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## Food Insecurity in Rural Benton County: An Ethnographic Study

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# Food Insecurity in Rural Benton County: An Ethnographic Study<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

In 2003 the US Census Bureau found that 11.2% of the United States population was food insecure at some time during the year. This is a shocking statistic, especially when paired with the information that we export more food than any other industrialized nation and we pay a far lower percentage of our income on food than any other industrialized nation.<sup>2</sup> For comparative purposes we can look at Europe's food insecurity rate of 5%, less than half that of the United States.<sup>3</sup> The curious nature of such statistics only increases when we shift our gaze to the state of Oregon. This state enjoys a temperate climate and good farmland, especially in the rich Willamette Valley. Agriculture was once the major economic sector of the state, though now it has lost its status to more urban-based high-tech industries. Oregon ranked as the 15<sup>th</sup> poorest state in 2000, but during that same year, it had the highest percentage of people who reported being hungry. This information started a flurry of research, trying to understand the nature of food insecurity and hunger in the state.

As applied anthropologists, we were contacted by the recently formed Benton County Food Security Task Force to carry out ethnographic interviews in two rural areas in this county in the mid Willamette Valley that were known to be low on emergency food services: Adair, a community of 900 people just 8 miles north of Corvallis; and Alsea, a community of 1100 people 24 miles to the southwest over a mountain. We were assisted in this endeavor by two students, Talya Shuler Abel and Katora Ruiz. There are general trends that affect the poor all over, but each community, and even each household, has a unique configuration. We hoped to explore some of these configurations in rural Benton County. In listening to and analyzing people's stories about food and poverty, we can help figure out improvements to the food system and better understand the reasons for hunger in Oregon in the broad context of people's lives. Low-income people often have thought of solutions that they are powerless to implement and "top-down solutions" are frequently not successful because the policies are not based on the realities of people they affect.

In this paper, we first outline our methodology and give an overview of the two targeted communities. The next section deals with the intersection of food and identity. Food is

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks go to the Benton County Food Security Task Force, Doug Sackinger, and the OSU Rural Studies Program for getting us started and supporting our research. We could never have gotten the rich information we did without the help of concerned community leaders in Adair and Alsea. Faye Abraham, Jerri Hansen, Jenny Lanning, Margaret Matthewson and Bill Smith all assisted us in making contact with people who were struggling to make it. Certainly, our warmest thanks go to the people who remain unnamed who gave of their time and their stories.

<sup>2</sup> Economic Research Service, USDA <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data/FoodSecurity/CPS/>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.fao.org/newsroom/en/news/2004/41347/print\\_friendly\\_version.html](http://www.fao.org/newsroom/en/news/2004/41347/print_friendly_version.html)

symbolic as well as nutritious and it is deeply integrated with people's lifestyles. We came to understand that the food insecure population is a very diverse one. The following sections look more closely at how people become food insecure. Food insecurity seems to be related to three factors: income, cost of living, and social support, (Weber and Edwards 2003). We will address how these three areas were discussed by our informants in the major section of this paper, "Making Ends Meet." In that section, we look first at income and assets and at strategies for food security before addressing cost of living. At the end of the section, we look at the influence of stability and mobility on people's ability to feed their families and then at social support. Throughout these sections, both strategies for and obstacles to food security come to light. These will be addressed in the conclusion.

## **Methodology**

Our targeted population was food insecure people in Adair and Alsea. Our first step was to get information on these two areas of Benton County to see if there were obvious pockets of low-income people who were likely to be food insecure. We met with Doug Sackinger who provided us with maps of the two areas according to median household income by census tract 2000 and property value of tax lots. Alsea lies in a tract where median household income falls at \$36,200 in 2000. Adair's median household income in was \$49,000 in 2000. When we look at property values, the vast majority of Alsea lots run from 5000-108,000 while most of Adair's tax lots run from 108,000 to 146,000. We were able to find out from the Department of Human Services that there were 36 households on food stamps in Alsea including 72 children. We could not find out this information for Adair because it shares a zip code with Corvallis.

Our next step was to meet with several community leaders and ask them what they knew about food insecurity and poverty in the area (appendix A). We also asked them for referrals to low-income people whom we could interview. Several of the community leaders we interviewed in both Alsea and Adair were low-income themselves and had experienced food insecurity at some point in their lives. These people contributed their own insights to the study. The bulk of our sample came from referrals by other people, but we also targeted some areas for door to door interviews. Many of the interviews were recorded on cassettes and later transcribed. Others were recorded by hand. The 4 researchers met regularly to discuss research findings. Partway through the interviews, we received food from Linn Benton Food Share (LBFS) and milk coupons from Dairy Mart to compensate people for the time they spent interviewing with us. In all cases, they were very appreciative.

In interviewing low-income people, we began with the sixteen question USDA survey and followed up with an ethnographic survey aimed at describing a more holistic view of community food needs and practices (Appendices B and C). During the course of our interviews, we also developed shortened questionnaires to accommodate people who did not have the time to respond to the longer one. We translated a short questionnaire, along with a few extra culturally-focused questions into Spanish to make sure that the needs of the Latino community were being reported.

Ethnographic interviews do not straightjacket the participants into only answering specific questions. Questions are designed to elicit information on particular topics, but participants are encouraged to follow up with related stories. Information that is picked up in these stories often prompts us to add questions in subsequent interviews. In other words, ethnography usually resembles a series of linked conversations. The beauty of this approach is that the informants play a bigger role in shaping the discourse. They do not have to fit their experience into predetermined categories. We quickly saw the usefulness of delivering the USDA questionnaire first and following it up with an ethnographic interview. Several people answered the straightforward, quantifiable USDA questionnaire as not being food insecure. However, as the ethnographic interview progressed, information came out that would cause us to question their initial self designation. In addition to interviewing people, researchers participated in other community events such as community meetings, rummage sales and sewing circles. This made the researchers more familiar with the communities and gave us a more holistic view of local networks and their effect on food security.

The differences in the two communities led to slightly different approaches. In Alsea, we interviewed 17 community leaders representing 3 churches, the health clinic, business interests, the school and parent, teacher, student association (PTSA), The Alsea Valley Gleaners and Alsea Community Effort (a non-profit organization focused on improving life in Alsea). We interviewed 39 low-income households. The majority of these (11) were raising children under age 18. We also interviewed several seniors and some people under 30 without children. After the first 15 or so interviews, hearing a pattern in the solutions that were offered, we devised a survey and asked people at the end of their interview to rank the suggested solutions by level of importance. It was harder to meet people in Adair because of the lack of community organizations and leaders who could introduce us to people. We interviewed four community leaders (the mayor, the past mayor, the minister, and one older long time resident). Many people we contacted subsequently did not have time or energy to talk when we asked; they work several jobs that are often physically difficult. We ended up doing long interviews with 15 residents and another 25 shorter interviews. Participant observation was weighted more heavily in Adair since one of our researchers, Katora Ruiz, lives there and was able to gain a more holistic view that way.

## **Locations**

### **Adair**

Adair is about 8 miles north of Corvallis. It was built as an army base during World War II and grew to house more than 10,000 people, including some Italian and German POWs during the war. It was later converted into a Navy hospital and then, an Air Force base. The base closed and was opened for sale to civilians in 1973. In 1984 it was incorporated as a city. Most of the barracks and training facilities have been torn down, but two circles of houses—one of single homes for the officers and one of duplexes for the enlisted men still stand. Many people who bought homes, moved away and now rent the houses out. A few stayed and have lived in Adair for more than thirty years. The population of renters tends to turn over rapidly. Homes have 2, 3, or 4 bedrooms with small kitchens, but large yards. Many people moved there because house prices and rents were low and they could

have animals. Children who grew up there remember roaming around the old military buildings and across the fields of the base. At this point, one large air force building is unused and other military buildings have been turned into a private Christian school. A small Christian church has taken over the large chapel. A vocational training institute and a catering service use other military buildings. Adair has one very small grocery store and a tavern. Because store prices are high and goods are scarce and old, only one of our participants actually shopped there. Two hundred new houses have been built since 2000, partly filling the demand for medium cost housing in the city of Corvallis.

Rent and utilities were often cited as the most difficult expenses to pay in Adair. Rent in the old section has risen to about \$700 per month or \$8400 per year. The average salary of our participants was around \$16,000. This means that some people are paying about 50% of their income on rent. These houses have electrical heating and are poorly insulated. Electricity bills were often more than many poor families could reasonably afford. Some get public assistance, while others simply do without heat, or convert to wood stoves. Water bills are much higher in Adair than in Corvallis, about \$80 per month. The town uses the old military water system which is large and hard to maintain. The result is that people have to cut corners somewhere—and food is often the place where they can do so.

Most of the people in Adair are the working poor. Although this community does not have a lot of organizations, people help each other out as they can. There is no stigma attached, however, to receiving aid from the federal, state or local governments. Rather there is the attitude that circumstances have put them where they are: jobs are hard to find and bills are too high.

