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Food Security and Food Sovereignty: The Difference Between Surviving and Thriving

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Previous research in American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities has documented high prevalence of food insecurity. Yet many AI/AN scholars and communities have expressed concerns that the dominant societal conceptions of food security are not reflective of the teachings, priorities, and values of AI/AN communities. Food security initiatives often focus on access to food and, at times, nutrition but little consideration is given to cultural foods, the spirituality carried through foods, and whether the food was stewarded in a way that promotes well-being not just for humans but also for plants, animals, land, and water. Despite the concerns of AI/AN communities that their needs are not centered in dominant societal food conceptualizations and food security programming, the food sovereignty efforts of AI/AN communities have captured national attention as a solution to modern food system inequities. Indigenous Food Sovereignty (IFS) is a holistic approach to food that incorporates values of relationality, reciprocity, and relationships. Fundamental differences exist between food security and food sovereignty, yet dominant society often reduces IFS as a solution to food security, rather than an entirely different food system that is predicated on values that contrast with that of dominant society. Despite calls to decolonize the definition and measurement of food security, we explore whether fixing the concept of food security is a worthy endeavor or whether efforts would be better spent supporting the resurgence and revitalization of AI/AN food values, food knowledge, and community food sovereignty initiatives.

Keywords: food sovereignty; food security; American Indian/Alaska native; nutrition; indigenous; structural determinants of health; foodways; health equity; indigenous food sovereignty; indigenous communities; indigenous knowledge; community–academic partnership; decolonization

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ORIGINS, CONCEPTUALIZATION, AND MEASUREMENT OF FOOD SECURITY

Prior to the arrival of settlers in North America, American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) peoples were sustained by their relational foodways and their reciprocity-based relationships with one another, plants, animals, waterways, and land. Settler colonialism disrupted the original foodways of North America and has resulted in significant inequities within the current dominant food system, including food security.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has measured and monitored household food security since April 1995, using the Food Security Survey Module (FSSM) as part of the annual Current Population Survey. The USDA defines food security as "access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life" (National Research Council, 2006, p. 1). Food security in the AI/AN context is underrecognized and underrepresented in national data collection, research, and reporting (Nikolaus et al., 2022).

There are several critiques of the definition and measure of food security in representing Indigenous food systems and conceptions of health. First, the very conceptualization of food security in the United States, reflected in the FSSM, is based on Euro-American food systems and experiences in the sample population with limited diversity when developed in the 1990s (National Research Council, 2006). Second, the FSSM solely focuses on the economic dimension of food security. Third, it perpetuates the deficit discourse that much research with AI/AN communities is framed in (Walter & Suina, 2019).

Recently, there have been calls to advance the U.S. food security efforts to instead address nutrition security, which considers the health promoting qualities of accessible foods (Calloway et al., 2022). Yet initial efforts to operationalize nutrition security have not addressed measurement shortcomings for AI/AN respondents (Calloway et al., 2022). Ultimately, measures of food security or nutritional security only capture a portion of AI/AN experiences, without considering access to Native foods, culturally specific coping strategies, social systems of food sharing and trade, knowledge systems, and Indigenous landscapes (Gurney et al., 2015; Kuhnlein et al., 2009; Sowerwine et al., 2019).

CULTURAL FOOD SECURITY

Food security, in accordance with dominant cultural narratives, is situated at the level of the individual, or at most the household. When we extend beyond that, to the neighborhood or community, we shift our language to talk about food deserts or economic disparity. Although these definitions can certainly be accurate within the Indigenous context, what they fail to capture is the security that is derived from the culture and practices that surround food. Thus, for many Indigenous peoples, merely the presence of sufficient food—even high-quality food—does not equate to food security. Although the details are unique for each Native Nation, food security is likely to include ceremonial foods, origin story foods, and foods that are harvested, processed, and prepared using knowledge passed down inter-generationally. The definition of "food secure" may include secure access to fishing, hunting, and harvesting rights; land sovereignty; or a freezer full of seasonally harvested fish, elk, or berries. For many communities, it also includes having enough food to share at community, family, and ceremonial gatherings, and as gifts, from one season or year to the next.

