the meat shared by skilled young hunters in order to suppress feelings of superiority (Lee, 2013). South American chiefs tend to have no authority to give orders but instead the obligation to work nonstop to acquire gifts, often of food, for their clan (Clastres, 1974/1989). In modern societies, mutual aid collectives exist to direct resources toward unmet needs, typically without structures separating givers from receivers. Food Not Bombs, for example, is a movement of "anarchist soup kitchens" that share rescued food in public spaces of cities around the world (Giles, 2021). Chapters are supposed to make decisions by consensus. In practice, these groups work to empower anyone involved to make operational decisions autonomously, encouraging folks to ask comrades for advice rather than seek directives.[14] To avoid infantilizing recipients, mutual aid groups go beyond offering consumer choice, such as a menu from which to order, instead inviting all comers to participate in decisions like shaping the menu itself (Sbicca, 2014). Tellingly, participants call mutual aid "solidarity not charity" (Spade, 2020). Mutual aid networks we encountered in the Brattleboro area clearly strived toward these ideals.

Might charitable food institutions transform into something like food recycling-and-regifting depots where people of all social classes work, eat, and self-govern? Critics of food charity, for their part, celebrate emergency food providers that reinvent themselves as "community food centers" focused on relationships (Fisher, 2017, p. 35; Poppendieck, 1998, pp. 315–317). What might it take to morph a culture of charity into a culture of sharing or solidarity?

We can only eat excess as equals if everybody has some. Most affluent people, however, would not think to eat what is on offer at a food pantry, soup kitchen, or supermarket dumpster, which would mean choosing to have less choice and breaking the taboo around contact with waste (Barnard, 2016). But what if those practices were seen the same as foraging in the woods or buying what is in season? Marketing has trained consumers to be suspicious of waste, but eating rescued food could, in principle, be considered dignified because it is a public service and a frugal act, making use of resources that have already been spent. We hypothesize that if well-off individuals receive salvaged, non-market food from the institutions that collect and distribute it, the experience is less stigmatizing for all recipients.

But is there enough non-market food for more people to incorporate it into their diets? Potentially, yes. Critics of food charity sometimes express concern that the streams of surplus might dry up as farms and factories fix the inefficiencies that generate consistent donations (Fisher, 2017; Galli et al., 2019), but that has not happened: the nation's largest network of food banks diverts four times more food waste than it did a quarter century ago (Feeding America, 2022a). This is still only 3% of the mass of U.S. food waste, which is, in nutritional terms, more than 1,000 calories per person per day (Buzby et al., 2014).[15] Commercial food systems produce plenty of food that is good to eat but not profitable to sell (Barnard, 2016; Lindenbaum, 2016).[16] Because of the enormity of

[14] Disclosure: the lead author of this paper works with their local Food Not Bombs chapter. There is no citation for this claim because it is a finding from participant observation.

[15] Smaller-scale studies find that businesses donate less than 10% of their edible excess (Griffin et al., 2009; Stuart, 2009). About 8% of commodity crops planted in the U.S. never get harvested (USDA, 2023), and even small farms have to plow crops under for economic reasons and sort out produce that does not meet aesthetic standards.

[16] Activists claim that modern capitalism has to waste food because of overproduction (Barnard, 2016). Industrial agriculture produces enormous abundance but needs some degree of scarcity to keep prices up. At the same time, capitalists hold wages down in pursuit of profit, and thus consumers cannot buy up all that is produced anyway. More to the point, economic reasoning suggests that throwing food away is profitable. Since food is a necessity, the demand for food is price-inelastic (Andreyeva et al., 2010; Green et al., 2013): when food prices increase, consumers decrease the total quantity they purchase by less, in percentage terms, than the magnitude of the price hike. In other words, a 10% price increase would result in less than a 10% decrease in demand. Thus, when the price goes up, total revenue goes up too. Throwing away food does exactly this. So even if the cost of disposal is the same as the cost

excess, receiving free food need not mean taking it away from the hungry.

