

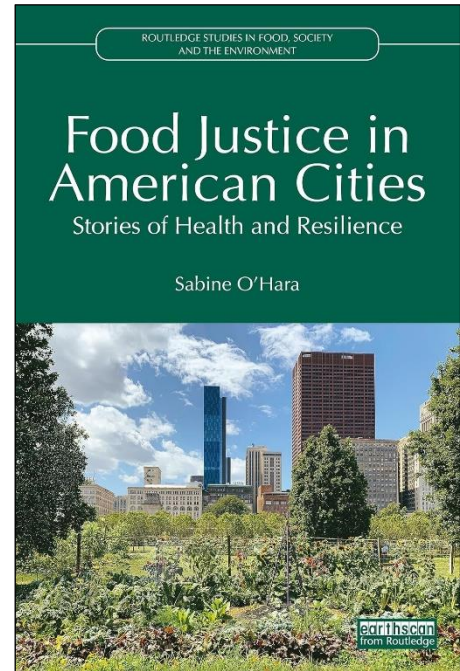
Centering lived experience in the study of food justice

Book review by

Kaitlyn Harper *

Johns Hopkins University

Review of *Food Justice in American Cities: Stories of Health and Resilience*, by Sabine O’Hara. (2024). Published by Routledge. Available as paperback, hardcover and eBook; 198 pages. Publisher’s website: <https://www.routledge.com/Food-Justice-in-American-Cities-Stories-of-Health-and-Resilience/OHara/p/book/9781032344904>



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As a food systems researcher who teaches about the intersections of food, health, and environmental justice, I often find myself searching for materials that balance quantitative data with the qualitative lived realities of those the data repre-

sent. Sabine O’Hara’s *Food Justice in American Cities: Stories of Health and Resilience* (2024) is a prime example. Throughout the seven chapters, O’Hara draws on case studies in five cities—Chicago, Albuquerque, Atlanta, Oakland, and the Brooklyn borough of New York City—to describe how food insecurity affects the lives of urban residents and how the structural inequities that underlie food insecurity relate to history, policy, and place.

In the first few chapters, O’Hara sets the stage by providing background and current context for each city. This context situates readers to each city’s history and demographics, providing a foundation for understanding the challenges residents face. In subsequent chapters, we return to each city to hear powerful stories from individuals experi-

* Kaitlyn Harper is an assistant scientist in the Department of Environmental Health and Engineering at Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health, and co-chair of the Nutrition and Obesity Policy Research and Evaluation Network (NOPREN) Food Security Work Group. Her research and teaching focus on building equitable and sustainable food systems. She uses community-engaged and justice-focused approaches to address issues of food insecurity and wasted food in the United States. She can be contacted at kharp14@jhu.edu;

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1737-7034>


encing food insecurity and those working to improve food justice in each context. Many of the stories connect with current events and policies. For example, we hear from a 56-year-old immigrant in Oakland who stopped teaching to care for her mother. The two struggle to pay for food among the mounting rent, utilities, and medical bills. Her story underscores how SNAP work requirements—policies mandating 80 hours of work or training each month for able-bodied adults without dependents—can unfairly penalize care workers and those who do not fit the conventional definitions of “dependent” (U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA] Food and Nutrition Service, 2025).

In another story, we hear from a mother in Chicago who describes her monthly trips to the local food pantry, driven in part by the strain of paying a thousand dollars a month for childcare. Reading this passage shortly after New Mexico became the first state to establish universal free childcare (New Mexico Office of the Governor, 2025), I was struck by how the book’s insights about one city’s struggles underscore the importance of another’s policy progress. O’Hara does not make these specific policy connections herself, but the text invites readers to do so, linking local individuals’ realities to national debates.

O’Hara’s book is rooted in a systems-thinking perspective and emphasizes how individual experiences of food insecurity are connected to broader social, economic, and policy structures. This systemic framing reminds us that food insecurity is what Rittel and Webber (1973) famously called a “wicked problem,” a challenge so complex and intertwined with other societal issues that it defies straightforward solutions. Yet, O’Hara approaches this complexity with pragmatism and hope. Her training and extensive experience as an agricultural and environmental economist allows her to unpack the mechanisms that perpetuate inequities, taking economics into account as well as other complicated social dimensions. Toward the end of the book, she proposes many solutions to improve food justice in urban settings. For example, she describes how food prices might be corrected within our current economic system, while simulta-

neously challenging readers to consider how our economic system devalues care work, perpetuates the myth of self-reliance, and continues cycles of oppression among the working class.

The insights in this book stand alongside and build on the work of other key texts, such as Alkon and Agyeman’s *Cultivating Food Justice* (2011), Broad’s *More Than Just Food* (2016), and Holt-Giménez’s *A Foodie’s Guide to Capitalism* (2017). Like those authors, O’Hara illustrates how the food system is shaped by broader structures of inequity. However, this book is set apart by its focus on urban case studies and O’Hara’s unique ability to weave data and story together. From a teaching perspective, this book is clear and accessible without oversimplifying, making it suitable for both academic and community audiences. It moves between economic analysis, social critique, and storytelling with ease, giving the reader multiple entry points for understanding the problem. For example, chapters provide a baseline of knowledge on topics like the history of urban agriculture, the development of food assistance programs, and the negative externalities associated with food production, making it accessible to those with a limited background in food systems. At the same time, it provides enough depth to support robust discussions among more experienced, interdisciplinary learners on topics such as the value of community-based participatory research, critiques of the charitable food system, and the possibilities of reimagining governance and economic reform.

Reflecting on the extensive notes scribbled in the margins throughout my own copy of the book, I feel called to action. O’Hara’s text pushes readers to imagine what genuine transformation might look like in our food system. Her closing chapters invite us to envision a different world, one in which we value nourishment, care, and interdependence as much as efficiency and profit. As policymakers debate the future of social safety nets and as cities—and all communities—grapple with widening disparities, *Food Justice in American Cities* provides a compass for how scholars, practitioners, and communities might navigate these complexities with both optimism and resolve. 

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