### **Alsea**

The first white settlers came to Alsea in the 1850s. They hunted and trapped and farmed. In 1874 a grist mill was set up and Alsea became a thriving farming community. Flat bottom scows were built to transport food on the river down to Waldport, since the coast road didn't go in until 1910. They continued using the river for several years after the road was constructed. The largest recorded load of goods leaving Alsea for Waldport was 7 tons of lumber, apples and grain. Other recorded loads included three hundred bushels of oats and wheat shipped out in 1910, nine thousand pounds of grain in 1911, and 75 bushels of apples in 1912. There were about 100 people in Alsea in 1912, but it served a much larger area. Polk's Benton County Directory of 1913 reported that farming and dairying were the principal businesses of the valley. A stage ran from Alsea to Philomath daily except Sunday and to Tidewater semi-weekly. Businesses listed in the directory included real estate, hotel and feed, furniture, cooperative creamery, confectionary, blacksmith and hardware. Other businesses that thrived in the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were a hardware store, a livery stable, cafes and taverns, hotels, a barber shop, a pool hall, Methodist and Nazarene churches, and a skating rink. The mercantile founded in 1898 was the only store between Philomath and Waldport and it had to compete with other grocery stores. The gristmill went out of operation, but there was a large fruit drier used mainly for drying prunes. The creamery made cheese and butter and selling cream

was one of the major ways that farm families earned spending money. The wealth of the community was attested to by the founding of the Alsea state bank in the early 1920s.

Logging on private land was going on before WWII, but logging federal land began in earnest after WWII. Small mills dotted the valley. Local men got jobs in the mills and other men were attracted from elsewhere by the work. Logging is a dangerous line of work. Few people escape without sustaining a major injury that prevents them working for an extended period of time, and some die in logging accidents. Families that were dependent on that wage, had to find creative ways to sustain themselves during periods of unemployment. The ones who had continued farming on a small scale were in better shape than those who depended solely on wage labor. However, it had become increasingly difficult to live by farming alone. By the 1980s, descendants of farmers reported having to get jobs in mills in order to be able to afford living on their family farm.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, several young people moved into the Alsea Valley as part of the Back to the Land movement. These people worked hard, grew big gardens, raised chickens and, sometimes, larger animals. They did not always share the same worldview as the longtime residents and enjoyed different forms of recreation and dress. Because of this, they were not readily accepted into the community. This population group also experienced the decline of farming as a viable way to make a living. The back to the land people who stayed share with the longtime residents a desire for locally grown foods, and the memory of working hard and having little to eat.

### **Differences and Similarities between Alsea and Adair**

Adair, at 8 miles from Corvallis, is just outside of the category defined as “urban rural” by the governor’s Office of Rural Policy. Urban rural communities are defined as being “at least 10 miles by road from an urban community”. While Adair is slightly under that, other parts of the definition fit: “many individuals commuting to an urban area to work or shop, an economy with few natural resource and agricultural activities, easy and immediate access to health care services and numerous paved streets and roads.” If we follow the distance specifications, Alsea, at 24 miles from Corvallis, also falls into the urban rural category. However, the description of a “rural” community (which lies at least 30 miles by road from an urban community) fits Alsea far better than the urban rural description. It has some commercial business, reasonable access to health care and, most importantly, the local economy is changing from a natural resource base to more commercial interests. The 24 miles to Corvallis seems longer since you have to follow a windy road over a mountain. There are times during the winter when Alsea is cut off from Corvallis and Philomath due to mudslides or icy roads whereas Adair being only 8 miles up a flat road is continually accessible. Both populations do most of their shopping in Corvallis. Alsea is a tighter community with several large extended families that have lived in the area for generations. It also has a much higher percentage of Back to the Land people who arrived in the coastal range in the late 1960s and 70s. Adair residents tend to be more mobile, living in nuclear families, though a number of our interviewees moved to the area to be near relatives. Many have urban backgrounds. The relative stability of residence in Alsea as opposed to Adair promotes a pioneer spirit of community self-

sufficiency and leads people to distrust anonymous help from outside. To be fair, Alseans can point to several cases where regulatory bodies from outside the community forced agendas that were not looked upon favorably at the local level. We did not find the same distrust of government intervention in Adair.

Utilities in Adair cost more than in Alsea. In both communities there are people who heat only with wood. In Adair this is done to avoid the high electric heat bills. In Alsea, it's more of a tradition with people often gathering the wood themselves from surrounding forests. Additionally, there are families in Alsea who get their water from springs. There are more food insecure people who rent in Adair than in Alsea where some people own land and houses, but still have trouble making ends meet. Dual working couples with children were a greater part of our sample in Adair than in Alsea. Alsea has suffered more from the shift away from natural resource extraction, but both populations suffer from the predominance of low-wage labor with few fringe benefits, if any.

Being within commuting distance to Oregon State University, several of the families we interviewed in Adair were university students with children. There are a substantial number of food insecure people in Benton County who have college educations and education appeared to be an important value for most of our informants. Several people in Alsea mentioned the Clemens Scholarship that their children could use for a college education. There were families who chose to home-school their children in both places. However, in Adair, they tended to do so for religious/moral reasons and in Alsea for counter-cultural reasons, or disagreements with the staff at the local school. There were also people in Alsea who sent their children to a Christian school in Philomath, rather than using the local public school. In Adair, the only local school is a private Christian school whose tuition is prohibitive for most residents.

## **Food and Lifestyle**

All humans must eat, but food is far more than a biological necessity. Food helps define who we are. In most cultures of the world, eating is a time for communion with loved ones. This is still a value among the American poor as evidenced by their descriptions of "favorite meals." Most often, these descriptions were of holiday meals with family, or potlucks with friends. Common elements included a great variety of foods, plenty for everyone, and the presence of people they enjoyed being around. People who were estranged from their extended family and had not built up a strong social network, more commonly described restaurant meals, focusing on the taste and quantity of the food, rather than the meal as event.

Whether the "favorite" meal was taken at home or in a restaurant, it contrasted significantly with daily eating habits which were often characterized by a lack of variety, a lack of quantity, and often eaten in isolation. One teenage boy reported that he generally ate only one meal a day that consisted of a hamburger wolfed down in front of the television set. He lived alone with his father who left for work before he got up in the morning and came back in the evening, too exhausted to cook. A dual working couple alternated their working hours so they wouldn't have to pay for childcare. Supper was usually taken in the car at McDonald's as one parent shifted the children to the other's

car. Others, who worked at fast food restaurants, got good deals on that food and brought back copious amounts to their children on a regular basis.

People were, at least, aware of basic nutritional facts. Almost everyone we interviewed thought that they should be eating more fresh fruits and vegetables. Adults realized that if they would do so they would lose weight, but said that they could not afford to. Most of these people accepted the fact that their children did not like vegetables. They felt powerless to change the eating habits of their children. They were particularly concerned with being able to give their children what they liked and making sure that they would not stand out amongst their peers. For instance, many parents acknowledged that “Lunchables” did not provide good nutrition and were very expensive, but they tried to buy them at least occasionally so that their children could be like other children. Aware of the problem of “fitting in with peers,” gleaner coordinators made sure that donated “Lunchables” went to families with children. In general, parents feel good when their children are happy and health concerns take a back seat. We watched one child consume a dozen oreo cookies as a snack after school.

No parent admitted that their children didn’t have enough to eat. Children we interviewed gave a different story. When an 8 and 13 year old heard their mother saying that they had enough food, the children rolled their eyes and started making comments to each other. Later the 8 year old counted up her pennies and told her dad not to take any because she was saving up for hot lunch on Tuesday when they would have hamburgers. Another teenager told us that the cupboards are bare when he leaves for school in the morning and he tries his best to talk people out of food at lunchtime. While no one felt comfortable saying that their children didn’t have enough to eat, they did mention eating less in order that their children could eat.

Poor people are also well aware that more nutritious foods are more expensive. Much of the food gathered by gleaning groups and food banks is weighted toward carbohydrates. Many said that they would like to eat more fruits and vegetables or meat, but they couldn’t afford them. People were often stuck at the end of the month, eating mostly inexpensive carbohydrates. They understood that a high sugar/carbohydrate diet led many of them into diabetes and could lead their children into the same disease, but they felt powerless to change their diets. A couple of people claimed to be “addicted” to sugar.

Foodways cannot be separated from lifestyle. Close to 50% of the money Americans spend on food is for food eaten outside the home.<sup>4</sup> The typical American household spends much less time preparing and eating food than households in other cultures and cooking styles tend not to be passed on through the generations, causing a lack of stability of local food cultures. This was apparent in many of our interviews where people could not name dishes that they had learned how to make from their older relatives and older people complained about younger people’s lack of knowledge concerning food. Still we often found people’s ethnic backgrounds reflected in their food choices. A Native Alaskan received whale blubber from relatives. A woman from Singapore said that she

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/sb965/sb965e.pdf>



wouldn't know what to do without periodic trips to the Asian grocery store in Corvallis. A Mexican family was shocked by seeing frozen vegetables in their gleaner box and threw them away—an act that was seen as extremely wasteful by the other gleaners who grew up on frozen food. It didn't take the mother of this family long to come up with a delicious recipe for crayfish from the local stream, using traditional cooking methods with onions, tomatoes, and peppers.

Most Americans today did not consciously choose to abandon family traditions of cooking. Over the past 30 years, workers in middle-income, married-couple families with children have added the equivalent of five more months at work and more than half of this additional time came from women's work.<sup>5</sup> In 2000, American workers put in more work time than workers in any other rich, industrialized economy and (unlike almost every other advanced state) the U.S. has no federal policy of paid family leave. Contrary to popular belief, increases in annual hours worked have been larger among middle- and low-income families than among those at the top of the income scale.<sup>6</sup> We are left with a society with no time to learn and practice foodways that have sustained their elders. The dual working couples with children who we talked with had very little time to spend as a family.