Food security also extends beyond the tangible food items and to the environment and systems that enable those food sources. A freezer full of salmon may not feel like food security if the spawning rivers and streams are suffering. Indigenous food security is not about having enough food to survive physically: it is about having foods that nourish one physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Foods are tied to identity (e.g., some Anishinaabe call themselves People of the Wild Rice), and they may ground one in place, in community, in responsibility, and in relationship.

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

The food sovereignty efforts of AI/AN peoples have captured national interest in recent years as a solution to food system inequities, such as food security, and to uplift the needs and priorities of consumers over capitalism. One of the most common definitions of food sovereignty offered through the Declaration of Nyeleni reads, "Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems (Sélingué, 2007)." Indigenous conceptions of food sovereignty expand on the values offered through the broader food sovereignty movement (e.g., agency, rights-based approach to food) by centering the value of food to Indigenous peoples in holistic well-being (physical, social, spiritual, emotional, and intellectual), in being accountable relatives to our food systems, and emphasizing responsibility to engage with one another and our food systems with reciprocity and respect

(Martens et al., 2016). Although the food sovereignty efforts of Indigenous communities have only recently captured dominant society attention (after millennia of intentional destruction and weaponization of food systems by settlers against AI/AN peoples), the underlying values and practices of these movements existed long before the arrival of settlers and are not a response to the shortcomings of the dominant food system but rather a resurgence and flourishing of Indigenous ways of knowing and being (Jernigan et al., 2023).

While each Tribal Nation is unique, for many AI/AN peoples food is an integral part of their creation stories, teachings, and original responsibilities to engage with the land, waterways, plants, and animals (also called: our more than human relatives) with reciprocity and respect. While broader definitions of food sovereignty focus on human agency in the food system, the agency of our more than human relatives are seldom considered. As stewards of these lands since time immemorial, Indigenous peoples having agency in the food system is not just key to our survival as humans, but key to ensuring the protection and flourishing of our more than human relatives for generations to come (Jernigan et al., 2023). Self-sufficiency is often heralded as the central goal of food sovereignty, and it is indeed an admirable goal, yet self-sufficiency is a value rooted in individualism and settler-colonial values. As AI/AN peoples, we have always been in relationship with and relied upon one another and our more than human relatives to be nourished. Celebrating the role of kinship in food sovereignty movements restores balance in our foodways and centers connection, food sharing, and joy as part of our everyday food practices. Rather than focusing on self-sufficiency as the pivotal goal of food sovereignty, focusing on restoration or maintenance of reciprocity-based kinship in our food systems is key to moving beyond surviving to thriving.

While achieving agency in the broader dominant society food system may provide temporary relief to nutrition inequities, such as food security, in and of itself it will not provide access to cultural foods, restoration of our kinship system, or the ability to protect and steward our lands and waterways for the interests of our more than human relatives. To fulfill our relational responsibilities as Indigenous peoples, we must understand and recognize the limitations of the dominant society food system and its conceptualization of food security, while continuing to advocate that just having enough food to survive physically by dominant society standards is not enough to support our holistic well-being, or the needs of our more than human relatives.

IS FOOD SECURITY A CONCEPT WORTH FIXING?

Broadly speaking, most AI/AN communities hold and pass down food values that consider not just how food contributes to individual physical well-being but also how food supports the holistic well-being of humans, plants, animals, waterways, and communities. Many AI/AN communities hold sacred responsibilities to engage with aspects of their food systems with reciprocity and to ensure the well-being and continuity of the food system, not just for humans but also for their more than human relatives (plants and animals). Yet AI/AN values and conceptions of well-being are not reflected in dominant society measures of food security. This leads to a fundamental error in measurement as the measurement of food security is not aligned with how AI/AN communities conceptualize food security. Dominant society conceptions of food security consider food security at the individual, household, or, occasionally, the community levels at one point in time. AI/AN communities consider food security to mean not just sufficient access to food for humans in the present, but also consistent food access for plants, animals, and entire kinship networks (reaching beyond just the household or family).