Expanding non-market food while substituting charity with solidarity could engender more of the benefits specific to food that is not for sale—relationships, resilience, food rescue—but we do not mean to suggest that it is sufficient to address hunger. Charity's critics make an airtight argument that anti-poverty measures are the best anti-hunger measures. They insist that local food sharing cannot end hunger because hunger is caused by global political-economic structures (Allen, 1999).

However, there is evidence that a culture of sharing can ameliorate the worst effects of food insecurity (Adams, 1993). In small-scale societies, sharing ensures that nobody goes hungry unless everybody does. Whereas critics of charity see a "retreat from national standards to haphazard local provision" (Poppendieck, 1998, p. 12), local groups might respond that they are best positioned to witness and respond to local need with local resources—and they would not be wrong (Lentz et al., 2013). Large-scale anti-hunger policies and community-level non-market food distribution are complements, not competitors.

Moreover, food sharing can contribute to fighting poverty if it allows people to interact as equals across classes. People who are not poor themselves may be more likely to take part in anti-poverty activism when they see the poor as people like them, who should not be mistreated or discounted (Miles, 2007). For that, the well-to-do need to identify with the poor, not just serve them.

If anti-hunger work turns to food justice activism (Dixon, 2015), the enormous network of emergency food provisioning can shift toward food sharing that, while it may alleviate hunger, does not pretend to "solve" it. The dilemma is that without the myth that they are solving hunger, corporations and individuals would probably not donate so much food, money, and time to maintain the food rescue-and-redistribution network that exists.

Nevertheless, based on our findings we recommend sharing food. Many cities have prohibitions on public food sharing that limit the circulation of food to two possibilities: a private affair or a market transaction (Giles, 2021). Even without prohibitions, market culture enforces this norm. Charity challenges this paradigm by giving away food on a large scale. Even though charity is at worst stigmatizing and at best still not up to the task of ending hunger, it provides benefits that are specific to non-market foodways. Because of these benefits, we caution against throwing the non-market baby out with the charitable bathwater, so to speak.

Conclusions

In *Beginning to End Hunger*, Jahi Chappell (2018) describes how the city of Belo Horizonte, Brazil, cut malnutrition in half by setting up subsidized People's Restaurants, low-cost grocers, and local farmstands—all institutions that sell food (Lappé, 2011). In a city rife with poverty, it would seem that food should be free in order to be accessible to the poorest of the poor. Chappell, however, responded that in a market economy, participation in the market means dignity (personal communication, September 12, 2018). "Food with dignity" became a motto in Belo Horizonte.

In a sense, Chappell is right. In this unequal, capitalist world, it is easier to create the dignity of commerce than to give gifts as equals. After all, it was poor and hungry people, not scholars or food bankers, who first said that receiving free food is stigmatizing. Lewis Hyde called charity a "decoy, providing [the recipient] his daily bread while across town someone is buying up the bakery" (1979, pp. 179–180). Today's critics of food charity add that it is a distraction from actually working to end hunger.

But we contend that food charities, as today's major non-market food institutions, serve several functions that may be worth preserving. We found that non-market food distribution strengthens relationships, fosters local resilience, makes use of edible food that is not profitably sellable, and aligns with an alternative, non-market vision of a

of getting food to market (it is probably actually less), profits go up. Indeed, governments and the food industry have repeatedly culled livestock and destroyed crops at outrageous scales to keep prices high (Poppendieck, 1986). Our analysis suggests that wasting food to increase profits is an invisible, everyday occurrence.

desirable future foodscape. Some interviewees even ascribed magical qualities to food that is not for sale. These are advantages specific to institutions that distribute food in ways other than selling it.

So, how might society construct non-market food institutions that continue to generate the relationships, resilience, food recovery, and values-alignment that interviewees of this study described to us, but that do not depend on destitute people to consume the food? Our discussion points toward possibilities for reducing stigma by sharing food as equals rather than giving it away as charity. Everybody can incorporate more non-market food into their diets. Directing free food only to poor people, even without formal means testing, contradicts the equality implied by the universal need to eat.