With this as a background, it is interesting to note that a subsection of our informants rebelled against the standard American pattern of working, cooking and eating. These people would be called “counter cultural.” One segment stems from the back to the land movement of the late 1960s, and 1970s. Many of these families moved to rural areas and attempted to live off the land, using very traditional methods. They maintain a mistrust of processed foods, try to incorporate lots of whole grains and fresh fruits and vegetables into their diets, and know how to process foods in traditional manners. Few of these families are still living off the land as they did in earlier phases of their lives and once their subsistence shifts to wage labor, they find that they have far less time and energy for food preparation and preservation. They still maintain a preference for “healthy” food and are marked out in the gleaner group as those who refuse white bread.

An even more extreme counter cultural group is a group of young people who call themselves freegans. This is a name that they made up to reflect their philosophy. Ideally, they would eat only whole, unprocessed foods, but of more importance to them is whether or not it is “free.” They prefer to opt out of the economic system entirely, living only on what society throws away, or what they can gather in other people's gardens, in the wild, or by picking up roadkill. Some of the favorite foods they listed were wild salmon, acorn mush, hazelnuts, blackberries, burdock, chickweed, nettles, mushrooms, dandelion, lambs quarter, violets and venison. This is a different kind of survivalist who enjoys periods of time in rural areas where they can be close to nature but knows where the best dumpsters are located in cities as far apart as Miami, Minneapolis, and Eugene. Top on their list are the dumpsters of organic food processors. These people have a very strong mobile network and they share both information and food. They are not against

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<sup>5</sup> Poor, single mothers derived 41% of their income from the labor market in 1979. By 2000, this had grown to 73% to counteract shrinking government cash assistance.

<sup>6</sup> The State of Working America 2002-03; The Economic Policy Institute 2005.

using food stamps or emergency food boxes, but when they have a choice, they are very picky about choosing only organic, whole foods. We interviewed four people in this group and they all reported times of hunger and of having to eat food they didn't like because they were hungry and that was all there was. One told about being dropped off while hitchhiking at a truck stop. She was hungry and went to the dumpster and all that was there was a whole box of doughnuts. She gorged herself and felt sick afterwards. These people realized that they were able to live like this because they did not have children or regular jobs. They owned only what they could carry. You need to have a lot of time to be a successful freegan and you need to be mobile.

More common in our interviews were people raised with middle class consumer values who carried those cultural expectations, even when their personal finances could not support that lifestyle. These people subscribe to personal consumer preferences that are perhaps out of their reach, but deemed too important to give up. One woman listed payments on her van as one of her biggest expenses, yet she felt that she needed a roomy car since she had three children and one on the way. She insisted on having some of the trappings of the middle-class lifestyle she was raised in. She did not work outside the home, and home-schooled her eldest daughter because of her religious beliefs. Her husband had a part-time service job and often brought home fast food from his work. With this extra food and food stamps, she considered them to be food secure. In general, then, personal preferences within a consumer culture often clashed with economic status, and food took a back seat.

### **Making Ends Meet**

U.S. scholars talk about the new poverty in the US that has developed from the corporate and government focus on the global free market and its ideological emphasis on efficiency and cost effectiveness, cheap consumer prices and large, corporate strength.<sup>7</sup> While the parents of the adults living in Adair were able to work in factory jobs with union wages as high school graduates and older men in Alsea made family wages in the lumber industry, present day adults find it hard to find steady jobs that pay a living wage. Most jobs held by our interviewees were in the service economy—bus drivers, car detailers, pizza deliverers—where the pay is very low with no benefits and no security. Jobs are often part-time or seasonal. The minimum wage in Oregon is high compared to the federal level, but it is still not a living wage. Housing costs in Benton County are among the highest in the state which gives family little to live on after the rent/mortgage is paid. Many people are without health insurance and when a health emergency hits, they are instantly in debt. Food, the sustenance of human life, is often the first expense that is cut.

In this part of the paper, we address the two sides of the money question: income and assets on one hand and expenses on the other. First, what are the incomes and assets, including knowledge, family composition and social ties, that people in these communities have to draw from, or how do they meet their expenses? This question

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<sup>7</sup> Maskovsky, Jeff 2001 *The Other War at Home: The Geopolitics of U.S. Poverty*, *Urban Anthropology*, 30(2-3), pp. 215-238.

leads us to strategies for food security and brings us into the realm of public assistance for this is the only way that many people can feed their families. Second, what are the costs of living, in other words, what were our interviewees' main expenses and their attitudes towards them? This question leads into the spheres of housing and health. We found housing to be the largest constant expense, while ill health presents people with extraordinary expenses. Finally, we address the questions of stability and mobility and affective ties. Affective ties and the time that it takes to create them crosscut a strictly economic model.

### **Income and Assets**

In both places we conducted interviews, as elsewhere in America, poverty is maintained through low-paying jobs that offer few benefits. The federal poverty level was set at \$18,850 for a family of four in 2004, but a living wage in Corvallis has been set at \$20,363.20 (based on an hourly wage of \$9.29). This discrepancy between the federal poverty level and living wage calculations means that national statistics concerning people "in poverty" are greatly underestimated. Most of our informants were below the "official" poverty level, though several made above the federal poverty wage and were still food insecure.

One lesson of this research is that measuring the income and assets of low-income people requires attention to complex and multiple factors in their lives. Just asking someone their income without asking about the composition of their household and such factors as cross-generational sources of help or friends with whom they exchange is not very meaningful. Furthermore, strategies to increase one's monetary income are often diverse and complex. Thus, in discussing income and assets here, the conversation quickly spills out into other areas of life and into strategies that are difficult to quantify. The freegan example brings to light that income and food insecurity are not in direct relationship to each other. People who make more money are, in several cases, more food insecure than those who make less money. When we look at food insecurity, we must take into consideration the expenses that households incur and the social networks that assist them.

Several households in the study coped by developing a strong sense of what income source would pay for which expenses; this helped them to keep track of their income in relation to their expenses. For example, a retired person knew that her income from renting her land and trees would pay for her property taxes, fire insurance and gas. The \$270 monthly expense for her prescriptions for a chronic illness had to come out of her social security check, leaving her less than \$330 for all other expenses, including food. In another case, a married couple with children earmarked the woman's higher income for monthly expenses and the man's for doctor bills and extraordinary expenses.

Of people interviewed in Alsea and Adair, those who were food insecure held a variety of paying jobs from manual labor to fast food workers to white-collar work at major institutions. The majority of jobs required manual labor. Few working age people interviewed had no job and were completely dependent on public assistance—only five in Alsea and two in Adair. Four of these were on social security disability.

Retirees we interviewed (four in Alsea and one in Adair) collected social security and helped themselves in other ways. A few qualified for food stamps. All the retirees interviewed in Alsea were active in the gleaner group. They complained that the younger members of the group should be doing more, but were proud of their ability to outwork people younger than themselves. One retired woman sold garden produce and another got income from timber on her property. One Adair couple had lost their retirement funds and the promise of yearly interest income. They privately wished their children would help out, but the wife said of her husband: “He just won’t hear of asking for help. He’s just sitting in there dying a slow death worrying.” The husband had been an auto mechanic and bought old cars and bikes, fixed them up, and sold them. This was fine as long as his health held up. As his health failed, she considered going back to work in some capacity. She worried because she could no longer afford the prescription medicines that she needed to keep a chronic condition at bay.

Our interviews unearthed comparatively few households that consisted of couples with children both of whom were formally working. (We specify “formally” because usually the person who stays home participates in a variety of income-saving and even income-generating activities.) Dual working families appear to be more food insecure in Oregon than in other states, so we expected to encounter more of this population segment (Weber and Edwards 2000). Two of these families were so busy that they only consented to answer the short questionnaire. In another case we were able to get a richer description of their lives. The wife had a white-collar job and the husband a manual labor job; they still barely made their expenses and did not have money for the kind of food they wanted by the end of the month. The two jobs put a stress on the family because of requirements for after-school care for the two elementary-age children and the fatigue factor which is exacerbated by the long drive in one car to pick everyone up at disparate places at the end of the day. The fatigue of work and the wife’s double burden is well encapsulated in the wife’s comment:

We eat worst in the winter. It’s dark and I get home late. I don’t want to cook in the dark. We eat more pasta. It’s quick and easy. Or I say ‘make your own dinner.’ They get a bowl of cereal, peanut butter and jelly, a can of soup or grilled cheese.

Other two-parent families with children who were interviewed had the mother stay at home with the children while her husband worked. In two cases in Adair where the wives did nothing else to bring in income, they were well aware that if they went to work, their entire paycheck would go to childcare costs. As one woman said, “I would bring home only three dollars a week after childcare and gas. I would be robbing Peter to pay Paul, the bill collector.” This represents an honest comparison of low-wage labor and childcare costs. In other cases, the choice to have the mother stay home with the children was made on ideological, rather than economic grounds. A clear example of this was the Adair man who had promised his wife that she could be a “stay-at-home mother” when they moved to Oregon. Despite the fact that he lost his job and was unemployed for several years, she did not find a job. Rather, they depended on their joint efforts to get every kind of assistance that they could for themselves and their five children and to put effort into

finding the cheapest food at a variety of stores and storing it.

In one case, the woman had a full-time job, while the man furnished the after-school and weekend childcare. He was a student getting financial aid and had the more flexible schedule. In many of these cases, the non-working member was doing something to augment the income and assets. In two cases it was cleaning houses on an informal, though paid, basis. In three cases it was dedicated work with the local gleaning group. One woman in Adair said, “I consider the Gleaners my work.” In Alsea, a mother also raised hens and sold eggs; made crafts for the market; and sold produce. Her children helped her with these activities when possible.