Considering the many shortcomings of dominant society's conceptualization of food security, one might wonder whether attempting to align food security measures with AI/AN conceptions of health are worthwhile endeavors. While considering food security more holistically (e.g., including mental health) could benefit all populations, the shortcomings of the current dominant society's food system (including in conceptualization and measurement of food security) are not the responsibility of AI/AN peoples to fix. Many AI/AN peoples may be uninterested in attempting to make a concept grounded in settler-colonial food values and food systems (e.g., food security defined through economics, through scarcity mindsets) compatible with their Indigenous worldviews. Instead, AI/AN communities may wish to expend their energy cultivating and stewarding their cultural values within their communities without trying to force their values to fit into Western frameworks.

Yet, as scholars of Indigenous food systems, we understand the need for measures that allow comparability with other populations to advocate for funding and policy change. While disparities between racial groups may pique interest in a health priority, any level of food insecurity, regardless of how it compares with other groups, is unacceptable. Although we understand

that the systems under which we operate require comparable data, it does not diminish the need for nutrition and food system measures that are grounded in AI/AN worldviews and values.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC HEALTH RESEARCH, POLICY, AND PRACTICE

Future research should engage AI/AN communities to define food security through their cultural values, teachings, and community priorities. Efforts should be made to align supplemental measures to the food security module with community conceptualizations of food security and food sovereignty. Furthermore, food system researchers should consider how evaluations of food systems with humans conceptualized as the center ignore the contributions of the health of land, waterways, plants, and animals to a thriving food system of which humans are only a part.

Policy is a step in the right direction to address the issues at hand; however, mainstream policy implies recognition and alignment with settler-colonial ways of being. For many AI/AN communities, policy can serve as a reminder of previous federal policies that evoked widespread historical mistreatment of AI/ANs, removal of AI/AN children from their families, disruption of food systems, and criminalization of spiritual activities, including those that involved foods (Hipp & Givens, 2020). As a result, it is necessary to draw on the resilience that has derived from mistreatment and center cultural values and practices that have strengthened and evolved to meet current context. However, the challenge lies in how to develop policy that best serves AI/AN communities and supports the Indigenous Food Sovereignty (IFS) approach, including incorporating relationality, reciprocity, and relationships, with the understanding that each AI/AN community has the right to self-determine what this means in their community context. This approach shifts toward an empowerment narrative, allowing communities to have agency in their decisions to grow, harvest, prepare, and share their food with communities, changing the system, and not the individual. The cultural and community specificity required for each food sovereignty initiative to be meaningful and impactful is difficult to account for in broader state and national policies and funding mechanisms. However, many communities are creative in how they apply and interpret dominant society policies to meet their needs while still being guided by their cultural values.

Many Indigenous communities provide real-world examples of pragmatically applying IFS values and practices. Nikolaus et al. (2022) highlights many community-led interventions that center around the revitalization and cultivation of culturally relevant foods. This includes a tribally owned and operated farm, and the transmission of intergenerational knowledge related to traditional foods, their cultivation, processing, and preparation. Future practices and initiatives should be centered around community priorities, cultural values, and teachings, which will support the restoration of relational foodways and reciprocity-based relationships with food and the land. Funding sources should align themselves with principles of food sovereignty, ensuring that time is built in for relationship building, stewardship of land and more than human relatives, and time for deep community conversation and reflection.

Restoration of Indigenous ways of knowing and being will uplift what Indigenous communities have always known: that our foods, our lands, and our more than human relatives do more than provide nutrition to us, and that they are key to our physical, social, emotional, and spiritual thriving. Achieving food security may be enough to ensure our survival as AI/AN peoples, but a resurgence of our ways of knowing and being in relationship with food is key to our continued thriving.

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