Further research exploring non-market foodways might uncover more benefits specific to these practices. Documenting the prevalence and power of non-market production and distribution contributes to our understanding of the diversity of economic practices in a world that is often analyzed as if it were singularly capitalist (Gibson-Graham, 2008). We suspect that virtually everybody shares food at least occasionally.

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Appendix A. Interview Questions

1. History

First we want to ask you about your role in the community.

A. What do you do here [at this organization, garden, homestead, etc]?
    a. [If they talk about what the organization does, ask:] What do you do here?
B. How long have you been [involved/doing this]?
C. How did you first get started?
D. Have you perceived [____] change over time?
    a. How has your involvement in [practice] changed over time?
    b. Has COVID had any influence in these changes?

2. Distribution

[If they work for a distribution institution] Now I am going to ask you a little more about [institution].

A. How does sharing food here work?
    a. Where do you get the food you distribute?
    b. Who all is involved? Do you have any partners or collaborators?
B. Who receives this food? Who eats it?
    a. How is that determined? Who decides?
C. Has the distribution of food at this institution, or organizations like it, changed in your lifetime?
D. What's important to you when distributing food at no charge?
    a. What do you care about when you're sharing food with the community?
E. Do you have experience selling food?
    a. [If yes] How does selling food compare to distributing it with no cost?
    b. [If no] In what circumstances would you sell food, if any?

3. Production

Now, we are going to ask you more about the ways you grow and harvest food that's not for sale, the first question on that survey you filled out.

A. Tell me more about [whichever non-market production practices participant partakes in, e.g. foraging, gardening, hunting].
    a. Any good stories?
    b. How long have you been doing it? How did you learn?
B. Who do you [garden/hunt/fish/forage/etc] with?
C. Who gets the food you produce? Who eats it?
D. Why do you produce food that's not for sale?
E. What's important to you when you are [gardening/fishing/hunting/etc]?
    a. What do you care about when [doing practice]?
F. Do you also sell food you produce? [If yes, ask…]
    a. How much of it? Which?
    b. How does producing food for sale compare to producing food you don't sell?
    c. [If no] In what circumstances would you sell the food you produce, if any?
G. Whose land do you grow food on? Or …harvest food from?

4. Access

Now we want to talk about the second question on the survey, how you get food other than buying it.

A. Tell me about [whichever non-market access practices participant partakes in].
    a. How long have you been doing that?
    b. Any good stories?
    c. How does this compare with buying food?

[If they share/gift/barter] Let's talk specifically about informal exchange -- sharing, gifts, and barter.

B. Why do you partake in those types of transfers?
C. Who do you do these informal food exchanges with?
    a. From whom do you receive food?
    b. Who do you give food to?
D. How does [sharing/gifts/bartering] work?
    a. Has this changed over time?
    b. [For barter] Is what you give and what you receive of equivalent value?
E. What's important to you when you are [sharing or bartering food]?
    a. What do you care about?
F. What does food accessibility mean to you?
    a. Does this relate to accessibility to land/ water/ resources?

5. Relationships

How do these non-market food practices affect your relationships, if at all? Be specific.

A. Relationships with people
    a. People you [garden/hunt/forage/fish/work] with
    b. People who you give food to, or from whom you receive food
B. What about relationships with your food?
    a. And the plants and animals who become your food
C. Your relationship with this place, its ecosystems?
D. How about your relationship with yourself?

6. Final thoughts

A. Is there anything you would like to add?
    a. Something you haven't got the chance to mention
    b. Something you want to elaborate on
    c. Something we should be aware of

Appendix B

Table B1. Demographics of Interviewees

19 of 25 participants filled out the survey.