In a Mexican family we interviewed, the mother had been staying home and preparing a large hot meal in the middle of the day for her five children who went to a nearby elementary school. They had retained the Mexican custom of eating their largest meal at midday. When we interviewed them, the mother had just found work in Corvallis and was not sure what she would do since the school did not offer reduced price hot lunches and her children had never eaten cold sandwiches for lunch.

In our overall sample, we had nine single parents living with children; these were all mothers except one. The father had just received his 8 year old daughter after her mother lost her food stamps after being caught misrepresenting her situation by Human Services. Five of the mothers worked and three more were students. The three that were students suffered from periods of no income; financial aid checks coming at “strange times.” Five of the eight women got significant help from relatives—mothers, older children, and, in one case, a sister. The bulk of assistance was with childcare. In one case the interviewed mother was temporarily depending on her elder daughter’s income while she cared for her own illnesses and the younger children. Another woman lived long-term in her mother’s house with her children and received her children’s school tuition at the nearby private school from her mother. Thus, we cannot really understand these women’s income and assets without considering their relations and informal economic relations with relatives.

Three women in the sample were living alone and had jobs. All three had experienced serious illness or accidents in the recent past. One had several children living in the vicinity on whom she could depend when necessary. When her white-collar job got cut in half, she opted to give up her house in Adair and live with her son on the coast while commuting several days a week. The second woman barely made enough to survive, especially given her pain medications and prior debt. She had to depend on others: a stepdaughter and a church of which she was not even a member. The third, a student, barely survived on financial aid and a paper route and often found herself with not enough money for food.

### **Strategies for Food Security**

Many strategies for food security came up in our interviews. Knowing how to grow and gather food, how to prepare and preserve it and having the materials (food driers, canning equipment, freezers) and time to do it can greatly increase food security. Having access to

discount grocery stores and having the time to research sales and clip coupons is also very useful in stretching one's income. Having good social networks (family, friends, and neighbors) to whom one can turn when necessary is a great asset to low-income people (and people in general). Our informants' social networks helped out with car-pooling, childcare, temporary lodging, and food sharing, in addition to direct cash assistance at times. People were often more comfortable accepting help through ties of affection than through the more anonymous social service type arrangements. In spite of these various methods for increasing food security, emergency food assistance is still very necessary.

Most of our low-income informants who answered the USDA questionnaire saying that they were not food insecure depended on food stamps, WIC, gleaning groups, free meals, and emergency food boxes. This means, of course, that if they were not able to access free food, they would certainly be food insecure and, quite likely, hungry every month. Most of the people we interviewed were very uncomfortable with the idea of receiving charity and would much rather see themselves as providing for others. This is exemplified by the comment of an unemployed, middle-aged diabetic father of several young children who, when asked if he thought that setting up a local emergency food bank would be a good idea, responded, "Yes, I'm sure that we could find some food to donate."

The low-income people we interviewed had opinions about the usefulness of food assistance programs. Of all the social services related to food, people were consistently happy with WIC, which supplies basic foods to women with children up to age 5. Because the aid is aimed at the children, it was easier to accept. Many of the community leaders we talked with used WIC when they had young children.

Generally speaking, those who qualified for food stamps, but did not use other services could not make it through the whole month, which tells you that the program is not functioning as it should. Families reported quite frequently living on macaroni and cheese or ramen noodles for the last week of every month. People complained that to qualify for food stamps, they only took into account your income and your housing costs. Those who had other high monthly bills, for instance for medication or transportation, didn't feel like they got sufficient aid. Another common complaint was that no household items or personal hygiene products (especially toilet paper, menstruation supplies and diapers) could be purchased with food stamps. Here are the opinions of one community leader who used to use food assistance programs at an earlier stage in her life.

I think WIC is excellent, what I've seen through my children I think it's excellent. I think that the job of making sure that children are getting the right nutrition at a young age [is important]. I think that food stamps are as good as it's going to get, because ya know, you can't control that tight enough to make sure it is used for the best purposes. Although actually, when I was on food stamps I felt like there should be one book for items that you could use such as toilet paper and toothpaste because we had no money and I collected pop cans and bottles on the road to buy toilet paper.

A few families we interviewed were disappointed that after filling out all the paperwork, they only qualified for \$10 of food stamps. Many thought that it was not worth it for that amount. We also heard several stories of people who felt that they were punished for making more money. One family got a \$200 raise and their food stamp allotment went from \$470 down to \$10. They weren't sure how they were supposed to make up the extra \$260. Others talked about the stigma that food stamps carry and how other people in line and the cashier examine what they are buying. This was not an imagined fear. Many of the wealthier people in the community who we talked to mentioned people on food stamps buying beer and cigarettes, and non-nutritious processed food. Food stamps can be used to buy food that is low in nutritional value, but they cannot be used to buy alcohol and cigarettes. Many people assume that if someone is using food stamps for a portion of their purchases, that they are being used for everything. Even if they understand that food stamps are not being used for alcohol and cigarettes, some people feel that they have the right as taxpayers to police the purchases of the poor. When they see money spent on non-essentials, they are quick to attribute poverty to bad purchasing decisions, rather than examining deeper economic realities.

Free meals and emergency food boxes offered occasional help to our interviewees. Free meals are more common in urban centers than in the country, though rural churches often sponsor community meals. Emergency food pantries where needy people can get a box of food a month did not exist in either community, but several of our informants used them in neighboring towns. Our informants were most pleased when they could choose what went into their box. The biggest problem for working people was that the food pantries were only open when they were at work.

There is some recognition of the unrealistic nature of the federal poverty level in the eligibility guidelines for gleaner groups. Gleaning groups are available to people who are at 200% of poverty level. There have always been gleaners. In biblical times, farmers were expected to leave a percentage of their crop for poor people to gather. In mechanized times, machines that cut and sort the crops typically leave a percentage on the ground, or sometimes there is a glut in the market, or the crop is damaged in some way. Gleaning groups organized to gather this food and distribute it to the poor. Nowadays, fresh produce from fields constitutes only 5% of the distributed food, the rest coming from grocery stores, bakeries, etc. who need to unload unsaleable items, for which they receive charitable tax benefits. Ideally each able bodied gleaner gleanes for their family and one other person who is not able to glean themselves. In reality, most gleaning groups have more "adoptees" than active gleaners. The Alsea gleaning group has about seven adoptees for each active gleaner and the majority of the active gleaners are elderly people who are becoming frail. Many of these people grew up in rural communities and saw the tail end of the depression. They know how to preserve and prepare raw food and can make the most of harvest quantities of single foods. Multiple freezers are often standard fare. They enjoy the feeling of working hard to provide for themselves and others and they often malign others in the group, who do not seem to share these ideas. People who were less involved in the actual gleaning but who received boxes of food from gleaner groups or food banks frequently commented on the poor quality of food in the boxes. They complained about the huge amount of starchy foods

and food that “nobody eats.” They also noted that a lot of the food was past its expiration date.

In Alsea, successful low-income people supplement their budgets using several rural strategies. The historical attitude towards the land as a source of income underlies this strategy. In fact, many people have moved there because they want to be close to the land or because they were raised there, they like it, and their parents have given them land or skills related to the land. Growing crops and cutting timber have been sources of income for several people in the sample. In addition, people raise chickens for eggs and (occasionally) meat, cattle, goats, or pigs or they fish and hunt to get food. This both compensates for low-income and gives people a sense of self-sufficiency and control over their diet.

The following case study is an excellent example of the creative strategies that people employ to survive in rural areas. Gloria, a single mother, illustrates a number of strategies that were seen in several of the households: using not only income-producing but income-compensating work; using children’s help in income-producing or income-compensating activities; having various kinds of income-producing work to draw from at any one time; using her social network in the work world. Gloria and her children live in a converted vehicle on the land of a friend who is very low-income himself, but bought the land in the early 60s for little money. He doesn’t own a vehicle or a telephone. He doesn’t charge Gloria anything to live there, but she takes care of the property, lets him use her telephone and gives him rides when he needs them. She also helps him with his checkbook and cleans his tiny house on occasion. They both get water from a spring.

The one thing that is unique about this case study is that Gloria started her own business, although she was not yet employing other people. This woman had a son who was a senior in high school and a pre-school daughter. She had gone to two years of college where she had studied business and horticulture, but she had given that up and returned to her work in the woods wild crafting—collecting medicinal herbs and other products of the forests to sell to companies. Along with that, Gloria began to learn skills from a group of local male friends who had a company that worked in the construction business. Although she still works with them on big jobs, she also has started to take on smaller jobs on her own and views herself as starting a new business with all the responsibilities of contacts with clients and realtors, taxes, and payments to suppliers. She likes her work because it is “artistic” and she wants “to make people appreciate it.” Although she would like to run crews someday, she likes the more personal touch she can provide. At this point, she only uses the help of her son in this enterprise when she is busy. Gloria also uses the help of her son to babysit for her daughter on days when she is working by herself. Her son has made the choice to be “home-schooled” which means that he is much more available for babysitting. He is finishing high school at home and gets help on his essays from his grandmother by email. Thus, her son is an important part of her strategies to make and compensate for income. In addition, he helps her to take care of the pigs that they raise to slaughter and eat. Gloria was able to produce a lot more of her own food before she started working construction jobs.