ID	Birth Year	Gender	Race	Ethnicity	Political Identity	Housing Status	Income Bracket (in US$)
1	1943	Female	White	NOT Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origins	Democrat	Rent	—
2	1945	Female	White	NOT Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origins	Democrat	—	$100,000+
3	1975	Non-binary	Black or African American	NOT Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origins	Not affiliated	Rent	$25,000–$50,000
4	1996	Male	White	—	Democrat	Rent	$50,000–$75,000
5	1995	Female	White	NOT Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origins	Not affiliated	Rent	$75,000–$100,000
6	1950	Female	White	—	Democrat, Progressive	Own	$75,000–$100,000
7	1982	Male	White	NOT Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origins	Independent	Rent	$50,000–$75,000
8	—	—	White	—	—	Homeless	$0–$10,000
9	1969	Female	White	NOT Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origins	Democrat	Rent	$50,000– $75,000
10	1973	Female	White	NOT Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origins	Independent	Own	$25,000–$50,000
11	1965	Male	White	NOT Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origins	Democrat	Own	$100,000+
12	1992	Female	White	NOT Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origins	Progressive, Anarchist	Rent	$25,000–$50,000
13	1996	Non-binary	White	NOT Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origins	Progressive	Rent	$10,000–$25,000
14	1981	Female	White	NOT Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origins	Democrat	Own	$25,000–$50,000
15	1972	Male	White	—	Not affiliated	Own	$50,000–$75,000
16	1963	Female	White	NOT Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origins	Democratic Socialist		$25,000–$50,000
17	1976	Female	White	NOT Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origins	Progressive	Own	$75,000–$100,000
18	1980	Female	White	NOT Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origins	Progressive, Independent	Own	$50,000–$75,000
19	1959	Male	Two or more races	NOT Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origins	Not affiliated	Own	$25,000–$50,000

Table B2. Tally of Interviewee Participation in Non-Market Food Production

Number of participants (from 19 total) who did each of the following activities in the year preceding study.

Home Garden	Community Garden	Chickens for Eggs	Beekeeping	Other Livestock	Foraging	Fishing	Hunting	Maple Syrup
15	8	6	0	2	3	3	2	4

Table B3. Tally of Other Non-Market Food Accessed by Interviewees

Number of participants (from 19 total) who got free food from each of the following sources in the year preceding study.

Community Meals	Soup Kitchen	Food Pantry	WIC	Barter	Sharing or Gifts	Gleaning	Dumpster Diving	Donations
9	3	6	2	5	13	4	3	1

Appendix C. Institutions Profiles and Non-institutional, Non-market Food Practice

Institutions

What follows is a short description of the institutions in which people we interviewed were involved. Institutions' profiles summarize how they distribute food and generally function.

Agape Christian Fellowship Food Pantry

Every Thursday from 5:30 to 7 pm, volunteers give out grocery boxes they have prepared. They "don't say no to anyone" who comes looking for food. The grocery boxes are useful only to households with kitchens. The pastor delivers some boxes to households that cannot pick one up. The pantry can serve about 40 families a week. Church members share info about the pantry mostly over Facebook.

Ames Hill Brook Community Garden

Some of the core group that started this garden in West Brattleboro's Stockwell Park still participate. The 22 plots, each 5 feet by 25 feet, are rented out yearly for $25. Some gardeners live in the neighborhood. No gardeners sell their produce, but some have shared it with the public from a table by the road. The garden has become a landscaping project that has rejuvenated the park.

Atowi Project

Rich Holschuh dreamed up and now directs the Atowi Project. His mission is to raise awareness of Abenaki needs and struggles. The project aims to educate first tribal members and then the broader community about cultivating and gathering traditional foods. Atowi is about reconnecting the region's Indigenous peoples to their land, communities, and practices. The Retreat Farm and Vermont Foodbank have contributed resources.

Edible Brattleboro

Edible Brattleboro aims to grow food everywhere for everyone. They plant and tend gardens and fruit trees all around town, often partnering with the owners, residents, or managers of the land. They communicate to the public about these edible plants with signage and green flags that mark produce ready to harvest. Volunteers share produce from Edible Brattleboro's gardens and produce gleaned from the farmers market at their weekly Share the Harvest farmstand. Anyone can receive food for free. There is a jar for cash donations, though. The group also hosts workshops to teach people how to cook and preserve seasonal vegan foods.

Everyone Eats

This statewide program pays restaurants $10 per meal for meals to be distributed for free to anyone who has been "negatively affected" by the pandemic. Ten percent of the total cost of ingredients must be local. What started as local projects in the Burlington and Brattleboro areas scaled up to 14 distribution hubs around Vermont with CARES Act funding. Now funded by FEMA, Everyone Eats meals in the Brattleboro area are delivered from restaurants to their hub and then to partner organizations that distribute them.

Foodworks

Foodworks is the Brattleboro food pantry of the organization Groundworks. Like many food pantries, it shifted from in-person shopping to distributing pre-made grocery boxes during the pandemic. Now, anyone can fill out a form with their preferences and pick up two weeks' worth of food during open hours on Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and the last Saturday of the month. Foodworks delivers to households that cannot pick up groceries on Tuesdays. They take people's names but do not require identification.

Loaves & Fishes

Located in the basement of the Centre Congregational Church in Brattleboro, Loaves & Fishes distributes food to "anyone who's hungry" every Tuesday and Friday. They served sit-down meals, like any soup kitchen for the 35 years before COVID-19. Now, they serve the same food in to-go containers, plus grocery bags, Everyone Eats meals, and other items. Volunteers prepare separate grocery bags for cooking recipients and for non-cooking recipients, most of whom do not have access to a kitchen. They also run deliveries to partner organizations and households that have requested food.

Nicole's Community Kitchen
Early in the pandemic, Nicole began cooking meals in her own kitchen for people who needed them, "100% free, no questions asked." Her one-person cook-and-delivery team eventually expanded into a team of volunteers as more people requested meals through social media, email, or the website. At its peak, Nicole's Community Kitchen was delivering 600 to 700 meals a week to people's homes. The nonprofit dissolved in early 2021 because it lacked financial and administrative support. Nicole's Community Kitchen is now a commercial enterprise that sells meals, but also still produces a few free meals a week for neighbors in need.

Putney Food Shelf
Volunteers and staff give out groceries on Mondays from 9 to10:30 am. Anyone can drive up or walk up, fill out a form with their preferences, and get a grocery bag. Recipients do not have to give any information. Volunteers deliver food to ten households who cannot make it to the pick-up. The Putney Food Shelf, like other food pantries, is beginning to plan its transition back to in-store shopping.

Putney Mutual Aid
A group of people and organizations formed Putney Mutual Aid at the beginning of the pandemic. People would make requests over social media or email, while others would offer help. Coordinators would match volunteers with requests. Volunteers would buy groceries, but typically just as a delivery service to quarantining households or elderly folks; the person requesting would pay them back. Similar mutual aid groups arose all over the region, some of which did provide food as a gift: Brattleboro Area Mutual Aid, Dummerston Cares, Guilford Cares, West River Valley Mutual Aid. Some became advocacy groups, organizing politically to pressure governments to address unmet needs, while others, like Putney Mutual Aid, remained in the realm of "neighbors helping neighbors," which allowed extremely progressive and extremely conservative people to coexist and cooperate.

Retreat Farm
The Retreat Farm is a community institution in Brattleboro. Families have long come to visit the petting zoo. The pandemic accelerated their planned transition toward farm education in service of expanding food access. In its first iteration, the community food project purchased groceries for the farm's Open Barn Members who qualified for SNAP, WIC, or free school meals. The program grew from 25 bags to around 60 bags a week. They put leftover veggies up for grabs on the porch of their new farmstand. They gathered food donations from several organizations and businesses into 100-lb holiday boxes. For winter, the farmstand became a 24-hour, open-air pantry where anybody could receive food. Currently, it operates as a pay-what-you-can, self-checkout farmstand, where customers can choose between paying full price, half price, or nothing.