At least once a month I don't eat so that my teenage son can get what he needs. These last two years have been a little tight, being pregnant and then trying to get the business off the ground and then having the baby and continuing trying to build the business. I haven't been able to focus on growing a garden, but it made my grocery bills drop considerably when I had the time, starting probably about mid to end of June and going through September or October. And, if I have the time to can and get everything dried and in the freezer, it makes a big difference. Now, I get home at night too tired to deal with anything.

## **Cost of Living**

The lives of low-income working poor people are full of both effort and worries. The people we interviewed in Alsea and Adair found it quite difficult to meet their expenses. In almost all cases, these are the working poor with full-time or part-time jobs, but they are enough on the edge that one extraordinary expense will push them over it. We will make general remarks about each expense category, and use case studies to illustrate them. The case studies, however, cannot be oversimplified, and thus various expenses will come into play. It is important to note that people simultaneously try hard to meet expenses in one category as they fail to meet them in another. This is exacerbated when extraordinary expenses hit. In addition, we show the various strategies that people undertake to pay or get around various expenses that are difficult for them.

People are responsible, to a certain extent, for their expenses, though a few bad decisions along the way can haunt people for many years to come. The cultural encouragement to take on consumer debt places many families in an interest-paying cycle that they cannot get out of. It is also difficult to change one's lifestyle when jobs are lost, especially when raising children. Medical emergencies are expenses that are not a matter of choice—and many people put off needed care for lack of funds. In a list of expenses, food paled in comparison to many others, such as housing and healthcare. This is, in part, because food buying is an elastic expense able to be regulated somewhat, and, in part, because food stamps and other food assistance programs made people feel as if they had adequate resources for food. With the flexible nature of food spending, it is important to examine other expenses that poor families must deal with when trying to solve the hunger problem. In other words, you can always skimp on your meals in order to pay the rent, but if you skimp on your rent to buy food, you will soon be homeless.

### *Housing*

Housing was named by most of our informants as the most difficult expense to pay every month. It has shown the steepest growth over the past decade or so. People move to rural areas of the county in order to get cheaper housing. (They do not factor in, however, the increased transportation costs which often cancel out their savings.) One of our informants was paying 80% of her income for housing. (The federal definition of affordable housing is 30% of income.) One older couple was forced to sell their house—when they had only four more years left on a 30 year mortgage—and rent it back from the buyers. This particular couple had lost their retirement funds in the Enron scandal and had recently paid \$4000 to adopt a needy child. In addition they had to spend \$200 a

month for medication to prevent the recurrence of a heart attack. These were folks who did not want to accept any public assistance. The rainy day got them despite their best efforts at having special accounts for taxes, growing and canning their garden food, and fixing their cars themselves. At the time of writing, they were still having a hard time, becoming more food insecure, and contemplating moving to another state where they have grown children.

One of our interviewees had had her trailer repossessed after a divorce and a health crisis. She was left having to declare bankruptcy and moving in with her aged mother. Another woman who owned her home told a story of getting behind on house payments at a time when she was temporarily out of a job and had had a death in the family.

It was scary. I sent some money [to the mortgage company] but they sent it back because it wasn't all I owed. It's a miracle they didn't say that's it. It really was stressful. I just kept trying [to pay] so they'd have that on record and sent them a letter explaining why it was late.

Luckily for her, she got a bonus after the first 45 days of a new job which allowed her to pay what was due.

The only thing that made rents or mortgages a simpler expense for some was that it was a fixed expense and there were no surprises like there sometimes were with utilities, healthcare and transportation. People often paid rent first and struggled with other expenses later. Many people came to Adair in search of rents that were cheaper than Corvallis. While cheaper, rents were still generally \$7-800, but varied between \$650 and \$850. One man considered \$700 to be cheap for a small, 3-bedroom home in the Corvallis area, but following the federal definition of affordable housing (30% of income) a person would have to make \$28,000 a year and few of our interviewees made that much. Rents were even cheaper in Alsea, though many were in worse condition and the transportation expenses were considerably more. In one case, this resulted in dire circumstances when a family moved there, 18 miles from the nearest big grocery store without a car to live in a tiny apartment with a broken oven, a desktop refrigerator and poor heat.

If I could come up with \$1500, the first thing I would do is find a little place. It doesn't have to be exactly what I want or anything like that, but feasible to work with. And I will have a good refrigerator, and I will have a little bit of property and then I don't have to worry about the basic things. My problem is where, personally, to find a place to live. I want my family environment to be correct. Everybody else takes this for granted a thousand times. This is my goal. I want my family to be able to go to bed in their bedrooms, have a refrigerator to where it's not going to rot, and have the room. Yeah, my refrigerator is about 2 ft. by 2 ft.. Even if I go to town and get groceries right now I can't fit them in the fridge.

In both places, there were areas of cheaper and more expensive housing. A trailer park,

outside of Alsea, provided low-cost housing, and the people we interviewed there seemed to be making it. One Mexican man said that he had a job, the ability to commute, and a strong social network of fellow immigrants and his family was “doing fine”. Far on the other side of town, deep in the woods, was an abandoned mining camp where people got cheap rents. This place had a much less stable population, as people (at first charmed with the idea of country-living) realized the difficulty of living such an isolated existence.

People found various ways around their rent problems. In several cases, renters talked of not being able to pay their rent until late, and of their landlords who were “great,” “understanding,” or “willing to work with” them so that they could pay late. One woman who was in ill health had lived in a barn for awhile when she could not afford housing and then had gotten help with her housing from a local church. In another situation, a person bartered her work around the property for her rent.

### *Health Care*

Medical expenses are a huge burden that can easily push people over the edge of a precariously balanced budget. Sally worked at OSU for two and a half years. Then she got married and her husband convinced her to take out her PERS money and invest it in farm machinery. She did so and they supported themselves for several years, but then the business went down and he walked out and she had to find new work. Things were going fine until her knees went bad. She got arthroscopic surgery done on one and was back at work in a month. Then she had the other one done and something went wrong. It swelled up and didn’t improve. She had trouble getting her doctor to do anything. Finally, the pastor’s wife went with her and insisted that something be done. They discovered that she had a staph infection and had to operate again and take out the prosthetic knee. For many months she was without a knee and had to depend on people to take her in her wheelchair where she wanted to go. She could no longer work, and lost her health insurance. She got on the Oregon Health plan eventually, but found that they wouldn’t pay for the medication that took away her pain. She leaped at the chance to work again when she began to walk, but after one small raise she lost the Oregon Health Plan and had nothing in its place.

A two-earner family felt burdened by the \$360 per month they paid out of her paycheck for health insurance, but their son had a chronic illness that they had to be able to pay for. Even those with health insurance, don’t have dental insurance. The son of one of our informants was losing enamel off his teeth and had to have \$3300 worth of dental work done. Then her husband cut part of his finger off on Dec. 29<sup>th</sup> and even though they had medical insurance, they had to pay the \$500 deductible for his initial visit and another \$500 for followup work done the next week because it was a new year. Another woman’s daughter’s dental treatment incurred heavy expenses. She arranged with the dentist to pay the expenses little by little, but soon the dentist retired and the collection agency called her. Although she was working at the time, they yelled at her, “Get off your lazy butt and get to work.” Home with a small child, she was very short on money for food, utilities, and rent because the collection agency was garnishing 25% from her husband’s paycheck. In anger and desperation, she said, “I just want to run away. Maybe we’ll

have to move back to Las Vegas and work in the casinos, even though I didn't want to raise my children in that atmosphere."

As a population that has been dependent on lumber extraction, many of the stories we heard in Alsea involved logging accidents. One of our informants lost two husbands in logging accidents. Others were temporarily disabled for a year or more after logging accidents and one was permanently disabled. These accidents plunged the families into poverty, as the logging companies carried no health insurance on their employees. Lower women's wages put households at a distinct disadvantage when mom has to support the family.

Many of the health problems that lead to poverty are, themselves, caused by poverty. Diets of cheap food consisting mainly of fats, carbohydrates, and sugar lead to obesity, high blood pressure and diabetes. Medicines that control these diseases can push budgets into the red and the medicine costs take away from the money that could be spent improving family diets. But food choices are seldom rationally made on the basis of enhancing health. What people eat is shaped by family tradition, habit, time constraints, knowledge, and status aspirations, as well as available money and food assistance.

Two of our interviewees had lost legs to diabetes. Mary, below, tells of three generations of diabetics in her family and how her legs were amputated.

Well my daughter out here, she's also diabetic and so is her daughter and she has some broken bones in her foot that she is dealing with and she's going to have to have some surgery on that. That's one of the wonderful things about diabetes that you get to do. That's kind of what happened – my arch in my foot brook down, that's how I lost my first leg, you know because it eventually got infection in the bone and had to be taken off. And then the other one, the same year had to be taken off. One at the beginning of the year and one more towards the end.

The very poor are covered by the Oregon Health Plan (OHP), though they comment that it pays for less and less every year. Some people have refused raises in order to stay on the plan. Many have lost eligibility as their salary creeps over the maximum and leaves them uninsured yet with insufficient funds to purchase insurance. One woman and her small daughter were in a fix because she was being dropped from the OHP. She said that she looked like she was bringing in \$2000 in her new business, but they were not looking at her \$1800 in expenses. Another woman who had had serious joint surgery was just facing the loss of the OHP because of a small, welcomed raise in her hourly wage job. She would have to get to Community Outreach clinic in Corvallis via a friend and pay for pain medication out of pocket. Several people who had the OHP or Medicare still were burdened because their plans did not pay for certain prescription drugs such as insulin or Celebrex.