St. Brigid's Kitchen and Pantry
A project of St. Michael's Catholic Church, St. Brigid's operates in a house across the street. They have served lunch five days a week since the early 1980s. A different team prepared a meal each weekday. These meals are distributed from the house's front door. There is "no criteria" limiting who can receive food. A few volunteers deliver meals, mostly to elderly households in the area. St. Brigid's thus provides low-sodium and diabetes-friendly food options. A small shed by the street serves as a 24-hour free pantry, stocked with bread, produce, and non-perishables for anyone. Once a month they hand out grocery boxes at a drive-up pantry event.

SUSU CommUNITY Farm
SUSU is an Afro Indigenous-stewarded farm and land-based healing center addressing food apartheid. In 2021, a farm manager and volunteers grew vegetables at a plot at Retreat Farm. A network of volunteers delivered this produce, plus food donated by and purchased from local farms and organizations, to 35 BIPOC families in Windham County every Wednesday for 22 weeks during the summer. These Boxes of Resilience were "always full" and "pretty deluxe," according to the farm manager, which they attributed to food's abundance. They grew crops that box recipients had requested, and strive to make culturally relevant food readily available.

Vermont Foodbank
The local Vermont Foodbank distribution center distributes donated, gleaned, and cheaply bought bulk food items to their network partners. They have a shopping list from which their partners can order. Organizations must apply to become network partners. They can then distribute food they buy and receive for free from the Foodbank according to their own norms. Workers at partner organizations are only allowed to receive the food as "just another client." The Foodbank also distributes food from its Veggie Van Go and mobile pantry programs. The Vermont Foodbank makes grant funds available to their network partners and any organization addressing root causes of hunger.

Vermont Wilderness School
This nonprofit provides nature connection mentoring to people of all ages. It offers apprenticeships for tracking, foraging, and hunting. Vermont Wilderness School also hosts summer camps and workshops that delve into more philosophical topics. The aim is to connect participants to themselves and to the other-than-human world, including through harvesting wild food in ethical and reciprocal ways. The School prioritizes gift economies, often practicing and teaching giving away one's first harvest, either to other people or simply back to the land.

Practices
Below, we describe each non-institutional, non-market food practice we encountered in our research.

Gardening
Many Brattleboro-area residents grow vegetables and fruit at home. There are educational and productive gardens at many local schools. People without access to land at home grow in community gardens at Saint Ames Brook, the Retreat Farm, and other sites. At these community gardens, gardeners tend individual plots but must manage tools, water, pests, and weeds collectively. Edible Brattleboro, and possibly others, garden collectively in public places for anyone to harvest. Gardeners who know each other sometimes pick each other's plots when things are ripe and unharvested.

Livestock raising
People keep animals for meat, dairy, and eggs. Many of these products are consumed within the household or shared, gifted, and bartered. One homestead we talked to has been raising chickens for the past 20 years. They preserve some of the eggs and move their coop around to fertilize different pieces of land.

Sugaring
Commercial sugarers direct some of their maple syrup to home consumption and sharing. Farmers who tap maple trees on one woman's land give her syrup, and she gives a lot away in turn. There are, in all likelihood, entire sugaring operations in the area that do not sell their product. These are probably small-scale.

Gleaning
Farmers often have leftover produce in their fields that they could not profitably harvest. Or they have edible food in storage that cannot be sold. Farmers often offer this produce to people and groups who are willing to harvest and distribute it. The Foodbank's gleaning program sends teams of volunteers harvest vegetables at numerous partnering farms.

Foraging
Gathering wild edibles can be an educational activity, a hobby, or a significant contributor to one's diet, whether nutritionally or emotionally. People forage nettles, fiddleheads, garlic mustard, ramps (wild leeks), berries, and mushrooms of many varieties. One homesteader would even forage for seaweed in Maine and bring it back to use on their soil.

Hunting
A few locals report eating only meat that's hunted. Others grew up getting much of their protein from hunted animals. Hunters frequently gift and barter meat from the animals they take. Or they freeze it to feed their household for months.