Creative strategies were few when it came to health care. A few women treated

themselves with herbs or just didn't believe in doctors. A man and his wife made the decision that it was cheaper to pay for doctor visits and drugs for his diabetes and their son's ADHD rather than to pay for health insurance out of pocket. In general, health impairments were a debilitating burden, whether chronic or acute, physical or mental.

### *Transportation*

When people live far from grocery stores and employment, they have added expenses of transportation—buying a vehicle, maintaining it, insuring it, buying gas. The absence of reliable transportation can easily lead to food insecurity. Many people move to rural areas drawn by cheaper housing, as well as a preference for country-life, without sufficiently realizing the added transportation expenses. Men who have remained in logging travel farther and farther from Alsea for work. One of our interviewees drove 3 hours one way to work. With fewer local businesses, people commonly travel to Philomath (18 miles) or Corvallis (26 miles) to work. The gleaners drive hundreds of miles every week to secure the food that they distribute. It is also easy to forget that transportation costs translate into higher prices at rural grocery stores that are no longer on delivery routes.

With no public transportation, people living in the two rural areas of Adair and Alsea have to have cars to survive adequately. As a strategy against poverty, one single man and another family did not have cars—a fact which contributed directly to their inability to get reasonably-priced and good quality food. Another strategy was to limit the family to one car. In one family that did this, the woman had to drive about twelve miles out of her way each day on the way to and from work to deliver and pick up her husband. The sons had to go to after-school care at the Boys and Girls club, and they had to wait for the parents to finally get there. When the wife had to work late, she had to ask her friend to pick up her husband and children. Given some extra money, a car or a second car was the wish of these people.

People with low incomes do a balancing act of choosing where to put scarce funds and transportation is an area that requires increasing amounts of money. People drove old cars with various results. Interviewees were often painfully aware that they drove cars that did not get the best gas mileage or ones that took too much maintenance. “Gas is killing us,” bewailed an Adair woman, but buying a new, more efficient car was unimaginable at this point in time. Another woman was caught in the dilemma of having a car that took a lot of gas, but no money to buy a new one, both of which limited her ability to visit her husband in jail in Umatilla because it cost \$75 for one trip. This woman had to choose between losing her house or updating her car. Personal preferences because of past experience also entered into the mix. One woman, for example, had bought a mini-van cheaply from her ex-husband, and that was all she could afford. Another woman who had lost her husband in a recent car accident, bought a large car that she felt was safe for her and her children as they traveled across the country to Oregon a year ago to live near her sister. The gas continues to be hard for her to pay, especially combined with the funeral expenses that she still owes.

Several people realized clearly the contradiction between pouring money into a car that required a lot of maintenance and not feeling they could sell it, but did not feel they had a

way out. As one man said, “We are still making payments on our van. The maintenance costs more than it’s worth. But we have to keep it because we still owe money on it. I am not going to let it sit there and them still wanting payments.” Others simply drove their cars as best they could without repairs. As one said, “We have no money to get the brakes fixed.” Car insurance was also difficult for people. One man who was experiencing a long period of unemployment thought of his car as a necessity both to get food and to get a job, but he pointed out that agencies never think of help needed to pay for car registration and insurance. Asking for rides of friends and neighbors is much easier done than asking for food. Our interviewees felt good about providing rides to each other in emergencies, because they were all quite familiar with broken-down cars themselves. However, if it became a regular, rather than an occasional, thing, people felt that they were being taken advantage of. One woman in Alsea decided to make a small business out of making regular trips to buy things for people she knew, thus filling in for the lack of public transportation.

### *Utilities*

Utilities are an ongoing expense that increases considerably during winter months, Utilities—electricity in both Adair and Alsea , and water in Adair—were difficult expenses to meet for our interviewees. In Adair, all the houses had expensive and inefficient electric heat. Water was also expensive at \$80-90 per month. Those whose landlords had put in wood stoves felt very lucky, except for one woman who was ill, lived alone, and could not deal with getting in the wood. In Alsea, a man who had thought he was getting low-level, affordable housing was brought up short when the landlord charged him for gas. People who could not pay their electric bills in expensive winter months often got public assistance to do so, but even this was not easy. One woman reported that she and her husband who recently moved in, had not realized how expensive it would be. To get public assistance, she and her husband both had to take off work for the day: “They quiz you: ‘If you have things, why are you here?’ ...The younger one [child] was sick and if it hadn’t been for that, they’d have shut off the heat.” Another woman had gotten fouled up in her request for electrical assistance and, feeling cold and worried about her small child, paid the electric bill first and negotiated with the landlord over rent.

### *Clothes and Furniture*

Clothes and furniture were generally not considered to be difficult expenses to pay. Both categories were easy to come by second-hand, and furniture lasts a very long time. Interviewees said that they simply did not buy clothes for themselves. If they did, they got them from thrift shops, second-hand stores, or charity centers. As an older woman said, “I know what few dollars I get and where it has to go...I can’t tell you the last time I bought shoes or a dress. I was born and raised on second hand and hand-me-down.” Clothes for children usually came from neighbors, or more rarely relatives, who gave them a box of hand-me-downs every year. A smaller group mentioned grandmothers who bought clothes at the beginning of the year for their grandchildren. One of our interviewees has a mother-in-law who works at Wal-Mart and buys her kids clothes there; with deflated prices and employee discounts she is able to get bargains, like kids’ shorts for 60 cents. An adult who lived alone and had heavy medical as well as animal

care expenses reported that her mother buys her jeans, or she buys them at the Arc. She gets her underwear on sale at K-Mart and, she hesitated, “I need a coat.”

### *Household and School Expenses*

Household supplies like toilet paper, diapers, menstruation supplies, and both personal and house cleaning products are a problem because food stamps cannot be used for non-food items. For people with children in school, first-of-the-year school supplies can be a tremendous burden. Some estimated paying up to \$75. One couple disagreed as to whether to use credit to buy the children what they wanted for school supplies or to deprive them. Many people expressed anger because when they do put the money out for things their children really want (such as a Pokemon notebook) the children have to put it all in a pile at school and everyone receives materials randomly. Other claimed that Wal-Mart sales sufficed. As more school activities become fee-based, children of low-income families are left further out of the mainstream. Generally some scholarships are available, but many families either don't find out about them, or choose not to be on the receiving end.

### *Entertainment and Communications*

Poor people are not a culture apart. They are barraged with the same images as the rest of us, showing every American family to be electronically hooked up with the rest of the world. People felt that computers, internet, phones and even cell phones were becoming necessities for work or to look for work. Trying to find a job without a phone is almost impossible. Precious dollars went to pay for both the initial investment of equipment and then monthly bills for internet hook-ups and phone plans. Canceling long distance service and using long distance phone cards instead was one way to save some money. A few mentioned using antique computers, and one unemployed man said that he had no phone and had “never pressed a button on a computer.” People with children felt that it was important to have internet connections for their children's schoolwork. Some home schoolers got their curriculum from the internet. Surfing the web was a major form of entertainment for some of our interviewees who spent a lot of time at home. Television sets are considered a necessary part of most American houses. As a strategy to save money, a few women who lived alone simply had no TV, but most people chose to have a television, even if it could only get local reception. In Alsea, reception is very poor and many bought satellite dishes and had to pay monthly fees of around \$60.

Being poor requires depriving selves and family of expectations in a consumer society. The television was the only source of entertainment for most people (other than socializing) because people could not afford more expensive forms of entertainment, like movies and concerts. The woman above who lost her house remembered how she and her husband used to go to a nearby hot springs every month but could no longer afford it. She said that they used to go out to eat every two weeks, but hadn't been out for three months now. A short, but poignant, conversation between another long-married husband and wife shows that eating out was also difficult, but sorely missed. “We haven't been out like that for months.” “I've thought about it.” “I have, too.” When asked what they would do with several hundred more dollars, answers of some form of entertainment for selves or children was quite common—from Christmas funds to camera film to “taking

the kids out to do fun stuff.”

### *Childcare*

We expected that childcare might be a difficult expense for people to pay, but it turned out to be one of the more flexible expenses—one that people could use their own labor or their social network to fulfill and thus compensate for other expenses. Most people with pre-school children had one adult who stayed home with small children because they could not earn enough to exceed the childcare expenses (“Why should I go to work to pay for daycare?”). The problem of daycare did not go away once young children entered school, but people seemed to fill in the gaps through neighbors, grandmothers, or even ex-parent-in-laws doing after and before school care. Some of this neighborly care was arranged between friends, but some just happened as children gravitated towards houses where their friends lived and adults had food and care to offer. One interviewee, for example, without a word to the mother who was already at work, regularly fed breakfast to a neighbor boy who came a bit early every morning to catch the bus with her son. When people lived close to others in rural communities, people valued the sense that everyone was watching out for everyone else’s children and that one would hear if one’s child was getting into trouble.

In one case, a man who was a student solved the childcare problem by agreeing with his wife that she should work nights so that they did not have to pay for childcare for her two children--and also that they could make it on one car. He missed his wife whom he hardly saw except at dinner (when she did not feel like eating with them), but felt that he had no choice.

### *Debt*

American consumer debt has never been higher. It was very stressful for many of our interviewees, some of whom had recently declared bankruptcy. One woman wanted to file for bankruptcy, but could not afford the filing fees. Mortgages are not included in consumer debt, but one family we talked with had re-mortgaged their home several times in order to pay consumer debt. Credit cards are seen as a strategy for survival, but in fact, create additional expenses. Low-income people generally pay minimal payments consisting of mostly interest, while their balance grows and grows. Credit card debt was quite pervasive, but not mentioned frequently, perhaps because there was shame attached to it, or perhaps because it instills a sense of false security, since a small payment every month keeps the creditors away. People do not see the compounding interest until much later. It was a question that we perhaps should have asked more directly. One woman who was very candid admitted that she had debt on five cards, and one card was almost maxed out. Another woman said, with some embarrassment, that in the summer when she did not receive financial aid for her college expenses, she had to depend on her credit card to care for her four children. On the other side of the credit card issue, several people had ruined their credit rating and could not get credit cards. Since credit cards have become so necessary in American consumer culture, one of these people had taken out a small loan and was trying to repay it monthly to establish credit—but it meant that he couldn’t pay for utilities. In many cases, some bills had to be ignored in order to pay other bills.



## **Stability and Mobility**

Many people move to improve their standard of living and are successful, but since our sample focused on low-income people, we commonly saw the negative aspects of moving. Our interviews showed that the most food insecure people were newcomers to an area. In some cases, it will be only a temporary hardship while they struggle to pay off first and last month rent agreements, cleaning fees, utility hook-up fees and transportation/moving expenses. Still, it is a situation of which people should be aware and emergency food is especially useful for families in transition.

One family we interviewed had recently moved to Corvallis so that the husband could attend college. They were only out of work for a few weeks while they made the transition, then the wife secured a full-time job. However, they left before their lease was up in Portland, so they had to pay rent there for a few months in addition to paying rent in Corvallis. This made things very tight. “We are still paying bit by bit . . . more than prescription drugs, more than food or anything, that is what probably hurt us the most. Just being out of work two or three weeks really messes you up.” Other interviewees were stuck in housing that they hated because they could not get far enough ahead to afford a first and last month’s rent and reestablish utility service.

The penalties incurred by moving can be calculated in social networks as well as in dollars. Family is our primary source of social networks. The more generations that your family has been in an area, the more relations you have and the more advantages you have for maintaining social networks and assets in property. When a member does come upon hard times, someone quickly finds out and is there to help him/her. One’s safety net is made of personal ties. People who migrate into communities like this are at a distinct disadvantage because people take their own social networks for granted and assume that others have similar social ties. A person whose family goes back four generations in an area has many more people to turn to than someone who left home in another state at age 13, as was the case with two of our interviewees.

Blood ties are not the only source of social networks in small stable communities. School, work and church are three other important sources. School is probably the first place outside of family where we create relations with peers. Many rural schools have closed in recent decades. There is no public school in Adair and Alsea residents have fought to keep theirs open. Remaining in the same area means that you retain ties to peers with whom you share childhood memories. Parents of school children may also find themselves creating networks with other parents, through school activities. Work is another major place for adults to form relations outside the family. When local employment dries up, there is one less way of forming dense, multiplex networks in a community. In communities that have been dominated by a particular line of work, such as logging, particular ways of seeing the world develop. When several members of a family do the same line of work, ties may be strengthened and particular worldviews are further solidified. If newcomers don’t partake in this same worldview, they may be rejected by the community. Social networks based on family, school and work are not quickly attained in rural communities. Churches are useful in this arena since being a

member of a congregation does not require a long history and congregations usually feel some responsibility to take care of their own.

### **Affective Ties**

Affective ties are important to all human beings. The family is the primary source of affective ties and most people are sustained by these ties until they reach adulthood; many people are also sustained by these ties as adults. Families provide a safety net and our interviewees have been on both the giving and the receiving side of this. In wealthy families, financial help through adulthood is very important as college educations are paid for, children are set up in business, down payments on property are supplied, etc. In poor families, children are expected to be self-supporting sooner. However, families are there for occasional shortages like paying a utility bill. More commonly poor families provide services rather than cash: childcare, meals, transportation, and housing.

Patty was fired from a well-paying job for taking too much sick leave. No longer able to pay rent, she took her husband and two children to live on the coast with her natal family for a year. Her parents got divorced and so she went to live with cousins in Sweet Home for awhile. Now, Patty's family is in a duplex. They are very active in a gleanng group, but Patty still receives food from family sources. Her father on the coast supplies her with frozen fish. Elk and deer come from her cousins in Sweet Home. In exchange for helping her aunt take care of an adopted child, this aunt passes along excess butter and flour that she gets via her enrollment in a local Native American tribe.

Family members can be asked for help without losing face for the most part, though it is much more difficult for aging parents to ask help of their children. In Alsea, many families have adult children living at home because they have not been able to earn a living wage. This is particularly true in families that expect their children to stay close to home, since job possibilities have become so limited locally. Having adult children (sometimes with families) living in the natal home places a larger burden on the parent, though some parents are happy not to lose their children. Having adult children nearby when one is old and less mobile is usually a great advantage.

Unfortunately, all families are not capable of supporting their members, financially or emotionally. Two of our informants left home at age 13. They are trying to form stable families today, but with no familial safety net, little income, and no personal models to draw from, it's a daily struggle. Not only do some families not support their members, but some family members use affective ties to take advantage of other members. Families with members who are addicts are particularly at risk.

Marital and parent-child relationships legally entitle people to economic interests. Divorces are a major strain on household economic integrity. One self-sufficient farm went under when the couple divorced and the one who stayed on the land had to sell the machinery in order to pay legal fees. She could not perform enough labor by hand to support herself and her child, so she had to take a job in town, driving 80 miles a day. In another case a father who had abandoned his child for 2 years qualified for disability through social security. Upon discovering that this made his son eligible for monthly

payments of \$430 a month, he filed for custody. In both these cases, relationships that are supposed to be ones of affection were converted into economic ones. In the case of divorce the economic consequences are negative while in the other case the economic impact was positive.

The taking in of foster children, which is a very common practice in these communities, can have either negative or positive economic consequences. Either way, in our conversations, economics never entered the discourse, while affective ties always came to the fore. A few well-liked, stable families had many foster children and people in need staying with them for varying periods of time. One family counted up 23 people who had lived with them over the years. Many were local teenagers who were not getting along with their own parents. Some of these were related in some way, but even those who weren't took on fictive kinship roles. In most of the cases explained to us, the fostering came through personal networks, not through an arrangement with CSD. One case is described below:

We thought we were done; we raised about five foster kids and five of our own. And we've had others in our home for periods of time to help them through a difficult time or something. But we had a situation right here, they used to live in one of those apartments and then they moved over to a little trailer. She's ten and one-half; sweetest little thing you ever – I wish she were here to meet her. I mean, she's a doll. Very affectionate, very loyal. hard worker. Her father ... did a little carpentry, and always had money for beer and cigarettes, but the little girl was hungry. And, she would come to Sunday School and everybody thought a lot of her and they were really worried about her. We were quite concerned about her. Once in a while I would go by there and make sure that she had something to eat and I'd buy milk or buy them eggs or something. Then he got to where he'd ask me for money. He'd been evicted a couple of times from different houses for not paying his rent. ... So, it got so bad that they were ready to evict him again. Well, I paid his rent for two months, myself personally. That didn't help a bit. It got so bad that I went to him and I said, 'Look, I know, I'm not trying to make up a story or anything else, I know that unless we do something very soon, CSD is going to knock on your door or take your child out of school and you're not going to see her again. So you'd better get your act together. And here's what I'm going to do. I want you to go to town with me, and I want you sign the guardianship papers and I'll take care of it.'

Affective ties extend beyond the family to friends and partners and even animals. Poor people are often the most generous people, offering what they have without calculating what they might not have in the future. Ideally the generosity one offers to another human will be returned in some way some day, but this doesn't always happen, nor is it always expected. Caring for others is a value in its own right. This can be seen clearly in the deep affection poor people have for their pets. While very few of the rural poor who we interviewed raised animals for food, most of them had pets, ranging from birds and turtles

to cats and dogs and even horses. A fairly high percentage of their income went to food, veterinarian bills, and other trappings of pet ownership. One woman, after a health crisis was even reduced to living in the barn with her horse for 3 weeks in April when the weather was still cold and wet. For her, this was a much better option than parting with her beloved companion.

### **Poverty and Low Wage Labor: Stresses and Strains**

When bill collectors come knocking and threats of repossession begin, the stress level rises in poor families. When you realize that your children cannot have, or cannot do what others have and do, it is hard to retain a good self image. Humans are social beings and want others to think well of them, but poverty in this country is generally seen as the fault of the individual. Poverty is accompanied by fear, not only the fear of losing food, clothing, and shelter, but the fear of having others think badly of you for being poor. One woman expressed fear that she would get a “bad reputation” for always bringing her old car in for repairs. She had also felt fear when she couldn’t make her house payments. A woman with four children who was finishing her college degree experienced panic when she miscalculated and overdrew her bank account in the summer. She had bought some pool stuff for her kids and bounced \$200 worth of checks. This quote conveys both the extra effort and the extra stress that being poor entails.

I’m panicking. I tried to hawk what I could. You can’t sell a scanner. I tried a diamond ring and they said, ‘Give you \$10.’ Finally I just went to the bank and told them, ‘I’m in over my head!’...They worked with me and I paid it off at the end of the month.