Fishing
A man fishing under the Bridge Street bridge reported fishing for both sport and subsistence. He does mostly catch-and-release but will kill any animal he wounds and process it for cooking or freezing. There is some concern over the safety of eating fish that have been caught in the Connecticut River.

Roadkill
Some people harvest and process roadkill for meat and, when it's a large animal like a deer, share that food widely. Vermont game wardens distribute collected roadkill to families who have asked to be on their list for such distribution.

Dumpstering
Folks also rescue food directly from the waste streams of grocery stores and other food businesses. Some people even dumpster dive from Foodworks' waste stream. We recovered pita bread, pizza crusts, jarred asparagus, and off-brand pop tarts from a dumpster behind a dollar store. One Brattleboro resident who has relied on dumpster diving for much of their diet declined an interview, even though it would be anonymous, because they did not want to draw more attention to dumpster diving. Perhaps this was not wanting to attract more scavengers to their spots, but probably not in response to any scarcity of discarded food -- dumpsters are bountiful -- but instead because when people make a mess or a scene, store managers lock up the bins. The organic bins behind the Hannaford on Route 5 are surrounded by a fence with a locked gate and a "Keep Out" sign. Vermont dumpster divers know the compost at most Hannaford locations as a prime food source.

Gifts
People bring gifts of food when visiting neighbors, friends, and family. They say they expect nothing in return, but in practice such gift relations tend to be reciprocal. One woman, a recovering heroin user, said, "I don't eat seafood. But I like fishing." She gives away the fish to her mostly elderly neighbors at a housing authority apartment complex in West Brattleboro.

Sharing
This woman also helps a friend who hoards food, because of previous experiences with scarcity, to separate out food he will not eat and then bring it to the community room, where other residents go through it. She says it helps; not everyone can get to the store easily. Another woman says that she would put vegetables from her front yard garden in a "help yourself" basket. Most people would take the produce and leave nothing, while others would leave money, or other vegetables they had grown. There has been a table by the road where gardeners at Ames Brook Community Garden give away extra vegetables.

Barter
Friends and close acquaintances sometimes trade goods and services in kind. Impromptu exchanges occur too. Vendors barter with each other at the Brattleboro Farmers Market. One cheesemaker exchanges cheese for cups of coffee from the coffee stand each week. They once swapped a block of artisanal cheese for a bouquet from a florist. Homesteaders also barter, mostly with their neighbors, trading what they have in abundance that their trading partner lacks for things they lack that their counterpart has in abundance. This then comes to a "balance" and can create a "sense of homeostasis in the community."

Appendix D

Table D1. Demographics of Interviewers

The six authors of the paper filled out the same surveys as did participants.

ID	Birth Year	Gender	Race	Ethnicity	Political Stance	Housing Status	Income Bracket
1	1991	Man	White	NOT Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origins	Not affiliated	Rent	$10,000–$25,000
2	2000	Female	White	NOT Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origins	Not affiliated	Rent	$0–$10,000
3	1980	Female	White	NOT Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origins	Not affiliated	Own	$25,000–$50,000
4	2000	Female	White	NOT Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origins	Democratic Socialist	Rent	$100,000+
5	2000	Non-binary	White	NOT Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origins	Anarchist	Rent	$0–$10,000
6	2000	Female	White	Hispanic, Spanish, or Latino origins	Not affiliated	Rent	$25,000–$50,000

Table D2. Tally of Interviewer Participation in Non-Market Food Production

Number of researchers (from 6 total) who did each of the following activities in the year preceding study.

Home Garden	Community Garden	Chickens for Eggs	Beekeeping	Other Livestock	Foraging	Fishing	Hunting	Maple Syrup
5	2	4	0	0	4	1	0	1

Table D3. Tally of Other Non-Market Food Accessed by Interviewers

Number of researchers (from 6 total) who got free food from each of the following sources in the year preceding study.

Community Meals	Soup Kitchen	Food Pantry	WIC	Barter	Sharing or Gifts	Gleaning	Dumpster Diving
6	1	1	0	3	6	5	1