The vulnerability of the poor came out in several interviews. Low literacy and communicative skills are very disadvantageous in society, but this characterized only a few people in our sample. Several of our interviewees had attended some college and most were quite articulate, but even they felt vulnerable at times due to their lack of income and assets. Many of our interviewees felt that they had been taken unfair advantage of, especially by landlords and employers. Sometimes this was at the level of not letting someone know the true costs of utilities when renting a house or apartment. One landlord insisted that the tenant buy wood from him at a higher price. When the tenant got a deal on cheaper wood elsewhere, the landlord wouldn’t allow him to store it on the property. Oftentimes house repairs were not done. Leaky faucets and cracked windows create higher utility bills.

Some of our interviewees used the court system to right wrongs and possibly pull them out of poverty. One woman was taking her landlord to small claims court for repairs that he hadn’t done, but many people do not have the time or know-how to proceed in that fashion. This woman did not have to pay rent while the legal process was going on and that gave her leeway to pay for other necessities. Another interviewee was waiting for a settlement on a situation in which she had been fired for taking too much sick leave when pregnant. She was depending on the settlement to buy land so that she and her husband could start life anew.

Low wage labor lies at the root of food insecurity because it makes it more difficult to have the time and energy necessary to access food and other services and does not provide enough income to buy food and health insurance. Both the Fregans and the Gleaners realize that they could not access the food they need if they worked. Both activities require an investment of time that is not available to someone working 40 hours a week, let alone adding another 10-30 hours a week for transportation, or for overtime or second and third jobs. One informant lost her eligibility for OHP when she got a small raise. She was later told that her son might still be eligible, but she had to call OHP between 8 and 5. She works during these hours and is not allowed to use the work phone for personal business. She could perhaps sneak in a 2 minute phone call, but since she has been put on hold for an average of 45 minutes on her previous phone calls to OHP, she didn't think she could risk it.

Despite the difficulty of making ends meet on low-wage labor, many of our informants maintained very positive attitudes towards their work. For example, one woman of 50 has done two paper routes from 5:30 in the morning for eight years. She likes the work because it is outside and talked with enthusiasm about discovering how to speed up her time by walking very fast between certain telephone poles. She hoped that with this, her job would help her to lose the weight she needed to lose in order to pass the test necessary to become a medical worker. With her husband in jail and a recent accident, she looked forward to this new line of work, hoping that someday she could work in an isolated community where they would value her work and even give her a free place to live. Another interviewee felt very lucky to have a job working with animals—young ones whom she feeds and gives medications. “I love my work,” she said. She doesn't care that she gets pooped on and her clothes get chewed on or that in busy times she has to work ten hours a day. She overlooks the low pay and unpaid sick leave and vacations and knows that she would be financially better off on the Oregon Health Plan and food stamps than she is working, but still, she prefers to work.

The importance of work to people's self-image in the U.S. emerged from our interviews. People feel pride in having a job. They also feel much better about themselves if they are treated well at work and have a supportive boss. Good relations with bosses even make up for lousy pay and lousy work conditions. For example, a school bus driver had seen tough times before she got this job, almost losing her house, but now she feels that she has a good manager who backs her up and, thanks to the efforts of the union, she continues to get pay raises: “In two years, I've gone up.” She is able to pay her mortgage and her car and, although money runs out towards the end of the month, she feels pride in herself.

This pride came across clearly in the way that one woman laced her talk about her low-income job with middle-class rhetoric. Although her claim that she was successful financially and not food insecure was not entirely convincing to the researchers, her way of talking makes clear the importance to low-income people of the way they are treated at work, their feeling of advancement, and the sense that as far as the outside world is concerned, they are making it. Jan told the researchers: “I work full time. I am management and have to go to dinner with my boss occasionally...I like it because it's

different everyday.” Her job is with a housecleaning service. She cleans the houses with teams, and then stays on at the office to arrange schedules for the workers and to sell the housecleaning services. The conditions of Jan’s work are typical of low-income work: hourly wages, work from 8 to whenever (3:00-6:00), health insurance for herself only—not her three children—and sick leave that she takes out of vacation days. She has to compensate for childcare by getting her mother to care for her young children after school. Jan describes her mother’s work with the same rhetoric: “Mother works for herself.” Her mother’s work is to do the clean-up after construction jobs, dealing with mud, nails, labels, etc. She gets jobs through the Jan’s fiancé’s company. Jan repeated throughout the interview, “It’s tight but we get all the bills paid.” The only bills that have remained impossible to pay were repeated, unexpected car maintenance expenses. Jan admitted that her fiancé helped pay these.

Even people who are not working for wages, work hard to sustain families and communities. One low-income gleaner makes 13 to 15 trips to pick up unwanted food at grocery stores, putting about 300 miles a week on her private vehicle. She earns no salary for this. The food is distributed to 35 needy families and to the local school in order to feed hungry children. The county allows the gleaners to use their building to distribute food at no cost to needy people. In exchange the gleaners must maintain the building, mowing the grass and fixing the pump that periodically breaks down.

We asked Tammy, a mother of three whose husband makes less than \$16,000 a year, what a typical day was like as far as getting food, preparing it, eating it, etc. She said that she got up at 4 am to fix her husband breakfast and lunch to take to work. She tried to go back to sleep for a couple hours, but had to get up at 7 to get breakfast for her 7 year old and to pack his lunch for school. Sometimes the 4 year old was up then, but usually he got up later and she fixed his breakfast separately. The baby got up at 8 or 9 and she fixed him cereal. At 11 or 12, the 4 year old was ready for lunch. She usually fixed him ramen noodles, a sandwich or a hotdog, the baby got baby food then and she would fix herself a sandwich. In the middle of the afternoon, the 4 year old was ready for a snack. At about 3:30, she would start making dinner because when her husband got home around 5:30 or 6, he was hungry. After washing all the dishes, she was soon ready for bed.

All of Tammy’s waking hours are structured around feeding the various members of her family. If she did find work, with her G.E.D., it would certainly not equal the amount she would have to pay for childcare. A schedule of feeding like this makes it very difficult to find the 3 hours that it would take to fit in a trip to the grocery store in Corvallis.

## **Conclusion**

This qualitative investigation in two rural Oregon communities has contributed a grounded analysis of the household and community context of food insecurity. The interviews clarify the everyday problems of poverty that exacerbate food insecurity in rural Oregon. At the root of food insecurity lies a range of problems: lack of well-paying jobs, distance from jobs and cheaper stores, decline in home-based food production and preservation, cost of housing, utilities, healthcare, and childcare, frequent moving, limited social networks, and negative attitudes about public assistance. We conclude that coping

with food insecurity as a state or national problem requires attention to these myriad conditions.

These interviews also show the multiple strategies which people use to cope with their broad and complex problems. Although people are poor, they keep trying against all odds and are creative in using their knowledge and social contacts to survive. Food insecure people do not always make the choices that food secure people would, but their choices make sense within the broader context of their lives.

This study of household and community contexts in the lives of poor people reveals a number of dilemmas in their lives that influence the strategies they follow. Dilemmas are created by emergency food services themselves because they create the illusion that people are food secure when they are not. The emergency food services are band-aid approaches that ignore the broad range of other problems in these people's lives. In addition, the quality of emergency food is questioned by many of the recipients, especially because it can contribute to obesity and does not allow those with health problems such as diabetes or autism to get the food they need. Some services are only available if a representative of the household has time to volunteer or the non-working hours match hours that food banks are open.

Another dilemma centers on the frequent moving of poor people in order to find jobs or get education. This ironically results in risk for food insecurity because of lack of knowledge of local services and stores and lack of social contacts.

Yet another dilemma exists between the expense of childcare and the need for income from the caretaking adult. If the solution is to alternate working hours between two caretaking adults, given the long hours worked in low-income jobs, their relationship suffers. Here again, frequent moving takes its toll as childcare arranged among neighbors or nearby relatives is often unavailable.

In a number of ways, poor people grapple with dilemmas that come from the attitudes and expectations of society toward them. This emerged in a number of ways in the interviews. At school, parents are currently expected to purchase school supplies for their children and do not want their children to feel poorer than others, yet these purchases are a large strain in September. Life in a commoditized society that encourages expectations among children for cool clothing and among adults and children for leisure activities creates a difficult situation for poor people who feel compelled to spend money in these ways, yet know they can ill-afford it. Poor people also feel the eyes of society upon them, however, when they do spend money for what higher-income people see as unnecessary expenses. Thus, they feel the public eye on them as they make food choices, eat out, or go to the movies. All of this goes along with the attitude that was expressed by middle-income people in both communities that those on public assistance do not have the ability to make good choices and are deserving of guidance and criticism.

Some of the dilemmas shown in this study pertain especially to rural communities.

People choose to live in the country because they want a lifestyle free from urban congestion, yet they often lack public services. This lack stems from the concentration of public services in urbanized areas, but is reinforced by the self-sufficient attitude of the long-timers in rural communities who feel that receiving public assistance is shameful and the community should support its own. Newcomers, however, do not necessarily receive such spontaneous community support unless they ingratiate themselves with old families and local groups.

Many choose the country because housing is cheaper. While this is true, they find themselves faced with climbing gas prices and far from health care and the large store chains that have cheaper prices and better quality food than local stores. Finally, although older generations maintain the know-how of animal-raising, food growing and preservation that they grew up with, most of the younger generation who live in the country have lost these skills, and thus the potential benefit of using rural land for gardening or animal husbandry is often lost.

All of these complex dilemmas are framed within the encompassing contradiction at the national level that assumes capitalistic growth eventually brings welfare for all while the gap in wealth and assets grows.